"Lifting as We Climb": Black Feminist Action Research with Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators

Paige J. Gardner

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Gardner, Paige J., "Lifting as We Climb": Black Feminist Action Research with Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators" (2020). Dissertations. 3788.
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/3788

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2020 Paige J. Gardner
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

“LIFTING AS WE CLIMB”:
BLACK FEMINIST ACTION RESEARCH WITH
WOMEN OF COLOR STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATORS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY
PAIGE J. GARDNER

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2020
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my ancestors, grandparents, family, mentors, and chosen family who carried me through this journey, I want to thank each of you for the distinct role you have played in my life. Without you and many others, the branches on my tree would not bear fruit. Thank you for your love, encouragement, laughter, hope, listening ears, patience, prayer, being a safe space for rest, a brave space for challenge, and the root of my strength.

In Loving Memory of my Grandparents

Annie & Lepoleon McLemore | Nevada Jackson & Joseph Gardner Sr.

Dedication to Parents and Family


Natalie Gardner & Joseph “Nate” Gardner III

Anna Hodge, Angel Massey, Starli Renee Hampton | Sylvia Thompson, Vernon & Charlotte Gardner

Earlene & James Davis | Freddie Swann | Cassandra & Charles Lowery

My loving Cousins & God-siblings

Honoring Mentors

Dra. Aurora Chang, Dr. Bridget Kelly, & Dr. Shawna Cooper-Gibson

First Lady Barbara Meredith & Pastor Gerald Harris of Bethany Church of God in Christ

Dr. Joi Lewis, Sadika Sulaiman-Hara, Dr. Sabrina Kwist, Charlene Martinez,

Dr. Erica Yamamura, Dr. Noni Gaylord-Harden and Dr. Pearl Ratunil
Honoring HESA Doctoral Cohort Members

Dr. Kristina Garcia, Dr. Joliana Yee, Dr. Cobretti Williams, Dr. Sammie Burton,
Dr. Norma Lopez, Dr. Michelle Kusell, Destiny Quintero, and Carlos Ballinas

Honoring Chosen Family

Latrice Wysinger, Lilian and Matthew Streeter, Jalia and Mackezie Tucker, Zayher Brown,
Robyn Fountain, Rebecca Frank, Charla Vazquez, Dr. Aja Trotter, Kamilah Williams, Simon
Hara, Miguel Macias, Juanita Jasso, Doris Martinez, Dr. Monica Nixon, Czarina Ramsey,
Rev. Darrell Goodwin, Dr. Alvin Sturdivant, Dr. Michele Murray, Erin Swezey, Benjamin Pola,
Alejandra Hong, Dr. Shardé Davis, Charity Seaborn, Dr. Cari Urabe, Dave Whitman,
Naseeb Bhangal, Angela Taylor, Ashley Williams, Akeya Porter, Dana Broadnax,
Dana Bozeman, Rabia Khan-Harvey, Devita Bishundat, Gaby Flores, Joseph Saucedo,
Aaron Aguilar-Ramirez, James Thomas, Allen Womble, Quortne Hutchings, Corey Winchester,
Rodney Matthew, Hannah Honor, Natasha Bhamla, Lisa Combs, Tasha Neumeister,
Jordan Turner, Dr. Natasha Turman, Ashley Brown, Lilliana Franco Carrera, Dr. Candis Hill,
Dr. Christina Harrington, Angela Smith, Sky Russell, and Sydney Curtis

Special Thanks

Student Life & Engagement

Division of Student Development
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii

LIST OF TABLES ix

LIST OF FIGURES x

ABSTRACT xi

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1
   Call to Action 1
   Statement of the Problem 2
      Women in Student Affairs 2
      Faculty and Student Affairs Administrators 4
   Purpose of the Study 4
   Research Questions 7
   Significance of Research 7
   Organization of the Dissertation 8
   Personal Relevance and the Power of Black Feminism 9
   Core Concepts Defined 10
      Black Feminist Theory 10
      Counterspaces 10
      Hegemony 11
      Intersectionality 11
      Sankofa 11
      Social Justice 12
      Systems of Support 12
      Women of Color (WOC) 12

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW 13
   Conceptual Framework 13
      Critical Race Theory 13
      Black Feminist Thought 17
      Integration of CRT and BFT 18
   Literature Review 20
      Professional Vignette 1 20
      Origins of Hegemony 21
      The Production and Maintenance of Hegemony in U.S. Education 24
      Understanding Critical Race Theory (CRT) 26
      History of Student Affairs Administration 35
      Erasure of WOCSAA Narratives and Research Conflation 42
      The Challenges and Barriers WOCSAA Face 45
      Cultivating Persistence and Achieving Professional Advancement 45
   Summary 47
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Design
Qualitative Research Rationale
Overview of Action Research
Critical Action Research (CAR)
Research Questions
Participants
Women of Color
Student Affairs Administrator
Jesuit Institutions
Snowball Sampling
Setting
Data Collection
Demographic Questionnaire
Individual Interviews
PhotoVoice
Focus Groups
Reflexivity
Data Analysis
Interview Transcripts and Member Checking
Focus Group Meetings and Observation Notes
Validity
Research Strength
Limitations
Positionality
Researcher Role

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Creative Non-Fiction Narrative
CNF Scene Development
The Use of Radical Imagination
Composite Character Development
Scene 1: The Art Exhibit Invitation
Context
Consciousness and Awareness of Identities
Significance of Relationships with Women of Color
Scene 2: The Art Exhibit
Context
Safe Spaces
Action-Oriented Support
Aspects of Career Navigation
Scene 3: The Art Exhibit Debrief
Context
Forming a Political Identity
Social Capital Exchange
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CLOSING 100
  Summary of the Study 100
  Discussion of the Findings 102
    Establishing Systems of Support 102
    Defining Systems of Support 105
    How Systems of Support Affect Career Navigation 114
  Closing 118
    Implications for Practice in Higher Education 118
    Future Recommendations for Research 121
    Concluding Thoughts 122

APPENDIX A: ART EXHIBIT STATION 2A 124
APPENDIX B: ART EXHIBIT STATION 2B 126
APPENDIX C: ART EXHIBIT STATION 2C 128
APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE FORM 130
APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 135
APPENDIX F: CO-INVESTIGATOR TRAINING 138
APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM 141
APPENDIX H: REFLEXIVITY QUESTIONNAIRE 144
APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP INSTRUCTIONS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS 146
APPENDIX J: PARTICIPANT EMAIL NOTIFICATION 1 AND 2 148
APPENDIX K: PHOTOVOICE INSTRUCTIONS 150
APPENDIX L: JASPA LISTSERV PARTICIPANT OUTREACH EMAIL 152
APPENDIX M: JESUIT VICE PRESIDENT OUTREACH EMAIL 155
APPENDIX N: PERSONAL COLLEAGUE OUTREACH EMAIL 157
APPENDIX O: PARTICIPATION OUTREACH FLYER 159
APPENDIX P: HUMAN SUBJECT PHOTOGRAPH CONSENT 161
REFERENCE LIST 164
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Action Research Methodologies</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Four Phases of Black Feminist Action Research</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Composite Characters</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Interactive Panel Board</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Findings in Scene of the CNF Narrative</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Integration of CRT and BFT model 19
Figure 2. Safe spaces 83
Figure 3. Challenges and barriers 90
Figure 4. Grounding reminders 92
Figure 5. Strategies for navigation 94
ABSTRACT

Black feminist action research is a methodology designed by Dr. Gardner to cultivate agency and solidarity among Women of Color student affairs administrators. By engaging participants as co-investigators, Women of Color student affairs administrators’ co-constructed knowledge to examine the challenges and barriers experienced in career navigation as well as the strategies used to disrupt oppressive working environments at historically White institutions. In this study the principle investigator and co-investigators explored the following research questions: (1) How do Women of Color student affairs administrators define systems of support? (2) How and why do Women of Color student affairs administrators establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of historically White institutions? (3) How do these systems of support affect WOCSAA in their professional navigation of historically White institutions?

It was equally important to articulate the findings in a way that protected the co-investigators’ identities as well as their places of employment. By using creative non-fiction, radical imagination, and composite character development, the findings evolved into an engaging, multidimensional narrative. Overall, the findings indicated that Women of Color student affairs administrators are often left alone to decipher coded interactions or forced to seek help from individuals who may not understand the gravity of their concern. There are two distinct ways in which leaders of HWIs can support WOCSAA in their career navigation: the implementation of professional support spaces and robust retention strategies.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Call to Action

“Lifting as we climb” is a declaration of commitment made by the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. This call to action was intended to serve two purposes: to elevate the social status of Black women through communal empowerment and to abolish forms of oppression that directly affect Black women and their families. By the NACW taking this charge, Black women worked collectively to combat the dominant narratives and systems of oppression designed to attack the humanity of Black women and men. Their commitment to strategic action and communal empowerment enabled the NACW to build coalitions of resistance to address lynchings, educate Black children and adults, and fight segregation laws (Parks, 2017; Potter & Claytor, 1994). The legacy of the NACW still ripples through generations of Black women as scholars, activists, and Black women who continue to give back to their communities, practice ancestral gratitude, and reimagine the future of society through Black feminism and coalition building.

The NACW represents the first of many examples of Black women taking the lead in developing a counterstance to the dominant culture through self-empowerment and community engagement. In a metaphoric resemblance of a Sankofa, this research embodies the power of learning from the past and bringing the lessons forward to empower the current generation of women of color (WOC) scholars, practitioners, and students in higher education. Spaces of
resistance such as the NACW lay the blueprint for how women of color student affairs administrators (WOCSAA) can use systems of support in their quest to survive and thrive in oppressive working environments. This research serves as a call to action for WOCSAA who believe in working in solidarity with other WOCSAA who hold similar and different social identities than their own and for senior leaders who are committed to building the retention and persistence of WOCSAA.

**Statement of the Problem**

The U.S. postsecondary education system is comprised of 6,636 colleges and universities that educate over 26.9 million students and employ over 3.9 million student personnel (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Less than half of all student personnel consist of educators who facilitate learning inside and outside of the classroom; 39.4% (1,545,381) of student personnel consist of faculty, instructors, researchers, and public service and only 4.6% (158,653) consist of those who provide student and academic affairs services. Although small in number, these student affairs administrators are tasked with supporting the academic, social, personal, and professional growth of all college students. Only 26% (41,820) of student affairs administrators are staff of color; within this group, WOC administrators represent 78% (32,695; NCES, 2016). This trend of WOCSAA to men of color (MOC) is very similar to White women and their White male counterparts, which indicates student affairs is a field dominated by women.

Similarly, the notion of women outnumbering men is seen throughout higher education as women are mostly concentrated in entry-level and mid-level working positions (Jo, 2008; Yakaboski & Danahoo, 2011) such as student and academic affairs, librarians, curators and archivists, faculty public service, management, business and financial operations, sales and
related occupations, community social services and media, and office and administrative support, in which women make up 80% of these positions (NCES, 2016). White men have nearly twice the representation of White women and triple the representation of WOC and MOC in senior-level positions in higher education. This raises the question of how and why hiring practices privilege men over women when it comes time to promote entry- and mid-level administrators.

In “Feminization of Student Affairs,” Hughes (1989) explored the answer to this question and provided a historical context for the creation of student affairs and how the defining contributions of student affairs have become feminized. The professional characteristics of student affairs became more feminized during a time when faculty transitioned from holding “out of the classroom” responsibilities in the mid-19th century to primarily focusing on “teaching, service, and research” to gain tenureship (Hughes, 1989). As such, there became a need to professionalize the role of administrators who would take on the responsibility of student development outside of the classroom.

The principles and values of student affairs have been historically and prominently shaped by the women who served as pioneers in developing professional associations in student affairs and serving in administrative roles (Hughes, 1989). Many of the characteristics of student affairs, such as “values of tolerance,” “compassion,” “nurturing,” “supporting,” and “promoting advocacy,” are viewed as feminine (Hughes, 1989). Although these characteristics are arguably seen as strengths, patriarchy disproportionately skews women’s proximity to positions of power and authority. With masculine traits seen as “competitiveness,” “ambition,” “confidence,” “aggressive,” and “analytical,” Hughes (1989) underscored how more men are seen in upper-level management positions and women are more likely to be in entry-level jobs that serve students more intimately. Hiring practices rooted in White supremacy and patriarchal ideology
suppress WOC administrators’ ability to navigate career advancement (Yakaboski & Danahoo, 2011).

**Faculty and Student Affairs Administrators**

The ratio of faculty to administrators in higher education also underscores the tensions that surround the significance of each position’s contribution to the retention and success of college students. Faculty are viewed as educators who create learning inside the classroom and advance institutional prestige and legitimacy through the production of knowledge (Bastedo, 2012). During the 1980s and 1990s, student affairs underwent a reform to change how academia viewed staff (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin Gyurmek, 1994). By building collaborative working environments between faculty and staff, the role of student affairs administrators transformed from just supporting students’ social and emotional experiences outside the classroom to serving as equal partners in educating the whole student. The minimization of how student affairs administrators contribute to student success both inside and outside of the classroom bleeds into how research invisibilizes the student affairs administrator experience.

**Purpose of the Study**

The literature on WOC in higher education often centers the following groups: college students, faculty, a conflation of WOC faculty and student affairs administrators, or a conflation of WOC faculty and academic administrators (Hinton, 2012; Patitu, Hinton, & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). WOC college students experience marginalization, hypersurveillance, and isolation inside and outside of the classroom. By establishing identity-conscious programming, WOC college students can find mentorship and support from faculty and staff who hold similar identities (Pendakur, 2016). A strength-based framework such as community cultural wealth can
help WOC identify the forms of capital they hold that dominant society often devalues (Yosso, 2005). When WOC college students are empowered to understand their cultural capital and provided safe spaces in which to develop their strengths, they can navigate their college experience more smoothly.

Research on WOC faculty and their professional navigation similarly aligns with what WOCSAA may face in their working environments (Molina, 2008). It is essential to distinguish the different experiences WOCSAA face versus what WOC faculty and academic administrators face. For example, WOC faculty navigate tenure promotions, which requires the constant production of research, teaching, and providing institutional service (Kelly & McCann, 2014). WOC faculty are often expected to take extra time to mentor and support the challenges and barriers of others who experience marginalization (Kelly & McCann, 2014). Though these added responsibilities and unspoken expectations are primarily placed on WOC faculty, leaders of academic departments do not recognize this form of labor as institutional service (Patitu et al., 2003). Because of this disregard, WOC faculty experience professional burnout, turnover, and prolonged promotion to tenure (Patitu et al., 2003). In addition to this occurrence, the experiences of WOC faculty, academic administrators, and WOCSAA tend to be conflated within the literature (Molina, 2008).

As a result of being invisibilized, WOCSAA exist within a borderland (Anzaldúa, 1989), where their professional role is oversimplified and their professional experience is met with intersecting oppression (Gomez, Ocasio, Johnson Lachuk, & Powell, 2015). Although this field of work pushes WOCSAA to the margins, it also fosters resiliency when WOCSAA continue to survive and, at times, even thrive within historically White institutions (HWIs). As shown in Gomez et al.’s (2015) research, WOCSAA navigate with intention. By using metaphorical
language and expressions and recognizing the boundaries that exist between themselves and their colleagues based on cultural differences, WOCSAA can navigate their HWIs strategically. These examples of resilience demonstrate how WOCSAA persist within spaces that are not meant for them (Gomez et al., 2015).

Although these navigational strategies prove to be successful for some WOCSAA, this form of navigation comes at a cost for WOCSAA and WOC academic administrators over extended periods (Gomez et al., 2015; Hinton, 2012). The performance of their professional role can take a toll on the wellness of WOCSAA and result in professional burnout, turnover, marginalization, and isolation in the workplace (Hinton, 2012; Jo, 2008; Nixon, 2016). To combat these detrimental outcomes, Hinton (2012) stressed the importance of formalized professional development and how it can optimize WOCSAA navigation. However, Hinton argued that WOCSAA already bring a wealth of experiential knowledge that makes them a valuable asset within HWIs.

Through their lived experiences, WOC learned how to navigate difficult spaces and find alternate forms of support prior to their full-time employed positions. Whether it be familial capital and taking on leadership roles within the family (Chang, 2017; Yosso, 2005), leadership experience within the church, or participation in community service, WOCSAA cultivate strong leadership skills prior to arriving at their full-time positions (Hinton, 2012). As a result, relying upon experiential knowledge and using mentoring relationships with other WOCSAA stand to be a stronger set of strategies that do not require WOCSAA to perform or suppress their professional identities (Hinton, 2012). Establishing systems of support cultivates collective empowerment and simultaneously provides a counterspace for WOCSAA to be fully embraced as a whole within HWIs.
**Research Questions**

The dominant narrative of WOC in higher education is based on the experiences of undergraduates, graduates, and faculty. Unfortunately, a narrative that is missing is the experiences of WOCSAA, who contribute significantly to the field of higher education. Similar to how WOC students and faculty navigate intersectional oppression in the classroom and workplace, WOCSAA also experience challenges and barriers that force them to navigate and persist in their working environments through the use of systems of support. To fill this gap in the literature, this study was conducted with WOCSAA who indicated they had identified systems of support to aid in their professional navigation of HWIs. As such, the research questions were as follows:

1. How do WOCSAA define systems of support?
2. How and why do WOCSAA establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of HWIs?
3. How do these systems of support affect WOCSAA in their professional navigation of HWIs?

**Significance of Research**

The importance of this research is framed by two distinguishing factors: leaders of colleges and universities continue to see an increase in the enrollment of students of color (SOC) and WOC and White women continue to fill the majority of administrator roles in the field of student affairs that involve working directly with students (NCES, 2016). Retention and student success, particularly for SOC, have remained trending priorities for many HWIs (Aragon & Rios Perez, 2006). As a result, many initiatives and strategies (e.g., cultural centers and mentorship programs) have been put in place to support the success of SOC and first-generation college students (Pendakur, 2016). These retention-based efforts require hiring managers to recruit and
select staff who reflect the identities of SOC and understand the complex experiences SOC and students with marginalized identities navigate.

In understanding that the population of SOC is growing and that the majority of staff of color consist of WOCSAA, it becomes critical to examine the division of labor and the (un)spoken expectations placed upon WOCSAA that are not equitably placed upon their MOC and White colleagues. WOC professionals in higher education, such as faculty and administrators, experience the dual responsibility of fulfilling the expectations of their position and additionally providing informal and formal support to SOC in need (Key et al., 2012). This additional work and commitment come at a cost, as WOCSAA, who directly work with SOC, and WOCSAA, who supervise employees of color, are held to a different standard of expectation that can cause isolation and require the negotiation of microaggressions and stereotypes (Nixon, 2016).

Ultimately, this research is imperative to leaders in higher education as they continue to think innovatively about the recruitment and retention of SOC and employees of color. WOCSAA are uniquely positioned to advance the missions of HWIs. However, for WOCSAA to rise to this challenge, leaders of these HWIs must do more than simply recruit WOCSAA—they must hire, support, and promote them to positions where they can effect change individually with students, professionally in supervisory roles, and institutionally as senior-level administrators who shape policy and culture.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

Each chapter of this dissertation builds upon previous chapters, framing the purpose and relevance of research on WOCSAA. Critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought (BFT) was used to center the experiences of WOCSAA with a particular focus on their
intersectional oppression, experiential knowledge, communal empowerment, and collective action. Following the theoretical framework, the principal investigator explored how and why WOCSAA establish systems of support through the literature review. Key points of the literature review include the production and maintenance of intersectional oppression within student affairs, the positioning of WOCSAA, and the strategies WOCSAA use to persist within their working environments. The theoretical framework and literature review was used to answer the research questions. The Black feminist action research (BFAR) methodology was intentionally designed to connect theory and practice. In doing so, the participants became co-investigators who worked with me to co-construct knowledge.

**Personal Relevance and the Power of Black Feminism**

The ways in which I exercise resiliency as a scholar-practitioner and queer WOCSAA are through building a solidarity-based community with other WOCSAA and using my experiential knowledge as truth to further connect theory to practice. Not only do I stand on the shoulders of ancestors, family, and mentors, I believe it is my duty to extend a hand to other WOC who are advancing in their personal, professional, and academic journeys. This collectivist mindset has been role modeled to me since I was a young child. Given that I have continued to receive this gift of support through community, it brings me great joy to now have a career that enables me to do the same for colleagues and college students.

The power of Black feminism allowed me, as the principal investigator of this study, to be a part of the experience with co-investigators. Through BFT, I was able to incorporate language such as “our,” “we,” and “us” given my insider knowledge and community involvement. My identities as a queer, Black WOC served as an asset to the quality of this research and assisted in fostering trust and community among the co-investigators.
Intersectionality affirmed my wholeness and ability to take pride in each of my salient identities without putting one over the other. As such, I was able to think critically about my social identities and name how power, privilege, and oppression shape my lived experiences. It was my hope that this research would provide the essence of affirmation to enable the WOCSSAA to feel safe to explore, name, and challenge their multiple identities.

**Core Concepts Defined**

To create a baseline understanding of the language used, the following is a list of key terms and concepts found throughout this dissertation.

**Black Feminist Theory**

A theoretical framework that centers on the unique experiences of Black women and how they experience intersectional oppression. Within the women’s rights, civil rights, and Black liberation movements, Black women experienced racism. Black feminism is an empowering theory that calls members of the Black community to build coalitions within their racialized group, disrupt intersecting forms of oppression, and strive to liberate all Black individuals (Simien, 2004).

**Counterspaces**

Positioned within the context of professional environments in higher education and student affairs, counterspaces serve as sites of resistance (West, 2019). By serving as a safe space in hostile environments, counterspaces become essential to finding professional wholeness, empowerment, and support. Counterspaces, coupled with Black feminism, created the basis of the definition of support systems used throughout this study.
**Hegemony**

This term best demonstrates how power is used to privilege some and oppress others. Known as a covert force interwoven throughout societal practices, ideologies, and institutionalized structures, hegemony thrives on the compliance of societal members to hold power and submit to power. This concept was essential to this study, as it illustrates why WOCSAA experience intersectional oppression in the workplace. Even if WOCSAA achieve a certain status, they will still have to combat challenges and barriers that their White colleagues and MOC colleagues will never experience.

**Intersectionality**

This concept illustrates how individuals hold multiple identities that are inextricably tied to one another. For WOCSAA, race and gender intersect and shape their professional experiences and navigation. In understanding this phenomenon, WOCSAA can experience power, privilege, and oppression in a multifaceted way. WOCSAA can establish counterspaces that foster empowerment for their marginalized identities. They also can experience intersectional oppression rooted in (but not exclusive to) racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 2000).

**Sankofa**

This term, meaning “go back and fetch it,” “return to your past,” or “retrieve what you have forgotten or lost” (Temple, 2010, p. 127), is a U.S. African American diasporic practice for individuals whose lineage derives from those enslaved. This term honors the wisdom and sacrifices made by so many for the betterment of Black/African American freedom that is experienced today. This term is used as a metaphor to embellish the power of Black feminism as it cultivates respect for current and past Black women pioneers, communal empowerment, and
shared action. Though this research is focused on WOC, Black feminism is used as a foundation to build upon and cultivate solidarity among WOCSAA.

**Social Justice**

Life-long, action-oriented process that requires individuals to critically expose, challenge, and uproot all forms of oppression. In this study, social justice is centered within scholarship (i.e., BFT & CRT) to both disrupt and empower researchers, participants, and readers. As a tool of liberation, social justice can be used by anyone to create change and cultivate community.

**Systems of Support**

Further building upon counterspaces (West, 2019), systems of support serve as brave spaces (Ali, 2017) WOC can use to support their professional navigation. Systems of support in this study reflected spaces (physical, emotional, and relational) in which WOC were seen as whole, did not have to perform or mask their emotions, could ask for help and guidance, and could even network as a means to persist in challenging working environments. Systems of support serve as another form of resistance that disrupts the dominant culture and serves as a tool for survival.

**Women of Color (WOC)**

A political, solidarity-based social identity that individuals must self-select (Santa Cruz Feminist Of Color Writing Collective, 2013). Participants in this study saw themselves as individuals who operated in solidarity with other WOC and acknowledged the similarities and differences in resisting intersectional oppression within working environments. Racial identities include African American/Black/African descent, Arab/Middle Eastern, Asian/Asian American/Desi, bi-racial/multiracial/mixed race, Native American, and Latinx/a Pacific Islander.
CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was intentionally placed before the literature review to provide a foundational understanding of the concepts and themes presented in this chapter. Critical social theories, such as CRT and BFT, are used to critique, disrupt, and uproot systems of domination (Levinson, 2011). The tenets of CRT and principles of BFT directly address the “why” and “how” WOCsAA navigate oppressive working environments and shift the dominant culture in order to persist.

Critical Race Theory

The formation of CRT began as early as the 1970s and stemmed from critical legal studies (CLS), a body of literature that exposes the inconsistencies of law and policy that oppress people of color and those with marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Though similarly grounded as CLS, the principles of CRT include that racism is a permanent fixture embedded within U.S. culture (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As a result, U.S. societal structures such as legal systems, educational systems, and local and federal governments are built upon racist ideologies and other systemic forms of oppression. In addition to recognizing the permanence of racism, CRT consists of four other core tenets of challenge to the dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, centrality of experiential knowledge, and a transdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
**Intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination.** Racism is the belief that one race holds superiority and dominance over other races and therefore benefits from the power of subjugating others (Lorde, 1984). In using this definition, CRT is rooted in the belief that racism is permanently embedded throughout U.S. culture and thus infiltrates societal institutions such as higher education (Patton, McEwen, Rendón, Howard-Hamilton, & Harper, 2007). Additionally, CRT underscores the importance of how race intersects with all social identities that members of society hold. In understanding how social identities intersect, Crenshaw (1991) stated that oppression also intersects. Therefore, CRT provides a context for how WOCSAA experience intersectional oppression based on race and gender. Given that the focus in this study was to examine the professional experiences of WOCSAA, race and its intersection with gender were central to this study.

**Challenge to the dominant ideology.** Hegemonic ideologies such as White supremacy and patriarchy shape the narratives of normalcy, societal expectations, and practices. Known as the “master narrative of American history,” U.S. history is often strategically told from the perspective of White settlers and often enough that words such as “American” and “race” become synonymous with Whiteness (Takaki, 1993). When storytelling takes a dominant perspective over an inclusive truth-telling perspective, the stories of those from marginalized communities are erased. Those with marginalized identities are forced to perpetuate, adapt, or combat dominant narratives as a means to survive environments that are not designed for them. In this study, the literature review was conducted to further explore how and why the narratives of WOCSAA are invisibilized by dominant groups such as White men, White women, and MOC. CRT becomes a tool that disrupts oppressive behavior, empowers those who are targeted, and strives to liberate those on the margin through changing the dominant narrative.
Commitment to social justice. In 1979, Audre Lorde, a queer-Black feminist scholar, courageously spoke on a panel at a feminist conference for women. It was in this space that she challenged the dominant ideology and embodied social justice as a liberatory praxis. The following quote best captures how social justice should be used as a tool of liberation:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support (pp. 113).

Lorde’s (1984) quote sharply captures the pain of many who are forced to live on the margins (e.g., WOC) within marginalized groups (e.g., all women). By stating these truths, she centered marginalized narratives and urged White feminists to deepen their consciousness as it relates to feminism. In using the “master’s tools,” White feminists were recreating the same White-patriarchal oppression for WOC and others who hold marginalized identities by using their lived experiences as a dominant narrative for all women.

Reminiscent of Sojourner Truth’s speech in 1851, “Ain’t I a woman?,” Lorde (1984) demonstrated radical truth-telling while being the only Black lesbian scholar to participate in an all-White feminist panel. Her bravery illustrated how social justice is used in CRT scholarship. Even when the truth is not asked for, nor seen or heard, CRT scholarship is designed to draw attention to and dismantle oppression in all forms and replace it with liberatory praxis. In this study, social justice is used to expose intersectional oppression in student affairs, elevate the stories of WOCSAA, and begin the process of reimagining a field of work to include WOCSAA at all levels of professional positions.
Centrality of experiential knowledge. As a result of using social justice in CRT, the value and expression of experiential knowledge naturally increase. Experiential knowledge is a form of empowerment in which the voices of those on the margins are validated and unquestionably deemed as truth (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The power of experiential knowledge comes from how mixed combinations of power, privilege, and oppressed social identities inform lived experiences.

A conceptual framework that best captures this phenomenon is the cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000), which illustrates how and why individuals move through the world with different access to power, privilege, and oppression. As a result, each individual learns and internalizes messages that come from influencers such as parents, teachers, and societal structures (e.g., K-12 education, churches, and social media). This framework can be used to conceptualize how the dominant ideology is produced and maintained. For example, those who conform to dominant norms and also hold privileges are rewarded with access to power and ease of living. In contrast, those who have marginalized identities are punished for resisting dominant norms or are heavily encouraged to maintain the status quo. In this study, all participants took the time to reflect on their lived experiences as WOCSAA, name their most salient social identities, and reveal how these experiences and identities shaped their professional navigation.

Transdisciplinary perspective. As shown above, CRT involves using the voices of scholars, research participants, and many different disciplines of scholarship to dispel the myths of dominant ideologies. Sociology, women’s studies, ethnic studies, and history are examples of disciplines in which scholars analyze and critique higher education as a systemic structure. As a result, a more inclusive scholarship is created and more experiential knowledge is represented.
To produce a rigorous study, CRT places value on experiential knowledge, which deepened the credibility of this study.

**Black Feminist Thought**

Structured within critical social theory, BFT extends Black feminism and draws upon the intellect of Black women as abolitionists, activists, artists, scholars, and everyday Black women to achieve liberation. BFT is used to inform the theoretical framework and methodology in this study by adding agency and communal empowerment. Hill-Collins (2000) laid the foundation for understanding counter-hegemonic stances that empower Black women to find and use the strength of self-definition and collective resistance. To determine these findings, Collins (2015) relied solely upon the knowledge of Black women, which included literature, song lyrics, testimonials, dissertations, art, and other nonconventional forms of knowledge. This radical act of inclusion served as the basis for why BFT was essential to this study for WOCSAA.

Though the participants in this study were not exclusively Black women, BFT served as a blueprint to build agency and communal empowerment between WOC across different races and ethnicities. BFT is founded upon oppression, epistemic agency, commitment to social justice, and intersecting power relations (Hill-Collins, 2000; Collins, 2015). Though some of the themes share similarities with CRT (i.e., intersectional oppression and commitment to social justice), epistemic agency and intersecting power relations offer a unique insight to research on WOCSAA.

**Epistemic agency.** This theme underscores the liberatory praxis of Black women claiming voice despite the silencing spaces they navigate and endure. Epistemic agency disrupts the dominant narrative that is often created by non-Black persons about Black women and men. As Black women often navigate spaces that do not represent them or affirm them, BFT offers
that there is power in Black women knowing their truths and using their voices to disrupt
hegemonic structures. Epistemic agency becomes a form of resistance that extends to the
physical use of voice (external process) or reframing ways of thinking (internal process). BFT
embellishes this theoretical framework to provide a way for WOCsaa to name their experiential
knowledge and see it as truth.

**Intersecting power relations.** Black women are not a monolithic group and hold
multiple identities beyond race and sex (Hill-Collins, 2000). The concept of intersectionality also
shapes how Black women’s multiple identities grant them access to privilege, power, and
oppression. Hill-Collins (2000) challenged Black women to consider how they hold oppressed
and privileged identities, as well as how they can build solidarity with other marginalized
communities of color.

**Integration of CRT and BFT**

The theoretical framework for this dissertation built upon the tenets of CRT, given that it
was designed to expose, disrupt, and uproot systemic racism in educational environments. Along
with this commitment, CRT values and centers the lived experiences of participants and
researchers who historically and presently are pushed to the margins of society. In creating this
form of validation and space, individuals can become empowered to use social justice to
reconstruct spaces that were not meant for them. Counter-storytelling becomes a powerful tool of
resistance and empowerment for communities of individuals who do not see themselves reflected
in their surrounding environments.

Although CRT provides an insightful structure that includes the experiences of WOC,
this framework alone was not developed to focus on WOC experiences solely. BFT adds another
dimension to CRT by explicitly focusing on the experiences of Black WOC. As such, BFT is a model for agency and solidarity that can further support and reflect the stories of WOCSAA.

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates how CRT and BFT are used as a tool to disrupt oppressive working environments (e.g., racism, sexism, hegemonic culture, and other forms of intersectional oppression). At the center of this model is a blue circle that holds CRT (intercentricity of race and racism, challenge to dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, centrality of experiential knowledge, and transdisciplinary perspective). As the arrows of disruption move from the center of CRT they move through BFT (epistemic agency and intersecting power relations) which adds to the movement of the blue arrow. The arrow signifies how WOCSAA can experience communal empowerment and agency by cultivating change in their workspace.

Figure 1. Integration of CRT and BFT model.


**Literature Review**

Given the dearth of literature about WOC in higher education and even less about WOCSAA, it becomes evident that their voices and narratives are lost within the generalized experiences of White women and people of color (POC). The theoretical framework for this dissertation supports the need for experiential knowledge and epistemic agency when researching WOC. As a result, two counternarratives are shared from the principle investigator’s professional journey as a student affairs administrator. In turn, readers can use this experiential knowledge to build stronger connections to the literature being reviewed.

This literature review begins with the history of student affairs administration as a professional organization and defining moments (i.e., the civil rights and feminist movements) that have assisted in diversifying the field. In addition to movements, research on feminism and critiques of feminism have assisted in creating language to analyze the challenges and barriers all women face in higher education. It is within these tensions that the principal investigator also explored and challenged how research positions White women, POC, and WOC in student affairs by presenting them as a monolithic group with similar needs and experiences.

**Professional Vignette 1**

During my second year as a full-time student affairs administrator, I worked as a resident director (RD) and had the opportunity to serve on the resident assistant (RA) training committee. Our committee was charged with revamping the social justice curriculum to use inclusive language and pronouns. The team was confident that this proposal would be well received by the director of residence life given that all of our assistant directors supported us in this effort. However, in a closed meeting between the director and the RDs, it was shared that there was discomfort in training students to use inclusive language and that we were, in fact, falsely
preparing students for the “real world” that cares less about inclusive language. More specifically, it was shared that members of the assistant director team, along with the director, were uncomfortable with using gender-inclusive pronouns.

In this reflection, I choose to unpack how hegemonic culture can lead individuals to maintain the status quo even while doing work that is designed to build college students’ critical thinking skills. In this professional vignette, my colleagues and I were asked to enhance the social justice curriculum and encouraged to engage topics on inclusive language. However, in taking on this project, we were unaware of the tension that would arise as a result of creating a more critical-based curriculum. The support and encouragement we received from the assistant directors were promising. However, once they realized the director’s discomfort, the assistant directors shifted their support of the RD committee and complied with the expectations of the director.

**Origins of Hegemony**

Hegemony, a term once used synonymously with “leadership” and “management” by Stalin and Lenin, was further examined as a theoretical concept by Antonio Gramsci (Bates, 1975). Gramsci is most known for his political influences and intellectual endeavors as the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party. In 1926, Italy’s political party abruptly shifted to a fascist dictatorship, which inevitably led to the arrest of Gramsci, who spent the remainder of his life in prison. During his imprisonment, Gramsci created a series of letters that illustrated more precisely how hegemony is produced and maintained.

During the fall of Marxism and the rise of fascism, Gramsci described hegemony as a superstructure that consists of two subsets of societal power that work in tandem to rule over the working class: civil and political societies (Bates, 1975). Civil societies consist of social
structures and organizations such as “schools, churches, clubs, journals, and parties” (p. 353). These organizations become social incubators that foster and influence political values, agendas, and ideologies. This societal power directly connects to hegemony as its role is to gain working class consent and generate the trust of the general population. However, the other half of hegemony requires the enforcement of power and dominance, which defines the role of political societies. This societal power’s role is best represented as the state, which consists of government, courts, police, and military. These representations of power exert dominance by punishing those who do not consent or fall outside of societal expectations and rules. It was in this structure of power that Gramsci separated the meaning of hegemony from leadership and management by analyzing how those in ruling power (dominants) can dominate the consenting working class (subordinates).

Gramsci’s depiction of hegemony, also known as cultural hegemony, reveals how culture, power, and capitalism (Lears, 1985) inform societal rules and expectations. Though Gramsci’s work is highly revered across academic disciplines, there are arguments to be made about the oversimplification of the “working class consent” (Gross, 2011; Lears, 1985). Based on the definition of hegemony, subordinates will fully comply with the power of the state and civil leadership. However, this concept is much more complex and requires a critical lens. Hegemony, paired with domination, illustrates the use of manipulation and coercion. Additionally, hegemony is spread by privileging specific individuals as a way of cultivating subcultures of compliance (Lears, 1985). By doing so, total compliance is not needed nor ever ultimately achieved by dominant parties.

In further building out the concept of hegemony, Gramsci continued to question how the ruling class maintains its power over the working class (Gross, 2011). One of the ways he
answered this question was by analyzing the phenomenon of consent without physical force and
how the working class comes to comply with the ruling class. Although the term consent implies
that individuals are making conscious decisions to align themselves with the ruling class,
Gramsci used the term consent in a more nuanced way:

He [Gramsci] did not mean to imply that an individual exercises total agency in choosing
whether to follow a direction imposed by a dominant group. Instead, such consent was
the result of structures (i.e., culture and ideology) that might be entirely or partially
invisible to an individual. (Gross, 2011, p. 59)

In understanding consent and the meaning it takes on in the process of hegemony, consent results
from societal pressures, expectations, and rules. Additionally, the phenomenon of consent
without physical force implies that hegemony does not have to be visibly present for individuals
to comply. As illustrated in my professional vignette, hegemony is intricately tied to societal
institutions, such as K-12 education, higher education, classroom environments, and working
environments.

Perceived threats can cause an individual to comply even if it goes against that
individual’s values and beliefs. Gramsci identified this way of thinking as common sense and
contradictory consciousness (Gross, 2011). Both types of thought provide more solid reasoning
for why individuals make the decision to comply. Common sense, as it relates to hegemony, is
an ideology that best captures how individuals unquestionably hold beliefs that are common
among most members of society. Examples of common sense derive from what society perceives
to be “right, normal, or desirable . . . [in] societal and political affairs” (Gross, 2011, p. 60). In
these assumptions, individuals unknowingly perpetuate and uphold hegemonic values that align
with the dominant group.
The Production and Maintenance of Hegemony in U.S. Education

If hegemony is predicated upon power, dominance, and generating social compliance from a subordinate groups of individuals, dominant groups must rely upon systems such as the U.S. educational system to begin the production process. Civil societies represent structural organizations that are able to influence subordinate groups. Often, these influencers are leaders and supporters who help spread hegemonic cultures, such as educators, police officers, pastors, and elected officials. For example, when children begin school, they are immediately socialized by their physical environments and by the educators who teach them how to behave, speak, and learn. This process of socialization is greatly influenced by the hegemonic culture, which dictates what is “normal” and “right,” as well as who advances and who gets left behind. Similar to how educators shape the minds of children, student affairs administrators play an essential role in producing and maintaining hegemony or creating counter-hegemony within the workplace and among college students.

In addition to using Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and its production and maintenance, theorists such as Bourdieu have offered another lens with which to critically analyze the role of civil society influencers (Levinson, 2011). Hegemony represents the ways in which dominant groups influence culture and how subordinate groups comply with these social rules, expectations, and values. But this theory does not account for how individuals gain access to power and privilege and how others are prohibited from gaining social mobility and advancement (socially, economically, professionally, and politically). Bourdieu specifically coined the term cultural capital to entail how social credit is awarded to those who can afford to access it, cultivate it, and pass it down through generations. Cultural capital is not merely gained by having the resources; its power derives from how capital is cultivated and used (Levinson,
2011). For example, upper- and middle-class individuals have access to better schooling districts based upon where they live; this represents having access to resources. The art of cultivating this privilege is represented in how individuals are able to pay for private education along with private tutoring, as well as access extracurricular activities and engagement opportunities that help prepare their children to navigate society with cultural capital.

Cultural capital further exemplifies how inequality is produced and maintained by privileging some and oppressing others. For individuals who hold subordinate identities, the experience of oppression looks very different from how dominant groups access privilege. Those who do not subscribe to the dominant ideology or do not hold the cultural capital to access power and privilege are marginalized, silenced, and at times shamed within society (Levinson, 2011). Examples of oppression for individuals within subordinate groups may look like a student being reprimanded for not using English as a first language, educators or peers associating stereotypes with particular students because of their race or physical appearance, or harsher punishments and hypersurveillance of students who appear to fall outside of dominant group norms and behaviors. Over time, these forms of macro and microaggressions begin to socialize students to internalize these messages, which results in students silencing themselves or even reproducing dominant ideologies and projecting them onto others who hold similar identities as themselves.

Although much of Bourdieu’s theory on cultural capital emphasized social class, over time, scholars (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2009) further connected capital to the multiple social identities individuals hold, such as race, class, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, abilities, religion, and age (Levinson, 2011). By connecting social identities to cultural capital and societal structures, the complexity of how power, privilege, and oppression affect an individual’s social standing and mobility can be better understood. Cultural
capital directly links to how hegemony becomes institutionalized and rooted in specific forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism.

**Understanding Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital provide a foundational understanding of how hegemony is produced and maintained in higher education. In building upon how hegemony is maintained, CRT provides another lens to understand how racism and sexism operate in tandem with one another and are used as tools to maintain a dominant and subordinate culture in higher education. Following the civil rights era, in the 1970s, scholarly publications within the field of law critically challenged the legal system’s role in creating and enforcing oppressive social structures (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In making this argument, legal scholars critiqued the legal system’s oppressive structure by illustrating how the legal system holds bias and therefore targets individuals of subordinate groups: “Critical legal studies’ primary goal was to expose and challenge the idea that legal reasoning was neutral, value-free, and unaffected by social and economic relations, political forces or cultural phenomena” (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 12).

Critical legal studies (CLS) exposed how civil and political societies, such as the legal system, legitimize systemic oppression in the name of justice in order to maintain a dominant culture. In doing so, it becomes easier to garner compliance from societal members, especially if this system is designed to privilege some over others (Gross, 2011). Examples of this can be found in Keeanga-Yamatta Taylor’s (2016), *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, where she states that Black bodies are criminalized in such disproportionate numbers that there is specific research dedicated to analyzing the school-to-prison pipeline and prison industrial complex. Leaders and influencers (e.g., politicians, teachers, and church leaders) of hegemonic
culture are able to further legitimize these forms of injustices by using fear tactics rooted in stereotypes and rhetoric of scarcity regarding resources. As a result, these tactics foster compliance and willful blindness even at the detriment of the most vulnerable communities in subordinate groups.

CLS laid the foundation for critical scholarship in other academic fields of research. In doing so, various forms of critical social theories and scholarship have since evolved. CRT provides an essential link to understanding how racism and sexism are tools of maintenance in hegemonic culture. Although CRT stems from legal scholarship, it is different from CLS in that race and racism are centralized and deemed as a necessary factor in order to accurately expose a broken system of justice:

Critical race theory emerged as a form of legal scholarship that seeks to understand how White supremacy and its oppression of People of Color had been established and perpetuated. In doing so, race and racism were placed at the center of scholarship and analysis by focusing on such issues as affirmative action, racial districting, campus speech codes, and the disproportionate sentencing of People of Color in the U.S. criminal justice system. (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 5)

With race and racism at the center of CRT, scholars within this field of study are able to fully advocate for those who hold subordinate identities and thoroughly challenge hegemony by directly naming White supremacy and the ways in which it produces and maintains the dominant ideology. CRT scholars also recognize that racism does not operate as an isolated tool of hegemony and oppression. Like racism, other forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, classism, genderism, and heterosexism) can interconnect and create a multidimensional experience of privilege and oppression.

**Permanence of racism.** Throughout U.S. history to the present, race has continued to be a social construct that is manipulated to determine who has access to power and privilege.
Although race is socially constructed, there are “deadly social causes and consequences” that harm POC (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 2). As stated by Feagin (2006), the United States is the only Western country that has been explicitly founded upon racial oppression. As a result, racism is permanently woven into the fabric of U.S. culture and essential institutions (Cobham & Parker, 2007). Feagin (2006) also argued that racism is systemic, extending beyond a mere isolated act of bigotry or prejudice. Given that racism has intentionally been imbedded throughout U.S. culture, White Americans gain social benefits, both materially and ideologically, from the disenfranchisement of POC:

White founders of the new United States advocated strongly an “all men are created equal” perspective . . . for they intentionally and openly excluded African Americans, indigenous peoples, and [White] women from the scope of this ideal. The new nation of the United States was explicitly designed to create wealth, privileges, and status for European Americans, people who had long stolen by various means, including much violence, the lands of indigenous peoples, and the labor of Africans. (Feagin, 2006, p. 2)

Racism is a tool of hegemony, as coercion and compliance work together to privilege White individuals and oppress POC. Both civil and political societies generate compliance from poor and wealthy White people by creating access to privilege and power. For example, racial discrimination and segregation have allowed White people to build generational wealth such that their children and family members have access to good education, affordable health care, and housing (Feagin, 2006). The inception of the United States as a nation is predicated on forcefully stealing land from indigenous people as well as the physical and mental enslavement of Africans and African Americans to build and manufacture economic growth and stability for a new nation (Lipsitz, 2006). Immigration law and the growth of the privatized industrial prison complex have also been used as ways to sustain and build more significant wealth gaps between White people and POC (Taylor, 2016). Scholars have explained racism as a systemic form of oppression that
continually operates at individual, structural, and institutional levels (Feagin, 2006; Harper, 2012; Hughes, 2013).

Racism has been a part of U.S. culture for so long that indicators of racism are invisibilized or reduced to individual random acts that are generally frowned upon within dominant culture (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). The minimization of racism and its effect on members of society stems from the ways in which research articulates the historical beginnings of U.S. and how racism manifests throughout institutionalized structures such as higher education (Cobham & Parker, 2007; Harper, 2012; Patton et al., 2007). For example, Harper (2012) analyzed over 250 peer-reviewed articles in higher education journal publications. He used this literature as data to pull themes of how higher education scholars discuss and make meaning of race-related findings that affect college students, staff, and faculty. His findings showed higher education scholars are failing to consider racism as an institutional factor that undercuts the experience of racially-marginalized students, staff, and faculty. Instead, research views marginalized members of college campuses through a deficit lens, where the challenges and barriers come from “anywhere but racism” (Harper, 2012, pp. 16). In using this approach, it becomes easier to place the blame of circumstance on POC as opposed to addressing the root causes of racism at play. The more race is omitted from theory-based research and student development literature, the more racial stratification and educational inequalities will intensify throughout student affairs and higher education.

**Whiteness as property.** Similar to CRT, critical White studies (CWS) is another critical social theory that works to expose and directly name the root cause of injustices. However, CWS centers Whiteness in the conversations of race and racism as White hegemony thrives on invisibility and the minimization of racism in U.S. history (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2016).
Cabrera et al. (2016) named “White responsibility” as one of the missing links to cultivating more just and inclusive spaces for college students at predominantly White institutions. Much of their research called for a critical analysis of Whiteness in order to further understand how racism manifests throughout higher education.

Whiteness extends beyond a racial category of skin color and becomes a social concept (Cabrera et al., 2016) that generates currency and can be exchanged for privileges, advantages, and rewards (Ahmed, 2007; Ellison & Langhout, 2016; Hughes, 2013; Lipsitz, 2006; McCoy & Rodrigicks, 2015; Patton et al., 2007). Whiteness operates as hegemony, invisibly dominant: “The unmarked category against which difference is constructed, Whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 1). With this form of dominance, White hegemony extends to how campus climate, race-neutral policies, and colorblind politics marginalize students, staff, and faculty at HWIs (Harper, 2012; Pope & LePeau, 2012).

The invisibility of Whiteness is not only harmful to the advancement of social justice and inclusion, it also cultivates a culture of White fragility and colorblindness. DiAngelo (2011) explained the phenomenon of White fragility to be a result of how White people are protected and insulated from race-based stress. When White individuals are confronted with challenge or disruption, White fragility can take the form of anger, defensiveness, and general resistance as a way to consciously or unconsciously “reinstate racial equilibrium” (p. 57). Although White privilege affords a level of comfortability, it also simultaneously lowers White people’s tolerance for racial stress (DiAngelo, 2011). White hegemony also thrives within a colorblind culture, where anything but racism is seen as the cause for injustices (Cabrera et al., 2016; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Although biological racism is no longer used to further substantiate White
supremacy, cultural racism is now used to systematically oppress POC through the development of policy within K-12 education and higher education that dictates course curriculum, recruitment and retention strategies, and the disbursement of financial resources.

Jones (2013) conducted research to explore how race-neutral policies affect staff of color who oversee programs that directly support students of color. Race neutrality is often tied to policies that dictate funding and restructure initiatives that directly focus on race-based programming (Wade-Golden & Matlock, 2010). Staff of color are expected to adopt race-neutral language to broaden their services to larger populations of students (Jones, 2013). In doing so, individual initiatives geared toward supporting students of color have significantly decreased, and more White students have become direct beneficiaries of race-neutral policies. Staff who oversee these programs are forced to develop strategies of survival in addition to maintaining their day-to-day workload. Survival strategies include the need to cultivate relationships with senior administrators to ensure funding, develop sharp assessment tools to advocate for student needs, and implement new strategies to recruit their desired populations of students despite using race-neutral language.

Another example of White hegemony can be seen in how institutions use justice-oriented missions to promote diversity and inclusion and at the same time maintain the racial status quo through the recruitment and retention of students, staff, and faculty of color. The hegemony within this example allows institutions to rely on the goodness of social justice without actually addressing how it is implicated in the social stratification of POC (Hughes, 2013). To further personify White hegemony, this act of racial stratification creates different experiences where White individuals perceive and experience their institutions as a diverse and inclusive environment as opposed to POC who experience racial tensions and marginalization.
Most often, racialized incidents are not isolated occurrences on campus and become a part of institutional practice and culture (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Harper and Hurtado (2007) found nine common themes from their multicampus qualitative study of racial climates. Two themes directly correlated with how White hegemony thrives implicitly and explicitly in higher education: the pervasiveness of Whiteness in space, curricula, and activities; and the consciousness-powerlessness paradox among racial/ethnic minority staff. Whiteness moves beyond the number of White individuals on campus and further encapsulates how classroom spaces, student organizations, and curriculum design center on Westernized-Eurocentric values (Ahmed, 2007; Feagin, 2006). Additionally, staff of color and White staff shared that they felt powerless in their institutions and unable to directly name the injustices that affected their professional experience and the experiences of their students for fear of being labeled a troublemaker (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). This particular example illustrates how White hegemony also silences individuals who seek to disrupt their structured flow of power.

Punishments and rewards are used to build social compliance from all members of society. Although Whiteness as property creates a clear pathway for White individuals to access privilege, Whiteness can also be used and reproduced by POC. In The Possessive Investment in Whiteness, Lipsitz (2006) explained that in order for White dominance to work, it must remain invisible, and it becomes dependent upon keeping POC siloed through perpetuating horizontal oppression. Giving power and privilege to specific groups of individuals with subordinate identities becomes highly beneficial to civil and political societies invested in producing and maintaining White hegemony. Colorism is an example that shows how POC with lighter skin and more European features have certain privileges in society and are deemed as the most desirable in their racialized group. In doing so, POC with lighter skin can participate in the
subjugation of other POC by enforcing, internalizing, and reproducing dominant beliefs. Although they can access some of this power and privilege, lighter-skinned POC still experience systemic racism on an individual, structural, and institutional level.

**Intersectional oppression.** Power, privilege, and oppression are multidimensional, making race and racism only one piece of dominance and subordination. Although race is primarily centered in CRT research, it also intersects with other social identities, making White hegemony only one of many ways for power and privilege to be produced and maintained within higher education and student affairs (Patton et al., 2007). In addition to the CRT tenets of “permanence of racism” and “Whiteness as property,” “intersectionality” plays a crucial role in further complicating the ways in which hegemony is constructed to operate within society.

In 1851, African American abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth delivered her groundbreaking speech, “Ain’t I a woman?” With precision, she courageously illustrated how race and sex intersect to construct a multidimensional experience of oppression for Black women. As shown in her speech, the concept of intersectionality among race, sex, and class has always been articulated by activists throughout U.S. history and present times. In further advancing intersectionality, Black feminist and CRT scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1991) exposed how the U.S. legal system and patriarchy work to invisibilize Black women’s issues through “patterns of racism and sexism” (1991, p. 1243). Often times Black women’s narratives are conflated with the experiences of White women and MOC in research, structural support systems, and other forms of resources (Carbado et al., 2013). Given this discrepancy, WOC are pushed to the margins of society and thus experience dual forms of oppression.

Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) research emphasized how social identities (whether privileged or oppressed) can intersect and how multiple forms of oppression can intersect to shape one’s
lived experiences. In building upon intersectionality, the model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) further explains how environmental context (e.g., classroom, residence hall, administrative department, academic department) influences identity salience (Abes et al., 2007; Jones, 2009). The MMDI is essential to understanding student affairs to be an environmental context that shapes how intersectional oppression, such as racism and sexism, affects WOCSAA. For example, I often experience the saliency of my identities as a queer, Black, WOC given that most times I am the only POC or queer person in a university committee meeting. There are times when I have to think carefully of how my words will be perceived by White and heterosexual colleagues to avoid being pegged as the “angry Black woman,” “angry queer Black person,” or “angry POC.” Additionally, when I feel marginalized or invisibilized in these spaces, sometimes it becomes difficult to decipher which type of oppression I am experiencing, which is why I now understand my queerness, Blackness, and WOC identities to be interconnected and permanently linked. Similar to intersectionality, MMDI illustrates how social identities can intersect and, at times, become inseparable for WOC student affairs administrators.

A common theme found within hegemony and cultural capital is how individuals who hold leadership positions can influence and shape working environments through institutional policy development, hiring practices, and resourcing initiatives. Given that all members of society hold social identities that carry power, privilege, and oppression, it is impossible for these identities not to influence how student affairs administrators show up in their working environments and interact with their supervisees and coworkers. This exploration of hegemony and cultural capital illustrates how and why WOCSAA experience intersectional oppression within student affairs and higher education.
History of Student Affairs Administration

Student affairs administration began in 1914 (Hevel, 2016) and has grown exponentially from merely supporting individual students to intentionally designing holistic co-curricular education that supports the whole student both inside and outside of the classroom. Through annual conferences, journal publications, and specialized training institutes, leading national organizations such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) continue to guide and shape the current philosophies and best practices of professionals in student and academic affairs (Evans & Reason, 2001). With a continual increase in the diversification of student populations and their needs, the ACPA and NASPA have created multiple value and ethic statements of purpose and professional competencies to further professionalize the field of student affairs and position administrators as equal partners to faculty (Hevel, 2016; Schwartz & Stewart, 2017).

The difference in professional representation in higher education between faculty (39%) and administrators (4%) provides an overarching insight into the tensions that surround the significance of how each position contributes to the retention and success of college students (NCES, 2016). It also indicates the ways in which funding is dispersed throughout higher education, as more money and resources are directed toward academic departments as opposed to student affairs work where budgets are more likely to be cut. Scholars such as Bastedo (2012) described the role of faculty in academia as being to maintain shared governance, design curriculum, and create knowledge. In building upon this notion of faculty’s role and contribution to higher education, there is some resistance from faculty in seeing student affairs administrators as partners in educating students both inside and outside of the classroom. Although this tension exists, those in the field of student affairs have still found strategic ways to connect co-curricular
learning to experiences inside the classroom. For example, residence life departments host faculty in residence programs and create “living and learning communities” that connect academic departments to students who want to live together, take courses together, and have programmatic experiences outside of the college environment that connect to their coursework.

Innovative strategies, such as living and learning communities, have demonstrated the ability of student affairs professionals to be valuable contributors to student success in higher education. Although student affairs has been around for over a century and has evolved significantly over time, research on the field of student affairs has only existed for approximately forty years (Hevel, 2016). Through the following discussion will show a stronger perspective of how White women and WOC have differing experiences in the workplace by exploring the purpose and organizational structure of student affairs. Critical moments in history, such as the civil rights movement, affirmative action, and the critique of feminism, have shaped this field of work and increased the diverse representation of White women, POC, and WOC student affairs administrators.

**Roles and positions in student affairs.** Higher education first began as a space to educate White, heterosexual, upper-class, able-bodied, Christian men and, over time, slowly opened to include more class variance with the inclusion of White women and then POC (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). As the realm of higher education began to expand, professional staff beyond faculty positions were needed to support and sustain student body growth (Hevel, 2016). As early as 1892, positions such as the dean of women, assistant dean, and assistant director of women began to join the ranks of student personnel. Since the inception of student affairs administrative positions, White women have been visible in shaping the foundational tenets and philosophical underpinnings of student development (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017).
The University of Chicago hired the first dean of women, Alice Freeman, who also served as a professor of history. Prior to her arrival, she served as the president of Wellesley, a prominent women’s college in Boston. Alice Freeman was able to mentor other White women who expressed interest in doing similar work. Marion Talbot, the successor of Alice Freeman, took the lead in developing the National Association of Deans of Women in 1916, which established an academic journal for White women’s work to be published (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). Another pioneer of the student personnel movement, Esther McDonald, was appointed as Northwestern University’s first assistant director of women. In this role, Esther was able to increase student satisfaction with the institution by connecting the importance of academics and student activities. Esther went on to pursue a doctoral degree and eventually produced the first body of literature capturing student personnel work through her dissertation (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). During this period, more White women moved into this line of work at Northwestern and eventually developed a national organization, the National Association of Appointment Secretaries (NAAS), which later became known as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) in the 1920s. Although literature accounts for contributions from White women, they had to navigate sexism that was not only blatant on an individual basis but also systematically. Often times when budget cuts occurred, deans of women lost their jobs, endured severe pay cuts, or downsized working environments (Hevel, 2016).

There is a noticeable absence of WOC and MOC in the history of student affairs given that POC only gained public access to HWIs in 1956 when *Hawkins v. Board of Control* passed, allowing people of color to have equal access to higher education, two years after *Brown v. Board of Education* passed in 1954. Although WOC are not mentioned as present in the making of student affairs, WOC were, in fact, present and played prominent roles in developing
organizations for the advancement of their community as educators and administrators. During the 1920s, historical Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were also growing and began to form similar positions as HWIs. Lucy Sloan Diggs, a dean at Howard University and an affiliate of the National Association of Deans of Women, created separate professional organizations for Black deans of women and men (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). However, WOC not only had to face sexism, they also endured racism, which required administrators, such as Dean Diggs, to navigate sexism from within her African American community and fight systemic racism simultaneously. This type of intersectional oppression currently continues to operate within student affairs and higher education.

Many women played a significant role in professionalizing the field of student affairs. Dean positions were initially created to establish housing and oversee students’ living experiences on campus (Hevel, 2016). However, over time deans pushed to expand their portfolio further to include more organized student engagement outside of the classroom as well as career and vocational guidance. In addition to these roles, deans of men and women were also expected to fulfill all other duties as assigned by presidents and faculty, which at times were understood to be work that senior leadership was uninterested in doing. It is important to note that there was also hegemony in how the role of student administrators was perceived and treated by senior-level administrators such as presidents, provosts, and tenured faculty. Hevel (2016) explained the frustrations some deans felt in doing their work and feeling their work exceeded mitigating student conflicts and maintaining student satisfaction (Gaston-Gayles, Wolf-Wendel, Nemeth Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2005).

Over time, deans became concerned with fulfilling the expectations of their role. Without a professionalized and credible field of work, student personnel staff would continue to be
expected to fill in gaps at the requests of senior-level professionals (Hevel, 2016). Therefore, more positions were created to support deans in executing their visions, journal publications were used to formalize the practice of administrators, and professional conferences were created to build the legitimacy of the work of student services personnel (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). Without movements such as civil rights and organized student demonstrations, deans would not have been able to expand their working areas into multiple functioning departments.

Civil rights movement and its impact on student affairs. With institutional changes occurring in the 1960s and 1970s, the field of student affairs continued to expand and professionalize. There were newly evolved professional organizations, more White women and POC administrators in leadership, and more established departments dedicated to supporting marginalized student experiences. As changes occurred, more issues surfaced regarding equitable access and the treatment of marginalized staff, which included WOC, MOC, and White women. Many setbacks occurred, including sexist and racist strategies of promoting men over women and excluding deans of women from particular staff meetings and decision-making opportunities (Hevel, 2016; Howard-Hamilton et al., 2011). Additionally, the field remained predominantly White, excluding POC from HWIs and limiting resources to HBCUs. It is within this history of hegemonic culture that patterns of exclusion and marginalization persist within higher education and student affairs.

Civil rights during the 1950s to mid-1970s helped elevate the student affairs administrator’s role on college campuses. Senior administrators positioned themselves to serve as a mediator between senior leadership and students and further support the college student experience. With the implementation of “students’ legal rights, due process, and free speech policies” (Gaston-Gayles et al., 2005, p. 268), deans of students were inspired to shift away from
the ideology of managing students and took more of an advocate role in holistically facilitating college students’ personal and professional identity development. By supporting student activism, student affairs administrators were able to develop responsible citizens and foster leadership development (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). This learning outside of the classroom allowed students to transform what they were learning in the classroom into concrete action.

Another essential way that civil rights shaped the field of student affairs was through the implementation of Title XI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, also known as affirmative action. With the support of the law, higher education became more accessible to marginalized groups of students (White women and students of color). Given the increase of students of color and student demands for their voices to be given more weight in institutional decision-making, leaders of HWIs had to evaluate their admission policies and hiring practices (Stulberg & Chen, 2014). Although there was a brief period of growth in race-based and social class-based initiatives created to correct years of oppression and exclusion in education, this active push for institutional change was short-lived and met by resistance from right-wing, conservative, colorblind political parties (Lipson, 2011). However, Lipson (2011) argued that despite the great efforts to dismantle and roll back the work of civil rights and affirmative action, some universities, including the University of California Berkeley, University of Wisconsin Madison, and University of Texas Austin, were able to build resilient structures rooted in race-conscious admission policies.

**Feminism and its critique.** On the heels of civil rights, an elevated positioning of student affairs, and a newfound voice for college students, academic research also began to shift toward more critical curriculum and academic departments designed to focus on specific marginalized experiences. Feminism as a school of thought has been in existence since the 19th
century and developed to directly name how women experience sexism and create strategies to build equitable systems that allow women to move through society as full members of society (Pasque & Nicholson, 2011). Moving alongside the civil rights movement was the second wave of feminism, which took a more radical stance on women’s rights:

The second wave unfolded in the context of the antiwar and civil rights movements and the growing self-consciousness of a variety of marginalized groups around the world. For example, there were several significant characteristics of this wave: the publication of The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan, the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the formation of the National Organization for Women, the passage of Title IX in the Education Amendments of 1972, and the Roe v. Wade decision, among other changes that impacted the cultural milieu. The New Left was on the rise, and the voice of the second wave was increasingly radical. (Pasque & Nicholson, 2011, p. 5)

From the 1960s to 1990s, the second wave of feminism grew beyond feminism as a single-sided movement focused solely on female subjugation. Its critical standpoint of understanding began to encompass a more intersectional lens in response to more WOC and indigenous women scholars who sought to disrupt the White hegemony and classist ideologies that excluded WOC from the feminist movements (Pasque & Nicholson, 2011).

One example of how feminism has been challenged and critiqued is through the development of new feminist theories that directly center WOC narratives and experiences. Though intersectionality as a theoretical concept has been used to understand how Black WOC and other WOC experience oppression, another prominent Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins (1990), authored *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (BFT), which extends the meaning of intersectionality (Alinia, 2015). BFT is a feminist epistemological body of work that is also grounded in critical social theory. Not only does BFT center how Black women experience intersectional oppression, it emphasizes the
phenomenology of how Black women resist and combat the dominant culture through activism and communal empowerment.

By taking a new perspective on how Black women challenge and resist the dominant culture, Hill-Collins (1990) provided the foundation for understanding counter-hegemonic stances that empower individuals to find and use the strength of self-definition and collective resistance. Additionally, BFT underscores the importance of understanding how Black women can experience similar oppression in a multitude of ways. Due to intersecting social identities (i.e., different class standings, gender expression, religious identities), Black women are not excluded from having different access points to privilege and oppression.

Feminism and BFT provide more language and knowledge to expose how intersectional oppression affects WOC and White women in student affairs. More importantly, intersectional feminism, such as BFT, womanism, and queer theory, are some of the theories that create room for researchers and administrators to understand the nuanced experiences of all women in higher education. It is dangerous to assume that all women have the same experiences given that each individual holds a different set of social identities from which they experience power, privilege, and oppression.

Erasure of WOCSAA Narratives and Research Conflation

As mentioned earlier, intersectionality is a theoretical concept used to understand how systems of oppression can be experienced when multiple social identities intersect. This framework is essential to understanding how power, privilege, and oppression operate (Strayhorn, 2017) and further marginalize WOC within student affairs and higher education. For example, White women hold a marginalized identity in which they experience sexism as women; this may be a common factor for all women. However, their access to White privilege sets them
apart from WOC, as White women receive more systemic support and social advantages. Similar to how intersectionality differentiates the experiences of White women from those of WOC, men of color also have a distinguishable difference, as their access to male privilege also provides access to power and dominance that are not afforded to WOC. Along with the noticeable difference in experience, WOC not only become lost in the dominant narratives of White women and MOC, they also become subjected to racist and sexist spaces within working environments, research, and literature that are meant to be safe and affirming.

Research on WOC is often generalized within the context of White women or POC experiences. This serves as a form of research conflation where the narratives of WOC become lost within the research. Studies that emphasize standardized test scores and racial-ethnic retention in higher education for students, staff, and faculty often offer little to no contextualized results (Molina, 2008). Research that relies solely on statistical data can misinterpret and exclude other variables that influence a participant’s narrative. Similarly, when researchers make general recommendations for women and the majority or all of their participants are White, the results become dominantly reflective of White women, thereby invisibilizing the nuanced experiences of WOC (Aguirre, 2000; Moore, Alexander, & Lemelle, 2010; Turner & Myers, 2000). As a result, a “one size fits all” approach informs how policy, hiring practices, and strategies are designed to support all women. This approach is dangerous, as White hegemony and patriarchy are perpetuated and maintained in how literature frames experiences (Landrine, 1995; Molina, 2008; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991). Contextualizing the experience of research participants is essential to producing literature that accurately represents WOCSAA.

One way to achieve contextualization is by using critical theoretical frameworks such as CRT or critical feminist frameworks to directly identify and disrupt the hegemonic culture that is
found in academia and student affairs. In doing so, research becomes more robust by examining how social identities (i.e., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender expression, residency status, ability) intersect and shape one’s professional experience in higher education. Research conflation is detrimental to the professional development and well-being of WOC as it falsely informs the best practices used to recruit and retain WOCSAA.

The concept of professionalizing a field of work signifies the underlying tensions between higher education and its perception of student affairs. With this negative perception, student affairs practitioners (e.g., dean of men, dean of women, and dean of students) had to work strategically and innovatively to keep student affairs as a valuable asset to senior leadership. By creating a niche for student affairs practitioners, they were able to advance from dean positions to vice president roles on president cabinets. In addition to these new positions, vice presidents of student development had the opportunity to build more organizational structure that would further share the responsibility of guiding students’ vocational journey, and assisting in the development of student leadership and civic engagement, along with the management of student crises on and off-campus.

To a certain extent, the historical purpose and evolution of student affairs as a structured organization parallels how WOCSAA have had to adapt, transform, and persist within student affairs. In a field that is rooted in patriarchal and racist ideology, it is clear that WOCSAA operate within a field that was not initially designed for them to thrive. Although WOCSAA are able to survive in spaces, there is a need for student development to redirect attention to connecting research rooted in critical analysis to design more inclusive working spaces that affirm WOCSAA and acknowledge the different forms of oppression that White women and
WOC face within student affairs. If not, WOCSAA risk facing emotional, physical, and mental burnout in their work, which can result in higher turnover rates and dissatisfied employees.

The Challenges and Barriers WOCSAA Face

Cultivating Persistence and Achieving Professional Advancement

When WOC exercise agency and resiliency, they can use healthy coping skills to manage stress-induced working environments. Hinton (2012) recommended two ways WOCSAA can persist and advance their careers in student affairs and academia: developing mentoring relationships and relying upon experiential knowledge. Mentoring relationships of the same race and gender play a significant role in creating safe spaces for WOC to be affirmed, challenged, and supported by individuals who understand how their social and professional identities connect. Additional benefits include the creation of a “third space” in which WOC can find sources of empowerment (Mirza, 2009) and systems of support when addressing conflict and issues in the workplace (Seo & Hinton, 2009). Much like counter-storytelling, “third spaces” or counterspaces serve as physical locations or verbal exchanges in which WOCSAA can be their full selves (West, 2019). Counterspaces cultivate resistance to the dominant culture in ways that enable WOCSAA to learn from each other and practice what they learn. The more opportunities WOCSAA have to process the oppressive incidents they experience or witness, the easier it will be for them to navigate toxic cultures and find strategies to uproot the problem (Mirza, 2009).

It is equally vital for WOC to rely on their life-learned lessons and leadership skills acquired from nontraditional forms of leadership and professional development (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Hill-Collins, 1990; Hinton, 2012). This agentic skill set was also referenced in Hinton’s (2012) research on Black WOCSAA. She argued that Black WOCSAA engage in professional development prior to entering and outside of the workplace. In doing so, Black
WOCSAA are entering their workspaces with the capacity and ability to navigate complex working environments. WOC participants in her study often relied upon childhood lessons from family, youth leadership opportunities in church, or mentor figures. Incorporating these communal-based strategies encourage networking that honor lived experiences, and cultivate professional advancement.

**Professional vignette 2.** My undergraduate and graduate experience as a queer, Black, WOC would not have been successful without the guidance, mentorship, and professional investment of WOC. These prominent figures came in the form of my mother and grandmother, the First Lady (the pastor’s wife) of Bethany Church of God in Christ, and many WOCSAA and faculty in higher education. Their implicit and explicit passing of knowledge equipped me to be resilient and use emotional intelligence and collective leadership to strive toward academic excellence in higher education and professional success as a student affairs administrator. In reflecting on my higher education journey, the WOC in my life have (un)intentionally designed a curriculum for me to use as a guide to successfully navigate spaces that were not made for me and other WOC in higher education.

At an early age, I was taught by my grandmother and mother that I would have to work twice as hard as the average White individual to earn and maintain my seat at the table. As a young Black woman, I desperately wanted to live a “normal life” free of rhetoric that reminded me of my difference in an all-White town. However, it was not until my sophomore year in high school that I begrudgingly took heed to these lessons, and my survival skills soon became second nature. I began to see how peers associated stereotypical characteristics to me; some students thought I was the “cool, ghetto-girl” who had a tough exterior and witty personality. I also recognized the ways teachers and administrators treated me differently. Some thought I was a
nice girl but not intelligent, and others assumed I would be disruptive and not interested in learning. Oddly enough, none of these perceptions or assumptions were applied to my White peers. With this knowledge, I was able to anticipate how I was perceived by my White peers, teachers, and administrators. I understood that I would need to be highly charismatic, approachable, and engaged in leadership activities to set myself apart from my White peers and be seen as an excellent student. By the end of my high school experience, I made history in being the first Black senior class president and Prom queen. I also was accepted into a prestigious women’s liberal arts college. This reflection is imperative to understanding my Blackness as a woman in predominantly White spaces. High school became a metaphorical training camp that helped me develop survival strategies and life skills that would enable me to navigate any White space.

**Summary**

Tacit theories such as CRT and BFT provide a context for how and why WOCSAA establish systems of support at HWIs. CRT is rooted in the belief that racism is permanently embedded throughout U.S. culture and thus infiltrates institutions such as higher education (Patton et al., 2007). As a result, CRT scholars actively work to expose and uproot the intersectional oppression woven throughout higher education and student affairs. CRT is used to enhance this study by creating space for WOC of all races and intersecting identities to share their experiential knowledge and use it as a tool of resistance for dismantling power structures. BFT was also incorporated into the theoretical framework to emphasize the importance of agency and communal empowerment, which provide the basis of how and why systems of support are needed (Hill-Collins, 2000).
In order to understand how and why WOCSAA establish systems of support, the exploration of hegemony within higher education provided insight into this need. The literature review was used to identify how intersectional oppression is produced and maintained in higher education. The theoretical concepts of hegemony and cultural capital provide a foundational understanding of how systemic oppression works to privilege some and oppress others. Additionally, it becomes essential to focus on the historical development of student affairs and the experiences of White women and WOC in higher education. Permanence of racism and its intersection with sexism have always positioned White women and MOC to dominate the narratives of marginalization in student affairs and higher education, leaving WOCSAA unheard and unseen in the literature, research, and working environments. The last portion of the literature review demonstrated how WOCSAA navigate and persist at HWIs. By using another tenet from CRT, “experiential knowledge,” the counternarratives and strategies WOC used to combat marginalization demonstrated how WOCSAA are able to survive and thrive within student affairs and higher education.

BFAR is designed to create an empowering, agentic body of literature for and by WOCSAA. Action research requires a partnership between the researcher and community members who strive to improve or solve a particular problem together. Given that this research was geared toward challenging and transforming work environments for WOCSAA, through action research WOCSAA were invited to name the challenges that affected their professional navigation and develop strategies to address them. However, action research has its limitations in that its methodology does not incorporate an intersectional lens. By pairing action research with BFT to develop BFAR, the scope of this methodology validates how WOC experience intersectional oppression and calls WOC to take agency in creating change for themselves.
BFAR positioned participants to become co-investigators who could create knowledge and best practices to enhance the field of student affairs.

Through the discussion of how the three CRT tenets work to produce and maintain hegemony, intersectional oppression was used to demonstrate how it operates within environmental contexts such as student affairs and higher education. A common theme found within hegemony and cultural capital is how individuals who hold leadership positions can influence and shape working environments through institutional policy development, hiring practices, and resourcing initiatives. Given that all members of society hold social identities that carry power, privilege, and oppression, it is impossible for these identities not to influence how leaders make decisions for administrative and academic departments. Student affairs administrators in positions of power and authority are urged to become more invested and aware of just how pervasive hegemonic culture influences working environments.

If hegemony and oppression best operate under the guise of invisibility, administrators must be trained to recognize and disrupt hegemonic culture when it is identified. By training student affairs administrators from the “top-down” to understand the complexity of intersectionality and the MMDI, a trickle-down effect (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018) will slowly occur where employees will begin to feel empowered to advocate for themselves and support their colleagues who experience oppression in the workplace. In order for this empowerment to filter through the workplace, senior leadership and employees must frequently exercise their critical thinking skills and willingness for their privilege to be challenged in order to strengthen their self-awareness and cultural competency. These conscientious acts of collegiality affirm employees such as WOCsAA who hold intersecting marginalized identities and create safer environments for them to not only survive but thrive.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Methodology illustrates the process of inquiry through the analysis of “assumptions, principles, and procedures” in research (Schwandt, 2007, p. 193). For this study, BFAR was developed as a methodology to partner with WOCSAA as co-investigators and creators of knowledge. This chapter begins with a rationale for BFAR, which falls under the umbrella of critical qualitative research. As such, this research was designed to analyze multiple truths that derive from the lived experiences of WOCSAA. Second, history of action research is explored to provide a foundational understanding of why this methodology was needed and best suited for the research questions being explored. It is essential to acknowledge that AR has its limitations given its lack of depth in criticality, which are also reviewed in this section. By integrating BFT, this methodology became a source of agency and empowerment for WOCSAA. Following the justification and basis of BFAR, the procedures of this study were outlined to illustrate this collaborative effort between the principal investigator and the co-investigators.

Research Design

Qualitative research has evolved into a field of study that reflects explorative practices in which researchers and participants both engage to contribute to the inquiry process. This form of research also derives from traditional research based on cultural anthropology and action research predating the 1960s (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schwant, 2015). As opposed to
positivism, which is rooted in scientific truth and objectivity, qualitative inquiry consists of philosophical, epistemological, and methodological beliefs that incorporate context, subjectivity, interpretation, and the researcher’s non-neutrality (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This holistic type of research centers the lived experiences of participants as seen from their ways of knowing and also gives space for researchers to identify how their personal journey connects to the research at hand.

There are many methods that fall within the realm of qualitative research, such as action research, case studies, ethnographies, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology. Although these are just a few of the many that exist, there are four shared values across qualitative research methods, which Ravitch and Carl (2016) argued are the critical factors for conducting ethical and valid research: criticality, reflexivity, collaboration, and rigor (p. 13).

Criticality. This value deepens the quality of the research conducted and requires researchers to understand how social structures rooted in power, dominance, and subordination shape and influence the narratives of participants and the researcher. By understanding the complex nature of power and equity, qualitative researchers can articulate a stance that disrupts hegemonic structures and provide counteractive strategies and best practices that empower participants and readers drawn to that particular study.

Reflexivity. Reflexivity is the process of being aware of and able to articulate positionality, subjectivity, and identities that shape an individual’s way of knowing and set of assumptions.

Collaboration. Collaboration is the essence of qualitative research given that this form of research highlights the importance of multiple truths, perspectives, and ways of knowing. Dialogic engagement best captures the ways in which researchers can strengthen the rigor of
their studies through collaborating with participants and research teams and seeking critical feedback that informs their body of work.

**Rigor.** Rigor represents the quality of research designs and strategic sequencing of methods used to conduct a study. What makes qualitative research rigor unique is that it extends beyond answering the research questions and includes capturing the emerging themes that come from dialogic engagement with participants and research partners.

All four horizontal values are essential to developing rich qualitative inquiry. Given that these values strongly align with my Black feminist epistemological approach, qualitative research seemed to be the best way to co-construct a space for WOCSAA to share and gain knowledge, develop interventions, and engage in reflexive praxis to deepen this research.

**Overview of Action Research**

As shared above, my epistemological beliefs align with the four horizontal fundamental values of qualitative research and most strongly underscore the importance of “collaboration” and “criticality.” These values enable researchers to co-construct knowledge with participants and interpret the meaning-making process that, in turn, accurately portrays the participants’ experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One methodological tool of engagement that is highly collaborative and action-based in nature is action research, a form of practitioner research used to address problems and phenomena encountered by participants (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). In addition, action research includes partnering with participants of the study to create solution-oriented interventions that either solve the issue or begin the process of change. By integrating collaboration into this study, the principle investigator was able to fully engage and work alongside participants in identifying and improving issues that affect the professional navigation of WOCSAA at HWIs.
In partnering with and including participants in the research, the researcher’s role shifts from structuring controlled environments to participating alongside participants and working with participants to address the issue at hand. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) outlined five principles of action research that include (a) identifying the issue or problem; (b) designing an emergent study where researchers and participants continuously seek to improve practice “planning, acting, observing, reflecting;” (c) engaging participants as co-investigators; (d) establishing the role of the researcher as an insider/outsider to the community; and (e) collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data. In this research, the goal was to identify the issues WOCSAA face while working within a marginalized field of work (i.e., student affairs). As shown in the literature review, WOCSAA experience and combat multiple forms of intersectional oppression, which results in marginalization, isolation, and burnout in the workplace. By using action research as a method, the principal investigator was able to co-investigate these issues with a select number of participants and collaboratively develop an intervention plan to improve some of these issues.

Although action research is an ideal method, it is also important to note that it lacks criticality as there is little room for calling how intersectional oppression affects WOCSAA and why they need to establish systems of support (Reid, 2004). Recognizing this shortcoming, critical action research, feminist action research, and Black feminist thought provided a multidimensional view of WOCSAA that validated their narratives, affirmed their experiences in the workplace as truth, and empowered WOCSAA to implement change. By using BFAR as a methodology, participants and researchers can more directly identify the issues experienced and design an intervention rooted in emancipatory praxis (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).
Critical action research. There are three different types of action research used as methods to collect data: technical, practical, and significant action research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although technical and practical, action research focuses more on how to control the outcome of the study or inform the practice of a particular role or position. It is through critical action research that participants and the researcher have the agency to work together and “attempt to challenge power relations based on societal structures” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 56). Given that this research centered the narratives of WOCSAA, it was imperative to use a more critical form of action research that named the social standpoint and location of participants/researchers and also exposed the ways in which hegemonic culture shapes the working environment. There are other forms of critical action research that create room for critical observation and intervention and also include the examination of intersecting identities and intersections of oppression, such as feminist action research.

Feminist action research. Feminist action research is a methodological framework specifically designed to illuminate the voices of women, explicitly name the struggles experienced by women, implement the practice of action and reflection (known as praxis), and collaboratively design an intervention to alleviate the problem identified (Reid, 2004). The success of a feminist action research study is measured by how well the identified problems are addressed in the research and how much agency participants have throughout the process (Reid, 2004). In using this methodology, the rigor and validity of the study must prioritize the participants' experiences and strive to achieve an outcome that benefits the participants.

Although the implementation of feminist action research strives to create an agentic process for participants, there is an opportunity gap that can be filled by this research. In understanding the critiques and limitations of feminist action research, there is a need for more
in-depth analysis of feminism that calls for a more diverse representation of researchers who enter the field to gather data and use accessible language as a key element of inclusion (Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009). With a greater emphasis on intersectional oppression and intersecting identities, WOCSAA can see themselves reflected in the guiding principles of feminist action research. There was also an opportunity to strengthen this framework by incorporating BFT. In doing so, the framework not only fostered agency but cultivated resistance that empowered WOCSAA to create change within their working environments.

**Black feminist action research (BFAR).** Black feminist thought derives from Black feminism and is a framework designed to explicitly name intersectional oppression and counteract hegemonic culture through the communal empowerment of Black women and other individuals who hold intersecting marginalized identities. As a critical social theory adjoined with feminist theory (Hill Hill-Collins, 1990), BFT became a blueprint for other researchers to make marginalized experiences the center of analysis (Collins, 2015). In creating BFAR, the criticality of feminist action research increased, and the framework expanded to explicitly depict how WOCSAA navigate their professional experience at HWIs.

Black feminist thought added another dimension to this specific study in that Hill-Collins (1990) challenged the notion of intellectuals whose work is deemed as valuable knowledge in the academy. The history of academia has always excluded and invisibilized the voices of WOC, White women, and other marginalized communities of academics. More specifically, she urged the following within communities of Black women:

Black women intellectuals need not be middle-class, educated, middle-aged, or recognized as such by academia or other establishments . . . the type of intellectual leadership envisioned here requires collaboration among diverse Black women to think through what would constitute Black women’s autonomy. (Hill Collins, 1990, pp. 40-41)
This is a transformative statement in that Black women and people in other marginalized communities are reminded that they do not have to have prestigious degrees and certifications to create meaningful knowledge. In fact, BFT encourages Black academics to be more critical and intentional in bringing more voices to the table as liberatory praxis is not exclusive to the classroom. In understanding this added element of inclusion, Table 1 illustrates BFAR as a hybrid methodology. This study was designed to uplift the voices of WOCSAA and invite them to participate in the research as co-investigators.

Table 1. Action Research Methodologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Research</th>
<th>Black Feminist Thought</th>
<th>BFAR Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action research principles (Merriam &amp; Tisdell, 2016)</td>
<td>Black Feminist Thought framework (Hill Collins, 2000)</td>
<td>Hybrid methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying the issue or problem</td>
<td>Intersectional oppression</td>
<td>Establish rapport between principle investigator and participants to share personal salient identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing an emergent study (the continual practice of planning, acting, observing, reflecting&quot;)</td>
<td>Epistemic agency</td>
<td>Shift the power dynamic between the researcher and participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging participants as co-investigators</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>Train participants to become co-investigators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing the researcher role as insider/outsider to the community</td>
<td>Intersecting power relations</td>
<td>Utilize action research methods to cultivate change that addresses the established issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Questions

In understanding the BFAR methodology and qualitative research, this research revealed the “complexity and subjectivity of [multiple] lived experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 5) that WOCSAA navigate daily. Given the nature of my professional work as a scholar-practitioner and WOCSAA, it is essential to explore the robust narratives of administrators of color and their experiences in the margins of higher education. In highlighting marginalized experiences in a marginalized field of work, the following research questions were asked:

1. How do WOCSAA define systems of support?
2. How and why do WOCSAA establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of HWIs?
3. How do these systems of support affect WOCSAA in their professional navigation of HWIs?

Given that the principle investigator and co-investigators shared intersecting identities as WOCSAA, the research group was able to work collaboratively in exploring the research questions.

Participants

The principal investigator created a space for WOCSAA to “lift as they climb.” The participants were asked to engage in revisiting the past, navigating the present, and shaping the future of their professional journey. As a result, WOCSAA were able to define systems of support, articulate how and why they established systems of support, and identify how these support systems affected their professional experiences. Participants were required to self-identify as WOCSAA, have a minimum of two years of professional experience as a student affairs administrator, and have current or past professional experience at a Jesuit institution.
For the purposes of this study, my goal was to specifically recruit 10 to 12 WOCSAA who self-identified as WOC. In a similar study, Martin (2018) selected 13 student affairs administrators to engage in a study using PhotoVoice as a methodology. Martin (2018) captured the ways in which entry-level student affairs administrators made meaning of scholarship in practice.

**Women of Color**

As mentioned in the rationale for this study, the term “woman of color” is a political, solidarity-based, social identity that individuals must self-select (Santa Cruz Feminists Of Color Writing Collective, 2013). In doing so, participants saw themselves as individuals who operate in solidarity with other WOC and acknowledge the similarities and differences in resisting intersectional oppression within working environments.

**Student Affairs Administrator**

Participants needed to have a minimum of two or more years as an administrator within the field of student affairs. By holding two or more years of professional experience, WOCSAA have had time to acclimate to their working environments and develop strategies to navigate their professional journey. Typically, professional organizations such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) describe student affairs positions as any type of student services role that fosters college student learning inside and outside of the classroom. The participants in this study held positions with roles and functions that incorporated “advising, counseling, management, or administrative function[s] at a college or university that exists outside the classroom [more specifically non-academic administrators]” (Love, 2003). Although these roles
can fit within many different types of administrative positions at colleges and universities, to participate, WOCSAA were required to hold non-academic administrative roles.

**Jesuit Institutions**

The principle investigator focused on recruiting WOCSAA who currently worked at midsize, four-year Jesuit institutions. Jesuit institutions are unique in that they are mission-driven, located in urban environments, and aspire to foster holistic student-centered practices for staff and faculty. Jesuit education is about transforming student experiences and using reflexive praxis to enhance student development practice. Although Jesuit universities hold aspiring missions and values rooted in justice and faith, the historical underpinnings of a Catholic, predominately White, and male-dominated space hold real implications for how WOCSAA navigate their professional identities, practice, and career advancement. As a result, Jesuit institutions become powerful spaces in which to examine the persistence of WOCSAA.

There are twenty-seven Jesuit institutions in the United States, in which 215,000 students are currently enrolled (“27 schools: 1 mission,” n.d.). Though there are no collective data to share insight on how many student affairs administrators or WOCSAA work at Jesuit institutions, professional associations such as the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) and the Jesuit Association of Student Personnel Administrators (JASPA Student Affairs) provide some information regarding senior-level professionals based upon perceived race and gender (no pronouns or racial identities are listed next to each individual’s name). JASPA’s Board of Directors consists of vice presidents of student affairs (or equivalent position titles). With the exception of one institution that is not represented on JASPA’s website, photos and position titles are listed for each vice president. As such, there are 16 (60%) women and 11 (40%) men who make up the Board of Directors. However, upon further examination of those
numbers, only four WOC (14%) and two MOC (7%) are vice presidents of student affairs at Jesuit institutions (‘Board of Directors,’ n.d.). Although this is a tiny snapshot of student affairs administrators in Jesuit education, the trend does not veer too far from the general makeup of student affairs administrators reported by the NCES (2016).

AJCU’s justice and faith-based mission positions Jesuit institutions to become trendsetters in critically examining how student affairs administrators who hold marginalized identities persist and contribute to the greater good of student success. As stated in the mission of the goal of AJCU is to foster a Jesuit, Catholic identity and mission: “educating for a faith that does justice; supporting national, international and online collaborations between campuses; and sponsoring professional and leadership development programs” (AJCU, paragraph 1). Using Jesuit institutions as locations to recruit WOCSAA created an opportunity for WOCSAA to identify and implement strategies to help empower and retain each other.

**Snowball Sampling**

The principle investigator held insider knowledge and status as a WOCSAA at a Jesuit institution and used snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to intentionally recruit and select WOCSAA at Jesuit institutions. Through snowball sampling, the principle investigator used her professional network to recruit WOCSAA initially, used the email listserv of JASPA, and asked for personal recommendations of other WOCSAA who worked at Jesuit institutions.

**Setting**

Given that the participants were WOCSAA from various Jesuit institutions within the United States, the principle investigator met with participants for individual interviews via Zoom (video communication) or in person. Participants had the option to schedule an online appointment or meet in a preferred location within the Chicago city area. By providing the option
for online or in-person meetings, participants had the ability to control whether or not they wanted to speak in their office or speak from a preferred safe space (e.g., home, coffee shop, closed-door space).

**Data Collection**

The general process of qualitative action research begins with individual interviews of participants as part of the planning process, engaging participants as co-investigators in a problem-solving process, and concluding with a reflexive exercise in which all co-investigators reflect on the process and action implemented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In *Table 2*, the BFAR phases directly align with the four tenants of action research. Although this process is simplified in the description, BFAR is challenging to achieve as the process must remain flexible to the needs of the entire group engaged in the study.

**Demographic Questionnaire**

In the first phase of data collection, participants completed an electronic demographic questionnaire. In doing so, the principle investigator collected general data about participants across different institutions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) and also confirmed that they met the criteria of this study. In doing so, participants chose their pseudonym, shared their racialized identities and gender, identified the number of years they worked in student affairs and at a Jesuit institution, and also shared additional salient identities that shaped their professional identity as a WOCSAA (see Appendix A). Lastly, they had a chance to ask any questions or concerns regarding this study.

**Individual Interviews**

As a part of the first phase, participants engaged in a 60- to 90-minute semi-structured interview. Each interview began with the participant reading and signing the participant consent
form (see Appendix B). By connecting with each participant through a semi-structured interview, the principle investigator established rapport, gained their perspective, and learn how they made meaning of their role as a WOCSAA at a Jesuit institution (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The principle investigator selected a semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) and asked each participant open-ended questions as well as follow-up questions based on each participant’s response (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**PhotoVoice**

Scholars such as Kelly and Kortegast (2018) have stated that visual methods can enhance “student learning, success and belonging” (p. 4). Given that social media, social networking, email, and cell phones are readily accessible and used as tools of communication, methods that include photo elicitation can serve as optimal ways in which students, staff, and faculty learn (Kelly & Kortegast, 2018; Kortegast et al., 2019; Martin, 2018). PhotoVoice is an action research method used in health community-based research and education (Ciolan & Manasia, 2016). As a result, participants experienced agency in co-constructing knowledge by taking pictures, reflecting on these images, engaging in critical dialogue, and identifying strategies to effect change in their surrounding community.

The principle investigator used PhotoVoice as a method to capture how WOCSAA made meaning of systems of support and professional navigation at HWIs. After participants completed their individual interviews, they moved into the second phase of the process where they were now co-investigators. The co-investigators worked together to define systems of support and identify why WOCSAA utilize systems of support. PhotoVoice is a participatory method in which co-investigators chronicle their daily experiences through photos and then discuss them in group discussions (Kortegast et al., 2019; Martin, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).
By using this empowering method co-investigators are the experts of their professional journey, and able to name the strategies and systems of support they use to navigate Jesuit institutions.

Co-investigators chronicled their daily encounters with systems of support over a span of thirty days. The principle investigator provided the co-investigators with a password-protected electronic space on Sakai, where co-investigators uploaded their photos along with a brief description of what that picture represented. After thirty days of daily photo submissions (minimum of three photos per week), co-investigators participated in a group discussion. The principle investigator sent co-investigators a “doodle link” to identify the time frames in which participants were available to meet. The principle investigator gathered the co-investigators availability, and randomly assigned them into small groups for facilitated dialogues. In an effort to provide a structured space for a facilitated dialogue, focus groups were used as an additional method to enhance the PhotoVoice method.

**Focus Groups**

The principle investigator facilitated focus groups of three to four co-investigators. The focus groups served as a space for co-investigators to share what their photos represented and listen to the stories of other WOCSAA. Focus groups are an ideal addition to PhotoVoice, as co-investigators gained access to a relational environment that fostered different modes of communication, enabled co-investigators to ask questions of one another (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), and developed their understanding of familiar and different experiences across a diverse group of WOCSAA. All focus group meetings were facilitated through an on-line platform called Zoom.

During each narrated presentation of photos and their meanings, the co-investigators were required to take notes of their reactions and moments that resonated with them. After each person chronicled their professional journey, the co-investigators were asked to discuss the following
open-ended questions: What are common themes found within these presentations? How do we define what systems of support look like for WOCSAA at Jesuit institutions? How do these identified systems of support affect WOCSAA professional navigation of a Jesuit institution? For each discussion question, co-investigators were asked to serve as note-takers, gathering the notes of what was discussed. By providing a space for co-investigators to listen to each other’s stories and engage in dialogue, they participated in a collaborative procedure that cultivated agency.

**Reflexivity**

The final phase of this process required co-investigators to complete a reflexive questionnaire. One week following the PhotoVoice presentations and focus group meetings, the co-investigators were prompted to complete a reflection form that captured how each co-investigator made meaning of their experience in this study. They answered the open-ended questions found in Appendix D that indicated how much agency, if any, they experienced as a co-investigator throughout the research process and how the PhotoVoice project affected their professional navigation of their institution.
Table 2. Four Phases of Black Feminist Action Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Purpose of each phase</th>
<th>Co-investigators gain the following research experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>A complete demographic questionnaire and 60- to 90-minute individual interview</td>
<td>Introduction to action research and member checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>30-day PhotoVoice project</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe</td>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>90-minute focus group meeting</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect</td>
<td>Phase 4</td>
<td>Complete an electronic reflection questionnaire</td>
<td>Researcher reflexivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

A benefit of conducting action research is the level of inclusion and constant flow of communication between the principal investigator and co-investigators. By using the BFAR methodology, the principle investigator determined the measure of success by how much agency the co-investigators experienced and how well the strategies improved the issues WOCSAA identified. In order to articulate the rigor and validity of this study, crystallization was used to analyze the interview transcripts, curated photographs, and observation/discussion notes from the co-investigators.

**Interview Transcripts and Member Checking**

During the first phase of data collection, participants engaged in an individual interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and saved onto a password-protected electronic system. Upon the completion of interviews, the recordings were uploaded onto Dedoose, a third-party vendor that transcribed the audio recordings and stored the transcriptions in a password-protected
system. Once each interview was transcribed, co-investigators were asked to member check their transcripts.

After each interview, the principle investigator conducted open coding to gather general themes, followed by axial coding to narrow the scope of themes and succinctly merge them with concepts that surfaced from the first round of coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once all of the data was collected, the themes were shared with co-investigators during the first focus group meeting. In this space, co-investigators offered more insight, made suggestions, or asked questions that better shaped the themes pulled from interview transcripts. This was also the chance for co-investigators to confirm that their interviews were represented in the themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Focus Group Meetings and Observation Notes**

During the first focus group meeting, co-investigators presented their PhotoVoice projects in small groups of four to six co-investigators. The co-investigators were asked to make observational notes of what information resonated with and differentiated from their professional journey, and how this information informed their understanding of how support systems are used by WOCSAA. Co-investigators had the option of taking notes by hand or electronically submitting them at the end of the focus group meeting. Observation notes were collected from each co-investigator and compared with curated photos submitted on Sakai to add depth to the crystallization process. Additionally, co-investigators engaged in a group discussion in which three questions were asked. Given that co-investigators were a part of the research process, the principle investigator asked for someone to volunteer as a note-taker for each discussion question. These notes were written electronically and visible on Zoom for all co-investigators to
view, edit, and confirm. In doing so, the notes went through another member check by all co-investigators in that particular focus group.

**Validity**

Although triangulation is a method to analyze data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), for the purposes of this study, the principle investigator chose to use a non-linear, multidimensional approach. Crystallization allows a researcher to explore “the messy realities that culminate into sense-making through thick, rich, interesting and coherent representations” (Stewart, Gapp, & Harwood, 2017, p. 2). With fifteen to twenty co-investigators, it became essential to allow this process to emerge. From a metaphoric standpoint, triangulation represents a static restriction, limiting data collection to a few forms of artifacts to be reviewed. The metaphor of a crystal embodies a three-dimensional image with depth, many surfaces, and angles to examine. In doing so, the following artifacts were crystalized: interview transcripts, curated photos taken by co-investigators, observation notes from myself and co-investigators, and any additional artifacts that documented the change co-investigator experienced throughout the study.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated researchers and co-investigators can work collaboratively to “collect and analyze data in a systematic way” (p. 52). After the co-investigators completed all four phases of the study, they assisted in analyzing the data via member checking through multiple stages of the process and engaged in a reflexive exercise. After collectively analyzing the data in a systematic process, the principle investigator examined all of the information collected to pull findings from the narratives and experiences of the co-investigators.

The curated photos, observation, and discussion notes were coded similarly to how the interview transcripts were coded. By using open and axial coding, the themes were narrowed to
gain a better understanding of how the co-investigators engaged with and learned from the PhotoVoice project and focus group activities. In using crystallization, the data from the different phases of this study to piece together a larger story of how the co-investigators worked to answer the research questions, experienced agency in being a co-investigator, and how much the PhotoVoice project affected their professional identity as a WOCSAA.

**Research Strength**

The strength of the BFAR methodology is within the collaborative and empowering relationship between the researcher and the co-investigators. As shown in Appendix E, the prospective participants were invited to take action, gain research experience, and create knowledge that reflected their personal and professional experiences. Although there were no monetary benefits, the opportunity to engage in action research was rewarding in that this study mirrored the metaphor of “lifting as we climb.”

**Limitations**

There were two distinct limitations for this study: (a) WOCSAA had to volunteer their time to engage in a four-phased process; and (b) WOCSAA were coming from Jesuit institutions, which are a small sector of private, 4-year institutions. Although the data collection and analysis of this story told a rich, multifaceted story of WOCSAA, it required participants to give up time during their regular working hours willingly. In the four phases of this study, WOCSAA needed to engage in a ninety-minute interview, take photos over a span of thirty days, present on their personal findings, and complete a reflexive questionnaire. Additionally, there are only twenty-eight Jesuit institutions in the United States, which means participants needed to be willing to share their experiences even at the risk of their institutions being known. There was a risk in readers or co-investigators identifying the Jesuit institutions represented in this study. Given this
reality, the principle investigator opened co-investigator recruitment to include WOCSAA who had once worked at a Jesuit institution. This way, more WOCSAA may have been willing to share their stories as there was no imminent threat to their current working environment.

Positionality

During my undergraduate and graduate experience as a queer, Black, WOC, I would not have been successful without the guidance, mentorship, and professional investment of WOC. These prominent figures came in the form of my mother and grandmothers, the First Lady (the pastor’s wife) of Bethany Church of God in Christ, and many WOCSAA and faculty in higher education. Their implicit and explicit passing of knowledge equipped me to be resilient and use emotional intelligence and collective leadership to strive toward academic excellence in higher education and professional success as a student affairs administrator. In reflecting on my higher education journey, the WOC in my life (un)intentionally designed a curriculum for me to use as a guide to successfully navigate spaces that were not made for me and other WOC in higher education. Because of these meaningful relationships, I believe support systems are not just strategies to survive, they are also used to build collective leadership, communal empowerment, and self-definition. As a result of the critical peaks and valleys in my educational journey, I am inspired to lift as I climb and create literature that encourages other WOCSAA to do the same.

It is also important to distinguish my political identity as a WOC, as it informs my commitment to solidarity work within communities of Black women and women of other marginalized races. For that reason, I intended to recruit a diverse group of WOCSAA who represented a vast array of intersecting identities beyond race and gender. By doing this, WOCSAA were encouraged to bring their full selves to each space that was created in this process as a way to affirm each co-investigator’s way of knowing.
Researcher Role

Given that the principal investigator has over seven years of professional experience as a WOCSAA and most of my professional identity has been at a Jesuit institution, I was able to build trust and rapport with this community of co-investigators. By having insider knowledge, I was able to immerse myself within this experience as a member of the group. However, as the principal investigator, I had a distinguishing role within the group. My purpose was to ensure the co-investigators (a) understood the requirements of the study, (b) experienced agency throughout the process, and (c) achieved some level of improvement in their professional lives.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Creative Non-Fiction Narrative

This chapter is strategically designed to protect the identities of each co-investigator and their Jesuit institution (Willis, 2019), and tell an engaging narrative that is accessible to readers. In prioritizing these factors, creative non-fiction (CNF), radical imagination, and composite character development were selected to present a cohesive narrative that will compel readers to deeply reflect on their professional journeys and how they contribute to the experiences of WOCSAA. CNF writing is a form of truth-telling in which fiction techniques are used to articulate the findings of qualitative research (Caulley, 2008). By providing vivid and descriptive scenes, readers can engage with the findings as if they were present with the characters. In addition to using CNF, radical imagination was used to creatively expand the ways readers think about institutionalized support and how it can be used to build staff retention and meaningful relationships between coworkers. Lastly composite character development was used as a strategy to efficiently present multilayered narratives through CNF characters that are based on experiences and direct quotes from the thirteen co-investigators.

CNF Scene Development

The concept of “showing rather than telling” is a CNF writing technique that incorporates descriptions of spaces, active-voice, and constant dialogue between characters (Caulley, 2008). The conversation that happens between each character integrates mostly direct quotes from the
co-investigators. Additionally, fictitious dialogue was utilized to provide an organic flow to this narrative. A total of three scenes were constructed to embody the stories, narratives, and discussions that the co-investigators had with each other during the focus group meetings. Each scene is connected to a research question and a set of findings from the study.

The first scene, entitled *The Art Exhibit Invitation* was designed to answer the following research question: How and why do WOCSSA establish systems of support? This scene is related to two findings from the study: consciousness and awareness of identities and significance of relationships with WOC. The dialogue between the characters indicates they are always aware of how their identities are perceived by White colleagues. With this knowledge, the characters had to make conscious decisions about how they showed up in workspaces and how they navigated their relationships with each other. The significance of the relationships between the characters embodies a professional sisterhood through the formation of text groups, professional development opportunities, and individualized meetings with each other.

The second scene is entitled *The Art Exhibit* and directly correlates with the following research question: How do WOCSSA define systems of support? The following findings are highlighted in this scene: safe spaces, defining systems of support, and aspects of career navigation. This scene depicts a professional development outing for the characters in which they attend an art exhibit that centers the narratives of WOCSSA experiences. The characters engage in dialogue and participate in an interactive art exhibit station. This scene allows readers to view some of the images derived from the PhotoVoice project.

The third scene, entitled *The Art Exhibit Debrief*, addresses the final research question: How do these systems of support affect WOCSSA professional navigation of HWIs? The last two findings are empowering political identity and social capital exchange. For this scene, the
characters participate in a closing discussion where they process their experience at the art exhibit. In this dialogue, the characters talk about how they experience empowerment from their identities as WOC. Additionally, they describe their support systems as ways to share power with each other in the form of emotional, professional, and motivational support.

The Use of Radical Imagination

Along with truth-telling, radical imagination conveyed a collective vision that inspired institutional change and shifted the way student affairs administrators think and do work with and for one another (Dyke, Meyerhoff, & Evol, 2018). With origins in Black radicalism, indigenous resurgence (Dyke et al., 2018), and interdisciplinary studies such as sociology and social work (Barnetz, 2015), radical imagination pedagogy is designed to disrupt vertical, hierarchal structures of power and investigate the promises, possibilities, and difficulties in HWIs (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2012). Radical imagination sparks collective decision-making and action-based goals. For this study, radical imagination further supports Black feminist action research, which demonstrates how university leaders can retain employees who hold marginalized-intersecting identities. In doing so, each scene begins with a contextual paragraph that situates the CNF narrative.

Though the character dialogues mostly comprise direct quotes from the 13 co-investigators, the fictitious university, professional development support group, and transitional conversations assist in stretching the reader’s imagination by demonstrating what senior-level administrators and hiring managers can do to support and retain their WOCSAA. Additionally, this strategy helps readers become less concerned about who the co-investigators are and what institutions they represent. As such, the fictional Magis University serves as an alternative Jesuit
institution that employs six characters who represent the diverse narratives of the co-investigators in this study.

**Composite Character Development**

The last technique used to develop an engaging story is composite character development. CNF is designed to provide multiple perspectives of a research topic and compel readers to immerse themselves in the stories that are presented (Vickers, 2014). As the co-investigators were a diverse group, there were many stories that overlapped and experiences that diverged from each other. Rather than provide an exhaustive list of quotes from each co-investigator, composite character development was used to create characters who reflected the co-investigators’ salient identities, administrative positions, experience navigating Jesuit institutions, and diverse relationships with their supervisors and colleagues (Willis, 2019). For this story, there were six characters based on thirteen co-investigators and one aspect based on the co-investigators’ relationships with their colleagues. *Table 3* contains descriptions of the salient identities of each CNF character, their employed position, and the number of years each character worked at Magis University.
Table 3. Composite Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Salient ideas</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Number of years at the institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Stephens, PhD</td>
<td>Black woman, heterosexual, cis-gender, parent, Jesuit alumni</td>
<td>VP of Student Affairs</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Black, Caribbean heterosexual, cis-gender woman,</td>
<td>Resident Director</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristina</td>
<td>Mexican/Mestiza, immigrant, heterosexual, cis-gender woman, parent, and doctoral student</td>
<td>Director of Student Orientation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>South Asian, Punjabi, queer, cis-gender woman</td>
<td>Resident Director</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mya</td>
<td>Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman, Jesuit alumna</td>
<td>Senior Academic Advisor</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>Biracial, Filipina and White, heterosexual, cis-gender woman</td>
<td>Student Conduct Coordinator</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scene 1: The Art Exhibit Invitation

Context

Magis University provides institutional funding for initiatives to encourage the retention of staff and faculty who hold marginalized identities. Over the years, multiple professional support groups have been formed to serve as safe spaces for informal gatherings, professional identity development, and networking. Women of Color in Solidarity (WOCS) is one of the professional support groups led by Nicole Stephens, the Vice President of Student Affairs. With institutional recognition, Nicole secured funds to sponsor WOCS members to attend a local professional development outing. After learning about the “Lifting as We Climb: Art Exhibit for Women of Color in Student Affairs,” Nicole drafted a formal invitation to the WOCS listserv to get an idea of how many staff planned to attend.
Clickity-clack-clack-clack was the sound of Nicole’s fingers finalizing the closing of an e-mail message addressed to the WOC in her division. Nicole exhaled loudly, a gratifying grin spreading across her face. She then turned from her computer to rest her mind and gaze into the beautiful summer day. As she looked out the window, she noticed the rhythmic ebb and flow of people walking busily from the parking garage to the student center and from the student center to other offices across campus. A group of individuals walked out of the student center toward the east quad where students play ultimate frisbee. A large group of students laughed loudly as one of their friends struggled to maintain balance while making their way across a web-like string anchored by two trees. A couple of feet away from them, Nicole could see young women tanning under the sun while reading books for class. There was a man who opened the door for a group of individuals exiting the building, chatting intently with one another, and making polite conversation. Without a glance, they passed a group of men dressed in tan uniforms and green baseball caps who were tending to a bed of flowers and shrubs. As Nicole prepared to turn back to her computer to start working again, she noticed a small group of WOC also exiting the building. She smiled to herself, proud to see this group of women exuding confidence and care for one another.

**Consciousness and Awareness of Identities**

Ruth opened the door for her colleagues, Cristina and Fatima, to walk through as they were all headed to a committee meeting.

“Okay, when we get to this meeting, do you think we should sit together?” Cristina asked.

“Girl, please, that’s not a smart idea. Remember the ‘feedback’ we received. I don’t want any unnecessary eyes on us today,” Ruth responded.
Everyone fell silent for a moment and continued to walk together. Fixated on Ruth’s comment, Cristina responded:

Yeah, I think this past year, I really saw what it meant to be a strong woman of color and to be friends with [you all] outside of work and how that impacted the job. And like folk’s [colleagues & supervisors] insecurity coming into play or not understanding what it meant or [perceived] it being clique-ish.

Fatima interjected:

Right! I don’t know that my like White colleagues could ever not have women of color in the same room and not compare them, and we very much feel that way or at least I feel that I’m constantly being compared to what should be like my support system.

Cristina responded:

And, there is this like this gaslighting, like look at this all-star RD we have, look at all the great work she’s doing, look at how she is she’s supporting [cultural student organizations], and teaching [freshmen seminar courses] and she’s so competent and great. But I think behind closed doors, it’s like your friendships are impacting someone else’s morale or like I just want you to be mindful of your friendships. But it’s like what am I doing that’s hurting someone else’s feelings? Why don’t they have the courage to tell me?

After a while, Ruth decided to chime in:

My identities as a woman of color really shape how cautious I am as a professional. And it’s really tied to my identity and sense of pride in how I’m perceived as a professional. Because it’s really important to me that I be seen as an equal and all this stuff and that I’m not written off or how I feel about things as a person of color when I speak out about certain things.

Fatima responded:

Mmmhmm. I always have to combat that as a woman but also as a woman of color. Like really monitoring like my tone and how I say things. So a lot of times, I won’t speak in meetings and other stuff because, like something that’s being said is kind of irritating me. So I have to monitor and be really cautious of how I say something or when I say something and how I say it, which also means like the moment passing for me to do so. But then I get told later like: “Oh, you don’t speak enough in meetings.” But then when I do speak in meetings, I get called out for being unhappy. I’m like there is this never-ending cycle of what it is that you want me to do and how to be. So that’s really led to like is this a hill I’m going to die on. Whereas, like yes, I feel like I’m bringing up a good point here at this moment in time, but down the road, how much of my time is it going to
take just like to defend my tone, my face, my body actions. And a lot of times it’s never supporting what I said, it’s how I said it, and how I looked as I said it.

Ruth nodded in agreement and said:

Yes, girl. I remember at the time where the person over an entire unit was a White male and me just saying if it was a bunch of White students, would we be in here right now and in trouble? But because I want to bring together a bunch of Black students now all of the sudden, “ooh,” everybody got to be there and watch, and we need security. And I remember he slammed his hand on the table and he was like “damn it, that’s not the point,” I said, “but it is, and since you can’t control your temper and I feel very threatened right now, I’m gonna get up and let you finish” [laughing with disbelief] and he kind of caught himself cause it’s like why are you so mad? Cause I just called facts, like this is what it is.

While walking with her friends, Ruth paused from the conversation to check her phone for new emails. She noticed a new message from Nicole Stephens and interrupted the discussion:

“Hey, did you all see the email Dr. Stephens just sent us?! This looks dope. I’d love to go to this art exhibit for women of color!”

**Significance of Relationships With Women of Color**

Fatima and Cristina both checked their phones to read the invite. Then Fatima giggled with excitement and shared:

WOOOW! I have never been anywhere with a vice president that like reaches out to the RD staff. I think at least for me it’s definitely hit me as a trickle-down effect to see how someone in her position of power in her position of leadership not be afraid to show emotion and not afraid to show like her vulnerabilities and not afraid to show her failures in front of the entire division and to the students as well.

Then Fatima checked her calendar for availability. Saddened at the sight of a conflict on her schedule, she gasped, “Oh no! I’m conflicted, I want to go, but I have a major conflict at that time. What should I do?” Cristina stated in agreement:

I feel you, it’s like, do I go to this training to be a better support to our undocumented students, or do I go to this meeting where it’s going to help me professionally? I’ve got my office right now, especially with pending maternity leave. I need to be at my desk,
and this could have been a great opportunity for my own development, but I just can’t do it.

Fatima took a minute to think about how to navigate this conflict, and then she shared with Ruth and Cristina, “I’ll just connect with my supervisor later to see if I can reschedule this conflict. I have yet to put together my professional development plan, and maybe I’ll just include this in the document to justify my decision.”

As they entered the staff meeting, Cristina stopped Ruth at the door, “Don’t forget to text the group and see who else is going the art exhibit.”

Ruth whispered sharply, “Oh, you’re right! I’ll text the WOCS group and see who else may be going.”

A deep buzzing sound vibrated on the table next to Mya as she wrapped up a one-on-one with her student she was supporting. She ended her conversation by saying:

What’s unique about me and my lens is that I also went to a Jesuit institution for undergraduate schooling and there at the time I was new, I was you know a person of color. I always knew I was a racial minority even though I didn’t know “person of color” or “minority” or those right names, but for me, I can really resonate with the experience of being first-gen, and I also didn’t know what that was called. I just knew I was navigating a university setting, and no one in my family knew any of the contexts of that, and I felt very alone about really small questions . . . So for me in similar ways, I think it is in those conversations that I realized I hated so much having that fear, and those questions kind of keep me from feeling like fully confident.

As her student employee left the room, Mya checked her phone and scrolled through her missed text messages in the WOCS group. It seemed people were generally enthusiastic about this professional development outing:

**Ruth:** Soooo, [insert eye emoji] who’s goin to the art exhibit?!

**Person 1:** How exciting, I love events like this so we can comfortably network.

**Person 2:** I wonder if a lot of people from other schools in the area are going, it’s not often we get to be around WOC at WOC centered events!
**Mya:** Usually, when I go to these kind of events, senior administrators have introduced me to other women of color and everything, so I’ve gotten connected with very powerful, very influential women of color who are in my line of work to do what I want to do. So, you know I’m going! [comment was liked five times].

**Ruth:** I don’t get to chat with them often, and because there are so few and far between [insert, sad-face emoji] they often get overloaded with people wanting to be their mentee and mentor them. So like I’m always cautious of that, so I don’t contact them as much. But I follow what they do, and I pay attention to what they do when I get a chance to interact with them and try to take those opportunities I have to learn as much as I can from them in that moment.

**Person 2:** I don’t have as many WOC mentors, so I’m nervous about networking at this event.

**Jessie:** Don’t worry, girl. When I think about like a professional mentor, that’s also more personal. And I think that is the difference between the type of mentor that I have with women of color versus men. With men, it’s very professional like hey I need to make it to this next step. How should a man navigate this situation? And then with women of color, it’s more like OK, let me tell you about my life and my family and all of these other things and also be mentored by you in regards to how I can navigate my profession in relationship to me as a person [comment was liked three times].

**Person 2:** Does anybody know Dr. Stephens; is she cool like that? Is she gonna help connect us to other WOC senior administrators? I can’t get a read on her.

**Ruth:** She’s helped me get through situations or how to navigate this or how to be able to advocate for myself to be able to get these opportunities or resources for my department. But that may not be other people’s experience.

**Mya:** I think you can also look to us to help you out. For example, me and Ruth are good friends. And it’s all been kind of like over this idea of friendship. It’s not just like I don’t see her as my mentor. She’s really my friend who is also mentoring me. And I think that’s super powerful that friends who truly love one another are going to be there to be able to help you and also be able to call you on your sh*t and also be able to say hey I’m here when you need to be picked up [comment was loved seven times].

Mya suddenly put her phone down when she realized her sister-colleague, Jessie, was coming to meet with her soon. She glanced at her calendar and saw that she only had 5 minutes to run to the restroom and refill her water bottle. Mya put her phone down and rushed out of the office; as she made her way into the lobby, a group of young Black women excitedly waved at her, signaling for Mya to join them.
Student 1 said, “Hi Ms. Mya, I really like your outfit today; you always look so professional.”

Everyone exchanged smiling faces when Mya, replied, “Thank you, Jackie, you know I try to stay fly. I appreciate the love.”

Then Mya asked the whole group of Black women, “How’s everyone doing? I know finals week is right around the corner.”

Student 2 nervously gasped, “Awe, Ms. Mya, why did you have to remind us? Honestly, I’m not looking forward to it because my professor’s office hours always conflict with my leadership obligations, and I’m not getting the help that I need.” Several of the Black women nodded their heads in agreement. Mya replied:

Okay, well, look, I have to run, but just remember we don’t get too many excuses in life. Make sure that you communicate to your professor that you need help or inquire if they have other availability. Also, don’t forget that you have access to the Tutoring Center to get help because professors can’t be on campus 24/7.

“You’re right. We’ll get on it,” Student 2 said.

Mya picked up her pace as she now had 2 minutes to take care of herself. She passed a young man of color and made sure to give him a friendly head nod, acknowledging his presence. As she passed the student worker’s desk, she greeted everyone with positive energy. She almost made it to the restroom when her colleague from the Advising Department tapped her on the shoulder. Her colleague said:

Hey, Mya, sorry to stop you before going to the bathroom. Real quick, I just wanted to let you know that I sent a student your way via email. I know you work closely with the Black Student Union, so I figured you could help this student find community.

Mya quickly inhaled, then exhaled and responded with a smile, “Okay, I will check out the email and see what I can do.”
“Oh thanks,” her colleague exclaimed, “you’re such a lifesaver, I just want to make sure this student gets, you know, the right kind of support.”

Mya finally completed her personal tasks, and as she returned to the lobby she saw Jessie sitting on the couch, responding to messages on her phone.

Mya greeted her, saying, “Hey Jessie, sorry I’m 5 minutes late. Of course, when I was heading out to use the restroom and things like five people stopped me along the way.”

Jessie responded in laughter, “Oh, it’s fine, I get it. No worries whatsoever.”

Scene 2: The Art Exhibit

Context

Nicole Stephens paid for fifteen WOC to attend the art exhibit. Given that the event was local, there was no need to organize transportation. Everyone was responsible for securing their own transportation and attending the WOCS debrief discussion following the exhibit. Once the art exhibit began, the Magis staff had about 90 minutes to view art and network with others.

Safe Spaces

Jessie felt at home the moment she stepped into the art exhibit; she could hear a mix of Jill Scott’s classic, Golden, and the loud laughter of joy and warm embraces. Before scanning the room for familiar faces, her eyes widened at the sight of hundreds of Black and Brown bodies of people in all shapes and sizes. Love was radiating from this space as people hugged, greeted, and introduced one another; everything about this venue screamed, “unapologetically free.” With admiration, Jessie slowly moved through the room and noticed some of the typical business casual attire. Still, it was also refreshing to see graphic tees and blazers, shoulder cut-outs, bamboo earrings, vibrant head wraps, and luscious locks of hair. She also caught glimpses of fun accessories such as funky-styled eyeglasses, colorful handbags/backpacks, sneakers, comfy flats,
and strappy heels. Jessie could not help but pay compliments to other WOC professionals moving around the room. After checking her coat and filling out a name tag, she was welcomed by the curator of the art exhibit. Fully prepared with a program and beverage in hand, Jessie headed to the first wall of curated photos. In the center of the collage, Jessie read the words: *Safe Spaces* (see Figure 2).

![Image of Safe Spaces](image)

Figure 2. Safe spaces.

As Jessie joined a small group of WOC viewing *Art Exhibit Station 1*, she could not help but be drawn to the images that aligned with her personal experience. As she was taking time to think about the pictures displayed before her, she felt someone tap her shoulder.
“Hey, Jessie! So happy, I found a familiar face. I’ve been here for a while but was dying to unpack the images at this station. What do safe spaces mean to you?” Fatima exclaimed.

“Hey, sis!” Jessie reached for a hug, then responded:

To me, hmmm? Having those individuals where it’s reciprocated. Like you can share information, you can share frustrations without judgment. You can be real and be honest. Like where there’s no mask, there’s no filter, you can just go in raw and uncut. You don’t necessarily have to explain, but if a question is asked, can you tell me more about that . . .

Fatima excitedly jumped in:

Yeah, it’s definitely a brave space to talk about it or a safe space to have those dialogues. I think we all [know] that we need this space to have these conversations and be in community with one another, [pause] I think in order to survive.

They both continued to view the images and maintain a coherent conversation without eye contact. Then Fatima continued to speak aloud:

It goes back to my journey as first-gen of I don’t know what I don’t know. So, who’s willing to journey with me? Slow down on their own journey to say, “I’m gonna reveal some truths.” People who are willing to slow down and share their lessons and illuminate truths. And also, the honest truth about systems or institutions I’m navigating that maybe systems or institutions wouldn’t tell me.

Jessie shook her head in agreement and replied:

Yes! I couldn’t have navigated a Jesuit institution as a woman of color without other women of color, creating spaces for me to just open up. But then also challenging myself to really name fears in institutions where fear means you’re not professional. To name your fear means you must not be good at your job. To name fear must be you weren’t ready. And we know that that’s not true. Like people learn a lot of the time, especially at entry-level roles, which was my experience on the job. And so women of color saying it’s OK, this is normal especially in diversity equity inclusion work where we are constantly battling if you’re not sure of yourself yet you’re in a position that is leveraging your identities then what does that mean about you as a professional.

Fatima said:

I would definitely say that they are those spaces where I can go to ask people for their honest thoughts and opinions and be able to have them love me no matter what. I think a perfect example are my friends from [out of state], Cheyenne and Danielle. And so they both were administrative coordinators as well in the executive suite, and we were all kind
of going through the same parts of our lives, which was really exciting. They were the people that I could be able to go and talk to about work things but also be able to talk to about different experiences. And then when I moved to [to another state], the three of us like stayed connected no matter what else. We have this group text that we are on all the time. It’s primarily Cheyenne and Danielle, like going back and forth and then me inserting like “haha” or whatever. But I love it because regardless of the distance, we still really maintain this relationship together.

Jessie responded, “Yeah. Finding safe and brave spaces where I can tell people I’m just surviving, which tends to happen with people of color. Those tend to be most of my safe spaces.”

While listening to Jessie speak, Fatima could see someone from the corner of her eye motion for them to move toward Art Exhibit Station 2. Jessie paused the discussion and excitedly waved to other Magis colleagues. Satisfied with their reflective discussion, Fatima and Jessie left to join more of their sister-colleagues.

**Action-Oriented Support**

Ruth and Mya were happy to be joined by their colleagues. Mya greeted each person with a hug and said, “Y’all have to do a twirl; your outfits are fire!” Mya continued to share, “It’s so nice to hang with y’all outside of the office and not be under a microscope, I feel so free!”

Ruth then redirected the conversation by saying, “What do we have here? There are so many pictures.”

This area was particularly crowded as many people were prompted to interact with this station. There were three distinct compilations of photographs that defined systems of support. Each panel was labeled as Art Exhibit Station 2a (see Appendix A), Art Exhibit Station 2b (see Appendix B), and Art Exhibit Station 2c (see Appendix C). There was intentional spacing between each panel to create opportunities for WOC attendees to add their personal examples of systems of support. Before the Magis team shared their reactions to each other, they picked up a
slip of paper and a pen and began to write their examples of systems of support as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Interactive Panel Board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Slip of paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>I had a conversation with my supervisor, where I had to write my conversation down and out so that I could hold myself accountable to actually saying what I was feeling, which was a lot of imposter syndrome. And I remember my supervisor just holding space for me, hearing me, validating this feeling of enoughness, which I think in identity work always comes up is I’m not enough of this. If I put this other identity out in front or in that moment feeling like I literally had to wear this identity to be able to then create a space where other students can actualize it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>He’s not even a tenured faculty. He’s very well respected on campus. Literally, in this meeting where we’re talking about what my department is going to do in regards to peer educators. This man never talks to me. He literally talks over me to my boss the entire time. And then [my supervisor] will then always direct it back to me. I know that he will be a support to me in those spaces and that he sees it, and then I can bring it up to him and be able to say, I was like microaggressed, and he’s like, “yeah.” And I was like, “OK thanks” like it’s not just me. And to be able to have him as a White man see that and affirm my experience has been so helpful as a woman of color professionally at my institution to be able to figure out you know how do I navigate this place and space and also keep my sanity because imposter syndrome continues on into the professional world. And he helps ground me in regards to my professional identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mya</td>
<td>My supervisor was phenomenal in understanding that being a woman of color is going to get lonely at times, and it’s OK to hold on to a few people and really invest in those relationships. They don’t have to be professional all the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>It wasn’t until graduate school that I felt like super empowered to be able to claim my identity as a woman of color. And I think a lot of that came from the other women of color in my program that were like, “No, you can come to our space you are allowed here.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ruth recognized that she was the last person to place her note. While everyone silently viewed the photographs, Ruth shared, “I didn’t know I needed to have that validated and to have like someone who I aspire to be. That’s going to be a part of my motivation to work every day.”

Mya replied:

Even with the system of support you know having someone come to you and say, “you need to get your stuff together, you’re gonna apply for that job, and you’re going to be up out here like what are you afraid of?” Or all of us agreeing “okay we’d be like alright 2018 we up and out, by this time everybody’s gone. We’re not leaving anybody behind.”

Fatima suddenly remembered her graduate assistant supervisor and shared:

My [supervisor] helped me get my internship into conduct. Gave me those connections there and all this stuff. And she was a White female and all this stuff but was very attuned to a lot of things that were going on. [She] was very open and honest like, “I don’t understand your specific experience of being a person of color. But I can see how it’s impacting you.” [She] never tried to like correct it or give advice or other stuff. [She] was just trying to like support me as a whole through it instead of just trying to like jump in and fix it. It was just like, “do you just need a break? You just like need to get away.” And so she was like really great. Like why I didn’t always have to like be worried about any of that stuff, which is a really cool kind of support like it fixes a problem without ever talking about the problem.

Jessie added:

I would imagine mentorship as a system of support through various supervisors or various staff members. I think it’s again it’s like helping with that need. So providing information or providing financial support or providing emotional support spiritual support. I think of churches, and although that’s not a space that I identify as a way of support, I know a lot of people a lot of my friends do.

In thinking about supervisors and developing meaningful relationships, Fatima felt compelled to share a memory with everyone:

[My White-male supervisor] sat down next to me introduced me to [a WOC colleague] and we bonded very quickly, and I think like meeting [another WOC colleague] and [another WOC colleague], and like [another WOC colleague] we’re still here. I think that just understanding what it meant to be part of a professional sisterhood was super powerful.

Ruth was moved by this memory and added:
And it’s all been kind of like over this idea of friendship. It’s not just like I don’t see her as my mentor. She’s really my friend who is also mentoring me. And I think that’s super powerful that friends who truly love one another are going to be there to be able to help you and also be able to call you on your shit and also be able to say “hey I’m here when you need to be picked up.” And so, I really think that is like the ultimate, ultimate mentoring relationship.

Mya then replied:

So for me support systems just make me think of the characteristic of truth. And then also I go back to this word, vulnerability. People who are willing to share like when they’ve failed and use like failure-based stories to give me a heads up or give me some sort of encouragement or remind me, like normalize. Like, normalize that sometimes things just get tough. So truth-tellers, vulnerable folks, folks who will normalize, rather than make me feel isolated like all that’s your experience, so deal with it. So for me, support systems are like places where truth is illuminated.

When everyone was just about ready to leave this expansive station, Mya noticed some interesting posts on the wall. Mya said, “Hey, before we leave, look at these other stories that aren’t so much like ours.” After they quickly read these posts, everyone left this station in deep reflection, remembering that everyone has different experiences at their respective universities. It was a sobering reminder that they were fortunate to find a unique institution such as this one.

Some of the posts were as follows:

In order for me to get a support system, I have to offer information so people can know me, and offering information is vulnerable because it might be used against me. So, I keep going in that circle. But who do I tell, and then what happens when it gets into the wrong hands?

I think for me trust is a huge thing and I’m definitely someone with a lot of walls up and like very guarded and all this stuff. I don’t like sharing weaknesses just because, like growing up in like Black communities and all this stuff is like showing vulnerabilities is showing weakness, and they can be used against you a lot of the time. So I’m very cautious of doing that with fellow colleagues, so getting to know them outside of the work environment and about personal lives has been really helpful to be able to share more of where we come from.

Like even in a support [system], I found with the [WOC] director, and I still see. I think sometimes it is very challenging and tricky because she can adhere to those very male very White ways of supervising and being and leading and so it’s just like, do you have
any empathy or sympathy or understanding for what I’m going through. You just put the kibosh on it, and you didn’t hear me. And so that was sometimes hard because it’s like you didn’t feel good. But I don’t think at times she realized it because it was a matter of survival for her and her even saying you know I don’t have. She is like, “you know when people say it’s lonely at the top, it’s lonely at the top.” And I don’t even have a true support system because there’s not a lot of folks if any that looks like me at this level at this institution.

There’s almost as protectiveness that I wanted to have of [my WOC supervisor] too. Going into this position and knowing that she doesn’t ask for help like I think she tries to put on this armor which I get because I put on the armor too, but I think trying to create a space, or it’s like you can take your armor off and it’s gonna be okay.

And my ideas for support have changed just because sometimes I want to talk about certain things, but I don’t have the right person to talk to.

There’s no willingness on my part to perform. So people have in their minds who they want to like mentor, or you know take you under their wing, and if I’m not that person, I have no desire or willingness to like perform.

Aspects of Career Navigation

Ruth glanced at her watch and noticed it was almost time to head to the WOCS debrief session hosted by Dr. Stephens. “Before we have to leave, let’s spend some time at Art Exhibit Station 3; I don’t know about you all, but I’m interested in the career navigation part!” Ruth said with a curious smile.

The group headed to the next station with great anticipation. Given their time constraints, everyone took the time to read the comments and view the images in silence. Upon arrival, this station had three panels of photos set up in a similar manner to the last station (see Figures 3, 4, and 5). Three subthemes captured career navigation: Challenges and Barriers, Grounding Reminders, and Strategies for Navigation. For this station, the photos included curation from the photographers. The descriptions of each photo explicitly stated the thoughts of WOC professionals who also worked at HWIs.
Figure 3. Challenges and barriers.

The curation alongside the images was as follows:

I think of the many characteristics I see exemplified by professional WOCSAA at Jesuit universities and colleges. Gender, sex, and race can all be overwhelmingly overlooked at historically White Jesuit institutions, causing a chokehold, forcing silent professionals who lie at the intersections of all three identities and more. Nonetheless, like the tree, WOCSAA grow, sometimes literally growing around that very thing that chokes them and sometimes doing so unapologetically (i.e., the tree looks strong as though it was overtaking the bike lock). This can include not forgetting the barriers that are around them but remembering those barriers while adapting beyond them. In my own experience, I’ve had to rely on WOCSAA at [my institution] to coach me countless times on how to navigate difficult conversations about wellness, devastating sociopolitical events influencing WOC on university campuses, compensation, interpersonal conflicts, and more. In doing so, I’ve appreciated how in listening to me, most of my fellow WOC colleagues have not had me explain that thing that is serving as an obstacle for me, literally choking me, but instead have lifted a mirror to show me that I’m very capable of growing around and beyond such obstacles. (Image 1)
This image represents my experience of being invited to be a part of creating a more inclusive atmosphere only to arrive at the meeting and realize no one is there with me. The symbolic idea of finally having a “seat at the table” is crushed with the reality that the seat was only open because no one else was interested in doing the work. In these moments, I feel tricked into thinking I would be receiving support when, in reality, I’m just being set up to blame myself if my desire or project does not come to fruition. (Image 2)

The picture is from the [departmental] breakfast, where the keynote speaker was talking about trans and reproductive rights. I sent this image to a colleague and said that this was the issue of our campus with our institutional leadership. We were able to have a conversation about this image and focus on critical hope for our institution. Regardless of the issues we have, there are people who are trying to educate the ignorant to produce a more socially just campus environment. (Image 3)

Providing support to others at a Jesuit university can sometimes be limited. One must still follow the mission and values of the university. You can’t steer too far left or too far right because, as a Woman of Color, your decisions are policed and questioned, especially if your lifting another Woman of Color as you yourself are climbing. (Image 4)

Something that I learned at [my institution] was that people leave bad management and bad environments. They stay because of good management and good environments. My second director at [my institution] was the best supervisor that I have ever seen. She modeled what she wanted her staff to do. She encouraged our holistic well-being, and so. As a result, there was very little turnover during her time. When staff left, it was because she had prepared them to go on to the next level. She was one of the main reasons I stayed at [my institution] for four more years. (Image 5)

Being present in the office but running on empty is as useless as not coming in at all. However, whenever I want to take time to refuel or replenish myself, I’m often pegged with an immense amount of guilt. I do not feel supported in my need to take time for myself. I feel as if I’m not being a team player by not showing up to work. (Image 6)

As I navigate the places and spaces of higher education as a Black, queer woman, I can’t help but think about this book. This book, written by the incredible Angela Davis, brings to light the historical and contextual history between gender, race, and class. Specifically, the tension between White women and Black women’s quest for freedom. Through this book, I learned that there is an ugly history between White feminism and Black women’s liberation. Through Davis’s research, I see current problems with the lack of White woman support and true, holistic support through Women of Color. With shared lenses through race and gender, only Black and Women of Color can truly understand this experience. I hold this book near to my heart and as a way to understand where we came from and where we are going to a community of Women of Color. (Image 6)
When I first started at [my institution], there were times when I struggled to be authentic. I think it was true for most of the folks in my department. I also think that it was often true for other colleagues of color. Finding spaces where you could be yourself—be accepted for you is something that we’re all looking for because it’s hard to keep your focus and motivation when things feel disingenuous. These fronts we put up happen because we don’t feel psychologically safe to share ideas, to be ourselves. Instead, what happens is that we settle for something that isn’t real, and that doesn’t feed us or energize us. I think if this had not changed for me, I would not have lasted as long as I did at [my institution]. (Image 1)

It was at [my institution] where I learned the power of interfaith work and collaboration. I do not identify as a religious person or with a particular institution of faith. However, I felt that even I had a place at [my institution]. I felt that [my institution] did allow me to grow spiritually and was unafraid of engaging in conversations of faith. Many private and
public institutions are afraid of faith and spirituality. [My institution] engaged students in conversation and facilitated collaboration in ways that I had never seen before amongst the different faiths. I felt connected to this conversation, and I never felt like there was no room for me because I wasn’t Catholic. (Image 2)

This heart-shaped lego build reminds me of how I have pieced together my support system while working at this Jesuit institution. The pieces are not innately connected, but I found a way to piece together what I have been given in order to get something that works for me. (Image 3)

This plant was given to me by my division when I first arrived to my institution. Even though it was a really nice gesture, I’ve found that it has taken more work than I anticipated in order to keep it alive. It is a constant reminder to me that nothing grows unless it is being nurtured and taken care of. There are times when I do not feel taken care of at work. However, when I do lean into my support system, I am able to continue to grow. (Image 4)

I find it to be a very poignant reminder that even though it feels rough, someone else was there and pushed through, and I have also pushed through and can and will do so again. (Image 5)

The curation alongside the images was as follows:

One of my passions since college is hair braiding, and now I have decided to create a business called “Braidz 2 go.” Offer women and girls in NYC quick hair braiding styles for a reasonable price. (Image 1)

This is a picture of a toddler on a balance bike. It has no wheels; therefore, the toddler must strike the right balance and coordination in order to move. My support system at a Jesuit institution stabilized me and wouldn’t allow me to fall or fail even if I didn’t completely feel confident in myself. (Image 2)

Starbucks became my ad hoc office. I appreciated being able to feel comfortable to meet in a public place to talk about how our offices can support one another. This week, I meet with our [food vendor] representative to plan New Student Orientation meals. She bought my drink and continued to tell me that the foundation we have created working together would allow the team to carry on without me while I am on maternity leave. It was great to hear from one of our most used campus partners that they feel secure in the program and team I have created to be able to continue the good work while I take on this next journey as a mom. That support, over a warm coffee, made me feel less anxious and stressed about my impending maternity leave. (Image 3)

This picture is a “staycation” that I desperately needed in order to get away from the worries of work. A lot of times, I realize that my way of working through difficulties at work is to remove myself mentally, and if that does not work then I will physically remove myself even if it’s for a long weekend. (Image 4)
Scene 3: The Art Exhibit Debrief

Context

Nicole Stephens reserved a private room in a restaurant nearby so the members of WOCS had a place to process the art exhibit outing. Nicole wanted to ensure the members of WOCS had a safe space to make meaning of their experience and draw connections to their current working environment.
Forming a Political Identity

It was 7:05 p.m. when the members of WOCS began to trickle into the restaurant’s private room. Suddenly there was laughter in the room, and small group chatter as people recounted their experience at the art exhibit. The chairs were arranged in the shape of a circle so everyone could see each other for the discussion. As Nicole Stephens moved to the front of the room, everyone began to quiet down in anticipation for the debrief. Nicole Stephens greeted everyone:

Thanks for participating in WOCS professional development outing. This was truly a success, and I hope that everyone feels comfortable in participating in this discussion. We have about 90 minutes of reserved space, so let’s jump right in. Take a moment to have small group discussions with three or four people next to you and talk about what this art exhibit on women of color administrators means to you.

Because Ruth, Fatima, Mya, and Jessie were sitting next to each other, they decided to engage in a small group discussion together. Ruth asked, “So, what came up for y’all?”

Fatima responded:

Women of color identity is not talked about from a student affairs perspective. We don’t hear presentations about how you help students actualize this identity, just like we have to in development theory. We know that certain students go through certain stages, and we don’t know yet what stages women of color go through. You know, do they have to give up a sense of their race or gender identity to kind of fit into this space? Through my work, I’ve learned, no. You can still racially identify as South Asian, as Brown and still show up and identify in a solidarity and political aspect, and that is as a woman of color. But no one’s writing some of this stuff down so that when you say you’re a woman of color, you’re not having to wipe away your other identities. [Reflective pause] I think in so many ways this identity has been something I wasn’t looking for, but something I needed, something that has allowed me to encapsulate all of myself.

Absorbing Fatima’s words, Mya shared:

I feel that [WOCSAA] understand what I’m going through with the battle the extra battles that come with being a woman of color as we try to navigate spaces that weren’t particularly made for us, [pause] but now we’re here.

Fatima responded again:
And I think it was through other women of color where I’ve often found like peace and support. But also, like women of color, understand what that means through a way, a look, or a question. Like someone who doesn’t share those identities, it means nothing right. But I think that someone who has a shared experience, I think, can provide a whole other avenue of support and affirmation.

Ruth added:

Yes, and [relationships with WOCsA] influenced my professional journey in the idea that community is really important, mentorship is really important. And I think having folks of those identities is not always going to guarantee that you’re going to run into women of color that are inclusive or run into women of color that are not anti-Black or have those ideals.

Everyone vocalized their agreement with head nods. Mya nodded in agreement and said:

You’re so right! There is this generational difference of people who’ve stayed at the institution. Women of color who have stayed at the institution, and their ideas of surviving and thriving is different. I think that’s been one of the challenging pieces when I came to [my institution]. There was kind of this small cadre of women of color that had been there both in the faculty and staff ranks for over 20 plus years. And [uncomfortable laughter] you know skin folk are not kinfolk sometimes. And I was like yo this is crazy. All this stuff that’s happened and I’m told like no it’s not, it’s fine. And they had acclimated so much into this White supremacist ideology of just don’t rock the boat, and you’ll be okay. And that was super challenging when I first came to the institution.

Ruth lifted her hands and said with a smile, “Preach” and then added, “I think that’s really important because you can bring a lot of women of color in, but if they don’t know how to model and support one another it’s not going to work like that.” Fatima said:

I don’t attribute my thriving to any institution, I attribute it fully to women of color who like radically embrace that identity. It’s not just a default identity that someone is putting on them but something that they’re willing to stand in and stand apart in. And therefore, like honestly, seek me out and talk to me about what this means. What does identity mean for you? What does it mean within a professional context for you that you don’t have to negotiate one or other aspects of you.

Jessie then said:

I couldn’t have navigated a Jesuit institution as a woman of color without other women of color, creating spaces for me to just open up. But then also challenging myself to really name fears in institutions where fear means you’re not professional. To name your fear means you must not be good at your job. To name fear must be you weren’t ready. And
we know that that’s not true. Like people learn a lot of the time, especially at entry-level roles, which was my experience on the job. And so, women of color saying it’s okay, this is normal, especially in diversity equity inclusion work where we are constantly battling if you’re not sure of yourself yet you’re in a position that is leveraging your identities then what does that mean about you as a professional.

Ruth responded:

At times, institutions will hire and tokenize this person of color and will use their labor. But when they try to reform the institution, [the institution] will slap them on the wrist and say no. And so, I felt the more I surrounded myself with other folks of different walks of life when it came to racial or gender experiences. I was arming myself, and I was also I don’t know I was doing the work of what it means to be a woman of color, not just saying it but actually like exercising it.

Social Capital Exchange

Nicole Stephens floated around the room, listening to her colleagues connect over dialogue. Though at times she wished she could participate in the conversation, she recognized that the women of color in her division needed a safe space to share their stories. As Nicole was about to interrupt the small group discussions to transition everyone to a large group discussion, she heard someone call her name. Fatima asked, “Dr. Stephens, could we ask you a question? We’re dying to hear from your perspective.”

Ruth then asked the following question, “Dr. Stephens, what advice do you give to entry- and mid-level WOCSAA who seek to make an institutional change at Magis University?”

Dr. Stephens replied:

One of the things that I say to young professionals that I work with and anyone coming into a new environment is, “Yes, you are brought there to be a change agent and to provide nuance to what’s going on at the institution.” But I don’t believe you can do that without some history of the institution and knowing what are the pathways that have led the institution to where they are and how can you infuse whatever new initiative you have to improve upon that.

Jessie added:
I have a mentor, and she’s been super helpful in helping me navigate, like “Alright I’m having a problem with this faculty, I don’t know what to do.” Like who do they know? Before I start popping off, because with my future relationships and job opportunities, please help me understand who’s connected and where which has been awesome.

Dr. Stephens also shared:

I think not initially coming in as a bull in a china closet but really getting to know other individuals is how I built support and then it garnered trust with those individuals for me because they looked at how I went about my way of knowing and getting to know individuals and then being able to provide my thoughts relative to how I was going to change things.

While the discussion was still happening, Dr. Stephens was called by another group. She politely excused herself but encouraged them to continue the conversation. Jessie pushed the dialogue along:

I think there’s something there’s some sort of like an organic connection that happens or this like, “hey I’m going to look out for you.” That happens or sharing of information or like social capital that happens. My first time having a woman of color supervisor, I couldn’t help but feel really validated throughout my whole experience with her and felt that I could be myself. We would kind of interchange between talking about work to talking about life, to talking about best practices in life. Just how to navigate institutions, how to navigate like male supremacy, how to navigate White male supremacy. Like all of this stuff which I had never had conversations like that at least in the supervisor capacity. I think I’ve had mentors or people I’ve worked alongside with. But I think there’s something about, for me, that was my first like, oh like this is really dope. She just really shaped who I wanted to be for other people or how I wanted to create relationships that could I think be both affirming, challenging, supportive, real like all in the same sense.

Moved by that example, Fatima responded:

Mentors who may or may not identify as women of color but still show up for me because they see some sort of affinity, especially at a Jesuit institution because we are racial or gender minorities individuals. Those people who are willing to feel a bit more comfortable around me are willing to let down the mask or let down their guard and allow me to do the same, are willing to share their power with me.

Realizing that Dr. Stephens was going to call the group back together, Ruth concluded with the following:
People want to see someone who looks like them. But at the same time it’s “that- and” I learned “that-and” part. People want to see someone who looks like them. But we also want to go beyond Whiteness models which say, “I want just someone who looks like me, to I want someone who looks like me and is willing to work with people who don’t look like me or people who will challenge me to work out of my comfort zone right.” I think that’s something that has always now kind of left me thinking, exploring as a woman of color through my professional journey from [my institution].

As the large group discussion proceeded, Ruth and her colleagues shifted their focus to the front of the room. By listening to the stories of other WOC, they felt validated and affirmed by their vice president and by their Jesuit institution.

Before everyone left the space, Dr. Stephens asked for everyone to do the following:

Everyone, please stand if you are able, take a deep breath and then exhale to center yourselves at this moment, be sure to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, take time to make eye contact with your sister-colleagues, and one at a time let’s each share a one-word check-out to close this space.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CLOSING

There are seven general findings that highlight the experiences of the 13 co-investigators in this final chapter. The findings are divided into three subsections that answer the overarching research questions: establishing systems of support, defining systems of support, and how systems of support affect career navigation. Each finding was connected to the theoretical framework and literature review as way to make meaning of key quotes and the structure of certain scenes in the CNF narrative. Throughout the discussion in this chapter, co-investigators are named by their pseudonym or referred to by the name of their character in Chapter Four. Following the discussion of the findings, there are three implications that highlight ways practitioners can create more inclusive and supportive working environments for WOCSAA. Last, this chapter concludes with future recommendations for research on WOCSAA.

Summary of the Study

“Lifting as we climb” is the process in which WOCSAA use systems of support to navigate their professional journeys at HWIs. With a conceptual framework rooted in CRT and BFT, this research was designed to expose how White hegemony and intersectional oppression manifest within working environments. As such, WOCSAA create systems of support to counter the negative effects of marginalization in the workplace. To center the voices of WOCSAA, three research questions were explored in this study: How do WOCSAA define systems of support, How and why do WOCSAA establish systems of support to assist in their professional
navigation of HWIs, and How do these systems of support affect WOCSAA professional navigation of HWIs? To best capture the narratives of WOCSAA, the BFAR methodology was used to center WOCSAA voices and create a culture of collaboration that will empower WOCSAA to enhance their career navigation.

BFAR is a qualitative research methodology that transforms the relationship between the researcher and participant to a collaborative partnership, values experiential knowledge as truth, and fosters communal empowerment. Designed as a methodological hybrid of Black feminism and action research, participants engaged in the research as co-investigators and co-created knowledge. For this study, thirteen WOCSAA who had professional experience in Jesuit higher education participated in an in-depth interview, collected and curated twelve photos, engaged in small focus groups, and completed a reflexive questionnaire. With WOCSAA as the center of analysis in this study, the voices of co-investigators were validated and seen as truth.

After designing an affirming methodology for WOCSAA co-investigators, it was equally important to articulate the findings in a way that protected the co-investigators’ identities as well as their places of employment. By using creative non-fiction, radical imagination, and composite character development, the findings became an engaging, multidimensional experience for readers. By creating a robust narrative, the professional experiences of the thirteen co-investigators were merged into six characters, created a fictional Jesuit institution, and designed three scenes to answer each research question. As a result, a total of seven findings were explored in each scene of the creative non-fiction narrative (see Table 5).
Table 5. Findings in Each Scene of the CNF Narrative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Art Exhibit Invitation</td>
<td>Significance of relationships with WOC and consciousness and awareness of identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Art Exhibit</td>
<td>Safe spaces, defining systems of support and aspects of career navigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Art Exhibit Debrief</td>
<td>Empowering political identity and social capital exchange</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the dialogue between the characters and curated images came from the co-investigators data collection. Each scene was developed for readers to immerse in the narrative and expand their perspective of how WOCSAA navigate HWIs.

Discussion of the Findings

Establishing Systems of Support

Two findings are essential to understanding how and why WOCSAA establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of HWIs. Many co-investigators shared how important it was to find and cultivate relationships with other WOCSAA to survive and thrive in their professional role. These relationships took the form of individual mentorship, searching for opportunities to collaborate and work with WOCSAA, and creating counterspaces for WOCSAA to foster authentic professional identity development. Additionally, co-investigators stated they sought relationships with WOCSAA to find refuge from hypersurveillance in the workplace. Many co-investigators were constantly aware of how their White peers perceived them. The feeling of constant surveillance strongly influenced how co-investigators showed up to work, asked for help, and vocalized their ideas and concerns. As a result, these findings answer how and why systems of support are needed in the workplace.
Significance of relationships with women of color. The structure of Chapter Four was designed to illustrate how relationships were experienced by the co-investigators. Throughout this chapter, results showed WOCSAA worked to support each other through in-person dialogue, text groups, and attending events that centered their professional experience in student affairs. Co-investigators who successfully found relationships with WOCSAA described a multitude of ways in which they cultivated these connections. The most common way co-investigators built and maintained relationships was through the use of text groups and social media platforms. By using technology to foster relationships with WOCSAA, co-investigators were able to problem-solve, vent, show support, ask questions, and celebrate one another. Many co-investigators described these relational spaces as ways to release what they were suppressing throughout the workday. Co-investigators also used these spaces to strategize how to confront or address conflict in the workplace. Overall, these relationships provided space for the co-investigators to exercise vulnerability and make meaning of their professional experience in an authentic way.

Some co-investigators did not have a direct line of communication with WOCSAA on their campus and experienced difficulties connecting with other WOCSAA. They described a longing for increased engagement with other WOCSAA on their campus as it related to their specific area of work. As a result, co-investigators were in search of senior-level mentorship from WOCSAA or individualized mentorship from people who were willing to share valuable lessons and tips for professional success. The co-investigators also shared that they appreciated when White colleagues and colleagues of color were willing to connect them directly to other WOCSAA. As a result, WOCSAA were able to develop formalized relationships with other WOCSAA and were able to schedule time to meet and cultivate a mentoring relationship.
Consciousness and awareness of identities. In the opening scene of *The Art Exhibit Invitation*, readers were introduced to what a HWI may look like through the eyes of a WOCSAA. While Dr. Stephens was taking in the view of her institution, she experienced a moment of pride in seeing a group of WOCSAA walking together on campus, exuding confidence and care for each other. Though the group of WOCSAA had a strong professional sisterhood and was perceived as walking confidently through campus, they were actually problem-solving where they should sit in a staff meeting based on feedback they received from their supervisors. As seen in Chapter Four, the co-investigators were constantly aware of their intersecting identities as WOC, how they were perceived by colleagues, and how the perceptions held by their colleagues could affect their professional navigation.

Though many co-investigators expressed joy in building relationships with WOCSAA, they also shared their awareness of challenges that stemmed from developing community with WOCSAA. Laila shared that she constantly felt her White colleagues would compare her to other WOCSAA. This was particularly difficult as she felt compared to WOCSAA who were a part of her support system. Other co-investigators shared similar sentiments toward being compared to one another during evaluation meetings or given feedback about who they spent the most time with during team gatherings. This kind of feedback was difficult to accept and sometimes confusing given that there were no concerns about their actual job performance.

In addition to being conscious of their intersecting identities and who they spent time with, co-investigators shared caution as it related to vocalizing their concerns or difference of opinion during team meetings with White colleagues. The co-investigators were constantly monitoring their tone or reaction to problematic discussions during staff meetings out of fear of being labeled the “angry” or “unhappy” employee. Fatima explained the following:
I always have to combat that as a woman but also as a woman of color. Like really monitoring like my tone and how I say things. So a lot of times I won’t speak in meetings and other stuff because like something that’s being said is kind of irritating me. So I have to monitor and be really cautious of how I say something or when I say something and how I say it, which also means like the moment passing for me to do so. But then I get told later like: “Oh you don’t speak enough in meetings.” But then when I do speak in meetings, I get called out for being unhappy. I’m like there is this never-ending cycle of what it is that you want me to do and how to be. So that’s really led to like is this a hill I’m going to die on. Whereas like yes I feel like I’m bringing up a good point here in this moment in time, but down the road how much of my time is it going to take just like to defend my tone, my face, my body actions. And a lot of times it’s never defending what I said, it’s how I said it, and how I looked as I said it.

Fatima’s quote implies that she expended an exorbitant amount of energy to determine her actions, behaviors, and terms of engagement with White colleagues. This experience denotes emotional labor and the cost associated with choosing to speak or be silent (Kelly, Gardner, Stone, Hixson, & Dissassa, 2019). The feelings and emotions tied to the co-investigators’ intersecting marginalized identities further emphasize the first tenet of CRT, intersectional oppression. It was not distinguishable if the harm they experienced was exclusively tied to race, gender, or both intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1991). These multi-layered encounters further isolate and silence WOCSAA in their working environments.

**Defining Systems of Support**

There are three findings that answer the following research question: How do WOCSAA define systems of support? Co-investigators shared the importance of developing or finding spaces at their HWIs that represented their salient identities. They described safe spaces as locations that were virtual, spiritual, and physical locations on and off campus. Second, many co-investigators described systems of support as receiving action-oriented support from White colleagues, mentors, and peers. This type of support almost always involved others intervening on their behalf or providing valuable information that would enhance their professional
development and advancement. Last, the co-investigators discussed specific aspects of career navigation that captured challenges and barriers, grounding reminders that kept them connected to work, and concrete strategies for career navigation.

**Safe spaces.** In the second scene of Chapter Four, the characters attended an art exhibit as a professional development outing for WOCSAA. By using radical imagination, this scene modeled how institutions can play a supporting role in WOCSAA finding safe spaces to cultivate relationships. Additionally, the opening scene was designed to showcase the essence of safe spaces for WOCSAA. When Jessie entered the art exhibit, she was no longer functioning in an HWI and joined a diverse group of WOC to learn and foster community. Immediately upon her arrival, Jessie felt welcomed, seen, and unapologetically free. Research shows that counterspaces (safe spaces) serve as direct sources of empowerment for WOCSAA (Mirza, 2009; Seo & Hinton, 2009; West, 2019). When WOCSAA exercise agency in creating their own spaces that counter the dominant culture in HWIs, they can build authentic, supporting relationships. As such, safe spaces are fundamental to how WOCSAA experience systems of support.

In order to better understand what qualifies as a safe space for WOCSAA, the co-investigators shared two important factors. Safe spaces must allow WOCSAA to be their authentic selves and serve as an opportunity for individuals to share their stories and lessons with each other. Jazz shared the following about safe spaces:

> You can share information; you can share frustrations without judgment. You can be real and be honest. Like where there’s no mask, there’s no filter, you can just go in raw and uncut. You don’t necessarily have to explain but if a question is asked can you tell me more about that.

In Chapter Four, the text group discussion also represented a safe space where co-investigators could share their perspectives, ask questions, and offer advice without being judged. Many of the
characters expressed in their text group that they would use the art exhibit to network with more WOCSAA. One of the characters expressed that she was nervous to network at the art exhibit, and the text group supported her by sharing their understanding of the difference in networking with men versus networking with WOCSAA.

In alignment with one of the BFT tenets, epistemic agency, the WOCSAA were taking the lead in developing counterspaces that addressed their personal needs and concerns. Though safe spaces allow WOCSAA to be authentic, it is equally important that these spaces provide opportunities for WOCSAA to network with each other. Amrit Mattu shared that safe spaces should provide an opportunity for WOCSAA to engage in truth-telling exercises:

I don’t know what I don’t know. So, who’s willing to journey with me? Slow down on their own journey to say, “I’m gonna reveal some truths.” People who are willing to slow down and share their lessons and illuminate truths. And also, the honest truth about systems or institutions I’m navigating that maybe systems or institutions wouldn’t tell me.

Amrit Mattu referenced the need for people in her system of support to “illuminate truth” about career navigation. Research on hidden curriculum shows that learning occurs beyond the classroom and permeates how institutions normalize social behaviors and maintain the status quo (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). As such, WOCSAA are also learning and internalizing the unspoken rules of student affairs. This co-investigator provided a nuanced perspective on how WOCSAA can use safe spaces to decipher the hidden curriculum of student affairs. By illuminating truths, WOCSAA can have open and honest dialogue around career advancement, discuss the benefits of networking, and develop strategies to work around or through an institutional problem. By having safe spaces where WOCSAA can be vulnerable and share their personal experiences with each other, WOCSAA can lift as they climb.
**Action-oriented support.** The curated photographs in Art Exhibit Station 2a (Appendix A), Art Exhibit Station 2b (Appendix B), and Art Exhibit Station 2c (Appendix C) evoked a sense of action-oriented support. Though co-investigators named that WOCSAA were essential to their system of support, it was evident that action-oriented support also came from other colleagues, supervisors, and students. This form of support was best demonstrated when individuals would intervene on behalf of WOCSAA, provide validation, recognize accomplishments, support promotions, and recognize when an institutional concern needed to be addressed. Although many co-investigators gave examples of how they received support, some co-investigators had yet to experience this type of support.

When the characters in Chapter Four looked at the photographs that embodied action-oriented support, they were asked to participate in sharing their own examples of receiving this type of support. Fatima offered an example of when her White male supervisor intervened and redirected a discussion:

This man [a faculty member] never talks to me. He literally talks over me to my boss the entire time. And then [my supervisor] will then always direct it back to me. I know that he will be a support to me in those spaces and that he sees it, and then I can bring it up to him and be able to say, “I was like microaggressed” and he’s like, “yeah.” And I was like, “OK thanks,” like it’s not just me. And to be able to have him as a White man see that and affirm my experience has been so helpful as a woman of color professionally at my institution to be able to figure out you know how do I navigate this place and space and also keep my sanity because imposter syndrome continues on into the professional world.

In this example, Fatima’s supervisor did more than just provide a space to hear about her concerns, he also took the time to discuss with her what support could look like should this issue arise again. As a result, Fatima’s supervisor intervened and redirect comments or questions back to Fatima as a way to disrupt the faculty member’s oppressive behavior. In doing this, White hegemony was disrupted and the faculty member was forced to acknowledge and engage with
Fatima. This form of support embodies one of the CRT tenets, challenge to dominant ideology, where an individual works to disrupt the flow of oppression. Fatima’s supervisor enacted White responsibility (Cabrera et al., 2016) and showed Fatima that her voice was valid. In addition, Fatima gained a new strategy for navigating institutional politics by enlisting the help of White men to disrupt toxic culture.

Another form of action-oriented support comes from individuals who are willing to offer constructive feedback that helps WOCSAA advance in their careers. This is best described as having someone who is invested in WOCSAA professional identity development. In doing so, feedback is not used as a weapon to tear someone down or to keep someone stagnant in their position but used to help WOCSAA grow in their position. For example, Jazz shared the following:

Even with the system of support you know having someone come to you and say, “you need to get your stuff together, you’re gonna apply for that job, and you’re going to be up out here like what are you afraid of?” Or all of us agreeing okay we’d be like alright 2018 we up and out, by this time everybody’s gone. We’re not leaving anybody behind.

As shown in the literature review, it is evident that WOCSAA are predominantly seen in entry- and mid-level positions, which denotes a larger problem—WOCSAA are not being promoted to senior-level positions (Gamble & Turner, 2015; NCES, 2016). In knowing this, Mya expressed that action-oriented support took the form of supervisors coaching her up to the next position in her career and colleagues working together to encourage professional advancement.

Though many of the co-investigators shared stories of receiving action-oriented support and having a safe space, some co-investigators had different experiences. They expressed discomfort in defining safe spaces as they had yet to experience an opportunity to be vulnerable
with their colleagues. The characters read a specific example on the interactive panel that said the following:

In order for me to get a support system, I have to offer information so people can know me, and offering information is vulnerable because it might be used against me. So, I keep going in that circle. But who do I tell, and then what happens when it gets into the wrong hands?

There are times when WOCSAA make intentional decisions to abstain from systems of support as it may involve risk. WOCSAA may not fully trust their colleagues to be vulnerable. Another example of disassociation stemmed from a co-investigator resisting the need to perform:

There’s no willingness on my part to perform. So, people have in their minds who they want to like mentor or you know take under their wing and if I’m not that person I have no desire or willingness to like perform.

Some co-investigators perceived systems of support to be a performative experience where individuals were not engaging in authentic working relationships. As such, it is evident that if institutional leaders want WOCSAA to use systems of support, relationships must begin with authentic connections and follow with action-oriented support.

**Aspects of career navigation.** Toward the end of the art exhibit the characters engaged with the last photograph collage, Art Exhibit Station 3. Though this station highlighted the challenges and barriers WOCSAA face in their working environments, it also provided grounding reminders and strategies for career navigation. The first sub-theme, challenges and barriers, underscored the difficulty in deciphering institutional rules, certain actions being policed, and being tokenized. Jay shared her disappointment when discovering she was just being tokenized in Art Exhibit Station 3.2:

The symbolic idea of finally having a “seat at the table” is crushed with the reality that the seat was only open because no one else was interested in doing the work. In these moments I feel tricked into thinking I would be receiving support, when in reality I’m just being set up to blame myself if my desire or project does not come to fruition.
In this example, the co-investigator was asked to oversee an initiative that focused on diversity and inclusion. Though she was excited to serve in this role, she was not given resources or a committee of individuals who were willing to follow her vision. As a result, she began to internalize this experience as not being good enough to execute the project.

Some co-investigators iterated the feeling of being policed by colleagues, especially when working to lift other WOCSAA. These concerns build upon research that exposed how White hegemony silently triggers a chilly campus culture that silences staff of color (Cobham & Parker, 2007; Harper, 2012; Patton et al., 2007). Though WOCSAA may be hired to execute their professional role, Rachel indicated in her comment on the interactive panel, “if one steers too far right or too far left,” that they can become a target. As a result, WOCSAA are limited in what they can do in their roles and at times be punished for challenging the systemic structure.

Another insightful image, Art Exhibit Station 3.1, showed how Amrit Mattu adapted to challenging working environments with the support of her sister-colleagues:

Gender, sex, and race can all be overwhelmingly overlooked at historically White Jesuit institutions, causing a chokehold, forcing silent professionals who lie at the intersections of all three identities and more. Like the tree, WOCSAA grow; sometimes literally growing around that very thing that chokes them and sometimes doing so unapologetically (i.e., the tree looks strong as though it was overtaking the bike lock). In my own experience, I’ve had to rely on WOCSAA at [my institution] to coach me countless times on how to navigate difficult conversations about wellness, devastating sociopolitical events influencing WOC on university campuses, compensation, interpersonal conflicts, and more. In doing so, I’ve appreciated how in listening to me, most of my fellow WOC colleagues have not had me explain that thing that is serving as an obstacle for me, literally choking me, but instead have lifted a mirror to show me that I’m very capable of growing around and beyond such obstacles.

Much like the hidden curriculum (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018), WOCSAA are entering the field of student affairs without knowing the institutional rules of engagement. Most often, these rules stem from a hegemonic culture that excludes those who hold marginalized identities.
(Patton et al., 2007). As such, it creates a choke-hold effect on WOCSAA career navigation. However, this co-investigator shared that despite the choking effect, she had sister-colleagues who were willing to coach her through challenges and remind her that she had the ability excel and surpass any obstacles. The CRT tenet, centrality of experiential knowledge, supports this finding in that WOCSAA are able to pull from personal knowledge and wisdom to help lift each other during challenging times.

The second sub-theme, grounding reminders, represented the wisdom the co-investigators shared throughout the study. Gigi shared that authentic work environments and psychological safety were key to retaining WOCSAA in student affairs and higher education:

When I first started at [my institution], there were times when I struggled to be authentic. I think it was true for most of the folks in my department. I also think that it was often true for other colleagues of color. Finding spaces where you could be yourself—be accepted for you is something that we’re all looking for because it’s hard to keep your focus and motivation when things feel disingenuous. These fronts we put up happen because we don’t feel psychologically safe to share ideas, to be ourselves. Instead, what happens is that we settle for something that isn’t real and that doesn’t feed us or energize us.

This co-investigator introduced the term psychological safety, in which employees can be their authentic selves and learn and question their colleagues and supervisors without fear of retaliation or punishment (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017). By using the CRT tenet of transdisciplinary perspectives, psychology and organizational leadership provided an additional lens to this study. If WOCSAA do not feel psychologically safe, they may resort to masking and suppressing their authentic selves. Newman et al. (2017) stated psychological safety is a key indicator of high-performing teams. This co-investigator’s wisdom served as a reminder that if WOCSAA do not have psychological safety, it will be increasingly difficult for WOCSAA to excel in their work productivity.
The co-investigators emphasized that WOCSAA are resilient and able to piece together their systems of support despite their working environment. Resiliency strongly connects to the third sub-theme, strategies for navigation. The co-investigators shared strategies that encouraged WOCSAA to find joy outside of their jobs, use self-care by taking vacations, and build intentional time to network with other WOCSAA during the workday. To maintain a healthy balance in personal and professional life, some co-investigators shared that it was important to have hobbies and side jobs that brought fulfillment to their lives. In doing so, WOCSAA can create distance between their professional and professional lives in order to strike a better work–life balance. In addition to finding balance, Jay shared that even if she did not have a vacation scheduled to leave town, she was happy with instituting “staycations” for herself. In doing so, she was able escape the “worries of work” and return with renewed energy. As shown in the literature review, WOCSAA and faculty are often expected to provide emotional support and mentorship guidance to students of color in addition to their workload (Kelly & McCann, 2014; Molina, 2008; Patitu et al., 2003). In understanding this disproportionate workload, it was important to Jay to institute her own forms of self-care and self-preservation.

The co-investigators also used their systems of support to strategically network. When WOCSAA cultivate strong working relationships with WOCSAA in different functional areas than their own, WOCSAA have a stronger network of support. Marisol shared a positive outcome that resulted from networking with a WOCSAA outside of her department:

This week, I meet with our [food vendor] representative to plan new student orientation meals. She bought my drink and continued to tell me that the foundation we have created working together would allow the team to carry on without me while I am on maternity leave. It was great to hear from one of our most used campus partners that they feel secure in the program and team I have created to be able to continue the good work while I take on this next journey as a mom. That support, over a warm coffee, made me feel less anxious and stressed about my impending maternity leave.
As a result of having a positive working relationship with her food vendor representative, she secured support for her team while she was away on maternity leave. The nuance behind this strategy derives from WOCSAA intentionally seeking relationships with other WOCSAA (Hinton, 2012). In doing so, WOCSAA can enhance collaborative partnerships and access unconditional support during times of need (Gamble & Turner, 2015). It is evident that safe spaces and action-oriented support prepare WOCSAA to navigate their professional careers with more confidence and balance.

**How Systems of Support Affect Career Navigation**

Two findings answer the final research question: How do systems of support affect WOCSAA professional navigation of HWIs? When WOCSAA establish systems of support with other WOCSAA, they have space to explore their gendered-racialized identities. As such, the co-investigators shared that despite differing racialized identities there were benefits of working in solidarity with other WOCSAA. By holding a politicized identity and choosing to work in solidarity with WOCSAA and other colleagues, they were able to exchange social capital with each other.

**Forming a political identity.** In the third scene of Chapter Four, *The Art Exhibit Debrief*, the characters made meaning of their professional outing by participating in a facilitated dialogue with Dr. Stephens. Much of the dialogue reflected how the co-investigators defined their intersecting identities as WOC. Some co-investigators felt empowered by connecting with other WOCSAA and made concerted efforts to build lasting relationships with WOCSAA to find validation. The co-investigators felt more confident in navigating challenges and barriers in the workplace by forming communities of support based on marginalized-intersecting identities.
Amrit Mattu shared the importance of being in solidarity with other WOCSAA without having to give up their racialized identity:

You can still racially identify as South Asian, as Brown and still show up and identify in a solidarity and political aspect and that is as a woman of color. But no one’s writing some of this stuff down so that when you say you’re a woman of color you’re not having to wipe away your other identities. [Reflective pause] I think in so many ways this identity has been something I wasn’t looking for, but something I needed, something that has allowed me to encapsulate all of myself.

As demonstrated in this quote, there is a need for research to further explore intersecting-marginalized identity development. Some WOCSAA may believe that by identifying as a WOC, they must give up or re-arrange the saliency of their social identities. Rather than lose part of one’s identity, Amrit Mattu suggested WOCSAA have the opportunity to gain a political identity that “encapsulates” wholeness.

Though the co-investigators shared similar feelings of seeking community with WOCSAA, they also emphasized that not all women with marginal-racialized identities subscribe to a shared political identity. Marisol recognized a difference in how women with marginalized-intersecting identities used survival strategies to navigate their career:

Women of color who have stayed at the institution and their ideas of surviving and thriving, I think that’s been one of the challenging pieces when I came to [my institution]. There was kind of this small cadre of women of color that had been there both in the faculty and staff ranks for over 20 plus years. And [uncomfortable laughter] you know skin folk are not kinfolk sometimes. And I was like yo this is crazy. All this stuff that’s happened and I’m told like no it’s not, it’s fine. And they had acclimated so much into this White supremacist ideology of just don’t rock the boat and you’ll be okay. And that was super challenging when I first came to the institution.

WOCSAA may not enact their political identity in the same ways or identify the term WOC as a political identity. As such, the concept of surviving and thriving is performed differently by women with marginal-racialized identities. Marisol experienced frustration in seeking support from women she perceived to share similar political identities. Rather than receiving
encouragement to cultivate change as a newer employee, she was encouraged to maintain the status quo to navigate her concern with ease.

Marisol’s example underscores the importance of giving women with marginal-racialized identities the space to form their political identity. Like any social identity, WOC are not a monolith, which means systems of support will be formed and used by WOCSAA in a multitude of ways. The BFT tenet of intersecting power relations provides a context for how interlocking systems of oppression affect WOCSAA career navigation. Hil-Collins (2000) revised her 10th anniversary edition to include the importance of solidarity between WOC. Amrit Mattu explicitly named the significance of opting in rather than placing the political identity of “woman of color” onto women who hold marginal-racialized identities:

I don’t attribute my thriving to any institution, I attribute it fully to women of color who radically embrace that identity. It’s not just a default identity that someone is putting on them but something that they’re willing to stand in and stand apart in. And therefore, like honestly seek me out and talk to me about what this means. What does identity mean for you? What does it mean within a professional context for you that you don’t have to negotiate one or other aspects of you. And so, I felt the more I surrounded myself with other folks of different walks of life when it came to racial or gender experiences. I was arming myself and I was doing the work of what it means to be a woman of color not just saying it but actually like exercising it.

Amrit Mattu’s quote demonstrates that political identity development is a process of choice and action. When WOCSAA have the agency to claim their political identity, they can make meaningful connections to other WOCSAA.

**Social capital exchange.** The last finding specifies how WOCSAA use their political identity to empower each other. With an established system of support, WOCSAA are able to lift as they climb by illuminating truths, coaching each other to advance in their careers, and role modeling how to navigate conflict in oppressive working environments. As explained by the co-investigators, the act of giving and receiving support took the form of WOCSAA exchanging
their social capital. In Chapter Four, Jessie named how she received capital from her WOC supervisor:

I think there’s some sort of organic connection that happens or this like, “hey I’m going to look out for you.” That happens or sharing of information or like social capital that happens. My first time having a woman of color supervisor, I couldn’t help but feel really validated throughout my whole experience with her and felt that I could be myself. We would kind of interchange between talking about work to talking about life to talking about best practices in life. Just how to navigate institutions, how to navigate like male supremacy, how to navigate White male supremacy. Like all of this stuff which I had never had conversations like that at least in the supervisor capacity.

In this example of social capital exchange, Jessie was able to learn firsthand knowledge from her supervisor by having honest and open dialogue about the realities of career navigation. As a result, Jessie felt validated in knowing that her negative encounters were not experienced in isolation. Her supervisor not only understood Jessie’s intersectional experience, but was able to provide suggested strategies for how to address the concerns.

In addition to WOCSAA exchanging social capital, the co-investigators stressed the importance of White colleagues and MOC contributing to this exchange. Fatima specified that social capital exchange was about people’s willingness to share power:

Mentors who may or may not identify as women of color but still show up for me because they see some sort of affinity especially at a Jesuit institution or because we are racial or gender minoritized individuals. Those people who are willing to feel a bit more comfortable around me are willing to let down the mask or let down their guard and allow me to do the same, are willing to share their power with me.

The responsibility of sharing power does not rest solely on the shoulders of WOCSAA and includes all employees who care about building more inclusive working environments. The act of sharing power creates room for individuals to unmask and be vulnerable with each other.

The theoretical framework for this study was designed to evoke action; the process of exposing and disrupting oppressive working environments for WOCSAA. Frameworks such as
CRT and BFT have similar and differing tenets that formed the basis of this study. Both frameworks underscore that racism is a permanent fixture in U.S. culture and therefore infiltrates societal structures such as higher education and student affairs. Second, they both espouse that beyond race and racism, other social identities and forms of oppression intersect to shape the lives of WOC. Last, both frameworks use social justice as an action-based strategy to shift culture and foster communal empowerment. These shared tenets provided substantive grounding for this study and challenge colleagues of WOCSAA to critically examine how HWIs hinder or propel WOCSAA in their career navigation.

Closing

Implications for Practice in Higher Education

Throughout the discussion of the findings, it became evident that WOCSAA are doing most of the heavy lifting as it relates to surviving and thriving at HWIs. The co-investigators in this study demonstrated that they were resilient and brilliantly innovative at constructing safe havens for WOCSAA to connect, recharge, and strategize career navigation. However, it is also prevalent that WOCSAA do not always have the opportunity to build a system of support because of a lack of representation, toxic work environments, and resistance to disingenuous connections. Though there were a few examples of White colleagues disrupting oppressive behavior, the findings show WOCSAA are often left alone to decipher coded interactions or forced to seek help from individuals who may not understand the gravity of their concern. In sharing the narratives of the thirteen co-investigators, leaders of HWIs should radically shift the burden of responsibility from WOCSAA to the hiring/supervising managers, and senior leadership who set the tone for the campus climate. There are three distinct ways in which
leaders of HWIs can support WOCSAA in their career navigation: the implementation of professional support spaces, robust retention strategies, and revitalizing hiring practices.

**Professional support spaces.** Research shows that more administrators in higher education are engaging in personal and professional learning networks (Manning, 2015; Trust, Carpenter, & Krutka, 2017). Given that student affairs administrators are constantly faced with adapting to the needs of their institutions and students, many employees have turned to using personal and professional learning networks to share best practices and professional experiences with challenges and success. As such, informal and formal communities are formed and most often seen through webinars, online trainings, and personal stories shared on social media platforms so professionals can continue to build their knowledge base outside of the workplace. The co-investigators in this study demonstrated they were constantly creating their own personal and professional learning networks.

When WOCSAA have systems of support, they are able to strike a stronger work–life balance, increase their capacity for work productivity, and help foster retention among WOCSAA communities. WOCSAA are actively engaged in developing political identities that foster solidarity-based relationships with other WOCSAA. Given that WOCSAA enter HWIs searching for affinity, senior-level administrators can institutionalize support for WOCSAA by offering affinity-based initiatives that allow WOCSAA to find each other. These empowering spaces can take the form of affinity-based retreats, designated networking hours, professional mentoring programs, or professional development training series. As recommended by the co-investigators, these events can take place on and off campus, through social media platforms, and at times with seasoned content experts. Additionally, there are opportunities for leaders of HWIs to share the responsibility in establishing these spaces by collaborating with different academic
and student development departments such as human resources, academic/student affairs, and faculty senate or staff councils. If WOCSAA have institutionalized spaces where they can connect, they will have the opportunity to build mentoring relationships and develop healthy coping skills for stressful environments.

**Robust retention strategies.** Hiring practices and recruitment procedures play an essential role in getting WOCSAA to join HWIs. However, the high turnover rates and multiple instances of burnout indicate leaders of HWIs can work harder to retain WOCSAA. Building upon the first recommendation, implementing retention strategies can help further institutionalize the creation of empowering spaces. Retention efforts can include a formalized orientation that articulates a statement of inclusion and a list of diverse initiatives through which employees can build community. As shown in Chapter Four, leaders at Magis University earmarked funding to support professional support spaces for staff who hold marginalized identities. As a result, Dr. Stephens was able to secure funding for the WOCSAA in her division. Though this study specifically focused on WOCSAA, if leaders of HWIs use this strategy, they can develop criteria to specify what marginalized groups mean and state the intent for how this funding is spent. If HWIs take the lead in developing robust retention strategies, a number of WOCSAA will engage and support the institutionalized efforts.

**Revitalizing hiring practices.** Although there are more WOCSAA in higher education than MOC on a national scale, WOCSAA are still largely underrepresented at HWIs. Additionally, White women and WOCSAA still do not represent a critical mass of senior-level positions in student affairs. As a result, WOCSAA are unable to receive mentorship from other WOCSAA or break into senior-level positions. The co-investigators also stated that though they appreciated relationships with WOCSAA, they also wanted more support from White colleagues
and MOC. One way to address this is by revitalizing hiring practices. Integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion into the hiring process will require recruiting a pool of candidates that have a solid understanding of how intersectionality operates on an individual and institutional level. This can be accomplished by requiring candidates to submit a diversity statement in addition to their cover letter as well as adding a few interview questions that examine candidates’ cultural competency. By implementing these strategies, all potential hires will understand how to foster welcoming and inclusive spaces for WOCSAA and other marginalized community members.

**Future Recommendations for Research**

This research is relevant to the field of student affairs and higher education as WOCSAA significantly contribute to how HWIs build diverse and inclusive environments. There is a dearth of literature with a specific focus on the experiences of WOCSAA in higher education. It is recommended that future researchers disaggregate the general experience of WOC in higher education and focus specifically on the narratives of WOCSAA. As demonstrated in the literature review, the majority of the research regarding WOC in higher education centered the narratives of WOC faculty and students. However, it is the WOCSAA who work on the frontlines with students, serve as advocates for students, and work as liaisons of their institutions to secure resources and support services. In addition to balancing their roles as professionals, WOCSAA have hopes and dreams of advancing their careers and deepening their professional skill sets. In order to move WOCSAA beyond mid-level positions, leaders of HWIs must lift the burden from their employees and provide institutional support as shared in the implications for practice.

Another recommendation is that researchers continue to explore the intersecting-marginalized identities of administrators in higher education (Kelly et al., 2019). There is
minimal research on the effects of emotional labor and WOCSAA in higher education. As demonstrated throughout the study, WOCSAA expend a high amount of emotional labor in their career navigation. In *Hidden in Plain Sight: Uncovering the Emotional Labor of Black Women Students at Historically White Colleges and Universities*, Kelly et al. (2019) explored the uneven distribution of emotional labor experienced by Black women collegians. In this study, they recommended that institutional support also come in the form of ensuring all administrators receive equity-based training. In doing so, White administrators and MOC administrators will be more equipped to offer action-oriented support to WOCSAA who may be in the process of building their system of support.

**Concluding Thoughts**

*The Miner’s Canary* illustrates how marginalized individuals, much like the miner’s canary, are poised to be the first to experience, anticipate, and predict harmful culture (Guinier & Torres, 2003). As marginalization consists of pushing others to the outskirts of dominant culture, it is from this borderland that the targeted are able to build solidarity-based communities of strength through which they can resist, reimagine, and transform institutions (Anzaldúa, 1989; Chang, 2017). There is both a tragedy and silver lining in using the miner’s canary as a metaphor. The preservation of the miner comes at the expense of the life of the canary. Educators are cautioned, particularly those in senior-level positions, to be wary of caging and invisibilizing WOCSAA. Placing WOCSAA in this losing position will result in professional burnout, high turnover rates, isolation, tokenization, and missed opportunities to promote WOCSAA to senior-level positions. Although this sacrificial tragedy exists, there is another way in which senior-level administrators can cultivate safer working environments for WOCSAA. By recognizing that WOCSAA transcend this notion of the miner’s canary, hiring managers and supervisors can
strive to cultivate the strengths WOCSAA already possess. WOCSAA can navigate challenging terrain, and they are resourceful and know how to build meaningful partnerships as well as provide support to others who may be seeking professional mentorship and guidance. If WOCSAA are seen as a valuable investment, leaders of HWIs will be able to recruit and retain more administrators with marginalized identities.
APPENDIX A

ART EXHIBIT STATION 2A
DEFINING SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT WITH COLLEAGUES
DEFINING SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Power Stance

Shared identities

Relationships with Students

Student Leaders as Support

Acts of Service
APPENDIX C

ART EXHIBIT STATION 2C
ART EXHIBIT STATION 2C

DEFINING SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT
VALIDATION, RECOGNITION, PERSEVERANCE

Recognition  Ecosystem

Test and Time  Chit Chat  Vent & Process  Socializing

Motherhood Flex

Encouraging  Continued Education
Pre-study Assessment & Demographic Form

The following information will be included in the online form for participants to complete. All information shared in this form will be kept confidential in a password protected drive.

Page 1: General Information about the Study
My name is Paige Gardner, and I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago facilitating a study on how and why Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA) establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of Jesuit institutions. Additionally, I explore how these systems of support affect WOCSAAs professional navigation at Jesuit institutions. Thank you for expressing interest in participating in this study. I will select participants based on the information you provide on this pre-study assessment form and will contact folks by May15, 2019 to provide instructions to confirm participation in the four phases of the study.

Criteria for participation includes:
● Must self-identify as a Woman of Color
● Must be a non-academic, student affairs administrator
● Must Currently or have worked at a Jesuit institution for a minimum of 2 years

Page 2 – Participant Demographic Information

1. First & Last Name _____________________________

2. Pseudonym _____________________________

3. Email _____________________________

4. Phone Number _____________________________

5. Do you currently work as a full-time student affairs administrator at a Jesuit Institution for a minimum of two years or more? __________________

6. Name of Jesuit institution___________________

7. Job Title _____________________________

8. Please describe the nature of your role _____________________________

9. How long have you worked at this Jesuit institutions? 0-2 years, 2-5 years, 5 or more years

10. If you do not currently work as a Jesuit institution, have you worked as a full-time employee at a Jesuit Institution for a minimum of two years or more in the past? ______________
11. Name of Jesuit institution___________________

12. Job Title ____________________________

13. Please describe the nature of your role ______________________________________

14. How long did you work at this Jesuit institutions? 0-2 years, 2-5 years, 5 or more years

Page 3 – Participant’s Social Identities

15. Do you self-identify as a Woman of Color? (must hold one or more of the following racialized identities: African American/Black/African descent, Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American, Bi-racial/Multiracial/Mixed Race, Latinx/Latina/Latino,Middle Eastern, Native American/Indigenous People) ________________________

16. Please share your racialized identity/identities __________________________

17. Please share other salient social identities that shape your professional experience __________________________

18. Please share your initial feelings, questions or hesitations about participating in an action-based research study? (There is no right or wrong answer to this question, just a way to check in with participants prior to participating) __________________

Page 4 – Interview Availability

1. Select your first preference for the day of the week you would like to schedule an interview
   a. Monday
   b. Tuesday
   c. Wednesday
   d. Thursday
   e. Friday
   f. Saturday

2. Select your first preference for a 90-minute in-depth interview
   a. 8:30am-10:00am
b. 11:30am-1:00pm

c. 3:30pm-5:00pm

d. 6:00pm-7:30pm

3. Select your second preference for the day of the week you would like to schedule an interview

a. Monday

b. Tuesday

c. Wednesday

d. Thursday

e. Friday

f. Saturday

4. Select your second preference for a 90-minute in-depth interview

a. 8:30am-10:00am

b. 11:30am-1:00pm

c. 3:30pm-5:00pm

d. 6:00pm-7:30pm

5. Select your third preference for the day of the week you would like to schedule an interview

a. Monday

b. Tuesday

c. Wednesday

d. Thursday

e. Friday
f. Saturday

6. Select your third preference for a 90-minute in-depth interview

   a. 8:30am-10:00am
   b. 11:30am-1:00pm
   c. 3:30pm-5:00pm
   d. 6:00pm-7:30pm

Page 5 – Closing Reminders & Completed Form
Thank you for completing this pre-study assessment form. I will select participants based on the information you provided and will contact folks by May 15, 2019 to provide instructions to confirm participation in the four phases of the study. For questions and concerns, contact Paige Gardner, pgardner@luc.edu.
APPENDIX E

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Participant Interview Question Form

Before beginning the interview participants will read and sign the consent form before beginning the four phases of the study. After formal introductions the interview will begin.

Pseudonym:

Interview Questions:

1. Share why you are interested in participating in this study?

2. What’s your student affairs story and how you began this type of work?

3. How if at all do your identities as a WOC shape your professional journey?

4. How if at all have other WOC at your institution influenced your professional journey?

5. What brought you to Jesuit Education and how do the values of your Jesuit institution speak to your professional identity?

6. Describe how you or how you have navigated your professional journey at a Jesuit institution?

7. How do you define support systems and please provide examples of times in your life you have felt supported?

8. What, if any, kind of support do/did you experience throughout your professional journey?
   a. From who?
   b. Was this support needed?
   c. Was this support beneficial?

9. How do/did you establish support systems at your Jesuit institution?
   a. Who do you rely on?
   b. Does your institution offer specific support?
   c. Does your department offer specific support?
   d. Do your coworkers offer any form of support?
   e. Do Women of Color offer any form of support?
   f. Do you colleagues outside of your department/office offer support?

10. Does working at a Jesuit institution affect the type of support you receive. Please explain.

11. If you have worked at other institution types, what might the difference of support look like?
12. Do you ever support others in your current or past role at a Jesuit institution?
   a. Why might you take on this role?
   b. Do you find balance in the amount of support you receive verses the support you give?

13. Define the difference between surviving and thriving in the workplace
   a. Do you describe your professional navigation as surviving or thriving?
   b. Please explain your answer to this question.

14. As we conclude, is there any other question you thought I should ask? Or any last comments you think I should know about you?
APPENDIX F

CO-INVESTIGATOR TRAINING
The co-investigator training will take place in the same location as the semi-structured interview and take place directly following the interview. The co-investigator role consists of collecting data using PhotoVoice, presenting your findings in a focus group and lastly taking observation notes during the focus group presentations.

The Co-investigator Role

1. PhotoVoice
   a. What is PhotoVoice? PhotoVoice is an action research method used in health-community based research and education (Manasia, 2016). As a result, participants experience agency in co-constructing knowledge by taking pictures, reflecting on these images, engaging in critical dialogue, and identifying strategies to effect change in their surrounding community.
   b. Over a span of 30 days, Co-investigators will upload a minimum of 3 pictures a week onto Sakai and include a curation of 3-5 sentence per picture that describes what each picture represents. The photos should represent how you experience systems of support from your Jesuit institution.
   c. Black Feminist Action Research recognizes that systems of support can include individuals, spaces, visual representations of objects and others not listed. Should you decide to take the photo of a human subject, you must have that individual or individuals sign a Photo Participant consent form. This means that you must have a form for each photo participant.

2. Focus Group Presentation
   a. Co-investigators will be randomly assigned to small groups of 3-4 co-investigators. Each person will prepare a presentation of their top 5-7 photos that illustrate their definition and experience of utilizing “systems of support” at their Jesuit institution. Each group will spend 90 minutes of time presenting photos and taking observation notes as explained further below.
   b. Co-investigators will submit completed presentations to Sakai one day before the presentation is due.
   c. Presentations will take place on Zoom (video conference call) where participants are able to see each presentation. The Principal Investigator will send a Zoom link to each group of presenters 1 day prior to the presentation.
3. Focus Group Observation Notes
   a. Co-investigators observing the presentation will listen and take observation notes, along with bracketing personal experiences that align or diverge from what is being presented. All notes should be taken on an electronic device and submitted to Sakai.
   b. Where are notes stored? Co-investigators are encouraged to take notes electronically and upload notes onto Sakai.
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH (General)

Project Title: Lifting as We Climb - Black Feminist Action Research on Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA)
Researcher(s): Paige J. Gardner, M.Ed
Faculty Sponsor: Dra. Aurora Chang

Introduction
You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Paige Gardner, (a doctoral student in Loyola University Chicago’s Higher Education Program) for a dissertation. Paige is working under the supervision of Dra. Aurora Chang, Professor in the Higher Education Program at Loyola University Chicago. You have volunteered to participate in this study because you identify as a Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA) and you are interested in participating in an action-based research study where WOCSAA participate as co-investigators. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

Purpose of Study
This study will explore how and why Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA) establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of Jesuit institutions. Additionally, I explore how these systems of support affect WOCSAAs professional navigation at Jesuit institutions.

Participant Selection
Participants must hold one or more of the following racialized identities: African American/Black/African descent, Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American, Biracial/Multiracial/Mixed Race, Latinx/Latina/Latino, Middle Eastern, Native American/Indigenous People.

Criteria for participation includes:
- Must self-identify as a Woman of Color
- Must be a non-academic, student affairs administrator
- Must Currently or have worked at a Jesuit institution for a minimum of 2 years

Procedure
Participants will complete a short pre-study assessment form to determine eligibility for the study. Once selected, participants agree to join a action-based research study in four-phases as listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Purpose of each phase</th>
<th>Co-investigators gain the following research experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>Complete demographic questionnaire and 60-90-minute individual interview and 10 minute Co-Investigator training</td>
<td>Introduction to Action Research and member checking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phase 2 | 30-day PhotoVoice Project | Data Collection
--- | --- | ---
Phase 3 | 90-minute Focus Group meeting | Data Analysis
Phase 4 | Complete an electronic reflexive questionnaire | Researcher Reflexivity

**Confidentiality & Voluntary Participation**
Given the nature of this interactive study confidentiality is not guaranteed, however your privacy will be protected, and information shared within the demographic survey, in-depth interview, PhotoVoice project, focus group meetings and reflexive questionnaire will be within a closed space and only open to participants of the study. Participants will not have access to the recordings of individual interviews. Personal identifiers will not be included should any themes or notes from the individual interviews be shared in this closed space. Throughout this study, participants will be invited to share aspects of their professional experience. You have the right to abstain from participating in any portion of the study should you become uncomfortable. I cannot guarantee that other participants will not know who else is participating. Because of the voluntary nature of this study, participants may choose to withdraw from the study at any point.

**Risks, Benefits & Compensation**
Participants are required to commit to 4-5 hours of time over the span of 2 months depending on their start date between May-August. There is a potential risk that the individual interviews and discussion may evoke emotional responses. The benefit of this study is that WOCSAA will experience agency and autonomy in co-investigating and co-constructing Black Feminist Action Research that centers the unique experiences of WOCSAA at Jesuit institutions. Participants will receive compensation of a $50 gift card at completion of the study.

**Contact Information**
Please contact me at pgardner@luc.edu if you have questions and/or would like more information about the study. If you are interested in being a participant in this study, please complete the pre-study assessment here by clicking here or using this link: https://tinyurl.com/WOCSAA

**Statement of Consent**
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. The Principal investigator will sign this document after reviewing it with you on the day of your scheduled in-depth interview. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

**Participant’s and Researcher’s signature**

Participant’s Signature ____________________________ Date ____________________________

Researcher’s Signature ____________________________ Date ____________________________
APPENDIX H

REFLEXIVITY QUESTIONNAIRE
Reflexivity Questionnaire

1. After participating in this study, how, if at all did your photos inform your understanding of systems of support?

2. How, if at all did the PhotoVoice project affect your professional navigation of your current Jesuit institution?

3. How much agency, if any, did you experience as a co-investigator throughout the research process?
APPENDIX I

FOCUS GROUP INSTRUCTIONS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Focus Group Presentation Instructions

Co-investigators will be randomly assigned to small groups of 3-4 co-investigators. Each person will prepare a presentation of their top 5-7 photos that illustrate their definition and experience of utilizing “systems of support” at their Jesuit institution. Each group will spend 90 minutes of time presenting photos and taking observation notes as explained further below.

- Co-investigators will submit completed presentations to Sakai one day before the presentation is due
- Presentations will take place on Zoom (video conference call) where participants are able to see each presentation in live time. The Principal Investigator will send a Zoom link to each group of presenters 1 day prior to the presentation.
- Co-investigators will be asked to take observation notes of the presentation, bracket personal thoughts, reactions and moments that resonate with them. After each person narrates their professional journey, I will ask co-investigators to discuss open-ended discussion questions.

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What were common themes or topics that surfaced from all of the presentations?
2. Were there commonalities in your story and the stories that were shared? Please explain.
3. How, if at all, do Jesuit institutions create space for WOCSAA to find or develop systems of support?
4. If we could develop a specific definition for “systems of support”, what would it be?
5. Is there anything else you wish could have been explored in this PhotoVoice Project or anything else that you would like to share?
Participant Email Notification #1- Meets requirements and invited

Dear [Participant],

Thank you for completing the pre-assessment and Demographic Questionnaire. Upon review of your completed submission, I am pleased to share that you qualify to participate in this study. Based on your availability identified in the questionnaire, I would like to schedule a 60-90-minute interview with you on [Date, Time, & Zoom Link]. After you reply with a confirmation of our interview time, I will send you an outlook calendar request as a reminder for our agreed upon meeting. Please review the following steps that outline the remainder of this process:

- Please read and sign the participant/co-investigator consent form
- Scan your signed consent form and email it to pgardner@luc.edu before the time of your in-depth interview
- On the day of your interview, you will also receive a 10-minute Co-investigator training
- Following your Co-investigator training, you will receive an electronic instruction packet that will assist you in understanding your role

Please note that on the day of your interview we will read your consent form together and you will have time to ask any questions regarding the process. After we have read the consent form and you have asked questions, I will sign the consent form, scan it and save the documentation in a password protected database in which only the Principal Investigator will have access. The hard copy will be destroyed once it is electronically stored.

I look forward to co-constructing knowledge with you this summer!

All the best,
Paige

Participant Email Notification #2 - Does not meet requirements and not invited

Dear [Participant],

Thank you for completing the pre-assessment and Demographic Questionnaire. Upon review of your completed submission, you do not meet one or more of the requirements to participate in this study. Although you will not be able to participate in this study, I am more than happy to share with you other ways you can get involved with JASPA or other student affairs networks that support Women of Color. Please email me directly if you would like to receive more information to inquire about these opportunities.

All the best,
Paige
APPENDIX K

PHOTOVOICE INSTRUCTIONS
PhotoVoice is a participatory method used by co-investigators in which they are asked to chronicle their daily experiences through photos and then discuss them in group discussions (Martin, 2018; Kortegast et al., 2019; Ravitch and Carl, 2016). By using this empowering method where participants are the experts of their professional journey, co-investigators will be able to name the strategies and systems of support that are used to navigate Jesuit institutions.

- After the 60-90-minute interview and completing the Co-Investigator training, participants will transition into their Co-investigator role and begin a 30-day PhotoVoice project
- Co-investigators will take photos of images that define systems of support
- Should a Co-investigator take a photo of a human subject you must get consent from that photo participant
- Co-investigators must submit 3 photos per week over a span of 30 days
- Co-investigators must include a 3-5 sentence curation of each photo submitted photos
- Co-investigators will submit all curated photos onto Sakai each week (minimum of 3 photos per week)
- Upon completion of the PhotoVoice project, Co-investigators will be sent a doodle link to share availability for participating in a focus group presentation

**Photo Participant Consent Form:**
Black Feminist Action Research recognizes that systems of support can include individuals, spaces, visual representations of objects and others not listed. Should you decide to take the photo of a human subject, you must have that individual or individuals sign a Photo Participant consent form. This means that you must have a form for each photo participant shown in each image. Co-investigators must collect the pseudonym and signature of the photo participants name, as well as provide their signature. Co-investigators must email the photo participant a copy of this form as well as submit this form to the Principal Investigator for a final signature. Once this form is properly saved in a password protected database, the Co-investigator must destroy the hard copy of the document.

**Recommended Suggestions for collecting photos:**
- You can use your phone as a camera or see if your school will allow you to rent a camera
- After you collect 3 photo’s that represent your definition/experience of “systems of support” at your Jesuit institution, copy and paste photos onto a word document and then write your 3-5 sentence curation for each picture
- Identify one day of the week you prefer to submit all 3 photos to Sakai
- Only submit one-Word document to Sakai as opposed to 3 separate submissions
- When in doubt e-mail Paige Gardner, pgardner@luc.edu with any questions or concerns about your curated-photo submissions to Sakai

**Focus Group Presentation Content:**
- Co-investigators will create a 5-7 slide PowerPoint presentation
- One slide should include a personal definition of “systems of support”
- Four to six slides should include photo’s that embody your definition of “systems of support”
APPENDIX L

JASPA LISTSERV PARTICIPANT OUTREACH EMAIL
Hello JASPA Members!

My name is Paige Gardner, and I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago under the faculty sponsorship of Dr. Aurora Chang. I will be facilitating a study on how and why Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA) establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of Jesuit institutions. Additionally, I explore how these systems of support affect WOCSAAs professional navigation at Jesuit institutions.

Criteria for participation includes:
- Must self-identify as a Woman of Color
- Must be a non-academic, student affairs administrator
- Must Currently or have worked at a Jesuit institution for a minimum of 2 years

Do you identify as a Woman of Color (WOC)?
Participants must hold one or more of the following racialized identities: African American/Black/African descent, Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American, Biracial/Multiracial/Mixed Race, Latinx/Latina/Latino, Middle Eastern, Native American/Indigenous People.

Why Jesuit Institutions?
Jesuit institutions are unique in that they are mission driven, located in urban environments, and aspire to foster holistic student-centered practices for staff and faculty. Jesuit education is about transforming student experiences and utilizing reflexive praxis to enhance student development practice. Although Jesuit universities hold aspiring missions and values, the historical underpinnings of a catholic, predominately white and male-dominated institution hold real implications for how WOCSAA navigate and negotiate their professional identities, practice, and career advancement. As a result, Jesuit institution become a powerful space to examine the resilience and persistence of WOCSAA.

Take Advantage of Scholar-Practitioner Development Opportunities!
With justice as a fundamental value of Jesuit education, participants will have the opportunity to: (1) gain research experience, (2) participate as a Co-investigator, and (3) work collaboratively in identifying issues WOCSAA face and developing strategies to address these issues.

Next Steps…
Participants will complete a short pre-study assessment form to determine eligibility for the study. Click here or use this link: https://tinyurl.com/WOCSAA to complete the form or share with others. Once selected, participants agree to join an action-based research study in four-phases as listed below:
Phases | Purpose of each phase | Co-investigators gain the following research experience
--- | --- | ---
Phase 1 | Complete demographic questionnaire and 60-90-minute individual interview | Introduction to Action Research and member checking
Phase 2 | 30-day PhotoVoice Project | Data Collection
Phase 3 | 90-minute Focus Group meeting | Data Analysis
Phase 4 | Complete an electronic reflection questionnaire | Researcher Reflexivity

**Confidentiality and Risk**
Given the nature of this interactive study confidentiality is not guaranteed, however your privacy will be protected, and information shared within group meetings will be within a closed space only open to participants of the study. Participants will not have access to the recordings of individual interviews. Specific identifiers will not be included should any themes or notes from the individual interviews be shared in this closed space. Throughout this study, participants will be invited to share aspects of their professional experience. You have the right to abstain from participating in any portion of the study should you become uncomfortable. I cannot guarantee that other participants will not know who else is participating. Participants will be asked to waive confidentiality. There is a potential risk that the individual interviews and discussion may evoke emotional responses.

**Benefits and Compensation**
The benefit of this study is that WOCSAA will experience agency and autonomy in producing Black Feminist Action Research that centers the unique experiences of WOCSAA at Jesuit institution. Additionally, WOCSAA will receive compensation in the form of a $50 gift card for their time and contribution to the study.

Please contact me at pgardner@luc.edu if you have questions and/or would like more information about the study. If you are interested in being a participant in this study, please complete the pre-study assessment here by clicking here or using this link: https://tinyurl.com/WOCSAA as soon as possible. I will contact folks within 48 hours of completing their pre-assessment form with a notification of their status.

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

**Paige J. Gardner, M.Ed., (She, her, hers)**
Doctoral Candidate
Loyola University Chicago’s Higher Education
Assistant Dean of Students in the Office of Dean of Student
Hello [Jesuit Vice President]!

My name is Paige Gardner, and I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago under the faculty sponsorship of Dr. Aurora Chang. I will be facilitating a study on how and why Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA) establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of Jesuit institutions. Additionally, I explore how these systems of support affect WOCSAAs professional navigation at Jesuit institutions.

**Do you know a staff member who self-identifies as a Woman of Color (WOC)?**
Participants must hold one or more of the following racialized identities: African American/Black/African descent, Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American, Biracial/Multiracial/Mixed Race, Latinx/Latina/Latino, Middle Eastern, Native American/Indigenous People.

**Criteria for participation includes:**
- Must self-identify as a Woman of Color
- Must be a non-academic, student affairs administrator
- Must Currently or have worked at a Jesuit institution for a minimum of 2 years

**Benefits to encouraging your WOCSAA to participate**
WOCSAA can expand their professional development by gaining research experience, participating as Co-investigators in Action Research, working collaboratively with other WOCSAA at sister Jesuit institutions in identifying the issues WOCSAA face in their working environments, and developing strategies to address these issues as a means of building retention and persistence of WOCSAA in Jesuit education.

**Why Jesuit Institutions?**
Jesuit institutions are unique in that they are mission driven, located in urban environments, and aspire to foster holistic student-centered practices for staff and faculty. Jesuit education is about transforming student experiences and utilizing reflexive praxis to enhance student development practice. Although Jesuit universities hold aspiring missions and values, the historical underpinnings of a catholic, predominately white and male-dominated institution hold real implications for how WOCSAA navigate and negotiate their professional identities, practice, and career advancement. As a result, Jesuit institution become a powerful space to examine the resilience and persistence of WOCSAA.

**Next Steps…**
Simply email your WOCSAA the participant letter and flyer attachment [JASPA Listserv Outreach Email Letter] which outlines the participant criteria, benefits, and phases of the study they will participate in. Your WOCSAA will also be compensated for their time and contribution to the success of this study by receiving a $50 gift card.
APPENDIX N

PERSONAL COLLEAGUE OUTREACH EMAIL
Hello [Colleague]!

My name is Paige Gardner, and I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago under the faculty sponsorship of Dr. Aurora Chang. I will be facilitating a study on how and why Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA) establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of Jesuit institutions. Additionally, I explore how these systems of support affect WOCSAA's professional navigation at Jesuit institutions.

Support WOCSAA research by participating or referring other WOCSAA to participate. Participants must hold one or more of the following racialized identities: African American/Black/African descent, Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American, Biracial/Multiracial/Mixed Race, Latinx/Latina/Latino, Middle Eastern, Native American/Indigenous People.

Criteria for participation includes:
- Must self-identify as a Woman of Color
- Must be a non-academic, student affairs administrator
- Must currently or have worked at a Jesuit institution for a minimum of 2 years

Benefits & Compensation. WOCSAA can expand their professional development by gaining research experience, participating as Co-investigators in Action Research, working collaboratively with other WOCSAA at sister Jesuit institutions in identifying the issues WOCSAA face in their working environments, and developing strategies to address these issues as a means of building retention and persistence of WOCSAA in Jesuit education. WOCSAA will also be compensated for their emotional labor, time, and contribution to the success of this study by receiving a $50 visa gift card.

Why Jesuit Institutions? Jesuit institutions are unique in that they are mission driven, located in urban environments, and aspire to foster holistic student-centered practices for staff and faculty. Jesuit education is about transforming student experiences and utilizing reflexive praxis to enhance student development practice. Although Jesuit universities hold aspiring missions and values, the historical underpinnings of a Catholic, predominantly white and male-dominated institution hold real implications for how WOCSAA navigate and negotiate their professional identities, practice, and career advancement. As a result, Jesuit institutions become a powerful space to examine the resilience and persistence of WOCSAA.

Next Steps… Review the attached documents or simply email other WOCSAA at Jesuit Institutions the attached letter [JASPA Listserv Outreach Email Letter] which outlines the participant criteria, benefits, and phases of the study they will participate in.
APPENDIX O

PARTICIPATION OUTREACH FLYER
ACTS OF EMPOWERMENT, RESISTANCE, & REFLECTION

JOIN THE ACTION!

LIFTING AS WE CLIMB
THE ACT OF WOMEN OF COLOR STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATORS (WOCSSA) SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN JESUIT EDUCATION

COMPLETE THE PRE-STUDY ASSESSMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN BLACK FEMINIST ACTION RESEARCH
TINYURL.COM/WOCSSA

CRITERIA TO PARTICIPATE
• MUST SELF-IDENTIFY AS A WOMAN OF COLOR
• MUST BE A FULL-TIME, NON-ACADEMIC, STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATOR
• CURRENTLY OR HAVE WORKED AT A JESUIT INSTITUTION FOR AT LEAST 2 YEARS

CONTACT PAIGE GARDNER
PGARDNER@LUC.EDU FOR MORE INFORMATION
APPENDIX P

HUMAN SUBJECT PHOTOGRAPH CONSENT
I, ____________________________ (Photo participant’s name) give written consent to ____________________________ (Co-investigator's name) to take my photo for the purposes of the following study listed below.

Project Title: Lifting as We Climb - Black Feminist Action Research on Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA)

Principal Investigator: Paige J. Gardner, M.Ed.
Co-Investigator: ____________________________
Faculty Sponsor: Dra. Aurora Chang

Introduction
You have volunteered to support a research study being conducted by Paige Gardner, (a doctoral student in Loyola University Chicago’s Higher Education Program) for a dissertation. Paige is working under the supervision of Dra. Aurora Chang, Professor in the Higher Education Program at Loyola University Chicago. You have agreed to support this research by taking a photo for one of the Co-investigators participating in this study.

What is a Co-Investigator?
Co-investigators are participants in Action Research who work to co-construct knowledge with a Principal Investigator (Paige Gardner) that has been approved by Loyola University Chicago’s Institutional Review Board. For the purposes of this study, the Principal Investigator has recruited 10-12 Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators who represent 28 Jesuit institutions in the United States. The Co-investigators have volunteered to participate in this study as they are interested in conducting action-based research. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to take a photo.

Purpose of Study
This study will explore how and why Women of Color Student Affairs Administrators (WOCSAA) establish systems of support to assist in their professional navigation of Jesuit institutions. Additionally, this research explores how these systems of support affect WOCSAAs professional navigation at Jesuit institutions.

Co-Investigator Selection
- The Co-investigator must hold one or more of the following racialized identities: African American/Black/African descent, Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American, Biracial/Multiracial/Mixed Race, Latinx/Latina/Latino, Middle Eastern, Native American/Indigenous People.
- The Co-investigator must complete a ten-minute Co-investigator training before participating in this study
- The Co-investigator must be a non-academic, student affairs administrator
- The Co-investigator must currently or have worked at a Jesuit institution for a minimum of 2 years

Confidentiality & Voluntary Participation
Given the nature of this interactive study confidentiality is not guaranteed, however your privacy will be protected, and your name or name of your institution will not be included in any part of the study. I cannot guarantee that other participants will not know who else is participating. Your photo will be viewed by a small group of three to four Co-investigators and will only be used for the purposes of this study. After reviewing this consent form, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym and sign the document as proof of consent. Lastly, your Co-investigator will scan this document and email you a copy of this form as well as submit this form to the Principal Investigator. Once this form is properly saved in a password protected data-base, the hard copy will be destroyed. You have the right to abstain from taking a photo at any point of the process and the right to request that your photo not be used in the study.

Risks and Benefits
The photo participant is required to provide consent in taking a photo for the purposes of this study. Though there is minimal risk by consenting to take a photo, there is a potential risk that the human subject may not receive total confidentiality. However, this study insures that the personal information of the human subject will remain private and protected by the utilization of a pseudonym name. The benefit of this study is that you will support this Co-
investigator in developing research skills, and you will have the opportunity to learn more about Black Feminist Action Research.

**Contact Information**
Please contact the Principal Investigator at pgardner@luc.edu if you have any questions and/or concerns or simply would like more information about the study. If you have questions about your rights as a photo participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

**Statement of Consent**
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. The Co-investigators will sign this document after reviewing it with you on the day of your scheduled photo. The Principal Investigator will also review and sign this document once it is submitted as an electronic attachment.

---

**Photo Participant, Co/Principal Investigator’s Signatures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo Participant’s Pseudonym (please print)</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo Participant’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-Investigator’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Investigator’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCE LIST


Smith, B. (1982). Racism and women's studies. In G. T. Hull, P. B. Scott, & B. Smith (Eds.), *All the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave*. New York, NY: Feminist.


VITA

Dr. Paige J. Gardner, PhD was born in San Jose, California and raised with two siblings, in a small suburban town, Hollister, California. Growing up, Dr. Gardner and her siblings were accustomed to being the only Black children in their predominantly White schools. Cognizant of this fact, her parents made a conscious decision to raise them in an all-Black church, Bethany Church of God in Christ. As a result of growing up in a Black church, Dr. Gardner developed a strong leadership identity through communal mentorship, performing arts, and the celebration of the pursuit of education. The high levels of affirmation and support from these counterspaces such as home and church equipped Dr. Gardner to boldly navigate predominantly White spaces.

In 2009, Dr. Gardner graduated from Mills College with a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Development. With the guidance of inspirational mentors and the support of a powerful community, Dr. Gardner made the decision to pursue her master’s degree in Student Development Administration at Seattle University. After four years of professional experience in residence life and multicultural affairs, Dr. Gardner felt the urge to return to the classroom and joined Loyola University Chicago’s Higher Education doctoral program.

During her time in the doctoral program, Dr. Gardner developed an interest in scholar-practitioner work that centers intersectional identity development among students, staff, and faculty in higher education and student affairs. Dr. Gardner’s research agenda and main concentration of work provides individuals with the necessary tools (rooted in solidarity and liberatory praxis) to successfully navigate their college experience and working environments.