

# Connection and Commitment: How Sense of Belonging and Classroom Community Influence Degree Persistence for African American Undergraduate Women

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In this study, six African American female college students were interviewed to explore perceptions about their college learning environment and the beliefs they have about their own competence and value with regard to others in the college community. Focus group and individual interviews were conducted over the course of the academic year to examine insights about classroom dynamics and peer interactions. Findings revealed that their decision to persist at the college was based on faculty being accessible, approachable, and providing authentic instruction. While this was encouraging, undergraduate women of color still described challenges such as experiencing microaggressions from professors and classmates and feeling a need to “represent their race” when asked to provide commentary on specific course topics. The results show that African American college women have experiences that are unique and faculty must be aware of the need to create a safe space in which these students can engage and participate fully.

Sense of belonging is a concept that has existed in the fields of education and psychology for several decades. In general terms, sense of belonging denotes a feeling of relatedness or connection to others. Although specific definitions of sense of school belonging vary, most researchers maintain that school belonging refers to a student’s “sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (Goodenow, 1993, p.25).

Traditionally, sense of school belonging refers to a student’s experience of the full school community, which includes the classroom setting and the interactions that take place therein. While the research base on classroom community in the elementary and secondary grades is extensive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004), there has been little research conducted on classroom-level student experiences within the college community. Even fewer studies have been devoted to African American student populations, and even less research exists that is qualitative in nature.

Research shows that African American students enrolled at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) have experiences vastly different from their African American counterparts attending historically African American colleges and universities (Guiffrida, 2005; Johnson, et al., 2007). African American students have reported harassment, hostile classroom interactions, feelings of disidentification, exclusion, and low self-esteem (Green & Glasson, 2009; Hope, Chavous, Jagers, & Sellers, 2013). As expected, these negative encounters can have serious long-term effects on a minority student’s motivation and desire to complete their degree.

## Theoretical Framework

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, only 59% of full-time, first year students persist to graduation within six years (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). For African American students, only 38% persist within the same time frame. While studying institutional variables is important, equal attention should be given to the micro-interactions that students have with professors and peers that influence a sense of belonging to the larger campus community.

*Persistence* refers to the continual pursuit of the completion of a college degree (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1987). Tinto's four-factor model of college retention and persistence includes the student’s family background, high school experiences, campus social interactions, and personal attitudes as predictors of African American student satisfaction with college. Of particular interest in the proposed study are the campus social interactions that women of color experience in the classroom setting. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine how (and if) African American female college students experience a sense of belonging in the classroom setting, in particular paying close attention to how faculty and classmates influence pathways to persistence for this group of students.

## Related Literature

Sense of school belonging has a long-standing empirical foundation. Belongingness has been studied in K-12 settings (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Goodenow, 1993), at the postsecondary level (Kay, Summers, & Svinicki, 2011; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Pittman & Richmond, 2007) and also at the faculty ranks (Kelly &

McCann, 2014). Students who report higher levels of belongingness in their educational environment have overall better psychological outcomes than students who demonstrate a lower sense of belonging (O’Keeffe, 2013). In postsecondary settings, belongingness has been related to self-esteem (Hope, et al., 2013), positive racial identity (Johnson et al., 2007), major selection and satisfaction, (Green & Glasson, 2009) and increased persistence to degree (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007) for African American undergraduates. Those students with a strong connection to their campus community even have better health outcomes (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Finn and Zimmer (2012) postulated an identification-participation model of school engagement that is applicable to this study. The model has three components: identification with the school to a minimal extent, a sense of belonging to the school, and a belief that students are welcomed, respected and valued by others. In this theory, identification with the school is a precursor to belonging, which subsequently positively affects student achievement. While academic achievement is not a concept that will be officially measured in the proposed study, African American undergraduate women’s performance in their classes is a consideration in the research. Specifically, it is important to note if female students express a connection to their instructors and peers in various courses based on how “well” they are doing and how those interactions influence their perceptions of belongingness.

### **Role of Faculty and Peers**

When examining sense of belonging in the classroom setting, two major players emerge: faculty and classmates. Faculty set the tone for students’ interactions and model respect and valuing (Gayle, Cortez, & Preiss, 2013; Wilson & Gore, 2013). The extant literature shows that students with high levels of belonging speak to having had positive experiences with faculty who exhibit a caring disposition, use active learning techniques, and create safe spaces for expression and debate. As Fredricks and colleagues (2004) noted, belonging is an affective type of engagement that encompasses how students feel about themselves and others in the learning environment. As the facilitator, guide, and moderator of the course, faculty are uniquely positioned to create classroom settings where students feel connected to each other as well as the subject matter.

Research shows a strong relationship between instructor characteristics and student sense of belonging. Kay and colleagues (2011) found that professors’ beliefs about classroom community building were directly related to student perceptions of belongingness. In their study, instructors were asked

about ways in which they facilitated a sense of respect and belonging among their students. Findings of note included a high priority placed on communicating clear expectations, providing multiple opportunities for students to collaborate, and “communing with the information” (p.237). The major limitation of this study is that student perspectives were not included.

While the research base on college student belonging has uncovered important information, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of minority student belongingness; specifically, most studies on this topic are quantitative in nature. There are few qualitative studies that give a narrative voice to the African American student experience of classroom community and fewer that approach it from the vantage point of African American undergraduate women. This study adds to the research base by framing the complex nature of belongingness with the actual words and feelings expressed by African American female college students.

When students from all dimensions of contemporary life come together in the learning process, they can be hesitant to let down their guard. Research shows that learning is maximized when students feel a sense of belonging in the educational environment (Fredricks et al., 2004; Osterman, 2000). When students share a sense of psychological membership with classmates and instructors, they are willing to take risks and challenge themselves with a greater focus on intrinsic and mastery goal achievement. In this respect, the reward for such behavior is greater confidence in one’s ability, higher academic performance, and positive peer relationships.

With a greater emphasis on collaborative learning and constructivism, students are expected to engage with others more now than in years past (Fosnot, 2013). Students take their cues from peers, and this togetherness can lead to feelings of support and encouragement or isolation and separation. Evidence suggests that the experiences African American college students have with their peers may be the biggest predictor of belongingness overall (Booker, 2008; Freeman, Anderman, & Jenson, 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007). When students feel valued, respected, and welcomed by their classmates and peers, they report experiencing a stronger bond to the greater campus community. They feel safe enough to share experiences, engage in thoughtful discussions, and offer support to others. Peers can also help buffer the effects of a negative classroom relationship with a faculty member (Sidelinger, Bolen, Frisby, & McMullen, 2011).

### **African American Undergraduate Women**

Research on the curricular experiences of African American college students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) is well documented (Fleming, 1985;

Flowers, 2003; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Thomas, Walters, Horn & Kennedy, 2013). Unlike their counterparts at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), African American students at PWIs report feelings of loneliness, shame, disrespect, fear, and disillusionment with their college experiences. These feelings grow into low levels of belongingness, which can ultimately impact their ability to persist to graduation (Tinto, 1987).

African American women may be especially prone to experiences of dissatisfaction as they are dealing with both gender and racial stereotypes that can affect their tenure in the classroom setting (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; McClellan, 2012). African American female college students report experiencing feelings of renunciation and rejection due to being a binary minority; in other words, they must contend with the microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) that can come from their identity as both a woman and a racial minority. In classes where they are a numerical minority, there can be a sense of frustration when dealing with feelings of invisibility, inferiority, and assumptions about their cultural background.

### Method

#### Research Questions

The present study used a qualitative approach to explore African American female college students' sense of school belonging by way of classroom interactions with faculty members and classmates. The present study examined the following research questions:

1. How do African American female college students describe their relationships with faculty members and peers in the classroom setting?
2. How do these interactions affect their sense of belongingness and persistence to complete a college degree?

#### Context

This study was conducted at a public institution in a Southern coastal city with long-standing racial and class divisions. The undergraduate student body stands at just over 10,500 enrollees, with the majority being female (62%). The college has 550 full-time tenured, tenure-track, or fixed appointment faculty, of whom only 13% are faculty of color and 44% are women. African American students comprise 7% of the undergraduate population.

#### Recruitment

Student participants were recruited through the campus office charged with providing outreach and support services to multicultural populations of students. Because the focus of the study was on persistence, it was important to recruit non-freshman participants. As stated previously, the purpose of this study was to explore how African American women experienced the classroom setting via faculty and peer interactions. A secondary area of interest was how, and if, those exchanges affected their decision to remain at the college. For these reasons, first-year students were not included in the recruitment efforts as they had not yet made the decision to return to the college after their first year. An e-mail was sent to prospective interviewees and then students with an interest in participating were asked to contact the author to schedule an interview.

#### Participants

Participants were six African American upperclass female undergraduates at the institution. The majors represented in the sample included psychology, professional studies, early childhood education (2), vocal performance and theater, and arts management. Of the six participants, all but one was a native of the state, with two having been long-term residents of the city prior to attending the institution. Half of the participants identified that the college currently attended was their first choice. There was one non-traditional aged student in the sample (age 35), who was also enrolled part-time. While grade point average was not obtained through official institutional records, students were asked to provide a self-reported grade both overall and in their selected majors. Five out of the six participants reported A's in their major subject areas, while four of the six students reported an A, A-, or B+ grade point average overall. One participant was a former student of the researcher. Please see Table 1 for a list of student pseudonyms and additional characteristics.

#### Data Collection

As previously mentioned, the majority of the research on student belonging in college student populations has been deductive in nature. This study used a qualitative approach to examine how African American female undergraduates described their sense of belonging to others in the academic setting. Admittedly, there can be disadvantages to using an interpretist design. Specifically, the small sample size and inductive approach reduces the ability to generalize the findings to other settings. However, in the current

Table 1  
*Student Participant*

Student	Classification	Major
Alana	Junior	Professional Studies
Connie	Senior	Early Childhood Education
Jody	Senior	Arts Management
Kim	Sophomore	Psychology
Shelby	Senior	Theater/Vocal Performance
Tina	Senior	Early Childhood Education

study, there is a distinct benefit to allowing the voices of these women to be heard both individually and collectively. For many students of color, and women in particular, having a chance to vocalize their feelings without recrimination is an important consideration. Whereas these data cannot be used to test a theory or applied to other populations, they can shed light on the lived experiences of this group of students.

Two forms of data collection were employed in this study: focus group interviews and individual interviews. The purpose of the focus groups was to allow the participants to discuss their classroom experiences as women of color at a PWI. During this time, students explored issues of belongingness, faculty interaction, and peer support (see the Appendix for an abbreviated list of focus group interview questions). The focus groups also offered students a chance to hear the thoughts of their peers and comment on like experiences and dissimilar feelings (Hollander, 2004). The focus group interview lasted approximately 75 minutes.

To follow up on ideas expressed in the focus groups, individual interviews were also utilized. Individual interview questions emphasized peer relationships, faculty availability, classroom dynamics, civility and respect (see the Appendix for an abbreviated list of individual interview questions). Each individual interview lasted an average of 40 minutes. Participants were given an opportunity to add, delete, or modify any of their previously expressed thoughts from the focus group. Students were not compensated for their time, although refreshments were provided during the focus group interview.

### Data Analysis

With student permission, all interviews were audiotaped. During these interviews the researcher penned analytic field notes as well (Kruger, 2000; Maxwell, 2005). All interview data were transcribed within 48 hours of the session. Transcripts were returned to participants with a request to add, delete, or modify those data in an effort to maintain the accuracy of their perspectives. Once the transcripts were returned, a multi-stage approach to coding was utilized.

In this first phase of analysis all confirmed interview transcripts were reviewed, and tentative ideas were captured in analytic notes. In the second phase of analysis a set of codes were developed from emergent categories in the student data (Creswell, 2013). Broad codes (e.g., “lack of office hours”) were then reduced to more specific ideas that better described students’ thoughts (e.g., “instructor availability”). In the final phase of analysis, themes that surfaced throughout the codes were named. Careful consideration was given to dissenting opinions and data outside the patterns which appeared (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech & Zoran, 2009).

### Role of Researcher, Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

As qualitative research is interpretivist in nature, it is critical that my position in the research study be clear and evenhanded. I am an African American female faculty member at the institution in which the study was conducted. This duality of roles influenced the planning, implementation, and dissemination of this study. As a woman of color who teaches and works with African American women undergraduates, I have biases about this topic and the effect negative classroom experiences can bring to bear on the education of African American college students. It was critical that I took steps to confirm that my findings could withstand the scrutiny of thorough empirical inquiry.

To ensure the highest degree of credibility and rigor in this study, several methods of trustworthiness were employed. The study was vetted and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the present college. This process carefully monitored the types of questions asked, recruitment procedures, and the proposed methods of analysis. Multiple data collection methods were adopted in an attempt to deepen the understanding about this subject and elicit various perspectives. As previously mentioned, all participants were offered the chance to review their transcript prior to data analysis. This form of member-checking allowed the analysis of the data to proceed from a place of accuracy of the participants’ perspectives. Additionally, another faculty

member associated with the project reviewed the findings for bias and clarity. Finally, themes were compared to the extant literature base which will be highlighted in the discussion of the study's results.

### Findings

The data from the student interviews are presented by thematic categories with illustrative quotations to highlight pertinent information. In both the focus groups and individual interviews, students expressed their opinions on classroom interactions with faculty and peers that can be classified within four themes: (a) Accessibility and Approachability, (b) Authentic Instruction, (c) Spokesperson Pressure, and (d) Microaggressions.

#### Accessibility and Approachability

Students agreed that the professors with the greatest impact on their choice to remain at the institution were relatable, engaging, and connected with them both inside and outside of the classroom. The respondents all recounted stories of how a particular professor could make them feel a sense of belonging simply by showing interest in them and their well-being. Tina shared with the group:

Her [Education professor] class was challenging but she was just really into us as a class... not just as students but also outside of school. I remember I told her a story about my niece and she followed up...even though it's not a part of the curriculum or what she has to teach me. I just told her a story and she said a few weeks later, 'Well, how is your niece doing?'... That's really important to care about the student as an individual.

Students expressed similar viewpoints, describing faculty who took a broader view of teaching and did not relegate teaching to only the classroom, but were accessible outside of class for office hours, had virtual chats, and had an "open door policy." Students recognized that, if they had difficulty, the professors who were willing to extend additional time inside and outside of class were often the ones considered "favorites" and "highly recommended." Conversely, students had stories of faculty who did not extend themselves and made students feel shame and doubt if they needed supplemental instruction or support. Jody explained:

I remember one time I was sick and I couldn't go to class, so I missed the homework assignment, but I could get an excuse because I

was legit sick. I went to office hours to explain that to them. I missed class and I know it is very important and so I wanted to see what they did [in class]. They [Business professor] completely shut me down and said, 'Oh well, I don't teach during office hours'...whatever.

As a result of this encounter, the student decided to withdraw from that section of the course, took another professor's section, and then ultimately withdrew from the major entirely.

#### Authentic Instruction

Women undergraduates noted that the professors who were enthusiastic about the content varied their instruction, and used "real-world" examples made the most significant impact on their decision to remain at the university. Across all courses, from required general education classes to courses in the major, the nod went to professors who took time to use students' backgrounds and experiences to both present new information and assess their understanding of it. Alana described:

This was a history course, he [History professor] presented it in a way that wasn't traditional in that the topic of the course was tied to the culinary history of food in [city] and just in general. It tied together a lot of important aspects of overall history and then it focused in on local history...then something that appealed to me, appealed to everyone, is the culinary part of it, the food part was very interesting...very relatable and made it practical and made it make sense for us, even for the students who are not from the area. They had an opportunity to be exposed to other parts of the city.

Other students echoed this sentiment with stories of professors who would use everyday examples and apply it to the content. This type of interaction made students feel comfortable and willing "to take a chance" in some subject areas admittedly out of their depth. Kim shared, "I've never taken a stats class before so I was really nervous about it...He [Statistics professor] ended up being an amazing professor...I learned a lot and I still remember some things. He would ask what we liked and personal things about us and apply it to what we were learning."

For many students, faculty of color provided safe spaces to express diverse opinions, which supported their feelings of belongingness in the class. One of the college's African American studies professor was considered by the students to be a favorite because of his ability to infuse class meetings with both conventional and novel instructional approaches as

evidenced by Jody's response:" "I like how the class is...it's equal parts lecture and discussion...he's [Ethnic Studies professor] making you think about what you're learning whereas in the past you just take in information and then spit it back out on the test...but he actually wants you to think about it." In this case, the professor's willingness to make content relatable, use diverse teaching styles, and encourage reflective thinking were appreciated by the students. Shelby felt her major advisor, an African American fixed appointment faculty member, was especially able to show her how to "play the game." Shelby commented:

What I love about her [Theatre professor] and enjoy so much is how authentic she is...she is true to herself to the core...she can easily fall into line and just play the part while she's here to get along...but she's true to herself...and that's what makes everyone around her feel free to be true to themselves as well.

### Spokesperson Pressure

While the previous two examples demonstrated the importance of positive interactions with faculty of color, students also mentioned how some White professors were also prepared to cover tough topics such as class, race, gender, and disability. These faculty members were not hesitant to push students outside of their comfort zones and require critical thinking on sensitive and weighty topics. Jody shared:

She [Art History professor] was very open, and she's probably one of the first Caucasian professors I've had to 'go there'...she says things I guess I think an African American professor would say...you get what I'm saying? So, that's why I liked her and her class. Some of them [White professors] go there...some of the other ones for some of the other classes...I feel like I have to represent my whole race because it's either me or one other [African American] person.

The aforementioned statement about representation underscores the third theme of spokesperson pressure. Every female student described uneasiness, frustration, and weariness at being "the only one" and feeling a need to represent their group. Shelby said:

Especially in the music department, it's a male dominant department...so being one of the few African American students in the department...especially when I first came here...I felt invisible but at the same time, very present...a raisin in a bowl of rice...seriously that's how I felt, I felt they were oblivious to my experience and

how intimidating it can feel...in a male dominant discipline, White male at that.

Students wanted to maintain their individuality and be seen as their own persons, but they carried the burden of being seen as the representative of their race (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Participants felt this was not only an issue with faculty, but with classmates as well. Jody recounted:

He [Music professor] wanted us to listen to a sample of music, then he asked, 'what do you think about the music?'...So you have a bunch of these White kids in there, and he asked them what they think about rap music...and they say, 'oh, it's promoting drugs and it's promoting gang violence...' and I'm just sitting there like, what?...you get looked upon like you have to stand up for your whole race...if you don't do that, you have all of these misperceptions that they [White students] float out there...at the same time how can I be one person representing my whole race?

Two participants, who are members of an early childhood education cohort, discussed a common experience they had in which a White male professor called on them to share their opinion about a civil rights hero. Tina asked Connie, "Do you remember last semester when we were talking about Rosa Parks? The history [class]... he called on us...he was like, 'what's your opinion?'" Students believed they were unduly asked to share perspectives only when the topic matter was about African Americans especially as it pertained to poverty, crime, music, or civil rights. In this way, they often felt marginalized to the fringes of class discussions.

### Microaggressions

Connie spoke about a time when she was personally offended about the type of language used during a class discussion. She shared:

One time I had a professor...I was taking art history and she was describing this painting and there was a Black woman in the background...I don't know if this was a bad word, but she referred to her as an ugly *nigress* or something like that, and I was offended by it and like no one else [classmates] really thought about it.

When asked if these types of interactions and "call outs" affected their decision to persist at the college, students all agreed that it weighed on their minds and affected how they perceived certain faculty and peers, but not to the degree that it would cause them to

transfer or withdraw. If anything, they chose to stay in spite of the less than welcoming contact they received.

When asked about their peer group and how they communicated with classmates, the women in the study were careful not to qualify all White students as oppositional; however, almost all participants had stories where they experienced microaggressions, or subtle disparaging comments, that sought to undermine their performance in certain classes. Shelby replied:

What I experienced here [in the college's music department] was not getting parts...they would say, you don't fit the 'physicality' that we want...or basically they're not ready to see an African American female and a White male in a love relationship on stage...in the music department...for a long time, I sort of believed that.

Participants described how students in some classes could be very naïve and sheltered about people of color and make comments that could be perceived as rude and off-putting. Jody mentioned:

We were in class discussing marriage and family and at the next table there is a group of white kids talking about babies... one says, 'Yeah, if I have a baby I'm going to give it a Black name!'.... I think, 'Well, what is a Black name then?' No one, including the teacher, said a word.

Students wanted both faculty and classmates to be more open and inviting of their participation in class and not just during special times of the year or when the conversation is only about race. Alana said, "It can be really easy to get discouraged in this type of environment. Because the types of students that are here don't always mirror your background. They aren't always as accepting as your own group. That impacts it a lot." The women in the study felt there were so many misconceptions about women of color that open dialogue should be encouraged, not dismissed. Shelby offered, "Instead of assuming something or just drawing blind conclusions, ask me...I'm here...I don't mind talking to you...I'm not the big bad wolf...I don't bite...I like to believe I am approachable and open enough for people to just ask me."

### Discussion

The results of this study show that African American undergraduate women have classroom experiences that are dissimilar from other demographics of students. Through in-depth focus groups and individual interviews, data were obtained to show how faculty and peers can both facilitate and become obstacles to a sense of belonging in the classroom

setting. Tinto's (1987) theory of student departure contends that both academic (i.e., faculty interactions) and social (i.e., peer interactions) integration are significant factors that influence a student's willingness to persist and graduate from the institution.

What can faculty do to heighten classroom belongingness and provide all students with an engaging and supportive learning experience? The findings of the present study speak to how faculty who were accessible, seemed approachable, and were authentic in their interactions became important reasons as to why these undergraduate women persisted. Faculty who took time to establish relationships both inside and outside the classroom were considered exceptional professors and made students want to participate and engage while in the classroom setting. These professors made the subject matter relatable, provided useful examples, and showed they wanted to students to do well in the class. Those types of interactions are similar to what has been found in the work of Bain (2004) and others (Case, 2013; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2013; Rychly & Graves, 2012) who argue that faculty must create a safe place for the expression of ideas and perspectives, maintain a sense of positivity in their interactions, and treat students uniquely and not with a broad brush of uniformity (Guiffrida, 2005).

While students reported having some professors who were likable and treated them with respect and consideration, they also discussed feelings of isolation, separation, and fatigue from race representation. Students frequently mentioned loneliness while in their courses and not wanting to always have to defend their race or correct some misperception from faculty and/or students. The constant weight of being "other" and not being fully integrated into the life of the course was difficult for students. Research shows that faculty who take a culturally responsive view of teaching and learning (Gay, 2010) are willing to teach from the perspective of all students and not interact with students of color only when the lesson requires it. Faculty must also be aware of how both slight, biting comments and questions students pose in front of each other can have a deleterious effect on student performance. When students feel on edge, guarded, and defensive, learning is minimized (Dunlosky, Rawson, March, Nathan, & Willingham, 2013). The undergraduate women in this study wished to be active participants and wanted to have frank and open discussions with both faculty and peers, but the environment must be primed for it. In this case, faculty have to be prepared to reflect on how their beliefs and background affect the classroom setting and all the players therein.

Peer group behavior influences how all students get along and work together in the learning environment. As Astin (1984) and Tinto (1987) both noted,

involvement is key. Without feeling like a part of the greater learning community, students of color can be shortchanged. They can feel excluded, which negatively affects their performance in the course and subsequently influences degree completion. It is useful to note that achievement, in the sense of grade point average, was not a focus of this study. Rather, the goal was to ascertain how interpersonal exchanges can affect the psychological membership minority women experience in the classroom setting. All of the student participants said they chose to stay at the institution *in spite of* how they might have been treated by other students and faculty. Some mentioned considering transferring to another school, while others were resigned to “stick it out.” In the face of these data, it could be argued that there was some other tangible or intangible factor that promoted their desire to persist to degree. One senior participant who was born and raised in the same city as the college simply said it was “easier” to stay there so she could maintain her close-knit family relationships. Another senior noted that her African American friends from high school were experiencing similar forms of isolationism and prejudice at their respective colleges, so it “wouldn’t be better there anyway.”

While the themes that emerged were present throughout the group, there were some threads that were more prominent in some of the women participants. For example, the majority of the sample were seniors who could reflect on their four-year experience with a measure of introspection that was not as discernible in the sophomore and junior participants. They could provide a deeper landscape of the college having matured over time, while the sophomore and junior women did not have the same longitudinal view. In the case of the sophomore, this finding could be due to less time enrolled at the institution, or because of the part-time nature of her enrollment as was the case with the junior, non-traditional student.

While the motivation of this study was solely on in-class interactions, there is evidence to suggest that African American students create counter-spaces in an effort to regain composure and a sense of identity in response to the microaggressions they experience on a regular basis (Solorzano et al., 2000). In fact, in the course of this research study the participants expressed gratitude at the opportunity to share their thoughts with others who had experienced similar incidences. While we want all students to feel a sense of community and shared purpose at their institutions, it is clear that these women of color still desired a place where they could speak and disclose in a free exchange.

At an institutional level, faculty and administration can use the findings from this study to engage instructional staff in the importance of classroom community and a sense of belonging. It is important

that senior staff and administration raise awareness that diverse populations of students will have experiences that are unique and noteworthy to the instructional process. Dedicated time for diversity training, monetary compensation for professional development, and partnering with other institutions are ways that campuses can begin to address some of the impediments to belongingness that students of color may have. As the ultimate goal is to move all students to degree completion in a timely manner, fostering classroom respect, valuing, and engagement is key to this objective.

### Limitations

While the use of a qualitative approach was deemed most applicable for the study, this type of inquiry is not without some limitations. First, the sample of students in the present study was small, so the generalizability of findings is narrow. However, there is utility in engaging African American women in discussions about their classroom experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The more faculty and support staff know about the variety of experiences this population faces, the more we can target our practices to increase minority persistence to degree.

Another limitation of the study is in the types of data collected. Individual interviews and focus group interviews were the methodology selected. What people say in interviews can be different from what they actual do in a particular setting. Incorporation of classroom observations, use of journaling throughout the semester, and faculty interviews would be useful additions to the study. Observing what takes place in the classroom environment and discussing these findings with faculty could provide an additional layer of contextual information to our understanding of minority college student experiences.

### Future Directions

This study examined the classroom experiences of African American women undergraduates at a PWI; however, there are other populations of students for whom the issue of belongingness is relevant. Data show one-third of African American males who begin college at a public institution will obtain a degree within six years (Harper & Harris, 2012). Some of the identical curricular issues that trouble African American women are present in their same-race, opposite-sex counterparts. Using an anti-deficit framework, Harper (2010) has shed light on how some African American male undergraduates persist in the face of disengagement, isolation, and microaggressions by classmates and instructors. The men in Harper’s study found that an effective response is to not internalize



damaging stereotypes, but to proactively seek ways to improve their academic performance. One of these methods is through regular and sustained interactions with faculty, which has strong empirical support in the literature. Other approaches included becoming active in campus groups that were personally and professionally meaningful. Finally, African American males who persisted to graduate extolled the benefits of mentoring other students of color in an effort to strengthen their bond to the institution. In all of these ways, it is clear that the African American male college students in Harper's study chose to become connected, either via the classroom setting or through selected peer group affiliations. This finding harkens back to Tinto and Astin's work on college persistence and the importance of academic and social integration during the undergraduate experience. While there is an absence of male students in the present sample, there is now a stronger understanding about persistence for African American women and how classroom interactions can support or hinder their sense of belonging. In the future, research can explore other specific factors that influence women of color to persist, which could be parallel to those of their opposite-sex, same-race counterparts.

Additionally, in the current study, there were no female students represented from the STEM fields, which has a culture all of its own that can affect student perceptions and degree persistence (Johnson, 2012; Steele, James, & Barnett, 2002). Research shows that undergraduate women in the sciences report incidences of loneliness and a lack of connection with faculty and peers at a higher rate than women in other disciplines. In the present study, the participants spoke primarily of how their classroom experiences were influenced by race. Because the college setting of this study is predominantly female, with women out enrolling men by 2 to 1, the salience of gender to the women in this sample may not have been as critical as race. Future studies can explore the relationship between possessing a binary minority status and sense of belongingness for college women of color.

A final area of research consideration rests in the preparation of faculty and staff when dealing with diverse populations of students. Faculty should confront biases and assumptions about minority student ability, be cautious when attributing characteristics to students based on preconceived notions, and ensure that overt forms of power and subversion do not go unchecked in the classroom (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015). Instructors must be aware that students' academic performance and subsequent persistence to degree are a delicate mixture of affective, behavioral, and cognitive factors. Faculty may not be able to affect previous learning experiences or current study habits, but they

do exert great influence on the connections students make with them and their classmates. Future research can address all of these ideas and also give faculty an opportunity to weigh in on how they establish a sense of community in their courses via specific instructional strategies, relational dynamics, and engaged practice.

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Appendix  
Sample Focus Group Interview Questions

- Give me three words to describe the faculty at [name of institution].
- What can a professor do to make you feel a sense of belonging in their class?
- Talk with me about issues of diversity and multiculturalism in your favorite/least favorite classes.

Sample Individual Interview Questions

- Describe the students at [name of institution] in three words.
- What kinds of classroom interactions do you want with your peers?
- If given the chance to go back into time, would you still have attended [name of institution]? Why or why not?