

African American Undergraduate Students' Experiences in
Residential Learning Communities at a Predominantly White Institution

by

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ABSTRACT

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There is a nationwide decline in enrollment, retention and degree completion for African American students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in the United States. Colleges and universities establish diversity initiatives to address these concerns, yet educational disparities persist. Institutions of higher learning also address ways to enhance the educational development of undergraduate students. One such initiative involves a paradigm shift to extend the curriculum into Residential Learning Communities (RLCs). Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: How do African American undergraduate students in RLCs perceive the role of these communities, particularly the kinds of contacts they afford with faculty, staff, and peers, in shaping their educational development?

I used qualitative methods – open-ended semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and a questionnaire – to explore students experiences in six academically-tied residential learning communities. Thirty-two current and former members participated in individual interviews. Sixteen full-time male and sixteen female students include twenty-two freshmen, four sophomores, four juniors and two seniors.

Consistent with Astin's (1985, 1993b, 1996) work, this dissertation suggests that student involvement with faculty, peers and academics is necessary for retention. However, this study argues that a critical race theory (CRT) perspective is needed to make sense of the way peer interactions create racial barriers and lead some students to develop "racial-cope-ability" skills to deal with racial challenges.

High school background plays a role in how students fare in RLCs. High school leadership experiences support high self-efficacy and help students connect with faculty, peers and activities at the onset of the collegiate experience.

A number of RLC components help create positive affective and cognitive developmental experiences:

- A sense of belonging and a sense of community significantly impact psychosocial wellbeing, success and retention;
- Built-in support systems, educational advantages for retention and personalized experiences at a large PWI are reasons to recommend RLCs to other students; and
- Residential learning communities can contribute to existing outreach efforts into untapped in-state and out-of-state communities, school systems and outreach efforts on campus.

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Acronyms

AP	Advanced Placement
ASPIRE	Academic Summer Program Introducing Resources for Engineers
BLSC	Biological And Life Sciences Community
CEED	Center for the Enhancement of Engineering Diversity
CRT	Critical Race Theory
CSRDE	Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange
CSA	Community Service Assistant
CS Project	Community Service Project
EF	Engineering Fundamentals
FIGs	Freshmen Interest Groups
GPA	Grade Point Average
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
Hypatia	Women in Engineering Community
JR	Judicial Review
NSBE	National Society of Black Engineers
PCI	Pre-College Initiative
QCA	Quality Credit Average
RA	Resident Assistant
RHF	Residential Hall Federation
RLC	Residential Learning Community
SEF	Southern Education Federation
SIT	Student Involvement Theory
STA	Student Teaching Assistant
The W.E.L.L.	Wellness Environment for Living and Learning
TRH	Traditional Residence Hall
24/7	Twenty-four hours a day/Sevens days a week

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Chapter One
Introduction to the Study

Recruitment and retention of African American undergraduate students are pressing issues for higher education in America. Predominantly White institutions (PWIs) grapple with approaches to address these concerns nationwide. Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) indicate that African American students at PWIs “do not perform as well academically or adjust as well psychologically as White students” (p. 7). Recent studies (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002; Hutchinson, Hyer, & Collins, 2000) regarding the adjustment and retention of African American students in PWIs indicate that racial and stereotypical barriers are contributing factors to these areas of concern.

Research (Chavous 1998; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Southern Education Foundation, 1999, 2002) attributes many social and academic challenges for African American students in PWIs to recurring factors such as isolation, alienation, typecasting, discrimination, and “Black invisibility” or “misrecognition” (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996), where the social structure ignored or dismissed the value of one’s existence. As a result, many African American undergraduate students drop out of college, becoming “at risk of being left behind in a changing and increasingly competitive global economy” (Southern Education Foundation, 1999, p.1). Students who complete an undergraduate program have an advantage over those without degrees. They possess a potential to become productive and responsible citizens in today’s technological and culturally pluralistic society.

This chapter provides an overview of the research project. Chapter Two is a review of the literature on the research topic. Chapter Three presents an overview of the research methodology. Chapter Four presents a review of fieldwork. The latter section of Chapter Four, followed by Chapters Five through Nine, presents students' experiences in six residential learning communities (RLCs). Chapter Ten includes former participants' experiences and comments, observations of the natural organization of students in common areas of RLCs, a discussion and reflections. Chapter Eleven provides implications and conclusions, implications for further research, and an epilogue. I use the terms "participants" and "interviewees" interchangeably in reference to students in this study.

Adjustment Initiatives in Predominantly White Institutions

Universities respond to undergraduate students' educational and adjustment needs in various ways. For example, students of color in a residence hall at the University of Massachusetts Amherst developed a multicultural, multiethnic theme residential community. The initial purpose of this residential community was "to create an academically and socially supportive environment for students of color" (Bourassa, 1991, p. 21). Due to the success of the initial program, within a year the university expanded the community to include White students. Consequently, this community is a place where White students and students of color work together to learn how to participate and "promote positive interracial relations" (Bourassa, 1991, p. 20). Learning communities also connect experiences outside of the classroom to objectives such as the formal curriculum, career interests, and vocational interests (Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997).

Another example of an initiative that enhances the educational experiences of undergraduate students is the learning community concept at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and

State University (Virginia Tech). These communities focus on themes or group interests such as health and well being, multiethnic goals, or the performing arts (Astin, 1985, 1993b; Turrentine, 2001). One more type of learning community at Virginia Tech is the residential learning community (RLC). This type of living-learning community involves students who live on campus in theme-based residential facilities (Turrentine, 2001). These RLCs also connect academics to on-campus living experiences (Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997; Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994; Turrentine, 2001). RLCs at Virginia Tech emphasize characteristics where students share a common purpose or theme, a commitment for group tasks, a sense of belonging and a built-in educational support system (Turrentine, 2001).

The establishment of institutional initiatives to promote cultural inclusion is not a recent occurrence in higher education. Many universities establish and implement initiatives, which they design to promote cultural awareness and create a welcoming environment for all students. Peer mentoring programs, funding of grants to sponsor diversity projects, and sensitivity training for faculty and staff are a few examples of such initiatives.

Despite the establishment of diversity initiatives in predominantly White institutions, research (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Hutchinson, Hyer, & Collins, 2000; Scott, 1995) continues to find a pattern of disengagement that causes many African American undergraduate students to abandon their undergraduate education. Consequently, the following questions are important to consider: Why do issues involving social, academic, and psychological adjustment for African American students continue to surface in PWIs? Do students participate in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment? What additional strategies can address these concerns?

Both RLC program initiatives, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Virginia Tech, focus on the enhancement of participating students' social and educational experiences. The multiethnic residential community at the University of Massachusetts Amherst focuses specifically on improving interracial relationships between students. RLCs at Virginia Tech connect academic and common interests or themes to living experiences in residence halls.

Residential Learning Community Outcomes at Virginia Tech

“As of academic year 2000-2001, there [are] six academically tied residential [learning] communities at Virginia Tech” (Turrentine, 2001, p. 3). The Division of Student Affairs used grade comparisons to measure the learning and development of RLC students against a control group. For example, in fall 2000, grade comparisons for members of The Wellness Environment for Living and Learning (The W.E.L.L.) reveal a QCA of 3.11 and a QCA of 2.87 for the control group in traditional residence halls. In spring 2000, the Division also implemented an assessment of each community's program mission. The Core Alcohol-Drug Survey found that The W.E.L.L. students are less likely to engage in high-risk drinking than control group students (19% for The W.E.L.L. residents, 59% for other on-campus students).

Another example of a RLC assessment of students took place in the Residential Leadership Community. This community is a program in leadership development. In fall 2000, a grade comparison of students in this community reveals a QCA of 3.21. The QCA for the control group is 2.82. The Division assessed the mission of this program using the Student Leadership Outcomes Inventory. Fall and spring semester students' assessments show significant increases found in 23 of 44 items measuring development of leadership skills (Turrentine, 2001). The literature review describes further details of RLC outcomes.

The Division of Student Affairs at Virginia Tech uses a scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree with the option of Does Not Apply. The scaling system ranks the success and the benefits of the program to evaluate these communities. In spring 2001, students in the Residential Leadership Community gave high ratings to experiences such as active engagement, specific learning outcomes, sense of community, and overall impact. The overall results of these assessments indicate positive outcomes for participating students.

Grade comparison assessments reveal significantly higher grades for residential learning community (RLC) members than those of a control group from traditional residence halls. Comparisons of affective behaviors suggest that RLCs provide positive behavioral models for students who participate in these communities. Therefore, these results depict RLCs as ideal settings for exploring the experiences of African American undergraduate students at Virginia Tech. A study on the experiences of African American students in RLCs will enhance this area of research.

Previous assessment outcomes for RLCs at Virginia Tech reveal positive academic and social outcomes. However, in Virginia Tech's 1999-2001 RLC assessments, there is not an available breakdown of student outcomes into racial and ethnic groups. Furthermore, a focus on students from one racial or ethnic group is not available in the review of literature on RLCs. Retention and degree completion for African American undergraduate students are issues that PWIs deal with across the country. Therefore, this inquiry focuses on African American undergraduate students' experiences in RLCs at one PWI.

Statement of the Problem

Research indicates that "too many" African American undergraduate students" drop out of college once they enroll in PWIs across the United States (Terenzinni & Pascarella, 1999;

Tinto, 1993). Research also suggests that African American students' experiences with cultural bias, disparities in education, and perceptions of an unwelcoming environment in PWIs are negative factors that affect retention and degree completion (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002; Hutchinson, Hyer, & Collins, 2001). In addition, research suggests that the completion of a bachelor's degree often requires a different type of persistence for African American students than for ¹Other students on predominantly White campuses (Scott, 1995; Sedlacek, 1999). In support of this contention, Feagin, Vera and Imani state, "In the process of developing strategies to cope with racial barriers, black and other targets of discrimination are injured physically, psychologically, and socially and forced to waste much energy and time" (1996 p. 7). Therefore, it is essential for universities to understand why, when and how to deal with racism to minimize interference with educational goals and maximize focus on attaining educational pursuits.

Recent studies (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Scott, 1995; Sedlacek, 1999) of students in PWIs indicate that African American students experience education differently than their White counterparts because of social barriers and educational disparities. According to Hatter and Ottens (1998), "Being faced with a university atmosphere that may be characterized as hostile or unwelcoming can lead African American students to feel confused and isolated, estranged from campus life and inclined to rate as negative their overall college experience" (p. 472). Consequently, predominantly White colleges and universities target diversity issues and establish numerous diversity initiatives (programs, projects, organizations, services, centers) to help rectify negative racial conditions on campus.

An investigation (Tinto, 1993) into the causes and cures of student attrition suggests the need for institutions to design programs to integrate students of color into the mainstream of the institution's academic, social, and administrative life rather than to establish programs that

¹ The word 'Other' is capitalized when used in reference to racial and ethnic groups that are not African American.

marginalize them. According to Tinto (1993), “Too often programs for ‘different students’ generally, are marginalized – segmented from the institutional mainstream” (p. 184). This position implies that the establishment of diversity initiatives such as cultural events, cultural centers, as well as universities’ recognition of special holidays, generates alienation for these programs and for the targeted students. In addition, diversity initiatives may physically isolate students of color from the larger university community.

Although diversity initiatives “sometimes remove students of color from the mainstream of the university community, they are very important support mechanisms for African American students” (Scott, 1995, p. 57). Nevertheless, the effect of programs and events targeting underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in PWIs has minimal impact on African American students’ integration, sense of belonging and inclusion into the larger university community (Chavous, 1998; Feagan, Vera & Imani, 1996). Further research (Hutchinson, Hyer, & Collins, 2001) on students’ perceptions of campus diversity at Virginia Tech asserts, “African Americans [along with Other underrepresented racial and ethnic groups] see and experience a less hospitable climate than do White Americans ... and perceive a less positive climate overall” (p. v).

Another perspective recognizes the daily occurrences of alienation and discrimination African American students suffer while fulfilling their academic requirements in PWIs. Research (Sedlacek, 1999) suggests that African American students need coping skills to help them discern when to question and when to ignore discriminatory and stereotypical actions. This discernment may require a decision to ignore recurring stereotyping, alienation and discrimination in order to successfully complete academic requirements. This perception also influences decisions to create awareness that racist acts generate negative and hurtful feelings

among fellow students. The necessity for coping skills for recurring disparities at universities indicate that African American students receive an education with more social and psychological consequences than Other students in PWIs. Therefore, how do African American students integrate into the social infrastructure (the process of application and acceptance, development of relationships, interactions with peers and faculty, and participation in activities) of RLCs on predominantly White campuses? This study is helpful for integrating students of color into predominantly White university communities as a whole, and in turn, increases the integration of White students into initiatives that universities establish to address diversity issues.

The literature draws attention to the considerable amount of tension and uneasiness that African American students continually endure on predominantly White campuses (Chavous, 1998; Lang, 1992; Saddlemire, 1996; Tinto, 1993). Despite numerous efforts to create cultural awareness, inclusion, and improve the multicultural quality of life on campus, cumulative discrimination for African American students persists (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002). Therefore, the image of PWIs as welcoming environments for students of color remains in jeopardy. In addition, a persistent decline in enrollment and retention causes PWIs across the nation to grapple with ways to increase and retain African American undergraduate students.

Research Question

This study addresses the following research question:

- How do African American undergraduate students in RLCs perceive the role of the communities, particularly the kinds of contacts they afford with faculty, staff, and peers, in shaping their educational development?

Purpose of the Study

This study explores African American students' experiences that affect educational and social adjustments on a predominantly White campus. In addition, this inquiry explores the possibility that RLCs may become useful as a recruitment incentive and increase retention and degree completion for African American students as well as Other students of color.

Furthermore, "Research shows that when schools and colleges are designed to facilitate the success of students of color, other students benefit as well" (Lardner, 2004, p. 114).

Overall RLC assessments of students' educational and interpersonal experiences reveal positive academic and social outcomes (Pike, 1997, 1999; Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994; Turrentine, 2001). Therefore, a study of current and former African American students' experiences in an environment that enhances the educational experiences of participating students is compelling. In addition, an exploration of African American students' experiences in an environment where previous student assessments show positive cognitive and affective outcomes is an important contribution to the scholarly literature on "the multicultural quality of [student] life" (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002, p. 119). Therefore, this research project is important for the personal, social, and multicultural quality of life for White students as well as for students of color.

Significance of the Study

One of the important aspects of this study is that the experiences of the participants belong to one racial group. Previous studies in the literature review (Pike, 1997, 1999; Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994; Turrentine, 2001) on students' assessments of RLCs do not indicate a focus on one particular racial or ethnic group. Recruitment of participants in RLC studies report students representing multiple racial and ethnic groups, including White students.

Typically, findings from respondents representing a random sampling of students produce generalized outcomes. However, research (Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994) indicates that general outcomes assume that all students benefit the same way from the same residential experience, which may not always reflect reality. In support of this belief, Chavous (1998) states, “Understanding the different experiences of successful and unsuccessful African American students will lead to a greater understanding of diversity on PWI campuses and its consequences” (p. 5).

Although the studies assess RLC students from various racial and ethnic groups, there is no indication in the literature review of student assessments for one racial or ethnic group. Therefore, this study focuses on the voices of African American students, exploring their unique experiences within a typology of academically tied living-learning communities (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). These experiences provide insight regarding Other students of color as well. Furthermore, this inquiry is consistent with Virginia Tech’s goal of strengthening systematic attention to issues of diversity in teaching, service, and research (Virginia Tech, University Strategic Diversity Plan 2000-2005). Consequently, a focus on RLCs ensues as a potential environment to support existing programs, services, and projects that encourage cultural inclusion, retention and degree completion for all undergraduates, particularly African American students.

Investigations of RLCs usually employ quantitative methods to collect data. However, this study uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods help to gain an understanding of the human experience within a naturally occurring environment (Mirriam, 1998), which also provides insight concerning RLC influence on student development (Astin, 1996). This approach explores African American students’ experiences to discover the quality of interactions

with RLC affiliates (faculty, staff and peers), participation in voluntary and involuntary RLC activities, required courses and seminars. More specifically, this study focuses on RLCs at a PWI to discover factors, which researchers associate with the quality of student involvement as they relate to African American students. In addition, this study explores the experiences of former African American undergraduate students in reference to faculty-student contact, interactions with peers, academic experiences, and participation in RLC activities. The goal is to explore the quality of student involvement and to discover how that involvement influences the educational development of current and former RLC participants in a PWI.

Theoretical Framework

Astin's (1985, 1993b, 1996) student involvement theory frames the onset of this study. The student involvement theory focuses on the quality and quantity of physical and psychological energy that students invest in their educational development (Astin, 1985). This theoretical position suggests that participation in educational experiences beyond the minimum requirement will create positive results.

Astin's (1985) investigation of the prevention of college student dropouts is the basis for the student involvement theory. Astin (1985) attributes the success of every institutional initiative as "directly related to its capacity for increasing student involvement" (p.157). Astin's study makes the following claim regarding students' persistence in college: Every positive factor is one that will most likely increase student involvement in the undergraduate experience, while every negative factor will most likely reduce involvement (Astin, 1985, pp. 144-145). Astin (1993b) asserts, "Learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups" (p. 394).

The student involvement theory makes other claims that are relevant to this research project: (1) what students do and how they participate are more important than how they feel and (2) the benefits of involvement occur along a continuum and do not happen the same way at the same time for everyone (Astin, 1985, 1993b). The first claim emphasizes the behavioral aspects of students' experiences, i.e. active engagement and performance (Astin, 1985). This claim also deemphasizes affective development, i.e. emotions, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Astin, 1996; Bowler, 1999). However, Astin (1996), came to realize the significance of the balance between cognitive and affective development for psycho-social well-being and intellectual growth.

The second claim emphasizes the contribution of individual differences within a community or group setting. This stance suggests that a community of learners includes individuals who bring meaning and purpose to the environment. This would entail individuals who contribute to the needs of the community, according to assets inherent to the individual, a willingness to share those assets, and a common interest in the environment. Furthermore, even though this study is community-based, a focus on individuals belonging to one racial group discovers characteristics unique to that group's experiences. This perspective may contribute to the literature on African American students' adjustment and inclusion into PWIs' larger university community.

Continuous research on student involvement finds previous recommendations from the 1980s just as relevant in the late 1990s, with one exception. Astin (1985) previously omitted *affective development* and *high expectations* from the context of this theory. Further research (Astin (1996) on student involvement found that development of affective and cognitive skills intertwine, and therefore are inseparable. Astin (1996) emphasizes "the importance of involvement as a powerful means of enhancing almost all aspects of the undergraduate student's

cognitive and affective development” (p. 126). Clearly, Astin (1996) finds both aspects of student developmental experiences to be equally important, since the quality of student involvement influences both personal and intellectual development. Consequently, Astin (1996) recognizes both factors as inherent features in the student involvement theory.

Sedlacek (1999) also recognizes the importance of affective experiences in college. His research focuses on eight noncognitive variables for the success and retention of African American students on predominantly White campuses (p. 539): (a) positive self-concept or confidence, (b) realistic self-appraisal, (c) comprehension and management of racism, (d) long-rang goals preferential to short-term or immediate needs, (e) availability of a strong support person, (f) successful leadership experience and (g) knowledge acquired in a field. Sedlacek (1999) reports that the effect of these elements “[are] critical to the lives of minority students [in higher education]” (p. 538). Therefore, this study also considers the affective or noncognitive aspects of African American students’ educational experiences in RLCs as equally important as their cognitive experiences.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are specific limitations inherent in this research project. First, a limited number of participants at one university decreased the *generalizability* of the study (Morse, 1997; Morse & Richards, 2002) to other large predominantly White institutions. Second, in a qualitative study, the findings can be subject to multiple interpretations (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, there is no way to replicate this study because of the human factor in multiple settings.

Another limitation to consider is the exploratory nature of this research project. Focusing on one research question in great depth limits the breadth of the study. An additional limiting consideration recognizes this research project as the first study outside of course assignments.

This type of research demands intensive listening skills, clear communication, the ability to develop a rapport with the participants and the capability of probing for better understanding. Although the ability to transfer these skills is adequate, analysis of transcriptions and reflections on the interview process recognizes that the status of a novice researcher is limiting.

Delimitation refers to the narrow scope of the study and a description of the boundaries therein (Creswell, 1994). Therefore, this study limits students to the parameters of race, age, enrollment status and housing status. This narrow focus defines the delimitation of the study (Creswell, 1994).

Summary

Despite the establishment of numerous diversity initiatives in PWIs, a decline of an already low population of African American undergraduate students persists. PWIs create initiatives to promote a welcoming environment, facilitating the transition from high school by encouraging a multicultural quality of life on campus. Examples of a few initiatives include resources, organizations, cultural centers, recognition of cultural and ethnic celebrations, heroes and holidays and diversity sensitivity training for faculty and staff members.

Previous investigations of residential learning communities (RLCs) found positive outcomes for participating undergraduate students (Dalton, 1991; Turrentine, 2001). They connect academically tied experiences to students' on-campus living. Assessments of students in RLCs indicate a sense of belonging and an academically supportive environment. Investigations (Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994; Turrentine, 2001) of students' achievement in RLCs indicate positive social outcomes and higher grade point averages than for students who live in traditional residence halls. According to those assessments, RLCs are ideal settings to explore African American undergraduate students' experiences in a PWI. Research (Astin, 1984, 1985,

1993b) indicates that student involvement is key to all institutional endeavors towards a universally inclusive educational environment. Consequently, this study explores the educational experiences of African American undergraduate students by focusing on their involvement in RLCs on a predominantly White campus.

Chapter Two Literature Review

This study explores African American undergraduate students' experiences in residential learning communities (RLCs) as a strategy to increase retention and graduation rates in predominantly White institutions (PWIs), nationwide. The following sections appear in the literature review: (1) Perspectives on Persistent Educational Disparities; (2) Enrollment and Graduation Rates; (3) Adjustments to Predominantly White Institutions; and (4) Rethinking the Use of Residence Halls. The first section of the review presents various scholarly perspectives on lingering inequities in education for African Americans in this country. The second section describes documented trends regarding a decrease in enrollment, retention, and degree completion for African American undergraduate students in PWIs. The third section links research about low enrollment, decreased retention, and graduation rates in PWIs to (a) social and environmental elements such as college reputation, cumulative discrimination in the society at large, and (b) evidence of continued disparities in education for African American students. The final section of the literature review takes a look at the purpose of traditional residence halls and the potential for these residence halls to enhance the educational experiences of undergraduate students.

Perspectives on Persistent Disparities in Education

Allen's (1988, 1992) sociological perspective on the educational progress of African Americans in higher education of the 1980s is the result of a national investigation of African American students in six state-supported predominantly White universities. Allen (1988) states, "Nowhere is this puzzle of persistent Black inequality and limited opportunity in American society more apparent than in the field of education" (p. 57). This investigation reveals that the

decades of transition toward racial equality and equity are an enigma. In support of this assertion, Lang (1992) states:

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was part of a struggle to gain for minorities equal access to the nation's institutions of higher learning ... yet a quarter century later, minorities are still underrepresented, both as students and as faculty and staff, at predominantly White colleges and universities across the country. (p. 514)

In acknowledgement of Lang's (1992) preceding observation, fourteen more years have come to pass. Educational challenges and disparities permeate the 21st century (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002; Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2000). Therefore, a renewed momentum to increase the educational gains of African Americans from kindergarten to higher education is overdue. To paraphrase Gloria Jean Watkin's (AKA bell hooks, 1995) statement during a televised interview, "You can legislate laws, but you cannot legislate the mind." Feagan, Vera, and Imani (1996) comment on the pace of social change affecting the quality of life for African Americans in this country:

One critical dimension of time is the sense people have of the character and pace of social change. This understanding of change is important because an appraisal of the future – Are things changing for the better or worse? What type of world will our children face? – affects to a substantial extent how we view the past, experience the present, and see the future. This sense of the possibility for social transformation is particularly momentous for groups, such as African Americans, that have a long history of oppression. (p. 24)

Questions in the preceding quote clearly illustrate concern for the pace of social change in American society. Educational transformation over time is not only important to institutions of higher learning, but also to society at large. Broadening the scope of educational opportunities

for disadvantaged students and for students of color is an issue that remains foremost on the agenda of many colleges and universities across the nation.

Key components for contributing to this society's social, political and educational endeavors focus on enrollment, retention, and degree completion in the academy. Therefore, compelling research, discussed further in this chapter, declares that African American students need opportunities for developing their potential in order to succeed in an increasingly global society and to qualify for careers into the 21st century. Consequently, a goal to increase enrollment, retention, and degree-completion for African American undergraduate students appears in diversity statements, missions, and initiatives on predominantly White campuses across the country. Therefore, an exploration of African American undergraduate students' experiences in RLCs has the potential to provide information that may lead to an increased attraction to PWIs for an undergraduate education.

Research (Parker, 1998; Feagin, 1992; Allport, 1979) attributes continuing educational disparities and the obstacle of cumulative discrimination (Allport, 1979; DuBois, 1978) to both the overt and subtle discriminatory acts within the society at large. Fifty-two years ago, Allport (1979), in *The Nature of Prejudice*, describes discriminatory practices in the American society. These practices include actions of prejudiced thoughts against socially-defined racial groups or individuals such as Negro, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, Indian, and Jews. This was an era when legalized segregation promoted racial exclusion, inequality, and physical hostilities, particularly against the group referred to as Negro (in the this study, African American among a world-wide decent of Black peoples). According to Allport (1979), forms of prejudice occur in a range of negative action from a mild form of discrimination such as antilocution (verbal rejection), to avoidance, exclusion, physical attack, and finally to extermination described as “the ultimate

degree of violent expression of prejudice” (p. 15). In addition, Allport (1979) attributes prejudice and acts of discrimination to a true or “psychological problem” due to uninformed or ill perceptions within the individual (p. 502). For example, discriminatory obstacles may include apathy and/or denial of the existence of discriminatory practices within an environment. Allport (1979) credits this state of mind to satisfaction with the status quo: “People are so accustomed to the prevailing system of caste and discrimination that they think it eternally fixed and entirely satisfactory to all concerned” (p. 502).

Conversely, DuBois (1995) asserts that the source of educational disparities for the “American Negro” has roots in the social-historical development of this country. A study of the condition of the “American Negro” in 1901 led DuBois (1980) to the conclusion that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (p. 281). Unlike Allport’s (1954) psychological perspective, DuBois’s (1995, 1980) sociological and historical perspectives attribute cumulative discrimination in education to the inability of the American Negro to break the color line. For DuBois (1978), dismantling the color line meant the acquisition of equity in education, civil rights, the right to vote, work with adequate wage, housing without segregation, and social equality. The literature between the early 20th century and the early 21st century on the education of African Americans shows further evidence of a persistent struggle in education for African American students.

This incites the question: how does this dilemma affect African American students in PWIs of today? Over a decade ago, Dalton (1991) examined reports, articles, educational conferences, and studies of racial incidents on the campuses of PWIs in this country. Dalton’s (1991) overview reveals key factors, which contribute to bias-related incidents on these campuses: (1) limited contact with other races and ethnic groups, (2) the power of peer group

influence, (3) increased competition and stress of White students toward students of color (who they perceived as having special privileges), (4) excessive alcohol use, (5) White students and students of color's perceptions of unfair treatment and (6) campus and community law enforcement's unfair treatment of minorities. Dalton's (1991) overview reveals that the campus climate "on predominantly White college campuses across the United States continued to include subtle and overt forms of racism" (Bourassa, 1991, p. 13). Similar findings in other student adjustment studies support these claims (Chavous, 1998; Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002; Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2000). Despite the efforts of program initiatives to support students of color, a review of the literature continues to show an acute need for further institutional investments in the education of African American students in PWIs.

The literature attributes recurring issues of educational disparities for African Americans to social, psychological, historical and racial inequities in this society. The literature also suggests that society's impact on an environment, such as institutions of higher education, can negatively affect the institution's efforts to increase enrollment, retention, and degree completion for African American students on predominantly White campuses. In addition, patterns of enrollment and graduation rates emerge as important indicators of continuing educational disparities for African American undergraduate students in PWIs.

Enrollment and Graduation Rates

In the 2000-2001 school year, the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) surveyed retention and graduation rates in 344 colleges and universities across the country. Findings list the following rates for African American students: first-year retention rates for African American students were 74% compared with 87% for Asians and 79% for White students. After the second year, about 60% of African American students persist to the third year

of college, compared with 78% for Asians and 69% for White students. Documentation presents six-year graduation rates for the 1993-1994 cohorts as follows: 37% for African Americans compared with 61% for Asians and 57% for White students. According to the CSRDE report (2000-2001), “After the second year, the gap in retention rates grew wider [for African American undergraduate students]” (p. 2).

Virginia Tech published a similar report. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning Analysis (2002) presents data from the 1996 cohorts, which reveals the enrollment of first-year African American students as 206. In four years, 27.7% of those students graduated. In 1997, the freshmen enrollment of African American students was 195. The graduation rate in four years was 23.1%. During the next two years, a decrease in enrollment for African American freshmen continued (1998, 194 students; 1999, 176 students). Graduation rates for first-year students entering in 1998, 1999, and 2000 were not available at the onset of this literature review. The need for further institutional interventions designed to address declining graduation rates for African American students in PWIs is compelling.

Tolerate to Graduate: A Coping Mechanism on Predominantly White Campuses

Research (Benton, 2001; DuBois, 1903, 1978; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996) attributes a state of psychological burnout and emotional disengagement to premature withdrawal of African American undergraduate students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Most African American students enroll in PWIs with full awareness that the “whiteness is omnipresent in student body composition, staff services, and a variety of campus facilities and affairs” (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996, pp. 40, 41). Nevertheless, they have high hopes for academic and social achievement (Chavous, 1998). Research (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996) suggests that African

American students who choose PWIs for their education must understand the need to learn how to cope with this environment. Feagin, Vera & Imani (1996) make the following observation:

African American students seeking academic opportunities in a majority-White setting must be able to put up with racial slurs, to avoid becoming 'lost,' to protect themselves from personal 'harm,' and to endure or confront the often negative racial climate. (p. 48)

This advice suggests that African American students need to confront racial challenges that will inform and promote cultural/ethnic awareness and respect and repress other racial challenges (Sedlacek, 1999). The preceding quote also suggests that African American students in PWIs receive an education differently than their White counterparts. Consequently, the trajectory of DuBois' (1995) concept of double-consciousness, "[a] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others ... feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts" transcends the advancement of colored people, colored schools and colored water (p. 45).

Therefore, the desire to survive in a predominantly White environment, along with routine academic challenges, suggests that African American students receive an education at a greater expense than do Other students in PWIs (Benton, 2001; Winant, 1994).

Social and Racial Experiences on Predominantly White Campuses

Feagan, Vera, and Imani (1996) explored the racial experiences of African American students and their parents on a large predominantly White campus. This study takes place at an unnamed PWI for the purpose of anonymity. Feagan, Vera, and Imani (1996) identify the setting as State University. Three focus groups of thirty-six randomly selected African American juniors and seniors participate in the students' group. Open-ended questions focus on issues such as the university's reputation, the social and racial climate, and students' experiences on campus. An exit questionnaire about the university's reputation reveals that 72% of the students feel that the

university's reputation is mostly negative, 22% indicate a somewhat positive reputation, and 3% (one student) answered, mostly positive. The results of the questionnaire support similar patterns of students' responses in the focus group discussion.

Students' responses on the social climate indicate that the campus at State University is "an environment filled with racial obstacles and hurdles created not only by other students but also by white instructors, other staff members, and security personnel" (Feagan, Vera, & Imani, 1996, p. 159). The participants indicate evidence of blatant and subtle hostilities from a range of campus personnel, residence hall assistants, cafeteria managers, to campus police. Feagan, Vera, and Imani (1996) report the following evidence of hostilities from many of the instructors: (1) stereotyping of athletes as undependable and untrustworthy, (2) ignoring evidence of individual differences, (3) providing insufficient academic advice; (4) lowering academic expectations, (5) grading unfairly; and expecting individual African American students to defend, explain and represent their racial group in class.

The Feagan, Vera, and Imani's (1996) report also suggests that staff members, such as officials and clerks, convey a subtle lack of responsiveness to questions and concerns of African American students. Therefore, subtle discrimination occurs when White instructors, staff and students either ignore their presence in and out of class or respond negatively to their questions or comments. According to Feagin, Vera and Imani (1996), "Evidence of differential treatment: the rules applied to black students are different from those of white students," (p. 125) "can seriously impede the progress of, or affect the retention of, African American students" (p. 133). Differential treatment refers to discrepancies in the dissemination of on-campus information, inconsistent academic advising, and discrepancies in everyday on-campus activities; examples at State University include (1) White residence hall assistants' discrepancies between White

students' residence hall parties and African American students' residence hall parties in the length and frequency of parties and types of activities, (2) a White dining hall manager's enforcement of a racially-defined space in a dining area, (3) African American males seen as prime suspects of campus crime and (4) rigorous enforcement of campus regulations which campus police officers waived for White students. Perceptions of African American students at State University indicate a Black experience in which faculty and students do not value or acknowledge them, i.e. treated like unwelcome intruders. Data from the focus group demonstrates a pattern of social, psychological, and educational disengagement over time for African American students at State University. Feagin, Vera & Imani (1996) assert:

Most African American students, including those with top grades, have some difficulties in coping with the unwelcoming climate of these [majority White] college campuses. As a result of campus racism, many students must endure anguish, pain, and repressed rage, and many face the *agonizing dilemma* of enduring this suffering or dropping out of college. Alien and hostile campus environments are a major reason for the dropout (push-out) problem of African American students [in PWIs]. (p. 160)

Further evidence supports this finding in Nancy Spann's (1990) interview with Dr. Vincent Tinto, a university professor and chair of the higher education program at Syracuse University:

We can't assume that [student withdrawal] is necessarily a lack of academic ability or some character or personality flaw. ... In fact, more [African American] students leave in good academic standing than leave because of the inability to keep up with their grades. (p. 18)

Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (1993) comment on Tinto's perspectives of "college coming and going" for African American students in PWIs:

Tinto has struggled to take into account the cultural contexts in which students reside, and doing so, he has laid to rest the more harmful psychological assumptions that have tended to 'blame the victim' for school departure." (p. 315)

In light of these findings, it is urgent that college and university's persist to support and retain African American undergraduate students to degree completion. This dissertation acknowledges the educational improvements over the years. However, it also acknowledges the continuing educational disparities of African American students. Feagin (1992) presents another exploration of African American students' experiences in PWIs which took place over a decade ago in various institutions of higher education in the U. S.

Feagin (1992) presents 24 of 180 in-depth interviews, which focus on the experiences of African American undergraduate students, graduate students, and professors at predominantly White colleges and universities. The interviews took place "in 14 cities, from Boston and Baltimore to Houston, Dallas, and Los Angeles" (p. 549). Detailed descriptions of barriers that African American students face in PWIs suggest several dimensions for describing acts of discrimination: (1) location of discriminatory action, (2) persons who affected discriminatory acts, and (3) types of discriminatory acts. The location of discriminatory acts "varies from the most private, with minimum discrimination at home with family and friends, to the most public spaces: (a) work and school settings, (b) stores and public accommodations and (d) the streets" (p. 573). According to Feagin (1992), the likelihood that African Americans students experience discrimination at home is low because of the protective environment among family and friends. However, when they are within a moderately protected environment, such as a PWI, the probability of experiencing racial injustice increases. Reportedly, the danger increases even more as the "Black student" moves into public places and spaces within the American society.

According to personal testimonies of the participants in Feagin's (1992) study, African American students face numerous blatant and subtle discriminatory barriers.

The second dimension identifies White students, White faculty members, White administrators and staff, and White alumni among those who treat African American students in PWIs disproportionately to White students. The third dimension of discriminatory acts indicates the following types of obstacles on majority White campuses: (1) verbal and physical aggression, (2) exclusion and social ostracism, (3) dismissal of the subculture including values, dress, and groups, and (4) racial typecasting. Similar to Allport's (1979) degrees of negative action, the preceding obstacles of discrimination manifest in varying degrees of intensity, from blatant to subtle forms. Therefore, the impact of all forms of discrimination negatively affect African American students' experiences in PWIs nationwide (Feagin, 1992; Allport, 1979, DuBois, (1995).

Another study (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002) of African American students in PWIs focuses on students' perceptions of diversity issues in student affairs preparation programs. The Flowers and Howard-Hamilton (2002) study took place in three predominantly White institutions located in the southeastern part of the country. Seven graduate students (six African American, one Latin American) participated in a focus group interview. Students overwhelmingly note, "The lack of minority faculty coupled with a lack of minority students resulted in other problems such as feelings of alienation and marginality" (p. 121). Participants also indicate that relationships between White students and White faculty are different than relationships between African American students and White faculty. African American students indicate feeling slighted because they do not receive social validation from White faculty. Another issue arose during discussions about topics of cultural diversity in the classroom when

the instructor expects African American students to accept the burden of responding as a spokesperson about racial issues.

The results of focus group discussions in that study suggest a need to improve the educational experiences of African American students on predominantly White campuses. Flowers and Howard-Hamilton (2002) assert, “These data seem to suggest that a considerable amount of tension and uneasiness that students of color feel may be eliminated partially by marketing diversity or outwardly displaying the importance of diversity in student affairs programs” (p. 122). A strategic assessment of African American students’ experiences in higher education is already in place in several southern states, which contained segregated school systems in the past.

Educational Assessments of African Americans in Higher Education in the South

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) conducted a series of studies concerning the equity and quality of education for African American and disadvantaged students. The SEF *Miles To Go* studies occurred in states that formerly operated segregated public schools and public higher education systems in the South. According to the Miles To Go reports (1999, 2002), southern states show persisting and difficult patterns of uneven investment and serious disparities at all levels of the educational spectrum. For example, the *Miles To Go: Maryland* (1999) report found that 80% of White students who entered high school graduated four years later. However, 62% of African American students graduated four years later. Similarly, 61% of White high school students enrolled in higher education institutions in 1996. Only 53% of African American high school students enrolled in higher education during the same year. A caption in the *Miles To Go: Maryland* report asserts, “Missing Links: Too Few African Americans Enroll in College” (p. 7). Over a six-year period, “Sixty-five percent of White

students who entered Maryland's public four-year institutions in 1990 earned degrees by 1996; only 40% of African-American students did the same" (p. 11). Another caption reads, "Access Isn't Enough: Few African-American Freshmen Earn Bachelor's Degree" (1999, p. 11). This SEF study illustrates limited access to higher education, lack of retention in college, and low graduation rates for African-American undergraduate students.

The *Miles to Go: South Carolina* (2002) report found that 25% of 135,000 undergraduates in the state of South Carolina were African American. African American undergraduate students' enrollment ranged from 7% at Clemson to 8% at the Citadel. On the other hand, the enrollment rates in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were as follows: 96% at South Carolina State and 94% at Denmark Tech. This SEF (2002) report gives HBCUs credit for playing a pivotal role in educating large numbers of African American students. Although the overall enrollment for African American undergraduate students in South Carolina increased by 20%, freshmen year retention in 2000 lagged behind. Retention for White freshmen students was 70% and approximately 65% for African American freshmen students. The retention rate was approximately 50% on two regional campuses of the University of South Carolina for African American freshmen students (SEF, 2002).

The summary of both the Maryland and the South Carolina reports assert that higher education has "miles to go" before equal status in education occurs for disadvantaged and African American students (p. 7). Both studies recommend relentless emphasis on college readiness from kindergarten to twelfth grade, from teacher preparation to financial aid. According to both *Miles To Go* reports, findings related to the education of African American students are grim. The *Miles To Go: Maryland* (1999) report states, "African American students are being lost at every point in the educational continuum, from grade school through the

university” (p. 1). In agreement, the *Miles To Go: South Carolina* report (2002) states, “There are too many barriers that continue to retard, rather than advance the broadening of educational opportunity and the attainment of excellence” (p. ix). These reports provide vital information for all secondary schools, colleges and universities in the South. In an effort to improve the social climate at Virginia Tech, the Office of the Senior Vice President and Provost surveyed students to assess their perceptions of the campus climate for cultural diversity:

Student Perceptions of the Campus Climate at Virginia Tech

In 1998, an investigation of the campus climate for diversity assessed students’ perceptions of the “multicultural quality of life” (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002, p. 119) at Virginia Tech (Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2000). Approximately 38.7% of 3,000 undergraduate students responded to a survey assessment about their perceptions of the campus climate. All African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American students received surveys to obtain a sufficient number of non-majority responses. Researchers gave surveys to fewer White American students (12.9%) and students from Other nationalities (13.8%), since the student population is primarily White along with international students of various nationalities (Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2000). The survey includes items about gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, and students’ enrolled academic college. *The Campus Climate for Diversity: Student Perceptions* at Virginia Tech reveals the following findings based upon race/ethnicity for undergraduate and graduate students:

- Almost all students (94% of graduate and undergraduate students) agree that diversity is good for Virginia Tech and should be actively promoted. However, 73% of undergraduates and 68% of graduates are less likely to agree that the Virginia Tech climate fosters diversity. In addition, 49% of undergraduate and 32% of graduate

student respondents believe that Virginia Tech is placing too much emphasis on achieving diversity (p. v).

- Minorities (i.e., anyone who is not white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and without disability) perceive a less positive climate overall and have greater sensitivity toward and respect for other minorities (p. v).
- The two groups differing most in perception were African American and White American undergraduate respondents. African Americans see and experience a less hospitable climate than do White Americans. They report more incidents of discrimination and harassment, less positive interactions with faculty, and seriously strained racial/ethnic relations in and out of the classroom (p. v).
- Undergraduates also held different perceptions of the climate at Virginia Tech depending upon the college in which they were majoring. The distribution differed significantly by gender with the majority of women majoring in Arts & Sciences (41%), Human Resources & Education (16%), Business (14%), and Engineering (10%). In contrast, male undergraduates came mostly from Engineering (34%), Arts & Sciences (24%), Business (18%), and Agriculture & Life Sciences & (7%). [For example,] (a) Students majoring in Arts & Sciences and Human Resources & Education tend to be more aware of university services, to judge current race relations on campus less positively, and to engage frequently in proactive diversity-related behaviors, such as attending programs on race and gender, to value diversity and to favor affirmative action and they also saw more diversity-related teaching in their classes than students from all other colleges except Architecture & Urban Studies and University Studies; (b) At the other end of the perception continuum ... Engineering

majors were the *least* apt to favor diversity and affirmative action, to experience unfair treatment by others` to participate in proactive diversity-related, and to experience diversity- related teaching in class. (c) Students in University Studies indicate that others seldom treat them unfairly, they rarely attend race-related programs outside of class, [however they], did observe more diversity-related teaching than students from most other colleges; (d) Students from Natural Resources show a high frequency of challeng[ing] others on their racially or sexually derogatory remarks; (e) Students from Business challenged others [on sexually and racially derogatory remarks] the least often; and (f) Natural Resources respondents as well as those from Architecture & Urban Studies felt they had been treated unfairly more often based on personal characteristics than students from the remaining colleges.

(pp. 39, 40)

This assessment indicates that minorities tolerate an estranged and marginalized existence within the larger university community and within college programs where the majority of the student populations are White male students. This assessment indicates that White male students generally perceive the campus climate as positive, do not favor diversity or affirmative action.

This report also indicates that a commitment to diversity is not simply a matter of increasing the numbers of underrepresented groups on campus:

It also means preparing our students, especially students from the majority group [as well as students of color], for their role in a multicultural workforce in which the talent of all must be brought to bear on economic, political, and social issues in a global context.

(Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2000, p. ix)

In accordance with Virginia Tech's commitment to diversity, along with the findings of *The Campus Climate for Diversity: Student Perceptions* report, "the multicultural quality of life" (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002, p. 119) for some students on campus is notably different. Therefore, an exploration of African American undergraduate students' perceptions focuses on the dynamics of their educational experiences in RLCs. The literature (Bourassa, 1991; Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2002) also reveals diversity initiatives as efforts to address persistent diversity issues in PWIs.

Diversity Initiatives at Virginia Tech

Virginia Tech established many diversity initiatives on campus. A few of these initiatives include:

- *Women's Studies (1989) and Black Studies (1991)* – Established to reflect the scholarship in these fields (Huthchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2001);
- *The Center for Academic Enrichment and Excellence (1995)* – Designed for all students and gives special attention to the academic concerns of African American students (Amenkhienan, 2000);
- *The Black Cultural Center (1991), The Women's Center (1994), The Multicultural Center (1996)* – Established to create a space for students to address their particular concerns, needs, and to provide a comfort zone on campus;
- *The Office of Minority Academic Opportunities Program, MAOP (1993)* – Established to increase the retention and graduation rates of all underrepresented students in the program regardless of race, creed, or color and to create a caring supportive environment and a sense of community (Office of Minority Academic Opportunities Program, 2002);

- *The Office of Minority Engineering Programs* (1992) – Established for all students and offers support for African American and Hispanic students and women in engineering (Amenkhienan, 2000);
- *The Office of Multicultural Affairs* (1998) – Responsible for a comprehensive focus on diversity and multicultural principles, policies, and practices, provide consultant and support services to create and sustain a positive environment in which to learn, teach and work (Dixon, 2000) and
- *The Annual Diversity Summit* (1998) – Established “to increase dialogue and understanding among a wide variety of constituency groups within the university community” (Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2000, p. viii).

These initiatives are among a variety of steps taken to meet the needs of Virginia Tech’s campus community. The *Campus Climate for Diversity: Student Perceptions* report suggests that students of color are dissatisfied with the campus climate after the establishment of such initiatives (Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2000). Bourassa (1991) claims,

In addition to these efforts, campuses need to provide social opportunities specifically aimed at facilitating interactions between white students and students of color [as well as other minority groups]. Programs need to be designed that will help students develop familiarity, ‘comfortability,’ and appreciation for peers from ethnic and racial groups other than their own. (p. 20)

In consideration of Bourassa’s (1991) recommendation, it is unclear what strategies will cultivate positive and intrinsically motivating characteristics of cultural inclusion among students, faculty as well as administrators. Such an endeavor in PWIs would create a healthy

environment for all students. Perhaps by 2056, all levels of education will experience real and humane improvements in all aspects of the humankind.

Despite the efforts of established diversity initiatives, such as those that Virginia Tech describes, findings in the literature illustrate the urgency for a heightened sensitivity toward students of color, particularly African American undergraduate students in PWIs. Educational opportunities and experiences that support and promote positive academic, social and psychological outcomes, rather than superficial patronage, are viable contributions to cultural awareness, moving upward Allport's (1969) *Continuum of Social Relations Among Human Groups* from tolerance to respect and cooperation. To further enhance the experiences of undergraduate students, institutions of higher education begin to focus on residence halls, which extend learning beyond the classroom.

Rethinking the Use of Residence Halls

At one time, the sole purpose of residence halls was to house students during their stay on campus. This section describes issues for institutions of higher learning to consider when making a paradigm shift that uses residence halls as a viable strategy for enhancing the educational development of undergraduate students. This section also includes characteristics of traditional residence halls, learning communities, and residential learning communities. Research on perceptions of student learning is important to address prior to expanding the educational experiences of undergraduate students through residential facilities (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

A study (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) of the effects of college on students led to a discovery of five myths in higher education for undergraduate students in America. Three of the myths are important to this study: (1) traditional methods of instruction provide proven, effective

ways of teaching undergraduate students; (2) faculty members influence student learning only in the classroom and (3) students' academic and non-academic experiences are separate and unrelated areas of influence on learning. According to Terenzini and Pascarella (1994), intellectual growth can be a primary outcome of academic involvement and effort. However, "the greatest impact [on student development] may stem from the student's total level of campus engagement, particularly when academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular involvements are mutually supporting and relevant to a particular educational outcome" (p. 32). These myths suggest the need for a shift in pedagogy when designing innovative education for undergraduate students. The foundation of learning communities and residential learning communities is the dismantling of these myths to influence students' learning beyond the classroom. Consequently, the traditional use of residence halls as dormitories, designed mainly to shelter and protect students during their stay on campus, is in question.

Traditional Residence Halls

Descriptions of traditional college dormitories reveal paternal characteristics that are often constraining, overly protective, and intellectually unchallenging (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Schroeder, Mable & Associates, 1994). Although the traditional residential approach has certain merits, Schroeder, Mable & Associates (1994) identify the following limitations:

First, the approach generally focuses on staff and their interests and preferences as opposed to students' needs and aspirations. Second, since control is primarily vested in staff, there is little broad-based student involvement and influence. Finally, the traditional approach ends up focusing staff attention and programmatic intervention on the needs of the individual resident – usually to the exclusion of the needs of the group. (p. 170)

Limitations of the traditional residence hall approach often result in excessive property damages, hostile versus supportive interaction, frequent judicial cases, poor academic performance, and lack of personal and group responsibility for behavior (Schroder, Mable & Associates, 1994). When compared with students living in theme-based learning communities, assessments of students in traditional residence halls show lower levels of involvement and interaction with faculty and peers (Gardner & Hoey, 2001; Turrentine, 2001; Pike, 1999). Therefore, an alternative to the conventional on-campus residential concept is one in which students participate in theme-related residential programs to connect in-class with out-of-class living experiences.

Learning Communities

Astin (1985) and Schroeder, Mable & Associates (1994) describe learning communities as small groups of students who share common interests and purposes. According to Gabelnick, et al. (1990), the steady growth of a diverse student body, specialization and fragmentation in the curriculum, financial restrictions, and bureaucracies increases the chances of losing sight of students' needs:

Learning communities are attractive because they address issues of curricular coherence, civic leadership, student retention, active learning, educational reform, and faculty development ... without requiring a massive infusion of new money or large-scale institutional reorganization. (p.10)

In agreement with Gabelnick et al. (1990), learning communities offers a structural response to a large and often impersonal institutional environment. This idea suggests that the learning community environment simulates the support and fellowship, which students and faculty on small college campuses share. Such communities are environments “where day-to-day contacts reinforce previous classroom learning, where the curriculum is organized around common

purposes, ... promotes active learning, discussion, and individuality [within a community setting]" (p. 9). Astin (1985) describes the following characteristics of learning communities:

Such communities can be organized along curricular lines, common career interests, avocational interests, residential living areas and so on. These can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness; to encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel. (p. 161)

These characteristics imply that learning communities are conducive to a wide range of educational and social activities. They can easily align with numerous program objectives in established settings to minimize financial costs. Implications also suggest that involvement in learning communities influences cultural inclusion, built-in support systems and produce a sense of belonging.

Researchers (Levine & Shapiro, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Smith, et al, 2004) refer to one type of community as a living-learning community where the residential area bridges the gap between in-class and out-of-class learning experiences. This type of community "integrate[s] the students' academic and residential life ... to enhance the intellectual impact of interactions between students and faculty and between students and their peers" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 15). In an experimental study of cognitive development, such as problem solving, applying abstractions and critical evaluation of ideas, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) compared first-year college students in a living-learning residence with those in traditional residence halls. A survey of both groups of students indicates that "students in the living-learning residence rated the institutional environment significantly stronger in intellectual press [or academic achievement] and sense of community and also reported significantly greater

freshman-year gains on the measure of cognitive development” (p. 151). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) do not provide further details regarding this investigation. However, the results of this investigation suggest that the living-learning community had a more positive influence on freshmen-to-sophomore persistence than for students in conventional residence halls. These findings are significant because descriptions of the living-learning community are similar to the residential learning communities (RLCs) of today. Therefore, RLCs are a viable strategy to positively influence student involvement, persistence in college, and degree completion for African American undergraduate students in PWIs.

Residential Learning Communities

Reportedly, RLCs integrate the formal curriculum with students’ co-curricular or interpersonal experiences (Pike, 1999; Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997). Welty (1994) describes a hypothetical university of the future called The Twenty-First-Century University where undergraduate students choose their housing according to learning themes, i.e. “food and agritech, the arts, electronics, the healthy body, the multiethnic community, and the integration of robots into society” (p. 76) . A goal of The Twenty-First-Century University links the undergraduate learning experience with the living experience. According to Guarasci and Cornwell (1997),

If ever undergraduate education needed a pedagogical model that recombined learning and life inside and outside the classroom, it is at this juncture in college history.

Reconnecting intellectual life with the social and communal development of students is now more than a luxury: it is an imperative for any undergraduate institution that takes seriously its larger obligations to this society and to the full development of its students.

(p. 13)

Therefore, the concept of RLCs emerges as a reform effort to enhance education through community-based learning, connecting academic and residential experiences for undergraduate students in these programs (Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997; Turrentine, 2001). Consequently, the practicality of RLCs as educational settings is a new and vital approach to learning in college, particularly for new students.

First-Year Students in Residential Learning Communities

A comparison of first-year college students in RLCs and a control group of students in traditional residence halls (TRHs) shows positive results in favor of RLCs. Pike (1999) surveyed the educational gains of first-year college students in RLCs and students living in traditional residential halls (TRHs) in a public research university in the Midwest. The results of this investigation are noteworthy for research that includes first-year students.

The research population consisted of 2,406 first time college students living on campus in residence halls. Survey respondents included 626 (26%) of those students. The racial composite of these respondents consists of 89% White, 6% African American, 3% Asian American, 1% Hispanic, less than 1% Native American and 1% other. RLC participants lived in three types of communities: (1) teaching and learning residence, (2) theme-related floors ranging from fine arts to women in engineering, and (3) the Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS). FIG programs focus on academic themes, a one-hour seminar and integration of information from in-class and out-of-class activities.

A comparison of students living in RLCs and traditional residence halls (TRHs) results in the following outcomes: (1) RLC respondents scored significantly higher mean ACT Assessment composite scores (26.0) for levels of student involvement, interaction with faculty and peers, and integration of course information and information in conversations than did students in TRHs

(25.7); (2) RLC students indicate significantly greater gains (13.64) in general education than TRH students (12.93); (3) Gains in intellectual development do not differ for the two groups and (4) No differences occur for racial/ethnic groups. The outcomes of this study have important implications for higher education. It suggests that students' out-of-class experiences have a positive effect on learning. A seamless learning environment has constructive effects on students' educational development and RLCs represent one method to bridge the gap between in-class and out-of-class experiences.

Pike (1999) finds that RLCs enhance students educational experiences through increased levels of student involvement, student/faculty interactions, and cooperative integration with peers. However, Pike (1999) also indicates that RLCs are less effective in developing intellectual growth since "the attainment of higher order intellectual skills is a maturational, rather than educational, process" (p. 282). Nevertheless, several colleges and universities, including Virginia Tech, establish RLC programs to enhance students' undergraduate experiences.

Implications of this study also suggest that the racial composite (89% White, 6% African American, 3% Asian American, 1% Hispanic, less than 1% Native American) do not yield any results pertinent to students who belong to underrepresented racial groups. Therefore, a research focus ensued for students' belonging to one racial group, i.e. African American undergraduate students.

Diversity issues affecting the educational experiences of students of color at another majority White university cause those students to take action. Students of color implemented a program to promote an academically and socially supportive environment at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

A Residential Theme Community at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

Students of color created “a multicultural, multiethnic community” in a traditional residence hall at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (Bourassa, 1991, p. 21). Students of color developed this intervention “in an attempt to create an academically and socially supportive environment” (p. 21). Due to the success of this community, the program expanded to include White students within a year. White students joined the community to learn about issues of race and racism (Bourassa, 1991). The design of the expanded community have two parts: “Nuance: Shades of Difference for students of color and Aware: Allies Working Against Racism Everywhere for white students” (Bourassa, 1991, p. 21).

Students in Nuance developed educational programs and social activities to focus only on students of color. They also design programs for the entire residential community. An optional one-credit course is available for Aware students “to learn about the dynamics of racism” (Bourassa, 1991, p. 21). Both parts of the community work collaboratively and independently “to offer a broad range of experiences that instill racial harmony” (p. 21). This intervention, reportedly improved racial attitudes and an increased interest in the multiethnic residential community by promoting “familiarity, comfortability, and appreciation” between White students and students of color (p. 20). Further information about this residential theme community is not available in the review of the literature.

Learning Communities at Georgia Institute of Technology

Another assessment of students residing in RLCs took place at Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech). Georgia Tech is a Research I institution located in Atlanta, Georgia, where the majority of the undergraduate students major in engineering. In the fall of 1999, the

Learning Communities Initiative helped first-year college students transition into the university to promote:

(1) interdisciplinary and collaborative learning; (2) interactive learning experiences characterized by heightened student-instructor interaction inside and outside the classroom and (3) undergraduate interventions aimed at fostering academic and social integration – hopefully leading to superior first-year academic performance and increasing first-year to sophomore retention rates. (Gardner & Hoey, 2001, p. 2)

The university established eight learning communities, with approximately 25 students each, in residence halls in close proximity to each other. The Georgia Tech Office of Assessment conducted an analysis of student data files, survey data, and focus group data. Results of an analysis of a cohort consisting of a learning community group (n=185) and a comparison group (n=273) are as follows:

1. Characteristics of Focus Group Findings

A comparison of responses found that both groups adapted to Georgia Tech, but in different ways. Students from the learning community group verbalized their opinions and were more open to a discussion of issues than students from the control group. They appeared to be more prone to study in groups, more focused on their studies, and more positive about the possibility of graduating from Georgia Tech. Conversely, students from the control group “sounded somewhat more independent, more alone, and perhaps more mature in their outlook” (Gardner & Hoey, 2001, p. 13). Students from this group formed study groups, friendships, and support groups on the basis of survival. They dealt with issues relating to the college experience on their own, and received advice from upperclassmen.

2. *Academic Performance*

Researchers did not observe any significant differences between the control group and the learning community groups for fall or spring term GPA. However, the learning community group performed significantly better (2.69) than the control group (2.26) in general Math.

3. *Non-Academic Variables:*

Students in the learning community (LC) group scored higher than students in the control group (CG) on measures of high relevance to the goals of the learning communities, such as student-to-student collaboration (LC 3.48, CG 3.17); student-to-faculty collaboration (LC 2.84, CG 2.51); academic involvement (LC 2.90, CG 2.72); and environmental adjustment (LC 4.32, CG 4.08).

The preceding data suggests that students who participate in learning communities at Georgia Tech “reaped the specific benefit of increased involvement in their academic experience and a better fit with their environment from being in a learning community” (Gardner & Hoey, 2001, p. 15). However, the study also reveals that learning communities may not be a suitable fit for some students who prefer to study alone.

Implications suggest that future residential community programs should consider offering a broader spectrum of learning communities and/or more intensive interventions. Furthermore, a limitation of this study reveals that a small number of respondents may not be broadly representative of the students at Georgia Tech. Although the study provides a breakdown of respondents into racial and ethnic groups (Asian American, African American, Hispanic, Native American, Multiracial, and Caucasian), “no significant differences were found between the

groups in terms of ... ethnicity [and racial group]" (p. 8). Virginia Tech also established RLC programs to enhance the educational experiences of participating students.

Residential Learning Communities at Virginia Tech

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) is a large land grant Research I public institution located in the town of Blacksburg. Research, and technology is the main focus of this university. The background of residential learning communities (RLCs) at Virginia Tech is important since the setting for the study takes place in RLCs at Virginia Tech. According to Wildman (1999), "Learning communities at Virginia Tech have several distinguishing characteristics:

1. They are composed of people who are bound to one another through a shared set of ideas, purposes and values.
2. Learning communities arise in the context of tasks or challenges that require the combining of diverse talents, skills, and values, and often involve novices and experts working side by side.
3. Communities usually involve a sense of place – an environment that uniquely supports and nurtures the interactions and work of the group. (p. 4)

These characteristics provide a framework for the current study of connecting African American students to their respective RLCs, by experiencing academic and social RLC activities and interacting with faculty and peers. Learning communities at Virginia Tech contain "design studios, theatrical ensembles, engineering car teams, the corps of cadets, and academically tied residential communities" (Turrentine, 2001, p. 1). For the purpose of this study, I selected the academically tied residential community or RLC as the type of learning community for this inquiry.

The establishment of RLCs at Virginia Tech is the result of collaborative efforts between the Offices of academic Affairs and Student Affairs. In 1995, the Sorensen Committee and the Perry Committee made a recommendation: “Study the feasibility of special assignment housing in selected residence halls such as Pritchard, Lee, and Ambler Johnston Halls” (Goree, 1995, p. 8). Committee members believed that the large-scale structures of these residence halls created a potential for vandalism and misbehavior. Therefore, the Perry and Sorensen Committees recommended “joint ventures between academic affairs and student affairs ... to create smaller communities within the large residence halls” (Goree, 1995, p. 8).

The recommendation to use special assignments or themes in on-campus residence halls led to the development of two pilot theme-housing assignments. According to the Director of Residence Education, Gerald Kowalski (personal communication, November 11, 2002), requests from parents initiated the development of a theme housing facility that encourages an overall healthy environment. Subsequently, the university named one pilot theme housing assignment The Wellness Environment for Living and Learning (The W.E.L.L.). Another housing environment manifested to transition first-year students into the university setting. This theme house is The WING, named for Slusher Wing. Subsequently, other RLCs transpired. For example, the Women in Engineering Community (Hypatia), the Residential Leadership Community, the Biological and Life Sciences Community, and the Hillcrest Honors Residential Community resulted from the success of the two pilot RLC assignments. Assessments of the Honors Residential Community are not available in the literature review. However, available assessments of RLCs provide findings that are important to a study of African American undergraduate students’ experiences in RLCs at Virginia Tech.

Assessments of RLCs at Virginia Tech reveal the following findings: Overall grade comparisons for The W.E.L.L community members were a QCA 2.86 and a QCA of 2.66 for a control group of a random sample of undergraduate students from traditional residential settings in fall 1999. A fall 2000 assessment reveals a QCA of 3.11 for W.E.L.L. members and a QCA of 2.87 for the control group. The WING community “focuses on both academic and personal transition issues” for first-year undergraduate students (Turrentine, 2001, p. 3). In fall 1999, an overall QCA for WING members was 2.64. The comparison group’s QCA was 2.51. Residential Leadership Community members’ QCA in fall 1999 was 3.06. The QCA for the control group in the same year was 2.75. In fall 2000, the QCA for members of the Residential Leadership Community was 3.21 and 2.82 for the control group. The university established the Biological and Life Sciences Learning Community in 2000. The overall QCA in fall 2000 for this RLC was 3.04. The QCA for the control group was 2.73. These assessment scores illustrate a statistical significance, at the .05 level for all of the preceding RLCs over conventional residence halls (Turrentine, 2001).

The Learning Communities Assessment indicates strong active engagement, learning, sense of community, identity, and overall impact for students in the Women in Engineering Residential Community (Hypatia). The results did not indicate strong agreement for identity.

Course evaluations by Hypatia members indicate a sense of satisfaction with the Hypatia community (Lazar & Laboone, 2002). In addition, the Grade Comparison Assessment compares QCAs of Hypatia members with a control group. The overall QCA for Hypatia was 3.14 compared to 2.67 for the control group (Lazar & Laboone, 2002). The assessment results for each of the preceding RLCs find greater gains for RLC participants at Virginia Tech.

The assessment results indicate a positive educational and social influence on RLC members. They suggest that RLC members “earn higher grades [than students in traditional residence halls]; feel connected to the community, learn some things that are associated with the purpose of the community; and [RLC members] would strongly recommend these communities for other students like themselves” (Turrentine, 2001, p. 22). These data suggest that RLCs at Virginia Tech positively affect educational experiences of participating students. RLC members have higher academic achievement, experience a sense of community, and a high level of student involvement (Turrentine, 2001). Implications from Virginia Tech’s assessments of RLCs agree with similar studies (Gardner & Hoey, 2001; Pike, 1999).

Assessments of RLCs at the PWI in the Midwest, at Georgia Tech, and Virginia Tech reveal an overall positive educational influence on participating undergraduate students. However, RLC assessments do not reveal variables pertinent to racial/ethnic issues. In addition, studies (Gardner & Hoey, 2001; Pike, 1999), which include racial/ethnic variables, do not find a significant difference between racial and ethnic groups. Consequently, these studies provide general findings and outcomes for all of the respondents. Therefore, a focus on participants from one underrepresented racial group is important to explore experiences that are unique to that group or similar to Other students of color in RLCs. Therefore, an exploration of educational experiences of African American undergraduate students in RLC settings provide insight into “the multicultural quality of [student] life” (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002, p. 119) for all students on predominantly White campuses.

Summary

This section suggests that learning communities are innovative educational initiatives, which require a shift in pedagogy to improve the undergraduate experience. This concept

connects the formal curriculum with out-of-class experiences in environments such as residence halls. The review of literature supports the belief that residence halls can accomplish many goals for enhancing undergraduate students' educational development beyond the classroom.

This study focuses on residential learning communities (RLCs) in a predominantly White institution (PWI) as a viable strategy for increasing retention and degree completion for African American undergraduate students. The literature review offers statistical and qualitative confirmation of a persistent decline in retention and graduation rates, following the establishment of diversity initiatives to support students of color in PWIs. Furthermore, the literature illustrates the significance of continual educational disadvantages for African American undergraduate students in this country. Current enrollment data suggests that under-representation of African American undergraduate students as well as students in Other racial and ethnic groups prevail in PWIs, nationwide.

In 1978, each state published enrollment data for four racial minority-group representations (African American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and American Indian) in PWIs in the United States (Astin, 1982). Astin (1982) describes these universities as prestigious and influential public institutions, including research universities I & II and degree-granting universities I & II.

Institutions in southern states had the greatest under-enrollment of African American undergraduate students. They include Clemson University in South Carolina (92%), Auburn University in Alabama (92%), Texas A & M University (93%), and Virginia Polytechnic Institute (88%). According to Astin (1982), "Access to such public institutions is of considerable significance to disadvantaged minorities, since these institutions frequently serve as conduits to positions of power and influence within state government and private industry within the state"

(p. 132). In agreement with Astin (1982), Benton (2001) asserts, “Predominantly white institutions can play a vital role in contributing to the success of their [minority] students” (p. 207).

The enrollment data illustrates that many African American students prematurely drop out of their undergraduate degree programs. This behavior causes a decrease in enrollment, retention, and degree completion for African American undergraduate students in PWIs. According to the Office of the Provost at Virginia Tech (2001), the African American undergraduate student enrollment in 1993 was 5.1% of the total undergraduate enrollment. In 1999, the African American undergraduate enrollment dropped to 3.9%. Therefore, persistent low enrollment, retention, and graduation rates continue despite the establishment of numerous diversity initiatives implemented in PWIs across the nation. In addition, the necessity of coping skills for recurring racial disparities as a process for earning a degree, indicates that African American students receive an education at a greater expense than other students in PWIs.

This study contributes to predominantly White university’s efforts for enhancing “the multicultural quality of [student] life” (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002) for White students as well as for students of color. It is a mystery to how much longer it will take for the fruition of a goal to increase retention toward degree-completion for African Americans in PWIs, nationwide. This study is an exploratory research project. It focuses on African American undergraduate students’ educational and social experiences to discover the influence of RLCs on their undergraduate education. The following chapter presents methods of collecting data for this study.

Chapter Three Methodology

A review of literature identifies educational disparities and the decline of African American undergraduate students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) nationwide (Flowers, Howard-Hamilton, 2002; Southern Education Foundation, 1999, 2002; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996). PWIs implement initiatives to address these concerns. Yet, a decline in degree completion is statistically clear (Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (2000-2001; Office of Institutional Research and Planning, 2002, Virginia Tech; Southern Education Foundation, 1999, 2002).

The review of literature on learning communities indicates that RLCs connect the formal curriculum with students' on-campus living experiences (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Smith et al, 2004). RLC assessments (Bliming, 1999; Pike, 1999; Turrentine, 2001) found that students generally have positive educational outcomes in these environments. However, the literature review does not indicate outcomes specific to students of color. In addition, few studies researched the influence of RLCs on the success of students from various racial and ethnic groups. Furthermore, the review of literature does not indicate a focus on underrepresented students belonging to one particular racial or ethnic group. Therefore, this study explores lived experiences of African American undergraduate students in RLCs at a PWI. The research question for this study is as follows:

- How do African American undergraduate students in RLCs perceive the role of the communities, particularly the kinds of contacts they afford with faculty, staff, and peers, in shaping their educational development?

Research Method

I used qualitative research methods to become an active part of the inquiry. According to Arminio & McEwen (1996), references in the first person of an author or a researcher who is an integral part of the investigation are appropriate. Therefore, references in the first person appear in accordance with the active role that I assume as a qualitative researcher.

A qualitative mode of inquiry provides details that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods such as surveys (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, the student involvement theory, the initial framework of this study, embraces the narrative form of gathering data in qualitative research. Due to emergent racial patterns throughout this study, the Critical Race Theory frames such experiences. Both theories emphasize rich descriptions of a culture to gain understanding of a particular social situation (Astin, 1985, 1993b; Delgado, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997).

Research Design

Elements of the research design include purposeful sampling, observations of common areas in RLCs, an observation questionnaire (Appendix-F) for students attending events and activities and open-ended semi-structured interview questions (Appendix-G). Multiple sources of collecting data help to triangulate the data (Merriam, 1998; Stakes, 2000).

Participant observations range from a complete participant to a complete observer (Williams, 2003). These features agree with the following descriptions of participant observations outlined by Jorgensen (1989):

1. A special interest in human meaning and interaction from the perspective of people who are insiders or members of particular situations and settings;

2. Location in the here and now of everyday life situations and settings as the foundation of inquiry and method;
3. A form of theory and theorizing stressing interpretation and understanding of human existence;
4. A logic and process of inquiry that is open-ended, flexible, opportunistic, and requires constant redefinition of what is problematic, based on facts gathered in concrete settings of human existence; and
5. The use of direct observation along with other methods of gathering information.

I observed behavioral characteristics and relationships in the natural environment to gain insight into the natural organization of students in common areas of RLCs. According to Morse and Richards (2002), “Experience is considered to be an individual’s perceptions of his or her presence in the world at the moment when things, truths, or values are constituted” (p. 44). Since an exploration of the participants’ experiences was vital to this research, an inductive mode of inquiry directs the analysis and the interpretation of data. Consequently, this inquiry provides insight into the educational aspects (affective and cognitive) of African American undergraduate students’ perceptions of their experiences in RLCs at a PWI. This research project explores multiple viewpoints for meaning in a naturally occurring environment. The settings of this inquiry are RLCs on the campus of a predominantly White university located in the southern region of the United States.

Gaining Entrée

To gain entrée, meetings with residential learning community (RLC) gatekeepers occurred to access to the field (Williams, 2003). Subsequent meetings with representatives from the Office of Student Affairs, administrators in RLC programs and the Office of Residential and

Dining Services took place to explain the purpose and objectives of the study. In addition, a request to contact African American students in RLC programs, conduct observations during RLC events and activities, occurred pertaining to IRB informed consent forms for participants.

Participant Selection and Contact

The type of participant selection is purposive or purposeful sampling. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) refer to purposive sampling as criterion-based selection where the researcher predetermines a list of attributes essential to the study. The criteria for selecting participants for this study include:

1. Race: African American
2. Classification: Undergraduate
3. Ages: 18 to 21
4. Residence: Residential Learning Communities (RLCs), Former Residents of RLCs
5. Enrollment Status: Full-time
6. Sector: Virginia Tech
7. Gender: Women and Men

I used each criterion to guide the focus and define the parameters of the participants in this study. This combination of criteria aides the access to a balanced student representation while ascertaining easy access to 32 willing participants.

This inquiry sought the participation of current and former members of RLCs to achieve the maximum variation of participants with a variety of experiences. According to Merriam (1998), “Findings from even a small sample of great diversity yields important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity” (p. 63). Therefore, I selected the widest possible range of participants within the confines of the

criterion for maximum variation. Network sampling is another way to find willing participants for this study. Network sampling involves asking the participants to refer other students who would make good interviewees (Merriam, 1998; Morse & Richards, 2002).

E-mail contact contained information about the purpose and the plan of the study (Appendix B). An e-mailed invitation to participants conveys the procedure of the study, date, time, and location of the interviews to students who agree to participate (Appendix C). The day before an interview, willing participants received e-mail reminders for confirmation (Appendix D). Participants received IRB consent forms to take part in interview sessions (Appendix A). The consent form includes information about the study such as the purpose, procedures, risks, compensation, consent to audio-tape the interview, confidentiality, freedom to withdraw, and the responsibilities that I accept as the researcher. I emphasized confidentiality, ethics, and trustworthiness to aid in the credibility of the study.

Data Collection

Data collection and analysis go hand-in-hand in qualitative research methods (Tolman and Brydon-Miller, 2001). Therefore, patterns, themes and concepts in the data commenced at the onset of collecting data. I used semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary method for collecting data. Seidman (1998) states, “A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience” (p. 4). Four phases of data collection took place: open-ended semi-structured interviews, observations of RLC activities and common areas such as lobbies, study lounges and hallways, personal communication with RLC program administrators and a questionnaire.

Semi-structured Interviews. In preparation for analysis, I audio-taped and transcribed face-to-face semi-structured interviews. I developed open-ended semi-structured questions in

advance. This technique allows participants to reflect and tell their stories according to their experiences (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Seidman, 1998). Semi-structured interviews also allow the interview questions to be sequentially arranged into pre-determined categories. This technique helps with the organization of the data in preparation for analysis (Morse & Richards, 2002). The interviews took place at a time and location that was convenient for the participants during 45 to 90-minute sessions. Participants had the opportunity to receive a copy of the IRB Consent Form and review transcriptions and clarify interpretations of those transcriptions to aid in the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985; Morgan & Krueger, 1998; Merriam, 1998).

The interviews began by welcoming the participants and thanking them for their participation. The interview guide (Appendix E) focuses on an explanation of the purpose of the study and the consent form. Each interview began with general questions to acclimate the participants to the interview process (Appendix F), moving from general questioning to specific open-ended questions. Then, the interviews proceeded with a focus on the research question.

Observing and Gathering Information. According to Jorgensen (1989), “Observation begins the moment the participant observer makes contact with a potential field setting” (p. 82). Jorgensen (1989) recommends that researchers consider the following questions about the physical space of the setting: “Is it typical of other spaces or buildings? How is the space organized? Is the space usual or somehow strange? What kinds of things are in this space or building” (p. 82)? Therefore, familiarity with the setting and the situation occur at the on-set of the observations. Initial descriptions include the timeframe of the event as another important consideration for the observations.

A focus on specific elements about the people and the event took place as soon as I became familiar with the setting. The same strategy for gathering information about the setting applies to gathering information about the people and the event. Jorgensen (1989) suggests the following type of questions for a preliminary observation of people: “How many people are there? Attend closely to how they look: What are their ages? genders? ethnicity? How are they attired? Can you see signs of social status and rank? Is there anything unusual or striking about these people?” (p. 83) Therefore, I focused on the organization of people, their relationships to each other, race and gender. A sample of self-posing questions in this study come from Jorgensen’s (1989) suggestions about observing and gathering information:

How are the people in this space arranged or organized? Can [I] discern connections or relationships among people? Are people arranged in cliques? or in some other recognizable patterns (such as [position], gender, [race])? What are people doing? What kind of gathering is it? Is this state of affairs typical? Or is it unusual in some way? What feelings do you get in this setting? Do you have a sense of things that you are unable exactly to account for observationally?” (p. 83)

These type of questions aid observations by focusing on relationships between an environment, the event, the purpose, time-frame and the effect on people. The relationship of these elements, which usually go unnoticed, enriches the scope for understanding an observable phenomenon.

According to Morse and Richards (2002), “The assumption behind most observational strategies is that they enable the researcher to learn what is taken for granted in a situation and to discover what is going on best by watching and listening” (p. 96). The observational phase of the study also includes field notes describing human and social aspects of the environment. Field notes entail patterns of faculty, staff and student interactions, body language, verbal

communications, conversations, patterns of student involvement and any changes that occur within the environment. Personal communication with RLC administrators also took place.

Personal Communication. Personal communication from RLC program administrators helped to triangulate the data. Personal communication is important to illuminate the data since assessments for some RLCs are unavailable (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Questionnaire for Observed Events. A questionnaire also helped triangulate the data. Faculty, staff and students (African American, Indian and White students) completed the questionnaire to look at different perspectives of an event, which gave credibility and trustworthiness to the research project.

Data Analysis

Data Analysis began “simultaneously with data collection and interpretation” (Creswell, 1994, p. 152). I read and coded transcripts using descriptive terms that emerged in the data. Therefore, collecting information, coding the data, and discovering emerging patterns in the data was an on-going process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I linked and categorized data from interviews, observations, completed questionnaires and personal communication (Morse & Richards, 2002). Designated codes represent a discovery of themes, trends, patterns and concepts. Qualitative strategies (Anderson, 1998; Seidman, 1998; Tolman and Brydon-Miller, 2001) for this study include the following principles and practices:

1. Transcribe audio-taped interviews following each interview session;
2. Provide participants with the opportunity to review and clarify transcriptions;
3. Code transcriptions and field notes. Identify and organize categories and subcategories or relationships to show similarities and distinctions between categories;

4. Group categories into a hierarchical structure to distinguish high level or significant findings from lower level or inconclusive findings;
5. Look for and modify themes, patterns, and concepts to help create a framework for understanding and working with the data;
6. Select quotations from transcriptions and field notes to support and illustrate findings (themes, patterns, concepts) in the data;
7. Analyze a convergence of category relationships developed from multiple data sources (interviews, observations, questionnaire responses and personal communication) to triangulate the data; and
8. Link categories within the triangulated sources to create mental images for understanding social and educational experiences in the study.

Credibility

Procedures to ensure the study's credibility illuminate the trustworthiness of the study. Following each interview session, I transcribed and analyzed audio-taped interviews. To minimize investigator bias, participants had the opportunity to review transcriptions and clarify interpretations of those transcriptions. The use of pseudonyms affirms a pledge of confidentiality and anonymity.

Summary

This inquiry embraces the narrative form, which is characteristic of rich descriptions of a culture (Creswell, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse & Richards, 2002). More specifically, an exploration of African American undergraduate students' experiences in RLCs at a PWI guided the focus of this inquiry. Such a focus informs this study in four ways: (1) open-ended semi-structured interviews (2) observations of RLC events and activities (3) personal communication

with RLC administrators and a completed questionnaire to triangulate the data. Such a triangulation provides credible insight into the educational and social experiences of African American students. Triangulation of the data is important for gathering different perspectives on the same topic or question and for insuring the study's credibility (Morse & Richards, 2002). The following chapters present a review of the fieldwork, fieldwork experiences, narrative display, a re-visitation of the theoretical framework and multiple case studies of students' experiences in six RLCs on a predominantly White campus.

Chapter Four

Review of Fieldwork

This research project focuses on theme-based housing programs or residential learning communities (RLCs) as a potential strategy for increasing retention and degree completion for African American undergraduate students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). Two factors in the literature review establish the rationale for this study: (1) nationwide persistence of educational disparities that affect retention and degree completion for African American undergraduate students in predominantly White institutions (Hatter & Ottens, 1998), despite the establishment of diversity initiatives to improve the quality of student life (Terenzinni & Pascarella, 1999; Tinto, 1993) and (2) positive overall educational and social outcomes of students' assessment of RLCs (Pike, 1999; Turrentine, 2001).

The audience for this research project includes (1) educators in predominantly White colleges and universities targeting the recruitment, retention and degree completion for African American undergraduate students, (2) educational development and cultural awareness for all students, (3) practitioners in living-learning programs and (3) residential and student affairs programs in higher education that plan to design and facilitate learning beyond the classroom (Schoem, 2004; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews & Gabelnick, 2004). The participants' perceptions in this study inform those who want to follow the unfolding of "pedagogical practices that work with students from underrepresented groups, as well as those that help traditional majority students develop multicultural competencies and awareness of perspectives and histories other than their own" (Lardner, 2004, p. 114).

Fieldwork Experiences

Fieldwork experiences (interviews, observations, personal communication, questionnaire) reveal two unforeseen aspects of the participants' educational and social experiences. First, a

deeper look into the types of living-learning communities leads to important characteristics within two communities in this study. The second aspect relates to White students' racial stereotyping of the participants. Albeit the student involvement theory remains a significant theoretical framework, the critical race theory (CRT) frames segments of the data, which CRT theorists associate with racial awareness, adversity and coping strategies.

The setting for this research project is residential learning communities (theme-based housing programs) academically tied to the on-campus living experience (Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997; Pike, 1999; Turrentine, 2001). However, data from my fieldwork indicates several distinct differences in how the communities approach the educational and social development of their students. Therefore, an update of the literature on living-learning communities is necessary.

According to recent research on living-learning communities (Schoem, 2004), there are three distinct types or models of living-learning programs: residential colleges, residential learning communities and residential education programs. Two of these programs are relevant to the communities in this study:

(1) *Residential Learning Communities* – “One year or multiyear residential academic programs with a set of courses that are linked together in any one of a variety of curricular structures. These courses are often held in the residence hall, where faculty members also maintain offices. (p. 140)

In an environment of “spirit of innovation and experimentation” (p. 130), this type of community integrates social learning, networking, and academics for both peers and faculty.

(2) *Residential Education Programs* – “A one or two year program to bring students together around a common interest and brings faculty into the residence hall, usually on a onetime basis, for discussions, lectures, films, mentoring, or receptions. This type of

program is usually “organized on the basis of an academic theme or approach and is intended to integrate academic learning and community living.” (pp. 140-141)

Two of the communities in this study include an element according to the above distinguishing characteristics: The Biological and Life Sciences Community and the Women in Engineering Residential Community require students to focus their career goals on these respective themes. In addition, faculty offices are located outside the community. Faculty contact occurs during class or during scheduled events inside and/or outside of the community; membership in the community requires students to enroll in co-curricular courses. Therefore, the previous elements associate these two communities with Schoem’s (2004) description of residential education programs. The other four communities resemble the above description of residential learning communities. However, I refer to all of the communities in this study as RLCs for the sake of consistency with the programs. To conduct research with students within RLCs at Virginia Tech, this study necessitates steps to gain entry into those settings (Creswell, 1994; Jorgensen, 1989).

Gaining Entrée

I met with the Director of Residence Education at Virginia Tech on February 10, 2004. I provided a brief description of the research project, a copy of the IRB letter of approval and an example of the consent form for review. I received permission to proceed with the research project in Residential and Dining Programs. The director also provided contact information for RLC administrators. The director of Residence Education e-mailed RLC administrators, letting them know my research project had his approval. At subsequent meetings with RLC administrators, I introduced myself and discussed the purpose of the study. All of the administrators were helpful in providing names of students and/or contact persons who could provide names of potential participants as well as schedules of events and activities for the spring

semester. They also indicated an interest in this study and requested a copy of the findings at the conclusion of the research project.

Context of the Inquiry

Data collection occurred during the spring semester and the summer I session of the 2003-2004 academic year. Participant observations, field notes and questionnaires took place according to scheduled events and activities during the spring semester (Questionnaire-Appendix G). In addition, field notes describe the natural organization of students in RLCs at various times of the day, evening and during the weekend.

The method of data collection that best represents this inquiry is 32 in-depth and open-ended semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place at a location that was convenient for the participants, namely a study lounge in the residence hall, participants' rooms, or in a conference room in War Memorial Hall. Audio taped interview sessions lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. Upon arrival at the location, I greeted the participants, offered refreshments and thanked them for their participation. Each session began with time for the participant to read the consent form and to have the opportunity to ask questions. A brief summary of the interview process ensued, followed by demographic questions to acclimate the participants to this procedure of collecting data.

Semi-structured questions specific to the study followed general demographic questioning. The interchange of specific questions with general questions proved to be a beneficial technique. This strategy allowed the participant time to relax, partake of the refreshments and reflect, often remembering an overlooked experience or thought. In addition, probing for details often facilitated the discussion of an interview question or as a follow-up to a participant's comment. This investigative process is necessary to explore and obtain more

information and/or to get a better understanding of a response (Interview Guide-Appendix E). Every session ended with an opportunity for the participants to offer any thoughts about the interview and time to reflect on any relevant issue that we did not cover. The following paragraphs describe the way in which I present the data for this inquiry.

Narrative Display

The descriptive narrative form uses the participants' authentic words as valid connections to categories and themes in the data (Creswell, 1994). This format provides valuable accounts of the (1) participants' experiences and involvement in their respective communities, (2) meanings the participants attach to those experiences, and (3) allows the reader to vicariously experience the educational development of the participants in these communities (Astin, 1993b; Creswell, 1994). In addition, the narrative form portrays a nuance of educational and social experiences in the data that literature often omits from its quantitative queries.

The use of problem-posing questions in this study is an attempt to draw the reader's attention to patterns in the data, relationships derived from the literature and/or existing theories (Creswell, 1994; Jorgensen, 1989). Finally, interpretation and paraphrasing of quotes from the participants' did not always occur. The participants' authentic word of thought allows them to give voice (explaining and clarifying) to their own realities (Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 1998). This approach also allows the reader to simultaneously reflect and analyze their own experiences in the course of their investigative query (i.e., a critical reflection – Freire, 1997, an advance reflection – Creswell, 1994). However, interpretations, which clarified and highlighted significant details, intertwine in many of the quotes (Creswell, 1994).

All six of the residential community settings in this study share common characteristics. However, distinctive characteristics offer insight into variations in educational and social

practices among the communities. Understanding distinct characteristics means being aware of multiple purposes, foci, and goals in each setting. Therefore, subtopics vary for each community; this represents students' experiences and their unique qualities in their respective communities, as I discuss in subsequent chapters.

Participants in the Biological and Life Sciences Community (BLSC) and in the Women's Engineering Residential Community (Hypatia) describe many experiences that are common for students in other communities. However, "intentional and cohesive educational focus for students" (Schoem, 2004) in these two communities also appears through the participants' responses. Participants in both communities have intense experiences that are deeply entrenched in their field of study. The participants (a) major in a discipline to reflect their community's theme, (b) benefited from high school advanced placement or prerequisite courses in that field and (c) shared at least two required courses plus labs directly related to their major. Therefore, these descriptions characterize the BLSC and the Hypatia Community as residential education programs. The identification of the other communities as residential learning communities remains since their foci offers a broader based community experience that is not specifically related to their major. This type of living-learning community accepts students from all majors. Nevertheless, many of the participants have to cope with racial bias regardless of the characteristics of their communities.

Theoretical Framework Revisited: Emergent Racial Issues

The student involvement theory is useful for guiding the exploration of African American students' contact and interactions with RLC peers and faculty for determining how those interactions influence cognitive and affective student development. Specific forms of involvement that are important to this study include academic involvement, participation in

activities and events, student-faculty/staff contact, and interaction with fellow students. This study emphasizes the significance of determining how the participants experience and respond to people in their environment, how people in those surroundings respond to the participants, and how the RLC environment influences the participants' educational development (Mirriam, 1998).

An exploration of African American undergraduate students' experiences, which the student involvement theory frames, (Astin, 1984, 1993b), reveals a persistent pattern of emerging racial barriers throughout the data. The participants describe many educational benefits of their participation in co-enrolled courses and seminars, formal and informal contact with faculty and staff members, and peer interactions. However, to reap those benefits, they have to overcome the manifestation of "hostile or discriminating actions [ranging] from aggression to exclusion, dismissal, or typecasting ... and some [participants] had to compromise their race to survive" (Parker, 1998, pp. 48, 49). Therefore, it is imperative to this study that I connect student involvement with an epistemological framework that embraces race consciousness and cultural pluralism. Consequently, the critical race theory (CRT) frames the analysis of tension arising from descriptions of (1) White peers' day-to-day subtle and blatant racial slurs, (2) intimidation by the dominance of whiteness, (3) ways of coping with racial tension, (4) attempts to inform and disprove imagined stereotypes of blackness, (5) negative affects of inadequate pre-college preparation on students' involvement in RLC courses, seminars and study groups, (6) marginalized and muted voices of fear to avoid conflict, academic embarrassment and/or intimidation by the dominance of whiteness and (7) a cross-cultural identity crisis. "These daily indignities take their toll" on participants in RLCs in this study on a predominantly White campus" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 16).

The CRT offers a connection between race and discourses, which the participants in the socio cultural contexts of RLCs describe. Elements of CRT relevant to this study include the following themes: (1) racism is an endemic and normal part of social relations in the American society “despite the enactment of civil rights laws and good intentions to eradicate racism” (Parker, 1998, p. 45), (2) qualitative research in education gives power to marginalized and dispossessed voices through storytelling, i.e. “[T]hey add necessary contextual contours to the seeming objectivity of positivist perspectives” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Storytelling can play a role in community building, i.e. “Stories help to build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and a more vital ethics” (Tate, 1997, p. 220) and (3) White privilege is the benefit of the whiteness property, i.e. “Whites know they possess a property that people of color do not and that to possess it confers, aspects of citizenship not available to others” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 15). Therefore, vestiges of racial overtones from recent and historical backdrops permeate a multiple case study of the participants’ educational and social experiences in RLCs at a PWI.

A Multiple Case Study of Students’ Experiences

This study presents a multiple case study of African American undergraduate students’ experiences from six RLCs in separate chapters due to unique characteristics, goals and mission of each community as well as their commonalities, i.e. a multiple or collective case study (Stake, 2000). The following chapters reflect the participants’ experiences in their respective RLCs: Chapter Four – The Hillcrest Honors Community, Chapter Five – The Biological and Life Sciences Community, Chapter Six – The Residential Leadership Community, Chapter Seven – Women in Engineering Learning Community (Hypatia), Chapter Eight – The WING Community and Chapter Nine – The Wellness Environment for Living and Learning. Chapter

Ten contains former RLC participants' experiences, observations of the natural organization of students in RLCs, a discussion and reflections. Chapter Eleven presents implications and conclusions, implications for further research and an epilogue. Six categories emerged in the data: (1) community recruitment, (2) learning and personal development, (3) a sense of belonging: academic, social and ethnic fit, (4) peer interactions, (5) racial and cultural awareness and (6) advice from the participants. I wrote the following chapters in the sequence of the RLC interview process, which begins with participants in the Honors Community.

The Hillcrest Honors Residential Community

The Honors Community is a three-year residential learning community (RLC) program with approximately 100 students who have a grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 or better. Students who fall below a GPA of 3.5 have one chance for appeal in the community's Academic Standards Council to maintain their membership. Gregory and Frederick lived in the community for three years. Honors scholarships provide partial funding for both participants' education. Frederick describes the Honors Community: "We have this community that's academic, it's intellectual ... that's what it's suppose to do ... find people that are motivated, have interests ... and I feel comfortable talking with any of these people." Gregory and Frederick believe they are a good fit for the community because of high achievements in high school and at the university. The participants' recounts of the recruitment processes targeted students in high school and students enrolled at the university.

Community Recruitment

Frederick and his father went on, what he termed, "a road trip" to visit college campuses such as Duke University, North Carolina State and Virginia Tech when he was a junior in high school. While visiting Virginia Tech, they met with a staff member in the Honors Community to

find out about such things as the community requirements, activities, opportunities and funding. That staff member also contacted them by telephone following their return home to provide further information about the application process, to encourage Fredrick to enroll at Virginia Tech and to apply to the Honors Community for residential housing.

The director also provides opportunities for students to participate in the community's outreach and recruitment efforts. Frederick participated in a committee to review applications and interview college students for membership in the Honors Community. I observed two interviews with White male applicants who are juniors at Virginia Tech. Both interviewees are high achievers who live in all male residence halls. One of the applicants indicate that he is "looking for a more mature group of peers to interact and study with." The interviews took place in the conference area of the director's office for approximately thirty minutes each. This part of the office resembles a family room, which includes a sofa with maroon and pink pillows. There are also five cushioned chairs, which form a semi circle. The room has two large bookcases on both sides of the front wall, a glass bookcase and pictures on the sidewall.

The interview process includes Frederick, another community member, the director and the applicant. The other community member is Frederick's best friend. They serve as student representatives of the community during the interviews. I discreetly sit in a chair that is furthest away from each applicant in an attempt to be inconspicuous. The director facilitates the interviews and encourages input from Frederick and his best friend. They shake their heads, indicating that they do not have comments at that time. Frederick and his best friend sit quietly, listening to the applicants and occasionally taking notes. Following each interview, Frederick, his best friend and the director review their notes about the applicants. The director makes a comment about the applicants' responses: "It's more important to ask the right questions than to

give the right answers.” The director asks Frederick and his best friend for their input about the interviewees. They recommend one of the students, but have reservations about the other student based upon his responses. The director praises them for having great insight about the applicants. Observations of the interviews depict the director as a mentor who praises and empowers these students to actively engage in community recruitment efforts. Frederick also took part in the recruitment of high school seniors:

It’s just absolutely insane! That process is amazing because everyone sends in their applications as a high school senior. Two people (a faculty member and community member) have to look at all of them. And then, you pick people. You call them back ... for an interview. And they all come up (to Virginia Tech). And then several groups with two faculty members, two community members and a high school student meet for a final interview. And, so it’s cool!

Frederick indicates that faculty members are professors from various fields of study on campus. The final interviews focus on high school students’ academic interests. The honors program uses a 1– 4 ranking order (1 as the lowest rank, 4 as the highest rank) for acceptance. Following the director’s review of the selection committee’s evaluations, he decides which candidate to accept into the Honors Community.

Frederick’s description of the recruitment process illustrates the director’s confidence in his opinions regarding the applicants’ qualifications. Frederick was a member of the selection committee and participated in the final evaluations of the remaining candidates. The preceding descriptions also represent Frederick’s active involvement in the growth of the community. The opportunity for students to volunteer for this activity is an example of how the director encourages students to engage and connect with the welfare of the community.

Learning and Personal Development

The Intellectual Elite and Academically Empowered

Formal and informal conversations with the participants indicate a positive adjustment to the Honors Community. Frederick and Gregory referred to all faculty and staff members by first name, including the director. They also indicate that the director is aware of them as individuals as well as community members. Gregory describes his access to the director: “It’s really easy just to go downstairs and ask [the director] questions and get stuff done.” Interactions with other faculty and staff members in the community occur at social events or for purposes related to clerical information: “In terms of our community, we (community members) mainly deal through [the director]. It’s more [the director’s] thing than anybody else’s. He knows a tremendous amount of things about all of us.” Gregory makes a similar response: “I have positive relationships with other faculty and staff. I don’t really know them as well as I know [the director]. I usually just interact with [the director].” Both participants indicate that they, as well as their peers, mainly interact with the director of the community.

The director also encourages creativity and spontaneity. He is often a sounding board for the participants’ ideas, projects and interests. Gregory and Frederick do not hesitate to contact the director for advice. Frederick describes how he shares ideas with the director:

I’ll send little [e-mail] notes about things that I’ve been thinking about, like doing things, like things that I might need advice about. It’s pretty much whatever you want. I’ve asked him for funds to sponsor projects that I’ve wanted to do. He generally would give me money if I ask for it, which is always nice.

The director of the Honors Residential Program is a White male who the participants describe as their mentor. Gregory and Frederick describe their interactions with the director:

Frederick: [The director], our mentor ... We've been to his house. He's cooked for us. And we chat a lot. When I have a problem, I just talk to [the director]. It's kinda ... if I needed a father figure, he could be a substitute. But, I'm not really lacking in father figures.

Gregory: We are really close to [the director]. It is good to know that someone is really behind me and felt strongly about an idea or a project that I wanted to do.

Personal contact with the director is important to Gregory and Frederick. The director's attention and interest in the two African American students in the community reinforce and validate their membership in the community. Frederick seeks emotional support "from his best friend, his Dad ... and [the director]." Gregory also receives emotional support from the director and his close friends.

Opportunities at Home and Abroad

The director is a mentor with whom the participants "could just hang out and relax." For example, Frederick was anxious to share with the director the experiences of his studies abroad during the 2003 Summer I session:

Over the summer, I came over here (the residence hall). I was taking classes and I came to talk to him (the director) ... because I went to England for half the summer (Summer I) and I came back here (Virginia Tech) for the other half (Summer II). And I came in, sat down, had lunch with him ... watched women's golf on TV with him. And then left.

Frederick describes watching golf on TV with the director as an example of a "random and unplanned treat." I asked about the courses that he took in England: "I took a Shakespeare class, an early drama class, and I took a Scottish Writers class." Frederick further comments, "The trip

was awesome and so worth it!” He was in England for six weeks. I asked Frederick how he decided to study abroad in England:

Well, me and my best friend were like ... ‘Hey!’ We see this trip and it looks pretty cool. And then we were both like ... ‘Alright we’re going!’ And then, we decided to go. [The funding for the trip came from ...?] My funding came from my parents.

The friendship between Frederick and his best friend is partially due to similar academic interests. Both students are English majors. They also participate in the same community activities and events. They encourage each other to take advantage of an opportunity the university offers to study abroad. This suggests that Frederick and his best friend inspire one another to make the most of their educational experiences in the Honors Community. However, Frederick’s family’s financial support for the expense of the trip, ultimately, allows him to take advantage of the opportunity to study abroad.

Frederick completes most of the undergraduate course requirements by the end of his freshman year:

I had already done most of my core [requirements] in high school. So the 6 or 7 classes that I had left to take, I pretty much finished that my freshman year. And then, [I finished] all of my major courses ... during my sophomore year.

Frederick receives credit for several AP (advanced placement) high school courses. He takes the remaining core courses during his freshman year. Frederick completes course work for a major in English during his sophomore year, which includes summer sessions I and II. He also receives credit from his studies abroad. Early completion of course requirements explains time for many extracurricular activities (described below in the ‘Study Practices’ section) that enrich educational experiences as an English major.

Frederick and his father's visit to Virginia Tech during his junior year in high school and contact with a staff member in the Honors Community indicates high academic expectations. Frederick not only receives encouragement from home, but he also receives support from the director once he arrives on campus. In addition, "highly motivated" peers constantly stimulate a desire to excel.

Fredrick describes the community's environment as "a very comfortable, stable living environment. Like everybody is expected to do more here than they would anywhere else ... because we are surrounded by similarly motivated people. ... It's quieter. It's calmer [than other dorms]." Therefore, the Honors Community is an environment that expects students to excel and uphold the image of the community.

Colloquium Magnus

Gregory and Frederick participate in various activities with fellow students, which includes a required weekly Colloquium Magnus two-credit seminar per semester. Students in the community organize and facilitate this seminar. Frederick's best friend's questionnaire response describes the colloquium:

It's a class that focuses more on what can be learned from peers rather than professors.

The focus tends to be more on the fact of conversation and seminar type learning rather than book learning. Questions are emphasized more than answers.

Observations in several colloquiums took place in a former dining room of their residence hall. They lasted from fifty minutes to an hour. I observed in one Colloquium for fifty minutes (1:00-1:50pm) and another for one hour (2:00-3:00pm).

Students attend presentations of various speakers on campus to share and discuss in colloquium sessions. For example, one discussion focuses on Bobby Kennedy's presentation

about environmental issues. According to the participants, colloquium groups discuss a large range of issues from social, racial, religious, and environmental to political. Students discuss issues on film and approximately one book per month.

The participants also take part in reading groups. Students receive a list of books to read over the summer on a wide variety of topics. Gregory's examples includes "the Michael Moore book, which covers racial issues in America, the environment ... and basically, it's a political book." They also read a book titled *Toxic Sludges*, "which is about PR (public relations) companies." Students write a paper about the readings and participate in discussions. However, during his three years in the community, he could not recall having read or discussed a book with an African American author. He indicated that a topic regarding "race seldom occurs in a discussion because it made everyone feel uncomfortable." In a reflective pause, Gregory had the following response concerning the absence of books with African American authors:

I don't think we have read any Black authors, at least while I've been here. The book on race was written by Michael Moore. It's (the absence of African American authors) kind of disturbing to me. I would not have thought much about it a year ago. This past year, I've had sort of an awakening of this ... involving race. But occasionally we will get on the issue of race.

Gregory indicates that racial issues were a non-issue for him in the community until recently. Gregory broached a topic regarding race in the colloquium, but his peers followed with non-responsive reactions to attempts to initiate a discussion:

I brought up the issue of race a couple of weeks ago in the colloquium. And I sort of get the impression that people (fellow White students) are really uncomfortable talking about [racial issues]. Especially, since we (referring to himself and Frederick) are the only two

Black people in this community. So, most of them (fellow students) are White. We get to pick usually what books we read. So, I just don't think that issues that Black authors discuss are important to them (fellow White peers). *So, the majority rules.*

Gregory would like to discuss the book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, but hesitates too long to submit the book for consideration before the deadline. He admits, "I was too lazy to get it in, in time." This may be a sign of hopelessness and oppression that paralyzes Gregory's efforts to submit his book choice in a timely manner (Friere, 1970/1997; McIntyre, 1997). The response, "*So, the majority rules*" suggests that he is in a no-win situation.

Frederick describes his input in the reading group: "I put a little twist on the reading group. I created a creative writing group. So that's another thing that students are going to be taught to do." As a result of Frederick's interest in writing, the community plans to initiate creative writing groups next fall.

Peers and faculty members frequently give approval, praise and positive feedback as Frederick and Gregory take part in community activities. Not only are many of the participants' ideas well received, peers and faculty occasionally initiate their ideas into practice. The community members' willingness to implement ideas, such as Frederick's idea for a writing group, is met with enthusiasm and support. However, a discussion of racial issues seldom occurs. Gregory's descriptions suggest a tendency to suppress the discussion of racial issues within the community. Therefore, implications indicate that this community may cause students of color to lose their racial identity, rendering ethnic affiliation as minimal and inconsequential.

Study Practices

Criteria for acceptance into the community already substantiated the participants' high

academic standing and personal qualities. Previous descriptions of Frederick's educational experiences provide insight into his academic prowess. However, Frederick insists that he does not study for tests. He describes quizzes in Greek and Roman Mythology as "easy." I asked Frederick if he had any tests at Virginia Tech: "Yes, but I don't study for tests." Frederick could not explain *how*, but he describes *what* he does to prepare for course evaluations:

I don't really study. I write papers. I don't study for tests. I do the homework. And once I did the homework, I didn't have to study for tests. But, if I have a group project, then I'll do group projects. But, as for the most part, I'm not going to study with a group. I go to review sessions. I do research in mathematics.

The English field, with a focus on creative writing, mainly requires written papers for course assignments and evaluations such as creative writings, presentations, reports and research papers. Frederick also participates in extracurricular activities related to various aspects of his academic interests. He receives 3 credits as a tutor in the Writing Center. Frederick is an intern in the Sports Information Office where he helps update the website. He also participates in writing sports articles in the university's newspaper. Therefore, he gains additional writing skills outside of the classroom through practical involvement relative to his field of study.

Gregory's major is mathematics with a minor in philosophy. He studies with students in the community who are in his classes; he meets with professors during office hours, and he studies in the library. Gregory states, "There's a few people in my dorm who are in my classes. So, usually we work together or ask each other questions." Gregory describes his study habits:

I don't like sitting in my room. Most of the time, I work in study lounges in the dorm. I also go to the library sometimes ...usually by myself. If I'm feeling really unmotivated to go, I'll try to get a friend from another dorm to go with me.

Frederick prefers to study alone unless an assignment requires a group effort. Gregory studies alone, but also participates in study groups with peers in his courses. The participants' study practices reflect the characteristics of their academic fields, educational gains from practical experiences in extracurricular activities and a preference to work independently.

The participants depict the Honors Community as a student-oriented environment and a source of academic stimulation and support. According to Frederick, "Everybody does more here than they would anywhere else for two reasons: (1) we are surrounded by similarly motivated people and (2) the atmosphere is more, it's better ... it prepares you for this." However, there are consequences for being an honors student:

The Honors Student Stigma

Frederick receives two kinds of responses from students outside of the Honors Community when he tells them where he lives:

First, they'll be like ... "Oh yeah? You live in Hillcrest? Where is that? Or, What is that? Is that a dorm? Is it on campus"? The second response I get, "Oh! So you live in Hillcrest! I see!" (Frederick laughs). *It's the whole stigma of being an honors student here.* It's a weird thing ... a very strange thing.

The first type of response came from African American students on campus. Frederick discovered that many African American students "don't know about this place (the Honors Community)." On the other hand, the latter response, "Oh! So you live in Hillcrest! I see!" came from a White honors student who lives in a traditional residence hall. I asked Frederick what he thought about those responses:

I think it's hilarious (laughs). I'm like ... what does that mean? Does that mean that I am better, smarter, stronger, faster than you? No! Look, I just ... I tend to be someone who

dismisses stereotypes very easily because ... stereotypes, they're just that. They're not how things always are. They can be like that. But, people are like ... 'Oh! You live in Hillcrest. Then you've gotta be a nerd.' Well, I'm like, No! What do you want from me? That just makes me laugh.

Frederick describes a conversation with a student who applied to the Honors Community:

This one guy (a White male student) was like, 'So, what do you have that I don't? Cause they didn't let me in there.' And I'm just like, what do you want from me (laughs)? I didn't de-select you!

Frederick shares his perception of this conversation:

He was questioning people (referring to himself) for being an honors student ... questioning their abilities and things like that. I think he's not confident in his own abilities ... that he has to belittle others. I had to put him in his place, and I don't really feel bad because he really deserved it. *That was the finest thing I've ever done.*

Frederick chooses not to repeat the conversation, but summarizes his annoyance:

Just because you think you are better than other people doesn't mean that you are. And you don't know everything. I emphasized his arrogance to him. And then I also just carefully corrected his misconceptions about some things that he thought about ... honors students.

Frederick believes that, as an African American honors student, he has already proven his intellectual ability:

I've pretty much succeeded. And so in terms of not being capable, it's hard for people to say that. There isn't much they can say to that. So, I don't think race will ever be an issue

[about my intellectual ability] because before it ever gets there, I have already dispelled any sort of sign that it's – it's just a black thing.

The time-frame of this conversation occurred during campus uproar about affirmative action plans. Therefore, this conversation could be a result of the debate concerning the elimination of affirmative action. Frederick finds it necessary to defend his membership in the Honors Community as an academically earned position, not to fill a quota. Frederick emphasizes that high academic achievement qualifies his acceptance into the Honors Community. He also came to realize that high achievement can conceal the representation of one's racial and ethnic identity. Therefore, academic achievement can overshadow racial identity to a point where race becomes an insignificant matter.

Frederick's interactions with several African American students outside of the community imply that he is different because of high academic achievements along with a membership in the Honors Community. I asked Frederick if he has friendships with African American students outside of the community:

No (fingers tap the table). But, I'm part of a Black Honors Society. I'm not quite sure how that happened. Like ... we were inducted. This was freshman year. And after that we haven't done anything. And that was two years ago. So, I don't know what that's about.

This is Frederick's description of contact with African American students outside of the community during his freshman year.

Frederick also shares perceptions of African American students on campus:

It seems like ... me and Gregory are not as ghettoized as some African American students here in general. And there is ... not a split between the two groups, but there is definitely a distinction between them. And it's a very interesting thing to be an African

American or Black American on this campus. Cause ... (a) there aren't a lot of us and (b) like we are either very densely packed as in like ... all of us will be hanging out together. And I'm not part of that. So I should say, all of *them* would be hanging out together. Cause there's just that split.

This description is Frederick's perception of two types of African American students on campus: the high achievers and the "ghettoized" African American students, whom he characterizes as "hip-hop." It is unclear what truly differentiates African American high achievers from "ghettoized" African American students. It brings into question the evolution of these perceptions and stereotypes and whether these perceptions are real or imagined.

Many African American students create their own spaces as a survival strategy to cope with racial indignities they experience on campus (Scott, 1995). Furthermore, the establishment of diversity initiatives at the university suggests the need for students of color to have welcoming places in the midst of isolating spaces built upon a "history of exclusion ... if all participants in the Virginia Tech community are going to thrive" (Hutchinson, Hyer & Collins, 2000, p. vii).

Frederick's description of educational experiences in predominantly White environments, such as high school and the Honors Community, suggests that high academic performance can erase ethnic identity. Therefore, high academic achievement camouflages Frederick's ethnicity so that he can become a member of 'the majority that rules,' i.e. assume the properties of whiteness to benefit from White privilege. If so, African American students must navigate between ethnic approval and academic achievement.

Peer Interactions

Frederick describes fellow students in the community as “smart people running around who can do absolutely incredibly amazing things.” He feels that the students are “basically good people with lots of opinions about lots of different things, very talented and extremely motivated.” However, he observes his peers’ treatment of students outside of the community with what he calls “an intellectual snobbery:”

It’s sort of obnoxious. It’s kind of annoying. It’s almost like an intellectual snobbery here. There’s clearly a level of separation between some of the people [in the Honors Community] and the rest of the Virginia Tech community ... like an almost minor disdain cause we all got to Tech. We’re all students here. And we are not better than anybody else. Like we are among the best students, but we are not the best.

Frederick wonders why many of his peers feel a need to display an intellectual superior attitude toward other students on campus. He believes these attitudes cause some level of social separation from other students on campus. Frederick chooses not to provide an example, but adds, “It’s just something that exists.” An inference about the concept of “intellectual snobbery” toward students outside of the Honors Community is unclear. This question requires further research on the topic.

Frederick and his best friend developed a close friendship during their freshman year in the community. He describes things they have in common:

We’re both English majors. Some would say that’s about it (laughs). He’s a tall White guy and I’m not (laughs). And that’s cool. We are both creative writers. We are somewhat alike.

Other close friends also live in the Honors Community. He has a friendly relationship with his roommate and positive relationships with other students in the community:

My closest friends are in Hillcrest. I'm pretty much on good terms with everybody ... uh, almost everybody at least. Like there's some people here that I'm not particularly fond of. But, in terms of a working relationship, everything is fine.

Although Frederick likes knowing everyone in the community, he is "tired of seeing the same faces everyday, all of the time, over the past three years:"

Like in the middle of the winter ... there's nothing else to do but hang out with people at Hillcrest. It's really hard to meet people outside of the dorm.

Gregory also has positive relationships with peers in the community. However, his close friends live in other residence halls:

Some of my friends in other dorms never even know who they live next to. But here, we are encouraged to get to know each other.

Gregory regards relationships with students within the community as "positive acquaintances."

He describes the friendship with his roommate as an "artistic relationship" because his roommate's major is architecture. Gregory shares similar thoughts about "seeing the same people every year:"

There's ... sometimes social tensions can develop. You know ... you just get tired of seeing the same people all of the time (laughs).

Gregory feels that a "weird thing about knowing and seeing everyone all of the time" is dating someone inside of the community:

You get a girlfriend or a boyfriend in the community and then you break up. And so you see them year after year... having the social awkwardness that comes with that.

Gregory perceives the public display of affection by couples as the most annoying experience in the community. However, the academic success of community members outweighs the annoying or uncomfortable experiences within the community: “It helps when your peers are successful.”

Gregory describes the advantages of living in the Honors Community:

One of the benefits is sort of ... being around people who are like-minded in terms of academics. It helps to keep you focused on doing well academically. ... Also, we are really close with [the director].

Both participants downplay uncomfortable relationships with peers in order to remain receptive to the benefits of the community.

Memorable Experiences

Frederick enjoyed organizing “Open Mike Night” in the community with his best friend who was the master of ceremony. He describes it as “two hours of people playing guitars, reading poetry ... having fun. ... That was a good time.” This type of activity helps students to remain socially connected and maintain a sense of community.

Gregory talks about his participation in organizing a dance for the Honors Community. However, he regards a dialogue with the director about an art project as his most memorable experience in the Honors Community. He shares the general idea of that discussion:

I was not sure about how to start it (the project). And we sat down and talked about it. And he had all of these great ideas. And he even offered to fund it if I get some money towards it. That was a good experience because it was good to know that someone was really behind me and felt strongly about an idea or a project that I wanted to do. That was memorable.

This experience, as well as previous descriptions of student-director interactions, substantiates the significance of emotional support as well as academic support. Astin (1996) indicates that college students' affective development is just as important as their cognitive development. In this study, affective experiences intertwine with students' educational development. Therefore, individual attention and emotional supportive experiences are important to maintain and enhance Gregory and Frederick's self esteem, confidence and educational achievements. Such experiences positively influence their academic pursuits.

The art project gains attention, emotional and financial support. The director's support of this project, the initiation of the writing group and praise for participation in the recruitment process are three examples of positive reinforcement and value given to the participants' intellectual credibility. On the other hand, minimal interest in racial concerns for discussion, the omission of African American authors from the book list and Frederick's delay in submitting his book preference have other implications. What about their sense of ethnic fit in the community?

Racial and Cultural Awareness

Teaching and Learning about Passive Racism

Gregory's family moved to the suburbs of New York when he was nine years old. He grew up in a predominantly White community and does not recall facing racial issues in his home town. The family's relocation suggests a change in economic status, which influences his childhood experiences:

I was born in New York City in a predominantly Black neighborhood. But then, we moved to the suburbs. So basically, growing, I was mostly around White people. And race was never really an issue with me. I got along well with everyone. At least I didn't realize that there were any issues with it (racism).

Gregory was unaware of problems with race as an issue until he went to college. His awareness of racial issues began through several conversations with an African American student from another RLC on campus:

My friend (John in the Leadership Community) is very involved in terms of diversity or the lack there of [on campus]. So, I've gotten into these big discussions with him. The topic got around to passive racism. That was my awakening and realization of passive racism.

I asked Gregory to talk about his understanding of passive racism:

It's institutional ... in that no one is directly discriminating against or trying to hold down or oppress a minority. There are certain things in place that are actually holding, oppressing people in subtle ways. It's not directly in front of your face.

According to Tatum (1997), "Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still. ... No overt effort is being made ... to move the bystanders from passive racism ... to active antiracism" (p. 11). When I asked Gregory to give an example of passive racism in the community, his response questions, "*Why were there only two African American students in the Honors Community in three years?*" Gregory recalls "about 7 people of color out of 100 students" in the community. His recount of non-majority students includes one Iranian, one Asian, two African Americans, including himself, and two students with unknown nationalities. He describes the director's response to this question:

I remember [the director] saying how he thought the population fit the diversity that he wanted to have, which at the time, there were also only two Black people in the dorm.

[The director] felt that the proportion of racial groups was satisfactory!

Gregory's memory of this three-year-old conversation suggests that he is well aware of the low population of students of color in the community over the years. The director's response to Gregory's question indicates that a 2% representation of African American students in the community is satisfactory. Therefore, Gregory's observation of a continuously low number of students of color suggests that he perceives this year-to-year occurrence as an example of passive racism. What strategies do the participants use to cope with racial challenges?

Survival Strategies: A Grain of Salt, Maybe More, But When is More Too Much?

The participants understand that it is important to stay focused on educational goals. They would rather spend time "enjoying college rather than be upset about the small stuff." They perceive behaviors that are not emotionally destructive or physically harmful as "the small stuff." Consequently, an adverse or offensive situation causes the participants to make choices about how to react or not to react. Fredrick shares his thoughts about coping with racial bias:

Don't let stupid things bother you. Like, throw it away. It doesn't matter. A lot of those things you gotta take it with a grain of salt or sometimes a handful.

Gregory shares similar coping strategies:

I just try to stay positive. When you take academics very seriously, you don't have time for many things. A lot of the time, you are just in your room working. To relax ... I go to my computer, chatting programs, browsing the Internet. Or, I visit my friends in other dorms. I also participate in organizations and activities outside of the community. And if I need to, it's easy to sit and talk with [the director].

The participants' awareness of racial bias necessitates a decision about when to remain silent, when to walk away and when to challenge an offense (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Sedlacek, 1999). For example, as an attempt to inform the White male student who questions his

acceptance in the Honors Community, Frederick vehemently refutes what he perceives as a direct insult to his intellectual ability. Contrastingly, Gregory does not follow through on a desire to submit his book choice for consideration for the book list. He decides to “let it go,” i.e. chooses silence. More importantly, he may categorize his concern about the book list as “the small stuff” to avoid the possibility for rejection.

Advice from the Participants

The participants believe that the atmosphere in the Honors Community is different than other residence halls on campus:

You are surrounded by people whose objectives are higher all of the time. Let’s get good grades (laughs)! I think this community emphasizes success ... in terms of being successful as a person and not being afraid to pursue big goals. I’m not sure I would have done as well if I weren’t in the community.

Both participants would recommend the Honors Community to other students. However, Gregory cautions,

It depends on whether or not you would like living in a place that is far away from everything, if you like being around people who are high achievers and, you know everyone. You know them one year and you come back and they are all here again.

Frederick shares perceptions of the university and his educational experiences in the Honors Community: “Like this is one of the most beautiful places that I’ve ever lived in. And so for me, it’s like life kind of sucks when you spend time being upset. So, don’t let stupid things bother you.”

Summary

Several factors appear from Gregory and Frederick's descriptions of social and educational experiences in the Honors Community: First, frequent contact with the director is significant and vital to their social fit to the community. Recurring references to the director's nurturance (daily contact, formal and informal interactions, emotional and academic support) indicates the value of positive affective experiences in the educational development of both participants. The director's confidence and high expectations encourage a sense of responsibility, value and pride in the Honors Community.

The director validates Gregory and Fredericks placement in the community by taking a hands-on approach. He is readily available for formal and informal interactions. The director routinely encourages their input in many aspects of the community's affairs by seeking and implementing their ideas and suggestions. Questionnaire responses from Frederick and his best friend about their participation in the recruitment process reflect personal ownership in the community's growth and development:

Frederick: Its important to have student participation in selecting its members.

Best Friend: I appreciate the philosophy behind member involvement and recruitment.

And he (the director) acts on it.

Therefore, the director is identified as the key figure in the participants' community experiences.

Second, the importance of student initiated activities, which allows them the opportunity to take ownership and have a stake in the success of their community, is significant. This type of involvement is not only an asset to the community, but promotes leadership skills while developing a sense of community.

The third factor relates to stereotypes associated with high achieving students. The community's environment is a safe space for the participants to excel academically. However, their status on campus becomes apparent through contact with students outside of the community: (a) African American students see the participants as intellectual elites or "nerds," (b) a White student questions Frederick's acceptance into the community and (c) although Frederick denies that he is a member of an intellectual elite society on campus, he believes that his peers in the community maintain an air of intellectual superiority toward students in other residence halls. Further research may shed insight into this assumption.

Fourth, Frederick's acceptance into the Honors Community is questioned by a White honors student in another residence hall whose application is not accepted in this RLC. This conversation takes place during the debate on campus about the elimination of affirmative action. The campus climate at that time could cause the White student to question Frederick's acceptance into the Honors Community. Frederick indicates that this student somehow tries to blame him for not getting into the community. Consequently, this conversation causes Frederick to defend his placement into the Honors Community. Frederick came to realize that he is not only an honors student, but an African American honors student whose legitimacy in the community is in question by a White student who does not have access to the community.

The fifth factor is twofold. The participants describe a distinct lack of interest in racial issues by White students in the colloquium: (1) The omission of African American authors for discussion in the colloquium, compounded with White students' indifference to the discussion of racial issues, affect sense of ethnic fit to the community, and (2) Students benefit and enhance their educational development through different ways of knowing by having opportunities to explore culturally diverse issues on campus and in the society at large.

Gregory's lack of response to submit his book choice is in contrast to previous enthusiasm for community activities. This response suggests an emotional, then physical, withdrawal from a desire to submit a book with an African American author. A speculation about Gregory's unresponsiveness indicates doubt that his peers would select the book. The delayed response suggests an act of suppression, i.e. accepting the existence of a racialized position in the community and/or an attempt to avoid peer rejection or disapproval. Although Gregory's peers accept him on the basis of intellect, the statement, "The majority rules," suggests that (1) his peers are unreceptive to his racial identity – his African American-ness; (2) he is powerless to influence the group due to a low number of students of color in the community; and (3) fellow White students' exhibit a lack of interest in "perspectives and histories other than their own" (Lardner, 2004, p. 114).

The sixth and final factor relates to the conversation between Gregory and the director about the percentage of African American students in the community. The director's response suggests that Gregory and Frederick represent an adequate number of African Americans in the community over a three year period. Data indicates that out of 100 members in the community, Gregory and Frederick plus the other five students of color are a satisfactory representation of culturally diverse students (2% African American; 7% students of color in total). I believe that the lack of increased numbers of diverse learners in the community, along with the participants' desire for meaningful dialogue rather than for symbolic references to historically underrepresented groups, met with feelings of hopelessness and acceptance of the status quo (Freire, 1997).

Gregory emphasizes the significance of his intellectual ability as a qualification of his acceptance into the Honors Community. Hence, this suggests that he faces a dilemma. He is

proud to have the status of an intellectual elite. Conversely, the feeling of hopelessness and oppression emerges due to a disregard for his racial/ethnic identity within the community (McIntyre, 1997). Speculations point to a tendency to suppress the discussion of racial issues within the community. This is a phenomenon, which implies two simultaneous occurrences in this RLC: (1) Persons of color should expect to lose their racial/ethnic identity and (2) The majority group renders the racial/ethnic identity of persons of color as inconsequential. The following chapter presents the second RLC in this inquiry.

Chapter Five

The Biological and Life Sciences Community

The Biological and Life Sciences Community (BLSC) is a one year program for forty first-year students who major in the physical or environmental sciences. They live on one floor of a residence hall. I characterize this community as a residential education program because of its intentional focus on an academically specialized discipline (Schoem, 2004). In addition, faculty and staff offices are in other buildings on campus, except for student Hall Counsel members and the RAs. Contact with faculty and staff occurs at the time of instruction, in the seminars and during social events. Patrice, Matthew and Brian are the participants in this residential community.

According to the participants, the BLSC program requires at least a 3.0 GPA for graduating high school seniors to qualify as members of the community. This RLC requires applicants to write an essay, which describes reasons they want to join the community. A search for on-campus housing leads the participants to the BLSC because of a decision to major in biology.

Community Recruitment

Matthew searches the Virginia Tech on-campus housing website. Brian hears about the community from a former BLSC student in a summer program on campus, then searches the website for on-campus housing. Patrice receives a brochure about the BLSC while she was in high school and also searches the website for housing. Matthew and Brian complete and e-mail on-line applications. Matthew describes how he learned about the BLSC program:

They really don't recruit for these things (residential theme housing). I was on line looking for dorms and I happened to see a link that said theme housing. And I looked at different ones. So, I knew that I wanted to be a biology major. ... I looked into the BLSC.

There are people here that didn't hear about [the BLSC] until the last minute. But, they (theme housing programs) don't really [actively recruit] anyone to try to come to these things (residential theme housing).

Brian attends a summer program on campus for in-coming freshmen where a former BLSC student volunteers:

One of the girls that was [a host in a summer program] recommended the BLSC. She said she got a lot out of it. So, that was another thing that made me feel comfortable. Like, another African American [recommended the community]. She said she was the only African American in [the BLSC] ... and it was ok. She said she had a fairly decent experience with it. My parents asked her would she recommended it. She said, 'I would benefit.' And that was another good thing that made me feel comfortable.

Patrice also completes an on-line application. However, she is notified that her application is missing:

Some how my application got mixed up and the BLSC people never received it. And I was like, 'how can you not receive it because ... it was like, on-line and I remember. And I even got a confirmation letter. And they were like, 'I never received it.' So, I was working with the lady advisor to see what was going on. And she helped me get into the BLSC.

These experiences indicate that the participants mainly discover the BLSC by chance through word-of-mouth conversations. Then, through a search for on-campus housing on the website and from a campus housing brochure.

The participants' experiences begin with the required educational components of the BLSC. They include (1) The Biological and Life Sciences Seminar, (2) The Community Service

Project, (3) Career Presentations and (4) Two Co-Enrolled Courses. How did these requirements shape the participants' educational experiences in the BLSC?

Learning and Personal Development

Required Educational Components

The Biological Life Sciences Community Seminar

The BLSC requires a one credit seminar per semester. Professors from across the campus, university program office staff members and former BLSC students visit seminars to provide information about resources, programs and opportunities on campus. I observed several BLSC seminars. The seminars take place in a large student lounge of the residence hall. In one seminar, STAs arrange lounge chairs and sofas in the center of the room facing one direction to indicate where presenters will stand. The room is well lit with numerous opened windows to allow the room to ventilate. However, several STAs comment that "the lounge is hot." The STAs connect a projector and a computer before students arrive, but have technical difficulties. They resolve the problem in time to begin the presentations. Two former BLSC students share experiences of their studies abroad with current BLSC members. One presenter studied in Africa and the other studied in Australia.

Following the presentations, a staff member from the Student Exchange & Study Abroad Program discusses opportunities to study abroad, course credits, living arrangements, travel costs and grades. She also invites BLSC students to the office for further information. This staff member asks students to think about a country where they would like to study. There is a buzz among the students as they whisper to one another. Several students raise their hands to share ideas. Matthew and Brian listen without making verbal contributions. Patrice whispers to students where she is sitting.

In another seminar, BLSC members receive a guide for writing a curriculum vitae or résumé and a guide to build skills in public speaking. Peer group assignments continue the focus of the seminar topic. Students form four peer groups during the last half of each seminar. Patrice shares perceptions of seminars and peer groups:

The seminar meets once a week on Thursdays for two hours. Basically, for the first half of the seminar, all we do is just listen. Someone would come in and talk to us about different topics for the day. After they finish talking, then we go into our little groups. The groups were organized by alphabetical order. ... The STAs are in charge of each group. They'll have, like activities. They'll have questions for us about how do we like the seminar? Did we learn anything? Do we have any questions? And they will try to give us information that we might need.

Patrice remembers a discussion about a familiar topic:

One time I did say something in the seminar, one time, because it was about time management and I knew some things about that. But, basically, I just listen.

Matthew shares his perceptions of peer groups:

They split us up by last name. So we might get an assignment like, work on your personal statement, do our four year planners and résumés. We turn in our homework to them. They grade them – Complete or Incomplete. Our group leader, she tries to inform us to see what's going on ... see how we like the speakers. But there's not much you can say when everybody is ready to get out of there.

I observed peer groups in several seminars. In one peer group, STAs (peer group leaders) help BLSC students with an assignment to develop a personal statement, which should include important influences from books, events, people and experiences. Another peer group critiques

seminar-speaker presentations. Peer group leaders ask students to provide input on a previous seminar presentation about effective public speaking. However, the participants in this study usually sit quietly, making minimal verbal contributions. Matthew and Brian describe their perceptions of seminars:

Matthew: We don't do anything in seminars (laughs). I find them pointless except for when we get speakers that tell you something you didn't know. We sit there ... we listen. We go to [peer] groups. We are informed of everything that's going on, on campus, and we are let out. So you sit there and listen.

Brian: Some of the topics are not interesting to me, like Veterinary Science. I think seminars can be helpful, but it also ... like, the things they want us to do, like a personal statement. I know we had to do the 4-year planner, and we were like ... we don't want to do this. But, after we did it, it is helpful because it helps you plan the required courses and the courses in your major. That was helpful because it gave us a head start to plan our classes.

I asked Patrice and Brian to share thoughts about the topic on studying abroad since they did not contribute to the discussion:

Patrice: "It was nice. I liked the one about Africa."

[Tell me about your interest in studying abroad]:

I love to travel and I want to study abroad, but knowing my father, I *would not* be able to go. I'm like the baby girl. So, he was like, 'I don't want you going over there because of the world situation now ... war and everything'. But, I would like to go to Africa.

Brian: Actually, I was planning to do that this summer. But, I probably won't do it this summer. ... I have to work. But, I do plan to do it my sophomore or my junior year. That would be something that I would like to do.

Matthew's interview occurred prior to this seminar discussion. Therefore, I did not talk with him about studying abroad.

Matthew has little interest in several of the seminar topics: "I didn't find plants and DNA interesting." However, he describes elements in seminars that are useful:

Matthew: [BLSC students] are always informed of stuff that [other students] don't hear [about]. Like, our professors will come to some of our seminars. So, come test time, we already know how they do their tests. Like, the biology professor took 80% of the test from the back of the chapter. The rest of the people (students outside of the BLSC) didn't know. But we knew to study the back of the chapter questions. So, we are all guaranteed pretty much a [grade of a] B. So, there's benefits.

In other words, BLSC students receive information in seminars that students in traditional residence halls usually discover on their own.

Unlike the participants in the Honors Community's Colloquiums, BLSC students rarely engage in dialogue or discussions in seminars. The participants, as well as other BLSC members, sit quietly during presentations or while faculty and staff members present information. In addition, the participants do not indicate involvement in planning activities or input in the growth and development of the community as did the participants in the Honors Community. The participants' disinterest in several requirements and topics suggest a disconnection from some of the seminar objectives. However, end of the semester evaluations provide instructors and the director with students' perceptions of the BLSC program. I received a copy of the BLSC Interim

Assessment form that students use to evaluate the program. Completed evaluations were not available.

The Community Service Project

The community service (CS) requirement requires students to complete eight hours of service in a setting of their choice. Brian talks about the challenge to plan the project, travel to the location and complete the eight-hour requirement:

We have to do eight hours of community service. I don't mind doing it, but it's like time as well. They had different things that we could pick from. One thing that we had on campus was like a stream clean up. Some others were the YMCA, Free Clinic and The Boys and Girls Club. I don't mind doing that, but we had to do *eight hours* and we had to set it up ourselves ... and call people.

Brian indicates that the time it takes to plan, travel to the location and complete the hours of service, limits time for studying. He shares his perception of the CS requirement:

I think that [CS] is fine. But, I didn't know that we had to do all that stuff. Me and my roommate were discussing it. And, I'm glad that I did join the BLSC. But, there are some things that I didn't know we had to do. I signed up for the Free Clinic [as my CS].

Patrice chose the Adult Day Services on campus as her CS project:

As a volunteer ... they gave us a list of places to go, like The Boys and Girls Club, highway cleanup, stream cleanup, the retirement home, things like that. I found the adult day care on campus.

I asked Patrice to talk about her CS experiences:

Oh, *it's very tiresome, oh boy!* Cause some of the people have Alzheimer's, and the levels vary. And talking with them is nice. It's ok, but I'm just very tired.

I asked Patrice how much time she volunteers each week:

I spent four hours [in one day]. After that I went to my room and laid down and got back up and did my work. My body was like, you need to go lay down and rest somewhere.

Patrice attempts to complete eight hours of CS in two weeks in an environment with adults who have a deteriorating brain dysfunction. Although the location is convenient, perhaps this type of community service is overwhelming for a first-year student with numerous academic challenges. Patrice came to realize that fewer CS hours earlier in the semester over a weekly time-frame is preferable, but believes that “course work comes first.” I advised her to consider that a two-hour, four-week schedule might be easier to manage. Patrice indicates that trying to “catch-up” in course work causes difficulty in managing time for the CS project.

Career Presentations

Career presentations replace the regular seminar meetings near the end of the spring semester. This assignment requires students to interview a person in careers that are similar to their career interests. Although this activity provides an opportunity for active involvement, the participants did not look forward to this activity. Matthew has a different major by the time of the career presentations:

I chose clinical psychology and that's who me and my partner will be interviewing. We have to ask them questions about what they do and what they like about their job and what they recommend. And we're just going to present it to the seminar.

I asked Matthew if he is looking forward to this assignment:

No, I'm really not. It seems to me like it's going to be, you know, like those little projects you use to do in high school, where everybody just gets up and presents at the same time. It seems like it would just get boring.

I asked what he could do to make his presentation interesting. He suggests that the only thing they could do is to “decorate their poster boards because they couldn’t make changes to the guidelines.” I asked if the assignment allows them to make suggestions or do something in addition to or in the place of the guidelines:

Oh yeah, we can do that, but it’s just too much time for something that isn’t an important grade. Nobody’s really taking the extra effort to ... all we know is, we do the work; we get our ‘A’. It’s an easy ‘A’.

BLSC students went to a different location outside of the residence hall for this activity to accommodate Power Point presentations. On the day that I observed, group members take turns talking mechanically or reading from note cards, pointing to items on a poster board or bullets on a Power Point slide. At the end of a group’s presentation, fellow BLSC students did not ask questions or make comments. Classmates applaud each groups’ finale. Observations indicate that students are going through the motions to complete the requirement.

The career presentation activity is an opportunity for the participants to become actively involved in learning. Yet, they did not look forward to this activity. What BLSC experiences causes them to dread this assignment as well as the CS project? Thus far, data reveals that the participants joined the community prior to becoming aware of these requirements. Unexpected academic difficulties in co-enrolled courses and labs compound educational challenges in the BLSC.

Experiences in Co-Enrolled Courses

BLSC students enroll in Principles of Biology during the fall semester and in a General Chemistry course in the spring. Each course contains lab requirements. These courses include academic support for first-year students who major in biology, chemistry and other areas of natural or physical science. Matthew shares perceptions about living with students in co-enrolled courses:

Basically, you are living with everybody that you take classes with. You see them everyday. They say it's a good thing cause it encourages you to go to class. I think, in a way, you get sick of seeing the same people all of the time. But it's beneficial when you are doing your homework and you can just walk right across the hallway if you have a question or if you don't remember something from class.

Matthew describes an ideal situation for first-year students majoring in the sciences. However, the participants experience other aspects of the BLSC courses:

Left Behind Trying to Play Catch up

Patrice blames inadequate high school preparation for academic challenges in biology and chemistry courses. She describes this deficiency as feeling “*left behind, trying to play catch-up:*”

There were some classes that were not offered to me, like AP biology [in high school]. That would have really helped me out coming here because I felt like I was further behind than most students. Because some people were like, ‘Oh, I need to go get my AP stuff.’ So, they went back home and got their AP bio notes. So, I'm sitting here like, *Oh man! We didn't even have that class in our high school!* So, that made me kinda upset

(clears throat). So, I kinda was *left behind* in the back. So, I was like *trying to play catch-up* since I got [in the BLSC], which was really challenging.

Patrice indicates that she sits quietly in co-enrolled courses and seminars to conceal a lack of knowledge or understanding about something she thinks her peers already know. She “tried to catch-up” to improve her grade point average: “Trying to play catch-up has been challenging ... staying in on the weekend ... sacrificing my social life to do academics.” Patrice’s low fall semester GPA places her on academic probation. She plans to change from a major in biology to undecided. Patrice also describes a change in study habits:

Right now, I have a daily planner. And I really use that a lot. That really helps me out. Because I can say, from 1:00-3:00 I’m going to work on my paper. It’s gonna get done cause I’ve set aside time.

She makes other adjustments to improve academically by attending tutoring sessions and attempting to participate in study groups:

Participating in Study Groups

The BLSC encourages students to work in study groups to extend classroom learning into the residence hall. Students use study groups to prepare for tests, presentations, work on lab projects and to get a better understanding of course instruction. However, Patrice has mixed feelings about study groups:

[Studying] in groups is good in a way because someone else will be able to help you when you have a problem. It has it’s good things and bad things about it. But, I mostly study by myself.

Patrice observes that “most, if not all,” of her peers refer to high school AP biology notes when studying for course assignments. Patrice compares her science-readiness with that of her BLSC peers:

If you’re not up to speed with everything, you’re going to be *left behind* cause you don’t know what they’re talking about. And you’re actually going to be *slowing [the study group] down* because they already know. If you are not up to speed, you are going to be *left behind* because you don’t know what they (students in study groups) are talking about. Then, you are actually going to *be slowing them down*. It has its ups and downs ... its good and bad points.

Patrice emphasizes the reality of academic deficiency by repeating perceptions of inadequacy. She indicates that the lack of AP biology in high school impedes her progress in BLSC courses, seminars and study groups. Matthew also experiences difficulty in study groups:

[Students in study groups] know [the subject matter]. I’ll listen to what they have to say about it and go back and look at notes. If I need help, I’ll get help. Otherwise, I’ll do it by myself.

Observing peers in study groups causes Matthew and Patrice to realize academic deficiencies, which negatively affects self confidence and academic fit. Therefore, Matthew and Patrice make minimum contributions in study group discussions. Study groups are oftentimes challenging for Matthew and Patrice.

Brian studies alone in his room as well. However, he prefers to study in small groups with classmates whenever possible. Brian also joins a study group with students in another residence hall:

I like to study with a couple of my friends in [another dorm]. They are in three of my classes. ... I go to them because they are ladies. I don't want to make them walk. So, I'm a gentleman. So, I walk to them and we went to one of their lounges and we studied in there. I find that to be very helpful.

Participation in a study group outside of the residence hall may indicate that Brian is more comfortable studying with same-race students. They are African American. In addition, he may perceive greater academic assistance in female peer groups.

Patrice indicates that her competency level in biology is different from her peers. Therefore, a lack of knowledge about the topic negatively affects participation in study groups. Matthew's lack of interest and understanding of several topics also negatively affects his participation in study groups.

A reluctance to seek assistance from peers suggests an attempt to conceal educational deficiencies. Patrice, Matthew and Brian came to realize that they are not as academically prepared to experience immediate success and fulfill expectations as their peers. Therefore, they often keep quiet. This behavior suggests a conflict with sense of academic fit in the community. Therefore, silence becomes a survival strategy to cope with academic deficiencies.

Studying and Still Doing Bad!

Brian describes test results in chemistry and biology as the most challenging experiences in the community:

The tests! Mainly chemistry and biology the first semester, about the grades. I didn't do as well as I would like to in chemistry. We would check our grades on-line and my grades were kind of low. There were some kids who, I guess, were real smart and they always get A's. Those guys and girls would go partying a lot and like drinking and

smoking. And I would be kinda discouraged because I would be like, they are going partying and drinking on the weekends ... and I didn't do none of that stuff and I'm still doing bad. I'm like, why are they getting grades like that? I wasn't jealous, but it just kinda disturbs me and it also motivated me that I should step-it-up as well.

Studying, receiving low test scores and observing social habits of several academic achievers are discouraging, but at the same time, a source of motivation. The following segment describes Brian's strategies for academic improvement:

Stepping-It-Up, Studying More

Brian reflects on the outcome of a chemistry test:

Chemistry, the past two quizzes have been ok. I didn't do well on my first chemistry test. I studied, but I guess I didn't study all of the material that I needed to. So this coming test next week, I plan to ... actually, I'm studying now and I plan on looking over the material more.

Brian describes efforts to improve:

I use to study a couple of days before the test. So now, I start earlier and I'm reading the chapters like I'm suppose to.

Brian also takes advantage of help sessions. His professor uses previous tests as practice to help students prepare for an up-coming test:

[My professor] puts [notes] on the blackboard in class. Then, we come to the help sessions and [the professor] answers questions. And that's very helpful. I did go over that. But probably, I didn't go over it like I needed to. I kinda skimmed through it. I thought I knew the material, but I didn't know it as well as I thought.

Brian did several things differently during the spring semester to improve: (1) reads thoroughly instead of skimming notes and assigned chapters, (2) studies more by preparing for tests a week earlier rather than waiting until a few days before the test, (3) participates in help sessions and (4) takes part in study groups with students outside of the community as well as with peers within the BLSC. Brian also describes a change in classroom instruction:

This semester, the biology teacher prints the notes out for [the class]. I find that to be helpful because I can pay more attention to what [the professor] is saying rather than writing something and trying to listen to [the professor] as well. I always have those notes to go back to when I study.

The professor's notes provide Brian the opportunity to focus completely on the instruction. Brian also met with the biology professor (the director of the BLSC) following a test to find ways to improve. Brian experiences some progress in biology, which he attributes to additional help from the professor and a change in study habits. Matthew, Brian and Patrice constantly revise their ways of studying during the spring semester.

High School Study Habits Deemed Inadequate

Similar to Brian and Patrice, Matthew reviews notes after class, attends help sessions and talks to professors during office hours. Matthew seldom participates in study groups. He prefers to study alone. Matthew describes study practices at the beginning of the fall semester as a carry-over from high school:

In high school I never studied. So, when I got here (Virginia Tech), I thought I could study a little bit and be done with it. It didn't work that way.

Patrice also talks about her transition from high school:

First semester here was very stressful. In high school, everything was easy. I had a good grade point average.

In addition to BLSC participants, several first-year students (Mike, in the Wing Community; Allison in Hypatia; Sarah, in the Leadership Community) believe that inadequate high school preparation causes unfair academic challenges in college. Expectations of high school exit-level readiness does not coincide with the demands of entry-level college courses.

How does the differences between high school and college expectations shape the participants' educational experiences? All of the participants describe a rude awakening to academic challenges at the onset of the collegiate experience. Unexpected community requirements and academic challenges causes them to change study habits, sacrifice social activities, in one case, seek medical treatment for stress-related headaches and seek extra help from supplemental sources of academic and emotional support.

Support Systems

Academic support for Patrice comes from her academic advisor, who is also the director of the BLSC:

I talked to my advisor. And he said that I could take away one of the classes. And so I took away chemistry. And that's kinda helping a lot because the labs and exams, that was a lot of work to do.

Therefore, Patrice did not register for the required chemistry course during the spring semester.

She also receives academic and emotional support from a "lady advisor:"

Ever since [the lady advisor] helped me get into the BLSC, I've been talking to her. That worked out good. I have a male advisor (the director) and I also go to 'this lady advisor' ... in biology. So I talk to both of them and they help me out a lot, especially when I was

trying to figure out what to do differently this semester. They gave me advice on what to do. It's very nice to be able to go to them and be able to talk about my problems too, outside of school work.

The "lady advisor" is a faculty member who provides earlier assistance with Patrice's misplaced application to the BLSC. Patrice describes other sources of academic support:

[First semester], I turned to my roommate and my other friends on the hall cause they had the same class and biology lab. And outside of the dorm, I was able to go to biology tutoring.

She learns that her peers have AP biology notes from high school in conversations with peers. She also realizes the negative effects of not having AP biology in high school. Therefore, she seeks academic support from the director, the "lady advisor," peers and the Tutoring Center.

Patrice discusses academic difficulties with family members as well:

I called home because like I said, first semester was very stressful. And I didn't have this problem before, but I've been having problems with migraines ever since I got here (the campus). So, I've been going to the doctor back and forth, changing my medicine. My Mom said, 'I wish I knew this before [the fall semester began]. I wouldn't have let you go [into the BLSC].' So, like emotional help, I get that from my Mom and [the lady] advisor.

This description suggests that Patrice and her mother were unaware of several requirements before she applied to the BLSC. In addition to academic and emotional support, Patrice seeks medical assistance for stress-related headaches. Patrice suggests an in-depth investigation of community requirements to make informed decisions to apply for future applicants.

Matthew also has several sources of support. He seeks emotional support from a family member:

My Mom is graduating [from college] in May. So, if I get a bad grade, that's all it takes for her to say, 'Oh my goodness! Oh Lord' (laughs)! She's graduating with a 3.7 or 3.8 [grade point average]. Just seeing her get those grades. I'm like, it could be done. All the focus she does!

Matthew seeks academic support from peers and other sources of built-in academic support:

We (BLSC students) get together and study at the end [of class]. We get help at the CLC. It's like a Chemistry Learning Center. People go there and bring the [chemistry notes] back to the hallway. Help sessions for homework ... [the lab leader] will work the problems for you. You can talk to your chemistry lab leader. He knows a lot of us and people e-mail him with questions. It seems like the whole floor will work together to find out about a chemistry problem.

Matthew's description of cooperation and collaboration among peers and a staff member is an example of continuous intellectual engagement beyond the classroom. Therefore, educational experiences overlap into the participants' residence hall experiences in the BLSC.

Social Components

Connecting with Faculty

The BLSC provides social activities for students, faculty and staff members. These opportunities encourage positive interactions between peers for developing friendships and cooperative relationships in residence hall study groups. Casual interactions with faculty and staff create friendly and approachable contact, which is oftentimes different in regular classroom

settings. The beginning of the year retreat is one of the first activities to bring the BLSC together. Matthew describes perceptions of his experiences at the retreat:

We started off the beginning of the year with a hike [on a retreat in the Cascades]. And at that point in time, we really didn't know each other. So, the whole time we were walking, it was getting to know everybody. We had to stay in a straight line. So, it's whoever is right in front of you or right behind you. So, we got to know a couple of new people there. And we would eat and talk to some more people. We met a couple of professors. That's when we first got to know [the director]. And I hope we don't have to do that again (laughs).

Although Matthew and Brian are not enthusiastic about the physical demands of the hike, the participants recall the retreat as an activity they will always remember. Patrice's major concern was staying out of the pool to prevent her hair from getting wet. African American women can empathize with that concern. This activity encourages members of the community to network with faculty, staff and fellow students. It helps them to become better acquainted. Success for developing a sense of community depends upon friendly relationships among peers and a positive rapport with faculty and staff members.

Further interactions with faculty and staff members occur during other planned activities; *Matthew*: "We don't see [faculty members] during the week. Just in classes and when they come to seminars." This description indicates that faculty interactions outside of the classroom occur during seminars and scheduled social events. Matthew describes other social activities in the community:

We did field day, ice cream socials, dinner at [the director's] house, etiquette dinners ... to keep us together. You look at other dorms and nobody talks to each other. But, you get on our hall and we're always talking. I think that's because everybody knows each other. The director invites BLSC students to his house for Thanksgiving dinner. They also use that time to complete interim evaluations. Brian describes his interactions with the director:

We had [the director] for biology the first semester. And since he is also our advisor in the BLSC, he got to know everyone in the community, personally. So I think that helped. I went to him quite a few times to talk about tests and things that I didn't understand on the test after I took it. So, I think that helped. So, he knows my name. He knows me very well. That class had 120 people. And I figured that since he was our advisor, he would know us since he came to all of our seminars.

Brian and his chemistry professor develop a special rapport as a result of a connection with the director:

I was surprised that [the chemistry professor] knew my name. She came to talk in one of the seminars and [the director] introduced me to her. So I think that was very beneficial. And every time I see her, I speak to her. And she says, "Hey Brian." And that makes me feel good that my professor knows me. Out of all those people that she teaches, she knows me.

Brian indicates that this experience positively affects self-worth and creates a sense of community. Therefore, frequent contact with the director provides an opportunity for personal contact with the chemistry professor as an individual as well as a community member.

Patrice connects with one of the course coordinators, whom she refers to as "the lady advisor." That relationship developed through the coordinator's assistance with Patrice's

missing application to the BLSC. Patrice maintains contact with this BLSC coordinator throughout the year. She adopts this faculty member as a “lady advisor,” which indicates a same-gender comfort zone. Patrice attributes acceptance into the BLSC as a direct result of this faculty member’s assistance.

All of the participants have positive relationships with the BLSC director as their biology professor and advisor. BLSC members interact with faculty and staff members twice a week in the residence hall. Students have minimum impromptu contact with faculty members in the residence hall. However, Matthew talks about one faculty member who visited his room:

[The course coordinator] stopped by me and Brian’s room, because a while ago her sons (elementary school age) came to visit the BLSC, and they love[d] Brian. So, she’ll stop by and say hi. She’s just really nice. ... If I had to go to somebody for emotional support, it would probably be her.

Therefore, Brian and Matthew’s interaction with the coordinator’s sons results in a positive student-faculty connection. A speculation about this connection indicates that the coordinator reciprocates their kindness to her sons when she stopped by their room. In addition, this connection is a potential source of academic and emotional support for Matthew and Brian.

Peer Interactions

Memorable Experiences

The participants reflect on experiences in the BLSC that they will always remember. Brian recalls the icebreaker in the first seminar as a memorable experience: “It helped us to get to know everybody in the community by name ... so that everybody can get to know each other.” Matthew remembers when everyone is in the hall on the way to a party:

It's like everybody is in the hallway at one time (laughs). It's more a home-like situation cause you feel more comfortable coming back to a dorm when you know [students in] the whole hallway versus people just to the left and right of you. I'm gonna remember just the way it feels ... to know that you are not really around a hallway full of strangers ... more of a personal touch to it.

Friendly contact with peers helps to facilitate a sense of community and creates and/or maintains friendly relationships for socializing and for creating study groups.

Resident Assistants plan activities, such as an ice cream get-together and field day activities. Patrice describes her participation in one of these activities:

The field day was really fun. I was on the orange team and I went really way out. And you got points on how well you dressed for the spirit of your team. So, we were on the orange team. So, I spray-painted my hair orange, [used] face paint ... and it was just nice. We had on orange shirts. We had a wheel barrel race, a lifesaver, apple bobbing, a pumpkin carving contest and a pie-eating contest. That was fun.

These comments suggest that social activities are useful elements in the BLSC. They help students relate in ways that encourage positive relationships and good citizenship. Cooperative living-learning skills are important for success in co-enrolled courses, study groups, group projects and presentations. Positive peer relationships are vital for creating a sense of community. The following section focuses on peer relationships in the BLSC:

Peer Relationships

Patrice describes a positive relationship with her roommate: "They really did a good job putting the roommates together cause [we] have the same attitude and we like the same things."

Matthew and Brian are roommates and best friends. Their close friends live in other residence halls. Brian describes the difference between close friendships and BLSC peer relationships:

Close Friendships: All of my close friends are African American except one of them is Latino. I don't really study with them cause we don't have the same classes.

BLSC Peer Relationships: The ones that I study with are White. I am friends with just about all of them. I have no problem with anyone. We always speak when we see each other. A couple of us associate in each other's rooms. We play games, talk, whatever.

In other words, emotional support comes from close friends with whom he shares personal thoughts and experiences. Brian indicates that it is important to study with classmates. Therefore, he is able to “transcend race [in order to] establish meaningful relationships across group boundaries with others, including Whites” to accomplish academic goals (Tatum, 1997, p. 76). Brian came to realize that positive peer relationships with classmates, regardless of race, is a valuable source of academic support. However, peer interactions also causes Matthew, Brian and Patrice to focus on racial differences in the community.

Racial and Cultural Awareness

All of the participants have positive working relationships with their peers. Nevertheless, the participants also cope with issues of racial identity and bias in the BLSC. They face decisions about responding or not responding to racially offensive challenges.

Limited Understanding and Ignorant Questions

Brian and Matthew relate daily annoyances with several White male students in the community. Matthew describes difficulty understanding “ignorant questions” that some White students ask about his personal hygiene:

Some people just don't understand! Like they'll ask you questions. And I'm just like, "Are you serious"? Like, they would ask me why I brush my hair cause you don't have any hair. I'm like, "*Oookayyy*"! They just don't understand that Black people gotta do the same things that White people do.

Therefore, the White student's comment reflects cultural ignorance or racial taunting. This experience, along with other descriptions of intolerance, signals a sense of subtle racial tension characteristic of cumulative and familiar ways that White students in the community act out thoughts of racial prejudice (Allport, 1969), indicating – 'here we go again!' Matthew's description also indicates his intent to inform rather than to retaliate. Matthew shares his perception of White students' display of limited cultural and ethnic awareness:

It's like not living around any Black people, probably. Like not having to see the daily routine of Black people. They just don't know!

Matthew's comment suggests that lack of racial awareness is the reason for "ignorant questions." This type of comment suggests either a natural curiosity about African American hair care and/or is a sign of racial intimidation and sarcasm.

Ghetto Typecasting

Matthew recalls another challenging situation that is uncomfortable for him as well as other BLSC students:

I can remember everybody going to a Halloween party. Everybody was in the hallway talking about costumes. And the guy next door said he should go as a ghetto person. And he looked at me and said, "No offense Matthew". I was like, "What"? Are you serious? Why would you say no offense to me, like I'm from the ghetto? Like, he automatically associated Black with being from the ghetto.

Other students in the vicinity of the conversation influence Matthew's response:

Everybody said, "Ok, ok you have to change the subject. And then everybody just dropped it. After that, he just went [to the party] in his normal clothes. He's Indian though. I couldn't do anything but laugh afterwards. I was like, I couldn't be offended. I'm not from the ghetto! It was just that he automatically associated Black with being ghetto.

Matthew admits that he, initially, was highly offended. After he drops the subject, he decides that the guy's remark is made out of "pure ignorance." Following the encouragement of his peers, he "drop[s] the issue to avoid conflict." However, telling the story and reliving the experience of a peer typecasting him as "a ghetto person" continues as visibly upsetting. Matthew's demeanor changes illustrating a prolonged emotional anguish. His facial expressions become quite serious, along with varying voice modulations, which depict astonishment and disbelief.

Matthew and Brian do not report subtle or blatant racial offenses to BLSC staff. This is a pattern for most of the participants in this study. Matthew and Brian decide to "let it go ... to avoid conflict." In other words, facing racist behavior has the potential to create stress and frustration. I believe they prefer to focus on academics in a peaceful environment. However, are African American students just as responsible for the persistence of racial offenses when they stand by and "let it go?"

In agreement with Sedlecek (1999), African American students in PWIs need to decide if, when and how to participate in anti-racist behavior to maintain focus on educational pursuits. This double-sided dilemma (DuBois, 1995) may put the participants in 'double jeopardy' regardless of the way they cope with racial adversity. For example, "let it go" could be interpreted as avoiding one's responsibility to promote anti-racist behavior. On the other hand,

African American students who confront racist behaviors face a greater risk of peer alienation, emotional stress, expenditure of time and energy combating centuries-old unsolved racial problems and the possibility of giving up on the goal to earn a degree in a PWI. This situation resembles the main character's position in *Catch-22* (Heller, 1978), i.e. a difficult situation for either response.

According to Matthew and Brian, stereotypes of African American students are rampant “among White students in the community [as well as] the rest of the campus.” Consequently, he, and other participants, busy themselves trying to disprove and/or cope with daily racial stereotyping caused by White students.

A Critical Reflection

Brian recalls a joke that he and Matthew heard in the BLSC:

This White guy was telling this joke. He said the word nigger! And me and my roommate didn't say anything ... because I don't know if he knew the word nigger or whatever. But we went back and talked [among] ourselves and discussed it (laughs).

Brian and Matthew had difficulty trying to decide how to cope with this situation:

We were like, I couldn't believe that he said that! I don't know if he did that intentionally. I don't think he did it intentionally. I mean, he was telling a joke that he thought was funny and the word was in the joke. And sometimes they (White male students) say, 'Yo, what's up man' or something like that, and they don't usually talk like that. We were like, should we go say ... did he know what he was saying? We both came to the conclusion that he was trying to tell a joke and he didn't do it intentionally.

I asked Brian about the opportunity to inform the guy about the offensiveness of “the word nigger” to African Americans:

That's what we (Brian and Matthew) talked about! We were like, did he know what he was saying? If he did it again, we probably would ask him. If someone would say something that we think was intentional, we probably would address them and tell them that it was offensive. But, we didn't want to ask him that time ... start any conflict.

Matthew and Brian are unsure if the White male student understands that nigger is an offensive racial slur. Consequently, they choose to say nothing, but to discuss the incident in private. Brian emphasizes many times that he and Matthew are trying to avoid conflict. What are the indications of their response to a racist jokes – action to inform or passive inaction? Freire (1995) identifies this type of response as an action of critical reflection. Matthew and Brian do not question the student. They decide to wait and see if the White student repeats the joke. Dialogue among themselves provides a reflection on the White students previous demeanor. This reflection leads them to conclude that saying nigger in a joke is unintentionally offensive, but nevertheless offensive. However, the earlier dialogue with people about their offensiveness, the sooner responsibility for one's actions can begin through communication (Freire, 1995).

Seeking Ethnic Similarity

Brian and Matthew have positive relationships with many of their BLSC peers. However, they indicate that they are fortunate to have each other as roommates:

Brian: Me and my roommate are real close. Since we are both African American we can relate to each other ... sort of the same interests.

Matthew: I'm glad that my roommate is Black because they (White students in the BLSC) do some crazy stuff. Like going out ... they get drunk every weekend. Me and my roommate, we don't do that stuff.

Patrice leaves the community to develop friendships with African American female students in other residence halls:

One thing that's a disadvantage for me is that I'm the only Black girl [in the BLSC]. So, I have to go out of the community to find other Black girls to talk to. I don't know if you call that a bad thing. But I have to do that ... and they come to visit me sometimes.

Patrice describes her experience as the only African American female in the BLSC:

Well, it goes back to high school, I'm kinda use to being around White people. So, it wasn't that hard. But it did kinda hit me when I was signing up and I was looking at the pictures and I didn't see any Black people. And I was like, *Wow!* And I was like, it's gonna be alright cause it's no big deal. I get along with everybody. But, it would be nice to have more Black people in here to balance it out more. Cause everybody might not be like me and can adapt to their environment. Some people may feel isolated because they are the only [Black] girl in there. But, not me.

Initially, Patrice is uncertain about attending a PWI, but convinces herself that she will easily adjust. Comments suggest that it is uncomfortable to live as “the only Black girl” in the community. The desire to find friendships with “other Black girls” indicates a sense of loneliness and isolation (Collins, 2000a). A need to find females who share ethnic and cultural similarities becomes important to Patrice. However, the latter comment sounds like a contradiction, but Patrice is describing how she deals with race-gendered isolation. She visits African American female friends in other residence halls. They visit with her in the BLSC. Therefore, visiting with “friends like [her]self,” in addition to friendships with BLSC peers, becomes a satisfactory coping strategy for Patrice.

Patrice does not recall an experience with racial offensiveness in the BLSC. Her dilemma is (1) stating that the absence of same-race females in the BLSC is “no big deal,” (2) having the desire to associate with African American females and (3) going outside of the community to satisfy a desire for ethnic and sorority-like companionship.

Advice from the Participants

The participants would recommend the BLSC to incoming students. However, they indicate that the small community population (40 students) limits their privacy because “everyone is always in their business.” Matthew cautions, “If you don’t want everybody in your business all of the time, it’s (the BLSC) probably not the best thing for you.” In addition, the participants advise students to research the BLSC program and ask questions about the requirements:

Patrice: Coming to the BLSC depends on their personality. I would tell them to look into it more, ask questions to see if it fits you. Is that’s what you really want? I discovered about the classes after I was in the community.

Patrice thought of further comments at the end of the interview:

My life story [in the BLSC] was about being on academic probation ... and how this was like a drastic change, even though I’ve been in a high school that’s half White and half Black. But, it’s still a big difference because you see like mostly Whites, like wow! So, I had to like kinda get use to that.

Patrice indicates disappointment in academic achievement and cultural adjustment.

Summary

The participants learned about the BLSC through word-of-mouth networking before searching the housing website. Their interest in biology as a major leads to the BLSC. However,

they became aware of some community requirements and expectations after their acceptance into the community.

The participants' academic experiences vary. First, success in high school leads to high expectations as first-year college students. However, their academic expectations are different from the expectations of their instructors. Second, Patrice, Matthew and Brian attempt to overcome academic deficiencies by improving study practices. Perceptions of a deficient background in biology and chemistry, along with inadequate study practices, call for a reevaluation of academic preparedness. Observations of peers in class, seminars and study groups motivate the participants to put forth extra effort into course work. They examine (1) areas of deficiency, (2) sources of support and (3) previous study habits. They changed prior concepts of schooling and study practices to accommodate the rigors of college demands.

Third, the participants describe (1) failing or low test grades, (2) concealing academic deficiency in study groups, seminars and co-enrolled courses through silence, (3) inadequate study practices and for one of the participants, (4) stress-related headaches and academic probation. These experiences reflect poor academic performance and a lack of academic fit to the community.

Fourth, academic and emotional support systems are vital. Sources of support include (1) the director/academic advisor (2) professors, (3) a course coordinator, (4) tutoring sessions, (5) course lab leaders, (6) student teaching assistants, (7) students inside and outside of the community (8) the Chemistry Learning Center and (9) parents.

Fifth, the participants attempt to compensate for deficiencies by (1) changing their major, (2) dropping a required course, (3) sacrificing weekend social activities and (4) cramming time into a tight schedule for unexpected community requirements.

Sixth, racial challenges in the community compound academic difficulties within the community. Day-to-day stereotyping causes the participants to cope with ethnic and racial ignorance among peers. They cope with racial jokes and stereotyping in the following ways: (1) use silence to avoid conflict, (2) engage in private discussions among themselves, (3) leave the heat of the moment, (4) plan to question what they perceive as intentional racial offensiveness and (5) cope with physical isolation from same-race students by seeking friendships with African American students in other residence halls.

Patrice is the only African American female in the BLSC. Although she develops positive relationships with White students, she sought close friendships outside of the community to cope with race-gendered isolation.

Seventh, daily social interactions with fellow students who live on the same floor and enroll in the same classes create opportunities for collaboration and cooperative learning. Social activities allow the participants to casually interact with faculty and staff members, as well as peers, for developing a sense of community. The participants indicate a stronger connection with faculty and staff members once they interact with them socially. Informal interactions with faculty members also allow the participants to perceive them as more approachable in the classroom.

Finally, Patrice and Matthew decide to change their major from biology during the spring semester. Brian continues to major in biology at the time of his interview. The participants receive academic and emotional support from many sources. However, it is not enough to maintain a major in biology. Chapter VI presents the experiences of participants in the Residential Leadership Community.

Chapter Six

The Residential Leadership Community

The Residential Leadership Community (Leadership Community) accepts men and women from all majors and promotes racial and cultural pluralism. This community has two educational programs: The First-Year Program and The Bridge Program. The First-Year Program requires students to attend a 3-credit two semester introduction to leadership class. First-year students must obtain acceptance into the Bridge Program to remain in the community. The Bridge Program connects or 'bridges' the first-year experience to leadership opportunities and responsibilities beyond the freshman year. This experience offers students the opportunity to participate in the Leadership Community as a Community Service Assistant (CSA) or a Student Teaching Assistant (STA). Bridge students must reapply each year for these positions to remain in the community. Sarah, Paul and Lance are first-year students. John, Margaret and Barbara serve the community in the Bridge Program. The participants share how they learned about the Leadership Community:

Community Recruitment

Two of the participants search the housing website. Other participants learn about the community in the following ways:

- High school NSBE Junior Chapter
- African American Students in the Community
- The Virginia Tech Housing Pamphlet
- Campus Tour with Parents
- High School Guidance Counselor

The Intern (Barbara) talks about how students learn about the Leadership Community:

Most of the time it's word-of-mouth. Currently, we've been working on a recruitment effort for students that are currently seniors in high school. As far as outreach for those who are already on Tech's campus, I think that people just hear that ... 'You live in a new building dude? You got carpet and air conditioning? What's that about?' And I'm like, 'Oh man, it's the Residential Leadership Community. And you just take a class and you get to live in the building. It's pretty cool!' And that's how people on campus learn about it.

Therefore, networking leads many interviewees in this community to apply to the Leadership Community. Community outreach plans for high school students are in the making. Barbara also describes the application process:

There's a [page for] prospective [students] on the website. So students, who are interested, apply to [the director] or [the associate director]. There's an application that can be submitted electronically. Then the students are notified by phone to offer you a membership in the Leadership Community. Then, there is an interview process. Most of the time they talk to you on the phone. Then you get to go on a retreat at the beginning of the year.

Barbara's description indicates that students search the website after they learn about the community from African American students on campus and hometown community leaders. Then, they apply for membership online.

Educational and social experiences in the Leadership Community begin with participants in The First-Year Program, followed by those in The Bridge Program. Social and educational experiences overlap in the data. Therefore, they interconnect throughout the chapter.

Learning and Personal Development

Year One: Leadership Classes

First-year participants in the Leadership Community have different educational experiences than the Biological and Life Sciences Community participants. The fall semester experience offers several sections of leadership classes and peer groups. Sarah describes her leadership class:

Honestly, the first semester I didn't feel that the class had a point. I would say it kinda made me feel like I was in kindergarten all over again in the beginning, cause we had to do a lot of coloring or outlining or drawing something. [The instructor] would always get off topic from leadership. It didn't make any connection to the class whatsoever. She'd say read a chapter that wouldn't really have anything to do with what we talked about in class. She wanted to do icebreakers all of the time. And after the first class, an icebreaker is really not necessary.

I asked Sarah what she would do differently as the instructor:

I would have focused more on leadership as a whole ... to get a grasp of the information that we were suppose to be learning.

Sarah's expectations are not fulfilled in the class. She prefers to connect assigned readings to real world issues. Therefore, she experiences disappointment in the outcome of this class.

Classroom topics extend into peer group discussions in the residence hall. Unlike the BLSC students, peer groups meet on a different day in student selected study lounges. Sarah's peer group members receive encouragement to interact in group discussions:

In the very beginning, no one really wanted to talk. So, our STA had her work cut out for her. But, after a couple of meetings, we all became relaxed around each other. And the

thing we did in the very beginning, we would talk about how our week went and everybody would take turns. That kinda helped break the awkwardness between the group and we bonded. We were able to accomplish many tasks together.

Sarah also describes an interactive task with members of her peer group:

We got to play a game where we learned what each others' values were and how everybody sees things differently. It allowed you to open up your eyes to see that not everybody has the same viewpoint as you ...to break the awkwardness between the group. It made you more optimistic to learning about different people ... and their values, their culture and why they see things the way they do.

Students engage in discussions about themselves, each other and classroom topics.

Conversations about daily experiences, plus activities, such as the one above, help peer group members become better acquainted and open to sharing ideas. Sarah describes the peer group as “one of the highlights of the leadership class. ... It was a nice experience to have that group where people could really get to know each other and get to bond.”

Sarah has a different perception of her spring semester class than the fall semester class: “This semester I feel that I’m learning more. I feel that it’s a better experience because I’m able to talk about real problems in the world and not just superficial ones.” Students have a choice of eleven class seminars in the Leadership Community. Sarah chooses the Learning About Diversity and Social Justice class. However, a high interest in this seminar causes it to fill early. Therefore, she joins the Gender, Leadership, and Globalization seminar:

[This class] focuses on gender stereotypes and if women can really lead ... and how religion and social stereotypes play into leadership roles. There’s only nine of us in that class. There are three boys. So it’s cool to see their reactions to how we react. A lot of the

girls kind of jump on them because they're so ... '*men have to lead!*' And women can do the same thing. It's actually kind of cool.

One classroom discussion begins with a topic about gender roles for young children:

We had to read a packet about how little girls group up differently than little boys ... how we are expected to play with Barbie dolls and have pretend tea parties. And [boys] are expected to go outside and fight and play army and be the leader and the commander. And, uh ... there was some disagreement about how girls do grow up because most of us in the class did not have Barbie [dolls]. And we grew up knowing that it's ok to play with boys. It's ok to rough around a little bit. It's ok to be tough. But at the same time, girls are expected not to be aggressive. And when we are aggressive, then there's a problem. And if guys are aggressive, they are just being boys. If a girl is giving out sexual innuendos, she's not a very perceptible girl. She's a whore. And guys, if they have more than one girlfriend, they are the man ... the player. They are the big dog. So, that caused a lot of disruption in the class. Everybody was going back and forth.

I asked Sarah how the instructor mediates the discussion:

She just kind of let us go ahead off on our own tangent and resolve it whenever we would resolve it. She would ask questions to kind of probe people to go further into their answer. She didn't let anything get out of hand. But, nothing really did. At the end, the guys understood where we were coming from and we understood where they were coming from. I think we influenced the guys to be more lenient toward their answers about how women can lead.

Women's roles in leadership are an important issue in this seminar. This discussion connects gender roles from early childhood, society's views of male and female promiscuity and

perceptions of gender bias in leadership roles. Male students in this class present a challenge about women leaders. Sarah indicates that female students convincingly illustrate how gender bias affects women in leadership roles.

Sarah's spring semester peer group participants in residence hall social activities. They host a progressive dinner on all three floors of the residence hall. They serve salad on the first floor, the main course on the second floor, and dessert on the third floor. The idea of the progressive dinner facilitates a sense of connectedness in the community.

Sarah's spring semester peer group also participates in a collaborative project at the time of the interview:

We are actually doing a documentary on different stereotypes and how they effect how people look at different people, how people are judged immediately just because of something they may have on or just because they are female or male.

Sarah's peer group plans to conduct interviews with people from various age groups to include in the documentary. They also plan to extend this assignment to present on campus in the film festival. During the spring semester, participation in topics about societal issues coincide with Sarah's expectations of class and peer group activities.

Male first-year students describe a different fall semester experience than Sarah's experience. Lance and Paul describe fall semester leadership classes as "open to the discussion on a variety of topics:"

Paul: My leadership teacher last semester ... taught us what leadership was about ... how we can apply that to where we are now, and just about how anybody can be a leader.

Lance: Of course we are suppose to talk about the leadership ... leadership in history, leadership styles. But, a lot of time the conversation will come into ethical issues about

morality, gender-based differences ... like how women lead, how men lead. They sort of put racial discussions into the lesson plan a lot. But, we talk about ways of defining diversity and how racial conflict can be resolved.

Lance and Paul enrolled in different fall semester leadership class sections. However, both students indicate that their instructors take advantage of teachable moments. Lance describes his leadership classes:

I really, really like the leadership classes just because it's with the people that I live with and there's a strong sense of community.

Lance and Paul enrolled in the 'Learning About Diversity and Social Justice' class during the spring semester:

Lance: I can really talk about anything in there. I mean even the teachers, we don't see them a whole lot, but we see them enough that there're friends ... sort of. You can discuss a lot of things about racial barriers and stereotypes that you wouldn't really feel comfortable talking about in any other class.

Paul: Multiculturalism in leadership was something that I wanted to get involved with. And that's why I'm in the class that I'm in this semester.

This seminar provides opportunities for students to give voice to views on sensitive issues in the American society and on campus. This class is a safe environment for the participants and their classmates to contribute to discussions on topics such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism.

The Leadership Community also encourages participation and involvement in elective or optional activities. Lance describes his contribution to the Leadership Community:

As the Vice President of the Hall Council, I maintain the Hall Council's constitution and help plan and carry out events. All of us have a duty to be at the meetings. The Hall Council plans programs (pizza night, ice cream socials, the community's most wanted to learn interesting things one another, coin wars to raise money) every couple of weeks. It also takes the needs of its inhabitants and tries to bring them to a larger scale ... do something with them ... just taking care of the people in the dorm.

I observed while Lance and other members of the Hall Council plan an end-of-the-year event for the community:

We were trying to plan a big Bush Gardens trip at the end of the year. We're not sure if it will go over. But either way we have a lot of money. So, we are going to have some sort of big end of the year community party. I'm very involved in the community ... and it rounds out my academic side.

Lance indicates that the Residence Hall Federation provides partial funding for this type of event. The Hall Council also raises money from activities such as 'coin wars' and 'battle of the halls,' which is a competition between residence Hall Councils. The competition rewards Halls Councils that initiate the most and the best activities and events (number of meetings, most additions to website, and activities for their respective residence halls). With a look of admiration, Lance states, "So, we've been winning that a lot."

Paul shares his perceptions of involvement in the Leadership Community:

- "They kind of want us to do social things ... things that are not required just to get involved. That's the main thing. If you get involved with something, you feel a lot better while you're here."

- “Another thing is little seminars on campus ... sometimes [faculty and staff members] suggest that we go. They don’t make it mandatory, but there will be like ... a lot of leadership events going on, on campus. This week, coming up, there is something that’s called ‘Diversity on Campus.’ They are having an event regarding diversity and leadership. And since I’m doing that in my leadership class, I feel that’s something that I might want to find out what that’s all about.”
- “They have a lot of opportunities [in the community] as far as meetings and different things during your off-time just to find out more about the Leadership Community and diversity in particular. They really stress on that. So I’m happy that they welcome that and feel comfortable talking about that. *That’s the main thing.*”

The participants explore various issues that often relate to racial and gender bias. Paul, Lance and Sarah consider their participation in activities and events as important contributions to the community. They indicate that elective activities in the community and on campus are vital to their educational development.

Study Practices

Similar to the BLSC participants, first-year students in the Leadership Community realize that college instruction calls for more effort than they put forth in high school:

I got a big wake-up call. I use to study about two days before a test and that didn’t work.

When it came down to test time, I guess my study habits needed to change to adjust with the expectations here (Virginia Tech).

New strategies include “looking over a planner several times a day to see what assignments are due over the next two or three days and to prepare for tests a week in advance.” This process involves reviewing notes, looking over the textbook, “looking over each thing that was going to

be on the test”. Another important factor is time management. Lance describes how he manages work and social activities:

It’s really not time to relax until the weekend. Like sometimes, you might say I’ll relax and put it off. But, then you are staying up late trying to finish work. So, the quicker you get it done, the quicker and the less time that you slack off and procrastinate, the more time you’ll have to do things that you want to do. That’s what I live by while I’m here.

Lance describes a well thought out approach to prioritizing social and work-related activities. This description indicates a sign of maturity that many first-year students attain in the second semester of their undergraduate experience. Paul describes his approach to studying: “I work with [fellow students] cause sometime they’ll have the right answer or they know how to approach the problem where I wouldn’t be able to.” Paul studies with students in the same major and/or with students in his classes. Therefore, learning from the academic strengths of his peers is an asset.

Paul and Lance also increased contact with instructors during the spring semester. They attend tutoring sessions at the Center for Academic Enrichment and Enhancement and use faculty office hours. They came to realize the advantage of frequent contact with instructors for academic support.

Building Bridges for First-year Students

The Bridge Program accepts first-year students using specific criteria. Barbara describes the application process for the Bridge Program:

For this year, their applications get reviewed and of course it’s the GPA process ... their strengths in academics and extracurricular activities. Then, [the director and associate

director] filters through the applications. And those that rise to the top are interviewed and offered a position.

The Bridge Program accepts Lance as a Student Teaching Assistant (STA). Therefore, he eagerly anticipates a second year in the Leadership Community: “I am going to be an STA [next year] and I’m trying to have a relationship with the faculty.” Lance spends time and effort preparing his application. He develops a portfolio highlighting activities and community involvement, writes an essay about his role as a prospective STA, develops a positive rapport with faculty as a resource for recommendations, and earns a 3.9 GPA. Serving the community as the Vice President of the Hall Council is also an asset. The final stage of the application process for Lance was a successful interview. All of these elements contribute to the success of Lance’s goal to remain in the community for a second year. He is a computer science major.

Sarah also applies to the Bridge Program for a STA position. However, she had difficulty receiving faculty recommendations: “I know that both of my advisors that I got to give me a recommendation, they sent it over to the office. And they said that one never made it. There was also a thing with my GPA,” which means that Sarah’s GPA is too low. Sarah’s major is undecided. She shares many thoughts about the Bridge Program’s application guidelines. I present them to illustrate her perceptions, anguish and disappointment:

I don’t think they evaluated for the STA position very well. They base it strictly on a GPA, which I don’t think they should. I know that you need to have certain requirements for someone who is suppose to be an STA. But, there are people in the Leadership Community that may not have the 3.0 GPA because they have taken harder courses. And for those harder courses they’ve gotten the best grades that they could, which didn’t equvalate (Sarah’s word) to a 3.0 GPA. But, they’re the ones who would be strongly

dedicated to being a really good STA ... to really help these incoming students to grow and become adapted to their new environment easier. Whereas, they pick people who had a 3.0 and higher that don't even really want to ... like, I know a girl that said, 'No, I don't even want to be an STA. I don't want to be bothered.' And they called her and said, 'Would you like to be an STA because you meet our requirement.' And she said, 'Sure.' It's just no point! I really wanted to be an STA because I could help people not make the same mistakes I did. I would have been able to make it easier for some students that are coming in with similar problems that I had ... a world of issues my first semester. And I could help someone not go through those or help them get through them quicker and focus on their work. But, they don't see that. All they see is GPA, which can't necessarily evaluate how a person works. And some people just don't do as well academically as other people. But they have that motivation and that drive to be a better person and to help other people.

Sarah believes that a lack of consideration for other qualities, in addition to GPA, is unfair. She suggests that the Bridge Program allow students, who do not meet the GPA requirement, find other ways to qualify for the position. She also indicates that an individual "could be hired on probation to at least give them a chance." However, Sarah's interview reveals that she is in denial about her qualifications as a STA. Her GPA is below 2.0, which indicates that she needs to put more time and effort into course work. I asked Sarah to describe what she learned from the outcome of test scores and grades: "That science is not my subject." Sarah also blames low grades on a car accident:

Sarah's Road to Recovery

Three participants in this community had health related challenges. Two participants had severe illnesses. They recovered physically and academically. However, Sarah's car accident becomes an additional challenge to her first-year undergraduate experience:

I was in a car accident in November and it ... it tore me down quite a bit. So, I wasn't able to do well on some of the final things that I needed to do to bring my grades up. So, I was going through academic relief to get one of my grades withdrawn. And I got it done, which is why I have a low GPA right now.

A request for academic relief occurs when a student writes an appeal to withdraw from a course after the deadline to withdraw. I asked further questions to probe for more details:

What happened in your courses during the fall semester?

Chemistry and Calculus were the two courses that really brought me down. I ended up withdrawing from chemistry. Calculus wasn't on my math course [schedule in high school]. I don't know calculus ... to do it online was hard. So, I didn't do too well on that. Biology was also a tough subject last semester.

Why did you enroll in those courses?

When I first came here, that was the schedule I was given [as a biology major]. My advisor told me that I should do what I'm comfortable with and that if I become uncomfortable, then I should drop a course. But I was just gonna try to wing-it ... because I wanted to get things over with as quickly as I could. I used my rate credits to withdraw from chemistry.

How did you make course selections for the spring semester?

I made the decisions. No one else really ... you just kinda take what you want to

take. You can ask a professor what do they think you should take, but uh ... me, I haven't done that. And that's probably because I won't be here next year.

Sarah did not seek advice from campus resources during the first semester. Consequently, she makes the following changes to compensate for academic difficulties: changes her major, drops a course and receives academic relief to avoid penalty for dropping a course after the scheduled drop date. Nevertheless, the end result is a low GPA, which is the basis for an unsuccessful application to the Bridge Program. Following the decision about her application, Sarah withdrew emotionally from the community. Her final recourse is to withdraw from the university at the end of the spring semester. These experiences indicate that Sarah needed advice and support to manage these challenges during the first semester. However, she did not seek academic support.

Emotional support comes from Sarah's suitemates and family at home: "My Mom made a couple of trips down here. And of course, I go back home. I went home every weekend one month." Sarah explains why she went home so often:

Well, I had things I had to do. I was an extra in a movie for a while. And so I had to go home for that. [What movie?] Beauty Shop – It's a movie with Vivica Fox and Queen Latifah. ... I've actually been doing some modeling. But, I haven't found the right agency yet. [So, are you going to pursue a modeling career or a major in psychology?] I'm going to pursue my psychology so that I'll have something that grounds me in case I don't make it in modeling. And I want a minor in nursing. [Earlier, you said that you are going into criminal psychology.] Right, if I do criminal psychology, then I won't do nursing. But, if I don't do criminal psychology, which is really a big interest right now, then I will think about going into nursing. [It seems that for an interest in criminal psychology, you would minor in law or something like that.] Right, that's another reason

that I was gonna leave here. I was gonna go to a place that has law because they don't have it here. ... I might end up having to go into child and adolescence psychology, which is what I initially started off with and interest in because I've always wanted to be a pediatrician. And since I don't want to go to school for that anymore, I figured that I would still be with children by being in child and adolescence psychology.

Sarah describes approximately eight career interests. Furthermore, a major in psychology is a back-up plan in case of a failed modeling career. Numerous career interests indicate that Sarah needs to decide between a career interest in academia or entertainment. I advised her to explore interests and options with someone who can help with career choices once she returns home.

Sarah's memorable experience in the Leadership Community occurs in a conversation with the Intern about the denial of her application for the STA position:

Sitting down and talking to the Intern about why I was upset that I didn't get the STA position and how I feel that the Residential Leadership Community needs to change some of their standards. That was a really long conversation.

Sarah's comments indicate a decrease in educational and emotional connectedness with the community following the denial of her application to the Bridge Program. She initially enrolled as a biology major because she wanted to become a pediatrician. At the time of the interview, she is unsure about her career goals.

Students in the Leadership Community attend a variety of diversity events on campus.

The following experiences describe such an event:

A Sense of Ethnic Fit

A Dwindling Majority (or) Exodus of the Masses

A Leadership Community administrator suggests that I attend a diversity workshop

scheduled in February. The workshop took place one Saturday afternoon from 1:00pm-4:00pm in the banquet room of a dining facility on campus. I sat at the end of a row beside a first-year African American student who introduces himself as Paul. His major is General Engineering.

The speaker's topic focuses on the existence of prejudice and "the isms" (racism, sexism, heterosexism, class-ism, age-ism) in today's society. As students enter the workshop, they sign an attendance sheet. However, approximately 10 minutes into the presentation, several White students begin to trickle out of the room. About 15% of the White students leave within the first hour. Paul shares perceptions of the exodus of White students in the diversity workshop:

The workshop was required as far as signing in, but it wasn't required, per-se, as far as staying the whole time. I heard a couple of White students in the first ten minutes [of the workshop] say that they didn't know what [the speaker] was trying to get across. So, they left. Some of them even went to the extent of saying they weren't prejudiced, which was ... I mean that's their opinion. But, at the same time, they should be able to listen to what [the speaker] has to say. You don't have to agree. But, just think about what he's saying and kind of apply that a little bit. And I didn't really see that from most of the White students there.

Paul suggests that, as an African American, he can identify with the discussion of the "isms" surrounding prejudice and bias better than White students in the workshop. Paul describes his understanding of the speaker's message:

From what I got out of [the workshop], it was for the White male. The whole [workshop] was for the White male to acknowledge that *you* are the dominant person here. *You* are the only person who does not get discriminated against in this room. So this whole message is for *you*.

Comments indicate that students who cope with other peoples' prejudices (1) are aware of diversity issues in an environment, (2) strive to understand their own prejudices, (3) have a desire to understand cultural and racial issues that affect their scheme of existence and (4) attend diversity events and activities to (a) share experiences, (b) listen to others, (c) gain new insight and (d) seek ways to shape and/or reshape coping strategies.

Lance also describes strong feelings about White students' premature departure from the workshop:

I think if it's required, we should all be there regardless of whether you like it or not.

Obviously, it has to be of some importance if it's required. So, for some people to just sign in, stay there for 10 minutes and leave, I feel that was wrong as far as this guy (the speaker) is spending his time to come out and talk and you not even respect him.

Paul and Lance indicate that the topic about "prejudice and the isms" in today's society is an important dialogue for understanding one's own prejudices. However, they hear many of their White peers say that this presentation is unnecessary. They share ideas about racism among peers:

Lance: That's sort of why racism is so bad because everyone (White peers) comes in there saying, 'We don't need this talk. There's no racism.'

Paul: I think we definitely, definitely needed [the workshop] because *it's not so hard to see*. There's a lot of racism, even in this dorm, the people (White students) that should be refined leaders. But, there's so much racism on the campus that *people just don't see*. And people laugh it off. I can say that [the presentation] really touched me. But, I can't say it really touched many White students.

These comments generate the following questions and implications:

Question 1. What message do students of diverse cultures, races and ethnicities perceive when White students prematurely exit required diversity events?

Implications: Premature departure (a) is a lack of respect for the speaker (b) ignores the community's mission to encourage inclusion, (c) shows an unwillingness to learn about experiences that are different from their own, (e) demonstrates that diversity issues are unimportant to White students' scheme of existence and (f) negatively affects ethnic and social fit of underrepresented groups in the community.

Question 2. Why do African American students remain in diversity events and activities?

Implications: (a) Racial experiences create a cognizant awareness and attentiveness to the 'isms' in prejudiced behaviors; (b) A diversity event, which is facilitated by a White male speaker and includes racial issues, creates curiosity from that perspective and (c) Racial challenges create a desire for those who beget racism to become informed, aware and thoughtful about the consequences of racist acts. Several participants indicate an attempt, on an individual basis, to bring about racial awareness in the residence hall, but "nothing seems to work." I believe the hope is that diversity events and activities will have a positive affect on those they have no true power to change. Paul and Lance indicate that White students left the workshop for three reasons: (1) the inability to comprehend the speaker's message, (2) the perception that racial prejudice no longer exists, therefore the topic is irrelevant and (3) the community does not stipulate a requirement to remain in the workshop.

A Silent Minority

I observed African American students leave their seats and walk toward the speaker. This happens before the diversity workshop begins as other students enter the room. Paul explains this occurrence:

Before the [workshop] started, [the speaker] got all of the minorities (I saw African American students only) together and said, 'Ok, I want you guys to speak up. I want you guys to talk, to answer some of my questions, to get involved because I want to get your standpoint as well.' Since there were only about 20 of us in the room, that was important [to the speaker].

Paul believes that the speaker needs the participation of the African American students to enhance his presentation. These comments also indicate the speaker's assumption that underrepresented student groups will make minimum verbal contributions during the presentation.

Once the workshop begins, African American students sit quietly while, on occasion, the speaker attempts to reason with White students who disagree with his assertion that racism is alive and well in the 21st century. I asked Paul to share his perceptions of the silence of African American peers in the workshop:

When you are dealing with racism and prejudice, it's a real touchy subject. And a lot of people, even minorities, are not comfortable talking about it ... it's existence. *It's here! So, it's not anything we can really do about it!* Me personally, I don't mind talking about it. But, I feel that the minorities that were there, since there were *so many White students* that were there, they might have felt intimidated about talking about it. The White students that were there, since they couldn't relate to it, it was harder for them to understand it. So that could have been an issue. Like I said, *it's intimidation more than anything else*. It's probably the main reason a lot of the minorities didn't speak.

This description is similar to Gregory's perception that "the majority rules," which points to the power in numbers. I observed African American students stare at the speaker, sit motionless,

quiet and expressionless. As indicated in the BLSC, silence emerges to avoid conflict and confrontation and to protect emotional and psychological well-being. Paul perceives racial intimidation as a barrier for African American students in the workshop and in the community.

Paul and I spoke briefly following the workshop about the purpose of this research project. He agrees to meet at the Residential Leadership Community for the purpose of introducing potential participants for this inquiry. I also met students who agree to complete a questionnaire about their perceptions of the diversity workshop.

Questionnaire responses indicate that the objective of the diversity workshop is to raise awareness of various types of prejudices in today's society. Eleven responses reveal varying perceptions of the speaker's message. Four White students, one student from India and three African American students describe disappointment with the outcome of the workshop, but for different reasons.

White students indicate that "the speaker unfairly portrayed White people, especially White males, as the oppressor." Responses also suggest that the speaker "promoted resentment among students of color toward White people by portraying them as the source of their problems." The student from India indicates that the speaker "changed his approach to the topic ... [and therefore] was hypocritical." One White student expected to learn about "the experiences of people in minority groups."

African American students' questionnaire responses indicate that the topic on prejudices in today's society is relevant and appropriate. However, they express disappointment with "the speakers' approach to issues relating to prejudices in this country." One African American student believes that "the speaker was not the right person to give a talk about diversity."

Another African American student thought “the speaker was powerful because he [is] a White man who was concerned about racial discrimination.”

Two White students indicate that the presentation was enlightening; they became aware of prejudices within themselves. They also expressed sympathy with how people of color “suffer in the face of racial prejudices,” which indicates experiences void of prejudice and racism for these students. Finally, a doctoral student, who is also an instructor in one of the leadership classes, notes that she is “mainly concerned that the students were going to get fed up with another mandatory diversity event. Many of the mandatory events focus on diversity.” Therefore, in contrast to perceptions of interviewees in this community, mandatory diversity events create resentment among White students. In agreement with Tatum (1994),

White students often struggle with strong feelings of guilt when they become aware of the pervasiveness of racism in our society. Even when they feel their own behavior has been nondiscriminatory, they often experience “guilt by association.” These feelings are uncomfortable and can lead white students to resist learning about race and racism. And who can blame them? If learning about racism means seeing one’s self as an “oppressor,” one of the “bad guys,” then of course there will be resistance. Few people would actively embrace such a self-definition. (p. 463)

These comments imply that attendance in such events may require a different strategy than mandatory attendance.

Mixed Messages: Class vs. Workshop

The speaker visited leadership classes prior to his presentation in the diversity workshop. Paul and Lance perceive the speaker’s message differently in the class from that presented in the workshop:

Paul: In our class where there were about 12 individuals, he was like, everyone has prejudices. And if everyone can acknowledge that they have it, maybe they can think about racism in a different way. In [the workshop], his message was dealing more with prejudice in general.

Lance: [The speaker] gave one good story and talked about it. And that promoted some really good discussions [in class]. There was too many of us [in the workshop] and just not enough time to talk about everything that he was trying to get across.

Paul and Lance indicate that students better received the speaker's discussion in class than in the workshop. Another general consensus in the participants' interviews, as well as informal conversation with other community members, is that the workshop was too long. Many of the participants agree upon the speaker's good intentions. However, they believe that an attempt to cover too many issues with too many students contributes to negative feelings among White students.

Avoiding the Issue

Sarah did not attend the workshop because she went home that weekend.

However, she describes the speaker's discussion in class:

At first we talked about how someone cannot fully understand what an African American, or a White person for that matter, goes through because they haven't gone through it themselves. So, a White person cannot understand why I feel the way I feel about certain things because they haven't gone through what I've gone through. I can try to grasp it, but I can never fully understand why they think the way they think cause I haven't been there. I really feel strongly about that because I think that's something that

people really need to understand. You can't judge me on what I know and what I feel because you don't know why I feel what I feel. I can tell you, but you're never gonna fully grasp the emotional part of it because you haven't been through what I've been through.

Sarah indicates that her classmates' response to this point is favorable, but they have difficulty recognizing inner prejudices and understanding the persistence of racism:

They (classmates) agreed with [what I said]. But, they had trouble connecting with the fact that racism is still around. They had trouble agreeing with the fact that everyone is prejudiced in their own way. They just said, 'I'm not prejudiced!' And I'm like, '*Uh huh.*'

Sarah also describes satisfaction with the speaker's classroom discussion:

I liked where he was going with this stuff. Not everybody [in the class] felt that same way after the workshop. In our next class meeting, people didn't like what he said at all! They felt that he didn't go anywhere with [the topic]. But, that was my classroom. You know, they're all White. I didn't go. So, I didn't really see.

However, a speculation points to Sarah's absence as a coping strategy to escape racial intimidation, avoid conflict and emotional distress in the workshop and with peers in the following class meeting. These comments are indications of conflict avoidance by distancing herself from a familiar and uneasy position in class. Facing and coping with intimidation by White students emerges again. Another speculation suggests that Sarah missed an opportunity to learn more about herself and her peers.

A Difference of Opinion

Although the participants express disappointment with the outcome of the workshop, they

imply that this workshop is essential. Several participants express an appreciation for the speaker's attempt to create prejudice awareness, but some interviewees have different perceptions.

I discovered that required attendance for the workshop does not include Bridge students. Therefore, perceptions of appreciation for the speaker's association with the Civil Rights Movement came from participants who are first-year students:

Paul: During the seminar when [the speaker] talked about M. L. K. (Martin Luther King) and other Black activists during that time ... when he learned what African Americans had to go through, what they were striving to achieve. I could see that he had a sense of what these people were fighting for and wanted to get involved. At first I was like, "What does this White guy know about this?" So, from that standpoint when he got around to that, I guess he basically ... had a better understanding of what was going on in our country during that time. So, for him to be involved with that, I really appreciated him doing that. And I was just happy that he was open minded enough to get involved with that cause. I know a lot of White people wouldn't have been able to do something like that or wouldn't even attempt to listen to what a Black person had to say during that time. I thought that was really important.

Conversely, perceptions from interviews, questionnaire responses and informal conversations with Bridge students indicate that the workshop is "unsuccessful and disturbing:"

John: One thing that really upset me about the presentation was that [the speaker] was like, "I spent X number of years in the Black community and I know the Black experience." Oh, I was just boiling! What kind of crap is that? You are going to tell me that this White man just spent ... I don't care how long he spent in the Black community.

I'm Black and I don't know the Black experience! This dude had no business saying stuff like that. He was talking about prejudice. But not really explaining institutional prejudice and how institutional prejudice translates into institutional racism ... not even talking about sexism ... a system of worldwide patriarchy.

John suggests that many first-year African American students better received the presentation than African American Bridge students: "Some of the first-year Black students here just aren't familiar with the topic." Indications suggest that African American Bridge students are critical of the presentation because they are "more familiar with the issues [of prejudice]."

Year Two: Current Bridge Students

The three remaining participants, John, Margaret and Barbara serve the community in the Bridge Program. John and Margaret are Community Service Assistants (CSAs). John is a double major in Interdisciplinary Studies and Psychology with a concentration in Leadership and Social Change. His minor is Africana Studies. Margaret's major is Psychology. This is their second year in the Leadership Community. They help plan many residence hall activities such as cookouts, special occasion social activities, and snacks for study breaks during exam time. They are also working on a project to recruit underrepresented, low income and first generation students in the state of Virginia to the university:

John: We actually create our own projects and do it ourselves. So it's very autonomous. Our activity is more theoretical. It's called RAW (Realistic Approach to the World). And basically we make an independent film for recruiting efforts of underrepresented, low income and first generation students. And we were going to travel all over South West Virginia doing that this year. Unfortunately, we weren't able to get to the schools. So, we decided to just focus

efforts on the production of the film and plug it into a lot of existing organizations next year so we will be able to reach all of Virginia, especially some of the urban areas where our recruiters from the Admissions Office don't target ... like Richmond, Tidewater and some high schools in South West Virginia.

John plans to continue the project after he leaves the community. A rejected application for the Intern position precludes the opportunity to remain a third year in the community. He expresses support for the student with whom he "was competing [who is] heavily qualified." Therefore, he is satisfied with the outcome of the selection of the Intern position: "It is best that the other student serve as the Intern. I'll still support the Leadership Community, even though I didn't get the position (laughs)." Margaret did not seek a third year in the community. She prefers a different experience in another residence hall.

Barbara is a senior who lives on campus all four years in the Leadership Community. She has a double major in Secondary Education Agriculture and Interdisciplinary Studies and a double minor in Horticulture and Leadership and Social Change. Barbara networks with African American students in traditional residence halls to inform them about the Leadership Community: "Most of the time students [learn] about this place by word-of-mouth." Barbara also mentors first-year undergraduate students. In previous years, Barbara served as a CSA and a STA in the Bridge Program. She also served as a member of the steering committee during the organization of the community's first Hall Council, the Student Advisory Committee for The Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Service Learning Center and a member of the National Issues Forums. As the RLC Intern, Barbara spends much of her time in the staff's office talking with students about their day, classes and attendance in various campus events.

A Hot Topic

Barbara describes her position in the Leadership Community as the Multicultural Programming Intern. However, she comments that “the word multicultural had been explained to her as being too controversial.” Barbara’s concern about using the term multicultural in this position causes her to contemplate a change in the title. Since John planned to apply for the Intern position, Barbara and John discuss changing the title of the position for the following year:

John and I were bantering about the position for next year and changing the title about it and some of the ways we could reform it so it’s not so controversial. *The word multicultural, it’s a hot topic.* I’ve been told that it just makes people run away.

Barbara’s comments indicate confusion and uncertainty about the term multicultural. Her perception of a multicultural-state-of-being is as follows:

I’m like, 90% of the people in this building are White. Ten percent of the people in this building are anything but White, multicultural. So who are you talking about running away? The ones that wake up everyday and realize that we are? Or the ones that wake up realizing that they aren’t? Hint, hint, there’s a problem.

This perception suggests that multicultural reflects only people of color. C. Banks (2005), J. Banks (1997, 2001, 2002) and C. Sleeter (1996) agree that multicultural concepts include “concerns, perspectives, and experiences rooted in minority as well as dominant positions, without trying to synthesize them all into one whole (Sleeter, 1996, p. 114). Therefore, multicultural perspectives do not melt or assimilate in a pot. They promote inclusion of multiple minority and dominant perspectives. Barbara also discusses a role change for the Intern’s position:

Last year the focus wasn't necessarily placed upon working within the program with the students. It focused on networking with other organizations and building rapport. This year I wanted the focus to lead back within the community.

Barbara believes that she can better serve the community by helping students to understand and respect cultural differences within the Leadership Community.

Working with Resident Assistants (RAs) is another challenging experience for Barbara as the community's Intern:

Let's say we're having a program and the Interns want to send e-mail out to all the residents. If we send you e-mail, forward the e-mail! Don't just let it stop on your desk because you don't think it's important enough! We need a little more cooperation from the Resident Assistants in this building.

Barbara acknowledges that some RAs are more responsible than others. She encourages RAs "to take a more active role, rather than a passive role, to support the Leadership Community Program." She also indicates that the lack of cooperation from the RAs reflects a resistance to an Intern who is African American. The RAs in all six of the RLCs are White students.

Barbara's description of four years in the Leadership Community indicates active participation and connectedness to this RLC. She is the only Intern for a community of approximately 230-240 students. Further descriptions of her involvement occurs through various contact with community members.

Peer Interactions

All of the participants, with the exception of the Intern, describe close friends with whom they share special relationships. They describe relationships with many students in the community as cordial friendships:

Paul: I have two or three friends that I can confide in. I can talk to other people about certain things ... but I can talk to my close friends, who are African American, about deeper issues.

Sarah: I have good female friends of my race ... of African American descent who are my suitemates.

Lance: There's only like, two other Black guys on this floor who I see every once in a while. ... They are very busy. So, I have to find the Black guys, the Black friends, because you need that identity and you can't ... it's really hard to survive if all you know is ... if all of your relationships are built from knowing White people. So, you just have to go out [in other residence halls] and find the Black people.

Margaret: Most of the people, I say 'Hi' to. Some [White students] don't like to say 'Hi' to me (laughs). There were some White students who "just don't speak. So, I smile and say 'Hi' and keep going. The main people that I really talk to in the community are all African American.

John: I speak to everyone in the hall. Specifically, my group of friends are all people of color ... [African], African American and an American Indian student. They're all in the Leadership Community.

The participants describe close friendships inside and outside of the community with students who are predominantly African American. Barbara's relationship with community members is different because of her assumed role in the community:

The Mother Figure

Barbara's role as Intern involves listening and advising fellow students who come to her with concerns about social issues, homework assignments, minor illnesses or injuries. She helps students develop applications for The Bridge Program and suggest resources for creating projects. She also works with other staff members in the community. Barbara describes her relationship with many of her fellow community members as "a mother figure:" Over time, I've been a mom-figure to a lot of people in here. A nickname that I had was Mama." She provides Band-Aids for cuts and bruises and serves chicken noodle soup to anyone who is ill. Students interact with Barbara for many reason: "Some students come to me for emotional support, for help with homework, food, to go to Wal-Mart, or just to have fun." She becomes acquainted with many students in the community in a role as 'the mother figure.'

The Noise Thing

Excessive noise causes social challenges in the community. Margaret describes what she terms "the noise thing:"

In the middle of the night, like 2, 3, or 4 o'clock in the morning you hear, Woo-o! ... going up and down the hall. Nothing would be said. But let us have a suite door open ... and you know when sistahs (Africa American females) talk and laugh, we talk and laugh a little loudly. So, the RA comes ... knocks on the door, 'Sorry, you need to close this door. All you guys are being too loud.' But yet, 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, you can have this White guy going down [the hall] on a skateboard drunk off their butt going Woo-o-o! I went down stairs to the RA on duty. I'm like, 'Could you explain this?' And then he comes upstairs and was like, 'Well, I didn't see the guy. Then you end up being termed a snitch, they tell. Yeah, I'm gonna tell if you get away with it and if it's

something that's not the greatest thing to be doing. And all you got to say to me is, 'can you keep the volume down.' Yeah, I'm gonna snitch if that's what you want to call it.

I was really irritated because no one does anything. So I'm like, Ok, that fool is flying up and down on a skateboard and I can't sit here and have a conversation! I'm being threatened by JR (judicial review) for having clean fun and he's going up and down the hall on a skateboard drunk!

Margaret acknowledges the laughter from her room, but feels that it is unfair for the RA to minimize her report of excessive noise in the hall. Margaret believes that residence hall rules should apply to everyone.

Another participant also experiences excessive noise in the community. John dislikes the violent computer games (Counter Strike and Halo) that suitemates play in their rooms:

It is really loud. It's bombs and machine guns, cursing ... I mean some really foul language. I mean it's crazy and I can't handle it!

As a result, John and his roommate often leave their suite to escape the noise. He also comments on his suitemates' view about women and posters they mount on the walls:

They're all sexist too. They have this saying, 'get-R-done' ... a horrible concept that they say all of the time. And I'm like, "You don't find that sexist at all just the slightest bit?"

They don't!

John's comment does not reflect a report to the RA about the noise. The issues that John raises reflect a double-edge sword. The right to display posters and freedom of speech are in question. One issue questions freedom of expression. On the other hand, these rights infringe on John's desire to exist in a noise-free/sexist-free environment. At what point does free expression

infringe on the rights of humankind? The latter issue implicates gender bias in rooms where several male students hang posters of scantily clad women on the walls.

Margaret and John indicate that White students break noise rules throughout the year, which are often ignored by RAs. Consequently, unfair treatment leads to animosity against RAs as well as students who break rules without repercussion.

Adjusting to Suitemates

Margaret and her roommate were CSAs during the fall semester. Several conflicts of interests caused their relationship degrade. Margaret met new friends, found other things to do outside of their suite; Margaret and her roommate were interested in the same guy. Margaret also suggested that her roommate was not a responsible CSA:

She's not really doing anything. She was rejected as an STA. So, we picked her up as a CSA. She didn't even help write the proposal for the project. She's not pulling her weight. ...She was slacking off ... and wouldn't or couldn't make the meetings.

In a CSA meeting, Margaret and the other CSAs discuss her roommate's lack of participation. Consequently, her roommate decides to move out of the Leadership Community at the end of the fall semester. Therefore, Margaret does not have a roommate during the spring semester.

Paul describes the relationship with his roommate as "*all about adjustment.*" They had differences early in the fall semester about the room temperature, loud music and different sleeping habits. However, they decide to make an effort to compromise and adjust to each other's likes and dislikes; to get to know and understand each other: "So, we kinda know each other now and we kinda respect each other with that."

Positive rapport early in the year with roommates is important to efforts of adjustments. Margaret and Paul have contrasting experiences with their roommates. Their descriptions suggest

differences in personalities as well as characteristics identified with gender. Paul's comments describe reciprocal attempts to adjust. Margaret's comments indicate rivalry, competition and disproportionate CSA participation.

All six participants imply that racist behavior is common in this community. They talk about improving mutual respect as roommates; informing others about developing respect for cultural differences; forming study groups; reminding each other about the noise level and making a contribution to the community. Most of the participants describe an overall sense of accomplishment in the community. The next category overlaps peer interactions with racial bias.

Racial and Cultural Awareness

The participants describe experiences with racism within a community that encourages racial inclusion:

John: The classes provide a source of dialogue, a source of information. That's how I met my friends here because we all took a common class together. And a lot of the issues that were raised in class were very personal to us (African American students). So we have that extra support group after hours, those 2 o'clock in the morning discussions about racism and reparation and all that good stuff.

John describes topics in leadership classes as a catalyst for the discussion of sensitive issues, which stimulates further late-night discussions in the residence hall. Support groups include African American students who desire further in-depth dialogue about issues of concern. John describes these groups as believers in proactive ways of informing White students about racial stereotyping. However, daily subtle and blatant racially biased behaviors causes them to make decisions about when to question or ignore racial adversity.

Vanilla Ice Cream, Fried Chicken and Little Jokes

The participants are in agreement that “racist statements were usually laughed off [by White peers] as if they were little jokes.” According to Lance, “Things that White students laugh off are racist to me.” The participants share examples of subtle and blatant racist acts in the community. I present the following examples in their own words:

Example #1

My suitemate and I always shared his biology book. He said, ‘You can always use it. I’m fine with sharing it with you.’ So I picked it up to study with one day. When I came back, the guy across the hall said, ‘Oh Lance, you stole it! It must be because you’re Black.’ And ha ha ha, laughing it off. It’s not right to say, ‘Because you’re Black so you stole it. You must have stolen it for that reason.’ And that sort of propagates more and more. When all of your friends are around, all you really can do is just say, ‘Ha, ha, ha’ in a sarcastic way.

Later in a one-on-one conversation, Lance told the guy that his accusation “was not cool.” Lance indicates that the guy’s response is aloof and not taken seriously.

Example #2

The Hall Council, which includes me, was putting on an ice cream social, and I was talking with one of the Black students in the dorm. He had gotten some vanilla ice cream. A White guy across the hall said, ‘Hey John, You got vanilla ice cream ... interesting, interesting.’ As if he should have gotten chocolate ice cream because he was Black. All we can do is just give them a sort of weird look.

I asked if he thought that strategy works when this type of behavior occurs: “I really don’t know what works better. Nothing does really because it still goes on.” This statement implies that

racial challenges are persistent and an endemic part of campus life.

Example #3

We went out to dinner with some friends last week. I brought a Styrofoam container full of fried chicken back to the dorm. And everyone (White peers) was like, 'Oh Lance with fried chicken! Who would have thought?' You know, like Black people and fried chicken! It's just the day-by-day little jokes that people say. *It just happens so often.*

This example reaffirms the persistence of racial bias and typecasting in the community.

Example # 4

I present this example as a vignette. John confronts racial taunting and blatant racism in the community:

After 9-11, there has been a large increase in anti-Semitism in the United States, which is something that we don't talk about on campus. Which I think is extremely unfortunate because it's only going to perpetuate more stereotypes. So, this guy would say, 'Yeah they all look alike.' One of his suitemates was from the Middle East. He picks on this suitemate all of the time, saying that he's a terrorist ... you have a towel on your head. So, one night a friend of mine, who's in that suite too, came and got me in my room, and was like, 'There's something going on in my suite! I think you should come see this!' I walked to his suite. And right there in the middle of the hall is this guy in a bed sheet and a pillowcase on his head. And he had put the pillowcase in a point and he had a Swastika on the pillowcase. And he was just standing there (voice inflection raised expressively)! I just stood there looking at him! I was like, 'What are you doing?' And he was like, 'Oh, it's just a joke.' My mouth dropped! This guy thought it would be funny to dress up like a KKK member! I went and got my friend and we were like, 'Joke? We don't joke like

that! What end up happening is, we had a two-hour conversation with this guy about White privilege, White supremacy, all that good stuff. And we decided not to tell the RA (resident advisor) because he could have gotten expelled. We know we could have, if we made enough noise after that. We were like, 'What good would it do to get this dude expelled?' Like, ok ... he's going to get expelled. Then, his parents have enough money, so he was just going to go to another university. He's going to forget about this situation. He's probably going to hate Black people and people he classifies as terrorists even more. So it's probably not the most productive way to deal with this guy. So we decided not to tell the RA or anybody. But, just to sit down with him and have a serious, serious heart-to-heart with him and hope for the best. Yeah, get him expelled. Then what? Like the consequences of that ... punishment in that arena? I don't think it really works. *That's not what you really need, especially to change someone's perception. And that's the whole point!*

This experience demonstrates a critical reflection, a complex analysis and a decision to explain and inform rather than to ridicule and punish (Friere, 1993). John believes that a serious discussion would be more effective than acts of retaliation. He perceives expulsion as a short-term consequence that may result in long-term negative feelings toward people of color. John illustrates passion, beliefs and resolution to a challenging experience. However, this vignette describes racial harassment, which is not reported to authorities.

These examples provide insight into the popularity of the *Learning About Diversity and Social Justice* class among students belonging to underrepresented groups in the community. These descriptions are a few examples of the participants' challenging experiences with racial typecasting. They cope with racial bias, as well as routine social and academic challenges, to

receive an education (Benton, 2001, Winant, 1994). The participants believe that the educational advantages in the RLC outweigh social discomforts. All, but two, of the participants apply to the Bridge Program to remain in the Leadership Community for another year. The Intern graduates with honors at the end of the semester.

Advice from the Participants

All of the participants would recommend the Leadership Community to other students. The following quotes contain the participants' advice for prospective undergraduates, particularly African American students:

- “Do not get engrossed in how bad White students can be ... Black students can be the same way or worse. Just be on guard. But don't let it consume you.”
- “Take advantage of the opportunities in the community, and what can be done.”
- “They need to have very good study habits. Be ready for the demanding work load.”
- “Be respectful to other students. Gossiping behind someone's back, and then pretend that they are buddy, buddy is sad.”
- “Get involved in something that's not required. Meet people. Get some networking done. Make a few close friends. Be friendly in general.”
- “Ignore the small stuff. Make a difference when the occasion arises. Make good choices. Stay focused.”
- “Improve your study habits: use a planner, gage time to study, pay attention to details, study longer, small study groups are helpful, use professors' office hours, stay in contact with your advisor, attend tutoring sessions, and go to anybody in the community with the same major or the same classes to study with.”

This type of advice may resonate well with many students, particularly new students. The tone of advice is apt to appeal to the emotions for long-term effects on educational development.

Summary

Three participants are members of the First-Year Program and three participants serve this community in the Bridge Program. Data collection in the Residential Leadership Community includes the following social and educational experiences:

- The participants in the First Year Program (1) emphasize the importance of student initiated discussions and activities in courses and peer groups and (2) make several adjustments to improve study habits by using a daily planner, studying for a test a week in advance, focusing on time management, working in study groups, meeting with faculty during office hours, contributing to the community through service or leadership praxis projects, joining committees and accepting RLC positions.
- Students in the Bridge Program plan social activities and community service projects, which facilitates social contact and sense of community. John reapplies for a third year in the community to serve as an Intern, but is not accepted. However, he believes that the other applicant has better qualifications. Therefore, he will continue to support the community the following year. Margaret did not reapply to the Bridge Program for a third year.
- Barbara is a senior who assumes many responsibilities as a member of the Leadership Community for four years. She undertakes numerous responsibilities, participates in many social activities and serves on several committees throughout her four years in the community.

- The participants cope with racial awareness/unawareness issues in the community. The Intern describes resistance from several RAs to follow through on e-mail requests. She believes this lack of cooperation is an affront to her role as an African American student in a leadership position. In addition, the Intern describes her position as the Multicultural Intern. She struggles with the idea that the term ‘multicultural’ is a controversial topic on campus. Her interpretation suggests a limited understanding from an exclusive standpoint rather than an inclusive or global perspective, which includes people from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, minority and dominant groups (Banks, 1997, 2001, 2002). Nevertheless, the Intern’s efforts to serve the community extend to many students as a source of academic and emotional support.
- The Leadership Community encourages discussions on diverse issues such as gender, class and race to promote diversity awareness. However, racial intimidation emerges in many ways in descriptions of all of the participants in this community. They cope with racist jokes and taunting, racial stereotyping, a blatant disregard for the effect of racist jokes or snide remarks, harassment, unfair treatment by RAs who reprimand African American students, but not White students who break rules and indifference or unresponsiveness to friendly greetings in passing.
- Some participants worry about labels such as snitch or troublemaker. Therefore, they rarely report students who consistently break residence hall rules. Sarah’s report of excessive noise and safety violations in the middle of the night receives minimum attention from the RA. Several participants suggest that “the RAs play favorites.” They ignore noise in White students’ rooms or noise they make in the hallways, but knock on African American students’ doors for lesser violations, warning or reporting them for

judicial review. Implications suggest that the participants do not report racism in the RLC. Therefore, administrators or authorities may be unaware of racially biased acts in the community.

- The participants acknowledge the prevalence of racial bias in the community. They cope with racial intimidation using strategies such as silence and critical reflection, courageous dialogue, conflict avoidance by walking away, dialogue in private with African American peers and proactive dialogue to bring about racial awareness. However, one participant indicates that attempts to inform are for naught because occurrences of intimidation by White students continue on a daily basis. Implications also indicate that persistent racial bias reflects the campus climate and the society at large. Therefore, it is likely that many of the participants expect racial insults at some point, but are sometimes caught off guard.
- Topics on racial issues are uncomfortable for African American students as well as White students. Several participants indicate frustration with White students' blatant disregard for diversity issues in presentations as well as in the residence hall. White students who sign an attendance sheet for a required diversity event, then walk out shortly thereafter, is an example of such frustration. Interviews, questionnaire responses and observations in the diversity workshop have the following implications about the premature departure of White students: (1) Many White students deem the diversity workshop unnecessary; (2) White students' deny the existence of racism and are unable to recognize and/or admit personal prejudices; (3) The walk-out is an act of protest by White students against mandatory participation and (4) White students develop a resistance to mandatory events and activities that focus on racial issues.

- The participants regard ‘exodus of the masses’ as disrespectful to the presenter as well as the presenter’s message. The participants regard the walk-out as another way to illustrate the power of whiteness and the insignificance of blackness in descriptions of racial jokes, taunting, racial stereotypes, social isolation and racial intimidation. A distinct message from the participants in this community implies that many White students leave diversity events prematurely to avoid the discussion of racial issues. In addition, participants indicate that many White students do not relate to racial prejudices because it is irrelevant to their scheme of existence. What about consequences for leaving a required event? Paul indicates that attendance in the workshop is a requirement. However, the community does not require students to remain in the workshop.

These descriptions indicate an assumption that White students will not attend culturally diverse events unless they are required to attend. If this is correct, I believe this assumption represents an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Expectations of how students behave influences how they tend to behave (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Therefore, speculations indicate that students immolate role-modeled expectations, which may affect how they behave on campus.

Educational and social experiences interrelate throughout the data. The participants’ involvement in leadership courses, contact with faculty and staff, and peer interactions, contribute to this stance. Racial and cultural awareness emerge as a significant factor in all of the participants’ experiences in this community. However, a mission to embrace and give voice to diverse groups of students makes a positive impact on the participants’ sense of ethnic fit in the Leadership Community. The next chapter focuses on participants in the Women in Engineering Residential Learning Community.

Chapter Seven

Women in Engineering Residential Learning Community

Typology descriptions of living-learning communities in Schoem (2004) characterize the Women in Engineering Residential Learning Community (Hypatia), as well as the BLSC, as residential education programs. Identifying characteristics include (1) extension of courses in a specific field of study into residential settings, (2) location of faculty offices outside of the community, (3) faculty-student contact on scheduled time-frames and (4) “activities ... that bring faculty into the residence hall, usually on a onetime basis, for discussions, lectures, films, mentoring, or receptions” (p. 140).

The Hypatia Community housed approximately fifty women in spring 2004 at the time of the interviews. Hypatia students live on one end of a floor in a residence hall. Male students live on the other end of the hall, many of whom are also engineering students. Hypatia students begin the fall semester as General Engineering majors. The participants describe the following perceptions of the Hypatia Community:

Cynthia: Hypatia focuses on girls who live and work together and help one another out to get through the freshman year ... the first semester was work, work, work, and more work. I plan to specialize in Civil Engineering.

Kate: The classes were designed to help you be successful throughout college. [She plans a career in Engineering Science and Mechanics.]

Renée: Just having engineers on the floor doing the same work that you are doing, especially last semester, the big transition of the first semester. I made several friends by being in the same classes. I'm glad that I joined Hypatia. [Renée's interest is Electrical Engineering.]

Allison: Interesting, really interesting ... like, it's only a few of us people of color. And,

during the beginning of the school year, we were kinda like the outsiders, in my opinion.

Kate shares advantages of living in the community:

It was just great. If one person couldn't figure out something, you could just run down the hall and like, "Did you get this out?" and have different study sessions, just to have someone like right there having to do the same exact thing that you have to do. A lot of people [in engineering] have a conflict with that, who live outside [of Hypatia], if their roommate is like, an art major. An engineering major is going to have tons of work. They're probably going to be up like until 2:00 every morning doing the work. And it doesn't help if you have a roommate who's out partying all the time. That would be no fun. But, it's just a different commitment. So it's good to have like, a natural support system where everyone is going to be as stressed as you are when it comes to test time, and like respectful of that, and know what you are going through.

These participants describe a sundry of social and educational experiences. They tell stories of success, disappointment and a focus on course work "24/7" (24 hours a day/seven days a week). However, three of the participants do not readily respond to open-ended questions. Initial questions met with vague or superficial responses. I found it necessary to revise open-ended questions such as – Tell me about ... or Describe your ... or What is it like... or How are you...? More follow-up questions are necessary for Renée, Kate and Cynthia than other students in this study to probe for details. Direct questions about specific aspects of their experiences help to generate in-depth responses. On the other hand, Allison is surprisingly expressive. A speculation about her openness suggests an emotional need to tell her story. Therefore, it is important to recognize various temperaments during the interviewing process. They may reflect thought patterns that are characteristics of a chosen field of study, unique situations, as well as individual

personalities.

Community Recruitment

The Hypatia Community, along with various engineering organizations, implements recruitment incentives to introduce and encourage perspective students in the field of engineering. Several participants mentor high school students throughout the year. Therefore, this community's outreach efforts are on-going. The participants discovered the Hypatia Community in various ways:

- Kate learns about the community through a search (The US News Magazine) for the best engineering universities in this country. Virginia Tech is highly rated.
- Renée hears about the community in a conversation with friends enrolled at Virginia Tech when she was in high school.
- Allison discovers Hypatia through a search on the housing website.
- Cynthia learns about the community from her mother, who searched for on-campus housing on the website.

Students apply to the community by answering questions in the on-line application. Acceptance also provides an opportunity to participate in a summer enrichment program.

Learning and Personal Development: *Sense of Ethnic Fit*

Experiences in an Engineering Summer Program

Cynthia, Allison and Renée participated in the Academic Summer Program Introducing Resources for Engineers (ASPIRE). They describe ASPIRE as a five-week summer program, which supports underrepresented racial groups in preparation as first-year General Engineering majors. Allison's perceptions of ASPIRE are as follows: "It was kind of like a heads-up on what you need to expect ... cause it is a predominantly White school ... so what should I expect?"

When the academic year begins, they maintain contact with the director of ASPIRE as an academic resource through the CEED Office (Center for Enhancement of Engineering Diversity). They also maintain friendships with students they met in ASPIRE.

The first semester begins with a retreat. Activity objectives encourage problem solving and team building skills on a ropes course. They also take part in a wall climbing activity that requires support from fellow students. Then, the academics begin. According to Cynthia, “First semester fun activities were at a minimum.”

Fall Semester: Common Classes

Hypatia students participate in a one-semester seminar that meets twice a week. They also enroll in a two-semester Engineering Fundamentals (EF) course. This course is a requirement for all first-year engineering students, but not for membership in the Hypatia Community. The first semester EF course introduces first-year engineering majors to the field of engineering. The second semester EF course focuses on design projects. The EF course introduces various branches of engineering, which allows students to discover specific career interests in the School of Engineering.

Hypatia Seminar discussions and activities focus on success talks, study tips, career services, time management, stress management, development of a résumé, a four-year planner and survival skills for women-related issues. Cynthia comments on a topic about safety issues for female students on campus:

One seminar was about the protection of women ... like people who have been raped ... like on that line. You know it's beneficial, but I know it probably won't happen to me. It just didn't relate to me. So, I just kinda sat there.

Cynthia recalls a topic on the victimization of women on campus. However, she finds the information irrelevant. This perception indicates that routine places and spaces on campus such as classroom buildings, dining halls and residence halls are safe environments for students. Therefore, feeling safe provides a sense of security.

The participants also write reflection papers and journal entries each week on various topics, such as the role of women in the field of engineering. Seminars take place in a building outside of the residence hall. Cynthia “use[s] the Hypatia class as time to relax and socialize [because] it wasn’t as stressful as other classes.”

All of the participants in this RLC have positive relationships with faculty and staff. They do not indicate contact with faculty and staff members outside of the seminar and the retreat. Kate and Cynthia share perceptions of the staff member (a graduate student) who facilitates the Hypatia Seminars:

Kate: “The coordinator [of the Hypatia Seminar] does a good job of getting guest speakers to introduce new things that you can do in engineering that weren’t so common ... like a talk about invalids, a talk about prosthetics.”

Cynthia: “I talk to [the coordinator of the Hypatia Seminar] a lot and she is very helpful. I can email her if I have a question about anything.”

These comments suggest that the Staff Coordinator is a valuable source of academic and emotional support. All of the participants seek help from assigned academic advisors and assigned student mentors about class schedules, career interests and life on campus. The participants do not indicate any other contact with faculty and staff members.

Allison’s educational experiences are largely influenced by an omission of a calculus course in high school. Calculus is a co-requisite course to the first semester Engineering

Fundamentals (EF, Introduction to Engineering I) course. Therefore, she is ineligible to enroll in the first semester EF-I course with her peers. She discusses the effects of exclusion from this course:

Maybe not the best of what I needed for here (the Hypatia Community). I didn't have calculus in high school. The highest I took was pre-calculus. We didn't have any technically based classes [in high school]. I needed calculus for here. I took calculus last semester. So, it was like a struggle to understand the concepts. So, it was a big adjustment to understand and learn.

Similar to Patrice in the Biological and Life Sciences Community (BLSC), Allison perceives that she is not as academically prepared as her peers. Both participants “try to play catch-up” with fellow students in their respective communities.

Although Allison participates in the seminar, lack of enrollment in the EF-I course causes uncomfortable relationships with many of her peers. Finding a study group or a study partner in the Hypatia Community becomes a challenge.

Study Practices

Allison attempts to join a study group with her roommate's friends. Her roommate is a White student:

I tend to like, go in a corner and hide because I feel like an outsider to the other girls on the floor. Like, if they are in the room, I always ask someone for help. And they are like, 'Can you? Oh! Well, you don't have the [EF-I] class. Can't help you.'

Allison expresses feelings of alienation and rejection from this study group. Further descriptions of study practices overlap in the category of *Peer Interactions*.

Allison does not study in her room. Her roommate prefers to work in a dimly lit environment:

My roommate likes to turn off the lights all of the time and just work in the dark. She put Christmas lights up around her dresser. So, she'll turn off the lights and turn on her Christmas lights. And I'm like, why are the lights out? She says, "Oh, I couldn't concentrate." And I was like, well you do your thing cause I'm going somewhere else! And it's like, if you turn the lights out I'm going to get tired and sleepy and I'm going to lay down. So, I can't work in there. Nothing would get done in there. So, I go to someone else's room to study.

These comments indicate conflicting peer interactions. They suggest a need for these roommates to work together to create a cooperative study environment for both students. Allison often visits the rooms of the other participants' in this study. Finding a place to study means studying with the other participants and/or engineering students who live outside of the community.

Allison describes another experience that affects social interactions with peers and study practices:

My pod is the loud pod. The girls next to me play music, the TV [is] loud, [there's] banging on the walls, eight to ten people in the room and everyone in there is talking. And, they aren't talking to me. Like, you try to make conversation. But, you can only ask so many questions and then [the conversation] is over with. And *I feel like the outsider too*, because I don't have any classes that they're working on. So, they'll all be working together on something and I'll be doing something else. So, I need to go find someone who's doing what I'm doing.

A pod is defined as "six rooms clustered around an opening in the hallway"

([w ww.eng.vt.edu/hypatia](http://www.eng.vt.edu/hypatia)). These comments describe simultaneous social and educational challenges. They overlap in a seamless pattern that marginalizes Allison socially, emotionally and academically. Allison indicates that she is the only student in Hypatia who does not qualify for the EF-I course. Consequently, she is the only student in Hypatia who takes a calculus course. These experiences indicate to Allison that she is an outsider in the community.

Kate uses the CEED Tutoring Center as an academic resource during the first semester. She also e-mails professors to request academic support. Educational experiences for the second semester are different:

I am in the position to help other students now. This semester's EF [II] class is now more of a drawing and a visual thing and that's where I am a little more comfortable.

Kate indicates that she does not require academic support during the second semester. She studies alone before joining a study group. She sometimes studies with engineering students outside of the community who live at the other end of the hall.

Cynthia describes study habits as “24/7” (24 hours a day/7 days a week). Therefore, she has limited time for socializing. She also prefers to study alone in her room. Her study routine begins every night between 7:00pm and 8:00pm until around 12:15am. However, she joins a study group when she needs academic support, but rarely studies with her roommate: “She is a couple of classes ahead of me ... because of high school AP credit. So, if I have a question about a class that she took last semester, I'll ask her.”

Cynthia uses several resources for academic support: “Other than the people on this hall, I turn to my RAs in ASPIRE. I'll ask them for old tests ... also the CEED Office. They have a whole cabinet full of old tests.” Cynthia indicates a dissatisfaction with her academic progress.

Therefore, she plans to focus on physics assignments and writing skills for an English class during spring break.

Renée describes her study routine: “I try to start a week before the test. I have to take breaks for homework assignments. I can’t just work nonstop. But studying, I study for about two hours in my room.” Renée makes adjustments in time management by prioritizing daily activities in order to accomplish academic expectations. She prefers to study alone as well. Renée joins a study group with close friends when she needs academic support. This study group includes the other interviewees in this community.

Kate, Cynthia and Renée describe a successful transition from high school to college as General Engineering majors. Hypatia students are ready to begin the second half of the Engineering Fundamentals course (EF-II, Introduction to Engineering II). Allison finally has the opportunity to enroll in an EF course. However, she faces additional challenges since the objectives of the EF-II course are different from the EF-I course.

Spring Semester: Maintaining the Connection

Kate comments on the progress of students in Hypatia, which suggests that goals in the General Engineering program are on target:

Everyone on the floor has grown a lot since last semester and [are] now investigating different fields [in the engineering program]. We don’t need each other as much. We’re still on the floor, but their isn’t a rigid set-up anymore.

They continue to explore different aspects of engineering during the spring semester in the EF-II course. Committee activities replace the Hypatia Seminar to maintain a sense of community. The participants volunteer from a selection of several committees: the kindness committee, the community service committee, the social committee, the website and technology committee and

the recruitment committee. Allison participates in the recruitment committee: “High school women stayed on campus for a weekend to see what it was like. I housed one of the girls to sleep in my room for that weekend.” The recruitment committee hosts the Women’s Preview Weekend and Open House for juniors in high school.

Kate participates in the kindness committee. They intend to perform various acts of kindness among their peers and compile a memory book for the year. Renée belongs to the social committee. They plan activities such as ice skating, hiking and a trip to Kings Dominion. Kate suggests that all of the committees are making plans and scheduling activities: “So, we are still trying to do things to keep together as a group in Hypatia.”

On the other hand, Allison enrolls in the second semester EF-II course (Introduction to Engineering II) devoid of the first semester EF-I course (Introduction to Engineering I):

This semester I’m taking the Engineering [Fundamentals-II] class. The most challenging thing in there is remembering all of the concepts and trying to apply it, and time management. Like they give you a ton of work. It took me three days to do one assignment, trying to manage that, and trying to understand that, while also doing your other classes.

These descriptions suggest that the sequence of the courses, EF-I and EF-II, is important.

Therefore, Allison has to find a way to compensate for not taking the EF-I course:

Figuring It Out on My Own

During the spring semester, Allison’s educational experiences are, again, different than the other Hypatia students’. She indicates that her progress is a semester behind that of her peers:

Because I didn’t have calculus in high school, I couldn’t take EF because calculus is a co-requisite for EF. So that pushed me behind. The workshops and seminars that they went

to last semester [in the EF class], well, it's not offered this semester to me. *So, It's like I have to figure it out on my own.* [Last semester], people within their professions, like with different engineering fields, come in and talk to you. *So, I don't know what's going on in any of [those professions] ...* cause they had to take workshops in their EF class. But it's not offered the second semester in my EF class. So it's like, *what do you do? Who do you talk to?* You can talk to the department heads. But, they just give you the overall insight of it cause they're all professors. So, they only give you the professional side of it. What about the industrial side?

Allison's enrollment status, "not math ready," makes her ineligible to enroll in the fall semester EF-I course. I asked Allison if she could attend the EF-I course even though she did not enroll:

My advisor said, 'You're technically in the school of engineering, but you don't take engineering classes. So, she emailed me [the schedule for] some of [the topics in the class]. So, I was only able to attend a couple of them, but not as many as I would have liked to. My advisor told me to contact the department head people and call around and ask for an alumni list ... and try to speak to them by telephone.

Allison struggles with the advice to use her own resourcefulness to obtain the information that her peers received in the fall semester EF-I course. She indicates that she still needs to contact people in the department to gather information that will help with career decisions. Her career goal was Industrial Systems Engineering during the fall semester. However, she is undecided by the time of the interview. Allison describes educational experiences as "overwhelming."

A telephone conversation (June 2004) with a Hypatia staff member indicates that provisional acceptance is permissible without calculus, i.e. "admitted into the engineering program as not math-ready." Provisional status students must pass a calculus course during the

fall semester to remain in the program. I also received information about the online EF course schedule and syllabus. The staff member suggests that Allison could access the schedule online and attend the class sessions. However, Allison presents a different perception of the options that are available for attending the fall semester EF-I course:

The way they said it, like the teachers and everything were like ... it was mandatory for the engineering students ... who were in the engineering class ... *like it was for them only*. And I was like, what about me? Can I not take it? And I think [there] was like a miscommunication. My advisor was like, 'Go to it anyway and see if you like it.' And that's what I did for a couple of them. [Also], being in the hallway and like, everyone is leaving. I was like, where are you guys going? 'Oh we're going to our seminar for our engineering class (EF-I).' So, it was like ... it's mandatory for them to go. So, maybe it's something just for them to go to. So, I was like, can I go? And they were like, 'I don't know. All we know is that we have to go for our class.'

This description suggests that Allison is unsure of an option to attend the class without enrollment. She describes this situation as "frustrating and stressful." Therefore, alienation and rejection from her roommate's study group, along with a provisional enrollment status reinforces Allison's position in the community as "an outsider." These experiences have negative affects on academic fit and social interactions with peers, which jeopardizes a sense of community.

Peer Interactions

Allison describes another type of experience with peers in Hypatia. She talks about cliques in the community:

We don't connect as a whole. I think the point of [the community] was to get us all together ... to stick together. But yet, we're not. We are sort of in a way separated

because they do have your little cliques that you hang out with. And with that, you don't tend to associate with many other people. We could all be walking down the hall going to the same place. Everyone would leave in their own cliques.

These comments point to a lack of interpersonal relationships for promoting teamwork, cooperative leaning and a sense of community.

Kate has positive relationships with peers in the Hypatia Community. However, she identifies close friends as Cynthia, Allison and Renée. She describes how everyone on the floor “use to hang out in the hall during the weekend.” However, student vandalism on other floors causes strict enforcement of quiet hours during the weekend in the residence hall. Therefore, they no longer socialize in the hall. Renée describes a problem caused by students on the grounds of the residence hall:

Last night I was trying to do work kinda late. And there were people outside of the dorm on a Wednesday night starting to party ... being rowdy and loud and I was trying to study. That happens in the hallways in rooms in other dorms. And that was a Wednesday night. So, I just can't imagine that happening on our hall.

The location of the community, in close proximity to students on other floors, sometimes interferes with efforts to study as well as the limited time they have for socializing. In addition, students in this residence hall open windows or use window fans to ventilate rooms due to a lack of air conditioning. In this case, outside noises have negative effects on efforts to study.

The participants describe each other and a student from India as “best friends.” They describe other students in Hypatia as “acquaintances.” They also socialize with students who live on the other end of the hall and with students who participated in ASPIRE (Academic Summer Program Introducing Resources for Engineers).

RLCs are places where students can develop friendships for socializing, cooperating in community activities and for receiving academic support. Cynthia describes her friendships in Hypatia:

I have two groups of friends. I have my roommate's friends who are White. And I have my close friends who are African American (the other participants). So I'm split down the middle with them.

I asked Cynthia if her two groups of friends ever socialize together: "Yes, a couple of us did a Step Show. ... So we invited my roommate and her group of friends." Previous descriptions indicate limited interactions with White peers inside the community. Implications of this experience suggests that voluntary participation in an ethnic event outside of the community is a positive experience.

Allison indicates that she and her White roommate sometimes have a strained relationship inside of the community. This experience is similar to Cynthia's experience with her roommate. On several occasions, they eat together in the dining hall. They also attend an African American fraternity party and a Step Show together, sponsored by NESBE (The National Society of Black Engineers): "My roommate enjoyed that and would like to go again."

Cynthia and Allison describe examples of positive experiences with White roommates outside of the community. These experiences have two implications: (1) Voluntary participation in culturally diverse activities, opposed to mandatory activities, result in positive outcomes and (2) Peer interactions with White roommates are friendly when they occur outside of the RLC.

Cynthia also visits friends who live on the end of the hall to get "a break from Hypatia [since I] seldom leave the building:"

I like how the floor is co-ed ... like this side of the hall is girls and that side of the hall is guys. So, if you don't want to hang [out] on this side or want to get away from the engineering part, you can just go on the other side. So, I can just step out and go venturing into the other side of the hall if I want to.

A busy schedule with course work limits time for socializing. However, visiting students on the other end of the hall is a convenient change of pace. Cynthia also describes friendships with the other participants in this study:

Our relationship is like sisters. We do everything together. We hang out in one another's rooms, we dance, listen to music, we go to dinner together. Some of us live in the same area. So, we hang out when we go home.

Renée and Kate are roommates. Renée describes close friendships with the other interviewees as well:

I've made five really good friends in Hypatia. We go through the same things. We help each other out. I have two or three White friends, but I can't relate to them like I can with my Black friends. The rest [of the students in Hypatia] are acquaintances or casual friends.

The participants have positive relationships with many of their peers, but describe close relationships with each other and a student from India. Peer interactions in the community also point to racial awareness and cultural preferences.

Racial and Cultural Awareness

Allison believes that some of the White students in Hypatia treat her, as well as the other participants, like intruders:

During the beginning of the school year, we (African American members of Hypatia) were kind of like the outsiders. But, I get along with my roommate. She is White. But, her friends that she hangs out with are kind of like *iffy* to me. Like sometimes they'll speak and sometimes they won't. If you speak to some of them in the hall, say, "Hey," they'll look down and keep on walking. They'll come into the room and speak to my roommate and just look at me and say nothing as if I wasn't there ... *Just iffy!* So, I think we are sorta like excluded as the Blacks [by White peers]. So, you mainly hang out with the Blacks.

Allison describes difficulty fitting in with her roommates' friends, who are also members of the community. These experiences indicate marginalization, alienation and rejection. They support Allison's perception of cliques in the community. Therefore, the participants turn to each other for academic and emotional support from a marginalized standpoint. However, they participate in an engineering organization where a sense of belonging contrasts the position as the "outsiders:"

The Insiders: National Society of Black Engineers

All of the participants in this study are members of The National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). They describe NSBE as a support system for African American engineering students. NSBE also invites companies to introduce various engineering careers. Kate describes one of NSBE's goals to introduce the field of engineering to African American students from neighboring high schools:

NSBE [and the CEED Office] runs a Pre-College Initiative (PCI) program to students in various high schools from 9th to 12th grade. They come to campus and we plan and introduce them to problem solving activities.

The participants indicate that the PCI program appeals to high school students' interest in college, the field of engineering, NSBE and membership in the Hypatia Community upon acceptance to the university. Kate and Renée accept elected positions for the up-coming academic year. Kate will serve as chair of the PCI and Renée is elected secretary.

Allison also shares perceptions of NSBE: "Basically, it's networking and how to keep us motivated and keep us going in a school predominantly for Whites ... to push on to get the degree." Although Hypatia provides an opportunity for women engineers to co-exist, the participants mainly interact with each other. Speculations point to an assumption that African American engineering students become insiders when they unite as NSBE.

Advice from the Participants

Allison: "Students like me ['admitted into engineering program as not math-ready'] need to attend those EF workshops [in the fall] since they are not offered in the EF class during the second semester."

Cynthia: "The Hypatia Community is an experience that you almost need to have as an engineering major. It's something that you don't want to miss out on as an engineering major. It's really important, as a freshman, to be in an environment with like majors. You make the best friends ever."

Renée: "I recently told a family friend back home, who planned to attend [the university] as an engineer, about Hypatia, 'It's something you don't want to miss out on.' I can't imagine myself not being in Hypatia ... cause if I wasn't in Hypatia, I would be put in some other dorm where possibly there might not be an engineer around. Or even if there were engineers, there might not be a female engineer. And in other dorms people are more disruptive in the hallways and they have different course loads. And also your

roommate may not be an engineer. And it's good to have somebody that's in the same position as you are living with you. It's really important as a freshman too. I feel more confident."

Kate: "I am happy that I chose Hypatia. I would recommend Hypatia to in-coming students. But, it depends on whether or not you would like this area because I know some people who want to leave because they prefer the city. But for me, this is perfect. I don't want to go to a school in the city."

Summary

Descriptions of peer interactions in Hypatia are interwoven with numerous aspects of the participants' educational development:

- The participants create close friendships, academic and emotional support among each other. They describe positive relationships with many of their peers, but also describe strained relationships as well.
- Academic challenges fulfill most of the participants' expectations. Comments suggest that they expect to spend a great deal of time, "24/7," and effort with course work and minimum time socializing. Therefore, descriptions of long study hours indicate a high work-ethic. Not only is this perception attributed to individual expectations, but to the field of engineering as a rigorous intellectual pursuit.
- Allison begins the year at an academic deficit. She is admitted to the school of engineering as "not math ready," which means that she did not take calculus in high school. "Not math ready" also means that she is ineligible to enroll in Introduction to Engineering (EF-1). Consequently, Allison enrolls in a calculus course to fulfill a co-requisite requirement for the EF-I course. Another challenge occurs when Allison enrolls

in EF-II during the spring semester, devoid of the EF-I course. The EF-I course has a different objective than EF-II. Therefore, she receives advice to compensate for being ineligible to enroll in EF-1. Comments suggest that Allison needs to conduct an independent search for information presented in EF-1, in addition to completing the EF-II course.

- Speculations point to a need to undertake multiple initiatives and to successfully complete academic requirements to overcome a “not math ready” deficit: *First Semester* – (1) check the online class schedule and syllabus for EF-1, (2) contact the instructor/s for permission to attend the class (3) make an assertive effort to attend the course if granted the permission and (4) successfully complete calculus assignments. However, implications of Allison’s experiences are in contrast to these speculations. Therefore, she needs to compensate for missing EF-1, an important segment of the General Engineering Program. Consequently, Allison sought advice from her academic advisor. Descriptions of this advice suggests the following strategies: *Second Semester* – (1) obtain a list of potential resources from various engineering offices, (2) contact faculty, staff and alumni resources to inquire about topics in EF-I, (3) schedule meetings with as many of these resource people as possible and (4) successfully complete EF-II. However, these strategies are incomplete at the time of the interview, which occurs near the end of the spring semester.

Allison’s comments indicate confusion and uncertainty. Needless to say, blaming the victim (Weis & Fine, 1993) has a tendency to obscure the emotional state of experiencing academic deficiency along with enrollment as “not math ready.” The provisional status creates

educational and social challenges among peers in the community. Consequently, academic fit and a sense of community are in jeopardy.

- Data reveals that pods, cliques and study groups usually contain voluntary race specific members of the community. I visited the Hypatia floor on several occasions. I observed the participants walking in and out of each others' rooms. I also greeted them in one another's rooms. Data indicates that alienation, isolation and cliques in Hypatia are reasons that the participants look to each other for friendship and support.
- This point focuses on student-initiated racial integration outside of the community. Cynthia and Allison have positive social and interactive experiences with White roommates outside of the community. Although those relationships are sometimes strained within the residence hall, voluntary participation in culturally diverse activities are positive experiences for these students.
- These experiences point to several speculations: (1) Some White students who participate in racial offensiveness may do so to impress other White students, (2) Positive experiences with White students may occur in the absence of White students who are close friends and (3) Student-initiated interracial interactions can have a positive effect on the university's strategic plan of inclusion. An interesting aspect of these experiences is the voluntary element of an invitation to a diversity event as a leisure activity. Cynthia, Allison and their roommates venture into unfamiliar territory. The White students have a cultural and ethnic experience for the first time upon their own volition. Cynthia and Allison take a risk by inviting their roommates without knowing how they will react. The outcome of taking this risk is a positive

experience. They plan to attend cultural events, outside of the community, together in the future.

- Other speculations also stem from these experiences: (1) An invitation may be a small step toward the voluntary racial-mixing of students to become acquainted with cultures other their own; (2) Students can behave inclusively without mandatory attendance sheets (3) and The campus climate may improve if students can find a way to become comfortable with each other, enjoy each other's company, and routinely engage in each other's lives as part of their educational development. These experiences contrast the Leadership Community's mandated attendance in the diversity workshop.

Chapter Eight

The Wing Residential Learning Community

The Wing Residential Community (The Wing) experience provides transitional support to first-year students in any major. Coeducational participants live on two floors in the same residence hall as the Women in Engineering Community (Hypatia). Other students also live on upper floors in the residence hall. Wing students participate in a required three-credit fall semester class, which meets twice a week. Tom describes the advantages of participating in The Wing Community:

People come to our class and tell us about a lot of the services that the campus offers that you normally wouldn't get just coming into the [university]. Like career services ... I would never have gone over there if I didn't have The [Wing] class first semester. They offered a lot of good information in terms of how to stay focused and study right, and how to get involved on campus. If I didn't have that, I wouldn't have known where to get started.

Community Recruitment

The participants learn about The Wing Community in the following ways:

- The Virginia Tech Housing Website
- A friend on campus
- Mother searched the Virginia Tech Housing Website
- The Virginia Tech Housing Brochure

The Wing Community experience begins with a cookout on the grounds of the residence hall. RAs plan activities, which include cookouts, ice cream breaks and volleyball tournaments for students in the entire residence hall. Six participants in this RLC take part in this study. Many

experiences are summarized at the end of the chapter due to saturation in the data. However, William, Mike, George and Tom share a unique nuance of educational and social experiences, which are illustrated in this chapter.

Learning and Personal Development

William and Mike describe different types of experiences in The Wing Community:

William: The Wing was just about The Wing class. I really didn't do too much else in The Wing. I thought The Wing was just about the class. The RAs planned some things, but I never did go because I'm so busy. I'm an engineering major and I have a lot of extracurricular activities.

Mike: Getting to know new people, the transition between high school and college, I believe is easier. I had people to guide me along and help me along [in The Wing class]. Teachers would ask me, 'How are you doing? Bring in your notes. Bring in your tests. Tell me how many hours you're studying. Write these journals. Write these papers about what's going on.' So, I definitely would recommend The Wing to anyone. ...It's a great way to meet people, considering there are only about 4.9% of us (African American students) on campus. It's hard to make friends and have a big network of friends. And I think the Wing helped me start my network of friends.

William and Mike have different types of experiences in The Wing. Mike shares many advantages to living in community. However, William's comments indicate minimum attention to community activities. Further comments shed light into William's experiences as a first-year student:

Aspirations from a Summer Program

William is an Industrial Engineering major with a minor in Business. He attributes much

of his success to the participation in the Academic Summer Program Introducing Resources for Engineers (ASPIRE):

ASPIRE was an intense learning experience for minority engineering students. It was the best program ever. It helped me more than anything I ever did. It helped my grades so much as a first-year student.

William participates in classes such as chemistry, chemistry lab, math, and computer skills/MAT Lab Programming in this program. He also attends a seminar, which introduces topics such as team building, stress management, study practices, résumé writing, etc. as an incoming General Engineering major. William adds, “Plus the friendships that I built ... I had 27 versus 0 friendships by being in the ASPIRE Program.” Several of his these friends are Hypatia students. William indicates that this enrichment opportunity is pivotal as a new student and as a member of an underrepresented racial group in a PWI.

William describes pre-college experiences in a summer program as a newly admitted student in the School of Engineering. Comments indicate that this program introduces many of the same success strategies that Mike receives during the fall in The Wing Community. William also develops a network of friends before the onset of the fall semester. This indicates that the difference in William and Mike’s experiences is that the transition to college begins earlier for William than for Mike.

Mike’s transition to college begins in the fall semester. He plans to major in Computer Science. Mike is not involved in extracurricular activities. He spends the fall semester adjusting to the collegiate experience. Mike changes his major to a double major in English and Human Foods, Nutrition and Exercise by the time of the interview. Despite the differences in their experiences, implications suggest that Mike, as well as other students in The Wing Community,

have advantages that many first-year students in traditional residence halls often discover through trial and error or, not at all.

Academic Adjustments

All of the participants make adjustments to study practices to cope with the rigors of course requirements. Mike expresses disappointment with college preparations in high school:

My study habits have changed drastically from high school. Last semester, I was still new to [college] and I wasn't expecting such a rush. My high school said they wanted to get you ready for college, but they didn't, no where near, get me ready for college. *I was so shell shocked when I go here!* I was like, wow! This is a lot different ... and I have to change some things. I need to be in my room studying and I can't be going out all of the time. This semester, I had to bear down more.

Mike begins to improve study practices during the spring semester. He joins study groups, studies between classes, keeps a dictionary on his desk and uses a planner "to plan when, where, and how to study." A speculation points to even greater progress if these type of strategies occur as soon as possible during the fall semester.

Becoming A Mentor

William indicates that his purpose for living in The Wing is to develop "an impressive résumé and to gain leadership skills." He begins to achieve these goals as the president of the Hall Council for the entire residence hall. In addition, he recently learns about his selection as Resident Assistant in another residence hall for the up-coming year. William's desire to become a mentor is another step toward achieving his goals.

Students have the option to change class sections in assigned Wing classes. William describes his decision to choose a different class:

I was in a different class before I switched into the one where you can be a mentor. The first class was a lot slower ... and focused on random things. The mentoring class covered the same things as the other one, plus the mentoring part. Instead of journals and papers being focused on something random, they were focused on the mentoring part. And I wanted to learn how to be a good mentor. The next time I'm a mentor, I would know what to expect. I would be a better mentor.

The description of William's original Wing class suggests that he is already familiar with the objectives that the class offers, which is attributed to similar experiences in ASPIRE. Therefore, the mentoring element in the desired class is a new experience.

William is one of twelve students who mentors a student at one of the local middle schools. He describes activities to prepare the class for mentoring assigned students:

We had different daily assignments. We had journals every week to write in about what we did as mentors. We talked about different things to do with our students. We used worksheets to analyze personality types so we could better mentor our students ... to try to see how they are and what things would benefit them. We did camaraderie type things to help build good relationships with our students.

William describes the instructor's comments on journal entries and reflection papers:

I had extra journals to write and extra papers to write. And I think that actually writing them and getting feedback from them was the part where I learned the most. It was like another English class where you write an essay and get feedback. But, it wasn't as strenuous. They didn't grade you based on whether or not they liked your paper. They just based it on content.

William suggests that the instructor's comments positively motivate freedom of expression. He also indicates that positive feedback validates the value of his ideas. This, in turn, boosts self confidence in the writing process, especially since an English grade keeps him from the Dean's list. Much of his writings in The Wing class reflects his experiences as a mentor.

William works with a middle school student twice a week for an hour during the fall semester. Occasionally, he stays longer to help an eighth grader with class work and homework. He describes the student as "a White male" who is somewhat withdrawn when they meet. William states that the student is "kind of haphazard about everything and not really interested in anything." When they are better acquainted, the student becomes open to casual conversation. William tries to focus their talks on college and thoughts about a career. But, the student is only interested in basketball. William tries to help the student think about other interests as possible career choices, since he is not selected for the basketball team:

I wanted to gear our talks more towards talking about the future cause his main focus was basketball. And I was trying to change that cause he didn't make his 7th grade team. And he was an 8th grade student and he didn't make the 8th grade basketball team. And I was thinking, 'If you are going to play basketball, *you kinda have to play basketball.*' I was like, what else can you do if you didn't play for the NBA? And he kinda didn't have much direction. I tried to get it across in fun ways. I tried to take him on the Internet and show him different job opportunities and different things that he could do with his life rather than just focus solely on basketball. And his grades weren't the best. That's why he ended up being assigned a mentor. I was trying to help him with his grades and I was trying to give him a little bit more motivation because he didn't have much. Sometimes he wouldn't have his homework done. So, when I came in I would have to help him with

that. He just didn't seem to care that much. And that was pretty much my main focus the whole semester.

Toward the end of the fall semester, William believes that the student is improving and "trying to get more on track with schoolwork." The student also becomes open to new interests and ideas about possible career opportunities. Most importantly, the student is able to converse about topics other than basketball. William indicates an overall sense of satisfaction with his student's progress and his efforts as a mentor.

William considers this mentorship opportunity as one of the most significant and rewarding experiences in The Wing Community. Implications suggest that the goal "to be a good mentor" is instrumental in his motivation and dedication to the eighth grader. He presents the mentorship experience as a class presentation. Rewards of this experience are the eighth grader's progress and an 'A' in the class.

Since the Wing Community does not offer a class during the second semester, William spends much of his time in study groups with engineering students. He is also highly involved with a position as the residence hall's President of the Hall Council.

Peer Interactions

The Greeting Game: An Act of Protest and Resistance

The "greeting game" is a term that William uses to describe the 'song and dance' routine between he and a White male student when they are in each other's presence:

There's this one guy, like it's kind of a game. I say, "Hi" to him everyday. And he continuously won't say anything at all. And there's really no reason other than he just doesn't want to.

William receives the same reaction from other individual White students when he greets them in the hall:

Individual White students walk toward you and don't say anything. Or, if you say, "Hi", you get a response like – Don't say anything to me the next time! There's about 10% of the people on the hall who are like, envious. They say, 'Oh you're president?' Like you're not supposed to because you're Black. It's always something. Like you can always detect it.

Most of the time, William's strategy is to ignore racial bias:

I think it's very silly. I'm gonna be better than that person in the future anyway because a person like that is not going to go far. He's going to have to come across tons of minority students in his lifetime. And if he's going to always be biased toward them, it's going to come out one day and it's going to backfire. And it's not my problem to deal with that ... because I'm doing my thing. I don't change the way I am based on anyone's else's reaction to me.

Nevertheless, he plans to continue the "greeting game," especially since he is the Hall Council President. William describes strained peer relationships with some students in the community from that standpoint. These experiences describe "the greeting game" as a routine social struggle. A routine persistence of this struggle suggests a form of resistance. Resistance, then, becomes as a way to protest social alienation and to free one's self from the imagined human condition of invisibility (Ellison, 1994).

Racial and Cultural Awareness

A Leader in their Midst

William describes issues that relate to his position in the residence hall as Hall Council

President:

When it comes to the Hall Council, I'm not sure if me being the only African American guy [that ever served as president of the Hall Council] makes any difference to the amount of work they (Hall Council members) put into it. Like, I always have to put 'read-receipts' on e-mails. I have to hand deliver notices for people to come to the meetings. I remember reading some of the constitution stuff and some of the things the Hall Council did in the previous years. And I'm like, 'Why is it taking so much of my effort to get things carried out?' I have to do everything! I have to write the plans for everything and I'm not getting the response that I should. Why do I have to do more than send e-mails and schedule meetings for them to come? It's like I don't have something that someone else has.

These comments indicate a lack of cooperation from Hall Council members. William suspects this lack of support is due to his African America-ness. He is the first African American student to hold this position.

William's experiences as Hall Council President are similar to Barbara's experiences as the Intern in the Leadership Community. She also has difficulty with students (Resident Assistants) following through on requests pertaining to community affairs. Both participants face challenges in leadership positions in their respective RLCs. These experiences indicate an attempt to negate the leadership authority of African American students 'in their midst.' Consequently, both participants experience interference in their roles as leaders.

In contrast, William also observes White students whom he believes display an exaggerated exhibition of friendliness:

Some people seem to be overly nice. You see how they converse with others. And then I'm coming. And then they're like, "Oh, Hey-ey-ey!" Like they want to make sure they are proving that they're not making any difference, which almost makes the difference.

It's kinda like they want to prove that they *are not racist*.

William's perception suggests that this behavior is condescending, patronizing and demeaning. He connects this problem to White students who belittle others to impress their friends. He also perceives this experience as a subtle form of racism, i.e. an attempt to diminish his leadership status and question his leadership ability. Nevertheless, William fulfills leadership responsibilities despite interference from these challenges. He also suspects that his experiences as president of the Hall Council are different than the experiences of previous Hall Council presidents (Sedlacek, 1999). I asked William if discussions of racial and cultural concerns occur in the community: "I think we might have had a discussion about that one day in class. But, not like ... hall wise." This statement implies that African American students cope with racial challenges on their own. Participants do not indicate a discussion or a report of racial concerns to staff members.

Chat Room Antics

George's perception of subtle and blatant racial interactions parallels those of other participants in this community. For example, George shares perceptions of a riddle in a chat room designed for classroom instruction:

We had this thing called Instant Messaging. On this White girl's profile, there was a joke (How do you spy a nigger in the snow? Just look for the dark spot.). We have profiles where you can put anything you want about yourself. And that joke was in her profile. My friend saw it first. And we weren't too happy about that.

George talks about their reaction to the joke: “We were surprised ... to think that anyone would actually put that in their profile.” I asked George to explain how the girl’s identity came about:

My friend knows her. She’s in his class. He knows her screen name. It’s like a chat room, but you know everybody that’s on your list. It’s not like, strangers.

These comments indicate that racism on a computer is unexpected in a classroom setting. George does not indicate a report of the racist joke to the instructor.

How do White Students Understand the Term “Ghetto”?

George describes a similar problem as Matthew’s in the BLSC with White students, who associate African Americans with living in the ghetto and/or acting ghetto:

Little things like they may not know ... like acting ghetto. I have to explain that all Black people are not ghetto. ... Things that they see on TV or music videos, crime and violence and stuff like that. ... They try to imitate like, ‘Hey, how ya doing? Like, Yo, Yo.’ And I’m like, ‘Not every Black person is like that!’

George and Matthew indicate that media influence largely contributes to this type of negative rhetoric. In contrast to all of the participants in this study, Mike found stereotypical behavior directed toward him from African American students as well as White students in *The Wing*:

A Double Dose of Racial Bias

Mike identifies himself as biracial, having an African American parent and a White parent. He identifies his racial affiliation as African American. Mike describes racial challenges in the community:

Predominantly, I had friends who were Caucasian [in high school]. I think that had something to do with [the fact that] I’m mixed myself. There are some White students in *The Wing* who are racist, but not against me, but against African Americans as a whole.

There is this one White guy who is friends with me. He'll go to lunch [with me], but African Americans as a whole, he doesn't do that. So, that's somewhat of a challenge. I have to try to deal with that.

Mike describes a difficult friendship with a White student. This student associates with Mike, but not other African American students in the community. This friendship association has several implications: (1) preference for characteristics of whiteness, (2) conscious/unconscious efforts to define his identity described below as "mixed," (3) and/or racial identity issues. Mike's comments suggest a critically conscious effort to develop a racial identity. He describes perceptions of peer relationships:

Being the only African American in a group of 20 Caucasians is very hard. I've grown up that way, but it is still hard when other people see me. Then, there are African Americans that look at me and are like, 'What is he? What is he doing?' (laughs) So, it's a constant battle everyday. ... I try to be friends with everybody. I don't want any enemies. When I meet people, I'm just myself. And I believe people tend to like that. When they get to know me, I'm just like anybody else. I'd like to think about that as ... I'm a mix.

I asked several probing questions in search of details: [Describe the responses you receive from students' when you meet.] "I think there're just confused. They don't know. ... What are you?" [Why would they wonder what you are? You're here in a community just like they are. You're here to get an education just as they are.] "These are just my perceptions. I don't know if they say that." [What are your perceptions?]

First of all, I don't dress as a stereotypical Black person. And in high school, I had friends who were African American and Caucasian. But when I was with Caucasians, I was too Black to be with them. And when I was with African Americans, I was too White to be

with them. This is where I get my perceptions from because all through my thirteen years of school, that's how it came at me. Of course, I didn't realize it until like my senior year in high school. And it didn't really bother me until now. And I don't want people to think that about me because I'm just like everyone else. And I don't tend to dress a certain way. And I want to do my own thing. It's not like I'm dressing like a White person or a Black person. I want to dress the way I want to dress. And I want to dress like ... I'm mixed.

Mike officially identifies his racial affiliation as African American, but describes himself as "mixed." Will society dictate that he choose one part of himself over the other? Racial groups and/or social settings may dictate such a choice. I speculate that society will influence who he is and what he becomes because of physical features, dress and language patterns. Another speculation indicates that Mike's inner circle of friends and associates will indicate an identity preference. However, these comments imply Mike's desire to have the option of defining himself according to his beliefs.

These experiences indicate an emotional conflict with "external differentiation[s] (I am different from another), and "internal differentiation[s] (I contain differences within myself)" (Winant, 1994, p. 54). Therefore, Mike's relationship with this White student suggests psycho-social discord in an attempt to cope with an identity crisis, which involves double consciousness (DuBois, 1903), racial ambiguity (Tatum, 1997) and critical reflections (Freire, 1997).

Mike indicates a challenge with racial identity since high school. Ethnic fit becomes a balancing-act between not acting too White or too "Black" based upon the presence of students from one group or the other. Mike indicates that friendship with a White student who distances himself from African American students is difficult. However, Mike also indicates that he is in

the process of developing a niche in the community through the natural progression of becoming himself. An earlier quote from William summarizes Mike's outlook toward racial identity: "I don't change the way I am based on anyone's else's reaction to me." In the following section, Tom also associates with White students, but the circumstances differ from Mike's:

White Friends, Culture Shock: Black People Make Me Nervous!

Tom describes friends in The Wing Community: "There're all White." His preference for White friends is indicative of the description of friendships at home. He was the only African American student in his high school graduating class. Unlike Mike, both of Tom's parents are African American. I asked Tom to explain why he connects with White peers and not with peers who are African American:

That's the way it's always been. I've never lived around Black people. [So, what do you think when you are around Black people – How does that feel to you?] I get nervous sometimes around Black people. [Why is that?] Their culture just seems so different from mine. [In what way?] Like clothing and the way they act. Not that I have a problem with that. I don't have a problem associating [with Black people]. But it's a little culture shock. [What kind of culture shock?] Like, one of the fellows down the hall took me to a [Black fraternity's] probate ... their initiation. It was the last day before they get initiated. It was like, they came in and they were all masked. They did like steps and songs. And it was like a celebration. This was new to me.

Tom's family lived in three different locations during his childhood due to changes in his parents' occupations. His family moved from his birth place when he was four. They relocated again when he was approximately eleven years old in sixth grade. The family's relocations

indicate a change in socio-economic status. Tom went to school in their current location from sixth grade to twelfth grade. The neighborhood is described as predominantly White.

Tom restricts friendships to one racial group. Implications suggest a preference for friendships with people associated with the economic and social status of his predominantly White neighborhood. Tom's descriptions also suggest a lack of cultural and racial awareness. Further experiences on campus with students from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds have the potential to dispel similar racial stereotypes that many participants in this study cope with from White students.

Research on college adjustment for African American students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) identifies the importance of congruence to college with the high school and neighborhood environment (Chavous, 2000; Sherman, Giles & Williams-Green, 1994). In other words, African American students from same-race high schools and neighborhoods have difficulty adjusting to PWIs. On the other hand, Chavous (2000) states, "African American students who c[o]me from predominantly White neighborhoods and high schools d[o] not differ from White students in their general well-being" (p. 82). In light of this information and Tom's experiences, he is a better social fit to a PWI than African American students from same-race high schools and neighborhoods.

Advice from the Participants

All of the participants would recommend the community to incoming students.

- "Be prepared. Don't be scared. Talk to people because nobody is going to bite your head off if you try to talk to them."
- "Bring a lot of window fans."
- "Get to know people as soon as possible."

- “Be open and real with people.”
- “Have respect for each other.”
- “Try not to miss any classes. You can get so far behind when you miss just one class.”
- “Brace yourself – Be prepared to work hard.”
- “The biggest thing is time management. The hardest thing is staying focused. You are on your own. No one’s telling you what to do. As long as you’re focused. I remember when I missed a class at the beginning of the semester and when I went back, I had missed so much. Just go to class!”

Summary

Six participants share similar educational and social experiences creating saturation in the data (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, common perceptions indicate that the participants (1) are acquainted with students on their floor and/or students in assigned Wing classes, (2) develop a network of friends as soon as possible, (3) indicate that the fall semester class creates a sense of community, but functions like a traditional residence hall during the spring semester, (4) receive information that students in traditional residence halls often discover on their own, (5) develop a positive rapport with faculty and staff members, (6) prefer not to be the only African American student in class, (7) choose to ignore daily racial stereotyping, (8) try to promote good will among peers, (9) see a need for White peers to learn about and respect racial, ethnic and cultural differences and (10) consider time management as key to success.

Educational and social experiences are interwoven for William, Mike, George and Tom:

- William’s pre-college experience in ASPIRE provides advantages over other participants in the community. William participates in several extracurricular activities such as the Hall Council President, NSBE and mentor of a middle school student. Other participants

discover resources and learn skills in the first semester that William learned in ASPIRE. Consequently, other participants do not participate in extracurricular activities.

- Many participants cope with variations of racial prejudices. Several participants indicate an expectation of some form of racial adversity. They plan and use strategies such as ignoring stereotypes, resisting invisibility, accepting an uncomfortable friendship and developing their own identities rather than adapting to the status quo, i.e. identity expectations of White students or African American students.
- William manages a position of Hall Council President with minimum cooperation from Hall Council members. According to Freire (1997), “Any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression” (p. 37). Therefore, interference of leadership responsibilities indicates an attempt to undermine William’s leadership ability. Persistence implies just the opposite; strengthening leadership skills while coping with this racial barrier.
- George experiences a racist joke on Instant Messaging designed for a course. He perceives this experience as a blatant act of racism. This is the only indication in this study where a computer activity creates racial tension.
- The term “ghetto and/or acting ghetto” creates challenges to disprove negative media portrayals of “black culture.” Therefore, individual differences of identity emphasize the use of Standard English rather than slang, fashion preferences and peer associations that are unrepresentative of stereotypes. Social fit, racial identity and/or ethnic fit for Mike becomes a balancing act between “acting too White or too Black” based upon his presence among students from one group or the other to create a sense of belonging.

Chapter Nine

The Wellness Environment for Living and Learning - The W.E.L.L.

This substance-free RLC houses students in all majors on any college level.

Coeducational students live on the first two floors of a seven story residence hall. Female and male students live on opposite ends of the halls. The W.E.L.L. offers an optional two-credit fall semester course and voluntary student-run community board committees. These activities offer W.E.L.L. members the opportunity to learn practical experiences such as time management and leadership skills, meet faculty and staff members across the campus, while contributing to the community.

The participants in this community do not take part in the optional two-credit course or the community board committees. One participant is unaware of the optional course. The participants indicate the RA as the only staff member in which they have contact. Consequently, the primary focus in this community is the participants' social experiences. It is important to see how this environment affects the participants' educational experiences without participating in community activities.

Community Recruitment

The participants learned about The W.E.L.L. in the following ways:

- Received housing information in the acceptance packet.
- Searched the Virginia Tech housing website.
- Heard about the community from a tour guide on campus.
- Unwilling acceptance of parents' residential theme housing options.

Among six participants, Eric, Neil and Edward are freshmen. Cynthia is a sophomore. She shares a two-year perspective as a member of The W.E.L.L. Patsy and Erica are freshmen and roommates. I present their experiences together due to a nuance of unique experiences.

Learning and Personal Development

Neil, Eric and Edward apply to The W.E.L.L. Community to live in a substance free environment:

Neil: No smoking, no drinking ... [The W.E.L.L.] is quiet compared to other dorms and other floors and the bathrooms are cleaner.

Eric: It's good to be around people who do not drink, smoke or do drugs ... to be around people of like minds. I don't like being around people who are drunk.

Edward: You do not see posters of half naked women on the walls in the guy's rooms like you do in some other dorms. And if you're Christian, not everybody in here is Christian, but a lot are, this is a good place to be.

These participants desire to live with students who support decisions to lead lifestyles for good health and well-being. Eric further explains reasons for living in this community:

The reason that I chose [The W.E.L.L.] was to have people who have the same values as me. I grew up not drinking and not exposed to drugs. My family is Muslim. And that was one thing that I was concerned about.

Eric suggests that religious beliefs are also a significant influence on a decision to live in the W.E.L.L. Community. Therefore, these students perceive The W.E.L.L. Community as an environment that is different than other TRHs; one that supports a healthy lifestyle and religious values.

Peer Interactions

Neil, Edward and Eric describe relationships with peers in The W.E.L.L.:

Neil: My set of friends live in other buildings. I always have to leave my dorm to go to their place. A lot of my friends [outside of the community], I can just walk up one flight of stairs to the next floor to go to someone's room. Everyone gets along, but we form our own little groups. Also, you may not find people with the same interests as you do. Luckily, I was able to find people in The W.E.L.L. that I could talk to [who are] engineering majors.

Although Neil prefers the lifestyle of The W.E.L.L., close friends live on other floors outside of the community and in other residence halls. He also indicates that finding students with the same major is a disadvantage of living in this community.

Edward: Me and my roommate are fine. We don't talk a lot, but there are no animosities.

We don't have an interest in the same things, but we get along. I have friends on other floors [outside of the community] who drink [alcoholic beverages], but I never have. I'm not ever tempted.

The relationship between Edward and his roommate implies a degree of maturity and tolerance. He also indicates that a goal to live a substance free lifestyle does not affect friendships with students who drink alcohol.

Eric: I like having a roommate who's not going to be coming in drunk. The people here are nice. They are easy to talk to. That's what I like about it. I have good friends in and outside of The W.E.L.L. I go to other dorms when I want to study with a group. Me and my roommate ... not many similar interests, but we get along. He respects me and I

respect him. I'll have a different roommate next year. I plan to live in The W.E.L.L. again.

Eric has close friends inside and outside of the community. He indicates that he studies with students in other residence halls. Like Edward, Eric has a cooperative relationship with his roommate. Eric also describes an advantage of the location of The W.E.L.L. Community:

The thing I like about The W.E.L.L. is [that] it's located in [a building] that has a computer lab. I like to study there. And there is a study room on the hall. If my roommate is listening to music, I can go in there. I study mostly here in the computer lab.

Edward describes plans for the up-coming year:

I loved the experience here, but I want to try something else. I want to find out what it's like to live in another dorm that's not so sheltered. I don't think this is the typical college experience, which is important to me.

He expresses a desire to live in a different residence hall in the fall. He wants to experience the lifestyle of students in traditional residence halls. Further research of life on campus may shed light on the "typical" residence hall experience. Eric, Neil and Edward rarely take part in social activities planned for the residence hall. They indicate involvement in other campus organizations, but are unaware of activities planned for members of The W.E.L.L.

Activities Just for W.E.L.L. Residents

Neil and Eric express a desire to become better acquainted with other members of the community:

Neil: I know my roommate probably doesn't know half of the people in The W.E.L.L. You really don't get to know anyone unless you introduce yourself to them. So, I would like to see [the community] have mandatory programs or

activities, especially at the beginning of the year. And make it fun. Don't make it boring because, then people are just going to sit there and say, 'Oh this is horrible.'

Eric: I don't think there's organized socials [just] for the community. The W.E.L.L. is not designed as a community for working together as a group. I would like to have more activities to bring people together so they don't have to go out for fun and be around people who drink or smoke.

These descriptions suggest that the participants' decisions to opt-out of community activities negate opportunities to network with peers, faculty and staff members. Substance free guidelines do not apply to students on other floors of the residence hall. The following section describes students outside of the community who live on other floors of the residence hall:

Weekend Overflow in The W.E.L.L.

This is Cynthia's second year in the community. She describes how students on upper floors affect The W.E.L.L. Community:

There is a big difference on the floors of The W.E.L.L. and other floors in the building. Our floors are quieter. Sometimes we get drunk traffic because anyone can enter through those doors. Our bathroom facilities are usually clean except for when the party people come through on the weekends and they can't make it to their floor to throw up. Just sitting in the crossover lounges on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, you will see people coming back in the building who have gone to a party and was drinking. You can tell by how they were acting and how they were walking.

These comments indicate a disadvantage of The W.E.L.L.'s location in a residence hall with students outside of the community. Cynthia shares her perceptions about the community's location:

There should be a whole dorm dedicated to The W.E.L.L. so that you won't get that traffic of people ... who start to party on Thursdays.

Cynthia believes that a residence hall for The W.E.L.L. Community, only, would avoid contact with students who engage in excessive partying. She decides not to spend a third year in the community.

Neil describes a rare incident among community members. He recalls W.E.L.L. members breaking the substance-free rule:

I saw a couple of guys come in drunk one time. But they didn't get caught. The RA usually just stays in his room or he is off someplace else. His door is always closed.

Nevertheless, the participants' descriptions suggest that most of their peers respect and support a substance free and healthful lifestyle:

"This is a community to keep yourself healthy."

"The W.E.L.L. is a way to get away from having to worry about vomit all over the place or in the hallways."

"Our floor is quiet compared to other dorms and other floors [in the building]. It's a place where you know that you will not be exposed to vices."

However, contact with students from other floors on the weekend indicates a defeat to the purpose of living in a substance-free environment. Peer interactions also create experiences with racial bias:

Racial and Cultural Awareness

Neil describes experiences with peers that indicate a subtle form of racism. He describes White students who do not return a friendly greeting:

There's this one White kid in the dorm, I'll walk by his room and we'll look at each other and I said, 'What's up?' And he'll just look at me and not say anything. When we are walking down the hall he'll look the other way. He won't look directly at me. And I said to myself, 'What's his problem?' Same thing with my RA [who is a White student]. I've noticed that a lot on campus. White students will look at me ... no fights or arguments or anything.

Similar to William in the Wing Community, Neil faces a persistent form of imagined invisibility. He shares perceptions of this experience:

I am the only African American in a wing of all males. I don't know what stereotypes they have of Black people, but there are some ... I guess, just because I am African American. They have this stereotype of Black people of some sort, especially if you look into the cafeteria. You have African Americans sitting with African American and White sitting with Whites. Every now and then you'll have a mix.

Neil, along with participants in other RLCs, describes annoyances with White students who turn away and/or do not respond to friendly greetings. These comments illustrate experiences with students who refuse to see and acknowledge his existence. He describes this experience as an overt form of racism. Neil notes that he "will speak anyway just to see if this White kid's [ever] going to speak." Similar to William, Neil validates his existence as a form of protest and resistance.

Neil describes a conversation with his father about the occurrence of racial bias on campus as a source of emotional support:

My Dad told me that stuff like that happened to him when he was at Virginia Tech and he said, 'Just don't worry about it. Actually, every time you see [a White student], say Hi loudly so they can hear you so they have to respond. But if they don't, you know that something's wrong.' Because if you say it softly they can say they never heard you. But if you speak loudly and clearly, then that's all you can really do. So, I can deal with it.

Neil's father recalls the same type of experience at the university. His father graduated in the School of Engineering.

Other participants in The W.E.L.L. do not describe racial challenges. Edward is not aware of racial bias in the community "because I didn't tend to look for those kind of things." The final description of experiences in this community involves the participants who are roommates. Their experiences are presented in the form of a vignette:

Roommates Living in a Vacuum

Learning and Personal Growth

Patsy and Erica describe an unplanned room placement with each other as "perfect." After several attempts to interview them individually, they agree to participate in this study together in their room. They scheduled the interview for 12:00pm. When I arrive, they are asleep, even though I e-mailed a reminder of our interview. I waited in the hall while they take care of personal needs. After about ten minutes, the door opens to a dark room with a narrow slit of light streaming through the panels of a closed curtain. Upon entering, I step over stuff to find a pathway into the room. I help them move clothing, books, and chairs around to accommodate my stuff and a place to sit.

It Can't Be That Bad!

A stay on campus during a summer program influences Erica's desire to spend her freshman year in the same residence hall. Comfortable rooms and the location of a dining hall and the stadium nearby attracts her to this residence hall. An Internet search of the residence hall lead Erika to The W.E.L.L. Therefore, she applied to The W.E.L.L. Community:

When I signed up for The W.E.L.L. during the summer time, I was thinking this was the dorm that I wanted to live in. So, I was like, what caters to [this residence hall]? And it was The W.E.L.L. Program. So, when I read all of the requirements, I was like, I can do this. Maybe it's not exactly how they put it on the website ... the no smoking and the quiet hours. No loud music is what I heard, just rumors from other people and no boys.

And I was like, it can't be that bad! We are in college. It's not going to be that bad. When I got here. I noticed that it wasn't as lively as the other dorms that I had visited. I feel like I'm different than most people that live on this hallway because I go to other dorms and have fun. I don't know if they go out. I don't know what they do. But, now looking back on it, I don't think that I would have chosen to live here. I guess they like the serenity and the quiet. But, I want to interact more with other people who are just like me.

Erica came to realize the consequences of trivializing The W.E.L.L. Program. She failed to consider the proximity of the residence hall to classes. Therefore, the location of the residence hall becomes a challenge for attending an 8:00am class:

First semester was better than the second semester, although I had an 8 o'clock class that never saw me (laughs). Eight o'clock and me, we don't work. We don't mix at all. The weather during the first semester ... trucking through the snow that was up to my ankles at like 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning trying to go to class and everything. Then, sometimes

when I went [the instructor] didn't show up and the class is cancelled, I was like, "No"!

So, I barely went. So for me, I know that I can't do 8 o'clock classes ever again.

Consequently, Erica schedules spring semester classes later in the morning. However, she continues to have difficulty attending classes:

This semester I slacked off a little bit even though I told myself that I was going to do better than last semester. It's just that when the weather got nice and you're tired and everything, even though my classes start later, no one understands why I still sleep. My classes start at 11:15am everyday. And then, they usually last until about 4 or 5 o'clock.

This semester I slacked off a little bit, like sleeping more. Just not going to class. It's not an everyday thing. It's just the classes that I know I'll be ok in.

Failure to attend spring semester classes is attributed to excessive sleeping habits. These comments suggest a lack of motivation and involvement in her educational development.

College is Making Me Sick

Health problems at the beginning of the first semester affects Patsy's academic performance:

The first semester, I didn't do anything. I either didn't go to class, or if I did go to class, I wasn't really prepared. I did well in one class out of seven. I got really sick the second or third week in school. So, I wasn't in classes. And when I went back to classes, I was just so overwhelmed with work. And instead of sitting down and saying, 'Oh, I gotta really catch-up,' I kinda went like, 'Oh, let it go (laughs). I'll worry about it later.' But, later never came.

Patsy is an engineering major. She did not seek help from faculty members nor did she seek advice from advisors: "I just didn't go to see them. I mean it's no one's fault except for mine.

I just didn't do my work like I was suppose to." I asked Patsy if her professors ever said anything about her course work:

No, they never asked me anything. Just because, I mean it's college. I guess they figure you're a big girl. You can do it on your own. I could have emailed anyone in the class.

And that would have been the smart thing to do, but I didn't. *And I just didn't care.*

Patsy describes difficulty "catching-up" with assignments without academic support.

Consequently, she gives up. Patsy did not recover academically. She faces academic suspension for the next semester. Nevertheless, she plans to return to the university for the spring semester. I asked Patsy what she plans to do differently upon her return: "Definitely go to all of my classes, which I've been trying to do this semester, and do my work and ask for help." Perhaps another reason that Patsy "*didn't care*" is a disagreement with her parents about campus housing:

A Stalemate with Parents

Patsy prefers to live in a traditional residence hall. She describes her parents input on a decision to live in The W.E.L.L.:

My parents are the ones who brought up theme housing (RLCs). I filled out my acceptance paper and put down, 'No Theme Housing!' Then, I got all kinds of information, especially about Hypatia! I told my parents that I didn't want to live with a whole bunch of people in the same major. I want to go to college to meet different people. And they're the ones who actually *made* me live here. I *did not* choose to live here.

Patsy indicates that her parents insisted that she live in either the Hypatia Community or The W.E.L.L. Therefore, she reluctantly chooses The W.E.L.L. In addition, these comments indicate that Patsy's parents are unwilling to consider her desire to live in a traditional residence hall,

which causes antagonism and resentment. I asked if living with other engineering majors might be helpful for academic support:

Probably not, just because I'm not one to ask for help anyway ... so, that's what I learned from last semester ... cause I just kind of flat out ignored [course work]. It's been crazy this year because I've been sick so many times. College is trying to kill me.

Patsy explains why her parents insisted that she live in a theme housing or residential learning community:

The reason my parents made me do this was there's a guy in our church who lived [in the W.E.L.L.] and he really liked it. And they were like, 'We know you're not going to drink in college, but we don't want you to be in an environment where everyone is.' Which, now that I think about it, it's really dumb because most people in this building go out.

These comments point to her parents' intent to isolate her from students who imbibe in alcoholic beverages. They also infer a lack of trust in their daughter to make good choices. Erica and Patsy take turns discussing contact with students on upper floors outside of the community:

Erica: So, we get all kinds of traffic. So you're encountering inebriated people walking by. And you're not going to have friends just on your hallway.

Patsy: There're from all over. And they're going to do stuff. So, it doesn't really deter you from doing anything. I kind of fought with [my parents] over living here. And they were like, 'Well, at least you won't have drunk people throwing up in your bathroom,' which is not true because so many people walk in. As they're walking up, they use our bathrooms and they are not cleaned on the weekends. So, that's kind of gross! If anything, we get *more* traffic in our bathrooms from people walking in and out on the weekends.

Erica and Patsy describe experiences that are opposite from Patsy's parents' expectations of living in The W.E.L.L. These comments also justify Patsy's perceptions that such a community does not prevent students from the influence of others. Patsy also shares her parents' response to her low academic performance:

When they saw my grades, they were not happy at all. Surprisingly, there was no yelling. But, they told me before when I came home for Thanksgiving break, 'If you don't pass those classes you'll be paying for them next semester.' So, I am paying for this semester ... with all of the money that I saved up from my summer jobs. And my parents gave me a loan, which I am paying back this summer.

Patsy indicates that her parents' good intentions backfired. The statement, "*I just didn't care,*" may be the result of their insistence that she live in a RLC against her wishes. I speculate that Patsy and her parents need to reevaluate reasons that she should attend college while she is on academic suspension.

Peer Interactions

Patsy and Erica invite friends to visit during the weekend. They indicate that the weekend is the time to socialize. However, neighbors on the hall complain about noise in their room:

The RAs came over once. They've banged on the walls. The girls next door came over twice. One time when I was here by myself and I was studying and I had my music playing. And [the girl next door] comes saying, 'Can you turn your music down?' And I'm like, I'm studying! This is my only time in here to myself, like listening to my music. And I turned it down, but it just made me mad because I'm doing me. I'm doing what I like to do. I play music to study.

Consequently, Erica often packs a bag and spends several nights with friends in other residence halls. She comments, “The RAs in those buildings see me so often they think I live there.” Patsy and Erica prefer “the lively atmosphere” in other residence halls.

Erica and Patsy do not recall any experiences with racial issues in the community. Therefore, the racial and cultural awareness category does not appear in their community experiences.

Advice from the Participants

The participants shared the following words of advice for new community members:

- “Get to know people early in the first semester.”
- “It depends of your values. If you looked at the drug free and alcohol free ... that’s basically what the W.E.L.L. provides. I would recommend it if that’s what you are looking for.”
- “[The W.E.L.L. is] good if you are interested in a healthy Christian-like environment.”
- “Be careful. It might be hard to find some sort of [academic] connection with the people there.”
- “Overall, it’s not a bad place to live. The bathroom facilities are usually cleaner compared to other dorms.”
- “You don’t have to worry about alcoholics coming in and out all of the time.”

Summary

The participants choose not to participate in the optional one semester course or the community board committees. Therefore, involvement in The W.E.L.L. does not extend beyond following the rules and supporting a substance free lifestyle.

- The participants do not have contact with faculty and staff members through the community's built-in support system. Consequently, they do not receive the community's assistance with on-campus resources and advice to improve study skills.
- The participants are unaware of activities sponsored by the community. It is likely that they are not privy to information about W.E.L.L. activities since they have minimum contact and interactions with peers as well as faculty and staff in the community. Edward admits that he "did not know any W.E.L.L. members on the second floor."
- The participants' recount of social activities, which they rarely attend, indicates that RAs plan activities for the entire building. Eric and Edward prefer the exclusion of students who drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes. They suggest that weekend social activities for W.E.L.L. residents, only, will better acquaint them with each other and avoid contact with students who indulge in unhealthy habits. However, they fail to realize that the optional course and committees help members to unite and experience a sense of community.
- Cynthia describes "students on other floors who start partying and drinking alcohol on Thursdays." This suggests that the party-weekend overflow is unwanted traffic in The W.E.L.L. Therefore, W.E.L.L. residents on the first and second floors cope with intoxicated students as they make their way to upper floors of the residence hall during a three or four day weekend. Implications suggest that a relocation of this community might increase the advantages of living in a substance free environment.
- Neil is the only participant in this community who describes challenges with racial issues. Description of experiences with White students who do not return a greeting is similar to William's experience in The Wing, Allison's experience in the Hypatia Community and

Margaret's experience in the Leadership Community. Implications suggest that many of these participants will continue to speak as an act of protest and resistance.

- Erica and Patsy describe an unsuccessful first-year undergraduate experience, academically and socially. The roommates failed many courses because they did not attend classes and/or did not complete course requirements. The comment, "*I just didn't care,*" appears in descriptions of their educational development. Patsy's illness at the beginning of the fall semester affects academic performance for the remainder of the year. She fails to contact professors for advice, nor did she seek help with course work from classmates. Consequently, she becomes "overwhelmed with work" and is unable to recover from missing classes and assignments. Therefore, she will not return for the up-coming semester due to academic suspension. In addition, Patsy is not interested in living in a theme housing community. Therefore, I speculate that her parents' insistence that she live in a RLC negatively affects her first-year experience. Her behavior is attributed to retaliation against her parents for forcing her to live in this community.
- Erica also has difficulty attending classes. She misses an 8:00am class during the fall semester and sleeps through many classes during the spring semester. However, her GPA is 2.2 at the end of the fall semester. Erica's comment, "It can't be that bad," indicates a lack of acceptance of community objectives when she completed the application to The W.E.L.L. Community. Further comments suggest that Erica is not a good social fit to this community. She describes herself as "someone who likes to have fun." She and Patsy often stay overnight with friends in other residence halls.
- The roommates' descriptions indicate that they spend much of their time together. They invite friends to visit, but students in neighboring rooms complain about the noise.

Consequently, they either spend time in other residence halls or sleep through classes. Erica and Patsy's experiences imply that they are social mismatches to The W.E.L.L. Community, living in a vacuum in time and space. Implications also suggest a sense of hopelessness. The unshakable feeling that "I just didn't care" implies that the roommates sustain each others' psychosocial and academic dilemma. Together, they create and maintain a no-win situation. The following chapter presents: former participants' experiences and comments, observations of the natural organization of students in common areas in RLCs, a discussion and reflections.

Chapter Ten

Former Participants' Experiences and Comments

Finding former RLC students who are African American was a challenge. I discovered that racial identity of RLC students are not available. One administrator recalls several names of former African American students. Participants in this study provide names of other former RLC members.

Margie is a senior who spent her freshman year experience in the BLSC. She describes a community service (CS) project:

Me and my roommate did a service project [in the BLSC]. We wanted to raise money for medical supplies for Kenya. It didn't work out. September 11th happened. So, we didn't trust going abroad at that time. We eventually ... this past winter we went to Ecuador, instead, to deliver medical supplies with the help of a medical supply company. We were working on that project to recruit people to help deliver medical supplies. We continued the project idea from our freshman year. It was a good experience.

Margie and her roommate remain roommates following their BLCS experience. Their CS project comes to fruition three years later. It is the catalyst of a trip abroad during their senior year.

Margie also talks about "the missing minority factor" among students in the community: "I thought there would be more students from culturally diverse backgrounds." She recalls three African American students, one student from India and one student from Ecuador when she lived in the community. Margie's roommate is the student from Ecuador, which influences the destination of their recent trip. Margie graduates in May 2004.

Sandra is a junior. She lived in the Leadership Community during her freshman Year:

I really didn't see anyone on my hall that looked like me. I need to see somebody that I can relate to. I expected [to see some Black students], coming to Tech, but the reality of

it is, I'm just here by myself. My suitemates seemed overly nice. They were always smiling and speaking. It seemed like they were always on their tippy-toes trying not to get on my bad side or something. I didn't really think they were being real with me. But, I didn't really care.

Similar to Gregory (Honors Community) and John (Leadership Community), Sandra is concerned about passive racism in the community. Sandra shares her perceptions of passive racism: "When you benefit from the effects of racism, because a lot of Whites benefit from racism. And [White students in the seminar] were like, That's a whole bunch of bull and I refuse to accept it." Former RLC members indicate a need for more outreach to students of color. They indicate that low numbers of African American students perpetuates passive racism.

Melanie is a junior who lived in the Hypatia Community as a General Engineering major. She shares perceptions of her experience as a committee member in the community:

I don't think I really did much because I wasn't close friends with the girls in the committee. They had their own little group and I was friends with different people. I always had a conflict with their meeting time. So, I never really met that much with them."

The Hypatia Community offers a one semester seminar in the fall. Therefore, students participate in various committees during the spring semester to maintain a sense of community. These comments suggest a disconnection with committee members. They also reinforce Allison's description of cliques in the community in Chapter Seven. Therefore, a sense of community is in jeopardy. Similar to many of the current participants in this study, close friends are African American and Other students of color.

Community Benefits

Although former RLC participants emphasize the “missing minority factor,” they are generally satisfied with academic experiences and would recommend their communities to interested students. They describe the following advantages of participating in their respective RLCs:

- “Living on the same floor with students who have the same major and the same classes.”
- “The [BLSC] seminar class is located in the residence hall for most of the year.”
- “The Leadership Community provides a safe environment for discussing sensitive issues.”
- “Living in an environment with students who have similar interests and ideals.”
- “Students keep each other motivated.”
- “Frequent contact with faculty and staff members in formal and informal settings.”
- “Receiving information about strategies and resources on campus.”
- “Opportunities for involvement in meaningful hands-on projects.”

Advice from Former RLC Members

Former RLC participants have the following advice for in-coming students:

- “Shut the TV off. Study! Seek help when you need it. Don’t wait until the last minute. Use professors’ office hours for help with course work.”
- “Don’t think you can do it all on your own. Use all of the resources on campus. Seek counseling if you are having trouble with your roommate or difficulty in your family.”
- “Try to live on campus when you leave the community. Be open to differing perspectives, ideas and beliefs. You can learn from each other.”

- “Take the initiative to get involved in something that is not required by the community. Network and make friends early in the first semester.”

The following section summarizes students’ inner-group preferences according to casual interactions with each other within RLCs:

Observations of the Natural Organization of Students in Common Areas

I observed students in their rooms, suites, pods, lobby areas, the laundry room, study lounges and in hallways. For the most part, students group themselves with same-race friends (Bourassa, 1991). Residence hall suites or pods often house one person of color out of six. Several participants resent being the only African American student on an entire hall. Persons of color usually spend time in rooms where there are same-race or students from Other racial or ethnic groups. Occasionally, one person of color and a White student enters or leaves the building together. Students usually acknowledge same-race students in passing. Observations indicate that White students interact with Other students of color (Asian, Indian) more than they interact with African American students.

Observations show voluntary racial separation as the norm. Many African American students leave their rooms and the building with other African American students. Exceptions relate to participants who belong to committees or community groups. They hold meetings in study lounges or lobby areas. However, a small population of African American students in each community decreases the number of same-race students. For example, I observed a maximum of three African American students together in common areas of RLCs at any given time. The remainder of this chapter presents a discussion of themes and reflections.

Discussion

Numerous categories and concepts emerge in the data. Themes framed by the student involvement theory and the critical race theory answer the following research question:

- How do African American undergraduate students in RLCs perceive the role of the communities, particularly the kinds of contacts they afford with faculty, staff, and peers, in shaping their educational development?

Themes overlap throughout the data. Therefore, discussions of themes also overlap. Peer interactions are a significant element in this study. They interconnect many aspects of the participants' educational and social experiences. Consequently, recurring patterns of peer interactions significantly influence the discussion. An exploration of students' perceptions of experiences in their respective RLCs leads to the following themes: (a) community recruitment, (b) learning and personal development: connections with faculty and staff, social and academic involvement and peer interactions, (c) racial and cultural awareness, (d) a sense of belonging: academic, social and ethnic fit and (e) advice from the participants.

Community Recruitment

The participants learn about RLCs by chance through word-of-mouth from former and current RLC members, a summer program at the university, high school councilors and parents. This leads to a search for on-campus housing on the website. Several participants learn about theme housing from a residential and dining brochure in their acceptance packet. Participants in two RLCs participate in active recruitment for prospective students throughout the year.

Learning and Personal Development

Faculty and Staff Connections

Positive connections with faculty and staff members are vital to academic success.

Frequent interactions provide emotional and academic support and a sense of belonging. Contact with faculty and staff members in the Honors RLC occurs throughout the day. The participants often interact with the director, whose office is downstairs from the living area. Many faculty and staff members have offices in the building. Schoem (2004) links this characteristic with the residential college typology of living-learning communities where faculty work, socialize, advise and teach in the residence hall. However, the Honors Community does not contain enough characteristics to identify it as a residential college.

A connection with faculty and staff members is important socially as well as academically. Social activities and events with faculty and staff in five RLCs create a positive rapport with the participants, which make faculty members more approachable in the classroom. However, participants in the W.E.L.L. Community elect to opt out of the optional one-semester seminar as well as the community board committees. Therefore, they do not make connections with RLC faculty and staff members.

BLSC faculty members come into the community at scheduled times for seminars and community activities. However, the faculty member, whose young sons develop a friendly relationship with Brian and Matthew, makes a social visit to their room. This connection depicts the faculty member as a source of support and motivation. BLSC participants also interact often with the director who serves as a biology professor, academic advisor and facilitator of seminars.

Contact with faculty members in other RLCs mainly occur outside of the residence hall in class and in social activities. The participants in those RLCs also have positive relationships with faculty members. However, participants with leadership positions describe a lack of cooperation from staff members who serve as RAs and Hall Council members. Other participants in this study also describe uncomfortable relationships with RAs.

Social and Academic Involvement

Educational and social experiences vary according to the theme or mission of each RLC. Generally, participants describe unique educational experiences in RLCs as African American undergraduate students in a PWI:

- Living and working with peers who had similar goals and interests.
- Built-in educational support systems that linked students to on-campus resources.
- Minimum distractions from students outside of the RLC.
- Opportunities for informal as well as formal contact with faculty and staff.
- Developing leadership skills.
- Improving study skills through a built-in support system.
- Helpful transitioning from high school to college.

Various experiences in RLCs occur due to the participants' academic preparedness in communities that are characterized by Schoem (2004) as residential education programs. Illusions of high school academic readiness in a chosen field affect academic fit to the community. Four out of seven first-year participants in the BLSC and the Hypatia Community discover that they are academically unprepared in high school for their major field of interest. This situation causes (1) lack of participation and/or contribution in course discussions, seminars and study groups or peer alienation in study groups (2) low or failing test scores (3) psychosocial analysis and challenges to "catch up" with peers in the community, (4) self remediation to make up for the lack of academic preparedness, while struggling to fulfill current course and community requirements and (5) decisions to compensate for academic inadequacy when they change majors, drop courses, and/or request academic relief.

Participation in a summer pre-college engineering program indicates educational advantages for the first-year undergraduate experience, as well as for General Engineering majors. Pre-college opportunities allow students an early start in the undergraduate process to (1) meet and work with faculty and staff members, (2) begin to develop peer friendships, (3) become familiar with the campus and (4) learn new study skills to prepare for the rigors of academic requirements.

Peer Interactions

Peer interactions in RLCs create social and educational opportunities to develop friendships, cooperative relationships in study groups and to associate and learn among students with similar interests and goals. Although many of the participants experience minimum contact with students outside of the RLCs, obstacles from students who live in the same building, but do not belong to RLCs, occur when they (1) make noise on the grounds outside of rooms with raised windows in buildings without air conditioning, (2) cause late night fire alarm pranks and (3) vandalize and/or pollute floors and bathrooms on RLC floors. Peer Interactions also reveal racial and cultural overtones. Therefore, peer relationships and experiences intertwine with racial and cultural awareness:

Racial and Cultural Awareness

Dismantling the Term 'Ghetto'

Several participants cope with the concept of ghetto or acting ghetto as a negative representation of people of African American decent on campus and in the U. S. society. These participants attempt to dispel such images when they (1) invite White students to African American traditional activities such as a Kwanza presentation, a step show, or an African American fraternity party, (2) participate in conversations to bring about awareness of racial

stereotypes, (3) dress to represent one's personality rather than negative media images of the hip hop clothing fashion, (4) use standard English rather than ethnic slang and (5) one participant only associates with White students.

Attempts to dismantle mainstream society's negative impressions of African American youth indicate an attempt to imitate perceptions of cultural codes of power (ways of doing and being) in a PWI. Delpit (1995) describes culture of power as "linguistic forms, communicative strategies and presentation of self; ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting" (p. 25). In addition, the acquisition of linguistic and cultural competencies, inherited and learned, are characterized by Robbins (2000) and Tierney and Hagedorn (2002) as leaning and using cultural capital to further success in the academy.

Courageous Dialogue

A critical analysis of reality may ... reveal that a particular form of action is impossible or inappropriate at the present time. Those who ... perceive the infeasibility or inappropriateness of one or another form of action cannot thereby be accused of inaction. (Freire, 1997, p. 109)

A private conversation between Matthew and Brian in the BLSC considers racial bias unusual for a White student who tells a joke that includes the slur, nigger. This type of reaction is an example of critical reflection (Freire, 1997). The decision to wait until they are sure of his intent to offend may be construed as inaction. However, in light of Freire's description above, this reaction is an act of critical reflection, which "is also action. ... [and] occur[s] simultaneously" (p. 109). On the other hand, in agreement with Freire (1997), "The earlier dialogue begins," the sooner honest communication about the affects of insensitivity will bring about critical awareness and accountability for everyone involved (p. 109). Therefore, the "legitimacy" of

change or transformation lies within the initiation of “courageous dialogue” (p. 109). This experience causes Brian and Matthew to reflect, analyze and make decisions about how and when to respond to racial bias (Friere, 1997; Scott, 1995; Sedlacek, 1999). This experience also indicates a missed opportunity to bring about awareness of the offensiveness of a racial slur.

Seeking Ethnic and Cultural Kinship

It is immensely helpful to be able to share one’s experiences with others who have lived it. Even when White friends are willing ... to listen ... to one’s struggles, they cannot really share the experience. (Tatum 1997, p. 70)

Students of diverse races and ethnicities often seek same-race friendships to maintain a link with ethnic interests and cultural practices on a predominantly White campus (Allen, 1991; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996). How is this manifested in the experiences of the participants in this study? Data indicates that the participants form same-race friendships for two reasons: First, the social dynamics are less complicated with ethnic and cultural familiarity, i.e. students with similar backgrounds, social and academic concerns, likes and dislikes, skin care needs and hair texture. Students of color create spaces where they do not have to explain themselves, i.e. how they are, what they do and why they do it. Furthermore, they do not bear the burden of representing the race from which they belong. Therefore, many of the participants create safe spaces with African American students and Other students of color for the freedom to be vibrant, visible and validated as a strategy for psychosocial survival in a PWI. As a whole, indications of educational and social gains occur through interactions with students belonging to multi-racial groups, including White students, and becoming aware of “multicultural ... perspectives and histories other than their own” (Lardner, 2004, p. 114).

Secondly, cultural and ethnic interests and preferences, from food to hair maintenance to the desire to read a book written by African American authors, are sometimes dismissed as irrelevant or ridiculed by White students. “*So, the majority rules*” out ethnic inclusiveness of diverse cultures. Consequently, creating dominant White spaces marginalizes students of color, then criticizes those margins for marginalizing. Therefore, margins create segregated groups in residence halls, dining halls and cafeterias, cliques in pods, late night racial support groups in suites and in common areas of RLCs (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Tatum, 1999).

Examples of conflicts with White peers relate to music preferences, room temperature, roommate’s insistence on studying in a dimly lit room, stereotypical jokes and remarks, non-recognition of a greeting in passing, presence ignored when White student/s visit a White roommate, uncooperative behavior when participants have leadership roles in the community, unapologetic responses to verbal offenses, extreme and over-the-top gestures of sarcastic friendliness in front of other White students, the need for a participant to leave his or her room to avoid loud and violent computer games, etc. Therefore, exclusion and intimidation by White students “encourages black students to congregate in their own groups and plan their own activities, a reaction that often brings white condemnation” (Feagin & Sikes, 1994, p. 95). Accordingly, this scenario indicates an attempt to blame the victim (Weis & Fine, 1993).

A Culture of Silence

Many participants in this inquiry describe academic accomplishments and innovative contributions. They also describe a sense of social tolerance through praxis (reflective action) and/or conformity often leading to the participation in a culture of silence (Freire, 1997; Weis & Fine, 1993). Silence occurs for several reasons: (1) Silence takes place as an avoidance strategy, i.e. a coping mechanism to avoid the prospect of confrontation (Tatum, 1999); (2) Silence

becomes a strategy to deny or minimize subtle or blatant racism to ease discomfort and/or fear of retaliation; (3) Silence occurs in situations of overwhelming hopelessness. For example, “So, the majority (White students) rules.” “I don’t know what works.” “It (racism) happens so often.” “You see it (racism) everyday” and (4) Silence also transpires as a form of resistance and hope (Freire, 1997).

One participant identifies intimidation by White students as the cause of silence among African American peers. Other participants also describe experiences of racial intimidation in their respective RLCs. Tatum’s (1999) compelling description of “the paralysis of fear” emerges in this study as a symptom of racial intimidation by White students in RLCs in the form of silence: “Fear is a powerful emotion, one that immobilizes, traps words in our throats, and stills our tongues. ... When we are afraid it seems that we cannot think, we cannot speak, we cannot move” (p. 194). Weis and Fine (1993) differentiate empowering educational experiences from disempowerment:

Students who are empowered by their school experiences ... participate competently in instruction as a result of having developed a confident cultural identity as well as appropriate school-based knowledge and interactional structures. Students who are disempowered or disabled by their school experiences do not develop this type of cognitive/academic and social/emotional foundation. (p. 106)

Therefore, active participation in educational and social activities, frequent contact with faculty and positive/proactive interactions with peers are characteristics of empowered students. Then, disempowerment is the result of fear and intimidation.

Weis and Fine (1993) identify cognitive and affective factors as separate concepts in their research. They also acknowledge “that [cognitive and affective factors] are extremely difficult to

separate in the case of minority students who are at risk academically” (p. 106). In contrast, data in this research project indicates that cognitive and affective developmental processes are interwoven for all of the participants, regardless of academic standing. Although Weis and Fine’s research focuses on primary and secondary school students, data on undergraduate students in this inquiry consistently points to overlapping cognitive and affective experiences. This indicates that fear and intimidation interferes with the educational development of African American students’ goals to succeed. In addition, cumulative disempowering experiences similarly affect academically strong and academically deficient African American students.

A term, *the in-be-tweens*, emerges in the data to describe academically deficient first-year students. These participants attempt to get-by academically and socially. They try to self-remediate and/or acquire untaught prerequisite course requirements (appropriate school-based knowledge) while keeping up with current course and community requirements. These participants are teens, on the margin between passing and failing, and emotional and physical withdrawal.

Exodus of the Masses

Premature departure of White students in a diversity workshop implies a lack of racial cultural awareness, a disinterest in the topic and/or a rebellion against mandated attendance. The following implications emerge to answer the question:

What do the participants attribute to premature departure of White students in the diversity workshop?

- *Implication #1:* White peers are unable to recognize or acknowledge their own inner prejudices.

- *Implication #2:* White students who cannot perceive their own prejudices have limited means of understanding for relating to the constructs of prejudices, thereby limited tools to de-construct or dismantle the dynamics of inner prejudices.
- *Implication #3:* White students believe that racial prejudices no longer exist.
- *Implication #4:* The speaker attempts to cover too many issues, which causes the presentation to become difficult to follow.
- *Implication #5:* The racial majority holds contempt for mandatory diversity activities.

These implications suggest an evaluation or reevaluation of strategies initiated to encourage inclusion. In addition, they indicate that a focus on diversity and whiteness issues for majority as well as minority students is necessary for establishing equal status among students in a PWI.

These implications also reinforce findings in Tatum's (1994) study that understanding the properties of whiteness is a prerequisite for promoting openness to racial, ethnic and cultural differences. To know prejudice allows one to perceive its danger. To conceive prejudice allows one to recognize individual prejudices before they become acts of discrimination (Allport, 1969).

Questions and speculations also emerge from descriptions of premature departure of White students in the diversity workshop:

What constructs form White students' beliefs that they are not prejudiced and racism no longer exists?

- *Speculation #1* – White students rarely understand White identity. Therefore, they rarely recognize the properties of whiteness and the power of White privilege.

What does this entail?

- *Speculation #2* – The privilege of not knowing and/or not wanting to know or knowing and failing to take responsibility or a proactive stance for one's beliefs.

Why should White students be responsible for something they believe does not, presently, and will not, in the future, affect their scheme of existence?

- *Speculation #3* – The above rationale suggests that White students, who cannot perceive and confess their own prejudices, emit uninformed and imagined orations to justify intolerance.

What affect does signing an attendance sheet for the diversity workshop have on (1) White students, (2) underrepresented students and (3) the RLC?

- *Speculation #4* – Mandatory attendance (1) causes White students to dread the diversity workshop. It is likely that a preconceived and negative outlook on the event, the presenter, and the topic develops prior to the event; (2) emphasizes the minority status of underrepresented students as an indication that “*the majority rules*” and (3) undermines the objective of inclusion in the RLC. Therefore, the attendance sheet becomes a negative element that hinders the community’s objective for encouraging inclusion.

Hence, these speculations, along with students’ perceptions, underscore the urgency to encourage White consciousness as tantamount to the promotion of racial and cultural awareness in a PWI.

A Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging in this study refers to whether or not students have a sense of organizational involvement, ethnic, emotional, social and academic fit to the community (Astin, 1993b; Chavous, 2000). Coping and adaptation strategies to fit-in also affects a sense of belonging (Astin, 1985, 1993b; Chavous, Rivas, et al., 2002; Gonzalez, G., 1989). “Coping refers to the efforts of individuals to deal competently with crisis and stress” (Gonzalez, G., 1989, p. 21). Adaptation refers to “beliefs that people develop over time to maintain themselves

and the integrity of their activities” through efforts to belong or matter in their RLCs (Gonzalez, G., 1989, p. 21). Three factors directly affect a sense of belonging in this study: (1) academic fit, (2) social and (3) ethnic fit to the community.

Academic Fit

Academic fit includes involvement in community opportunities and responsibilities as well as successful outcomes in course work. Several participants engage in mentorship and leadership positions. Experiences in roles such as Hall Council President, Hall Council Vice President, Community Intern, CSAs, STAs, PCI Chair, and PCI Secretary enhance educational development and contribute to their respective RLCs. In addition, frequent contact with program directors positively contributes to academic and social fit to RLCs.

Although RLCs present information targeting academic success, not all of the participants are academically successful. One participant faces academic suspension. Another participant experiences academic probation. Participants with GPAs of 2.2 and below describe many educational challenges. Therefore, not all of the participants describe a sense of academic fit to their RLCs. Several factors indicate a lack of academic fit: (1) inadequate high school preparation for a desired major, (2) self-reflection of daunting academic inadequacy, i.e. feeling “left behind, trying to play catch up” with peers, (3) remediation for academic deficiencies, (4) decisions to compensate for academic inadequacy when they change majors, drop courses, and/or decide to withdraw from the university, (5) low or failing test scores and (6) uninformed decisions to join a RLC.

Other types of involvement include assumed responsibilities in colloquiums, committees, and organizations. However, BLSC participants indicate that former RLC members and other upper classmen occupy leadership positions. Interviewees in The W.E.L.L. opt out of the

optional one-semester course as well as the community board committees. Therefore, the participants in those communities do not engage in leadership roles, nor do they help plan community activities.

Social and Ethnic Fit

Academic deficiencies often affect social fit to RLCs, particularly for first-year students during the first semester transitioning stage. For example, (a) minimum contributions in study groups, seminars and co-enrolled courses occur due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the topic, (b) self-remediation at the expense of keeping up with current course and community requirements and peer interactions, (c) perceptions as an academic outcast due to alienation by White students in the community and (d) low GPAs (below 2.0) create a stigma of inadequacy when participants face academic probation, suspension, denial of a community position and/or a request for academic relief. I characterize the circumstances of these participants as *the in-betweeners*.

Racial and cultural awareness overlap into factors affecting a sense of ethnic fit to RLCs. Many of the participants face daily subtle and blatant racial intimidation in the form of (1) verbal and computer generated racial jokes, (2) racial stereotyping, (3) alienation, (4) a biracial participant's association with a self-proclaimed racist, (5) premature departure in the diversity workshop, (6) uncooperative staff and committee members, (7) avoidance in common areas and in assigned rooms with a White roommate, (8) indifference to known racial offensiveness, (9) "ignorant questions" and comments about ethnic hair care and food preferences, (10) RAs' threats of JR, but non-action for White peers who break residence hall rules and regulations, (11) omission of African American authors as a source of reference in seminars/colloquiums, (12) indifference to a discussion of racial concerns and (13) respect for intellectual ability, but blatant

disregard for racial/ethnic identity. Coping with everyday bias becomes a constant reminder that “race matters” (West, 1993) as well as the continuing significance of racial prejudice (Feagin & Sikes, 1994).

Advice from the Participants

The participants provide advice and comments for prospective first-year students and new RLC members. I use quotes to illustrate the human element that prospective students may identify as new students embarking upon a new stage of life on a predominantly White campus. All of the participants recommend RLCs to take advantage of built-in support systems for enhancing academic and social skills for learning, success and retention.

The participants advise new students to thoroughly research the requirements of a community prior to completing the application. They advise in-coming students to network with peers as well as faculty and staff members early in the fall semester. Developing positive faculty, staff and peer relationships are vital to every aspect of the RLC experience. For specific advice, see the heading, *Advice From the Participants*, at the end of each RLC chapter.

Many participants emphasize networking as an important academic and social strategy. Tierney and Hagedorn (2002) discuss this concept in terms of the social network theory, which

- Highlights the importance of significant others within each person’s social system for providing support and resources such as information or financial assistance,
- Provides a buffer against negative stresses, thereby promoting greater psychological and personal well-being, and
- References social networks as an integral component of social capital, ... defined as the informational, attitudinal and behavioral norms and skills that individuals spend or invest to improve their chances for success in societal institutions. (pp. 201, 202)

Interpretations of detailed descriptions of the participants' academic and social experiences in this study may vary for each reader. This element in qualitative research methods is a limitation of the study. However, living vicariously through these experiences, drawing on similar and/or contrasting personal experiences, provide the human experience. This element is important for understanding the 'not so obvious' in African American students' experiences at PWIs. A few points in these experiences create empathetic reflections that I experienced as a first-year undergraduate student, but under a different circumstances than the participants in this study.

Reflections

As I listen to participants describe attempts to “catch up” academic deficiencies, I reflect upon my freshman year at Spelman College. The freshmen population was African American women and one foreign exchange student from India. Spelman College is a HBCU for women. Along with many similarities came obvious differences within the first week of the quarter. My course schedule includes a remedial reading course.

The class began at 8:00 in the morning. Early fall mornings in Atlanta, Georgia are cool, brisk and refreshing. As I leave Chadwick Hall, I walk through the grounds of immaculately manicured shrubs, well kept gardens and ivy arches with other students. However, the further I walk, the more noticeable it becomes that I am walking in the opposite direction of many of my peers. The closer I come to the front gate, I notice students coming onto campus as I head off campus. One morning, a classmate in another course asks, “Where are you going?” I replied, “I’m going to Clark College for a reading class.” She ever so curtly responds, “Oh, so you’re going to remedial reading.” I was devastated and embarrassed. I thought, “Why is this course off campus? Am I the only person going off campus to remedial reading? I really did not recognize anyone in that class. Was the course so embarrassing to Spelman that they located it off campus? I loved the campus. I did not want to leave the campus. I thought all of the smart Spelmanites had classes on campus.

My high school grades were A’s and B’s in reading during the era of segregated school systems in the Deep South. However, Spelman’s entry level reading test for freshmen determined that I needed to enroll in remedial reading. I was shocked and felt like an outsider.

I began to pay close attention to other young ladies in my dorm. I listened and learned that I was different in other ways. Many of them dressed for success everyday when they went to

class. I called a frying pan a spider. Of course, I knew that it was a frying pan, but that's what my grandmother called it. I sometimes announced that I was going to wash my hair opposed to shampoo my hair, which stopped immediately as a result of strange looks of wonderment. They had a certain type of polish and finesse that I admired. They personified the epitome of a Spelman woman. I was determined to get it and own it. The first step was to speed up the remediation process to get out of that remedial reading class; to lose the stigma of remediation as soon as possible. My efforts paid off. I received a "P" for passing. I was free to be a true Spelmanite with all of my classes on campus for the rest of the year. I perceived that I was, finally, an academic and social fit and therefore accepted by peers in my freshman class. The following sections contain reflections of patterns and categories in the data.

A Catch-22

The stories in this study are important because they humanize the participants' successes, challenges and plight of *the in-be-tweens*. I characterize *the in-be-tweens* as first-year students who describe overwhelming entry level academic experiences in courses as "behind, trying to play catch-up." Play is the operative word in this quote – the irony in play indicates attempts to "catch up" as a fantasy-objective. Academic progress teeters on the borderline of passing and failing within the first semester for *the in-be-tweens*. Several *in-be-tweens* are GPA points away from academic probation, while others already face academic probation or academic suspension.

These experiences imply that a sense of belonging, socially and academically, hinge on a test of endurance. These students have overwhelming responsibilities to "catch up even with built-in academic support. They observe and compare differences in academic readiness of peers. They analyze deficiencies and contact resources for supplemental support. Then, they attempt to learn what their peers are taught in high school. They self remediate and attempt to keep up with

the rigors of course work and community requirements – all within the first the semester. What is the feasibility of *catching all-of-this-up* within one semester? The *in-be-tweens* in this study are teens who are in-between getting by and failing, hope and despair, which is indicative of a vicious circle, a no-win situation – *A Catch 22*.

The Insiders' Track to Success

Many participants in this study describe a difference between expectations as high school honor roll students and their instructors' expectations in freshmen course requirements. However, participants in a summer academic experience, such as ASPIRE in the College of Engineering, describe many advantages that prepare them as first-year students. In light of positive academic experiences in this summer program, other colleges and departments that do not provide such opportunities, may consider the social and academic rewards of summer programs for entering first-year students. Similarly to ASPIRE, these programs can provide pre-introductory courses to “get a heads-up” in the desired field of interest, as well as transitioning assistance to the campus. Prospective African American students and their parents may have an interest in learning about summer pre-college opportunities.

Socio Cultural Experiences

The *in-be-tweens* also appear in the form of cultural and racial identity choices. Mike and Tom live in the Wing Community. Mike describes himself as bi-racial and identifies his racial group as African American. He associates with a White student in the community whom he describes as “racist ... against African American students.” Mike’s body language and comments about this friendship illustrates an emotional strain. His intent is to develop friendships on the basis of individuality and personal qualities. However, he is stuck-in-between an identity crisis. He copes with peers who base relationships with him on physical features such as a fair

complexion, European facial features, hair texture and eye color: “I was too Black for White students ... and too White for Black students.” Mike also points out that he dresses to please himself, “not ... White and not Black, but ... mixed.” I believe that he is *in-between* a state of identity confusion caused by racial and cultural conflict. The following paragraph reflects Tom’s claim that campus experiences have more diversity in comparison to his community at home and in high school:

I Get Nervous Around Black People

Both of Tom’s parents are African American. He describes friends at home, on campus and in the Wing Community: “They’re all White. That’s the way it’s always been.” Implications suggest that his perception of “Black people” is the result of negative depictions in the media. He describes similar racial biases about African American students as many of the interviewees experience with White students. However, one step toward cultural inclusion occurs when he observes a ceremonial tradition in a “Black fraternity” on campus. He describes the event as “strange,” but at least he allows himself to experience an event with students from the same-race, but “from a different culture than he is use to.” Therefore, Tom’s cultural experiences on campus and in the Wing Community are at the opposite end of culture shock, which positions him, physically and socially, *in-between* identity and awareness of cultural diversity, particularly of the African American culture on campus.

Similar to Tom’s secondary schooling, I have a daughter who is a ninth-grader in a predominantly White high school at the time of the interviews. She was also a student in a predominantly White elementary and middle school. We live in a predominantly White area in the state of Virginia. I asked her to read and comment on Tom’s descriptions of his friendships:

Muriel: Is he White?

Julia: No, he is African American.

Muriel: Maybe he should just look for people with the same interests

that he has. He probably did not have a choice about his childhood, but as a college student, he should be open to new friendships on campus and be willing to accept people as individuals, not because they are White or Black.

My daughter has contrasting perceptions given her involvement in a similarly populated community. One perception indicates society's (family, community, schools) positive affect on racial identity. Tom's perceptions indicate how society can infect self image, i.e. negative influences of media portrayals; negative influences of an environment on racial and cultural identity. Tom's cultural perceptions are important to illustrate the significance of environmental influences. They reflect a cultural identity and preference that excludes the race in which he belongs. Ironically, several interviewees describe similar stereotypes from many of their White peers. Implications are not clear on whether or not this situation makes Tom a better fit to a predominantly White campus than African American students from same-race communities.

Cumulative Effects of Racial Intimidation in RLCs

Many participants own their struggles, contest the ignorance, seek full humanity, and often resist subtle and blatant racial offensiveness, hopelessly and in despair. Their voices struggle for similar, yet different, types of enlightenment for centuries-old unsolved racial problems in this country. They seek the right to earn a degree with equal respect and equity as their White counterparts. Many discontented voices reveal marginalized positions by White students in RLCs as targets of racial slurs. They often struggle to maintain an ethnic identity and survive in a majority-dominated society. A need to view the world from several vantage points

(an African American, a Black man or woman, and an American) becomes important for survival (DuBois, 1995).

A Hot Topic

In agreement with Levine and Cureton (1998), “Multiculturalism is a painful subject on campus today” (p. 72). However, the Leadership Community embraces the needs of its students of color by including a class designed specifically to address issues that are important to the participants, but usually of little concern to many of their White peers. Furthermore, the Leadership Community requires the attendance of first-year students in diversity presentations to bring about awareness and appreciation of cultural differences. James Banks (2002, p. 123) describes multicultural education:

- An ideology whose aim is to actualize American democratic ideals, such as equality, justice, and human rights and
- A process that never ends because there will always be a discrepancy between democratic ideals and school and societal practices.

Banks (2002) describes a major misconception of multicultural education over the last two decades: “One misconception is that multicultural education is an entitlement program and curriculum movement for African Americans, Latinos, the poor, women, and other marginalized groups” (p. 5). This is evident in Barbara’s perception of the term multicultural. However, Banks (2002) also asserts that multicultural education “is a reform movement designed to restructure educational institutions so that all students, including White, male, and middle-class students, will acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to function effectively in a culturally and ethnically diverse nation and world” (p. 5). Accordingly, multicultural is a hot topic – not because it is exclusive, but because it is racially, culturally and ethnically inclusive!

Cherry Banks (2005) asserts, “Multicultural education is ... as important for middle-class White suburban students as it is for students of color who live in the inner city (p. xii). Christine Bennett (2003) encapsulates multicultural education from a global perspective:

Rapidly increasing interconnections among all nations ... as they face global issues related to the ecosystem, nuclear weapons, terrorism, human rights, and scarce natural resources. (p. 14)

In light of these characteristics of multicultural education, Barbara’s comment in the Leadership Community is an example of a misconception of the term multicultural by the exclusion of White students. Consequently, Barbara’s misconception negatively influences the conceptualization of the term multicultural as “too controversial,” subsequently framed as “a hot topic.”

The Diversity Attendance Sheet: Motivation or Trepidation?

Mandated attendance to culturally diverse events raises the following questions:

1. Has student mandated attendance to culturally diverse events and activities backfired?
2. Do students attend to receive credit for their signature or to become culturally informed?
3. Does mandated attendance create a sense of negativity among White students from the on-set, thereby arriving to a diversity event with a set of preconceived negative ideas?
4. Has signing an attendance sheet become a moot strategy to motivate White students’ interests in becoming racially and culturally aware?
5. What strategy might intrinsically motivate students, particularly White students to (a) become aware of inner prejudices, (b) appreciate culturally diverse traditions, (c) respect racial and ethnic differences of Other students belonging to underrepresented groups on

campus and (d) “develop multicultural competencies and awareness of perspectives and histories other than their own” (Lardner, 2004, p. 114)?

Comments in a conversation with a White professor suggests that racial inclusion cannot be forced upon White students, “They need to learn that on their own.” Yet, mandated attendance pervades in diversity activities. White students’ premature departure and lack of interest in required diversity events indicate that those students (1) receive credit for their signature on an attendance sheet, (2) disregard the speaker’s efforts to inform (3) show contempt for underrepresented student groups and (4) are indifferent to the university’s Strategic Plan that encourages racial and cultural inclusion. Participants in this study look forward to attending diversity events and activities. Interviews, informal observations and conversations in diversity activities reveal that African American students attend on their own volition. They indicate an interest in social justice and equity for themselves and Others.

Spontaneous racial mixing on campus by individual students indicates a natural desire to acquaint themselves with a culture other than their own. A small percentage of students in this study invite White students to engage in ethnic social activities on campus. These experiences indicate a interest in another culture. They imply an intrinsic desire to understand, appreciate and respect cultural differences. These experiences represent a small step toward a natural desire to learn about Others.

I believe that the campus climate will improve when students become comfortable with each Other. Comments about White students’ interests in ethnic related activities indicate a natural curiosity and/or desire to experience a different culture. Consequently, these experiences indicate a cultural appreciation from an objective standpoint rather than from a mandatory perspective. How can students begin to develop an intrinsic desire to become aware of different

ways of knowing, doing and being human – to understand that racial and cultural differences are enriching elements of the human race? Taking this question into account, PWIs may consider capitalizing upon the approach and the effect of voluntary intercultural interactions initiated by individual students in this study.

Summary

Stories in this research project contribute to the reality of African American undergraduate students' educational development in RLCs at a predominantly White academy. Voices of hope and high self-efficacy, voices of distress and/or hopelessness seek a way out or ways to survive. Several voices describe emotional and physical withdrawal. They participate in a culture of silence (Freire, 1997). Silence serves multiple purposes in this study. Silence is a strategy to avoid conflict. Sometimes silence cloaks academic ineptness and/or an attempt to channel a sense of invisibility. Silence becomes a shield to protect a vulnerability to racial intimidation. Silence is a façade that tolerates, but does not succumb to the status quo, i.e. a form of resistance. Silence conceals racism from RLC authorities. Hopefully, voices in this study inform and inspire readers of this dissertation to better understand the day-to-day fundamentals of African American undergraduate students' educational development (social and academic) in RLCs at a predominantly White university. The final chapter presents implications and conclusion, implications for further research and an epilogue.

Chapter Eleven

Implications and Conclusions

This study addresses the following research question: What are African American undergraduate students' perceptions of faculty and staff contact, interactions with peers, and participation in residential learning community activities and events at Virginia Tech? This inquiry is exploratory in nature to reflect the participants' view of realities in RLCs on a predominantly White campus. Therefore, I used qualitative methods to explore and understand experiences of students belonging to one racial group, which are not covered in many quantitative RLC studies.

There are a number of lessons learned from collecting data through in-depth interviews, participant observations and a questionnaire. The dynamics of African American undergraduate students' educational and social experiences are complex and have implications for influencing educational development and practice. These experiences also have implications for expanding current recruitment and retention strategies to increase and retain African American undergraduate students at predominantly White universities. Therefore, this chapter presents implications with respect to ways the interviewees learn about RLCs and issues of retention for African American undergraduate students, as well as Other students of color in PWIs. This chapter also includes implications for further research, followed by an epilogue.

Learning about Residential Learning Communities

All of the RLCs have websites that describe their living-learning programs. However, many interviewees learn about RLCs from friends and acquaintances prior to a search on the website. Several first-year participants recall reading about RLCs from a brochure in the university's acceptance packet. They describe pictures on university advertisements as a turnoff

because of the “missing minority factor.” However, decisions to apply point to the educational benefits of RLC programs.

Two RLCs create outreach events as strategies to recruit new students. The Honors Community recruits high school students and students who attend the university. The Recruitment Committee in the Women in Engineering RLC (Hypatia) hosts the Women’s Preview Weekend and Open House for juniors in high school. However, many participants learn about RLCs by networking with African American students on campus and/or friends at home. These conversations lead to a search on the website for residential theme housing programs.

High school guidance councilors disseminated information to several participants. Interviewees in the Honors Community learned about RLCs in high school on a campus tour with their parents. Other students in this study learned about RLCs from their parents’ search on the website. Therefore, initial awareness and interest in applying to RLCs usually occur through conversations with people, including African American students on campus, acquaintances at home, high school guidance councilors and parents.

Networking on campus and/or at home is instrumental for influencing most of the interviewees to apply to RLCs. Implications of these experiences indicate that an expansion of current outreach efforts (recruitment fairs) may reach untapped African American communities and school systems, in state and out-of-state. In addition, pipeline programs in untapped communities may increase awareness and interest for those who are unfamiliar with the university. In turn, advice from current and former RLC members, in addition to faculty or staff outreach representatives, may be highly impressive to potential applicants and their families. Therefore, RLCs may serve as a recruitment incentive to apply to PWIs for students belonging to underrepresented groups, particularly African American students. Extending outreach efforts in

untapped areas may also provide awareness and interest in other university opportunities. For example, summer programs to help transition admitted students to expectations of the university are extremely beneficial.

Retention through Affective Experiences

Retention is an important phenomenon for African American undergraduate students once they arrive on predominantly White campuses. They begin to invest time and effort into retention in many ways. Pressing issues that directly affect retention for African American students in this study, particularly first-year students, include the need to: (1) network with peers, faculty and staff members at the onset of the semester, (2) develop positive working relationships with peers, (3) learn to manage racial, social and academic challenges, (4) improve study skills and test grades, (5) “catch up” with the knowledge their peers demonstrate in class and study groups in the residence hall and (6) keep up with course work and RLC responsibilities.

The literature points to a sense of belonging, i.e. academic, social and ethnic fit to the environment, as a fundamental aspect of retention (Astin, 1993; Chavous, 2000; Rivas et al, 2002). The small-scale design and mission of each RLC positively contributes to the importance of belonging to the campus community. However, some participants perceive that RLCs isolate them from other students on campus. On the other hand, isolation has its advantages for some interviewees. High achievers indicate that living with academically focused students is a positive influence and a source of motivation. It also limits distractions from students outside of RLCs.

Another aspect of retention in RLCs is the significance of a built-in support system and supplemental academic assistance, i.e. seminars, help sessions and tutoring services (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Smith et al, 2004; Turrentine, 2001). Required academic and social components are crucial for creating a sense of community as well as academic support in all but one RLC.

Participants in The W.E.L.L. Community opt out of the one-semester optional course and committees. Therefore, access to the built-in support system is not available to those participants.

Frequent contact with faculty and staff creates sources of emotional support as well as academic support. Formal and informal opportunities to network with faculty and staff enhance the approachability of faculty in the classroom. Administrators and instructors in five RLCs with required components are credited by the participants for influencing a high self-efficacy (Bandura (1986, 1997); “Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Frequent contact with directors has a significant impact on affective and cognitive RLC experiences. In the Honors Community, the location of the director’s office, inside of the RLC, creates availability for impromptu conversations. The family room style arrangement of his office contributes to a personalized approach to a living-learning environment. In addition to frequent contact in the RLC, members of this community visit the director’s home for holiday and end of the semester activities.

Interactions with this director depict him as a mentor who empowers the interviewees through positive feedback and opportunities that encourage a sense of responsibility and pride in the community. This director often integrates students’ ideas into the community, allocates funds for projects and is readily available for individual contact through e-mail and face-to-face conversations. This director demonstrates a hands-on approach (individual attention, academic support) to enhance the educational development of the interviewees in this community. Therefore, this director continuously embraces and validates academic fit to the community.

However, implications regarding a sense of ethnic fit in the Honors Community are different. Broaching issues of racial concerns causes awkward and uncomfortable feelings for

Frederick and Gregory. Comments suggest that peers dismiss racial issues as irrelevant to their scheme of existence as indicated in Gregory's comment, "The majority rules." Furthermore, his recollection of a conversation with the director about the low number of African American students (two in 3 years) in the community encounters feelings of indifference. Therefore, the interviewees seldom broach racial concerns in this community as a result of disinterest in racial issues and feelings of indifference. Consequently, the interviewees make decisions to suppress issues of racial concerns. However, the interviewees believe that educational advantages in the community outweigh social and/or racial annoyances.

Directors and faculty members in other RLCs maintain offices outside of the community. They generally interact with students in courses or seminars inside or outside of the residence hall. Faculty members attend presentations by guest speakers and various social events. These activities take place in places such as a banquet hall on campus, a picnic on the grounds of the residence hall, a faculty member's home and a beginning-of-the-year retreat off campus. Some participants rarely see faculty and directors inside of the residence hall. However, there are cases where faculty members come into the residence halls to provide instruction and to facilitate discussions in RLC seminars and courses.

Another aspect of retention is peer interaction. Educational requirements and social activities provide opportunities for students to learn from and socialize with each other. Positive peer relationships create cooperative relationships for developing friendships and study groups in the residence hall. Recurrent interactions among peers promote teamwork, cooperation and collaboration beyond the classroom.

Living together on the same floor or in a RLC residence hall creates opportunities for developing various types of peer relationships. Some participants develop close friendships in

the community. Others have positive working relationships with peers as study partners. Study groups in RLCs include students in the same classes and/or students with the same major. Although many of the participants study with RLC peers, several interviewees join study groups outside of the RLC. Allison, in the Hypatia Community, experiences rejection by peers in a study group. She describes a 'not math ready' placement in General Engineering as the reason for that rejection. Therefore, a search for study partners occurs outside of the RLC. Essentially, this experience depicts Allison as an outsider. Interviewees in other RLCs also disclose experiences of indifference from peers in study groups. Consequently, they make minimum contributions in study group sessions, join study groups in other residence halls and/or decide to study alone. These experiences defeat the purpose of a sense of belonging and a sense of community.

Peer interaction also creates opportunities for learning how to cope with racial and ethnic issues as a matter of relevance to retention. Thirty out of thirty-two interviewees describe various forms of subtle and/or blatant racial and ethnic challenges among White peers and a small number of international students. Two interviewees (Brian and Matthew, BLSC) express difficulty in knowing if a racist joke is intentionally or unintentionally offensive. Private conversations with other African American students convince them to ignore the joke unless prior interactions reflect racist behaviors. The intent of this type of strategy points to a critical reflection and an attempt to avoid conflict.

The interviewees cope with racial challenges in different ways. Some choose to ignore racial bias. In one situation of racial typecasting, encouragement from peers convinces an interviewee to "drop the subject." Dropping the subject entails (1) creating a boundary to distance themselves from racial conflict, (2) protecting emotional and psychological wellbeing, (3) creating time to reflect and (4) planning responses for repeated racial offenses.

A strategy to ignore or suppress racial bias appears as a common occurrence in RLCs. The use of an avoidance strategy represents an immediate reducer of emotional distress. Avoidance also mutes the impact of racial conflict in RLCs to circumvent labels such as “snitch” or troublemaker. The interviewees also use avoidance to control a potentially volatile situation. They spend time and effort developing strategies to cope with racial conflict in RLCs.

Other interviewees question racial offensiveness. They describe long involved conversations to inform White students about the impact of racial offensiveness. A goal to remain in RLCs with minimum racial distractions becomes just as important to retention as the goal to achieve academic success. These experiences imply that African American students receive an education differently than the majority of their peers, i.e. at a disadvantage.

Diversity is an ongoing topic in the Leadership Community. Interviewees in this RLC identify issues such as sexism, heterosexism, racism, class-ism, age-ism and multiculturalism within course objectives. Classroom discussions often carry-over into the residence hall. However, implications suggest that White students in the classroom and in the residence hall limit the scope of discussions about race. Therefore, interviewees join other African American peers for late-night in-depth dialogue in the residence hall.

Classroom and residence hall discussions on issues of diversity illustrate a commitment to proactive ways of promoting equity and social justice in the Leadership Community. These examples illustrate proactive involvement to reduce racist acts and a desire to affect change in attitudes among White peers; provide awareness of various aspects of racial and ethnic differences. Furthermore, Paul, a first-year student in the Leadership Community, identifies intimidation by White peers as the culprit of silence and the use of avoidance strategies among

African American peers. Hence, the effect of intimidation often silences African American students' voices.

Interviewees in the Leadership Community describe faculty and administrators' support of diversity and inclusion as a major source of encouragement for increasing self-esteem and racial pride. These elements are critical to perpetuate a positive self-efficacy for affecting retention. The mission of the Leadership Community includes the acceptance of students representing multiple cultures, creeds and beliefs. Implications indicate a belief that differences in people are reasons to learn about unfamiliar ways of viewing and experiencing the world, rather than reasons to alienate and marginalize those differences. Implications of proactive contributions to the community's goals that encourage inclusion motivate students of color in the Leadership Community to continue their involvement in the community's mission to encourage equity and social justice.

Voluntary or optional community activities provide ways for RLC members to contribute and support their respective RLCs. This is another aspect of creating a sense of belonging as well as a sense of community. Many participants take part in committees, staff positions and plan residence hall activities. However, remedial course work and/or steps to acquire prerequisite knowledge consume several first-year participants. They become aware of academic deficiencies early during the first semester when they observe peers in class and study groups in the residence hall and when they receive low or failing test grades.

Several participants become overwhelmed and often discouraged as they attempt to close the gap of academic deficiency and keep up with course assignments and community requirements. Therefore, the physical and emotional feasibility of their participation in voluntary community activities is limited by academic deficiency. These experiences describe a

disproportionate amount of time and effort (“24/7”) to acquire and improve academic skills, which also requires social and emotional support. In many cases, these experiences limit or cancel-out the extent of involvement in elective community activities and time to socialize with peers. Therefore, this situation compromises a sense of belonging and a sense of community.

Two elements reveal academic deficiencies at the onset of the first semester: (1) interviewees (BLSC, Hypatia, The Wing) observe peers in class and in residence hall study groups and (2) they receive low or failing test grades. Therefore, they have limited time to socialize with peers and participate in elective RLC activities. These experiences effect perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997):

Influence[s on self-efficacy] may entail regulating one’s own motivation, thought processes, affective states, and actions, or it may involve changing environmental conditions, depending on what one seeks to manage. ... Peoples beliefs in their efficacy ... influence the courses of action [they] choose to pursue, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles and failures, their resilience to adversity, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self aiding, how much stress and depression they experience in coping, with taxing environmental demands, and the level of accomplishments they realize. (p. 3)

Lack of academic fit, coupled with racial issues, often result in low self-efficacy for many first-year participants, which negatively influences a sense of community and a sense of belonging.

Another coping strategy that affects retention involves a desire to find students who share ethnic and cultural similarities. Positive relationships with peers for studying and socializing are important. However, interviewees also describe a desire for other types of peer relationships. Many interviewees develop close friendships outside of the RLC with same-race and Other

underrepresented racial and ethnic groups on campus. In one case, the only female African American student in one RLC develops close friendships with African American female students in other residence halls. She visits them occasionally, and in turn, invites them to visit her RLC. This is an acceptable solution to race-gendered isolation for this interviewee.

Low numbers of African American male students in RLCs often result in a desire for ethnic kinship as well. They generally develop close friendships with male and female students of color on other floors and/or in other residence halls. However, some friends seldom visit RLCs due to the enforcement of codes of conduct. On the other hand, several friends visit RLCs to study alone and/or join study groups with RLC members. Nevertheless, implications of same-race friendships outside of the RLC indicate ethnic and cultural acceptance among students with similar hair and skin care needs, food and music preferences. In addition, friendships with students of color, particularly same-race students, limit expectations of racial innuendos. Comments indicate that same-race friendships limit the need to compromise, explain, defend or justify ethnic and cultural ways of being themselves.

Implications suggest a connectedness with same-race and/or Other students of color outside of the RLC to fulfill a desire for ethnic kinship, i.e. ethnic, cultural and racial acceptance. However, this strategy also creates social experiences that are, again, different from those of White students in these RLCs. The use of time and effort to procure ethnic kinship outside of the RLC is a non-issue for White students. Therefore, a sense of ethnic fit becomes an important commodity for positively influencing retention for most of the participants in this study.

Several RLCs provide incentives that motivate students to remain in the communities beyond the first year. Interviewees in the Honors Community participate in student-governed colloquiums. In addition to maintaining a grade point average of 3.5 or better, they serve on

committees, organize social activities and participate in the interview process of applicants to the RLC. They also meet regularly with the director to discuss ways to improve the community and enhance their educational pursuits.

The Leadership Community's incentive to bridge first-year students into its second-year program also influences retention. Lance, a first-year student, successfully completes an application to remain in the community. He describes RLC experiences and high school extracurricular activities as having significant implications for retention.

Creating an impressive portfolio to include in an application to the second-year program is important to Lance. His efforts include a membership in the Hall Council and active participation in residence hall activities. Further examples include a meeting with the Intern to discuss ways to improve his application and prepare for the interview. Positive letters of recommendation from faculty members and a reported GPA of 3.9 are other factors that qualify him to remain in the community. Consequently, Lance's application and successful interview qualifies him as a Student Teaching Assistant (STA) in the Bridge Program. Implications of these experiences indicate adequate time management skills, conscientious study practices, positive peer relationships, a desire to connect with faculty and staff members and a strong perceived self-efficacy. Lance describes himself as "an extrovert who takes seriously opportunities [offered] in the community." Other implications for retention emerge from Lance's descriptions of high school extracurricular activities.

Lance describes playing several instruments and coordinating talent competitions among many high school activities. They include captain of the Step Team, parliamentarian of a community service group and drum major in the marching band. He credits these activities for an easy adjustment early in the first semester. Lance uses terms such as "leadership experiences,

community service, taking care of the business for the group, coordinating meetings and taking charge” to describe tasks in these activities. These responsibilities created leadership skills and collaborative opportunities to network with fellow students, teachers and community leaders. Lance’s descriptions suggest a positive impact on his outlook and expectations as a first-year undergraduate student at the onset of the first semester, rather than later as experienced by other participants.

Several interviewees describe a delayed connection with peers, faculty and staff members. They recall reaching out for assistance in the second semester of their first-year experience, which is better late than never. However, consequences of a delayed attempt to seek support have negative effects on educational and social experiences. Implications of Lance’s experiences suggest that early networking efforts at the beginning of the first semester are viable undertakings and valuable for retention. Implications of these experiences also indicate that high school extracurricular activities and community service positively influence life-long educational and social skills for college and beyond. Another look at retention efforts in the Leadership Community appears in an analysis of Barbara’s experiences.

Barbara’s four-year-residency in the Leadership Community as a senior presents elements of positive self-efficacy and retention. Therefore, I deem that a brief prelude to her experiences will show significant efforts of student involvement. Barbara credits the support of faculty members, opportunities to contribute to the community in its early stages and a desire to achieve academic success as reasons for remaining in the community. The importance of positive peer relationships is also apparent through mentoring activities with first-year students. She emphasizes the importance of developing positive relationships with fellow students.

Barbara's long-term residency in this community begins with a membership on the Steering Community during the initiation of the first Hall Council. She serves as a CSA during her sophomore year. An interest in the student teaching opportunity for a third-year experience becomes a goal during her second year in the RLC. However, a long illness lowers her GPA. During recovery, Barbara contacts faculty members and asks peers in her classes for assistance. Therefore, positive relationships with instructors and peers create academic and emotional support systems.

Determination to qualify for a STA position, which requires a 3.4 GPA or better, presents motivation for academic improvement. Barbara participates in study groups, works with a study partner, uses faculty office hours and campus resources to complete previous and current assignments. By the end of her sophomore year, Barbara qualifies to remain in the community with a reported 3.83 GPA. Therefore, an impressive application and a successful interview qualifies her for a position as STA and a third year in the Leadership Community. Barbara serves as the Intern in the community during her senior year. She expresses the importance of accepting responsibilities to improve the community i.e., "attempting to cause change ... creating a legacy and creating a tradition [in the RLC]." She believes that these experiences allow her to "think, [which] accelerate[s] learning ten times as much as going to sit in a class ... being told what [to] think."

Social and academic efforts to remain in the RLC for four years create positive experiences that affect Barbara's educational development: "Positive change [and] independent thinking. ... It's the one part of this program that kept me in here." Barbara describes ambitious involvement with people and activities in the community. I believe that many positive social experiences in the RLC positively influences self-efficacy, retention and degree completion.

Implications suggest that the RLC's Bridge Program initiative, along with a mission to encourage diversity, are significant elements in the community for retention. Barbara's efforts result in graduation with honors in the spring of 2004.

Another aspect of retention for several participants in this study involves the opportunity to contribute to their communities in leadership roles. Barbara and William are the first African American students to hold those positions in their respective RLCs. Barbara experiences lack of cooperation from Resident Advisors (RAs) to follow-through on e-mail requests to RLC residents. In addition, she indicates lack of support from RAs when they do not participate in community activities.

William, president of the Hall Council in the Wing Community experiences a lack of cooperation from Hall Council members. They also do not follow through on requests to send e-mail messages to students. On several occasions, they contribute minimally in scheduled meetings. William sends several e-mails to schedule meetings with no responses. Therefore, he resorts to hand delivering notices door-to-door.

William also describes experiences where White students stare in silence when he greets them in passing. In several instances, White students, reportedly, look the other way or look downward to avoid eye contact rather than speak. Neil (The W.E.L.L. Community) has similar experiences. A conversation with his father, who is an alumni in the College of Engineering at this university, relates similar experiences as a student almost two decades ago. His father encourages him to continue to greet his peers and ignore negative responses.

William also describes White students' display of exaggerated friendliness. They become animated and jovial using hip-hop slang as he passes in the hallway. He identifies this behavior as an example of racial stereotyping. William chooses not to participate in this type of behavior

by ignoring their antics. He explains that he does not own “their problem” with his racial identity. William describes this behavior as problems that White students will have to solve for themselves.

Implications of experiences in leadership roles indicate that lack of cooperation and support from committee members are attempts to minimize, downgrade, even eliminate Barbara and William’s qualification for these positions. Therefore, counteracting negativity with proactive responses or oftentimes choosing to ignore racial offensiveness becomes an essential coping skill. Proactive responses in leadership roles indicate an intact self-efficacy. However, lack of support and cooperation from committee members persist as daily occurrences.

These experiences clearly illustrate challenges in leadership roles among students who are racially different. These experiences highlight Barbara’s and William’s commitment to their leadership responsibilities, but with greater effort and different challenges than their predecessors in the same positions. An implication of this aspect of retention involves retaining one’s dignity with a determination to complete the time of service in those positions. Furthermore, implications of efforts to fulfill responsibilities as leaders in the midst of persistent racial adversity is challenging and time consuming beyond the norm.

Each chapter of RLC case studies of students’ experiences ends with ‘*advice from the participants.*’ This advice provides further implications for this study. The participants offer suggestions for academic improvement and social adjustment. For example, “Keep your eye on the prize.” In other words, focus on the goal to earn an undergraduate degree. To accomplish that objective might include sacrificing opportunities to socialize, analyzing and improving academic skills and seeking academic and supplemental support. Other suggestions from participants include developing positive peer relationships, connecting frequently with faculty and staff

members and participating in optional RLC opportunities. Another type of advice is unique to African American students. This advice suggests that students seek ways to minimize racial challenges in RLCs. Implications suggest that the coordination and incorporation of '*advice from the participants*' into a daily routine are important for positive self-efficacy and retention.

Implications for student involvement in this study point to characteristics that are unique to African American undergraduate students' experiences in a PWI. Students in this study create avoidance strategies for several reasons. Avoidance strategies (1) create space and time to reflect, (2) present a form of resistance (3) affect decisions to question future racial offenses, (4) reduce tension, emotional stress and conflict, (5) curtail labeling of "snitch" and (6) camouflage and/or minimize the existence of racial adversity in RLCs. The use of an avoidance strategy requires physical and emotional distancing from a potentially volatile situation and the offending student/s. Then, avoidance operates as a survival mechanism to preserve psychosocial wellbeing as well as a strategy to inhibit conflict.

Common examples of advice and comments throughout this study include, "Let it go;" "Just ignore it;" "We just walked away;" "It's not worth it to get upset;" "I don't know what works. Nothing seems to work so far;" "I wasn't there, so I didn't see." In addition, comments in all six RLCs indicate no reports of racial challenges to authorities from students in this study. Lack of reported information to authorities implies that the occurrence of racial incidents in RLCs may be unknown to university administrators, as well as RLC faculty and staff members.

Three strategies for effecting diversity in the Leadership Community have positive implications for encouraging university-wide cultural inclusion and retention. First, classroom discussions and peer group dialogue in the residence hall take place as hands-on strategies to fulfill instructional objectives. Second, faculty-participation in diversity events and activities

serve as role models and support for racial and cultural inclusion. Third, private one-on-one conversations with students who participate in racist acts represent a proactive strategy to inform and encourage cultural awareness, inclusion to promote equity and social justice.

Implications for retention indicate that students of color need to discern when, where and how to respond to racially offensive behaviors to maintain focus on educational goals with minimum distractions. These experiences reinforce findings in the literature (Sedlacek, 1999) that African American students and Other student of color at PWIs need to recognize racism and develop response patterns that maximize the pursuit of educational goals with minimum interference. Additionally, the attempt of individual African American students to bring about racial and cultural awareness without the support of experts is a difficult task. The participants in this study indicate an overwhelming burden of mediating, mitigating and educating their peers to attain a multicultural quality of student life on campus.

Conclusions

Predominantly White institutions across the country report declining African American undergraduate students' enrollment and retention rates (CSRDE, 2000-2001; The Office of Institutional Research and Planning Analysis, 2002; SEF, 1999, 2002). Consequently, PWIs establish numerous diversity initiatives to improve the multicultural quality of life on these campuses for students of color (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002). Yet, a decline in enrollment and retention rates in the already small population of African American undergraduate students persist in many PWIs, nationwide. Implications of students' experiences in RLCs in this study provide insight on day-to-day social and educational achievements and challenges. They include accomplishments for successful students as well as struggles and disappointments for others.

Several implications reside in detailed "narrativization" of RLC experiences in this research project. Riessman (1993) contends that "narrativization tells not only about past actions but how individuals understand those actions, that is, meaning" (p.19). The dynamics of social and educational experiences in RLCs overlap in this research project. They point to the following issues for recruitment, adjustment and retention:

1. Leadership roles in high school extracurricular activities promote networking skills and a prompt transition to college;
2. Networking with current and former African American RLC members, high school guidance councilors, friends and family are pivotal for influencing decisions to apply to these communities;
3. Many African American students on campus are unaware of RLC programs;

4. Affective developmental experiences influence academic success and retention as well as cognitive experiences;

5. Frequent contact with directors, faculty and staff members create academic as well as emotional support systems in five RLCs with academic and social requirements.

Participation in diversity events and activities by the director and faculty members in the Leadership Community depicts them as role models for encouraging cultural inclusion and racial pride. Consequently, they empower students of color to engage in proactive ways of promoting equity and social justice;

6. Academic attempts to remedy unexpected educational deficiencies often compromise perceived self-efficacy, a sense of belonging and a sense of community for first-year students. I characterize these students as ‘the in-be-tweens.’ The in-be-tweens are teens who teeter between just passing and failing GPAs. Comments describe this dilemma as “behind, trying to play catch up;”

7. Peer interactions create opportunities to develop relationships for academic support, friendships and strategies for coping with racial challenges;

8. The development of racial-cope-ability skills for African American students at a PWI points to involvement with racial challenges as an addition to Astin’s (1985, 1996) three necessary forms of student involvement (faculty, academics and peers) for learning, success and retention. Therefore, racial-cope-ability is equally important for retention as academic ability.

9. Educational advantages of RLCs on a predominantly White campus outweigh day-to-day racial indignities, which implies that some students earn an education differently and at a greater expense than the majority of their peers.

The participants in this study indicate that RLCs have many educational advantages. RLCs also have the potential to increase enrollment and retention rates in PWIs for students of color, particularly African American undergraduate students.

A Potential Recruitment Strategy

There are five conclusions and implications about the use of RLCs as a potential incentive for recruitment. First, descriptions of how interviewees learn about RLCs include: (1) Networking with current and former African American students, high school guidance councilors, community leaders and parents; (2) University housing pamphlets and a search on the website provide further information and (3) Outreach efforts within two RLC programs target local high school students and academically qualified students who attend the university. Therefore, the participants use a combination of methods to learn about these communities. However, deciding factors for applying to RLCs mainly occur as a result of conversations with current and former African American RLC members. This implies that networking and comparative academic and racial experiences are key for influencing decisions to apply to RLCs.

Second, data suggests that many African American students on campus are unaware of theme housing or residential learning program opportunities. This situation has implications for an expansion of current university outreach efforts, such as pipeline programs in untapped African American communities, school systems and on campus. Additionally, this effort may positively affect low or declining enrollment and retention rates of African American undergraduate students at PWIs.

Third, implications also point to advantages of living in a small-scale academically-tied learning environment, such as RLCs on large predominantly White campuses. Personalized experiences positively influence the transition from high school to college. RLCs also have

positive effects on prompt academic and social adjustments through built-in support systems. They promote positive peer interactions for creating relationships for study groups and for developing friendships. Frequent contact with faculty and staff members helps them appear more approachable in the classroom. Frequent contact with faculty and staff also creates sources of emotional as well as academic support. These elements promote a sense of community and a sense of belonging, which are attractive reasons for participating in RLCs.

Fourth, RLCs provide elective opportunities for developing leadership skills as well as for creating a sense of community. They include organizing social activities, assisting with classroom instruction, facilitating peer groups, fulfilling a community service, joining RLC committees and accepting elected community positions. This is another element that enhances a sense of belonging as well as a sense of community.

Implications also show that elective RLC opportunities help to personalize social and educational experiences in living-learning environments. Elective opportunities are among several reasons students in this study keep commitments to their respective communities. Consequently, they describe many educational assets of having the RLC experience. Implications for recruitment are embedded within many narratives as reasons for living on a predominately White campus. Implications point to these characteristics as appealing strategies for advertising in recruitment fairs that target prospective African American students, as well as Other students of color.

Finally, first-year students who do not volunteer for elective activities spend time improving academic skills, learning deficient high school information to “catch up” with peers, keep up with course assignments and/or RLC requirements. This dilemma presents limited free time to socialize or participate in extracurricular activities. In this case, such experiences

compromise academic fit and sense of community. They also negatively affect perceived self-efficacy. Nevertheless, comments on the advantages of built-in educational support and academic resources provide positive reasons to apply to RLCs. In most cases, the educational benefits of living in RLCs outweigh negative social encounters and disappointing academic outcomes. Accordingly, implications clearly point to RLCs as a potential strategy for encouraging African American students to apply to PWIs.

Contrasting experiences of a small number of interviewees (Patsy and Erica, The W.E.L.L.) indicate a lack of interest in elective activities and minimum involvement in academic requirements. These participants describe feelings of indifference, lack of commitment and/or confusion about educational goals. A speculation about lack of involvement for Patsy also points to a rebellious attitude towards parents' insistence that she should live in a RLC. This is an implication for parents to allow prospective students to contribute to college decisions and to consider the advantages of cooperation and negotiation.

Affective Developmental Experiences in RLCs for Retention

Social and educational experiences in this study reinforce Astin's (1984, 1996) contention that the quantity and quality of involvement in one's education affect academic success and retention. Additionally, positive affective or noncognitive experiences with peers, faculty and staff members have profound influences on cognitive development and retention (Astin, 1996; Sedlacek, 1999). Astin (1996) describes affective outcomes as "self-understanding, tolerance, honesty, citizenship, and social responsibility" (p. 124). Sedlacek (1999) lists "eight noncognitive variables that are critical in the lives of minority students" (pp. 538, 539): (1) positive self-concept or confidence, (2) realistic self-appraisal, (3) understands and deals with racism, (4) demonstrated community service, (5) prefers long-range goals to short-term or

immediate needs, (6) availability of a strong support person, (7) successful leadership experience, and (8) knowledge acquired in a field. Although Sedlecek's (1999) variables relate to African American students' use of university counseling services, I believe there are relationships between Astin's (1996) and Sedlecek's (1999) findings to the experiences of students in this study.

I used Astin's (1984, 1996) affective outcomes and Sedlecek's (1999) noncognitive variables as models to identify elements that are unique for motivating students in this study. The following characteristics reflect affective developmental experiences for the success of African American undergraduate students in RLCs at a PWI:

1. *Early social networking.* Connect with educators and peers before and/or at the onset of the undergraduate experience in high school, college summer programs, freshmen orientation week and contact-people in college programs and organizations.
2. *Seeking leadership roles.* Participation in optional activities and/or positions that require leadership skills, i.e. tolerance, organization, inspiration, cooperation and collaboration among peers, faculty and staff members.
3. *A sense of belonging.* Develops faculty and peer relationships that validate academic, social and ethnic fit.
4. *Frequent contact with strong support persons.* Connections with people who positively contribute academically, socially and emotionally to educational experiences.
5. *Turn challenges into reasons to persist.* ("Studying and still doing bad;" "Behind, trying to play catch up;" "Stepping-it-up, studying more") A temporary state of low self-efficacy becomes motivation to improve and/or reasons to revisit career decisions.

6. *Participation in optional or elective opportunities.* Demonstrates ambition, tolerance, perseverance and a desire to bring about change for equity and social justice.
7. *Teaching and learning about racism.* Recognizes levels of racism to (a) minimize distractions and maximize educational interests and responsibilities, (b) engage in proactive responses and (c) know when to distance one's self from a potentially volatile situation.
8. *Adaptation to cultural codes in a PWI to maximize current educational experiences and future career goals.* Understands that the properties of whiteness are relevant to success for employment in prestigious career opportunities in the society at large.

Clearly, these characteristics work hand-in-hand with cognitive development as motivation for success. Interwoven patterns of social and educational or affective and cognitive characteristics emerge throughout this study. Therefore, it is important to note the following eight implications in this study for recruitment, which also appear as affective and cognitive developmental strategies for retention:

First, networking with peers, faculty and staff members at the onset of the first semester is crucial for social and educational support. Frequent contact with faculty and staff members not only enhances students' educational development as resources for emotional support, it allows faculty members to appear more approachable in the classroom. Positive interactions with peers create relationships for working cooperatively, studying and socializing together.

Second, implications suggest that high school extracurricular activities have positive influences on adjustment to college and achievements in college. Students' comments indicate that leadership experiences in high school provide organizational, collaborative and cooperative skills. These elements help them connect readily with peers, faculty and staff members at the onset of college life. Students with leadership experiences in high school describe a desire for

leadership roles in college. They indicate immediate signs of social, emotional and academic gratification at the beginning of their undergraduate experience.

Third, a sense of belonging and a sense of community have significant implications for retention for degree completion. The small-scale model of RLCs helps to personalize campus experiences within a large university setting. However, several students describe a feeling of isolation from other students on campus. Visiting other residence halls and/or other floors are solutions to fulfill a desire for ethnic kinship. Students who perceive isolation as a positive element rarely venture away from their communities. Isolation for them becomes an asset to minimize distractions from students outside of the RLC. Nevertheless, a sense of belonging emerges as an important commodity for students in this study.

Fourth, a built-in support system (peers in study groups , RLC faculty and staff, faculty and staff members across the campus) positively influences social and academic experiences. These benefits usually occur through required elements of RLCs. Lack of participation in the optional course in The W.E.L.L. renders the benefits of a built-in support system unavailable for interviewees in this RLC. Lack of interest in joining committees in this RLC also implies a disconnect from community activities. These experiences suggest that the interviewees' only involvement in The W.E.L.L. occurs when they follow the substance-free and healthful lifestyle guidelines. Another implication suggests that RLC requirements may provide unforeseen benefits to students who do not recognize the value of elective elements in RLCs.

Frequent contact with RLC directors positively influences affective and cognitive RLC experiences. The location of one director's office inside of the RLC increases opportunities to schedule meetings and to have impromptu conversations and discussions. The style and

arrangement of furniture in this office provides a personal touch in this living-learning environment.

The participants in five RLCs emphasize the importance of the directors' hands-on involvement. The directors' individual attention and efforts to "know [all members] well" helps to personalize their place in the community. Therefore, frequent contact with the directors, regardless of the location of their offices, provides emotional support and enhances academic fit to the community. All of these elements contribute to a sense of belonging.

Fifth, implications of students with atypical academic deficiencies point to limited or no free time and energy for engaging in RLC activities and socializing with peers. These experiences can have negative effects on students' academic, social and emotional well-being. Several first-year students experience academic probation or academic suspension, request academic relief or they have GPAs that are a few points from failing by the end of the first semester. Comments suggest that this situation compromises academic fit and a sense of community. These experiences also create a low self-efficacy within the first few weeks of the undergraduate experience.

Seeking academic and supplemental support for unrealized high school deficiencies negate involvement in elective opportunities, social activities and time to socialize with peers. However, comments also describe experiences of low self-efficacy as a temporary state of mind. Academic and social challenges can motivate students to put forth more time and effort into their education. Evidence of long-term progress strengthens self-efficacy, and in turn, increases self determination. Therefore, manageable challenges can be a catalyst for staying-the-course.

Sixth, voluntary or elective opportunities to participate in community activities benefit RLCs, positively contribute to a sense of community and to a sense of belonging. RLC program

incentives to remain in a community beyond the first year have a positive impact on retention. Many first-year students desire to remain in the Leadership Community through the second-year Bridge Program. Participants in this community improve academic skills and increase GPAs to meet criteria for the Bridge Program. Students also find it “important to get involved.” They participate in social activities, serve on committees, hold elected positions and network with peers, faculty and staff members. These efforts enhance applications to qualify for reacceptance into this community.

Incentives to remain in the other RLCs offering residency beyond the first year relate to the mission of RLC programs. For example, the Honors Community requires a GPA of 3.5 or better to remain in the community. The interviewees in this RLC also serve on committees and actively participate in community affairs. The W.E.L.L. Community interviewees abide by the substance-free guidelines of this RLC, but do not participate in optional course or committee opportunities. Only one of these interviewees plan to remain in The W.E.L.L. for another year. The mission of the three remaining RLCs focuses on the experiences of first-year students.

Seventh, a significant amount of advice from the participants indicates that it is critical for African American students on a predominantly White campus to develop a plan to cope with racially challenged students’ behaviors. Therefore, retention in PWIs for African American students, to a large extent, depends on the development of what I call racial-cope-ability skills. Therefore, racial-cope-ability may be equally as important to retention as academic ability for these students.

Finally, implications suggest that intellectual ability can override racial group identity by highlighting characteristics that relegate to the property of whiteness, such as intelligence, middle class and academic achievement. However, students learn to maintain their racial and

cultural pride and fit the expectations of those in power. They adjust for social acceptance and educational advantages. These students understand that the properties of whiteness are relevant to success for employment in prestigious career opportunities in the American society.

An Epistemology for Framing Racial-Cope-Ability Skills

Racism in RLCs require the support of an additional theoretical concept. Therefore, I deem the critical race theory (CRT) as an appropriate epistemology to address the underlying issues of racial concerns in this study. An application of the CRT is vital for an honest attempt to understand truths about the lingering mysteries, myths, and mirages of racism on predominantly White campuses. Therefore, the critical race theory frames social experiences pertaining to daily racial challenges in RLCs at a PWI.

Critical race theorists (Delgado, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000; Parker, 1998; Tate, 1997) contend that racism has an endemic position and function in the American society. Scholars use the CRT to address many racial concerns. However, I present the following elements from Laurence Parker's (1998) list of CRT features to address racial issues in this study: (1) the persistence of racism, despite good intentions and the progress of civil rights laws, as an endemic and normal part of life in the society at large and in predominantly White institutions, nationwide, (2) the importance of storytelling and narratives of racially marginalized students on predominantly White campuses, (3) the need to analyze problems such as decreased African American student enrollment and retention on predominantly White campuses and (4) the commitment to social (racial, ethnic, cultural) justice.

Peer Interactions and the Critical Race Theory

RLCs encourage positive peer interactions for developing cooperative relationships, i.e. academic collaboration and friendships for socializing. However, peer interactions also create

opportunities for learning how to cope with racial concerns for self preservation. The following experiences with racial bias create a need to develop racial-cope-ability skills for retention at a PWI:

1. The use of an avoidance strategy (a) allows one to step away from racial conflict, which creates space and time to reflect, (b) reduces emotional distress, (c) acts as a form of resistance, (d) avoids the potential for conflict, (e) keeps experiences of racial bias quiet in RLCs, which in turn (f) curtails the label of a “snitch” or troublemaker and (g) limits the awareness of racial acts in the RLC to authorities;
2. Racial isolation and race-gendered isolation creates a desire for ethnic kinship. Male and female interviewees often develop friendships with students belonging to underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and/or same-race students outside of RLCs. A solution to race-gendered isolation occurs when the only African American female in a RLC seeks close friendships with African American females in other residence halls;
3. Dialogue in classroom discussions (Leadership Community) regarding various diversity issues often extend into the residence hall. Conversations about racial issues with White peers, reportedly, limit the extent of those conversations. Therefore, residence hall discussions more often involve conversations between African American peers in the residence hall;
4. Several comments describe silence of African American students’ voices in racially mixed groups. They identify intimidation by White peers as a deterrent to open discussions about racial concerns;

5. Distancing one's self from negative "Black" male ghettoized media portrayals of socio-economic class to cope with racial typecasting, i.e. language, dress, gangs, violence, crime and poverty;
6. Developing a scheme of perceptions for coping with intentional or unintentional racial jokes, mockery and myths;
7. Recognizing that intellectual ability can override racial group identity by highlighting characteristics that relegate to the property of whiteness, such as intelligence, middle class and academic achievement.
8. Several first-year students recognize, analyze and attempt to overcome unrealized academic deficiencies to "catch up" with White counterparts in RLC classes and study groups in the residence hall. They struggle to keep up with current assignment and RLC requirements. These experiences describe a disproportionate amount of time and effort ("24/7") to acquire and improve academic skills. In many cases, these experiences limit or cancel-out the extent of involvement in elective RLC activities and time to socialize with peers. Consequently, this situation often compromises a sense of belonging, a sense of community and positive self-efficacy.
9. Understanding that "the majority rules" out perceptions about concerns that are insignificant to the existence of the majority.
10. Experiencing lack of corporation and support from group members' as an attempt to undermine roles in RLC leadership positions held by African American students;
11. Mike, a biracial-American, identifies himself as African American. Yet, he accepts friendship from a self-proclaimed White racist peer who "wants nothing to do with Black people." African American peers say, "What is he and what is he doing?"

Peers usually identify Mike as “not Black enough for Black students and not White enough for White students” and

12. Proactive responses to racism (a) attempt to bring about awareness of the negative effects of racially biased acts, (b) defend students belonging to Other underrepresented racial groups in the RLC and (c) demonstrate a desire to affect positive change and social equity.

All of the above experiences require skills to focus on self preservation and endurance for retention. Advice from the participants includes survival strategies for developing racial-cope-ability skills. Implications suggest that coping strategies are valuable to the survival of African American students as a racial minority within a majority White environment. Implications of how these skills simultaneously enrich and dilute educational experiences of African American students are apparent. The use of time and effort to cope with day-to-day racial barriers imply a significant amount of involvement with racial challenges. These experiences indicate a need to develop racial-cope-ability skills for retention, which are not relevant for the success of their White counterparts. Therefore, earning an education is different for the interviewees than for the majority of their peers

Infusion of the CRT with the SIT

Astin (1985, 1996) lists three necessary forms of involvement for undergraduate students’ cognitive and affective development: (1) academic involvement, (2) involvement with faculty and (3) involvement with student peer groups. Implications in this study reinforce the significance of student involvement in educational and social activities and connections to people. Students in this study also describe necessary skills for retention that involve “racial-cope-ability” in addition to Astin’s (1985, 1996) features of student involvement. Therefore, a

need to develop “racial-cope-ability” emerges as a fourth form of student involvement.

Accordingly, the quality and quantity of African American students’ involvement with race-related elements within their educational development affects learning, success and retention at a PWI.

These implications suggest that involvement for developing “racial-cope-ability skills” in addition to Astin’s (1984, 1996) forms of involvement, affect survival, academic success and retention for African American undergraduate students. Consequently, these experiences have implications for the emergence of a phenomenon, which connects the critical race theory (CRT) to the student involvement theory (SIT) for students of color. Responses to daily racial indignities serve three purposes: (1) a form of resistance, (2) preventive measures through conflict avoidance as a survival strategy and (3) proactive attempts to bring about cultural and racial awareness for achieving social justice and equity. Involvement with racial challenges demonstrate reflective thought, emotional distress, psychosocial effects and time and effort to develop ways of responding to racial indignities.

Implications point to racial interactions with White peers in RLCs as a cumulative and persistent social phenomenon. Therefore, racial-cope-ability skills are important for learning the characteristics of racism. They are also important for creating cultural and racial awareness. This phenomenon requires vigilant attention, time and effort to accumulate strategies and develop effective racial-cope-ability. These skills are critical for minimizing racial distractions to maximize educational pursuits. The construct of these skills develop over time from prior experiences, on-the-spot racial conflict and from shared experiences of African American students and parents.

Comments from interviewees indicate that skill development for racial-cope-ability affects psychosocial and emotional well-being, i.e. perceived self-efficacy, which in turn affects educational experiences and academic success. Consequently, planning and developing these skills take away time and energy from educational and social interests. Therefore, implications indicate that the development of racial-cope-ability for African American students are as equally valuable for retention as the need for involvement with academics, peer group, faculty and staff members, thereby an infusion of the CRT with the SIT.

Experiences that directly affect retention for African American students in this study, particularly first-year students, include the need to: (1) network with peers, faculty and staff members at the onset of the first semester, (2) develop positive working relationships with peers, (3) learn to manage racial, social and academic challenges, (4) improve study skills and test grades, (5) “catch up” with the knowledge peers demonstrate in class and study groups in the residence hall and (6) keep up with course work and RLC requirements.

Implications for Further Research

This exploratory exercise focuses on African American undergraduate students’ perceptions of social and educational experiences in RLCs on a predominantly White campus. First, a follow-up study to track the educational development, progress and retention of students in this study would be an interesting undertaking. It would be important to find out how many students graduate early, on time or late. It would also be interesting to learn whether or not any of the students drop-out or transfer to other colleges or universities. To learn about the reasons for either of these occurrences and to find out what they would do differently and/or the same might also be useful.

Second, this research project focuses on undergraduate students belonging to one underrepresented racial group, African American students. Another type of follow-up study might focus on White undergraduate students' social and educational experiences in RLCs on predominantly White campuses. This type of study would offer interesting comparisons to the experiences of participants in this study.

Third, a focus on one PWI is among the limitations for this study. The participation of a small number of students (32) produces another limitation. Hence, relative experiences cannot be easily generalizable. Therefore, I recommend the following implication for further research: Undertake a longitudinal study of African American undergraduate students in RLCs at a number of large predominantly White land-grant institutions across the country. This type of research would determine the generalizability of data found in this study.

Fourth, another interesting study might use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data on predominantly White campuses with increasing numbers of African American students. Subjects for collecting data may include students in RLCs, other types of on-campus environments or a randomly selected group of African American students enrolling within a particular timeframe. The following questions are important to answer: Would their social and educational experiences be similar to or different from this study? What causes an increase in African American students' enrollment in a PWI? What is the rate of retention since the increase in population for each college level following the first year of enrollment?

Fifth, this study reinforces a continuous and persistent need for additional research to develop strategies for discouraging racial intimidation on predominantly White campuses. Furthermore, a consensus among all, but two, of the interviewees indicates the use of strategies that deal with emotional and psychological residue of racism in residence halls. Therefore, do

students of color in other residence halls experience similar subtle and blatant racial indignities in PWIs? Research using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods might shed light on the existence, extent and gravity of racial innuendoes in residence halls on predominantly White campuses.

Finally, an interesting study might focus on the effects of diversity initiatives on White students and students of color at PWIs across the country. Interviewees in this study express concern about White students who sign an attendance sheet for credit in diversity events, then leave prematurely. How does premature departure affect (1) the university's goal of inclusion, (2) instructional objectives, (3) the speaker's presentation and students in attendance who belong to underrepresented groups on campus?

Epilogue

Conversations with several interviewees within a year of data collection reveal updates and changes in academic goals:

While shopping in Wal-Mart, I had conversations on several occasions with two BLSC participants a semester after their interviews. I asked them about their progress as biology majors. Both students changed their majors as a result of academic difficulty. They maintain current enrollment status at the university and are living off campus. Therefore, all three of the BLSC participants have different majors.

I searched the Internet for contact information for participants in Hypatia a year following their interviews. All, but one, of the interviewees' names are no longer available on the university's website. This indicates that only one of those participants remain at the university.

I spoke with John during the summer of 2005 on campus in front of the library. He was a sophomore in the Leadership Community at the time of his interview. His news was exciting.

Taking courses in summer school and doubling the course load in his junior year qualifies him to graduate a year early.

The methodology advisor for this study and I talked about the implications of a need for racial-cope-ability, which lead to this question: How can the university reduce the need for African American undergraduate students to develop racial-cope-ability skills? After several days of pondering the question, I wrote the following statement as a response:

A Reflective Response: First, I think it is important to focus on the reason this skill is necessary. Two elements in the student involvement theory with people include faculty members and peers. Administrators and faculty members in this study provide an important source of academic and emotional support. However, peer interactions provide an assortment of experiences. Some are friendly, others experiences create relationships for studying together. However, many peer-encounters reveal day-to-day racial biases. As a result, students in this study survive by preparing ways to respond to avoid conflict and/or to inform in an attempt to bring about awareness. Therefore, the source of racial encounters in RLCs point to White students who are racially, ethnically and culturally challenged. I think students of color are expected to deal with it – racism, intimidation, oppression, taunting, intolerance, etc. – on their own. Students in this study accept the responsibility of dealing with ‘it’ everyday. So, how are students’ homemade responses to a persistent source of racial bias effective? Maybe it is time to focus on the source of racial bias in addition to the victims of racial bias. From that perspective, I suggest the following thoughts for consideration:

- Visible university role models (administrators, faculty, staff) across the campus demonstrate a belief and value in the university’s goal of inclusion. This idea imposes the trickle down theory – a top-down interactive approach to changing attitudes and

behavior. By example, those *in power* can have a *powerful influence* on the student population. A concept of university involvement (everybody) has the potential to develop intrinsic reasons and ways to develop tolerance, inclusion, acceptance, respect and cooperation.

- Create frequent small-scale opportunities/activities that bring students, administrators, faculty and staff members together for socializing in residence halls and other on-campus locations, i.e. movie night, poetry readings and rap sessions, luncheons, dinners, picnics, sports, talent shows, karaoke, etc. These opportunities can occur through departmental collaboration between students, faculty and administrators. Purpose – an intrinsic desire to experience a sense of belonging to the university-wide community.
- Students, administrators, faculty and staff members adapt a routine to invite peers and family members to attend campus events. However, in light of recent racial incidents on campus by off campus friends of students enrolled at the university, caution is recommended to circumvent a repeat occurrence.
- Create a safe and confidential way for students to report personal and observed racial and cultural indignities beyond the Resident Advisors (RAs) to make sure the information reaches administrators and authorities. Provide immediate follow-up meetings, consultation and counseling sessions.
- Create ways to invite and encourage students of many colors, creeds and beliefs to participate in university programs, initiatives, traditions, etc in addition to providing separate but equal time to celebrate nationalities, special months and designated cultural holidays and traditions.

- Develop a required one-semester freshmen course on cultural awareness. The course would include similar topics and instructional objectives to those in Leadership Community classes (racism, gender bias, heterosexism, class-ism, ageism, etc.). I suggest that a representative of students from enrolled nationalities, races, ethnicities and cultures participate as guest speakers, instructors, etc. throughout the semester.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Virginia Tech Informed Consent for Participants of Investigative Projects

Title of Project: African American Undergraduate Students' Experiences in Residential Learning Communities at a Predominately White Institution

Investigator: Julia Best, Interviewer
Dr. Josiah Tlou, Advisor

I. Purpose of the Research/Project

The purpose of this research is to explore African American undergraduate students' perceptions of their social and educational experiences in residential learning community (RLC) programs at Virginia Tech.

II. Procedures

- Meetings with your residential learning community official/administrator gave permission to (a.) recruit you to participate in this study; (b.) obtain consent from you to review your residential learning community records (i.e., application, assessments, participation in program activities); (c.) conduct observations in common areas of your residential learning community; and (d.) conduct observations during activities, events, and seminars in your residential learning community program.
- A questionnaire will be distributed during observations of residential learning community activities, events, and seminars about the purpose and your involvement in the experience. I will collect your completed questionnaire and answer any questions at the end of the event.
- Interview questions will ask about your involvement in the residential learning community where you reside. General questions will be asked followed by specific questions about your social and educational experiences in your residential learning community. For example, questions will focus on your daily living experiences; relationships with peers; faculty and staff; and course work.
- Interviews will be audio taped for the purpose of analyzing and discussing interview responses. The interview should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes.
- You will have the opportunity to review your responses to the interview questions. We will meet at a time that is convenient for you to read, correct or to expand on the information that you provided during the interview.
- I am also requesting your permission to play small portions of your audio-taped interview at scholarly seminars or academic conferences. No portion of a tape containing real names or identifying descriptions will be used.

III. Risks

You may choose not to answer any questions that you feel may cause discomfort or that may lead to a discovery of your identity in this study.

IV. Benefits of this Project

I cannot promise any direct benefits to you from your participation. My hope is that my research might result in general knowledge that could inform teachers, educators, and administrators concerned with issues of cultural diversity in theme housing programs.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Every attempt will be made to protect your identity. However, I cannot guarantee complete anonymity.

- I will not give your name to anyone, and I will not share the names of any people you choose to talk about.
- A pseudonym will replace your name to help protect your identity.
- Audiotapes of interviews will be maintained by the interviewer and kept in a secure place at the interviewer’s home. The interviewer is the only person who will have access to these tapes.

VI. Compensation

I cannot offer you any compensation for your participation. Refreshments will be served during the interview.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw, that is, stop the interview or cease your participation in the research, at any time without penalty. All you need to do is tell me, or contact one of the people listed at the end of this form. You are also free to skip questions that make you uncomfortable.

VIII. Approval of Research (Subject to IRB Approval)

The Department of Educational Research has approved this research project, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

You will be offered a copy of this form.

(Participant’s Signature)

(Date)

Dr. Jan Nespor, Departmental IRB Representative (540) 231-8327 nespor@vt.edu
 Dr. David Moore, University IRB Chair (540) 231-4991 moored@vt.edu
 Dr. Josiah Tlou, Advisor (540) 231-8344 tlou@vt.edu
 Julia Best, Investigator (540) 381-3063 jbest@vt.edu

Appendix B: Contact Script

Hello, My name is Julia Best. I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Teaching and Learning and the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. I am requesting your participation in my research for my dissertation. My dissertation is about the experiences of African American undergraduate students who participate in residential learning community (RLC) programs on the campus of Virginia Tech. The objective is to give voice to African American undergraduate students who participate in RLCs. The purpose of this study is to explore your relationships with faculty, staff and peers, and your participation in RLC activities at Virginia Tech.

Your participation and input are very important to my research and dissertation. Refreshments will be provided during a 60 to 90-minute audio taped interview. Are you interested in sharing your point of view about your experiences in a RLC on the campus of Virginia Tech?

Appendix C: Invitation to Participants

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the audio taped interview to be held on (date & time)_____ (location) _____. If the time is not convenient, please contact me as soon as you receive this letter. Please provide a list of dates and times that will be more convenient.

This research is designed to explore African American undergraduate students' experiences in residential learning community programs on the campus of Virginia Tech. The success of the research depends upon an open and frank discussion of issues and experiences with African American undergraduate students on the campus of Virginia Tech. The objective is to get your side of the story. The findings will help the university determine additional strategies to provide a welcoming environment for all students. The interview will be approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Refreshments will be served during the interview.

Once again, thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. Your voice will help provide a better understanding of your experiences and your perceptions. If you have questions prior to the interview, please contact me at (540) 381-3063 or e-mail me at jbest@vt.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Josiah Tlou at (540) 231-8344 or e-mail him at tlou@vt.edu.

Appendix D: Reminder Script

Hello, this is Julia Best calling to thank you for your willingness to participate in my research. I want to remind you that the interview will be held on (date & time) at (location). Refreshments will be served. Please feel free to call or e-mail me at (540) 381-3063, jbest@vt.edu if you have any questions.

Appendix E: Interview Guide

- Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. I am interested in African American undergraduate student experiences in residential learning community programs at Virginia Tech.

(DISTRIBUTE THE IRB INFORMED CONSENT FORM. AFTER A FEW MINUTES, ASK THE PARTICIPANT IF THERE ARE ANY QUESTIONS.)

- The objective is to give voice to students who would like to be heard regarding their participation in residential learning community programs. Your point of view is important.
- I will ask questions to find out about your college experiences. First, I will ask general questions about your home life and family. I will follow those with questions about your college life.
- The interview should take from 60 to 90-minutes.
- With your permission, I will audio tape-record the interview. The tapes and the transcriptions will be in my possession at all times. No other persons will have access to the transcriptions.
- Remember that you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You are also free to decline to comment or answer questions that make you uncomfortable. Do you have any questions?

Appendix F: Observation Questionnaire

- Thank you for taking the time to help me with my study. I am a doctoral student at Virginia Tech. I am interested in students’ and faculty/staffs’ perceptions of their involvement in residential learning community (RLC) events and activities.

Name of RLC _____
Title of this Event _____

Students:
Year in College: _____ Major: _____
Race/Ethnicity _____ Gender: _____

Faculty/Staff:
Job Title _____ Job Description _____

1. What is the purpose of this event or activity?
2. Why did you attend this event or activity?
3. What are your expectations for this event or activity?
4. What other RLC activities or events have you attended?

Were you satisfied _____ or dissatisfied _____ with the events or activities?

Why?

5. How often do you attend RLC events and activities?
____ frequently ____ seldom ____ as required by the community
____ when it is convenient

Explain:

6. Will you attend other RLC events in the future?

Yes ____ No ____ Why?

7. Are you satisfied with the activities and events in this RLC?

Yes ____ No ____ Why?

8. Would you recommend this RLC to students who live in traditional residence halls or to high school friends and family?

Yes ____ No ____ Why?

9. What is your opinion of this activity or event?

10. What would you change/keep the same about this event?

Why?

Appendix G: Open-Ended Interview Questions

I. Environment: Place/Space

- What is it like living in a residential learning community?

II. Social Experiences

- Tell me about relationships with peers/faculty/staff.

III. Educational Experiences

- How are you doing in your course work?