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Movement on the Margins: Exploring the Leadership and Agency of Women of Color Student Activists in Predominantly White Higher Education Institutions

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MOVEMENT ON THE MARGINS: EXPLORING THE LEADERSHIP AND

AGENCY OF WOMEN OF COLOR STUDENT ACTIVISTS IN

PREDOMINANTLY WHITE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY

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CHICAGO, IL

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To my mother, without whom this work would not be possible. It has been a gift and an honor to be raised by a Black woman.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn more about the experience of student activism through the eyes, ears, and narratives of women of color in predominantly White higher education institutions. Using an adapted theoretical framework of critical feminist agency, I conducted interviews and focus groups with women of color whom represent the past, present, and future of student activist experiences on campus. Their stories and knowledge affirmed the historical significance of student activism in higher education, and more notably, provided additional critical perspectives towards the development and reimagination of leadership, agency, and institutional structures in colleges and universities. Discussion and implications for higher education research, policy, and practice follows to close what was a reflective, intentional space for women of color to be seen as producers of knowledge and agents of change in higher education institutions.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Definition of Terms

To aid readers of this dissertation, I clarify the following important terms that will be used throughout:

- **Women of Color**: Acknowledging the controversial aggregation of woman of color in research and practice, this study employs the term in the essence of Loretta Ross, a renowned feminist, activist, and woman of color who views the term "women of color" as a political designation and symbol of solidarity among women experiencing racism and working together towards the liberation of each other (as cited by Western States Center, 2011). In addition to naming specific racial and ethnic identities of women referenced in the study as they apply, I also use women of color to name the collective struggle that women from racially and ethnically oppressed social groups encounter in society.

- **Marginalization**: In the context of this study, marginalization refers to both implicit and overt acts of discrimination against certain social identity groups that maintains an imbalance of power, dominance, and resources between privileged social identity groups and oppressed identity groups (Banks, 2004). In education, students with marginalized identities generally come from social backgrounds historically oppressed based on race, gender, sexuality, ability, immigration status, and socioeconomic status, to name a few. The history of higher education documents the marginalization of these student populations through

underrepresentation among students, administrators, and faculty, lack of access to resources needed for student success, and often times a hostile climate that promotes discrimination via racism, transphobia, sexism, or ableism, for example (Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart, 2004). While I explore and learn more about the experiences of women of color activists, this term will be used frequently to denote the social, historical, and political significance of their identity in higher education.

- **Student Activist Movement (Organization)**: A student activist movement is conceptualized as the mobilization of necessary resources and collective action of engaged student activists to achieve a common goal (Baker & Blissett, 2018). It is important to note some student activists may prefer the term movement over organization due to the structural constraints and power dynamics that occur between higher education institutions and recognition of student organizations with an activist orientation (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014). Though some activist movements do not identify as organizations necessarily, both terms share a certain organizational structure that maximizes and amplifies the goal of the collective. As such, throughout the proposal, student activist movements and student activist organizations are used interchangeably.

- **Social (Political) Change**: Social change is the advocacy and active commitment to transform the social dynamics between different groups of people and promote social justice (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). The motivation and enactment required for this change often entails a need to navigate a political culture of organizations that maintain inequitable social dynamics. Therefore, social and political change are used in concert with one another throughout the proposal to display their close connection to positive, sustainable change.

Introduction to the Study

As I have come to know myself as a scholar, my leadership - and subsequently, the research I engage in - is shaped by the need for critical perspectives from people across social identities. For the whole of my life, my understanding has been shaped by women of color that exist at the margins of race, gender, and sexuality. When I think of activism, I recall hearing my mother advocate for me in an unjust public school system in Florida, my friends and peers that took the time to help me deconstruct my privilege, and generally, the women of color I see on the frontlines of political thought and social movements in society. Their leadership and social justice education made me feel affirmed and valued in ways formal education institutions have not, and because of this, I am compelled to produce and disseminate research that honors their stories and brings light to their leadership and activism in a time when identity is deeply personal and political.

Currently, there is a rise in student activism, and more generally, students that are engaged in political and social issues on college campuses. In 2016, the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles conducted a student engagement survey with responses from over 141,000 first-year students (Eagen et al., 2016). The survey forecasted an increase in political and civic engagement among college students with one in ten incoming first-year students expecting to participate in student protests and demonstrations while in college. Statistically, this represents a 3% increase from the 2014 survey and 16% of these students identify as Black. While not conclusive of all college students, these numbers suggest student activism will become, if not already, a regular feature of campus life and the most engaged students hold underrepresented and historically marginalized racial identities in higher education.

As well, the number of student activist movements on college and university campuses is visible and evident, both in the United States and abroad. Since the 2016 U.S. federal election, Thomas and Gismondi (2017) reported over 670 protests in 173 cities internationally with visible discontent and outrage about the U.S. political climate. Commenting on the global display of student activism, Altbach and Klemenčič (2014) asserted:

> Although the era of student revolutions may have ended a half-century ago, students continue to be active in politics, and they are often a key force in political movements directed toward social change around the world. Students may no longer be at the center of political movements, but they are often indispensable participants, frequently helping to shape the messages, ideologies, and tactics of protest movements. (para. 3)

Based on this background information, I draw three inferences about the current climate of student activism in higher education. First, similar to U.S. higher education in the 1960s, colleges and universities must contend with the widespread nature of student activism and its impact on the campus climate and governance structure of higher education institutions. Second, students entering college today are just as politically engaged as previous generations of college students, if not more. Third, their engagement and desire to participate in protests, demonstrations, and other forms of student activism are a result of the increasingly volatile sociopolitical climate of U.S. society, one that is marred with social issues that affect incoming college students - and most notably - students with marginalized and underrepresented identities in U.S. higher education.

Problem Statement

Despite the presence of student activism, higher education research and practice, particularly from the organizational lens - is still emergent. Within the last five years, multiple university and college presidents and administrators resigned from leadership as a result of their negligence on student activist issues, including former University of Missouri President Tim

Wolfe after the events of Concerned Student 1950 (Izadi, 2015) and former Michigan State University President Lou Ana Simon after mishandling sexual assault allegations of Larry Nassar (Thomason, 2018). Changes in institutional leadership, among other things, are part of multiple demands made by student activists that often go ignored by administrators until situations become hostile. Moreover, as of 2015, TheDemands.Org website compiled a list of demands from student protesters across 80 institutions around the world; among those demands were a review of non-inclusive institutional policy, increased diversity of faculty and staff, and most importantly, increased support for marginalized student groups (Chessman & Wayt, 2016). These issues are indicative of multiple problems with campus climate, namely a lack of institutional commitment and practice to issues of equity, social justice, and support for marginalized college students, not to mention a lack of recognition for the work of student activists advocating for these issues (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014).

Previous research offers consideration for the history of student activism in higher education and the factors that facilitate student activism (Van Dyke, 1998, 2003). Conversely, the inquiry that guides this body of scholarship is largely historical and examples of empirical research that focuses on student activists' experience of structural issues in higher education is sparse. Furthermore, if one reviews student activist scholarship as a whole, more attention is focused on the organizational structure of the movement itself as opposed to a critical analysis of the identities and experiences of student activists that comprise the movement. For those studies that do explore student activist identity, analysis leans heavily towards Black and Latinx students, leaving a noticeable gap in literature on Asian American, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and other marginalized student populations, to name a few (ex. Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Rojas, 2006; Urrieta, 2007). Even further, student activist research often centers race and gender

as unitary categories of analysis, rarely exploring experiences of student activists with multiple, interlocking social identities such as women of color.

What I gather from these issues is that student activism, despite its long and documented history in higher education, is not adequately supported by colleges and universities, and more so, it is seen as an issue to quell as opposed to an accountability structure of higher education institutions, a developmental opportunity for student activists to engage in important social and political issues of society, or a chance to further affirm and support the experiences of marginalized student populations in U.S. higher education. Additionally, there is a dearth of literature that explores how student activists with marginalized, intersecting social identities navigate the institutions that do not wholly represent their interests in order to establish agency and effectuate social change. Thus, the current state of scholarship creates a problem both for institutions and students that must work with one another for any change to occur.

Significance to the Field

While there are many issues to address in research and practice on student activism, there are also significant contributions plausible from research in this area. First, given the eminence of student activism on college and university campuses, intentional research that focuses on structural and organizational issues through the perspective of student activists can help illuminate problems that impact campus climate and specifically, power imbalance that exists between students and institutional leaders. Furthermore, findings from research on this topic can offer more helpful strategies for collaboration and partnership between faculty, administrators, and student activists working together to address social and political issues on campus. As well, conducting an empirical research study with a critical focus on student activists has helpful

implications to how we view student leadership and agency development experiences for marginalized student populations.

Purpose of the Study

Therefore, the overall purpose of this study is to learn more about how students participate and engage in student activism within predominantly-White higher education institutions (PWIs) in the U.S. Specifically, this dissertation focuses on the experiences of women of color student activists so as to explore how, if at all, students with multiple marginalized identities across race and gender engage in social and political issues on campus that directly impact their identity and leadership development. Through research on this topic, I remain hopeful findings of this study will create a better understanding of the experiences of women of color student activists including how they navigate PWIs through student activism and how they build the necessary tools and mechanism to effectuate social and political change on their respective college campuses. The audience of the study is inclusive of higher education researchers, administrators, as well as women of color leaders and activists seeking to better understand how to support women of color activists in U.S. higher education and become better partners and collaborators for social change.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation study is broken into five chapters. In Chapter Two, I provide a critical review of relevant literature on student activism in U.S. higher education, denoting the history and emergence of student activism, the challenges student activists face in higher education, and the recorded experiences of women of color student activists in PWIs. Within my review, I also establish a guiding theoretical framework that undergirds the stated purpose and research questions of the dissertation study. Following in Chapter Three, I incorporate a critical feminist

methodological approach and detail a range of research methods that provide a rich and reflexive exploration through data collection and analysis. Finally, in Chapters Four and Five, I present the findings from data collection and end with discussion and implication for future research and practice.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I critically review relevant literature on the experiences of women of color student activists in predominantly White, U.S. higher education. To achieve this endeavor, I must incorporate multiple bases of scholarship on social movements, leadership, student activism, and the experiences of women of color to capture the nuance of my inquiry. Thus, I considered the three broad questions in my review. First, what is the history of student activism in predominantly White, U.S. higher education institutions (PWIs)? Since my unit of analysis centers on women of color student activists, it is necessary to understand how student activism emerged, influenced, and shaped higher education throughout history. Second, within the history of student activism in higher education, what are the experiences of women of color that participate and engage in student activism? Reviewing student activism history, I hope to gain insight into the challenges, obstacles, and achievements of student activists, including historically marginalized and underrepresented student populations in PWIs such as women of color college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). To that end, my last question seeks to understand the experiences of women of color student activists in the context of leadership development, and namely, how these experiences reflect or expand upon current models of leadership and agency development. To conclude this chapter, I provide a summation of the literature review with implications for current and future research and a theoretical paradigm of critical, feminist agency theory to undergird the purpose of this study.

Social Movements: The Antecedents of Student Activism

When student activism emerged in higher education, its structure and foundation were modeled after prominent social movements that tackled the social and political conditions of U.S. society. Tarrow (1995) described the reciprocal relationship between movements and societal politics as the cycle of contention, specifically, "the emergence of very active student movements often coincides with a more general rise in the level of political contention in the societies from which those movements hail" (p. 19). Given the multiplicity of laws and policies that govern U.S. society, the opportunity for social and political conflict and contention increases; the magnitude of this contention then creates a spillover effect into social institutions of society, which also includes colleges and universities, or higher education as an industry. In terms of literature, sociology and political science scholars offer an abundance of literature on social movement theory, each that employs one of three specific frameworks that influence the structure and goals of a social movement: resource mobilization, political opportunity, and collective action.

Resource mobilization is a framework of social movement theory that emphasizes "both societal support and constraint of social movement phenomena. It examines the variety of resources that must be mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements" (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p. 1213). Put simply, a certain blend of organizational resources - namely, agents and actors within and between movements - and economic resources must be gathered and enacted in a strategic way for the success of a social movement. Likewise, for multiple groups within the same movement - different guilds represented by a labor union, for example - there is a greater likelihood of success for all

participants, creating opportunities for greater collaboration and resource mobilization (Van

Dyke, 2003). As a structural benefit of higher education institutions, colleges and universities

often encompass the resources such as meeting rooms, media access, or professional advising in

addition to the ability to amass multiple stakeholders that identify with the same vision and goals

of a student activist movement (Van Dyke, 2003).

Politically opportunity is another framework that offers a different way of

conceptualizing social movements. Specifically, political opportunity in the context of social

movements suggests that:

> Large numbers of people do not protest if they believe either that their efforts will be for
> naught or that the government will represent their concerns effectively without such
> efforts. States bound the political arena in which political activists operate. That groups
> increasingly choose movement forms to express their opposition to other movements
> suggests that states are open to challenges but that they cannot resolve conflicts
> definitively. (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1630)

When student activists attempt to shape the institutional culture about a social issue, there is an

opportunity to not only address a particular social issue but also gain and assert political leverage

within the campus environment. Meyer and Whittier (1994) affirm this orientation and state, "In

summary, movements can influence not only the terrain upon which subsequent challengers

struggle...In changing policy and the policymaking process, movements can alter the structure of

political opportunity new challengers face" (p. 281).   Higher education history reveals multiple

instances of educational policy reversed, changed, or expanded to fit the needs of students

advocating for social and political issues, as noted by contested views on affirmative action

policy, for example (i.e., Poon, 2009; Rhoads, Saenz, & Carducci, 2005). In the same vein,

students are also capable of building strategic alliances with external organizations like the

public media, widely expanding their message to local, regional, and national audiences (Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1997).

The last important framework to consider about social movements comes from organizational theory and structure; specifically, how the organization and governance of a social movement group can impact its success or failure. McCartney and Zald (1977) drew on familiarity with organizational studies to develop social movement perspectives including resource mobilization and political opportunity. Applying the concept of an open system environment in higher education, there is a central focus on the availability of limited resources, and therefore, a need to mobilize a social movement according to the conditions of the society (Neumann, 2012). For example, Rojas (2006) used data from established African American studies programs to understand how the social movement for Black rights in the 1960s was used to challenge institutional policy and pressure the power of institution leaders. Ultimately, it was found that non-disruptive protests were effective in getting colleges and universities to form African American studies programs. Meyer and Whittier (1994) also contend that social movements are not exclusive; rather, they are a collection of formal and informal networks of individuals that move the goals of the organization forward. Indeed, student organizers and activists of movements, the hierarchical structure of positions and responsibilities in the organization, and the mission of the organization are integral parts of a social movement.

Each of these frameworks, more than an orientation to view social movements, highlight important considerations when amassing visions, goals, support, and execution of a movement that is inherently active and engaged. Whether it is Black Lives Matter, Planned Parenthood, or Climate Change, the spillover onto college campuses gives students a blueprint to inform and guide their own movements. As the history of higher education shows, student activism was a

significant contributor of growth and expansion for underrepresented and marginalized student populations seeking social change.

Historical Overview of Student Activism in Higher Education

The first student activist movement took place at Harvard University, the oldest U.S. higher education institution. Intimate accounts of the rebellion state that students were not favorable to the butter served in the dining hall; after disagreement with campus administration, the students staged a protest for more desirable food choices (Moore, 1976). While distant from the protest issues of the future, this event is the first case of students actively working to change their educational institution. The prevalence of student activism rose in the 1930s in response to socialism and the onset of World War II in 1939 (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). Flare-ups of student activism happened again in the 1950s, including the ground-breaking *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that desegregated U.S. educational institutions (Rhoads, Saenz, & Carducci, 2005) and the creation of the Student Democratic Society in 1959 that would become a vanguard for political student organizations during the 1960s (Stryker, 1993; Van Dyke, 1998). Both of these incidents sparked debate and anger over racial segregation in higher education institutions, some of which were reluctant to open campuses to Black students at the time (Stryker, 1993), and the rise of the new left democracy in society. Unbeknownst to PWIs, these events would usher in a hotbed of student activism over the next two decades in the 1960s and 1970s.

The 1960s and 1970s set the blueprint for the student activism seen today; there were several key events and legislation that would inform the shape, culture, and policy of U.S. higher education in the future. Two contentious points of this period include the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, both of which displayed the nature of war, state violence, and human rights for racially-minoritized people in the U.S. (McCarthy & Zald, 1977b). Other factors of

influence included a move toward conservative, right-wing government politics and a changing economic situation in the midst of the Vietnam War. Students on campuses across the nation expressed dissent against racism and anti-war sentiment in the U.S.; as a result, the political climate catalyzed the student activist movement (Rhoads, 2016; Van Dyke, 2003). The Women's Movement and the Gay Liberation Front also ignited participation from college students wanting support, access, and equality for students facing sexism, homophobia, and gender-based discrimination on college and university campuses (Beemyn, 2003; Astin et al., 1997). In fact, literature confirms both these movements were modeled after the activist efforts of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Civil Rights Movement to mobilize efforts on and off campus (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). Certainly, this was a contentious time for higher education, with constant student protests and demonstrations until the end of the 1960s, including the death of four students at Kent State University in 1970 (Van Dyke, 1998). During the 1970s, the tumultuous events of the previous decade began to subside, due to a heightened sense of economic prosperity, renewed focus on science and business disciplines, the rebirth of student government organizations, and the decline in public media attention for student activist movements (Altbach & Cohen, 1990).

While the disruption student activism brought to U.S. higher education decreased in the 1970s, remnants of student activism continued to impact the campus climate of institutions across the country. Notably, it is during this period where the curricular structure of U.S. higher education began to change; ethnic studies and women's studies programs became entrenched academic disciplines of the university as a result of student and faculty activism from the 1960s and 1970s (Arthur, 2011; Stewart, Settles, & Winter, 1998). Continued institutional response to student activism and society made college campuses more diverse and accessible to

underrepresented and marginalized student populations across race and gender (Rhoads, 2016). The 1980s began as a relatively quiet period for student activism, stifled by the election of Ronald Regan and the reemergence of conservative politics that downplayed welfare the state of society (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). Regardless, students found a way to voice their concern to administration, including a call for divestment from the Apartheid Movement in South Africa and instances of campus racism at selective institutions such as Dartmouth College (Baker & Blisset, 2018). Reviewed literature shows issues of racism, sexism, and diversity continued to be central concerns for student activists in the 1990s, indicating a hostile climate for Black and Latinx students attending college (Rhoads, 1998). Again, the politics of the U.S. reflected on higher education institutions with the police beating of Rodney King, the LA Riots of 1992, and the Gulf War from 1990-1991 (Duncan, 1999). While a far cry from the intensity of student activism in prior decades, the 1990s served as a reminder of latent student unrest and the necessity of institutions to respond to and manage student activism.

Today, there is emerging literature on contemporary student activism that speaks to similar issues of the past. Politically, movements like #BlackLivesMatter and the #MeToo Movement paints pictures of inequality and oppression in U.S. society, and more aptly, mirror the concerns of marginalized student populations in higher education (Hope et al., 2016). Incidents of bias against race, gender, and sexuality still impact the wellbeing and livelihood of marginalized and underrepresented student populations (ex. Jones, 2016). As such, organizations like Concerned Student 1950 of the University of Missouri harken to the historical motivations of student activists, and subsequently, the ability to pressure higher education to respond, adapt, and advocate for all students (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

Surveying the history of student activism, it is evident that the U.S. sociopolitical climate undoubtedly affects the emergence and mobilization of student activists. Social movements are catalysts for activism that spills over into higher education, bridging the ability of student activist movements to organize, mobilize resources, and take advantage of the political opportunity on college and university campuses. As far as history is concerned, student activism has and continues to play a prevalent part in campus climate and politics, influencing the governance and institutional culture of U.S. higher education. Conversely, it is also clear the history of student activism is dominated by students with marginalized and underrepresented identities. While the literature of student activism prior to the 2000s has largely been theoretical and historical analysis of significant events, I continue review of literature in the following section with a focus on these student activists, paying particular attention to the experiences and challenges women of color activists incur in their participation and engagement in student activism at PWIs towards the end of the section.

Challenges and Experiences of Marginalized Student Activists

Historically, the goal of student activists in higher education has been to advocate for social change that impacts their experience on campus (Hamrick, 1998). In this regard, literature on student activists and associated organizations and movements conveyed a broad set of challenges and experiences between students and the institution. Specifically, even in aspects of student involvement, campus engagement, and leadership activities, student activists felt and described marginalization from the governance and power structures of the institution.

Participation and involvement of student activists stem from their marginalization by the institution. For example, in their analysis of transgender identity inclusion in university non-discrimination statements, Case et al. (2012) found that traditional institutional policies maintain

a status quo inherently discriminatory against the transgender community. While a specific

instance, critical research provides many examples to assert the motivation of higher education

institutions to enforce and maintain a regulatory level of stasis in culture, climate, and operations

to function (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014). Thus, engagement, involvement, and participation in

student activism has consequently sought to disrupt the status quo through various methods.

Protests and demonstrations on campus serve to interrupt institutional operations, especially if in

public locations visible to students, staff, faculty, or community members (Altbach & Cohen,

1990; Lipset & Altbach, 1966). The media attention received by student activists generates

public images and perceptions of the institutions that are not controllable by the institution itself

(Crossley, 2008; McAdam, 1986). As well, it cannot be forgotten that PWIs contain a wealth of

resources for mobilization, templates for organization, and political opportunity used to their

advantage (Gonzales, 2008).

Conversely, as institutions striving to maintain leverage in a resource-limited

environment (i.e., Neumann, 2012), they also create challenges that subconsciously quell student

activism on campus. In terms of institutional structure, administration primarily recognizes

students in formal leadership positions established by the institution (Chambers & Phelps, 1993;

Renn, 2007). Further, coupled with the perceptions of society, student activists are typically

portrayed as students that go against the rules of the college or university, creating instances

where student activists feel silenced, targeted, or marginalized (Christensen & Arczynski, 2014).

After completing life history interviews with undocumented student activists, Gonzalez (2008)

stated, "By elevating their visibility, they risk being identified by authorities and anti-immigrant

groups and, as such, leave themselves vulnerable to deportation and hate crimes" (p.

239). Inevitably, this perpetuates a hostile climate for marginalized students advocating for

social and political change that differs from the directives of the institution. Therefore, though student activism shows a capacity to disrupt the status quo of higher education institutions, ultimately, they are subject to marginalization and power exerted by institutions that desire maintenance of control.

In addition to the institution itself, literature shows mixed results of student activists working with other institutional stakeholders such as faculty and campus administrators. Notably, faculty were significant influencers within student activist movements. In an early study by Bayer and Astin (1971), they used longitudinal surveys that consisted of student characteristic inputs and institutional variables to better understand the antecedents of campus activism. At the conclusion of analysis, they found that faculty support of student activism was higher in four-year postsecondary institutions compared to two-year colleges. Moreover, institutional types - namely liberal art colleges and historically Black colleges and universities - had a higher proportion of faculty activism than other institution types (Bayer & Astin, 1971). To that end, most literature asserts social sciences and humanities fields were stimuli to student activist organizers on campus, with faculty imparting knowledge, pedagogy, and awareness of social issues that engaged and elicited participation from students (Frickel & Gross, 2005; Rojas, 2006).

However, not all collaborations with faculty and administrators were positive for student activists. Urrieta (2007) used ethnographic interviews of Chicano/a activists and Stake and Hoffman (2001) conducted a survey of women's studies programs at 32 campus. Both studies arrived at the same conclusion: academic programs with activist orientations are devalued and de-legitimized by the institution and other academic departments. The subsequent devaluation of a specific discipline or academic department creates implications for faculty attempting to gain

prestige within the institution, effectively limiting their participation and partnership with student activists (Lipset & Altbach, 1966; Kezar, 2010). Relatedly, literature documents faculty that created distance from student activism through curricular structure, changing class assignments, projects, and teaching strategies to align with the power and status quo of the institution (Grande & Srinivas, 2001). Taken from another perspective, student activists have not always had positive relationships with faculty or administrators. Though students indicated positive views of administrators supportive of activism, Broadhurst and Martin (2014) assert:

> Student activists often view campus administrators as representatives of the greater power system of higher education that contains elements they are struggling to change. From the view of student activists, these administrators, because of their positions, could either help or hinder the activities of student activists. (p. 82)

In response to campus demonstrations and the development of student activist movements, administrators made political and organizational shifts to either accommodate, support, or manage campus unrest (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014). Despite their affiliation to the institution, literature underscored multiple benefits received by administrators as a result of student activism. Markedly between 1960 and 1990, U.S. colleges and universities took significant steps to consider race-based admissions policies, recruitment of staff with marginalized identities, and inclusion of gender and sexual orientation in university nondiscrimination statements (Keppel, 1987). Additionally, legislation such as the Higher Education Act of 1965 expanded financial aid programs for students, creating a need for additional administrative services to be offered to college students (Capt, 2013; Keppel 1987). Thus, in light of student activists collaborating and partnering faculty and administrators of the institution, their efforts were met with mixed results that both helped and hindered their goals at times.

Identity and Political Consciousness

Undoubtedly, there were external challenges and experiences germane to student

activism including their relationship with the institution and its stakeholders. Alternatively,

literature also revealed a significant experience of student activists was their development of

identity and consciousness, particularly for women of color that engage in student activism.

Reiteratively, as PWIs in an open environment, there are students with previous participation in

activism before college matriculation, either through secondary education or influence by family

or community members that were activists (Lipset & Altbach, 1966). Once students arrive on

campus, they encounter and engage in activism through different outlets. Identification with a

particular movement proved crucial in the literature, increasing the likelihood of participation for

students with marginalized social identities (McAdam, 1986). Whether a peer, faculty, or

administrator with a similar salient identity, students are informed of opportunities to get

involved and engaged with specific social issues. Once students become involved and engaged in

activism, they begin to expand their awareness of social issues that are often mirrored by U.S.

society. As Urrieta (2007) stated:

> Raising consciousness was often used synonymously by Chicana/o Activist participants
> with teaching for social justice pero con ganas. By committing to raising consciousness,
> the participants were committing to educate others from a counter-hegemonic
> perspective. Raising consciousness meant that participants began to engage in the
> activity of teaching informally whenever possible in moment-to-moment opportunities
> as a form of day-to-day activism. (p. 133)

While raising consciousness was essential for addressing social inequities on campus (i.e.,

Hamrick, 1998), it is also evident the development of consciousness had far-reaching

implications for student activists. For some, activism was seen as a contribution and commitment

to social change for their representative communities. For example, Christensen and Arczynski

(2014) conducted six interviews with college students about their experience in activist

movements for sexual assault prevention. During the interviews, it became clear that the issue

was central to the identity of the students and thus motivated their involvement in their

respective organizations. Others would use their consciousness for professional aspirations,

pursuing careers in politics or education to continue passing down counter-hegemonic narratives

and knowledge about social issues (Rojas, 2012; Urrieta, 2007).

Previous research also unpacks the individual benefits and formations of self that students

undergo during engagement and involvement in student activism. General participation in

student activism inspires students to create social change and contribute to a positive campus

climate (Quaye, 2007). Moreover, in their study of morality development in student activism,

Keniston (1970) concluded that among all students, 56% of protestors were at post-conventional

levels of morality compared to 12% who do not protest and define morality in terms of law and

order. Speaking to the meaning behind these statistics, Keniston clarified:

> Those who have reached higher levels of moral development are more likely to act in the
> service of their principles-protesting when their principles are at issue; refusing, also for
> reasons of principle, to take part in other protests and forms of activism. (p. 583)

Expanding this assertion to the larger base of literature, it is important to note that not all forms

of student activism were liberal in nature; on the contrary, there were notable cases in history

where students took politically conservative stances against progressive social issues on campus

(ex. Dunlap, 1970; Hyers, Cochran, & Schaeffer, 2011; Munson, 2010). However, no matter the

issue of the student activist movement or organization, marginalized students exercised an ability

to pick and choose engagement and involvement in issues that mattered to their values and

principles. Markedly, student activists utilized their developed awareness, consciousness, and

sense of self to construct the reality of their world (i.e., Urrieta, 2007), a world that is based in

the reality of inequitable issues on campus and a degree of critical hope that guides their

motivation for social change (Quaye, 2007).

Women of Color in Student Activism

Because I chose to center women of color in my exploration of student activism, I looked

to literature that discussed their identity development in relation to activist work. The presence of

marginalized identities was clear as the perspectives of LGBTQ, Black, Latinx, Asian-American,

and women college students were documented. However, outside of race, gender, or sexuality as

separate categories of analysis, there were only a handful of studies that complicate analysis of

intersecting identities, specifically women of color student activists (Bernal, 1998; Linder &

Rodriguez, 2012). What I found in scholarship affirmed student activists from underrepresented

populations experience marginalization from their institution. These experiences, including lack

of institutional response to issues of social injustice, unwillingness to acknowledge the work of

student activists, and oppressive microaggressions towards student activists, provide context for

the gender consciousness and marginalization of women of color within student activist

movements in higher education.

Within literature on the social and political consciousness developed by marginalized

student activists, activism of women of color college students includes an analysis and

consideration of their gender identity. After interviewing Asian American women student leaders

in college, Chow (1997) found that student activism was helpful to Asian American women

cultivating their gender identity they felt unable to explore in other activist organizations or parts

of campus life. Similarly, Hernandez (2012) conducted a qualitative study with Mexican

American women and discovered the awareness of social constructs increased for Mexican

American women that actively identified and engaged in the Latino community at their

university. Paradoxically, as important as it is for student activist movements and organizations

to develop consciousness with their communities, scholarship exposes an understanding and

analysis of gender by women of color separate from the aims and motivation of their

organization (Bernal, 1998). Ironically, it is the development of gender consciousness that

allowed women of color to not only succeed in college, but also examine the existing power

relations in student activism for marginalized populations in higher education (Carrillo & Dean,

2018). Through gender consciousness, women of color activists became aware of sexism and

gender discrimination in student activism from peers in their organizations and movements.

Though women of color participated and actively engaged in student activism, their

contributions were often shielded in the public representation of activist issues, including those

with gender or race-specific goals (Breines, 2002; Chow, 1997; O'Connor, 2002). Referencing

the "Raza Womyn" and the absence of feminism in the Chicano movement, Revilla (2004)

purported:

> Chicana feminist who have shared concerns of their male counterparts have challenged
> the persistence of patriarchy/sexism and homophobia in Chicano Studies and the Chicano
> movement. Few projects have documented the experiences of young women today as
> activists on and off university campuses; tendency to document collective groups of
> activists without regard for how gender identity impacts engagement in movements. (p.
> 81)

As this study points out, the presence of gender discrimination and sexism in student activist

movements catalyzed the alienation and marginalization of women of color activists in student

activist movements (O'Connor, 2002). Additionally, it led women of color activists to subsume

gender consciousness to instead engage for the wellbeing of their community and the movement

(Pasque & Vargas, 2014; Rhoads, Lee, & Yamada, 2002). Elaborating on the effects of

marginalization for self-identified women of color activists, Linder and Rodriguez (2012) speak

to the burden of women of color negotiating their multiple, oppressed identities while participating in student activism; in most cases, the burden they faced led to burnout, isolation, and low retention at PWIs. As such, the effects of not providing an alternative, critical view of women of color student activists in PWIs reifies a gap in the literature and the significance of this topic. In the final section of review, I explore the role of agency in student activism, followed by an overarching summation of research gaps and implications under consideration in this study.

Leadership Development, Agency, and Activism

Student activist movements require the active engagement of organizational actors, including the dichotomy between people who contribute to movements and those considered to be leaders of a movement (Meyer & Whittier, 1994; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). In the same vein, when considering leadership and engagement in student activism, literature confirms that shared identity is essential for the practice of leadership to occur between organizational actors (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008). From this vantage point and given what is known about their experiences, the inquiry of my research purpose rests on understanding how women of color define leadership and agency through engagement as active participants and leaders in student activist movements. As such, I continue review of relevant literature and explore the concept of agency and its connection to student activism. Specifically, I consider the relationship between agency and power, agency versus structure, the nature and role of agency in leadership and followership and employed strategies for cultivating agency in leadership and student activism.

Power and Agency

To elucidate a potential connection between agency and student activism, I first explore the concept and origins of agency in research and scholarship. Rooted in critical social theory,

agency is described as the transformative capacity for individuals to act independently of socially constructed environments (Giddens, 1979; Dugan, 2017). Noting the nature of critical social theory, "to construct knowledge in the service of human freedom and social justice" (Levinson et al., 2011, p. 16), it is fair to explicate the presence and role of power in concert with agency, as the obstacles and barriers – representative of socially-constructed environments – inhibit individuals' ability to live and act independently. Further, applications of agency remain aligned with its origins, expanding to consider agency as a relational product of individual interactions of agents, structural in the subjective perceptions of actors, and temporal in its historical context (Sullivan, Williams, & Jeffares, 2012).

The concept of agency is thoroughly examined in leadership theory and scholarship; markedly, transformational leadership theory emphasizes the role of agency in leadership development and practice (Gunter, 2009). However, in doing so, transformational theory distributes the locus of power to the leader of the organization, or in this case, the student activist movement (Tourish, 2014). Looking at the critique of self-interest from Tourish, Craig, and Amernic (2010), agency navigates discussion of collective, distributed, and equitable access to power between all actors of an organization or movement (Bolden et al., 2008; Wolfgramm, Flynn-Coleman, & Conroy, 2015). A major reason for this perception of agency is built in the images, stereotypes, and representation of a leader, constructed by society and used to inform prominent leadership theory and practice. Pulling from "great man theory", trait-based leadership, and functionalist approaches to leadership theory, in times when leadership is needed, society shows a preference for visionaries, individuals with significant courage, strength, and an ability to persevere in the face of adversity (Bolden et al., 2008; Gunter, 2009; Simpson, 2016). However, the concern of this paradigm is the way it informs and limits our image of who leaders

can be and whom can practice leadership; consequently, the primary representation of leadership in society is visualized through the lens of cisgender, heterosexual, White men (Liu & Baker, 2016). Not only is this indicative of the influence of agency and leadership theory, it emphasizes how student activists attending PWIs must negotiate and manage their relationship with power and agency.

Structure versus Agency

In addition to the standalone perspective of agency theory, agency shares a relationship and tension with the concept of structure. Pointedly, agency and structure are viewed from opposite ends of a spectrum between self-determination and structural domination; in essence, "Agency has been reconceptualized as the inherent creativity of the human being given expression through the subjectivities that both fashion and are fashioned by, the structures they encounter" (Levinson et al., 2012, p. 116). Beyond its ability to enhance the capacity of an individual to independently act with self-determination and creative action, there exists a dialectical relationship between structure and agency that further explains relations to power and constraints inhibiting action and movement in terms of leadership and activism (Dredge & Schott, 2013; Dugan, 2017).

One considerable area of tension between structure and agency lies within the physical institution, itself. Influenced by the social processes of society and the subjectivities of actors within the institution – students, faculty, administrators, for example – these institutions then reciprocate organizational pressure and power back onto micro-organizations of actors with shared responsibilities, goals, and motives, such as student activist movements (Bolden et al., 2008; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). The end result is an imbalance of power between actors, agents, and the institution, creating hierarchies, separations, and formal divisions of

power conveyed through leadership positions, distribution of responsibilities, and perception of

agency among actors (Broadfoot, 2002). Relatedly, Kezar, Carducci, and Contreras-McGavin

(2006) proclaim:

> The very design of educational programs, opportunities to develop social and cultural
> capital, and the ability to develop a sense of agency amidst an increasingly structured
> educational environment may reify or disrupt sociopolitical, economic, and historical
> norms. Maintaining the status quo continuous the subjugation of the unique histories,
> beliefs, and knowledge bases that shape individual and collective identities within
> culturally diverse communities. (p. 12)

Within this quote, the repeated theme of disruption of institutional power and status quo is

evident and shows how agency exhibits an ability to challenge the institutional structures that

simultaneously perpetuate structural domination and limit the development of agency of actors in

the institution. Critical scholars have called for an active interrogation of this issue between

power, structure, and agency in favor of creating more liberating and emancipatory environments

for the collective education of students (ex. Broadfoot, 2002; Harris & Spillane, 2008). However,

this inevitably leads to an adaptation of structure that focuses on policies, organizational

leadership, governance, and resource organization, the same avenues through which agency is at

a disadvantage (Dredge & Schott, 2013; Rigby, Woulflin, & März, 2016). While the relationship

between structure and agency leans heavily on critique of the institution, it provides additional

understanding of the temporal, contextual, and hierarchical levels of power (i.e., Bolden et al.,

2008) student activists must consider in concert with their agentic desire for social change.

Leadership and Followership

At the individual level, the relationship between agency and structure also reveals a key

to addressing the separation and application of leadership and followership in agency and

transformational leadership theory. In terms of structure, it creates a dichotomy between leaders

who have access to power and agency and followers that perform the responsibilities set forth by the leader; subsequently, the follower gains power and agency at the discretion of the leader (Dugan, 2017). Studying agency perspectives in business school pedagogy, Tourish et al. (2010) stated, "A bifurcated view of leadership in organizations emerges, in which employees and leaders are regarded to have different, and perhaps opposed, interests. This perspective is consistent with agency theory's assertion of self-interest as the dominant influence on human behavior" (p. s47). To add, leadership literature predominantly assumes a leader-centric positioning of theory at the expense of followership (Lovett, Dempster, & Flückiger, 2015; Simpson, 2016). Taken from the individual level where organizational actors – student activists, for example – interact and unite around a common purpose, the division of leaders and followers creates a balance of power in favor of the leader. For followers, the outcomes of power imbalance include invisibility within the organization, limits opportunities to develop agency for creative action and self-determination, and further implants structural paradigms of leadership theory and practice (Tourish, 2014). In the same study, Tourish also mentioned situations where followers exercise agency that disrupts the function and established norms of the organization.

Strategies towards Agency

Alternatively, though the majority of literature on agency suggests an inextricable and oft imbalanced locus of power between actors and institutions, it also highlights instances where organizational actors who are not considered leaders develop, cultivate, and enact strategies towards agency. Explicitly, critical leadership scholars propose a reconstruction of the leadership paradigm, seeking to both disrupt the status quo of practice and destabilize the images and stereotypes of leadership that reproduce inequitable forms of power for organizational actors and institutions (Kezar et al., 2006). As suggested by Tourish (2014):

A process-oriented perspective would challenge the traditional separation in the literature between leaders and followers (Collinson, 2006). It can help to rebalance our view of agency in leader–follower interactions and therefore contribute to forms of organising that are less likely to inflict social, organisational and economic harm. (p. 83)

Furthermore, an equitable distribution of agency also leads to more productive flows of institutional work processes and cultivates the development of agency for individual and collective actors (Dugan, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2009). Another significant strategy towards cultivation of agency is reflexivity. Scholars have been intentional about the reconceptualization of agency, underlining the importance of reflexivity in the process of developing agency (Wolfgramm et al., 2015). As an intervention, reflexivity creates an opportunity for organizational actors and institutions to evaluate their actions, methods, and motivations, building enhanced awareness of ability to resist and obtain power (Kezar et al., 2006). To that end, the intervention and practice of reflexivity also contributes to the establishment of critical hope in these environments, one where the actor has a firm grasp of the realities of their positioning within an organization or institution yet can imagine the possibility of social change that is driven by creative action and self-determination (Quaye, 2007). It is here again where I return to the comparison of student activists, as actors within an institution and members of an organizational movement, working towards social change against the structural constraints of PWIs and their desire to maintain power and status quo.

Research Gaps and Implications for Study

In conclusion of the reviewed literature, I offer a series of significant implications for research, based on identified themes and gaps. Overall, the literature demonstrates that student activism has a significant impact on the structure, organization, and function of U.S. higher education, particularly those with a predominant representation of White students, faculty, and

administrators. Reflecting the sociopolitical climate of U.S. society and the prevalence of social movements, student activists built a similar model of organization and structure to combat the inequitable policies, practices, and climate of PWIs, especially activists with marginalized and underrepresented social identities in higher education. Though contemporary studies of student activism portray current issues of higher education and society, the concentration of literature still resides between 1960s and 1980s, with sporadic coverage throughout the previous three decades. Further, the study of student activism has largely remained a historical inquiry that could benefit from additional empirical analysis.

Another notable implication of the review is the uneven focus on organizational and structural components of student activism, compared to the contributions of student activists as creators, mobilizers, and leaders of movements on campus. By nature of structure and agency embedded in higher education institutions, future research can illuminate a potentially problematic power dynamic that exists between higher education institutions and student activists. Shifting the focus to student activists that engage and participate in movements toward social change, I also embark on a journey of critical leadership practice, which as Foster (1989) asserts, "is and must be socially critical, it does not reside in an individual but in the relationship between individuals, and it is oriented towards social vision and change, not simply, or only organizational goals" (p. 46).

Exploring the documented experiences of student activists in the literature revealed a rich history of students within and across movements formed to dismantle issues of racism, sexism, sexuality, disability, and immigration status. Motivated by their communities, identities, and desire for social change, student activists – overwhelmingly, activists with marginalized social identities – rise to meet the occasion, yet, encounter a number of challenges along the way.

These challenges, whether a result of a resisting institutional status quo or feelings of isolation, burnout, or marginalization, it is evident student activists find ways to persevere and develop the necessary tools and strategies to cultivate agency and effectuate change. However, women of color college students, a significant population and contributor to student activist movements, are rarely visible or centered in student activist literature (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012). Exploring the challenges and experiences of women of color student activists discovering and developing agency, research in this gap serves multiple purposes: amplifying the voice of women of color student activists subject to barriers to success within movements and the PWI itself; a reversal of deficit-thinking by exploring how women of color activist find agency in their experiences in the midst of barriers to success; last but not least, a potential opportunity to assess how student activism can be a positive avenue for learning, leadership, and democratic citizenship of women of color.

Utilizing the identified themes and gaps of knowledge presented in this literature review, I propose a conceptual framework, specifically an emergent framework of critical, feminist agency theory that builds on review and discussion previously presented in this chapter, providing foundational concepts helpful to understanding how women of color student activists practice leadership and define agency in PWIs.

Conceptual Framework: Critical Feminist Agency Theory

To explore the gap of literature that addresses how women of color student activists define leadership and agency in PWIs, I utilize a critical, feminist agency theory; bridging the conceptual and theoretical foundations of critical race feminism and feminist agency. Connecting both areas of inquiry into a coherent, unified framework, I detail the main components and concepts of critical race feminism and feminist agency, as follows.

Critical Race Feminism

A layered concept itself, critical race feminism brings together central elements of critical race theory and feminism. Critical race theory (CRT) emerged from a collective of legal scholars and activists exploring the relationship between race, racism, and power. Specifically, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) hold certain elements of CRT constant. First and primary, racism is an embedded system upon which society functions. Second, the embedded racism of society serves both physical and material purposes that advance the interest of both White elites and working-class individuals. Third, race is socially constructed; that is, our understanding of race is a product of social relations and identity groups and not a confirmation of a biological positivism. Last, and most importantly in regard to this study, CRT rejects the notion of anti-essentialism, asserting that no person has one unitary identity. The aforementioned concept of CRT builds on feminist insight on the relationship between power and the social construction of identity (Levinson et al., 2012).

Research and scholarship on feminism is expansive, and as such, scholars have developed different definitions and understandings of feminism; generally speaking, the collection of feminist literature defines the term as advocacy for the liberation of women who endure a patriarchal system of oppression based on gender (ex. Mann & Patterson, 2016). While feminism has a centered gender analysis of women, critical scholars assert a sole analysis of gender identity is not inclusive of women with multiple, marginalized, social identities (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Distinctly, it is scholarship by woman of color that challenged the essentialist nature of feminist theory and expanded the concept to be inclusive of the interlocking systems of oppression that exist for women of color beyond gender identity (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1989).

Contributing to the canon of woman of color feminist theory, critical race feminism (CRF) repurposes the tenets of CRT with critical feminist scholarship that acknowledges race and gender as constructed identities central to social, political, and economic realities of women of color (Wing, 1997). The application of CRF has been helpful to the study of educational institutions, and for higher education institutions specifically, the framework of CRF has been applied to consider the experiences of women of color faculty members, women of color college students, and how higher education institutions reproduce inequality for women of color through the structural constraints, organization, and governance of colleges and universities (ex. Croom & Patton, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Based on the utility of CRF to the experience of women of color, it is essential to include it in the emergent framework of this study.

Feminist Agency

The second component of the emergent framework is feminist agency. The connection between agency and feminism rests in the central concern for the relationship between power and the ability for women to independently act and self-determine given the structural constraints of society (Levinson et al., 20112). Accounting for the concept of agency and the nature of women's gendered oppression, Isaacs (2002) stresses, "Given the conditions of oppression presupposed by a feminist understanding of social structures, feminist agency is paradoxical. I am going to understand feminist agency as women's ability to be effective agents against their own oppression" (p. 129). Debate of the possibility of feminist agency lies within post-structural feminist analysis of agency, proclaiming that sexist oppression diminishes the ability of women to obtain any sense of agency, rendering the term contradictory and paradoxical in nature (Davies, 1991; Gill, 2007). While a valid assessment from a post-structural perspective, closer evaluation shows discord with the multiple realities of identity that women occupy in society.

Specifically, agency is applied as a unifying term, one that is absent of social, political, personal, and collective agency, each of which comes with its own set of motivations, guiding principles, and ways of accessing power and agency (Parkins, 2000). Additionally, an emphasis on sexist oppression, though with the intent of moving beyond the categorical boundaries of womanhood, attaches the ability for creative action and self-determination to the structures created by society. As affirmed by Clegg (2006):

> Attempting to clarify these terms is central to any politics which desires the emancipation of women from the binaries which trap women into having to be a woman, and thus positioned as always sexed, and yet does not permit her a universalizing voice that could allow her to speak as a human being without having to denying her sex. (p. 311)

Ultimately, the critique of feminist agency lacks compatibility with empowerment, or as Archer (1996) called it the *enchantment of being human*, suggesting women, despite the barriers they face as a result of marginalization and oppression, can move beyond the social consciousness of their reality to create change with social, political, and economic implications for self and community (Lee & Logan, 2017). In an effort to reverse the hegemonic paradigm of agency, one that gives power to leaders at the expense of followers, incorporating the concept of critical feminist agency reconstructs the view of women of color student activists, who despite all odds, find meaningful, agentic ways to lead and engage in student activist movements in PWIs.

Towards a Critical Feminist Agency Framework

Merging the theory and concepts of feminist agency with critical race feminism, I hold the following beliefs constant to the production of knowledge on this research topic. First, women of color embody multiple ways of being and as such, experience oppression at the intersection of race and gender in addition to other salient social identities, revealing a layered, multi-level perspective of oppression in society. Second, despite the marginalized identities of

women of color, it is still possible to obtain and access power and agency, particularly within social institutions such as PWIs where there is an availability of resources and political opportunity for creative action and self-determination. To that end, while acknowledging the structural constraints that exist for women of color student activists, both within PWIs and student activist movements that are not conscious of their gender or visibility, I make intentional effort to focus on leadership and agency within these structures to discover strategies women of color activists utilize to resist a dominant paradigm of leadership and social change.

In the next chapter, I outline my proposed qualitative methodology to understand the topic of women of color activists defining leadership and agency in PWIs, including specific methods for data collection and analysis. Furthermore, I highlight reflexivity by acknowledging my researcher positionality and possible implications it may have on the validity and trustworthiness of potential findings.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The history of student activism in U.S. higher education and its influence on policy, programs, and organizational structures is prevalent in educational scholarship. Review of this broad area of scholarship revealed an engagement of women of color student activists participating in various student movements on campus, as well as a plausible connection between their involvement in student activism and agency within these movements. To explore these implications further, I embarked on a journey of critical qualitative inquiry about women of color student activists. Given the literature on women of color student activism, I am curious to understand the lived experience of women of color student activists from their perspective, specifically highlighting both historic and contemporary experiences of student activism in higher education. Furthermore, I also seek to learn more about how these lived experiences may translate to the development of women of color, and how they are able to exercise agency within the localized, social environment of PWIs. The following chapter details the methodological framework and research design I use to explore this topic. Methodology is a pivotal component of empirical inquiry and communicates the methods and means by which a researcher collects data to explore a specific topic; the type of methodology utilized is dependent upon the overarching paradigm and worldview of the study (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

I begin with a restatement of the overarching research questions that provide a basis for the topic of inquiry. After personal reflection of the problem statement and critical review of relevant literature, I arrive at the following:

1. What are the experiences of women of color college students engaging in student activism at predominantly White higher education institutions?

2. What institutional factors, if any, inform how women of color lead, engage, and participate in student activism on campus?

3. Within these experiences, what does the engagement of women of color say about leadership and agency?

<center>**Critical Feminist Methodology**</center>

To explore the research questions in depth, I employ a critical, qualitative, feminist methodology. As defined by Bailey and Fonow (2015), critical feminist methodologies "continue to pursue empirical and theoretical questions and problems that explore the material realities of people's lives...or constitute gender and its many interactions, that seek to identify and interrupt forms of inequity and oppression" (p. 53). The unique position of this approach has multiple philosophical keystones to consider in application of methods, including the tensions between positivist and critical research paradigms and ontological and epistemological assumptions of its methodology.

One of the primary elements of methodology is its ontological foundation, or how the researcher views the nature of reality. Notably, it is our view of reality that informs how we construct, perceive, and access knowledge, and therefore, understand power (Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, & Gildersleeve, 2012). Critical feminist methodology derives its ontology from what Lincoln et al. (2011) describe as historic realism, one that is shaped by, "social, political,

cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallized over time" (p. 98). This viewpoint

opposes positivist perspectives of ontology that perceive of reality as a single entity; a reality that

can be measured through empirical inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, &

Baumgartner, 2007). The social location of women of color student activists in higher education

is complex with social and political implications for their social identity across race and gender

in addition to how they navigate higher education institutions with these salient identities.

Therefore, my methodology relies on critical qualitative inquiry that is based in historical realism

to better understand the complex, lived realities of women of color student activists.

The nature of knowledge is another important element to consider. Epistemology

explores the nature of knowledge and how we come to understand and perceive of our realities

through knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). However, assuming a critical ontological

underpinning, knowledge must be explicated as a form of power flowing between dominant and

oppressed groups of society (Levinson et al., 2011). Comparatively, while a positivist view of

epistemology is based on a unitary form of knowledge that separates the knower from ways of

knowing, critical and feminist methodologies allow both the researcher and subject to make

meaning of knowledge through their reality with conscious awareness of social, political, and

economic forces at play (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004). Critical feminist research speaks

to the notion of embodied experiences – tangible and intangible experiences that we encounter

that are then used to form our base of knowledge (Parkins, 2000). Plainly speaking, embodied

experiences affirm that so much of how people make meaning of the world is through their

everyday, lived experiences (Razack, Thobani, & Smith, 2010).

Within different systems of education, critical feminist epistemologies amplify the

experiences of marginalized student populations, asserting their role as producers of knowledge

that are capable of providing significant insight about social phenomena and reality. In secondary

education, there are notable studies that examine the power relations that exists within

curriculum and teaching practices from the perspective of the students, engaging scholars and

practitioners alike in critical discussion to make learning environments equitable for all students

(Bernal, 1998). Additionally, in higher education, critical epistemologies have troubled the

structure of PWIs, markedly, how policy, programs, and administration can evoke a hostile

climate for women of color college students (Cannella & Perez, 2012). Within this dissertation

study, the nature of knowledge is derived from women of student activists who navigate PWIs as

a marginalized student population and embody experiences of institutional culture and campus

climate as student activists.

Reflexivity and Representation

Reflexivity is both an important methodological tool and intervention strategy for critical

qualitative researchers examining and problematizing power (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014;

Pillow, 2003). Citing Collins' (1990) conceptualization of the matrix of domination in Black

Feminist Thought, Pasque and Pérez (2015) add that reflexivity:

> Allows us to resist the tendency to reify power within our own research constructs,
> processes, and practices, from conceptualization to representation and dissemination of
> inquiry...critical qualitative inquiry does not stop at a definition of power, but includes a
> constant examination, complication, and problematization of it. (p. 149)

An important point to consider within the previous quote is a focus on the constructs of the

researcher and the power it holds over the subjects of research. Indigenous, critical race, and

critical feminist scholars each share their own concerns with positivist paradigms of research, not

only because of the reduction of subjective knowledge for objective truth, but the ability of the

researcher to be seen as separate from the subject (Smith, 2004). Put simply, as individuals living

in an environment shaped by social, political, and economic forces, we also impart our own stereotypes, biases, and assumptions into our research (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Rather than detaching ourselves from this process, critical feminist methodology asks that we embrace our positionality, both as an acknowledgement to the ontological foundation of critical research and a tool to critically examine our relationship with power during the research process. To that end, as the primary researcher for this study, I practice reflexivity by offering the following statement of researcher positionality.

Positionality Statement

I identify as a queer, cisgender, first-generation, man of color with high educational attainment. Looking back on my life, I attach each of these identities to specific experiences in higher education. I came from a single-parent household and I am the first person in my family to receive a bachelor's and master's degree. While always cognizant of my Black racial identity, navigating the structure of higher education was a double-edged sword. On one hand, I gained access to language and cultural capital that has served me in future professional endeavors, especially as it relates to the development of consciousness needed to conduct and understand critical social justice research. As well and most prevalent, I possess male privilege, a systemic benefit that has given me access to authority and agency because of my gender identity, often at the expense of my mother, sisters, and women who have endured a history of misogyny, sexism, gender-based violence and discrimination. However, I also experienced the chilly side of higher education, encountering faculty, administrators, and students at various points in my journey that made me feel silenced, inadequate, and without an ability to make decisions that fit my passion and values. Without finding a brilliant community of activists, scholars, and organizers – openly, queer and trans* women of color - that would support my growth while pushing me to examine

my privilege as a cisgender man with a higher education degree from the U.S., I would not be where I am today. Furthermore, it is the support that I received from these various communities that propels the purpose of this study. Working with women of color activists and college students, though I may share salience in terms of race, sexuality, and education, it is critical that I hold tension with my cisgender male privilege, the capital I received through education, and power as a researcher. I hold this tension in the social capital I obtained working as a higher education professional, my rapport with women of color college students, and my motivations for conducting this research. Through reflection of these identities, I hope I can adequately convey a heartfelt intent to deconstruct pedagogy and practice that limits the agency women of color.

Taking both literature and my positionality into consideration, the practice of reflexivity also creates opportunity for representation, notedly, representation of voices that are not visible in the dominant structures of society (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Referring to what Pillow (2003) calls a "reflexivity of discomfort", by no means do I assume admittance of my positionality quells any responsibility or relief from proper representation of women of color activists as knowledge producers and active contributors to this study. Because my reality has been shaped by my social identities, I still maintain the benefit of privilege in many cases and therefore have the potential for bias when it comes to this study. Alternatively, by engaging in honest reflexivity, I hope to attend to the tensions that create opportunities to examine power and hold myself accountable to ensuring valid findings that reflect their experiences through inclusive, ethical, and collaborative collection and analysis of data (Styhre & Tienari, 2013).

Design and Methods

Building on tenets of critical feminist methodology, I utilize hermeneutic phenomenology as the research design. Derived from disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and sociology (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970; Klein & Westcott, 1994), phenomenology is generally defined as the study of lived experiences, emphasizing the essence of how humans make meaning of their experiences within a particular social context. Denoting the hermeneutic nature of phenomenology, Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) stated, "Phenomenology is concerned with lived experience, and is thus ideal for investigating personal learning journeys... the goal of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to develop a rich or dense description of the phenomenon being investigated in a particular context" (p. 616). The connection point between critical feminist methodology and phenomenological research design is lived experience, an acknowledgement of a social phenomenon that is women of color engaging in student activism within PWIs. Furthermore, phenomenological traditions of qualitative research place intentional focus on historicality, acknowledging that history contains valuable knowledge and essence capable of explaining important elements of human phenomenon (Koch, 1995). This focus offers a close alignment to critical feminist methodology, giving women of color student activists' space to openly express their knowledge and lived experiences throughout the research processes in data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

The unit of analysis and intended setting of the research question frame the criteria upon which participants will be recruited. Participants of the study will represent a specific set of characteristics. Also known as purposive or criterion sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), scholars and phenomenologists alike agree that although diverse samples may be suited to gauge

a generalizable set of findings, as far as qualitative inquiry is concerned, it is better to focus on a smaller number of individuals – typically between one and ten people - that can speak to the problem statement and topic of interest (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

In order to participate in the study, participants must (a) be an alumna or current undergraduate student of a PWI, (b) self-identify as a woman of color, (c) show current or previous involvement in student activism through individual participation or membership in a student activist organization that advocates for social justice issues. The reason for seeking recruitment of both undergraduate and alumnae women of color student activists is two-fold. First, higher education institutions have experienced rapid changes since the 1960s when student activism was most prevalent, especially in terms of student demographics, organizational governance of colleges and universities, and forms of leadership and student engagement when it comes to student activism (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). There is knowledge to be explored in these nuances and stories worth hearing to elicit whether these challenges still exist for women of color student activists as well as how the nature of activism has changed from the perspective of former students and women of color. Secondly, I believe it is important to hear perspectives both from alumni who offer historical knowledge and experiences that inform current student activism practices. Again, referring back to central tenets of critical feminist methodology and hermeneutic phenomenology, history is an important component of social identity that influences and shapes reality (Bailey & Fonow, 2015). Therefore, I want to be intentional about collaborating and hearing from participants embodying characteristics of these two groups. Additionally, the setting of the study in PWIs is necessary as they encompass a broad sociopolitical history, particularly within the United States where different student populations

lacked access to higher education, and as a result, faced marginalization, and sometimes, a

hostile campus climate (Christensen & Arczynski, 2015).

Table 1. Participant demographics including race, ethnicity, institutional affiliation, involvement and other salient social identities

	Pseudonym	Graduation Year	Institutional Type	Race/ Ethnicity	Salient Identities	Involvement
Individual Interviews	Tendei	2020	Private, small	Multi-racial-Black, White, Indigenous	Low socioeconomic status, bisexual, woman, demisexual	Environmental justice, prison abolition, immigration, metoo, racism, domestic violence
	Jennifer	2021	Public, large	Black	African American Woman	Gender and race equity
	Ming	2020	Private, large, religious	Multiracial, Cantonese, Chinese	Femme, woman, queer, college educated	Media representation, capitalism, intersectional feminism
	JD	2020	Private, large, religious	Black, African American	Woman, heterosexual	Racial injustice, environmental racism, reproductive freedom
	Lauren	2022	Public, large	Asian, Fillipino	Woman, lesbian, US citizen	LGBTQ liberation in faith spaces, school-to-prison pipeline, economic inequality
Focus Group #1	R	2012	Public, large	South Asian, Third Culture	Femme, pan, woman of color, atheist	Women's reproductive rights, domestic violence, community engagement
	Jeriyah	2015	Private, large, religious	Black	Woman, heterosexual, first generation	Black Lives Matter
	Nappeh	2004	Public, mid-size	Native American - Shoshone-Bannock	Queer, woman, working class,	Racial injustice, environmental racism
Focus Group #2	Celia	2010	Private, small	Puerto Rican/German	3rd culture, cisgender, woman, plus-sized, working class	Black Lives Matter
	Phoebe	1985	Private, large	Asian American	Woman	Asian American issue, anti-war movements, affirmative action
	Ashley	2014	Public, large	Black	Woman, cisgender, heterosexual	Black Lives Matter, Black Feminism

In total, there were 11 participants in this study. I conducted five individual interviews with current students and two separate focus groups between the remaining six participants. As the table above displays, there was much diversity between participants in terms of race, ethnicity, and sexuality. When identifying salient social identities, each participant openly identified as a woman regardless of race, ethnicity, class, or sexuality. While all participants were affiliated with PWIs at one point or another, the geographic difference in addition to perspectives from public and private institutions contributed to the study. Furthermore, participants also had range in their activism: some were presidents of their student organizations, some were community organizers, volunteers, or independent activists that did not affiliate with any institutional organization or student movement. Furthermore, participants were involved in a range of social issues including racial injustice, environmental racism, reproductive freedom, and other forms of structural oppression. The diversity of experiences and perspectives were welcomed contributions to the research inquiry between the interviews and focus groups that followed.

Individual Interviews

The first point of data collection was individual, semi-structured interviews. Generally speaking, individual interviews are a staple of qualitative inquiry, allowing researchers to connect and learn from the stories, narratives, and experiences of participants in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, phenomenological interviews create an opportunity for the participant to describe and reflect on their experiences in detail within a private and confidential space (Anderson & Jack, 1991). However, it would behoove me to note that there are significant concerns raised by scholars in reference to semi-structured interviews such as bracketing, a phenomenological approach to interviewing that asks the researcher to detach their

opinions, knowledge, and biases from the interview process (Carpenter, 2007). Conversely, some

scholars such as Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) offered an alternative view of

phenomenological interviews, one that focuses on the acknowledgement and reflection of the

researcher and allows the participant to participate and ask questions of the researcher as well,

allowing for a reciprocal and mutual construction of reality (Laverty, 2003; Smith & Osborn,

2004). Additionally, some researchers assert that bracketing, as it has been practiced in nursing

and medical research, is not always consistent in execution and antithetical to the reality of

hermeneutic knowledge of a particular phenomenon (Crotty, 1996). As Chan, Fung, and Chien

(2013) stated:

> In the semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a set of questions on an interview
> schedule, but the interview will be guided by the schedule rather than dictated by it...
> When the researchers maintain their curiosity regarding what they might not know, the
> participants are allowed to express themselves freely. (pp. 4-5)

Therefore, I approached individual, semi-structured interviews as a curious listener of participant

experiences while being mindful not to impart my own perceptions onto the interview. A crucial

consideration of phenomenological interviews is contextualization, structuring the interview in

such a way that the focus is on the lifeworld and biography of the participant and how they use

this to make meaning of their experiences (Bevan, 2014). The second and third stage of the

interview would be to offer an opportunity for the participant to describe their experience in

detail and then seek to clarify this phenomenon through descriptive questions based on the

account of participant rather than a predetermined set of questions (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000).

These three stages formed the basic structure of the interview and a starting point of conversation

between participants. Additionally, I used an interview guide to aligns with the research purpose

instead of specific interview questions the participant must answer. Participants also had the

agency to ask the researcher questions that came up for them in an effort to acknowledge my

positionality and its influence in the study rather than detaching from the interactive process.

The location for each interview took place in a private setting that was mutually

convenient and deemed safe by the participant. In each case, including those participants at a far

distance as well as those local to the Chicago area, they chose the online platform Zoom as the

location for the interview. The duration of each interview will be approximately 60-90 minutes

in accordance with general phenomenological interview formats (Smith & Osborn, 2004); this

includes the actual interview between myself and the participant the time before and after the

interview to debrief the interview process, and time to gather informed consent from the

participant. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed, followed by storage of the audio

transcription in the OneDrive web storage application. Interviews were transcribed, written, and

included in data analysis. Each participant was given access to written transcripts once they were

completed. Also, I included my separate notes that detail my interactions during interviews in

order to highlight particular bias that will be helpful to analyze in the data analysis process.

Focus Group Interviews

The second point of data collection was focus group interviews. Whereas individual

interviews offered participant privacy to be able to express their thoughts and experiences, focus

groups created an environment where multiple participants with similar identities are able to

dialogue about experiences, whether there was similarity or dissent across the group. The key

difference between individual and focus group interviews, as Hennink (2014) pointed out:

> Perhaps the most unique characteristics of focus group research is the interactive
> discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not
> accessible...participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine
> their own views in light of what they heard. (pp. 2-3)

In feminist research, scholars note that focus groups are helpful in addressing the ethical concerns of interviewing, particularly the power dynamic that exists between researchers and participants (Orbe, 2000). Indeed, participants have a greater level of control over discussions that is shared among members of the focus group, including the researcher. In terms of phenomenological focus, there is little difference from the structure of individual interviews that emphasizes contextualization of the lifeworld, description and clarification of the phenomenon; the exceptions are the researcher role as moderator rather than interviewer and analysis of the group process as opposed to individual participants of the focus group (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Similar to individual interviews, I provided a general guide of discussion for participants and focused on my responsibility as a listener, facilitator of time, and contributor of conversation when needed and called upon by participants (Morgan, 1988).

For focus groups, I elicited the participation of women of color alumni that attended PWIs and have a history of student activism. A reason for this focus group format is institutional affiliation for current students; based on the perception of student activists in higher education (Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Gonzales, 2008), a focus group may not be the best outlet to discuss otherwise private and confidential information. Furthermore, as hermeneutic phenomenology and feminist research affirm, history is an important facet of our experiences that informs how we view reality. Laverty (2003) states hermeneutic phenomenology is, "concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived...focus is toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives" (p. 24). Contemporary student activists may hold a specific view of their experiences in the current context of higher education, however based on the historical literature on women of color student activism, there is a possibility that alumni participants hold a historical knowledge of student

activism that contributes to the understanding of student activism as a phenomenon (Shapiro, 2005). Hence, I moved forward with focus groups as an adequate format to engage women of color alumni on the experience of student activism.

Similar to individual interviews, focus groups took place via the online platform Zoom at the choice of participants previous. Based on qualitative research (Hughes & Dumont, 1993), I am aiming for a maximum focus group of six participants and ended with three participants per focus group based on time and availability - keeping in mind saturation of data as an indicator of validation as opposed to the number of individuals participating (Hughes & Dumont, 2002). The focus group interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, including a combined thirty minutes to debrief before and after the interview and sixty minutes for the actual interview. The focus group will be audio recorded and transcribed. Written transcripts were collected from focus group interviews. Each participant gained access to the written transcripts once they were completed. Additionally, similar to individual interviews, I will remit notes taken about my interactions with focus group participants during the meeting that will be analyzed by myself and a peer debriefer who will help me safeguard against bias and assumptive conclusions in the study (Hughes & Dumont, 2002).

Data Analysis

With collected data from individual interviews and focus groups, I began data analysis for the study through a process known as coding. Basit (2003) defines coding as "tags or labels for allocating units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are attached to chunks of varying-sized words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting" (p. 144). Typically, coding follows one of two approaches: inductive coding that develops patterns and themes of meaning from

participant data and deductive coding, involving an *a priori* provisional list of themes from

literature to connect to developed codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For this study, I used an

inductive coding process. Specifically, I analyzed transcripts from interviews and focus groups

for codes as opposed to relying on a predetermined list of themes developed from the literature,

allowing the essence of experiences for women of color to speak for themselves instead of

literature that may or may not reflect their narratives.

First, I reviewed transcripts and notes to get a general sense of what was discussed that

brings new insight to the research topic and scope of the study (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Then, I

read a second time to draw out meaningful quotes from participants that speak to the lived

experiences of women of color student activists across interviews and focus groups. From there,

I analyzed the first round of codes and grouped them together based on similarity of meaning and

essence, creating what could be a potential pattern that threads through the interviews and focus

groups; this is also known as axial coding and the second step in the process of qualitative

coding (Basit, 2003; Creswell, 1997). Lastly, I looked through the axial codes created from open

coding and found prevalent themes that connected the codes together and created a story that

mirrors and honors the narratives of women of color student activists (Starks & Trinidad-Brown,

2007). These themes formed the basis of my findings for the study and the analysis from which I

based my research significance and implications for higher education.

Another important component of the data analysis will be the assistance of a peer that

will help me debrief both the interviews and focus groups as well as conduct analysis of data as a

second coder. We initially met to discuss data collection procedures and made ethical

considerations of outreach, consent, and data collection protocol. Additionally, we met

throughout the data collection and analysis phase to discuss patterns, themes, and significant

phenomenon that arises from interviews and focus groups. I will ultimately be responsible for writing up findings and results of data collection, however this person was crucial to the research process, especially in terms of data validity and reliability that I discussed within the final section of this chapter.

My goal for data collection is to reach a point of saturation where participant narratives converge, however, I aim to complete between four to six individual interviews, consistent with recommendations from scholars that focused on smaller, homogenous sample sizes (Smith & Osborn, 2004).

Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to rigor and relationship between the findings of the study and its underlying rationale and purpose (Morse, 2015). Separately constructed, internal validity refers more to the aforementioned relationship of data and purpose; in contrast, external validity – also known as reliability - assesses how the study overall translates to external reality (Creswell, 2013). I consider validity in multiple ways. Using a process known as member-checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), after individual and focus group interviews are accurately transcribed and verified by participants, I scheduled a follow-up meeting with each participant to discuss preliminary findings and discoveries participants made from their specific interview. As Maxwell (2013) purported:

> This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed. (pp. 126-127)

Moreover, through multiple sources of perspectives and data points between individual and focus group interviews transcripts and researcher field notes, I intentionally engaged in crystallization,

increasing the magnitude of truth in the experiences of participants and enhancing the credibility

of research (Patton, 2015; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

The last and necessary component I took toward sufficient rigor of methods included peer

debriefing and collaboration with an additional researcher that externally audited data for

consistency of coding and offers another perspective to data analysis (Morse, 2015). In this way,

peer debriefing bears similarity to inter-coder reliability, providing a safeguard against bias and

adding rigor to the coding process (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2013). Though Morse (2010)

critiques the necessity and ethics of peer debriefing, with particular attention to the assumption

of trustworthiness based on consensus and questions of responsibility for research outcome, my

utilization of peer debriefing serves as a prevention of bias, especially as a cisgender, male

researcher conducting an empirical study from a critical feminist lens. Peer debriefing took place

at three different stages: at the onset and conclusion of data collection and during the

development of preliminary findings after data analysis. Furthermore, the peer debriefer openly

identified as a queer Black woman and therefore shared similar, salient identities to participants

of the study and had experience working with critical feminist methodologies and qualitative

research methods. I believe this was necessary for my accountability as the primary researcher

and created more opportunities to collaborate with women of color on a significant issue in

higher education, and engage in research practices that are inclusive, supportive, and equitable

for participants in the study.

Compared to internal validity – which encompasses dependability and confirmability of

data – reliability emphasizes the ability of the findings of the study to be externally validated and

replicated to larger population and readers of the study (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). In the

fashion of qualitative inquiry, I express external validity through transferability, that is, how

readily the findings show applicability to the intended audience, fellow critical scholars, and readers (Tierney & Clemens, 2006). Consequently, and purposely, focusing on transferability shifts the applicability of the research shifts from myself as the researcher to the people who read it, self-determining the validity of goodness of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). As well, by ensuring the data reflects a rich, thick description of the experiences of women of color student activists, I am hopeful that a critical and descriptive analysis of behaviors, actions, and narratives offer a dependable, confirmatory semblance of meaning between participants of the study and the audience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Each of these steps – including details and explanation of data collection procedures, methods, and data analysis – are necessary to attend to the epistemological, ontological, and overall methodological rationale of this study. With care and attention to the ethics, validity, and reliability of research methods and analysis, I attended to the nuanced and complex tenets of critical feminist methodology. Notably, as the primary researcher and reader, I place great emphasis on the authenticity and trustworthiness of the findings and outcome of the study, not only in respect and integrity of critical feminist qualitative inquiry, but the sacred responsibility of caring for and conveying the knowledge and meaningful experiences lived and embodied by women of color student activists.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Dialogue with current and former women of color student activists revealed intimate

details about their experience as students, stakeholders, and change agents on campus.

Specifically, there were three overarching themes: a hostile climate that activated campus

engagement; a period of learning to navigate institutional politics and power; and building

collective and generational capacity. Within the quotes that are highlighted in these findings, I

merge prominent events from current students and alumni that hopefully strengthen and add

nuance to these themes. Last, I take a thematic approach to my findings; and while many

participant quotes and descriptions of events were organized under three main areas, I hope to

showcase the rich and contextualized nature of conversations I had with the women of color in

the study that will be discussed in the remaining chapter and section of this dissertation.

Hostile Climate Activates Campus Engagement

Through each interview and focus group, the impetus for involvement in student activism

was a hostile climate. Specifically, the hostile climate was portrayed through instances when

students experienced a microaggression or event that made them feel marginalized or oppressed

because of their social identity. Tendei had a powerful experience in this regard. In particular,

she recalled a conversation that took place in her first year of college between herself, two

friends, and the resident assistant for her floor. She started by saying:

> My other friend who is a student of color and her roommate were talking about age differences between parents, for some reason. I think it was related to the movie we were watching and her parents have a pretty big age gap between them. My friend's mom happens to be an immigrant and her roommate turned and looked at her and said, "Well your mom just married your dad for a green card anyways." And my RA is like sitting in the room and I'm there. I'm in complete shock.

The shock in this case came from multiple angles: watching her friend experience a

microaggression because of her mother's immigrant identity as well as RA's inability to address

the situation with the roommate:

> He was in the room. He knew it happened. I think dealing with my RA was so formative and important. Unfortunately for my first-year experience because like, the RA should have been fired. He failed to create a safe environment for his residents, and in fact you actively contributed harm in the process. So I think in that experience was my first of like, okay being here is really challenging because when you say that you support me, what you actually mean is like you can have tens of mediated conversations with this person and you can be told time and time again that you should forgive them and move on and work on repairing your relationship, but we're not gonna take you out of this hostile situation and make sure that you're provided with what you need. An RA should be sensitive to that and not ignore microaggressions when they see them. So that one was like particularly hostile.

From Tendei's perspective, this situation was hostile, unsafe, and not supportive for students

with an identity that is underrepresented on campus. In first focus group, Jeriyah recounted a

time when she and other Black students at her alma mater felt targeted and profiled in a campus

safety statement sent by the institution:

> So, there was this article published online by the school newspaper. A shooting happened by our school, so that's why I kind of said my school exists within a bubble because it's a predominantly white institution - outside of the school is extremely diverse. We have a lot of immigrants that come from literally everywhere and you definitely see gentrification pushing itself into areas that used to be dominated by indigenous people. But they put out an article that gave a description of the suspect and all they said was a black hoodie. They put out the description of the suspect, which was a tall black male with a black hoodie and dark pants. And I remember the day sitting in the cultural center and they were all just first off praying that it was none of ours. But thinking, wait, a few of the men actually commented, "I'm wearing that, I'm wearing that and I'm wearing that." So now it painted a whole image, of students at our school that looked exactly like that. So, everyone was pretty much on edge. I remember a few of my friends criticized

> how the university addressed the violence that happens in community and how it inadvertently painted a picture of the small group of black men that we actually did have at her school. So, it was like little things like that we felt like the wording could have been a little bit better so as to not criminalize the students at the institution. It was like little nuances like that, that, um, made the school a little bit difficult to navigate.

As two significant examples, Tendei and Jeriyah both highlight a time when they felt silenced, targeted because of social identities, and harmed by other students and the institution, despite attending two different institutions at separate times. Experiences like these two examples show how a hostile campus environment can activate and motivate women of color to seek social change within their respective campus communities.

Access to Language, Capital, and Power

Once engaged in campus activism, participants navigated their involvement in different ways. Current students like Ming and Jennifer took traditional paths of campus leadership positions in formal organizations while some students like Lauren took alternative routes of activism that ran adjacent or separate to recognition from the institution. Coming to a mid-size, public institution in the Southeast U.S., Jennifer became a camp counselor for an orientation program for new students at her university. Jennifer viewed the position as an important leadership opportunity to have on campus:

> I was targeted by the White students at first, then the Black students actually expressed to me how important it was to get involved and to start creating this space and that name for yourself. And I didn't realize how important it was until I actually got there. So, at first I did it for the leadership experience, but then I realized that this was more than just developing yourself as a leader. This is actually helping create a space for the classes and for the students that look like you, that come after you.

By targeting, I took this to mean that it was expressed to Jennifer being involved was a significant leadership position on campus, one that came with the power to create space and community for students on campus that look like her. From this, I assumed a formal leadership

role in this regard had an impact on the diversity of students on campus. Ming, on the other hand, took an interest in student activism from a different viewpoint. Specifically, Ming felt activism was central to getting access to information on the experiences of students on campus, especially for underrepresented and marginalized students:

> The access to information is scary because if a student isn't involved in activism for whatever reason, the only information they're getting is from the administration which completely different picture of the school. And I think that is how people can have such a different experience of the school.

From this statement, Ming is suggesting that there is a difference between how people experience an institution, and activism was an avenue where one can find accurate information about experiences that differ what was told about the institution. For example, Dyese, a college graduate, mentioned she did not know about the theory of intersectionality and Black feminism until after she graduated:

> It felt like, um, oh maybe this summer or last semester I read black feminist thought for the first time after applying to graduate school. And I was like, wow I've seen these images my whole life. I've seen or I've felt this way in a lot of different instances, but I didn't know there was a name to it and I can be a Black feminist. Like I didn't know that. Or you know, we're like, you know, these images that I've seen of black women in my entire life has been in certain rooms with me and I didn't know.

Based on this narrative, it seems this theory - one that aptly relates to the experiences of some students on campus in regards to their racial or gender identity - was not a prevalent part of the curriculum and general studies created and established by the institution; this elaborates on the lack of information Ming encountered before becoming involved in student activism. Being a sociology major during her undergraduate career, Nappeh learned how to convey the injustices she experienced on and off campus:

> When I was studying, like I was doing sociology with a focus on race and ethnicity and like it was a big, um, like seeing the injustices on a social scale and learning the language

to talk about what I had been experiencing. Um, and when I saw others experience what I did my whole life, I was like I have to do something about this. I can see it here at this institution and I'm going to do something about it while I'm living here.

Nappeh then used the information and language she learned about the institution to effectuate change while she was a student on campus. Similarly, Jeriyah found student activism helpful to learning how the university fit within the larger surrounding community, which in this case was racially, ethnically, and culturally more diverse than the institution itself:

> My experience in activism at its foundations started with organizing community outreach and community work. Um...understanding that places like my university kind of insert themselves into communities and they exist within this bubble. And then pretty much everything outside of that bubble is what it is. Um, it really inspired me to, I think that was like the first step into really understanding that universities and the communities at their end don't necessarily go hand in hand. I think the people I surrounded myself with at Loyola really changed it, but it took some time since there was not a large number of people of color in the overall community.

In this instance, Jeriyah who had experience working in activism outside the university was able to connect her work to diversity initiatives and organizing efforts on campus.

Representation Matters

Representation was also cited as a reason for student activism. Ming was already involved in a feminist student organization and did not plan to take on a leadership role until the lack of representation of leaders that were not White, cisgender women became a concern:

> I looked up to a lot of the folks that were leading that group. Then in the election cycle of new executive board leadership, the group kind of changed before my eyes. It was a lot less diverse. Part of it was because of the people who chose to run for the next cycle of leadership. I didn't feel exactly like it was the same group, but it was still important to me. So, I had to make the decision. If I wanted to stay and see what I could change within the group or if I wanted to leave and try and find that kind of community elsewhere. I decided to stay; I didn't feel like anyone was exactly representing my perspective or my needs. So, I ran for leadership and it's not necessarily something I would have pegged myself for initially; I'm not that outgoing and didn't consider myself a very good leader at the time. But I recognized the need for someone to show up in that space. Like the folks who I initially looked up to and I wanted to show other people who might show up in that space, then they could also be leaders.

Multiple participants across current students and alumni including JD, Jennifer, Jeriyah, and Nappeh also agreed that their interest and engagement in activism was motivated by a need to see diverse representatives, and particularly leaders that held similar social identities in positions of power.

Within this theme, the particular set of narratives convey the motivations, influences, and catalysts that led participants to student activism. The stimulus to their engagement in activism often came from a perceived and experienced hostile campus climate that they felt did not support, understand, or embrace their social identities. Ultimately, this led participants to become more aware of the campus climate, their access to information about institutional issues with diverse students, and the power that is afforded to students in leadership roles to begin making changes to campus spaces for underrepresented and marginalized students. Thus, as the examples above show, a hostile campus climate has been the dominant experience for participants and also the source for their desire to get involved, become engaged in the institution, and seek change to the representation and support of students historically marginalized and underrepresented social identities in higher education.

Navigating Institutional Power and Politics

Despite their perceptions of the campus climate, participants were often placed in circumstances that necessitated working with university processes and utilizing tools provided by the institution, including organizational funding, campus policies, and leadership imparted with more perceived power than the participants themselves. Moreover, the impact of navigating the politics and power dynamics of the institution created significant outcomes, some of which brought duress to the participants as this section will suggest.

Maintaining the Status Quo

Among participants, all current students and alumni in focus groups either explicitly named or alluded to a belief that the institution wanted to maintain a particular image, or rather a status quo. Before her current graduate studies, Nappeh attended two PWIs for her undergraduate degree, and became keen to the power structure and status quo maintained by the institution:

> The student populations are different. The student population at the private institutions that I've been to versus the public institution. This may not be generalizable across all institutions like but private institutions like generally speaking, like their funding structure speaks to people who have graduated from there and have a particular amount of money and power that maintained status quo. I've heard the dean of the school that I work with now say "equity initiatives are not popular among our funders; they like to fund things that go towards academic rigor and sports. It is just not something they care about. And so, like they had predominantly white privileged grads to go on to become successful and then fund the institution for things that serve predominantly White privileged kids who come into college.

Ming shared a similar belief in her interview and went further to note how elitism impacts marginalized student populations at her institution. Specifically, she said:

> The thing about marginalized groups that they don't have the same opportunities to even be at the school. So, it's a weird interaction between the school which preaches social justice, but also ironic because it is inherently elite and seeks prestige like a lot of other predominantly White institutions. It's very expensive school. Many of the students here are white and come from money. I think all the things and time really that would be needed to be put into being a so-called social justice school are kind of being taken for granted.

Clearly, Ming noticed that power granted to the administration came not just from leadership but also alumni, funders, and fellow stakeholders that did not want to embrace or emphasize a campus climate supportive of social justice initiatives. Markedly, the people that benefit most from this dynamic and structure of power are wealthy and White.

Transient Faculty and Staff

In addition to naming the political structure and power of the institution, participants

spoke to the reality student activists faced. In terms of support from faculty and staff,

participants shared both positive and negative experiences. For people like JD, a known Black

student leader on her campus, she worked closely with multiple advisors as an executive board

leader of a Black cultural organization, including a senior administrator of the institution:

> So, our advisor is Black and she is also the assistant provost. And I think the support that
> we've gotten from her has made it worth it. I'll name that. I think when you have someone
> that understands the agenda and is either doing the work or helping us craft a message, or
> continuing to promote agendas for black students, I think that support has been very
> inspirational. It's been very grounding. It's been very encouraging because it makes you
> feel like things can change if you just get enough people.

JD touches on multiple feelings here. Her advisor, also a Black woman, was an administrator

with considerable influence on campus who supported her agenda for Black students on campus.

It hints at the previous quote when Ming mentioned representation. Seeing someone like herself

in this position was important and necessary to believe change on campus was possible and that

her work was valid. Conversely, while this was a notable positive experience for JD, she was

quick to note many times where she did not have staff support, particularly when a sizeable

number of Black staff and faculty left the institution in the same time frame:

> I had my first Black professor last year. Will I have another one? Probably not. Because
> that's just how it is. You don't see them in your program. You don't see them in a place of
> leadership. And if you do, when they're ready to expand upon their career, they have to
> leave, and that's so disheartening. We've lost coordinators less than a year out the door
> they're in and we're like, oh, got another Black person leaving the institution. Why? Why
> are they leaving? What is the incentive? And it's just a ripple effect. It's a letdown when
> administration doesn't care, when your boss doesn't care, when the director doesn't care
> and you're cutting us short. And that's, that's how it is.

As we see, though JD had a particular positive experience with an administrator on campus that

is not the case in all areas of campus life. Furthermore, JD seemingly described a trend of Black

faculty and staff coming to the institution only to leave shortly thereafter. JD interpreted their

departure as a lack of care on the part of the faculty, staff, and the institution itself, cutting short

sources of support for students like her. The classroom presented another negative experience for

eight of the focus group and interview participants, including Dyese. During the second focus

group, Dyese spoke to the willingness - or lack thereof - of faculty to competently discuss and

incorporate social justice issues in the classroom when she was a student:

> There were a lot of faculty, a lot of professors who were ignorant to a lot of issues
> happening and tend to get very uncomfortable talking about these issues. People who
> were not White or male tend to bring up the conversations in the classroom only to feel
> unheard. There were a lot of instances with myself and my peers, the faculty didn't know
> how to handle conversations and they would often go sour in the classroom. They would
> acknowledge campus wide programs but as far as addressing social issues that were a hot
> topic on campus, there are a good amount of faculty that just don't care.

Lacking an Ethic of Care and Accountability

Between narratives from students and alumni like JD and Dyese, a pattern developed that

points to a lack of care from the institution. Further, participants believed institutional leadership

did not care to take action on social justice issues and were in many cases complicit with the

norms established by administrative practices, governance, and policies. In this regard, Jennifer

was fairly passionate about this matter. After facing multiple incidents of racism on campus,

Jennifer grew exhausted from the institution failing to do anything about it:

> I would not say that they are committed to social justice exactly but I feel like they're
> kind of at a point where they try to avoid those issues happening, if that makes sense.
> They want to avoid having like this spotlight on something negative like that. But we also
> can't continue to hide the truth. It's like everybody knows that it's going on but like to just
> say that they ever had like one particular like conversation about it because every time
> something like some crazy stuff pops up on campus. Like for example, one of the IFC
> fraternities said the n-word on stage at a panel political event. What killed me though is
> the way they tried to justify it. They said, "well he was drunk." I'm like, not only does
> that not excuse the behavior, but that's just wrong. So, their solution to everything is to
> have a town hall to talk about it in. My thing is we can have all the town halls in the
> world, but like what are y'all going to actually do about it? Because I'm tired.

Despite the attempts at quelling the racist incident and hosting a town hall, Jennifer did not

believe it was a sincere effort to address the underlying social issues on campus, again creating

what other participants quotes as a harmful, toxic, and hostile environment.

In the moments where the institution support or took accountability for issues on campus,

participants that brought the matter to their attention or contributed to the work felt they did not

get the recognition they deserved. Tendei is quite active on her campus and participated many

times with administrators to hire more diverse faculty and staff. However, she noted in the

history of activism by women of color college students, they often do not receive credit for their

efforts:

> I think most times it is women of color leading it. It's just, I think the story of activism in general. I think women of color so often are needing to fight, for like everything, it is just like historical. I mean like my big thing is always being like Coretta Scott King actually did way more work than Martin in the movement. So, like, I just think it is that it's like women of color are the ones doing the majority of work and not getting recognized for it. And so often like our, the idea behind the work and then just like don't get the credit. Like, I'm proud to be here, but like how am I supposed to be proud when you pulled me out of class for these meetings, you didn't pay me for all this effort. You told me it was going to be different. So, it's like, yes, I think that's just like part of the story of activism.

Here, Tendei shows an awareness of credit and recognition efforts that differs between leaders

based on race and gender, looking to the history of activism as a reference point. Moreover,

Jennifer took time during her interview to talk about an administrator whom she worked closely

with to create a space for Black students on her campus. Ultimately, the administrator decided to

leave the institution because they did not feel valued or honored for the work they did on

campus:

> She did a lot for the multicultural affairs office and the students in the office loved working with her. But in the end she left. So, it came from them giving her things that did not coincide with what she came there to do. It came from them taking her ideas and slapping their name on it. And it's not even the whole office. It was just, um, our associate dean of that office. She was the problem. And we would tell her to her face that

she's the problem. Simply because it's not her first time, like doing backhand and stuff like that.

Jennifer was keen to the actions and politics of the administration that told student activists one thing only to conduct operations that go against their word. It was also not the first time this happened, which shows an intentional effort on the part of the administrator to govern in a way that met the needs of the institution more than the students. In a more direct example, Phoebe vividly recalled a confrontation with the university president, both when she was a student activist and when her daughter attended the same institution and encountered a similar situation with university leadership:

> So, for instance, my daughter's one of the ethnic studies activists is a pretty small group. They learned because we told them that he was going to give a speech at the alumni meeting at one of the swaggy hotels downtown. So they planned a demonstration for when he was going to come in and you know, we tweeted that, you know, Larry, come talk to us at this particular time, but we knew then that he was going to try to come in early so they got there half an hour early. So, they were able to confront him and they had the cameras and the local newspaper there. They had this Native American student give a prayer so the president had to stand there and listen to it. Then they stood in front of the doors and he shook his hand, he pointed his finger at them and said, "I am not the enemy." So, it is very much like, if you want to talk about ethnic studies, you talk to a certain Dean instead of it being about like this is what our institution should stand for. Like we have to move forward. He's not about that. It's very like not my business, that's someone else's. And then for the prison divestment activist, he has office hours, like half an hour, you know, every few months or something. So, they get an appointment and they went in and he stormed out of the meeting. He said, "I don't, you know, you don't make demands on me."

At this point, both current and former student activists echoed a similar experience of their respective institution perpetuating a particular image of care for students that differed from a lived reality that does not support dissent, is complicit in the hostile environment marginalized students face, and when accountable, take credit for the work of student activists and campus personnel.

Enduring Emotional and Mental Harm

Working within the political power structures of the institution was one aspect of the

experience of women of color student activists. In this study, participants inevitably incurred

emotional and psychological forms of harm that would color their perception of the institution

and the nature of their engagement as student activists. Arguably, mental health was of particular

concern to current students and alumni that looked back at their experiences.. Though activists,

they are still college students with responsibilities to their academic program, employment, and

other significant relationships in their lives not related to campus activism. As the sole planner of

a conference for her organization, Lauren made a compromise that affected her ability to

complete schoolwork:

> There were definitely times where I fell behind. Though I am generally super anal about
> school, this spring quarter was the first time that I really put school on the back burner.
> I'm used to making everything my priority and saying, "okay, it has to happen so I'm just
> gonna do it all." Um, but that became physically impossible during the spring. And so, I
> was just like, I had to put something on the back burner and it was school. Um, and it was
> more like I put it on the back burner for the time being. And then when I had like a
> midterm, I'd stay up until like four, three or 4:00 AM studying just so I could do well on
> the test and it happened to work out. I don't, it's like I got so stressed to the point where I
> was getting 60% on like my practice tests. That was like really crazy and I emotionally
> exhausted from the burden and had a hard time expressing that. And yeah, so like another
> example of like, what am I doing to myself? That was, I mean that was a huge question
> through that, through the spring quarter it was like, what am I doing? Like what did I get
> myself into? Well, so I mean a main, the main thing about that particular situation was
> like, not really the stress of all. I mean I'm sure those, those stressors were contributed,
> but it was like I was, it was, I was at a conference and we were put, I mean it was a whole
> like they put me in such a bad position.

From this experience, Lauren expressed that her engagement in activism came at the detriment of

her wellbeing, created stress and putting constraints on the time, energy, and resources she could

have dedicated to academic pursuits. Similarly, Ming recognized the workload of all her

commitments in and out of the classroom became too much to handle. Ultimately, she had to

make a choice and wrestle with the fact that she could not say yes to everything, no matter how

important the issue was:

> I can't say no to things when I can't do them. But I, I also think that I, I thrive on the action to some degree. I wouldn't feel like I was getting anything if I just chose to do one thing. Um, I think like any resources I can give to a cause is something I want to do, but I definitely felt out of place and I have to kind of recognize the type of activism work I'm going to be able to do and the type that I just, I don't have the capacity or resources to do. Um, and that is something I have been working on lately and I'm trying to kind of get that balance. I'm, I'm not struggling too much right now with the types of positions I'm in. Um, I think some of it has to do with knowing is this organization like we are going to be um, in line with my values. And I guess I've just, I realized that I'm not always going to be able to have all the resources to fight for everything I'm most passionate about. Like I, I can't, I just don't, I don't have it all and I, I just don't have that energy.

As the latter quote shows, choosing between different commitments and projects became a point

of tension for all of the current students and three of the alumnae participants and the impact was

felt across multiple areas of their lives.

Competing for Resources

Another source of stress came from what half of participants describe as competing for

resources between student activist groups. For Phoebe, while she began her activism fighting for

the feminist movement at her college - she eventually left the organization due to conflicting

interests:

> Like I eventually stopped being involved with like the feminist group because um, um, there's like a lot of white feminism and that was like a big struggle I had after a certain point. And so, I would say in terms of resources, like the things that for the scope of like the programs and the organizations, we always able to like find money. I felt like the culture of didn't really like want or just wasn't like in the student body wasn't interested in like things like sit in or like at like that sort of activism. It was a lot more like programs or um, um, maybe letters occasionally. But I would say that there was like, I think a few instances on the campus where, um, there were some like in fighting within like different identity groups. I know prior to me attending, there was a kind of like a, a bit of an in fight between the black student union, the LGBTQ plus group on campus and the Asian-American group on campus. And I think it kind of set a tone about like, it started off with like wanting to, to do activism.

What Phoebe recalls presents a conundrum on multiple levels: departure from a feminist

organization that did not consider both race and gender in their engagement, a lack of funding

available for student organizations within the institution, and a disinterest from parts of the

student body in the nature and level of activism happening on campus. Dyese also talked about

the difference in commitment between student groups when she was an undergraduate; this

contributed not only to in-fighting between two activist groups with similar aims, but also

confusion about what was a legitimate form of activism:

> One of the Black student organizations was like we're gonna take institutional racism to take and challenge this and we're gonna do all these letters and different initiatives. Initially, they said that all of the multicultural student groups were involved with it, but actually hadn't agreed to it. So that turned into in-fighting within the different groups about what was the importance of social justice between them and different groups have different perspectives; some were like we have no interest in doing activism, we just want to do like cultural activities.

Radical Stereotypes

Adding to Dyese's account, there was not just a developed perception of valid student

activism between student activists themselves, the view of the institution also played a role in

how students engaged in activism. Specifically, Celia stated that when she was an undergraduate,

her actions were scrutinized for being too radical or being unreasonable about how the institution

address activist concerns. For example, JD spoke about her involvement with the Martin Luther

King Jr. Celebration at her university; her and other students on the committee made

recommendations that aligned with what they assumed were social justice values of the

institution. However, as JD put it:

> I remember, for example, one of the people that we were thinking of was like Angela Rye because they didn't give us a budget. It was like, give us a list of names and we'll start asking if they'll be willing to do it. Uh, we had people like, we were like, we can like listen to Angela Rye, let's think of people that are in politics. I think about people that are using, like if we're trying to get students - like this is student event - to come, it needs to

> be appealing. Um, and I remember like we were sitting in the meeting and I was like, "what about Angela Rye?" And everyone was vaguely knowing who she was. And I was like, "yeah, like she's a great woman, she's doing great, amazing work." And they were like, "oh, maybe I was just, I don't know, that just seems like a little much." But it was, it was one of the things were like, it could be said as like, oh, like it could be too much of money. It could be, but like everybody knew he was saying it was too radical. It was too much. She was going to say too much. It was, we're, weren't gonna be able to put her into a box and be like, you're not allowed to say this.

JD's quote further affirms even in situations where issues of social justice are centered on campus, there are still specific things one cannot say without having the message or action controlled by the institution. If the institution is unable to control the actions or messages communicated, then it was deemed radical. Because Angela Rye is an outside, even though student activists identified with her politics and beliefs, the institution grew concerned and decided not to bring her to campus. In a similar anecdote, R, who attended a large public university, admitted that she succumbed to this perception at one point and worked to not be stereotyped:

> Ultimately my goal was to develop as an individual but more importantly get that piece of paper that meant that other people would value me the way I valued myself. For a long time I felt as though if I made the wrong move and if I made too much noise, I would compromise being there and meeting that and, so looking back, I feel as though there was so much more I could have done more than I could have done while feeling safe and secure with the roots that I made about, I do remember that fear was constantly in the back of my head. Like if I, if I say the wrong thing, if I get too loud, I'm going to be seen as that, that bitchy brown girl who needs to go.

Previously mentioned, what R speaks to the developed perception of student activist work and their social identity as activists and its marginalization on campus. From the alumni perspective, Nappeh talked about a particular experience where, in addition to being insulted by the university president, she was part of a multicultural scholarship program that was eventually disbanded as a result of the university:

Their kind of attitude was like, "we've done enough. You're here, we paid for you to be here. So, like why are you complaining?" Um, but like, cause all the things we're bringing up were things that were not a problem to the white kids at school, you know, that like they, they didn't see an issue with it and we were loud. And um, they rolled back the scholarship program after that, a, um, got rid of our space. It really started to, it affected the way that we were organizing in the ways it affected at the community, really on campus. Um, and so the president was starting to have meetings with us to be like, okay, so obviously you guys aren't happy. Like what can we do? Um, and then he wasn't actually implementing any change. He was just listening to us and then not taking anything up. Um, and things kind of getting really heated. And those meetings are happening fairly regularly. In the last meeting, I was there before I took a break and when I decided to go on the six-month break, he said I couldn't come back and look down in mental health evaluation. Um, there were other people who had been pushed out or who had left for various reasons, but we were all part of the same organization because there were only so many organizations and there were not very many of us.

Retention and Belonging

According to Nappeh, after this exchange, many of the students in the program eventually left the university because they felt the campus environment was hostile and they did not feel like they belonged. It affirms what the finding revealed thus far and brings up an adjacent issue of retaining student populations that are underrepresented on campus. Tendei also spoke about belonging in her interview, referencing the challenges of activist work as a woman of color:

> As a woman of color, um, the way in which we approach your activism can sometimes be taken lightly and thrown to the side and that, um, and it's even worse because a lot of times it'll come from like other white women or people of color saying that to you. And so that's like something big to be aware of. Sometimes other people of color are going to get upset with you and they're not going to want to support you and it's going to be hard because you know that they're going through the same systems you're going through and you're going to want to be like, why don't you understand this? It just adds to everything and makes it a challenge to be here because it's like every year something happens that makes me go like, "why am I at this university?" And it honestly like every day sometimes like things are happening where I'm just like, "why am I here?" Like I wish I could just transfer but then again it's the same thing at a lot of predominantly White institutions.

At the time of this interview Tendei had a tone of exhaustion from dealing with these issues and seemed to be pessimistic about the possibility of finding a more supportive environment at another institution, mostly because she believes similar experience happen at other PWIs as well.

Taken together, navigating the institution required an awareness of the power dynamics that exist between student activists and the university, the political nature of working within and between student activist groups, and knowledge of how one's social identity is impacted by stereotypes and negative perceptions from the institution. Furthermore, there were both significant factors and outcomes that impacted how participants were able to achieve organizational goals and effectuate change on campus. In many of these cases, the factors and outcomes came under arguably negative circumstances. Even still, there were moments and times when their efforts were successful. As I found, the tools for success were learned and inherited adaptations to the campus environment informed by current and former student activists of the institution.

Collective and Generational Capacity

Though the campus environment presented hostile conditions for the participants in this study, it is important to note that not all effort was without gain and they still managed to obtain useful skills and attitudes to persist and remain actively engaged on campus. As the final theme shows, the leadership and agency exhibited by women of color student activists builds on the tools, mentorship, and community created among fellow student activists with shared salient identities and the guidance of those that came before them who imparted wisdom, knowledge, and support when they needed it most.

Intergenerational Leadership and Support

Among participants currently attending PWIs, eight participants cited that most support

from women of color and former student activists who were able to provide wisdom and

guidance to address social justice issues and give them motivation to lead. For four of five

current students, it was women of color who held the same or similar leadership positions as they

did. Prior to JD joining the Black student organization on campus, she was recruited by the

organization's president who was also a Black woman. Then, when the president graduated, JD

was tapped for the leadership position. As JD recalled:

> I was not going to run for president. I was secretary of my sophomore year and thought I
> was gonna be secretary again. And then I just remember we ran a board meeting one day
> and the former president was like you're gonna run for president. Right? And I was like,
> Huh? What was that? What do you mean I didn't get that? And she was like you're doing
> the work. You're taking on a different title is all you're doing. You are the secretary, you
> know how it works, you know what needs to be done. You know who we talked to, we
> have groomed you, it is time for you to claim the role. And I kept thinking was I'm not
> ready. But I think another part is like when someone is pushing you and combating the
> self-doubt that you would instill in yourself the imposter syndrome, that feeling as if
> you're not going to do well, the feeling is that you're not going to win. What if people
> don't like me, or whatever. And at the end of the day it was just like, are you going to step
> up to the plate? You know how this works. You have the ideas, you know that the
> organization needs a change, you continue to say things and you realize that the agendas
> are not being pushed. It's time for you to push your agenda. Um, it's like it's an
> empowerment thing and I think if I didn't feel that, I probably would not have pursued it.

Coincidentally, JD would become a part of a lineage of Black women that served in the president

role:

> I am still in the process of learning the organization's history. Like back from when we
> even became an organization, before we even had a room. Um, I want to know who it
> started with and I can't find it and they don't want to tell us. So that process has been
> hard. But from the people that I've met, it has been predominantly women. Um, my first
> year it was a female president. The year before her, it was another female president. Um,
> back in 2014 it was a female president. Um, all strong black women that had an agenda,
> whether for good or for bad, whether it worked out good or bad. Um, it's just how the
> space runs. I don't know if that's because that's the way history tells it, though black
> women have continually been behind social movements.

There was much to unpack from JD's quote and it reaffirmed much of what has already been

stated about student activists not having access to certain institutional history, the importance of

representation from other women of color holding leadership on campus, and how this

knowledge is passed from one generation of activists to another. From Tendei's perspective, she

also came to appreciate the model of leadership provided by women of color, and found it

helpful to learn from their experiences:

> One nice thing that happened is that I've like met a lot more people that are like from
> different generations that older than me and I see a lot more representation. I think a lot
> of good leadership comes from women of color. And I think a lot of that, like even if you
> were taking a smaller subsection, I think a lot of that traditionally at the university has
> come from black women. And so, I think like a lot of my activism has honestly come
> from like the student activists and honestly like a lot of the black women that have come
> before me in student activism at the school.

On the other side, Phoebe has remained engaged with activist work at her alma mater after

graduation, so much that she often bands together with fellow alumni to engage in current issues

on campus. Comparing the nature of activism today to when she was a student, she says:

> Oh, that's another difference about today's activists is that, um, they know how to draw
> on the supportable alums. Of course when we went, we didn't have alums and now we
> have some alums who are getting lots of amount of money and then we have other alums
> like me and my cohort who have become, you know, thorns in their sides and you know,
> can easily political petition or organize a demonstration or whatever. Um, and you know,
> we are in the press, so they both love us because we're on their side on and they don't like
> us because we're protesting at the same time.

Both Phoebe and JD show a mutual and reciprocal support between current and former student

activists; learning from different sides of the issue, it suggests that intergenerational knowledge

is helpful for effectuating change at the institutional level.

Building Capacity and Motivation for Leadership

Further, in addition to the added confidence and guidance of former women of color

student activists, current students gained a host of skills and tools that helped them process their

hostile experiences on campus, and ultimately, become more engaged student activists. Briefly

mentioned before, combating self-doubt was a significant challenge for some of the participants.

Through relationships with mentors and former leaders and student activists, many of the

participants were able to gain confidence and find the voice needed to effectively express their

dissent to and against the institution. Relatedly, Jennifer was particularly fond of the former SGA

president at her institution and the hope she gave to her in work on campus:

> The former SGA president who was a black woman was phenomenal. Like she had a 4.0 all four years here. She had like, she had a major and three minors, like she's literally the type of woman where it's like nothing can beat her. So, she created like, definitely created and demanded her space in any room she went into, and I feel like in that position from being a frosh camp counselor to SGA president to being in all these different roles and positions, she has definitely left the mark to be quite honest. And I feel like that's something that so many black women currently look at today. And it's like, well, if she can do that, I can. And this sounds like speaking a lot for somebody who here not too long ago.

Again, the prevalent theme of representation runs through the findings of this study. Put well by

another participant JD, "when you see yourself in the position, you're more likely to go for it.

Um, I think what other people are pouring into you and saying that you were capable of, you're

more inclined to pursue it." This was most impactful for current students in the study and made

participants like Ming lean more into an active role as a change agent:

> My leadership position within two initiatives for LGBTQIA students and faculty has helped me a lot to see myself in leadership positions. How I can actually make an impact because I think it just changed my outlook tremendously in being able to see myself as a leader or being able to see myself that worked like at the beginning with my first position in the women's leadership organization. I didn't see myself really wanting to be that leader, but now since working in multicultural affairs and getting to learn from other dope women of color alum, I think it's so much easier for me to see myself in that position and I can get a little bit of that negativity out of my head and really imagine myself doing the work that needs to be done instead of feeling like an imposter. Just because I'm not where I want to be now does not mean that I can't make it or do a damn good job as an activist.

Through the progression of these findings, it becomes clear that the issues Ming encountered

initially within her leadership role, though not completely eradicated, and became easier to

navigate after learning more about the language of student activism and gaining power and

support from fellow activists and alumni women of color. Celia is now a higher education

professional, and working with student activists as a staff member on campus:

> I think for me when I'm just always impressed when I see students engage and use social media to their advantage. I actually attribute a lot to Tumblr and other online spaces for the amount of knowledge folks have coming into college. They know way more than I did when I came in. I didn't even understand all of these social justice concepts till my first year and even though I was really trying hard to understand it.

In the same focus group, Phoebe also praised current students for their ability to leverage social

media and allies across campus to make quick movements on social issues:

> The media piece is a big one because I think even back then there was a sense of like, if you get the media involved and you get coverage behind it, then that gives you a little bit more weight and power. Like during the 50s or 60s even any of the movements, they're not social media, it didn't exist. Social media is like the foundation nowadays and they are so sophisticated. They're able to mobilize so much more easily and more effectively than we were. I think it's a good thing. At one point, a few fellow alumni became frustrated at the response we were getting the night before a takeover. We had to ring a building, but they can do these online petitions. They can do these incredible surgical media strikes. They know how to do the photo ops. They know exactly what their banner should say. They're like, okay, we need to have handwritten signs that are all different, um, in different handwritings. You know, they, they just know what to do. They can pull up, you know, the, all of the activist share like all the contact lists for police and how to get permits, how to do this and that. Just so impressive.

Phoebe's words implicitly show the distance and changes between student activism in the past

and present day: the ability to use technology, media, and resource mobilization to gather support

for a cause. Moreover, it also shows the ability of students to come together and build collective

capacity, regardless of who is designated as the leader of the organization or movement.

Decentralizing Models of Activism and Leadership

Within this model of collective leadership, the definition of student activist leadership is also changing. Based on her experience with internal fighting for leadership as an undergraduate student, Dyese believed defining a leader or the nature of activism itself:

> I don't think there is a need for a leader. I mean because times have changed and with like social media and access to the Internet there so much more information available to us that we can use to inform us. And with all this information it's so accessible that I feel that the information itself can be the face of the movement. I think the leader is your space, right? I mean leaders need a name, they're very instrumental for the practice. But at this point, I feel like it would just be a face because what are leaders going to do that us followers can't. We all have the same ability. Some of us may be more educated or have more knowledge, but let's use that cause to the movement's advantage because why is a face necessary when we have all this power?

What Dyese suggested is a decentralized model of leadership, one that values collective capacity and action over leader-centric movements compared to previous decades and generations of student activism. Furthermore, the collective community is also where women in the study found support beyond activism that was caring and affirming to their identities. JD, for one, felt strongly about the space others and herself created for Black women to feel valued at the institution, despite their circumstances:

> I think the Black cultural space, um, knowing that is like our space, feels like a method of like pulling back into myself. Um, but I like I will say to the day that I die, I am nothing without my people. Like the women that I've chosen to surround myself with, both older than me, younger than me, at the same age, doing multiple different things like they are my community. Like those are my people. Um, they're the same ones that will check me when I post some things that could get me fired. They are the same person that will also say, I see that your grades are slipping you need to come into my office. I know that you don't have classes. Uh, they are the same ones that'll be like, have you eaten today? Let me take you out to lunch. I'm like, that is, that is me. Like that is my safe haven is the women that we feed into each other. We cried together and we move forward together. And then just like, I think this past year it was just like learning that things are going to be the way that they're going to be and that is not my fault. And like that has been a constant process, but like learning to be able to take the personal side out of things. Um, and also learning to say no has also been a part of me like tapping into my own resource about self-preservation. I think it's been a long overdue process. But like at the end of the

day, like my sisters, like my mothers, are my resources, they are my people. Like that is my resource.

Coming to campus unsure of her ability and identity as a Black woman, my interview with JD reflected her growth as a woman of color student activist. Between these latter two themes, participants went from navigating a hostile campus climate to building capacity for individual, collective, and organizational capacity for student activism. This capacity was built both with the help of former activists and alumni equally vested in the success of women of color and student activists in higher education.

Now, from both interviews and focus groups, the full scope of activism from the perspective of women of color at PWIs became clear. We heard from participants that their activism comes from a familiar place of marginalization and hostility towards students from historically underrepresented populations. They often felt unsupported by fellow students, staff, and faculty in multiple spaces on campus, including classrooms, residence halls, and the institution as a whole. Moreover, they did not feel connected to the history of the institution and lacked sufficient information on the experiences of former students that shared similar identities and grievances with the institution. Described as a toxic campus environment, in order to make changes that were equitable and inclusive for marginalized students, they engaged in student activism and thus became entrenched in the political power structures embedded in higher education institutions. As a result, participants cited challenges to their mental wellbeing, time, and energy that could otherwise be used for academic and career pursuits. Fortunately, while support from faculty and staff were far and few in between, they gained the most support from former student activists, alumni, and leadership on campus that not only represented their salient identities but held equal commitment to creating social change at the institution. Not only did

they build collective and intergenerational capacity in this way, they developed a stronger knowledge base, confidence, and motivation to lead despite the circumstances, both for themselves and students that would follow them someday.

Though each of these themes contains large amounts of information and nuance to unpack, I am hopeful the next section will provide clarity about what this means for participants in this study as well as how much significance the work of women of color student activists brings to the critical study and practice of predominantly White higher education institutions.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

As the previous chapter shows, the experiences of participants were highly nuanced,

contextual, and undoubtedly lived narratives of student activism in higher education. Evident as

the themes of the study may be, there is also more to be said about how women of color student

activists navigated PWIs, institutional factors that influenced their engagement, and how their

journey overall speaks to leadership and agency. In terms of the findings, I categorized

discussion under three main areas: representation, identity, and equity as it relates to their

experience of activism at PWIs; institutional power and Whiteness that ultimately informed how

women of color student activists led, engaged, and participated in student activism; and finally a

reimagination of leadership and agency informed by participant narratives, stories, and

experiences. After the following discussion, I offer implications for this dissertation study that

should be considered and implemented for scholars, administrators, and fellow student activists

working within PWIs.

Representation, Identity, and Equity

When it comes to the experiences of women of color college students engaging in student

activism at PWIs, findings speak firmly to representation, equity, and identity that were

encountered by students and alumni in various ways. There were positives and negatives to this

experience, including how they navigated activism in collaboration with institutional

stakeholders, personal management of mental health and wellbeing, and the exploration of their own identity in the context of a socially constructed environment like higher education.

Simply put, representation matters; not just in the sense of compositional diversity among students, faculty, and administrators, but also in positions of power. The findings of the study echoed previous assertions that students become engaged in organizations and movements that closely mirror their identities and political interests (Bolden et al., 2008). Furthermore, participants often worked with faculty and administrators that held the same race and gender identity, which ultimately cultivated their motivation to become involved on campus and gave them a genuine belief and sense of authority within their organization and the institution. As JD emphatically said, "when you see yourself in a position, you're more likely to go for it." Similarly alumni including Nappeh were able to recall advisors with whom they shared a similar identity and held a position of power; this lines up with previous research by Kezar (2010) that confirmed one of the major reasons for faculty and staff involvement was often because of a "commitment to teaching democratic process to 'marginalized' individuals often outside that process—often they had also felt this way as students" (p. 465). Conversely, when there was a lack of representation across race and gender, there was an adverse effect on participants that made them not want to become involved or engage in important issues either because they experienced blatant racism or sexism, including the moment when Ming questioned whether to stay involved in her feminist organization because other women of color stepped down from leadership roles or decided to leave the organization altogether. However, Ming eventually decided to remain and take on a leadership role despite a lack of representational diversity among board members. As Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) said in their study of immigrant women of color in higher education leadership:

> We view ourselves both as currently authentic leaders and as aspirational authentic leaders—aspirational because we recognize that becoming authentic leaders is a process rather than a destination. And we recognize that how we enact that authentic leadership may differ markedly from those in the majority culture, because our "embodied actions are mediated by our relationships, as well as the social environment" (Gardiner, 2015, p. 2) in which we exercise leadership. (p. 397)

Though Ming expressed she was not ready for a leadership role at the time, she decided to pursue leadership anyway because she believed her perspective as a woman of color was necessary for what had become a White-centered organization. Furthermore, this finding also speaks to the necessity of social capital for student activists; whether it was from an advisor, dean, faculty member, or student leader, receiving support and acknowledgement from stakeholders with institutional power to change policies and practices motivated participants to continue their engagement in social issues on campus, thereby contributing to their sense of agency. Notably, this expands what is known about representation of diverse identities in higher education and pushes stakeholders to consider the power that identity holds for individuals given the authority and ability to change their circumstances.

Cultivating awareness of self and identity development was also central to their experience. From a broad lens, students and alumni both came into higher education with an certain understanding of systems of oppression such as racism and sexism only to have similar experience on campus, including when Tendei witnessed a xenophobic comment from a White student; referring back to the cycle of contention and interplay of social forces (Tarrow, 1995) - as the politics and social issues of society intensify, the contentious nature of these issues inevitably bleed into social institutions like higher education (Rhoads, 2016). To that end, they are also within a PWI where they are rarely visible in institutional history, the language conveyed through institutional policy and practice is inaccessible and difficult to navigate, and

perspectives of people of color and woman of color are not centered. Therefore, given the opportunity to explore this through activism and engagement with social issues on campus, their worldview and understanding of social justice increased; and once their worldview changed, so did their desire for social change. In this way, identity in the context of student activism is complex: its very essence is both the mechanism through which participants of this study experienced marginalization and oppression and also the source of empowerment and embodied experience through which they found the capacity for activism (Archer, 1996; Cleggs, 2006).

Moreover, their development of identity and awareness also came with challenges that were largely detrimental to their health and wellbeing. Whether it was the physical and mental toll Lauren experienced planning a conference by herself or Nappeh's mental health being questioned by the university president, it is evident the experience of activism comes with the burden of burnout mentally, emotionally, and physically. In 2017, we saw activist Erica Garner die from a heart attack; up until her death, those close to her emphasized the responsibility of fighting against social injustice and police brutality took on her body (Levenson, 2017). While not representative of participant experiences necessarily, it shows the extreme circumstances activists face when battling against systems and institutions that reproduce the oppression of marginalized communities. Even as racial incidents on college campuses increase, and incidents of gender-based violence and discrimination become more prevalent in higher education, student activists often have to choose between fighting for the greater good and fighting to maintain the mental, emotional, and physical stability necessary to ultimately graduate (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011).

Thus, the overall experiences of women of color student activists offer a confirmed and expanded perspective of engagement in campus activism. Much like open society, participants

battled various forms of oppression and marginalization in PWIs, including but not limited to racism, xenophobia, and sexism. While some participants understood these experiences before college, the environment of PWIs limited access to any historical and political context or language that would aid in their ability to be effective and informed agents of change. Ultimately, their development of political and social consciousness was learned in the engagement of activism and over time as they became more familiar with the institutional culture and climate. Managing this period and process of development was undoubtedly taxing and demanding of energy that could otherwise be used to focus on their education and social experiences on campus. Though this experience of student activism is rightfully nuanced, complex, and not entirely positive or negative, it is undoubtedly representative of the dynamic that exists between student activists and higher education institutions.

Challenging Institutional Power and Whiteness

The other component of my research inquiry wanted to learn more about institutional factors, if any, that inform how women of color lead, engage, and participate in student activism. Though participants affirmed what is already known about systems of oppression and marginalization underrepresented student encounter in PWIs, this element of findings prompted me to view resulting perspectives in a different way, with particular attention pointed to control and maintenance of power and Whiteness by these institutions.

First, it must be stated - at least within the context of this dissertation - that higher education institutions do not exist in a vacuum from greater society. The range in years between students and alumni and the similarity in involvement revealed that many of the issues students activists were facing in previous generations is still relevant today. Moreover, customs, laws, and policies regarding civil rights and liberties of historically marginalized communities in the U.S.

were catalysts for the engagement of both students and alumni like Phoebe and Ming; the fact

that the institutions themselves would trigger and make participants feel marginalized because of

their race and gender solidified the need for activism. Aptly described by Linder and Rodriguez

(2012), constant negotiation of identities coupled with the difficult dynamic with the institution

"leads to exhaustion and burnout… [and] contributes to isolation and poor retention of students

of color on predominantly White campuses" (p. 394). Given the significance of retention issues

for historically underrepresented students in higher education (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh,

2008), I believe this is an indicative of a bigger institutional problem.

As well, institutional governance was an issue for women of color in this study,

specifically how university leaders in positions of power supported and valued student activists

on campus. As Jennifer and Tendei expressed, they felt at moments some of their efforts were

not recognized by the institution, even if the institution asserted a commitment to social justice or

the participant was in a formal leadership position. It is this reason that other participants like

Lauren and Jeriyah found more agency in their work when it functioned outside of the

institution, partly because they felt ignored. On the other hand, R also mentioned shying away

from activism for fear of being negatively stereotyped as a woman of color by institutional

leaders. These experiences only crystallize the assertion made by Chambers and Phelps (1993)

that, "Student leadership has been based almost exclusively on the perspective of the

'institutionally accepted organized group'...because such [activist] behavior is often seen as

disruptive rather than complementary to the educational process" (p. 19). Thus, making a

commitment to student activism for women of color is a combination of fighting stereotypes

made by the institution and a system of organization that values leadership recognized by the

institution over efforts by activists to challenge social issues on campus.

Another striking element and byproduct of discussions with participants was the implicit presence of capitalism that framed how the institutions reacted and responded to student activism. From stories by Jeriyah, Jennifer, and Dyese, for example, it seems evident that the image of the institution was important for administrative leadership to uphold. Further, institutional image and actions often factor into future funding by alumni and donors that choose to support a specific image of the university they have in mind. As hinted by Nappeh, those alumni and donors are often White wealthy people that do not care about social justice issues that are often front and center for student activists. As such the focus has been placed on performance-based funding and the outputs produced by the institution, its quality, and ability to amass resources and prestige among other colleges and universities in the West. As Dougherty and Natow (2019) state:

> First, higher education personnel and institutions sometimes support performance-based funding because they believe it will produce improvements in higher education outcomes, such as student graduation or faculty research productivity, that state officials value...Secondly, higher education personnel and institutions frequently believe that performance-based funding – whatever the demands and the dangers it poses for the institutions – also provides them with a new way to legitimate themselves in the eyes of government officials, other stakeholders, and the public and therefore assure their access to public funding.13 When government funding is tight, they can make a case for more funding or at least protect existing funding by appealing to favourable performance indicators. (pp. 12-13)

Under this particular scheme that is rooted in neoliberalism, the engagement of student activists is silenced and ignored unless it fits with what brings the institution additional funding, prestige, or knowledge that can be capitalized for future gain. In this way, capitalism continues to permeate social institutions in U.S. society, and higher education is not exempt from its impact.

Returning to discussion on history and language, both are critical parts of understanding the development of an institution's values, culture, and practices, as these are often displayed in

pamphlets, brochures, and website materials. In the case of participants, many were not able to

find this history without difficulty because of the institution. JD, for instance, went searching for

documents and archives about the founding of the Black student organization on campus and

could not find it. Even more, she did not know it existed until it was told to her by a former the

former organization president. To add, language as I know it is the foundation of communicating

ideas, thoughts as well as their manifestation in policymaking, laws, and procedures of practices.

Pointedly, language is also a form of power that is at the disposal of social institutions in society.

Therefore, the inability for institutions to make this information available to all students

including activists shows an imbalance in power and creates a gap in knowledge necessary for

student activists.

With the previous examples of institutional power, I believe it is fair to assert that despite

the access, resources, and opportunities higher education provides, institutions are active

producers and agents of hegemony, Whiteness, and power. To add context, Gusa (2010)

developed a framework of White Institutional Presence that speaks to my assertion. Specifically,

it states:

> Today's PWIs do not have to be explicitly racist to create a hostile environment. Instead,
> unexamined historically situated White cultural ideology embedded in the language,
> cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge allow these institutions to
> remain racialized...One such consequence of an unexamined racialized environment is
> that PWIs become alienating spaces of hegemonic power. When Whites neglect to
> identify the ways in which White ideological homogenizing practices sustain the
> structure of domination and oppression, they allow institutional policies and practices to
> be seen as unproblematic or inevitable and thereby perpetuate hostile racial climates. (p.
> 465)

To be clear, it is institutional status quo and complicity that reproduces Whiteness in the campus

environment. Participants all came from different institutions, yet each expressed different

situations when the administration did nothing in the way of social justice issues or anything to

support the conscious development of women of color. Institutional factors in this case include an inability to access history of their existence and presence on campus, language and policymaking that is difficult to navigate, and lack of recognition and support both impedes their activism and further contributes to environments that value White knowledge, White bodies, and White-centered practices on campus. The combination of these institutional factors and their experience of them colored the way students and alumni participated and engaged in campus activism and impacted their sense of belonging, awareness of self, and retention.

Reimagining Leadership and Agency

Regardless of their experiences, it should be noted that students and alumni found ways to persist, lead, and effectuate change within their institutions. Given this phenomenon, there is also an opportunity to understand how women of color student activists understand leadership and agency as a result of these experiences. To that end, their engagement in activism offers a chance to expand and reimagine traditional models of leadership theory, development, and agency.

A glaring takeaway from this dissertation study is that so much of the work participants accomplished in this study was in the collective; that is, while each held an individualized goal for their engagement in campus activism, part of that goal was rooted in what best served their communities and people who shared their identities. In some sense, this essence affirms that resource mobilization in social movements requires the convergence and support of individuals coming together to form a larger group or organization (Rojas, 2006). Put another way, it also challenges traditional leadership theory that places the locus of power in individual, prominent leaders at the expense of followers. In conversation with Dyese, she was adamant that the biggest lesson she learned from her activism was that movements should be more decentralized to focus

on the people of the organization instead of the figure head. Furthermore, it expands the view of agency beyond self in favor of representative and collective determination. As Tourish (2014) confidently asserted:

> A continued stress on unbridled leader agency is likely to produce further imaginary Gods who fail to meet the impossible expectations of their followers...A different view of agency is central to any reimagining of leadership that can help avert such destructive outcomes. It is one that confronts the tendency to see almost all power and agency as vested in the hands of a few leaders and that depicts other organisational actors as the more or less powerless recipients of leader action. (p. 93)

Thus, the experiences of student activists in this study show that the image of leadership must be greater than the few in formal roles of power, and that power must transcend to other organizational actors within a movement to create unity and social change. Moving towards this assertion reifies the framework of this dissertation that is rooted in a development of critical feminist agency, one that is intersectional and accounts for the attainment of personal and collective power for the greater good.

Within this collective, alumni emerged as powerful mediators and contributors to student activist efforts in ways that have yet to be explored. Higher education research has generally defined the role of alumni through fundraising and development for their former institutions (Gaier, 2005; Wastyn, 2009). Looking at alumni through the context of this study, they were also key influencers when it came to current student activists navigating PWIs. Examples included Tendei receiving help from women of color alumni to craft her storytelling skills, the moment when JD was tapped by a Black woman to be president of her organization, and the way Phoebe has remained involved with her institution and offered support to current activists fighting affirmative action issues. In essence, alumni are more than what they give to the institution when

they graduate; they can also be a resource for institutional history, best practices for student

activism, and moral support that motivate and inspire current students.

Another interesting facet of the study was the temporal and historical nature of student

activism and its influence on students. Student activists spanned thirty years within this study;

while many of the issues students were fighting remained the same, the methods employed are

inevitably different, especially in terms of technology and access to media. Celia and Phoebe in

particular lamented current students for their ability to mobilize and build support much quicker

because of this reason, further affirming the importance of access to these resources. In cases

where students are unable to access the history and language of the institution, alumni were key

holders of this knowledge. With the mobilization of these resources, history, and language,

women of color then had the ability to determine and create strategies for social change. As

Sullivan et al. (2012) state:

> Agency focuses attention on action, what motivates it, what influences the choice of
> action and what constrains or confines it. These influencing factors take many forms.
> They may be relational, as actions are, at least in part, a product of individual agents'
> interactions with others. They may be structural as actors have 'subjective perceptions of
> the structures they have to negotiate, which affect how they act' (Evans 2002: 252).
> These influencing factors may also be temporal – processes of social engagement in
> which past habits and routines are contextualized and future possibilities envisaged
> within the contingencies of the present moment (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Agency is
> thus situated – influenced but not determined by structures and 'emphasizing internalized
> understandings and frameworks as well as external actions' (Evans 2002: 248). (p. 56)

Times may change as does student populations, but the combination of perspectives between

current students and alumni revealed a bridge of resources that gave students the ability to be

agentic, courageous leaders when necessary.

Because the study participants were women of color, the findings affirmed the central

tenets of critical feminism and additional scholarship on critical feminist agency. Participants

were vocal about their experience of race and gender, both in the salience of their identity as women with multiple marginalized identities prior to their interviews and focus groups and in some cases like Tendei and Ashley, naming how women of color are forgotten in critical social movements inside and outside of higher education. If we are to assume a critical feminist framework that acknowledges a matrix of domination by which race and gender and other salient identities intersect to form a unique understanding of oppression for women of color (Wing, 1997), then this study aligns with its application to women of color student activist that encounter marginalization of identities within a social institution that was built and founded on race and gender-based exclusion (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Furthermore, if we look to critical feminist frameworks such as Black Feminist Thought and Chicana Feminism (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019), we see that women of color in this study heavily relied upon dialogue, community, and collective action to propel their social and political agendas forward. Between and among students and alumni, a wealth of knowledge and information was shared that catalyzed student activism on campus with respect to the history and lived experiences they bring to the institution. Moreover, this commentary also fits within the concept of critical feminist agency. Regardless of when participants graduated or participated in student activism, each embodied a unique way of knowing when it came to racism, sexism, and discrimination, in general. Acknowledging the existence of these systems of oppression, participants actively chose to not be complicit with the status quo and create a different blueprint by which women of color and those that come after them can live, lead, and thrive. Despite the honest critiques about the practicality of feminist agency, women of color once again prove it is possible to imagine positive sustainable change beyond the circumstances of a situation.

Overall, each of these findings call for scholars, practitioners, and activists to reimagine leadership. There were multiple times when students like Ming and JD felt they were not ready for leadership, either because they did not see a representation of themselves as women of color or felt there voice and actions were being ignored, even mentioning at one point that women of color being ignored in social movements is the story of student activism. Thankfully they persisted and became successful student activists on campus, however these feelings further confirm that leadership and agency are only accessible to those with White or male privilege (Liu & Baker, 2016; Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Alternatively, their engagement despite feeling silenced, marginalized, and burnt out by the institution shows that leadership and agency is a possibility even for those with multiple, interlocking identities within a PWI. The willingness to press the issue, regardless of institutional structures and feelings of doubt and marginalization, participants of this study managed to embody their experiences and leverage the knowledge they developed and collaborations with fellow activists and alumni to effectuate change. I argue that this is the essence of critical feminist agency and the beginning of what could be a new way of viewing leadership in higher education.

Implications for Higher Education Research and Practice

Given the previous discussion of findings, I believe there are significant implications for research in the field of higher education and student development theory. This study covered various facets of student activism that were considered, including the dynamic between student activists and PWIs, current and former student activists, and their marginalized identities as women of color in higher education. For each facet, I offer recommendations for future research and suggestions for the practice of administrators, staff, faculty, and student activists within PWIs. First, as far as research is concerned, I connected the work of student activists in this study

to central tenets of leadership and agency theory. While this was helpful to the aims of the study,

I did not find a theory that detailed the development of student activists specifically.

Furthermore, I often went back and forth between leadership studies and social movement theory

to encompass the factors that influenced the engagement of student activists. For future research,

there are two possible actions that can be taken by researchers to address this gap: either

expanding the traditional paradigm of leaderships studies to include those leaders whose work

lies outside the domains of recognition by institutions or entities - that is student activists - or,

creation of more grounded theory that incorporates elements of leadership studies and social

movement theory, including the necessity of resource mobilization, political opportunity

structures, and the collective action that was taken among student activists organizations and

movements. In a similar vein, scholarship has only recently studied student activism from the

lens of students themselves as opposed to its historical influence on higher education. Granted, as

a mentioned before, it is necessary to study this phenomena within the scope of institutions like

higher education, however, as the social issues activists engage in become more nuanced,

complex, and urgent to stakeholders inside and outside of higher education, a breadth of

perspective that centers the positionality of student activists would be helpful, both for research

purposes as well as providing historical data that can be used by future student activists in the

years to come. Moreover, this study represents one of a handful within the last two decades to

explore activism from the perspective of women of color. To reiterate the significance and

theoretical framework of this study, participants lie at the intersection of multiple systems and

tensions within higher education where leadership of women of color is underrepresented and

yet, they must address issues of racism, Whiteness, and sexism from students, administrators,

and the institution itself. The nuance of inquiry in this study allowed for a deeper critical

perspective that leverages work done by women of color scholars, activists, and changemakers in higher education.

In terms of professional practice, I consider the issue of representation and partnerships among stakeholders in higher education. Participants spoke to collaborations with faculty and administrators from positive and negative standpoints, suggesting a potential area for improvement in the future. Specifically, there must be a willingness of faculty and administrators, particularly those with a vested interest in issues of equity and diversity in the institution, to find creative ways to support the work of student activism as change agents with the resources and capital that could benefit activists. As mentioned in the discussion, one of these creative ways could include helping students access and find organizational and institutional history they could leverage to gain more awareness or develop an effective strategy for organizing.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation study was to learn more about how women of color student activists experience predominantly White higher education institutions. I purposely centered the perspective of women of color in this study, both to highlight an underrepresented student population in higher education and to explore this issue from historical and contemporary lenses of a group with documented but often silenced leadership in social justice movements on and off campus.

To accurately portray this experience, I took a critical, qualitative approach to my methodology in order to facilitate a space for agency, voice, and ownership over their stories and experiences. In total, I had the opportunity to interview and dialogue with current and former women of color student activists, ranging in experience from the height of the Civil Rights era of

higher education to the contemporary practice of student activism in colleges and universities today. Using both individual interviews and focus group methods, I was able to align and validate similar and salient experiences of power, oppression, and leadership across race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class while also offering nuance between institutional types, involvement activities, and social issues of importance to each participant.

At the conclusion of this study, I was left with a series of reflections about my positionality and experience working with women of color in this study. From the onset, my intention was to divert all energy and attention to the participants to reduce existing bias based on my privileged identities. However, admittedly, I often struggled with the silence and discomfort that came with not being able to add affirmation or support to students and alumni telling their stories. My natural inclination is to always help or provide clarity when people struggle to find the words, concepts, or ideas to explain their experience. However, in this study I had to learn to be okay with silence. As the reflexivity of discomfort (Pillow, 2003) asserts, to assume that I needed to fill in the gaps of participant experiences would imply that I hold knowledge that the participants do not, that I understand their full experiences, and ultimately hold a specific conclusion about how their perspective presumptively fits into the study. Not only is this an abuse of power as the researcher, it also ignores the epistemological and theoretical framework of the study. Thus, as the study proceeded, I became more open to silence and used the reflection time with my peer debriefer to discuss any anxieties or uncertainties I felt about the interviews and how to best address them while maintaining respect for the participants. Coincidentally, it is in my comfort with silence that I began to see the nuances of these stories and learn how participants embody their experiences through their movements, actions, tone of voice, and behaviors that ultimately contributed to the findings of the study. Beyond this study, I

hope to continue practicing a reflexivity of discomfort as I believe it offers a foundation for critical researcher that hold privileged identities over participants that would otherwise be inappropriately reflected in qualitative inquiry, especially when it comes to critical feminist research.

What I learned from my time with participants validated the significance of this area of higher education research as we connected feelings of marginalization, silence, and inaccessibility to access, language, history, and resources for social change. Part of the challenge lied within the social and political structures of PWIs, further confirming how PWIs create, reproduce, and perpetuate campus climates rooted in a need to control and maintain power over their respective images. The other part rested in the people - namely, the stakeholders and people that make up institutions of higher education, student activists included. Their stories spoke to the challenge of creating momentum for social issues with limited resources and political power and the necessity of community, representation of identity at all levels of institutional hierarchy, and generations of student activists that pass down the knowledge, history, and motivational capacity to do this work.

In circumstances beyond comfort and environments that challenged their sense of belonging, participants persisted past the odds and came out more assured of their beliefs, identity, and ability to create change. Personally, I am inspired by the women in this study, much like the women of color that continue to shape my understanding of leadership in a just society. I am hopeful this dissertation sparks future conversations about the nature of higher education, and challenges scholars, institutions, and activists to be critical about our work as social justice researches and change advocates in higher education. Like the roses that grow from concrete, so too does critical hope, and the women of this study live in that hope in order to create the future.

APPENDIX A

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Individual Interview
Outline & Questions
Spring 2019

Thank you for participating in this interview dialogue. The totality of our dialogue will be approximately 90 minutes and include a series of questions before and after the actual interview. While these questions are planned, the actual interview will be more of a guide of topics that relate to your experience as a woman of color student activist that attends a PWI. Additionally, if you have any questions that arise for me as the principle investigator and researcher during this dialogue, please feel free to ask away!

Pre-Interview Questions
- What are your thoughts, feelings, and emotions coming into this interview?
- What expectations do you have for this interview, if any at all?
- Are there any questions or concerns you have about me as a researcher?
  - Is there anything I can do before the focus group to resolve questions and alleviate any concerns?

Planned Interview Questions

Please describe your lived experiences as it relates to:

1. Being a woman of color and a student activist at a PWI
2. Motivating factors/influences for participation in student activism
3. Instances, if any, where social identity influenced engagement and activism on campus
4. Experience or exposure, if any at all, with student activism prior to attending college
5. Lessons learned from your time as a student activist.
6. Particular moments or situations, if any at all, where you experienced agency as a student activist, or lack thereof.
7. Experience working with institutional stakeholders in activist efforts (ex. staff, faculty, board of directors, student activist organizations, etc.)
8. Things you would do differently in terms of activism and engagement
9. Advice and/or notes you believe current WOC student activists should keep in mind.

Post Interview Questions
- What are your thoughts and reactions to the interview? Did they differ from your original expectations?
- Is there anything you wish we could have discussed during the interview?
- Were there any questions asked or actions taken by myself as a researcher that should be revised or reconsidered for future conversations?

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Focus Group Interview Guide
Outline & Questions
Spring 2019

Thank you for participating in this focus group. The totality of the focus group will be approximately 90 minutes and include a series of questions before and after the actual interview. While these questions are planned, the actual interview will be more of a guide of topics that relate to your experience as a woman of color student activist that attended a PWI. Additionally, if you have any questions that arise for me as the principle investigator and researcher during the focus group, please feel free to ask away!

Before we begin, I would like to discuss privacy and confidentiality. Though this is a private setting and the focus group interview transcripts will only be shared with the people in this room, I cannot verify with certainty that all participants here will keep things discussed confidential and not share with anyone outside the room. Thus, I would like to emphasize and ask that all participants in the group not share any personal experiences or information shared in this group. If you are unable to agree to this requirement, whether you decide to no longer participate now, during, or at the conclusion of the focus group. If you agree to this term, please confirm by verbally stating "yes".

The guide for our dialogue is as follows:

Pre-Interview Questions
- What brings you to the focus group?
- What are your thoughts, feelings, and emotions coming into this interview?
- What expectations do you have for this focus group, if any at all?
- Are there any questions or concerns you have about me as a researcher?
  - Is there anything I can do before the focus group to resolve questions and alleviate any concerns?
- If any, please share any personal requests you would like focus group participants and the facilitator to be mindful of during the interview.

Planned Interview Questions

Please describe your lived experiences as it relates to:

1. Being a woman of color and a student activist at a PWI
2. Motivating factors/influences for participation in student activism
3. Lessons learned from your time as a student activist.
4. Particular moments or situations, if any at all, where you experienced agency as a student activist, or lack thereof.

5. Experience working with institutional stakeholders in activist efforts (ex. staff, faculty, board of directors, etc.)
6. Advice and/or notes you believe current WOC student activists should keep in mind.

Post Interview Questions
- What are your thoughts and reactions to this focus group? Did they differ from your original expectations?
- Is there anything you wish we could have discussed during the focus group?
- Were there any questions asked or actions taken by myself as a researcher that should be revised or reconsidered for future conversations?

APPENDIX C

EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

Email #1: To interested student or alumni participants that meet the points of eligibility requirements

Hello, my name is Cobretti Williams. I am a third-year doctoral student in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. I am currently conducting a qualitative research study on the experience of women of color student activists at predominantly White, U.S. higher education institutions. Through this research process, I hope to engage in meaningful dialogue with women of color student activists – both current undergraduate students and alumni – in an effort to amplify their contributions to student activism in higher education. If you would be interested in participating, please visit the following Google form for more information: (insert link). Whether your or interested, would like more information, or feedback that would be helpful to this research study, I also welcome dialogue via email at cwilliams18@luc.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I hope you have a good day.

Email #2: To higher education administrators and faculty that know interested students or alumni participants that meet the eligibility requirements.

Hello, my name is Cobretti Williams. I am a third-year doctoral student in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. I am currently conducting a qualitative research study on the experience of women of color student activists at predominantly White, U.S. higher education institutions. Through this research process, I hope to engage in meaningful dialogue with women of color student activists – both current undergraduate students and alumni – in an effort to amplify their contributions to student activism in higher education. If you know any individuals willing to contribute to this conversation, please forward this email and the following link to a Google form with more information: (insert link). Whether you are able to share this information, have additional questions, or feedback that would be helpful to this research study, I also welcome dialogue from participants via email at cwilliams18@luc.edu.

I am grateful for your time and consideration. Have a good day.

Social Media Communication: To groups and organizations with that support and show representation of women of color student activism in higher education.

Hello Everyone! My name is Cobretti Williams and I am conducting a dissertation study broadly on the experiences of women of color student activists at predominantly White, U.S. higher education institutions. If either you know of and are a women of color student activist – both current student or alumna – feel free to email me at cwilliams18@luc.edu to learn more information about participation, or the research study in general – I welcome all forms of constructive dialogue. Have a good day!

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

(Waiver for Documented Consent)

IRB Project Title: Women of Color Student Activists in Higher Education
Researcher(s): Cobretti D. Williams

Introduction:
Hello. You are being asked to take part in a dissertation research study being conducted by Cobretti D. Williams, who is the principle investigator and researcher for this study and a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. This research project is also being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Aurora Chang in the Department of Higher Education at Loyola University of Chicago.

In order to participate, you must be a 1) 18-years of age or older, 2) an undergraduate or graduate student of a four-year, predominantly-White higher education (PWI) institution in the United States or 3) an alum of a four-year, predominantly-White higher education institution in the United States, 4) self-identify as a woman of color with a racially or ethnically minoritized identity (e.g. African-American, Latinx, Asian American, Pacific Islander, etc.), and 5) self-identify as a current or former student activist.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to better understand the historical and lived experience of women of color student activists in U.S. higher education. Further, the hopeful goal of this study is to provide implications for higher education research and practice to create diverse, learning environments that support the voices and engagement of women of color college students and activists.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:
- **Participant questionnaire:** If you are interested in participating in either the focus group or individual interview, you will fill out a participant questionnaire that asks demographic information including gender identity, class standing, race/ethnicity, and extracurricular involvement on campus. A pseudonym of your choice will be used to follow up once you complete the form and I confirm the date, time, and location of your interview via email. This email will only be used to communicate about potential participation in the study and to share transcripts of either interviews or focus groups for verification purposes. The questionnaire should take approximately ten minutes to complete and will be completed via a Google form.

- **Individual Interview**: Current women of color student activist 18 years of age and older attending a PWI are eligible to participate in an individual interview. After completion of the questionnaire, eligible participants chosen for an individual interview will engage in an in-person or online interview with the principle investigator of the study, Cobretti Williams.

The interview should last no longer than approximately 90 minutes and includes the actual time of the interview and time before and after the interview to debrief the process and discuss informed consent. The interviewer will ask approximately ten questions in addition to follow-up questions that explore how you as a women of color student activist understand and define agency within your undergraduate institution. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator; the audio recording is a requirement to participate in the interview. Before the interview, the interviewer will review the consent form and ask for verbal consent instead of a documented signature to protect participant identity. Participants will then be asked to provide a pseudonym or alternative name to further protect the identity of the participant.

- **Focus Group***:* Woman of color student activists 18 years of age and older that are alum of a PWI are eligible to participate in a focus group. After completion of the questionnaire, eligible participants chosen for the focus group will engage in a facilitated discussion of individual and group experiences among women of color alumni about student activism. The focus group will be facilitated by the principle investigator, Cobretti Williams. The focus group should last no longer than approximately 90 minutes and includes the actual time of the focus group and time before and after the focus group to debrief the process and discuss informed consent. The focus group will be audio recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator; the audio recording is a requirement to participate in the interview. Before the focus group, the facilitator will review the consent form and ask for verbal consent instead of a documented signature to protect participant identity. Participants will then be asked to provide a pseudonym or alternative name to further protect the identity of the participant.

Risks/Benefits:
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. There are no direct benefits to you from participation.

Confidentiality:
- All matters discussed between participants and researchers during the study will be kept private and confidential in the case of the individual interview. Exceptions to this are in the case where physical danger to oneself or others is imminent and the focus group where there will be more than one participant and the researcher in the setting.
- With the exception of the principal investigator for this research study, no one will have access to any personal identification information of the participants.
- All audio recordings, interview transcripts and field notes will be stored in LUC One Drive and Dropbox storage accounts until the conclusion of the research project. Demographic questionnaires will be stored separately on Google Drive. Emails related to confirm interviews and share transcripts will be deleted once the transcripts are checked and verified by the respective participants.
- Coded information from questionnaires, interviews, and observations will not include identifiable information from the participant.
- Lastly, this information will be used to investigate our research study including in the aforementioned dissertation research study and potentially within research conference presentations.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about this dissertation study, please feel free to contact Cobretti D. Williams at cwilliams18@luc.edu or faculty sponsor Dr. Aurora Chang at achang2@luc.edu.

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.

Statement of Consent and Waiver of Documented Consent:
After reviewing this form, should you decide you would like to participate in the study, please sign and date below. For participants of the individual interview: you have the option to waive documented consent, if you choose. In this case, In lieu of your signature I will ask for your verbal consent to participate in the study prior to the individual interview or focus group interview.

The waiver of documented consent will also be explained in the demographic questionnaire prior to participation in either interview format. Again, this is to protect your identity as a participant and/or student at the university. If you agree to voluntarily participate, please indicate your intention by stating "yes" or "no" to the researcher reading this consent form to you.

_____   _____

             Participant Signature   Date

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VITA

The scholarly journey of Dr. Williams has been a vast and transformative. Dr. Williams started his primary education at Ocean City and jumped to three other grade school between the ages of five and nine. During his adolescent and teen years, Dr. Williams was located in Fort Walton Beach, Florida where he attended Edwin Elementary School, Max Bruner Middle School, and then Fort Walton Beach High school from ninth grade to senior year.

Dr. Williams began his postsecondary education within the state of Florida, attending Florida State University. Dr. Williams graduated in three years on April 2012 after coming into college with nearly a year's worth of college credit from the Advanced Placement Program. Admittedly, Dr. Williams switched majors often and ultimately bounced from accounting to economics, and finally finance as his graduating major of study. While he had a solid knowledge of business and finance, somewhere between my junior and senior year, Dr. Williams started to explore what working for a higher education institution would be like, especially after becoming involved in student leadership on campus. After a transformative internship experience the summer before my senior year, Dr. Williams switched from business to pursuit of a master's degree in education, focusing on higher education administration. Shortly thereafter, that led Dr. Williams to Seattle University where he would pursue and complete a Master of Arts in Student Development Administration. Notably, Dr. Williams completed a master's thesis project that explored the identity development of queer students of color attending Jesuit higher education institutions.

After graduating from his master's program, Dr. Williams made a professional move to work at Boston University before processing the possibility of pursuing a doctoral degree. After talking with multiple graduate programs, mentors, and trusted advisors, Dr. Williams decided to apply for doctoral programs that focused on higher education policy and leadership. After careful research, he decided to apply to the Doctor of Philosophy Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. Dr. Williams was ultimately accepted to the program and matriculated in fall semester 2016. Finally, after completed required program coursework, passing comprehensive exams, and Dr. Williams successfully defended his dissertation in February 2020 and graduated from Loyola University Chicago in May 2020 with a doctorate degree in Higher Education and a graduate concentration in Women and Gender Studies.