

***Where Do I Belong? – Exploring How Students of Color Perceive Sense of Belongingness
and Ego-Resiliency at Predominantly White Institutions***

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
August 9, 2025

Keywords: students of color, PWIs, ego-resiliency, belongingness, wellbeing.

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Abstract

The landscape of higher education has witnessed a notable surge in the enrollment of racially underrepresented students, particularly individuals representing various nonwhite racial or ethnic identities. While universities acknowledge the importance of contextual diversity in their mission statements, given the evolving diversity of the student body, the real-life experiences of these students remain complex. The purpose of the study was to explore how students of color perceive ego-resiliency and sense of belonging within the context of academic life at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) using a phenomenological approach, drawing on in-depth interviews with eight graduate students of color. The findings through five identified themes suggest that students of color at PWIs often navigate complex experiences of belongingness shaped by systemic structures and personal resilience. Despite feelings of marginalization due to limited faculty diversity and culturally less responsive climates, participants fostered community support, accessed affirming spaces, and relied on internal coping strategies, highlighting the role of ego-resiliency. Even minimal cultural validation through peer support, identity-based groups, or inclusive pedagogy reinforced their sense of belonging. These results emphasize the need for institutional transformation that centers student voices and promotes inclusive, affirming academic environments.

Keywords: students of color, PWIs, ego-resiliency, belongingness, wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation committee, whose guidance, support, and belief in my work made this journey possible. To my chair, Dr. Jinhee Park, thank you for your unwavering encouragement, mentorship, and thoughtful feedback throughout every stage of this process. To Dr. Jill Meyer, Dr. Sarah Flint, and Dr. Danielle Pester Boyd, thank you for your valuable insights, time, and the generous support you have extended throughout my doctoral journey.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to Dr. Jamie Carney, who has been a foundational part of my growth as a counselor educator. To the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling and my incredible cohort, you have been both an academic home and a space of community and learning that I will always cherish.

This dissertation is dedicated to my father – ‘Baba’, whose love and sacrifices continue to be the light guiding my path. To my family in Kolkata, your unconditional support across continents sustained me through every high and low. To my childhood friends in Kolkata, thank you for reminding me of who I am and where I come from. To my friends in Auburn, thank you for being my anchors during moments of challenge and celebration. Your presence made Auburn feel like home away from home.

As I reflect on this journey, I’m reminded of the words by Rumi:

“Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray.”

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

“Treating different things the same can generate as much inequality as treating the same things differently.” –Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991).

In the pursuit of fostering contextual diversity, universities champion inclusivity within their mission statements. However, the lived experiences of racially underrepresented students reveal a nuanced reality, reflective of the dynamic diversity within the student body. Kimberlé Crenshaw's words serve as a stark reminder that in the pursuit of fairness, overlooking the unique needs and challenges of diverse experiences can perpetuate inequality just as profoundly as overt discrimination. There is a critical need for studies like this one and others, which aim to delve into the multifaceted experiences of students of color in academia, further shedding light on their challenges and perceptions. There has been a significant increase in the enrollment of racially underrepresented students in higher education institutions, at historically high rates (Ponjuan & Hernández, 2021). Research indicates that of the 15.9 million graduate students enrolled in fall 2020, some 8.1 million were White, 3.3 million were Hispanic, 2.0 million were Black, and 1.1 million were Asian (Irwin et al., 2022). These enrollment figures underscore the significance of acknowledging and addressing the educational experiences of students of color and minority groups in colleges and universities. College students who belong to nonwhite racial or ethnic groups in the United States, and who represent a broader nonwhite Political identity on campus often faces subordination (Harper, 2010). "Students of color" is another term commonly used in academic literature to refer to individuals who belong to similar racial or ethnic groups that are not white. While there is no single, universally accepted definition, it encompasses students who

are not of Caucasian or white European descent. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes the need for educational practices responsive to the cultural diversity of students, particularly those from similar underrepresented and marginalized communities. Although contextual diversity is often acknowledged in mission statements across universities, it does not necessarily reflect the real-life experiences of the community, especially as the student body constantly evolves in its diversification (Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022). Like for example, studies suggest that despite a significant presence of Black students in predominantly White higher education institutions, there remains a limited and imprecise understanding of the factors influencing fluctuations in minority student enrollment (Allen et al., 1992). A lot of research in the past has demonstrated a link between educators' upholding cultural competence and its correlation to favorable outcomes for students, to promote fair opportunities and amplify the voices of those often overlooked (Samuels & A.J., 2018). This study aims to voice the perceptions of sense of belonging and ego resiliency among graduate students of color in PWIs.

Research suggests that graduate students of color often face unique challenges within academia, often experiencing heightened levels of stress and isolation compared to their white colleagues (Smith, W. A., 2014). These challenges often manifest across various domains, including academic achievement, campus climate, and mental health outcomes (Garcia et al., 2019). A review of the literature underscores the pervasive nature of these disparities, highlighting systemic barriers such as racial discrimination, stereotype threat, and lack of institutional support (Lee & Davis, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2021). A study by Martinez et al. (2022) examined the experiences of 17 graduate students of color in hybrid higher education and student affairs programs. The research highlighted that these students often face complex and multi-layered racialized experiences and that faculty interactions played a significant role in shaping

their sense of belonging, with supportive faculty contributing positively, while negative interactions exacerbated feelings of marginalization. Despite these obstacles, graduate students of color demonstrate resilience and a strong sense of community, often advocating for institutional change to foster inclusivity and equity (Jackson, 2019).

The experiences of students of color within higher education, particularly at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) have drawn increasing attention within counselor education programs, owing to their implications for persistence, mental health needs, and identity development. Counselor educators are uniquely positioned to address systemic inequities by fostering inclusive pedagogical practices and culturally responsive counseling training. Literature in the field has consistently emphasized the critical role of belongingness as a developmental need, especially among racially and ethnically minoritized students navigating predominantly white academic environments (Henfield et al., 2013). Aligned with the mission of counselor education, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2023) underscores the importance of cultivating multicultural competence and advocacy practices in counselor trainees. This includes a professional responsibility to understand and support the psychosocial well-being of diverse student populations. Research suggests that when students of color experience racial microaggressions, isolation, and underrepresentation, their sense of belonging and self-concept may suffer, leading to reduced academic self-efficacy and lower levels of engagement (Bryant et al., 2021).

Previous literature also highlights the necessity of institutional reforms in addressing these disparities. Rodriguez et al. (2022) argue that dismantling inequities in higher education requires structural changes that guarantee equitable opportunities for all students. In this context, the success of first-generation students of color has been closely tied to the availability of

academic support, transitional adjustment resources, and mental health services. Redford and Mulvaney Hoyer (2017) emphasize that tailored support systems addressing both academic and non-academic needs are essential in helping these students navigate college life, cope with the pressure of being pioneers in their families and succeed academically. The challenges extend into graduate education. Okahana (2018) explored the psychological and emotional strain faced by graduate students of color, revealing that these students often encounter systemic inequities, racial microaggressions, and high academic expectations, frequently without adequate institutional support. Many campus services are primarily targeted toward undergraduates, resulting in a significant gap in community-building and mental health resources for graduate students of color. Okahana's (2018) findings call for the development of targeted, culturally affirming support systems to promote holistic student well-being.

Parallel concerns also emerge in the professional realm of academia. Collins (2002) documented the double burden of racism and sexism experienced by Black women faculty and graduate students, leading to heightened stress, marginalization, and limited professional advancement. Institutional recommendations include fostering inclusive networks, implementing anti-discriminatory policies, and actively supporting retention initiatives to improve the workplace climate for Black women and other underrepresented groups in higher education.

These multifaceted findings point to a resounding need for comprehensive, tailored institutional strategies that account for both academic and socioemotional barriers to success. As Liz Fosslien aptly put it, "Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard." This quote encapsulates the heart of the current study: to amplify the voices of students of color and provide a platform to share their lived experiences of belonging and resilience.

In response to these pressing needs, several counselor education programs are being called upon to actively engage in dismantling systemic barriers and promoting inclusive training environments. Reese (2021) stresses the ethical responsibility of counselor educators to prepare trainees to support students of color, including those with disabilities, by incorporating inclusive practices aligned with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model to encourage leadership, advocacy, and systemic change. Similarly, Pieterse et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study on the lived experiences of students of color in U.S. counseling psychology doctoral programs, highlighting a dual reality in which some students report progress in inclusivity, while many still face racial discrimination and a lack of cultural representation.

Therefore, the current educational landscape demands intentional, equity-driven reforms that are responsive to the nuanced experiences of historically underrepresented graduate students. By understanding how students of color perceive their sense of belonging and ego-resiliency within PWIs, this qualitative study aims to inform future practices in counselor education and contribute to building inclusive, affirming academic environments. Such a pedagogical paradigm is essential to meet the evolving needs of a diverse student body.

Students of Color

Students of color represent unique cultural and ethnic orientations which are specific to their identity. During a graduate student's life, both on and off campus, students go through a transition process which involves leaving home, making new associations, and facing diverse stressors such as loneliness, anxiety related symptoms, financial insecurity, and inability to adapt to changing circumstances, among many others (Misra et al., 2004). As individuals navigate through various life transitions, be it personal or professional, they undergo a spectrum of adjustments that can significantly impact their emotional equilibrium (Fischer, 2007). However,

amidst these shifts, one phase stands out—the transition into college life. Research spanning several decades has consistently highlighted the pivotal importance of this period in shaping academic destinies (Gall et al., 2000; Hurtado et al., 1997; Padilla et al., 1997; Terenzini et al., 1994; Tinto, 1987). Students from all walks of life attend college with certain predispositions and attitudes like the need for belonging, openness to experiences, critical thinking ability, etc., (DeNitto & Strickland, 1987) and due to this experiential journey in academia, for some their beliefs and values are validated, while for others they remain invalidated (Bean, 1980, 1982; Fischer, 2007). Racially underrepresented students often face significant challenges like these at PWIs, which can hinder their ability to remain enrolled, persist, and ultimately complete their degrees (Palmer & Maramba, 2012). Because of these unique experiences, students of color often face several challenges, like culture shock, financial burden, food safety issues, depression, social anxiety, and isolation, which are not often talked about. Studies show that like many minority students, Black and Hispanic students often represent first generation college students and often come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds which may place them at more of a disadvantage and as a result of which they face adjustment difficulties at PWIs (Allen et al., 1992). Further, studies indicate that Black and Hispanic students, on average, tend to have lower grades and are more likely to leave college (Bowen et al., 1998). These students of color at PWIs have expressed feeling a greater degree of isolation and feelings of not being treated in the same manner as others (Allen et al., 1992). Human beings perceive any form of social rejection strongly, and as a result, neural circuits that are otherwise used to interpret physical pain are activated during similar social situations (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Social isolation and the inability to develop a sense of belonging to college life may have similar impacts on one's psychosocial well-being. In essence, the emotional toll of social isolation and the struggle to find

belongingness within the college environment mirrors the struggle of social rejection, activating neural pathways typically associated with physical discomfort. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in addressing the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals navigating the complexities of college life experiences. Social affiliation and oxytocin-based neurophysiological functions have been shown to have a correlational impact on one another (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999; Taylor et al., 2000). It was found in an endocrinological study that the channeling hormone, oxytocin, has a major effect on social inclusion and social bonding (Stallen et al., 2012). Based on these studies, oxytocin appears to mainly promote positive behaviors like cooperation, trust, conformity, empathy, and favoritism among individuals who share common affiliations, which might raise concerns for individuals who do not belong to the same affiliations (Stallen et al., 2012). Likewise, a study by Harper and Quaye (2007) found that Black students in PWIs often experience a sense of isolation that can impact their academic success. This isolation is exacerbated when there is a lack of representation among faculty and peers (Yosso et al., 2009). However, Astin (1993) emphasizes that students who actively engage in various aspects of college life, including their level of involvement on campus, the time spent on activities, and the overall quality of engagement, are more likely to experience positive impacts on their academic outcomes. This literature highlights the significance of a student's level of engagement in college life, which includes both academic and social dimensions, as crucial elements contributing to a student's overall academic achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The significance of providing students, particularly those of color, with a platform to voice their lived experiences is highlighted through these works, aligning with the idea that diversity goes beyond mere representation, but it involves inclusion and a sense of belonging. A qualitative approach in conjunction with these insights can help us gain a deeper understanding

of these experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. This study aims to further explore the perceptions of sense of belonging and ego resiliency among students of color attending PWIs.

Factors Impacting Wellbeing among Students of Color

Many elements impact students' academic and social environments, like social, political, and personal factors. Understanding how these factors interact with one another and impact one's mental wellbeing may provide us with the lens of understanding the space and place in which students of color function. This covers both the virtual environments that influence students' feelings of belonging as well as the physical aspects of campus climate (Allen et al., 2021).

Factors like ego-resiliency and belongingness have been identified as a few of the contributing elements to how well an individual adjusts to new places and roles. Ego-resiliency has been defined as “resourceful adaptation to changing circumstances or environmental contingencies” (Block & Block, 2014, p. 48). Research also suggests that ego-resiliency is inversely related to susceptibility towards mental health concerns (Friborg et al., 2003). Ego resiliency as is the internal drive of individuals that helps people to face adverse situations and thrive during transitions. The drive to find and sustain a sense of belonging has been regarded as a fundamental human motive that underpins all other human motivations (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1957). Research indicates that high-quality social associations are associated with contentment, social competence, school success, and the level of stress that individuals subjectively experience (Bagwell et al., 2018). Social attachments and a sense of belonging can help individuals experience emotional closeness and support (Holland et al., 2012). Building and maintaining similar meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging positively impact our mental wellness (Holland et al., 2012). Thus, in the context of academic experiences, these

factors are instrumental in shaping students' ability to adapt, cope with challenges, and achieve positive mental health outcomes as they navigate their academic and personal journeys.

A study conducted by Zirkel (2004) revealed that students from diverse racial backgrounds reported a sense of having fewer individuals at school with whom they felt exceptionally close or even moderately close when compared to their white peers. This again highlights disparities in social connections and a potential sense of isolation experienced by racially diverse students in the school environment. The loss of a sense of belonging has an overwhelming effect on psychological and social functioning, which can last through childhood and adolescence and well into adulthood in cases of abuse, neglect, or disorganized attachment (Allen et al., 2024). As per the broaden-and-build theory, it has, however, been demonstrated that people with resilient dispositions (i.e., people with high ego-resiliency) may endure considerable adversity and thrive during similar times (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004) because of their ability to maintain a broad spectrum of cognitive and behavioral responses. Further studies by Wolfe & Dilworth (2015) have also suggested that to effectively support graduate students of color, student affairs professionals and graduate education leaders must allocate significant financial, human, and material resources across areas. For example, they suggest that collaboration between these professionals is essential to provide continuous educational opportunities for faculty and staff, enabling them to learn and apply equitable and anti-racist practices in teaching, advising, and mentoring throughout their careers, from their first year of teaching to full professorship. Without such a pedagogical approach, faculty may inadvertently perpetuate behaviors that threaten the wellbeing of students of color. Furthermore, leaders in graduate education should actively promote cultural pluralism over assimilation, celebrating the myriad ways students of color perceive, think, communicate, and exist. This celebration should be

reflected in student affairs through programs and events that highlight research and the wider communities of color, in partnership with offices such as service learning, student leadership, and campus activities. Additionally, it is vital for campus leaders to thoughtfully consider the physical spaces that students of color navigate, making necessary changes to ensure these environments are welcoming, safe, and conducive to learning.

Overall, in essence, these two constructs, ego-resiliency, and sense of belongingness are closely intertwined, and their interplay can significantly influence an individual's ability to navigate adversities and maintain emotional wellbeing. While knowledge from previous works demonstrate existing quantitative insights, it is imperative to further understand the narratives and lived experiences of students of color so researchers can delve into their subjective perceptions, coping strategies, and adaptive mechanisms.

Belongingness

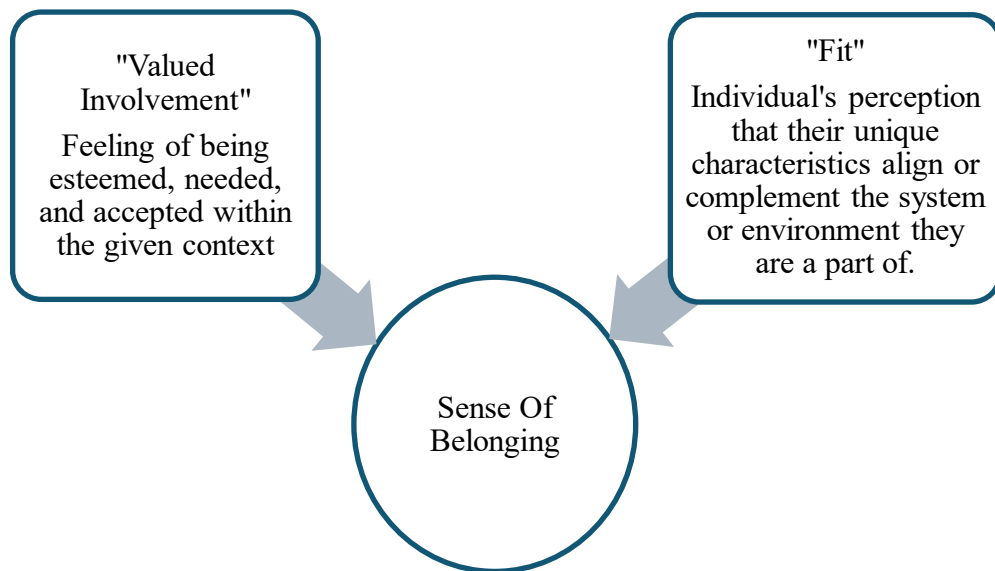
Belongingness is a fundamental psychological need that has been extensively explored in academic literature. It refers to the human desire to connect with others, to feel accepted, and to be a part of a social group (Allen et al., 2022). Belongingness means a sense of connection and or attachment. A sense of belonging is considered as a distinctive and subjective experience that one feels towards others in relation to innate social need and predisposition, as was proposed by Maslow (1943) in his theory of human needs. In the past twenty years, the concept of belonging has risen to prominence as a central idea surrounding college student retention and persistence (Museus et al. , 2018).

From a sociological context, belongingness is often associated with one's affiliation with groups or systems and from this viewpoint, belongingness can be understood and characterized by observable behaviors like being part of social groups and networks (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Researchers from the same study suggested that the sense of belonging arises in relation to various external factors which encompass other individuals, groups, possessions, institutions, surroundings (both physical and social), and spiritual aspects. Through a comprehensive analysis of this concept, two fundamental dimensions of the sense of belonging have been delineated by the researchers as represented through the following visualization.

Figure 1

Sense of Belonging: A Vital Mental Health Concept (Hagerty et al.,1992)



A study conducted by Museus et al. (2018) suggests that students of color notably encounter even greater challenges in persisting through their academic journeys compared to their White peers because existing research has established a correlation between a heightened feeling of belonging during college and increased commitment to graduating. Also, there is a lack of research on analyzing how campus environments that are culturally attuned and responsive either support or hinder this sense of belonging, ultimately affecting the graduation rates of ethnically diverse college student populations. Similar studies conducted by Museus and

Shiroma (2022) suggest that academic motivation in college is shaped by a multitude of individual factors, such as race, socioeconomic status, self-efficacy, cognition, and personality, alongside environmental influences. These findings highlight the complex interplay between personal characteristics and external factors in determining students' motivation levels. This study also highlighted that hostile environments characterized by racial discrimination and bullying can have detrimental effects on academic motivation, potentially diminishing students' drive to succeed. Conversely, their research underscores the importance of fostering positive environments and employing engaging teaching methods, which have the potential to enhance students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning.

Moving into the realm of education, Tinto (1975) explored the role of belongingness in the context of college student retention. His research in the past has indicated that students who feel a strong sense of belonging are more likely to persist in their academic endeavors. Tinto's work has for years influenced discussions on creating supportive and inclusive environments within educational institutions to foster student success. Studies in the past have shown that having meaningful friends is closely tied with concepts of contentment and academic success (Bagwell et al., 2018, as cited in Martin et al., 2017). As per the same study, Martin et al. (2017), having similar attachments with friends often lead to feelings of attachment and belongingness among young adults. Another relevant study by Vallerand (2000) delves into the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and its connection to belongingness. SDT proposes that individuals have innate psychological needs, including the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The relatedness aspect of SDT is closely aligned with the concept of belongingness, highlighting the importance of social connections in promoting motivation and wellbeing. These studies overall demonstrate the multifaceted nature of belongingness and its implications across various

domains of human nature. The study conducted by Trent et al. (2021) also suggested that a certain degree of alignment between students' experiences and their expectations significantly influenced their perception of their program and their sense of belonging. When students' values matched those of their program, they tended to have positive perceptions of their experiences, whereas in contrast, participants reported negative perceptions when the attitudes and behaviors in their learning environment conflicted with collectivistic values. One participant from the same study expressed disappointment, noting that the reality fell short of expectations, with instances of racism and microaggressions, and a lack of the anticipated collaborative atmosphere. Similarly, participants also reported that close-minded peers, unwelcoming cohort mates, competition, and racial slights contributed to a negative perception of their program. Overall, programs that embodied collectivistic values were more successful in creating an environment that mitigated feelings of "otherness" among students of color.

However, concepts like belongingness lend themselves to a subjective perception in this aspect and can be differently perceived or prioritized by each person (Martin et al., 2017). Allen et al. (2022) discussed how these perceptions can evolve, even though they contribute to one's sense of psychological wellbeing to a great extent. And though these constructs are well established as positive contributors towards feelings of association, there are many challenges in the path towards establishing a college environment that fosters a sense of belonging for students of color so that they feel valued and acknowledged through deliberate and coordinated efforts. When disengaged from culturally reinforced and validated identities in an environment that does not reflect their communities, students of color often experience high levels of loneliness and estrangement (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Turner & Zepeda, 2021). Belongingness on campus has been considered to impact individual perceptions of attachment, students' adjustment, and overall

achievement in college (Museus, 2014). As of recent times, schools and colleges have been focusing their attention on creating more inclusive and safe spaces as a result of which concepts of ‘belongingness’ have become more relevant than ever, which in turn can benefit many individuals who have been historically underrepresented in similar academic spaces (Turner & Zepeda, 2021). A qualitative study can be instrumental in exploring these nuanced experiences and perspectives related to one’s sense of belongingness, focusing in depth on the factors that may contribute to or hinder a sense of belonging among individuals, particularly among those from diverse backgrounds.

Belongingness Theory

A growing body of research underscores the critical role that social connection plays in human development, well-being, and survival, often regarded as a fundamental human need akin to food and shelter (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As behavioral psychologist Abraham Maslow noted, “The need for love, affection, and belongingness is in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, pivotal to human motivation” (Maslow, 1943). Social connection, particularly, sense of belonging, is essential in fostering emotional support and enabling individuals to access vital resources within their social environments.

The "Belongingness Theory," as formulated by Baumeister and Leary in 1995, has been a pivotal contribution to the field of psychology, shedding light on the fundamental human need for social connection and belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to this theory, humans have a strong desire to form and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships, and this need for social connections is as essential to our wellbeing as our need for food and shelter. The theory proposes that the desire to belong is a basic human need that has evolved, as social connections have played a crucial role in the survival and reproduction of our species.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that this need for social connections manifests in a variety of ways, such as the need for close relationships, the desire for social approval, and the need for social identity. One of the key ideas of the Belongingness Theory is that the need to belong is not just a simple desire for social contact or interaction, but rather a more complex motivation that is driven by a need for meaningful relationships with others. This means that simply being around other people is not enough to satisfy our need for belongingness; we also need to feel connected to others in a meaningful way. According to the same theory by Baumeister and Leary (1995), the psychological construct of belongingness consists of two core components: frequent positive interactions and relationships marked by stability and mutual concern. These elements are considered vital for fulfilling the need to belong, and temporary or superficial connections are insufficient to satisfy this need. Research following the publication of this theory has emphasized the profound emotional consequences of unmet belonging needs, including loneliness, depression, anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction (Cacioppo et al., 2008). Conversely, a strong sense of belonging is associated with increased happiness, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Seligman, 2002). And so, this theoretical proposition has important implications for understanding human behavior, motivation, and wellbeing. For example, it suggests that social isolation and loneliness can have profound negative effects on our physical and psychological health, and that people who lack meaningful social connections are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems. As mentioned earlier, this theoretical framework posits that the need for belonging comprises two primary components - firstly, individuals require regular personal engagement or interactions with others. While these interactions should be emotionally positive and enjoyable, what primarily matters is that most of these interactions remain devoid of conflict and negative

emotions. Seen from this perspective, the need for belonging is distinct from a mere desire for social affiliation. Regular interactions with unhelpful or apathetic individuals can have limited effects on enhancing one's overall sense of wellbeing and would provide minimal fulfillment of the need for. And secondly, individuals need to perceive the existence of an interpersonal connection or relationship characterized by stability, emotional care, and the prospect of continuing into the foreseeable future. This element offers a relational framework for one's interactions with others, making the perception of this bond essential for fulfilling the need for belonging. Overall, any form of social connection is considered to be a fundamental human necessity, providing essential access to resources and emotional support that contribute to generic wellbeing (Strayhorn, 2018). A crucial aspect of this connection is the sense of belonging, which encompasses feelings of comfort, fitting in, respect, safety, and a perception of importance within a social environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this context, belonging acts as a binding force that links individuals to their social settings. Strayhorn (2018) emphasizes that a sense of belonging is a core human need, intricately connected to social identities. When individuals lack a sense of belonging, they may not experience the same advantages from their environment as those who feel a stronger connection. Research also indicates that belongingness is influenced by power dynamics within social settings, which shape opportunities for participation and access to resources (Strayhorn, 2018).

Further research has extensively explored the implications of this theory, highlighting its relevance in various contexts, including mental health, wellbeing, and interpersonal dynamics. Numerous studies have underscored the significance of belongingness in promoting positive mental health outcomes (Cacioppo al., 2008) and its role in reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010). It has been frequently noted in research that a lack of

social belongingness can have adverse effects on individuals, leading to emotional distress and impaired psychological functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 2009). In "Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection" (2008), Cacioppo et al. delved into the intricate and often underestimated topic of loneliness, offering a comprehensive examination of its underlying causes, consequences, and the innate human need for social connection. This scholarly work illuminates how loneliness, often perceived as a personal or emotional issue, has profound implications for both mental and physical health. Drawing on extensive research in psychology and neuroscience, the authors emphasize that loneliness is not merely a subjective feeling but a deeply rooted evolutionary and biological phenomenon. Cacioppo et al. assert that loneliness is a signal, akin to hunger or thirst, signaling the need for social interaction and connection. They argue that loneliness has evolved as a survival mechanism, compelling individuals to seek out social bonds for protection, cooperation, and resource sharing. In this sense, loneliness is framed as a natural and adaptive response to social isolation. Thus, recognizing and addressing the need to belong is essential not only for individual mental health but also for fostering positive and inclusive social environments, ultimately contributing to a richer and more fulfilling human experience.

Thus, understanding this perceived sense of belongingness among students of color in PWIs is a topic of paramount importance as we strive to create similar inclusive spaces in academia. While research on students of color at PWIs has made significant strides in recognizing the importance of belongingness and other factors, there remain gaps in understanding the intersectionality of identities, the specific roles of faculty and peers, and the long-term effects of a sense of belonging. By addressing these gaps in research through qualitative methodologies, we can gain a deeper understanding of their diverse experiences, the

roles of faculty and peers, the impact of belonging over time, and the contextual factors at play. This knowledge is not only critical for advancing our understanding but also indispensable for the development of effective interventions aimed at supporting the success and overall wellbeing of students of color at PWIs.

Ego-resiliency

"Resilience is not about avoiding life's challenges; it's about confronting them head-on and growing stronger in the process" (Richardson, 2002, p. 308). This concept of resilience, especially ego-resiliency, underscores an individual's capacity to adapt to adversity, maintain psychological well-being, and achieve personal growth despite external pressures. From its early conceptualization in the 1950s to its current recognition as a vital component of stress management and health promotion, ego-resiliency has emerged as a dynamic trait central to understanding how individuals navigate life's challenges (Block & Block, 2014; Windle et al., 2011).

Ego resiliency is a dynamic personality characteristic that enables individuals to adapt to varying circumstances and control impulses based on diverse social needs (Farkas & Orosz, 2015). According to Block's theory, ego-resiliency refers to the ability to adjust one's level of control temporarily in response to specific situations. This adaptive flexibility allows people with high resiliency to experience positive emotions, possess greater self-assurance, and achieve better psychological well-being than those with lower resiliency levels (Letzring, et al., 2005). The concept of resiliency was first conceptualized in the 1950s and later postulated as a psychological construct by Block (Farkas & Orosz, 2015). Today, resilience is recognized as a stress-protective and health-promoting factor that enhances psychological development, well-being, and a high quality of life (Windle et al., 2011).

Block & Block (2014) identified two constructs within his theory of personality: ego-resiliency and ego-control. Of the two, ego-resiliency is the dynamic ability of one's personality to adapt to changing situations. Research indicates that individuals vary in their ability to cope with stress and emotional turmoil, with some coping more effectively than others (Bandura et al., 2003, 2015). This variability in coping abilities underscores the importance of ego-resiliency as a moderator in the relationship between stress responses and coping skills (Lee & Lee, 2021). Ego-resiliency reflects an individual's belief in their ability to exercise self-control to successfully cope with unforeseen difficulties and risks without experiencing emotional or behavioral problems (Block & Block, 2014). Resilience is understood as an evolving process in which individuals demonstrate positive adaptation despite significant negative experiences, such as trauma or adversity (Luther et al., 2000). It does not imply the elimination of stress or adversity but rather provides individuals with the tools to effectively deal with problems, overcome challenges, and move forward in life (Richardson, 2002). Ego-resiliency plays a crucial role in the academic and psychological well-being of students of color, especially those from marginalized communities such as Black and Latino students. These students often face systemic barriers, including socioeconomic disadvantages and limited access to educational resources, making resilience a critical trait for overcoming these challenges (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2021). Strong familial and community support, high levels of parental involvement, mentorship, and a positive school climate are key contributors to higher levels of resilience and academic achievement among these students (Anderson, 2019; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2021). Furthermore, students with a strong internal locus of control, or a belief in their ability to influence outcomes through their actions, exhibit greater resilience in the face of adversity (Tucker et al., 2018).

Resilience is also closely linked to academic motivation. Students with higher resilience are more likely to persevere through academic challenges and maintain motivation despite significant obstacles. Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to succeed, serves as a buffer against stress and is closely related to resilience (Pajares, 1996; Cacioppo et al., 2008). For students of color, resilience-building strategies, such as cultivating supportive relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, and enhancing coping skills, are essential for promoting academic success and well-being (Anderson, 2019). Additionally, harmonious relationships with peers and teachers positively influence resiliency by enhancing one's capacity to adapt and solve problems (Noble & McGrath, 2011). Individuals with high ego-resiliency tend to be more open to new experiences and exude confidence when facing new challenges and these individuals actively confront stressful situations and seek positive meaning in a variety of contexts (Letzring et al., 2005). The importance of cultural identity in fostering resilience among students of color is highlighted in Yosso et al. (2009) concept of "community cultural wealth," which asserts that students from marginalized communities draw on various forms of capital, such as familial and linguistic capital, that serve as buffers against adversity. Engaging with cultural heritage fosters a sense of pride and belonging, strengthening ego-resiliency. For instance, Black and Latino students who maintain strong connections to their cultural roots tend to exhibit greater resilience and academic persistence despite systemic challenges (Anderson, 2019).

Systemic barriers, such as racial discrimination, microaggressions, and inequitable educational practices, also significantly impact the resilience of students of color. These stressors can erode students' sense of belonging and emotional well-being (Masten, 2001). However, institutional practices promoting inclusivity, such as culturally responsive teaching and mentorship programs, can mitigate the negative effects of these barriers and foster resilience and

academic success (Gay, 2018). Intersectionality further complicates the narrative of resilience among students of color. This concept involves navigating multiple marginalized identities (e.g., race, gender, and socioeconomic status), which introduces compounded stressors requiring unique resilience strategies (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectional resilience, the ability to adapt to intersecting systems of oppression, is crucial for students facing overlapping disadvantages. Research indicates that students of color who successfully manage these intersecting challenges often develop higher levels of emotional and psychological resilience (Collins, 2015). Holistic approaches to resilience emphasize the importance of considering both individual traits and environmental factors. Ungar's (2011) social-ecological model suggests that resilience is not just an internal characteristic but also a product of supportive environments. For students of color, resilience is fostered through systems that promote access to resources, equity, and inclusion. This perspective highlights the need for educational institutions to create environments that support resilience-building by addressing systemic inequities and providing the necessary tools for students to thrive (Ungar, 2011).

Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that ego-resiliency among students of color is a dynamic and multi-dimensional process. It is shaped by cultural identity, systemic barriers, and the intersectionality of students' experiences, as well as by the environments in which they live and learn. Effective resilience-building requires not only strengthening individual traits but also addressing the broader social and institutional contexts that influence students' capacity to adapt to adversity. Ego-resiliency in this context enables students with similar predispositions to confront adversity, find positive meaning in their academic experiences, and maintain a sense of identity and self-confidence as they navigate predominantly white educational settings. While these findings underscore the significance of ego-resiliency as a personality trait, a qualitative

approach can deepen our understanding by revealing the underlying reasons behind the statistical relationships, thus providing richer insights into these complex dynamics.

Predominantly White Institutions

As is defined in the Encyclopedia of African American Education, predominantly white institutions (PWIs) is the term used to define institutions of higher learning in which whites account for 50% or greater of the overall student enrollment (Lomotey, 2010). Institutions with a focus on whiteness or the white majority in their history, policies, practices, and philosophies fall under this category (García-Morales, 2021). This demographic imbalance can often create unique challenges for students of color, affecting their academic experiences and outcomes in significant ways (Hurtado et al., 1997). The majority-minority dynamic at PWIs can impact students' sense of belonging, integration into campus life, and overall academic success (Strayhorn, 2018). PWIs have a longer history of exclusion than inclusion despite all efforts to build welcoming and inclusive places (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Integration into Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) is a pivotal aspect of the student experience for students of color. Defined as institutions where white students make up 50% or more of the overall enrollment (Lomotey, 2010), PWIs present unique challenges that affect these students' sense of belonging, representation, and academic success. The demographic predominance of white students can create an environment where students of color may feel marginalized or isolated. Research highlights that students of color at PWIs often struggle with establishing a sense of belonging. Hurtado et al. (1997) found that these students frequently experience feelings of isolation due to the absence of culturally relevant support systems and institutional representation. This sense of alienation is compounded by systemic biases and microaggressions that can significantly impact their academic experiences and mental health

(Solórzano et al., 2000). Strayhorn (2018) emphasizes that a sense of belonging is crucial for both academic success and student retention; however, many students of color report feeling marginalized within these institutions, which affects their overall academic performance. Similarly, authenticity and self-expression are integral to the experiences of students of color at PWIs. Griffin and Muniz (2011) discuss how the pressure to conform to the dominant culture can inhibit students from expressing their true cultural identities. This suppression can lead to psychological stress and decreased engagement in academic activities. Harper and Quaye (2009) further highlight the importance of supportive campus environments that value diversity, noting that such environments are essential for fostering authenticity and promoting overall well-being. The lack of representation within curricula and faculty can exacerbate feelings of marginalization and hinder academic success (Gusa, 2010). Adaptability also plays a significant role in the academic experiences of students of color. Study suggests that students who develop effective coping strategies are better equipped to navigate the challenges presented by PWIs and successful adaptation to diverse academic and social environments is linked to higher levels of persistence and academic achievement (Walters, S. D., 2017). The ability to maneuver through different cultural contexts and build supportive networks is crucial for overcoming the obstacles faced at PWIs.

The barriers to success for students of color at PWIs are multifaceted. Institutional and systemic obstacles, such as inadequate access to financial resources, mentoring, and academic support, can impede students' educational progress which are often intertwined with the historical and ongoing exclusionary practices at PWIs (McClain & Perry, 2017), which can create a challenging environment for students of color. Representation of cultural identity within academic programs is another critical factor affecting the experiences of students of color. Gusa

(2010) argues that curricula and faculty representation that reflect diverse perspectives are vital for engaging students and supporting their success. When academic programs lack cultural relevance, students of color may struggle to connect with their studies and feel marginalized (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Despite numerous institutional efforts to enhance diversity and inclusion, students of color at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) continue to face significant challenges. These challenges include pervasive microaggressions, cultural insensitivity, and insufficient representation, which collectively undermine their educational experiences and sense of belonging. Microaggressions even when subtle and unintentional, frequently target students of color, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and marginalization (Smith, W. A., 2014). Such interactions can be detrimental to students' mental health and academic performance, as they contribute to a hostile campus climate that fails to support their diverse identities. Likewise, cultural insensitivity within PWIs further exacerbates these issues. Many institutions, despite their diversity initiatives, still struggle to fully integrate and respect the cultural backgrounds of their students of color (Smith, W. A., 2014). This lack of cultural competence often manifests in curricula that fail to reflect diverse perspectives or in campus environments that do not adequately acknowledge or celebrate cultural differences. Consequently, students of color may feel that their cultural contributions and experiences are undervalued or overlooked. Additionally, insufficient representation of faculty and staff of color in academia is a critical issue that impacts students' educational experiences (Smith, W. A., 2014). The underrepresentation of diverse role models and mentors can limit students' opportunities for meaningful academic and professional guidance. This absence not only affects students' access to support but also contributes to a broader sense of isolation within the institution.

In response to these challenges, even though PWIs have implemented various initiatives aimed at improving diversity and inclusion on campus. However, significant disparities in academic achievement and student satisfaction among minority groups persist (Fry, 2007). Understanding the specific needs and experiences of students of color is essential for developing effective support strategies and fostering a more equitable educational environment (Hurtado et al, 2007). The intersectionality of students' identities—including racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic factors—further influences their academic experiences at PWIs (Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022). Addressing these complexities is crucial for enhancing educational outcomes and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive in higher education settings.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a multidimensional construct that encompasses various facets of an individual's life, like- satisfaction, health, and overall quality of life (Diener et al., 2018). The concept of wellbeing in this sense goes beyond the absence of illness and reflects a state of positive physical, mental, and social functioning (World Health Organization [WHO], 1948). The concept of wellbeing has gained prominence in various academic disciplines, including psychology, public health, and economics, due to its fundamental importance in assessing and enhancing individuals' quality of life. While traditional theories primarily focused on life satisfaction in the realm of ‘wellbeing’, Diener et al. (2018) advocated for a broader approach. They proposed that the concept of subjective wellbeing encompasses three distinct components, namely - life satisfaction, positive emotions, and a sense of meaning and purpose. This expanded framework recognizes that wellbeing is not solely about feeling good but also about living a meaningful and purposeful life. The authors also delved into the dynamic nature of subjective wellbeing, thus, highlighting the role of adaptation and discussed how individuals tend to adapt

to both positive and negative life events, and ultimately returning to a relatively stable level of wellbeing over time. This process can be closely linked to the concept of inherent human inclination to thrive, often referred to as ‘ego-resiliency’. Negative emotions that are severe or persistent and interfere with a person's capacity to function in daily life are considered to be detrimental to that person's psychological wellbeing, while, positive emotions of happiness and contentment, the idea of feeling good encompasses feelings like, engagement and affection (Huppert, 2009). Likewise, social wellbeing involves nurturing healthy relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, and participating in social activities that promote a sense of connection and community (Hettler, 1984). Diener et al. (2018) also delved into cultural variations, acknowledging that the pursuit and experience of wellbeing can vary across different cultural contexts. This further highlights the need for a culturally sensitive approach towards wellbeing and encouraging interventions specially catering to the needs of students of color.

As the significance of psychological wellbeing persists as a major concern within college environments and given its substantial impact on the overall quality of life for college students, educational institutions bear a significant responsibility in fostering and sustaining students' psychological wellbeing and holistic wellness and especially so with the increasing diversity in racial and ethnic backgrounds among higher education attendees (Koo, 2021). Factors like discrimination, adverse life events, attachment, etc. have been established as risk factors to one's perceived sense of wellbeing (Jenkins et al., 2008). Thus, the concept of well-being, when approached from multidimensional perspective, encompasses various facets of an individual's overall quality of life and health which goes beyond mere happiness.

Additionally, further exploration is needed to understand what specific elements contribute to the personal and academic success of students of color and for bridging these gaps a

qualitative approach will allow for a more profound comprehension of the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. This dissertation emphasizes the critical importance of providing a platform for students of color to share their lived experiences, underscoring that diversity extends beyond representation to include genuine inclusion and a sense of belonging. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. The study specifically explores the perceptions of sense of belonging and ego resiliency among students of color attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). From previous literature it can be safe to assume that ego resiliency and sense of belonging are closely intertwined constructs that significantly influence an individual's ability to navigate adversities and maintain emotional wellbeing. While quantitative research has provided valuable insights, it is essential to delve deeper into the personal narratives of students of color to understand their subjective perceptions, coping strategies, and adaptive mechanisms. Previous studies have acknowledged the importance of belongingness, yet gaps remain in understanding the intersectionality of identities, the roles of faculty and peers, and the long-term effects of a sense of belonging. By addressing these gaps through qualitative methodologies, this research seeks to understand the diverse experiences of students of color, the specific roles of faculty and peers, and the contextual factors influencing their sense of belonging over time. Additionally, identifying the specific elements that contribute to the personal and academic success of students of color is essential. As Maya Angelou eloquently stated, "We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter their color." The focus of this qualitative research is on understanding how students of color experience and perceive

their sense of belonging and ego resiliency within the environment of Predominantly White Institutes (PWIs).

Statement of Problem

Research indicates that factors like academic adjustment, institutional commitment, social adjustment, and emotional adjustment impact one's ability to adjust to college environments (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). These factors, along with others such as a sense of belonging and ego-resiliency, are additional factors that impact the academic journey and mental wellness of students of color in PWIs. Despite significant strides in research on students of color at PWIs, recognizing the importance of belonging, notable gaps remain in understanding the intersectionality of identities, the specific roles of faculty and peers, and the long-term effects of a sense of belonging. The paper aims to address these gaps through qualitative methodologies, seeking a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of students of color and other contextual factors that may be at play at PWIs.

Research Purpose and Significance

Students of color bring their unique cultural and ethnic orientation, which is unique to their origin (Britt et al., 2014). Throughout a student's academic and personal journey, they experience a transitional phase that encompasses leaving their home, forming new relationships, and confronting various challenges, including feelings of isolation, depression, financial instability, and the pressures of their academic responsibilities, among other factors. The purpose of this study is to comprehensively explore and understand the lived experiences of graduate students of color enrolled in PWIs in the United States. Counselor educators serve a pivotal role in promoting culturally responsive pedagogy by creating affirming learning environments that recognize and validate students' diverse identities and lived experiences. By incorporating social

justice principles into curriculum design, inclusive teaching strategies, and reflective supervision, counselor educators help foster students' sense of belonging and resilience (Constantine et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2009; Tummala-Narra, 2016). Utilizing qualitative methodologies, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of students of color, shedding light on the contributions of faculty and peers, the impact of belonging over time, and the contextual factors influencing their academic journey. Ultimately, the purpose is to contribute insights that can inform the development of effective academic practices and within counselor education trainings that support the success and overall well-being of students of color in PWIs, by fostering inclusive, equity-driven learning environments that affirm students' identities and lived experiences.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of students of color at PWIs?
 - i) How do students of color perceive sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency while attending PWIs?
 - ii) What are some of the resources available for students of color to better support their sense of wellbeing?

Chapter 2: Methodology

Description and Rationale of Qualitative Design

Within the qualitative approach, the chosen methodology for this dissertation involved employing phenomenology as the overarching framework. With its philosophical roots tracing back to European writings, particularly Edmund Husserl's development of the phenomenological school of transcendental philosophy, phenomenology provided a qualitative research approach suitable for exploring and comprehending the lived experiences of individuals within a specific phenomenon or context (Dowling, 2007; Husserl & Moran, 2012). The underlying premise of this methodology was rooted in the recognition that diverse truths and experiences existed, and knowledge was constructed based on these unique lived experiences. A systematic investigation into social phenomena in a natural setting was conducted using qualitative research procedures, which were defined by certain philosophical and theoretical frameworks (Creswell et al., 2016). Within the qualitative approach, phenomenological studies were one of the approaches that sought to comprehend the underlying aspects of a phenomenon using the inner meaning and structure of participants' lived experiences (Burns & Peacock, 2019). Through this approach, the dissertation aimed to gather thematic responses that contributed to a deeper understanding of the distinctive lived experiences of students of color attending PWIs, particularly in the context of a sense of belonging and ego resiliency.

Phenomenology

The term phenomenology has philosophical roots that date back to European writings (Dowling, 2007; Husserl & Moran, 2012). Edmund Husserl introduced the phrase in his development of the phenomenological school of transcendental philosophy, which was inspired by Franz Brentano (Dowling, 2007; Husserl & Moran, 2012). Phenomenology can be connected

to the science of the intrinsic being of human lived experience as it appears to consciousness to the objects themselves (Husserl & Moran, 2012). Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of individuals within a specific phenomenon or context (Creswell et al., 2016). It delves deep into the subjective, first-person perspectives of participants, seeking to uncover the essence of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). At its core, phenomenology acknowledges that human experiences are multifaceted, influenced by personal interpretations and perceptions. Researchers employing phenomenological methods strive to uncover the meanings, structures, and essence of these experiences, often through open-ended interviews and a suspension of preconceived judgments or biases.

The primary goal of phenomenological research is to comprehend the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have lived it. By examining the world through the eyes of the participants, phenomenology provides a valuable lens for exploring complex and often subjective topics (Creswell et al, 2016). In phenomenology, the researcher participates in the participants' experiences with them, allowing for greater knowledge and the possibility for insight. The experiences are then interpreted and combined into themes (Moustakas, 1994). I have used this approach to gather thematic responses to comprehend the lived experiences of students of color attending PWIs, focusing on their sense of belongingness and ego resiliency.

Procedures

Participant Sampling and Recruitment Techniques

The study utilized purposeful sampling to identify participants who self-identified as students of color currently enrolled in graduate programs at PWIs. Following Creswell (2012), who emphasizes sample sizes of 2 to 25 for phenomenological research, and Moser and

Korstjens and Moser (2017), who suggest fewer than ten interviews for saturation, the goal was to recruit 5 to 10 participants to achieve thematic saturation. In alignment with Creswell et al. (2016) guidance, the final sample included eight participants, sufficient to explore the phenomenon in-depth.

Eligibility criteria included individuals who: (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) self-identified as students of color, (c) were currently enrolled in a program at a PWI, and (d) consented to participate in a single, audio-recorded Zoom interview. Participants who were minors, did not self-identify as students of color, or declined audio recording were excluded from the study.

All procedures involving human subjects were reviewed and approved by Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This process included submitting a detailed protocol outlining the research design, participant recruitment strategies, informed consent process, interview questions, and plans for data security and confidentiality. IRB approval was granted prior to beginning data collection, affirming that the study adhered to federal and institutional ethical standards. Recruitment efforts were multi-pronged and inclusive. Email invitations were distributed to faculty and communication representatives across various academic departments at Auburn University and other institutions (see Appendix B). Flyers were also posted in high-traffic areas on the Auburn University campus, featuring brief information about the study and a QR code linking to a Qualtrics screening survey (see Appendix C and E). In addition, the researcher promoted the study on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to reach a broader demographic of eligible students. Interested individuals were asked to contact the researcher directly via Auburn University email. The recruitment package included an information letter, a demographic questionnaire, and contact

information. After reviewing completed questionnaires to confirm eligibility, the researcher scheduled interview sessions at mutually convenient times.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom in a secure environment, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. This occurred after eight interviews, at which point no new themes or codes emerged. Interviews highlighted consistent patterns related to marginalization, ego-resiliency, and belongingness, supporting the decision to conclude data collection.

In the present research study, there were a total of eight participants, all of whom identified as students of color currently enrolled in graduate programs at a PWI. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured Zoom interview to share their lived experiences navigating the sense of belonging and ego-resiliency. The participants included four females and four males, all between the ages of 25 and 35. Seven were from the Southern United States, and one was from the Midwest. Seven participants were pursuing doctoral degrees, while one was enrolled in a master's program. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' age group, gender, and degree enrollment.

Table 1

Demographic Details of Participants

Participants	Age Group	Gender	Year Of Study	Ethnicity	Country Of Origin
Participant 1	25-35	Male	PhD	Asian	International
Participant 2	25-35	Male	PhD	Middle Eastern	Domestic
Participant 3	25-35	Female	PhD	Latina	Domestic
Participant 4	25-35	Female	PhD	Hispanic	Domestic

Participant 5	25-35	Female	PhD	African American	Domestic
Participant 6	25-35	Female	PhD	Asian	International
Participant 7	25-35	Male	Masters	Asian	International
Participant 8	25-35	Male	PhD	Asian	International

Interview Protocol

The primary instrument utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researcher to explore the lived experiences of students of color regarding their sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency within PWIs. Grounded in existing literature, the protocol was carefully designed to elicit rich, in-depth narratives aligned with the study's central research questions. This semi-structured format allowed for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to probe participants' unique experiences more deeply. Interview questions centered on personal experiences, challenges encountered, and coping strategies employed by participants in navigating predominantly white academic spaces. This approach facilitated nuanced responses while maintaining focus on key thematic areas relevant to the study, like asking them to share their experiences with feelings of belonging at their university/college, in what ways do they feel faculty and staff have impacted their sense of belonging, what skills or approaches did they use to adapt effectively during an unexpected situation (Appendix E). The interviews lasted approximately between 20 to 50 minutes, with an average interview time of 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom to accommodate participants' availability and comfort. Each interview was audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed using a combination of Zoom's automated transcription feature and manual review by the researcher to ensure accuracy and preserve the integrity of the data. Participants received

an information letter prior to the interview, which detailed the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The letter also outlined the interview process, confidentiality measures, and how their responses would be used in the research. Implied consent was obtained as participants were informed that proceeding with the interview signified their agreement to participate.

In addition to the interviews, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire designed solely to collect background information such as age, educational level, and other relevant identifiers to contextualize the data during analysis. Participants were also asked to provide their email addresses to facilitate scheduling or potential follow-up interviews. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information, including email addresses, was stored separately from interview transcripts and demographic data. All files were securely housed on a password-protected device, and participants were assigned unique identification codes to ensure anonymity. During the transcription and data analysis stages, any identifying information was removed, thereby upholding the necessary ethical standards for confidentiality and participant protection.

Design & Data Analysis

Qualitative research methods served as the foundation for this study. The primary data collection technique involved conducting semi-structured interviews with participants. These interviews were carried out following the principles of Colaizzi's phenomenological methodology, as outlined by Colaizzi (1978). Before participants were enrolled in the study, they received a detailed information letter that clearly communicated the study's objectives, approach, and significance. This ensured that participants were fully aware of their involvement. To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, all Zoom interviews were securely

stored on Auburn University's Box platform, with pseudonyms assigned to avoid any identifying information. Access to these recordings was rigorously controlled through password-protected measures. Additionally, the transcription of interview data was conducted using Zoom software manually by the researcher to ensure accurate representation and analysis of the collected information. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, a flexible and rigorous method well-suited for exploring complex experiences, which includes: (a) familiarizing with the data, (b) initial coding, (c) theme development, (d) theme refinement, (e) theme definition and lastly, (f) narrative synthesis. In the first phase, following the completion of all interviews, I transcribed each Zoom recording verbatim, ensuring accuracy and preserving participants' original expressions, pauses, and emphases. Transcripts were then re-read multiple times, during which I made initial observational notes and memos in separate word documents to begin engaging with the data on a deeper level. This process helped me in beginning identifying recurrent ideas and emotional tones of each participant. Using a manual, line-by-line approach, I conducted coding for each transcript. I developed inductive codes directly from participants' narratives without imposing preexisting categories. Codes were documented in a coding matrix, where key segments of data were labeled with short descriptors (e.g., "implicit biases," "representation," etc.). This phase resulted in a list of initial codes that captured diverse aspects of participants' experiences. The initial codes were then reviewed and grouped based on conceptual similarity using highlighters, color-coded digital tags, and thematic memos. I examined how certain codes are clustered together to form potential subthemes and broader themes. For instance, codes related to seeking cultural connection, campus organizations, and peer belonging were grouped under preliminary themes. The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining themes in relation to the coded data and the entire dataset to ensure consistency and

coherence; weak or redundant themes were revised or discarded. In the fifth phase, once a stable thematic structure was established, each theme was carefully defined and named to reflect its essence. Detailed theme descriptions were written to clarify scope and boundaries. In the sixth and final phase the focus shifted toward refining the identified themes into a coherent and meaningful narrative that captured the depth and complexity of participants lived experiences. This involved a recursive process of reviewing all previously coded data and analytical memos to finalize themes that were both distinct and interrelated. As I revisited the thematic map and coding structure, I evaluated how each potential theme connected to the core research questions around sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency among students of color at a predominantly white institution. I compared the coded data extracts within and across categories, ensuring that each theme captured a specific and significant pattern of meaning. Through this iterative synthesis five prominent themes were solidified. Each theme was refined to ensure conceptual clarity, distinctiveness, and resonance with the overall dataset. I then defined and named each theme to reflect its essence, supported by descriptions and illustrative quotes in the final write-up. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, where a summary of the themes was shared with the participants. Peer debriefing with a doctoral colleague and consultations with the dissertation advisor further strengthened the credibility and validity of the findings. The interview protocol used in this study was designed to elicit rich, detailed accounts of students' experiences regarding their sense of belonging, the influence of faculty and peers, challenges faced, coping strategies, and available support systems. The open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on how their university experience has shaped their academic and personal journeys, particularly in navigating their identity and sense of inclusion. Topics included the

impact of faculty and peer relationships, overcoming barriers, personal growth in the face of challenges, and the support structures students rely on in their academic and social lives.

Reflexivity

In the context of the researcher being a student of color, her positionality could be influenced by a blend of personal and professional experiences. Growing up as an Asian, the researcher had to navigate the intersectionality of cultural heritage and Western perspectives prevalent in academia. However, it is important to acknowledge that these personal experiences and perspectives, while valuable, may introduce a degree of subjectivity to the research findings. The scope of this research may not encompass all cultural nuances and variations, making it essential to consider a broader range of perspectives. To address potential subjectivity in research findings, the researcher intended to use bracketing through peer debriefing, member checking, and ongoing reflexivity as techniques to ethically manage any biases, cultural influences, and or assumptions that might impact the analysis of participants' responses. At the outset of this study, the researcher anticipated uncovering narratives of resilience and marginalization among students of color at PWIs, shaped by both systemic barriers and personal coping strategies. These expectations were grounded in prior literature and personal observations within academic settings, which suggested that students of color often navigate complex social and institutional dynamics that impact their sense of belonging. The findings largely aligned with these expectations, particularly in the emergence of themes related to internal resilience, community-building, and the significance of culturally affirming spaces. However, the nuanced ways participants articulated their agency, not merely as a response to adversity, but as a proactive effort to cultivate belonging and meaning within academic life, were insightful. The researcher maintained a reflective journal to document and articulate emerging themes throughout the

study. During the interviews, the researcher purposefully avoided the use of leading questions and instead employed open-ended follow-up questions to deepen the understanding of participants' narratives.

Credibility

To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, member checking was implemented following data analysis. All eight participants were contacted via the email addresses they had voluntarily provided during recruitment. Each participant received a personalized email containing selected excerpts from their interview transcript, particularly those segments interpreted as significant to the emerging themes. Alongside these excerpts, a brief summary of preliminary interpretations was included to ensure transparency and invite participant feedback. Out of the eight participants contacted, five responded affirmatively. Among those five, one participant offered clarifying remarks, including rephrasing certain terms to better reflect their intended meaning and adding contextual details to enrich their narrative. The feedback from these participants was incorporated into the data analysis by adjusting theme descriptions to better reflect their experiences and ensure that participant voices were accurately represented. In addition to member checking, a peer review process was conducted with a colleague who has previous experience and expertise as a qualitative researcher and counselor educator. This individual reviewed the research design, coding framework, and thematic analysis. Feedback included suggestions to strengthen theme coherence and refine coding consistency, which led to the reorganization of subthemes and enhanced alignment between codes and research questions. This external review contributed to reducing researcher bias and improving the overall trustworthiness of the study.

Summary

This study followed a structured and ethical methodology to explore the lived experiences of graduate students of color at predominantly white institutions. Through careful participant selection, rigorous data collection procedures, and ongoing reflexivity, the researcher ensured that participants' voices were centered and authentically represented. The use of the phenomenological method and semi-structured interviews allowed for deep, nuanced insights into how students of color navigate their educational environments, fostering a rich understanding of the phenomena of ego-resiliency and belonging.

Chapter 3: Findings

In conducting the thematic analysis for this study, I aimed to comprehensively explore the sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency among students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The choice of thematic analysis was applied as it allowed me to identify recurring patterns and codes in the narratives collected from semi-structured interviews. Through this approach, I sought flexibility to capture the nuances of participants' experiences and gain a deeper understanding of how they navigate belongingness and resilience in these academic environments.

As a part of analysis, five prominent themes emerged: (a) *Fostering Belongingness-Representation in Academic Spaces*, (b) *Navigating Acculturative Stress*, (c) *Social Buffering as a Mechanism for Coping*, (d) *Ego-Resiliency through Social Adaptability*, and (e) *Implicit Biases as A Barrier to Inclusion*. These themes encapsulate the lived experiences of students of color in PWIs, highlighting the complexities of identity negotiation, resilience, and support systems. I selected these themes based on recurring patterns and salient narratives that emerged consistently across participants' responses. This thematic identification process was rooted in a phenomenological approach, prioritizing the voices and lived realities of the students of color who participated in the study. By carefully analyzing the language, emotions, and contexts embedded in their stories, I ensured that the themes authentically reflected the core dimensions of their experiences rather than imposing preconceived categories. Each theme was chosen because it encapsulated not only a common experience but also the meaning-making processes participants engaged in while navigating predominantly white academic spaces. Through this iterative and reflective process, my goal was to capture the complexities and nuances of how students of color develop a sense of belonging and demonstrate ego-resiliency in environments

where they may feel marginalized or underrepresented. This deeper exploration allowed for a more layered understanding of their adaptive strategies, interpersonal connections, and identity negotiations within the university setting. Ultimately, these insights contribute to the broader discourse on equity, inclusion, and student wellbeing in higher education by highlighting the personal and systemic factors that influence students' capacity to thrive in predominantly white institutions.

Discussion Of Themes

Fostering Belongingness- Representation in Academic Spaces

The findings from the semi-structured interviews suggest that students of color often felt a strong sense of belonging when surrounded by peers or mentors from similar cultural or ethnic backgrounds, making collaboration and communication more natural. Shared identity, particularly with advisors, helped ease their academic journey. However, limited representation in administrative roles was seen as a barrier to feeling fully included. Conversely, some students experienced isolation due to cultural or identity differences, and subtle exclusion in classroom interactions further impacted their confidence. These insights underscore the importance of diverse and inclusive representation across all levels of academia to foster a true sense of belonging. The in-depth interviews with participants further illustrate this theme, revealing both the benefits of representation and the challenges that arise when it is lacking.

Participant 1 expressed their sense of belongingness due to adequate representation in their department:

Yeah. So, before I came here, I was pretty skeptical about it that how much I would be able to fit in with everything, because, coming to a new country at this age is not easy decision to make. But from the very moment that I came here, everyone around me made

it easier for me to adapt, especially faculties in my department. Many of them are of people of color themselves. So, when I came here, I talked to few of them, they made it easier for me from the very beginning. Here in Auburn, specifically, in my department, there are a lot of people who came from Bangladesh. So, it was easy for me to collaborate with everyone else, but not everyone is from Bangladesh. So, a lot of people are native here, and some of some are from different countries. So, I didn't feel, anyhow, that I am from a different country, and had trouble to communicate with someone.

Participant 4 reflected on the dissonance between surface-level interactions and a deeper absence of connection, which further illustrates how a welcoming environment does not always equate to a genuine sense of belonging:

Yeah, so I have to admit that one of the things that I have not really loved about Auburn is that I haven't really had too much of a sense of belonging. On the one hand, as a graduate student, I mostly just interact with my department where people are generally pretty cool. Even though I can't relate to a lot of people they're at least welcoming and very nice. But it's weird not being able to relate to anyone when I see them so frequently, and we have so little in common. Part of it is because most of the people in the department are either white domestic students or their international students, who I don't have a lot in common with either. The other part would actually be because I am queer, and basically no one else in the department is. I was like the first trans person they had ever met in their lives. So that also adds this extra layer of like otherness, where I just even though everyone's very friendly and I enjoy them all. It's hard because we don't have a lot in common.”

Participant 7 shared a similar experience within their department:

If I talk about my connectivity, being here from foreign country for almost two years so it's a bit difficult to feel the connectivity at the level of my own country. But I have a few privileges, like my advisor is from the same region where I'm from, so we speak the same language and there are so many other people in my department, and also in my lab who are from the same ethnicity or the same nationality. So yes, I can talk in the same language that I'm where I belong. So, this is kind of gives me the sense of belongingness here that okay, maybe I'm not too far from home. And I think it's also depends on the personal level of homesickness. I'm not such a homesick person. So, it's okay for me. I have my friends. I have my both from my country and my international friends here whom I can actually hang around with, and I have very few obligations or restrictions because of the nationality or the relation. So many other things. People have many restrictions.

These narratives reveal that participants' sense of belonging was strongly influenced by cultural representation and authentic interpersonal relationships within their academic departments. While shared backgrounds with faculty or peers fostered feelings of support and inclusion for some, others noted that superficial friendliness did not translate into meaningful connections. Overall, the findings suggest that true belonging is cultivated through sustained, identity-affirming interactions rather than initial gestures of welcome alone.

Navigating Acculturative Stress

Students of color highlighted the emotional and practical challenges of adjusting to life in a new academic and cultural environment. Many had to quickly adapt to independent living, unfamiliar customs, and new social norms without prior guidance or support systems. This transition often came with a sense of added pressure, particularly when navigating daily

responsibilities alongside academic demands. Financial hardships and cultural gaps further intensified feelings of stress and isolation, making the early months especially overwhelming. These reflections emphasize the need for tailored support to ease acculturative stress and foster resilience among international and marginalized students.

Participants spoke about the challenges of adjusting to a new academic and social environment without prior support. Participant 1 shared:

I would say that the education system in general is quite different than how I'm used to. So, from the very simple things like using canvas. I didn't use canvas before and the assignments and everything that they have on a regular basis. That is quite different from the education system from our country. So, in the first few semesters, I guess in the 1st few months of the 1st semester it took me time to adapt.

Participant 7 described multifaceted challenges they faced as an international student, highlighting the cultural, linguistic, and economic adjustments that shaped their early experiences:

Most of my struggles were from migration from my country to here. So, a lot of students might not have the similar kind of challenges like mine. When I came here, I came with limited resources. So, I had to understand everything, the new customs, new values, new society system. This is one kind of challenge in the beginning, and also there are few economic challenges, because I had to manage all of my stuffs here at my home and all the other things.” And continued, sometimes the initial days the main challenges were I couldn't understand what they're talking about, because they would talk really fast. So, first of all, the language barrier, I completely didn't understand what they're talking about. The second thing is that their way of looking at things and mine was a bit different at that

time, and I could didn't understand so many little things which maybe they were noticing which sometimes I felt a little bit judged or less confident.

When asked to share their experiences of adjusting to a new environment, participant 2 responded:

I would say, you know, the 1st few months going from your home country to a new country, especially the US. I had to essentially like learned how to take care of myself more responsibly grocery shopping you know they're taking care of the room or the door I'm living in. The manual stuff that may mainly all students deal with the extra part, maybe was I would call it maybe a sense of extra added pressure.

Participant 4 reflected on the pressure to adapt their behavior and appearance in order to navigate their current environment. They expressed a sense of disconnection from their authentic self, noting that their identity, particularly as a queer and trans individual:

I would say that I've had to change a lot about how I act and how I dress while I'm here in particular like. I think that if my friends from undergrad or my friends from high school saw me, while, like the way I act when I'm here they would be really surprised, because just the type of person I was before I came here, I feel like doesn't really fit in and that's mostly again the queer aspect of like being trans being by like participating in that sort of environment. When I came here, I had a lot of issues with people accidentally misgendering me and calling me the wrong pronouns and things like that, and I realized that the only way that I could fix that was for me to dress a way that was different. Like I had to dress more masculine. I had to act more masculine. I had to sort of put aside that part of me so that it was easier for the people around here to you know, call me by the right pronouns, and to treat me right? So, I do think that that was like a big change is, I've

got an entire half of my closet that I can't wear anymore. Because if I do, people are going to assume things about me and treat me differently.

These accounts illustrate how acculturative stress affects students in deeply personal ways, emphasizing the importance of institutional support in facilitating smoother transitions. Students of color often face the challenge of adapting to unfamiliar academic and cultural environments while managing the demands of daily life. These early experiences highlight the critical need for universities to implement responsive, culturally informed support structures that ease the adjustment process and promote student resilience.

Social Buffering as a Mechanism for Coping

Students of color often relied on social connections—both from home and within their new environment—as a key source of emotional resilience. Regular communication with family, friendships formed locally, and engagement with counseling or peer networks helped ease feelings of isolation and supported a sense of belonging. However, some students coped more independently, highlighting varied approaches to managing stress and maintaining connection. These social buffers played a vital role in navigating academic and cultural transitions. The responses overall underscore the importance of social buffering in students' academic journeys, highlighting how personal connections serve as an anchor in times of stress.

Participant 1 emphasized the role of family support:

My strongest support system is my family and friends. Every day, I talk to my mother no matter how busy I am. The friends that I have both in Auburn and back at home. So, for me, I need at least one good conversation with a nice group of people every day. And it can be for 5 min. It can be for 5 hours doesn't matter, but it has to be there, and luckily, after coming to Auburn, I have found such wonderful friends who live right around me,

and every day they come over to my place, and we hang out. At least sometimes, that actually keeps me going, doesn't necessarily have to be related to my academic things, because I know they're from different departments, and even if I'm facing some academic challenges, they won't be able to suggest me or anything with that. But I have my advisors for that. But what I need my friend for is like just to vent sometime.

Similarly, Participant 2 shared how staying connected with loved ones lessened the burdens of isolation:

I try as much as possible to check on my friends and family. I'm thankful to have family in the U.S. who frequently call and ask if I need anything. Their support significantly reduces both financial and emotional burdens.

Participant 3 expressed getting support through networking and counseling services, besides social support systems:

I've gone to counseling services through the university. I've talked to the graduate student Coordinator in my department and then also like maybe to create those like networking opportunities. For myself, I've looked for professional associations where I've, enrolled in like mentoring programs and things like that, where I found, people from the industry that have more experience and that are willing to share those like experiences with me. So, I will say it's been a combination of all those things, and maybe like older grad students as well. And then for personal challenges, I will say my family, my boyfriend, and friends in general.

Whereas Participant 4 shared coping with stressors internally with minimal support seeking:

I probably don't have as many support systems as I should have. I do largely like rely on myself but over the years that I've been here I have managed to build up a network of

friends. There are some friends here at the University who I can count on even though it's not as big of a group or as close as of a group as I would like to have as I experienced in my undergrad or in high school. They still do help a lot, even if it's just someone to vent to. You know, complain about my frustrations to, that's still really important to me. The other thing is, I have tried to stay in touch with people who I knew before I came to Auburn, who I have common with, and who just understand me a lot better. And I make sure to stay in touch with those people. One group of friends we actually hang out on a phone call for. And just you know, talk about the things that we can't really share with anyone else, or that no one else really understands. And I think that, like that group of friends has been really important to helping me stay sane while I'm here. Yeah, mostly any difficulty I have, it's going to be either – I just keep it to myself, and I just deal with it. And you know, I have come to peace with it myself, or yeah, I have groups of friends who I, even if they don't necessarily give me direct help, then they can at least listen to my complaints, so that I'll feel better afterwards.

These accounts illustrate how social connections serve as a crucial buffer against the emotional toll of acculturative stress, highlighting the diverse ways students of color navigate their academic environments. Many relied on strong ties to family, friendships formed within their new communities, and support from counseling or peer networks to maintain emotional balance and a sense of belonging. For others, coping was a more solitary process. These varied approaches underscore the importance of accessible, culturally responsive support systems that recognize the value of both interpersonal connection and individual coping strategies in promoting student well-being.

Ego-Resiliency through Social Adaptability

Participants described specific strategies for navigating academic and cultural challenges. One adjusted to a new education system by learning tools like Canvas and understanding classroom expectations. Others spoke about overworking to meet academic goals, which led to frustration and self-doubt. To cope, some accessed university counseling services and joined professional associations and mentoring programs to build support and guidance networks. Resilience was also described as a mindset, choosing not to give up despite stress and setbacks and instead trying new approaches to succeed. Participant 1 shared an important insight on institutional and faculty support, both for emotional and academic reasons and how it can play a crucial role in helping graduate students recover and stay on track during unexpected health crises:

The most challenging thing I faced after coming here was probably last fall. I had a serious accident at the very beginning of the semester and had to undergo surgery. I was on complete bed rest for about three months. Obviously, I couldn't attend classes or participate in anything during that time. But from the moment the accident happened, I texted my professor and let them know I needed to go to the medical center. Everyone was incredibly supportive. They understood I wouldn't be able to meet the usual expectations and provided the support I needed—not just physically, but emotionally and academically as well. It wasn't just about recovering from the surgery—it was also about coping with the stress of falling behind. As a grad student, when you miss even a week, catching up can be overwhelming. There are TA responsibilities, coursework, research, everything piles up quickly. Learning new tools for data analytics in a short time was difficult, but I pushed through. But it went through somehow, I guess. All ended well, but I think this I am pretty greedy. I would say so because once I think that I need this, or I

will overcome this. Anyhow, I'll do it, so that gets me going. You have to keep going and need to be motivated. And that's what every grad student, I guess, have to hear once they leave their own space and like come to a new country. I believe that rewarding yourself in grad school is crucial because external validation can take a long time.

When asked to share about their experiences of successfully navigating a challenging situation, Participant 2 shared:

The whole graduate experience is not an easy one, especially in my case - like every small success I get whether it's coursework teaching assistantship (TA), or even research. I kind of feel proud of myself that despite the difficulties I'm trying as much as possible to make the most out of the opportunity I was given, and it also makes you feel grateful sometimes and thankful because you can always sit yourself. It can be worse. But for now, I always try to give my best and also even if it's in a small part, reward myself either by enjoying sometime, like alone, or like taking a walk in the park, or even participating in some of the club activities in Auburn.

Participant 3 reflected on overcoming struggles:

I put a lot of work into like getting things done, and faster, and I will like overwork myself. Just to achieve that one objective. And then, when I couldn't achieve that, I think it was very like frustrating, because I have a lot of self-doubt. I've gone to like counseling service through the university. And then also like maybe to create those like networking opportunities. For myself, I've looked for professional associations where I've been like, enrolled in like mentoring programs and things like that, where I found, like people from the industry that have more experience and that are willing to share those like experiences with me.

Similarly, Participant 5 described resilience as a mindset:

Not giving up or finding a way. I mean, I think I did want to give up. But instead of that, I was like all right I'm going to try one more way and then I'm going to give up. And so, I guess my tenacity and my I guess openness. I really try to make friends. I tried different, you know, like hanging out with different people to try and find folks that I could connect with on different things. I mean, try and find shared interests. Yeah, so just really pushing into my interpersonal skills, I think was the biggest thing. And yeah, leaning into my interpersonal skills and thinking about my different interests, and one of them was like language and culture, and those two things together, I think. But it was really survival. I'm would not say I ever thrived. I don't even think I would say I was okay, but I was just getting through.

Participant 7 emphasized that their sense of connection stemmed more from their own openness and adaptability than from the environment itself.

I feel that I am open to so many things. So, this is what helps me to kind of attach with so many persons. Regardless of their nationality, relation, race, or anything, or age even. So, yes, there is a certain level of connectivity here. I will give some credit to myself as well rather than the place, because I am open to so many things. Auburn is good. It is a college town, it has this community vibe. People are nice here. There is so many social aspects here, which is very nice. But being the authentic self that you talked about it's a bit tricky. I think it depends on the whom I am interacting with, because I am not the same person if I'm talking to my parents or my friends or my advisor. So, when I'm being with my people of my country, I'm being oneself. And when I'm interacting with someone from here, U.S.A. or any other country, I'm being a different person. So, it's also a kind of

relative experience being the authentic self. But I have my own time, and I have my friends whom I can share about my feelings and also, I am hanging around with friends outside the academic arena. So yes, it is working okay for me. I don't feel bad at all. It's kind of good I feel connected.

These accounts illustrate how students of color developed resilience by adapting to academic and cultural challenges. Some learned a new learning management system such as Canvas, while others coped with stress through counseling, mentoring, or peer support. Resilience often emerged as a mindset, persisting despite setbacks, highlighting the need for institutions to foster both internal and external supports for student success.

Implicit Biases as A Barrier to Inclusion

Several participants reflected on their roles as teaching assistants, revealing the complexities of navigating classroom dynamics in a predominantly white academic setting. Their narratives shed light on both the personal and professional challenges they faced, including feelings of exclusion, self-doubt, and the evolving sense of confidence that developed over time. These reflections illustrate how teaching experiences are deeply intertwined with issues of identity, inclusion, and belonging.

Participant 4 reflected on the contrasting experiences of navigating peer interactions at the graduate level and engaging with undergraduate students as a teaching assistant. While graduate peers tended to remain distant and reserved, teaching brought its own set of challenges, including encountering overt antagonism from some undergraduate students:

When I got here it was almost all white students or international students. The one thing that is still a bit lacking is again, almost everyone in the department is straight and cisgendered. So even though things are starting to improve as a student of color as a

queer student. I do still feel pretty alone. Continued, the only other issues, I would say, are, there are some students, both graduate students and undergraduate students who have been a bit I guess, rude or bigoted. At the graduate student level most of the other graduate students keep that sort of thing to themselves, and we just don't talk to each other. But sometimes when I'm teaching classes, I'm teaching undergrads I have had a couple of issues with students being hateful towards me. On the plus side. They usually don't make any bad comments until near the end of the semester, because they know that, you know I could give them a bad grade, but it has left a bad taste in my mouth.

Participant 6 reflected on the emotional impact of navigating predominantly white classroom spaces as a teaching assistant. They described feeling excluded by students who tended to gravitate toward peers of similar racial backgrounds, which led to moments of self-doubt and questioning their own competence:

Yeah, I guess that was one that I have briefly explained that in my teaching experience I sometimes feel like students in my department. I mean to whom I teach. They are mostly white, and they try to get along with someone who is from the similar race and that sometimes caused a mental trouble for me like, am I not good enough? Or sometimes even I am teaching the right way, and my other Teaching Assistant, that the person is also an undergrad student. I cannot blame her, but students prefer to go to her and talk to her and get the instruction. And then at the end, when I'm telling them the way you have done was wrong. They vent out the frustration on me. That was something I really struggled. I would say that was the most struggling thing I ever experienced in Auburn. And the other thing I would say, in one class, where there were no people who were out from the except me, who were out from the Us. When they used to talk about different context of

education. I couldn't really relate to them. It's because they always used to talk about their experiences and the Instructor (for the course) were aware of their experiences, and they used to elaborate on that issue more. But in that class, I really had to struggle a lot because that class used to talk about education system in school, in college in here, and also about the political situation. So, in that class I really struggled to connect, because I barely had any idea about the education system here, or how they kind of arrange an event, or how the political changes influence the background of the higher education or primary education. So that is something I struggled, I would say.

Participant 8 shared similar experiences while teaching undergraduate classes as a teaching assistant, while they also emphasized how their confidence and comfort level evolved over time, contrasting their initial experiences in their first year with the growth they experienced by their fourth or fifth year in the Ph.D. program:

So, 80% I would say positive. And 20% I can say negative. So apart from a very few cases, but in grad level. When you are going to a class of undergrad in your 1st year, as against when you are in your PhD. 4th year, 5th year. There's a huge contrast. You expect something, and that's not happening. I mean, not just with undergraduates. I forgot to mention with faculty even. I felt like I am not accepted, I felt demotivated. I felt bad.

These accounts illustrate how teaching assistant roles exposed students of color to complex dynamics around identity, inclusion, and belonging. Participants described challenges such as exclusion and self-doubt, but also noted growing confidence over time. Their experiences highlight how teaching in predominantly white settings can shape both personal and professional development.

Summary

Through these thematic analyses, the study underscores the multifaceted nature of belonging, acculturative stress, social buffering, and ego-resiliency within academic spaces. The experiences shared by participants provide a deeper understanding of how institutional representation, cultural adaptation, and social support influence their academic and personal journeys. Addressing these challenges through inclusive policies and support systems can contribute to more equitable and supportive educational environments for all students.

Chapter IV: Discussion

This research sheds light on the nuanced experiences of students of color in predominantly white institutions, as it relates to their sense of belonging and resilience. While existing research highlights common challenges such as discrimination and a lack of attachment (O'Donnell, 2014), it remains clear that more effort is needed to foster inclusivity both on and off campuses. Students of color often navigate the intersectionality of their ethnic identities with other social constructs like gender and class, which can exacerbate mental health issues such as stress and physical discomfort (Constantine et al., 2005). These intersecting identities and experiences shape their academic and personal lives, pointing to the need for a holistic, culturally responsive approach to mental health and support services.

Discussion of Findings

The themes identified in this study were (a) Fostering Belongingness- Representation in Academic Spaces, (b) Navigating Acculturative Stress, (c) Social Buffering as a Mechanism for Coping, (d) Ego-Resiliency through Social Adaptability, and (e) Implicit Biases as A Barrier to Inclusion - align with and expand upon existing literature. These themes emphasize the significant role of social support, identity negotiation, and institutional integration in fostering resilience among students of color.

Fostering Belongingness- Representation in Academic Spaces

Research highlights the critical role of faculty diversity in fostering student engagement and retention. Studies suggest that when students from underrepresented backgrounds see faculty members who reflect their identities, they experience a greater sense of belonging and academic motivation (Umbach, 2006). Institutions that actively recruit and retain diverse faculty contribute to an overall inclusive learning environment, ultimately supporting student success (Smith, W.

A., 2014). Social Science Research on Race examines trends in racial representation within higher education and their broader implications. These findings indicate that disparities in faculty and student representation impact institutional climate and access to resources. Addressing these disparities through policy changes and support programs can lead to more equitable educational opportunities and improved outcomes for historically marginalized groups (Garcia et al., 2018).

During the semi-structured interview, Participant 7 shared their evolving journey toward finding a sense of belonging within their academic environment. Initially, they felt a deep cultural disconnect, especially during social events where peers from their cultural background were absent. Reflecting on their experience, the participant shared that attending local parties for the first time felt vastly different from social gatherings in their home country, especially when there were no familiar faces from their region. They expressed feeling disconnected, stating they had little to contribute in those settings. The participant expressed how the individualistic culture in the U.S. starkly contrasted with the collectivist values they were raised with—values rooted in community, mutual support, and shared experiences. They further shared that over time, they adapted by making intentional efforts to connect with their peers. They noted that these efforts helped them feel more comfortable in social settings, illustrating how a sense of belonging can be built through persistence and cultural adjustment. This aligns with the findings of Glass and Westmont (2014), who emphasized that students of color often build a sense of belonging through ongoing exposure to intercultural interactions and adaptive strategies.

In contrast, other participants conveyed persistent struggles in achieving a sense of connection within their academic programs. Participant 2 expressed that although their department is generally welcoming, they have not experienced a strong sense of belonging and often struggle to relate to others within the academic environment. Despite being in an

environment that was outwardly inclusive, the participant's internal experience revealed a dissonance between surface-level acceptance and deeper interpersonal connections. This disconnect points to what Kimball et al. (2016) describe as the difference between structural inclusion and psychological belonging, where individuals may be physically present and acknowledged but still feel unseen or misunderstood within academic cultures. Similarly, Participant 5 conveyed a persistent emotional disconnection from the university environment, acknowledging that they never truly felt a sense of belonging and remained uncertain about whether that feeling had ever changed over time. Her reflection speaks to a long-standing sense of isolation, suggesting that belonging is not a fixed milestone but a dynamic experience that can fluctuate—or, in some cases, remain unfulfilled. This narrative resonates with Strayhorn's (2018) assertion that belonging is a basic human need in educational settings and when unmet, it can hinder academic engagement and personal well-being. Together, these participants' experiences illuminate the complex, layered nature of belonging in higher education. While some were able to forge pathways to connection over time, others remained on the margins despite being situated within seemingly inclusive spaces.

Navigating Acculturative Stress

The process of adapting to a new cultural environment often comes with significant stressors. Choy et al. (2020) examined different acculturation strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—and found that marginalization was linked to the most severe depressive symptoms, whereas integration correlated with the fewest. Key contributors to acculturative stress included language barriers, financial hardships, and unfamiliar social norms. These findings emphasize the need for targeted support systems to assist students in adapting to new cultural settings. Participants' experiences reinforced these findings,

illustrating the complex and personal challenges they faced in navigating acculturative stress. Participant 1 described the adaptive challenge as a pragmatic approach to adjusting to a new cultural environment, acknowledging that while it was necessary to adapt to local customs, it was also emotionally taxing. These themes were echoed in the present study, where participants vividly described their struggles with cultural dissonance and the psychological toll of adapting without sufficient institutional support. They also reflected on how even basic academic systems presented challenges, noting that the education system was quite different from what they were accustomed to, with even simple tasks like using Canvas proving to be unfamiliar. This speaks to the disorientation students may feel when navigating new academic technologies and learning environments without adequate orientation or guidance. According to Misirlis et al. (2020), unfamiliar digital platforms and academic expectations in host countries can exacerbate academic stress among students, particularly when compounded by limited social support networks.

For others, cultural adaptation went beyond academics and extended into self-presentation and identity management. Participant 4 discussed how they had to significantly alter their behavior and appearance since arriving, noting that their friends from undergrad or high school would likely be surprised by how they present themselves now. They shared that they struggled with being misgendered and having the wrong pronouns used, realizing that adjusting their dress was the only way to address the issue. This experience highlights the emotional effort required to modify one's gender expression in order to receive social recognition and minimize microaggressions in academic settings. Such findings align with Nadal et al. (2016), who emphasized that students with marginalized gender identities often experience chronic stress from navigating environments where their identities are misrecognized or invalidated. The

pressure to conform, particularly in predominantly cisnormative and heteronormative institutions, can result in identity suppression and emotional fatigue (Woodford et al., 2018). Participant 6 reflected on their ethnic identity within the teaching environment, mentioning that their students, who are mostly white, often seem to connect more easily with others who share their ethnic background. This underscores the challenges of navigating ethnic dynamics in academic settings. This narrative reflects feelings of social exclusion rooted in racial homogeneity and implicit biases, often experienced by faculty and graduate students of color in predominantly white institutions (Hussain & Jones, 2021). The participant's account underscores the importance of not only acknowledging diversity in educational settings but also fostering meaningful inclusion that challenges racial segregation in classroom dynamics. Taken together, these narratives emphasize that acculturative stress is not simply about adapting to a new culture—it is about negotiating one's identity, sense of safety, and belonging within systems that may unintentionally perpetuate exclusion. Institutional strategies aimed at improving support systems must consider the intersectional realities students face, from academic navigation and digital literacy to gender identity, racial representation, and social acceptance.

Social Buffering as a Mechanism for Coping

One of the most prominent findings in this study was the role of social buffering as a vital mechanism for coping with stressors among graduate students navigating unfamiliar academic and sociocultural landscapes. Hennessy et al. (2014) defined social buffering as the protective impact of supportive relationships in the face of stressors, particularly in unfamiliar or challenging environments.

This daily connection illustrates how even small, consistent interactions can serve as emotional anchors. Participant 1 expressed that their family and friends constitute their strongest

support system, emphasizing that they make it a point to speak with their mother every day, regardless of how busy they are. The ability to lean on trusted relationships has been shown to foster a sense of safety and belonging (Yeh & Inose, 2003), which is particularly crucial for international and marginalized students who may feel isolated in predominantly white institutions. Participant 3 expanded on this by actively seeking multiple layers of support, including university counseling services, departmental coordinators, and professional associations. This exemplifies intentional and adaptive effort to expand one's network of support beyond immediate personal circles, a strategy that research has consistently associated with enhanced emotional resilience, improved psychological health, and higher academic achievement (Misra & Castillo, 2004). By actively seeking guidance from counseling services, leaning on departmental mentorship, and participating in professional organizations, the participant reveals a nuanced understanding of how to navigate systemic structures to meet personal needs. This intentional blending of self-directed agency with available institutional resources illustrates a multifaceted approach to coping—one that not only fosters a sense of belonging but also builds long-term endurance in challenging academic and sociocultural environments. Such engagement demonstrates how students can construct a scaffolding of support that draws from both internal strengths and external infrastructures, thereby promoting sustainable well-being and adaptability.

In contrast, Participant 4 described a more self-reliant coping strategy, acknowledging that they may not have as many support systems as they would like, but over time, they have built a network of friends to rely on. This narrative aligns with Wang & Eccles (2012) who found that while some students navigate stress independently at first, gradual integration into social circles plays a critical role in reducing feelings of alienation. Though initially self-reliant, the

participant's ability to build meaningful social connections over time demonstrates the dynamic role of social support in coping with challenges. Research indicates that social connections serve as a critical buffering mechanism against stress, particularly in academic settings, by providing emotional and practical support (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Even when support systems are initially limited or slow to form, the process of gradually developing these connections helps alleviate stress and provides individuals with the resources needed to navigate difficult situations. This participant's experience reflects how engaging with others, whether through formal or informal networks, can significantly mitigate the impact of stress and improve one's ability to manage the pressures of academic and social adjustment. Collectively, these findings illustrate that social buffering is not a static construct but a fluid and evolving process. Whether through familial ties, institutional resources, or slowly cultivated friendships, participants revealed that social connections—regardless of form—act as a vital lifeline in the navigation of academic, emotional, and cultural transitions.

Ego-Resiliency through Social Adaptability

Zhang et al. (2022) explored the function of ego-resiliency in enabling individuals to cope effectively with stress while maintaining motivation and performance in challenging environments. Their findings underscore the capacity of ego-resilient individuals to adapt flexibly, persist through difficulties, and draw on both internal strengths and external strategies to stay engaged. Echoing these insights, participants in the present study shared experiences that highlighted similar adaptive coping mechanisms within the rigorous context of graduate education.

Participant 1 described the steep learning curve of mastering new data analytics skills under tight deadlines and stressed the importance of setting up personal reward systems. They

noted that graduate school can span 3 to 6 years before external validation arrives, so celebrating small wins along the way helps sustain motivation and momentum. This underscores the power of self-recognition and intentional self-reward, practices known to boost positive emotions and build resilience through what's called the "broaden-and-build" effect (Fredrickson, 2001). The participant's leisure routines—like going for walks or joining social clubs—also reflect research showing that short, restorative activities help buffer academic stress and support emotional well-being (Zhang & Zheng, 2017).

Participant 3 described a pattern of intense self-expectation followed by frustration when goals were unmet, eventually turning to university counseling services and networking opportunities for support. This reflects the dynamic process of seeking adaptive coping resources, consistent with literature emphasizing the importance of both intrapersonal effort and institutional support in managing academic-related stress (Lee et al., 2021). Similarly, Participant 5's comments revealed a persistent mindset shaped by openness and a willingness to try new avenues, whether through making friends or engaging in new social settings. They actively sought out different people to connect with, reflecting a deliberate effort to build meaningful social connections. Research has shown that such proactive strategies are effective in reducing psychological distress and enhancing engagement (Misra et al., 2004). Collectively, these narratives demonstrate how graduate students actively develop a repertoire of coping behaviors—from self-reward and mindset shifts to social outreach—to manage the emotional labor of academic persistence.

Implicit Biases as A Barrier to Inclusion

Graduate students in the role of teaching assistants (GTAs) who identify as students of color, racialized, or queer often face unique challenges that intersect across identity, authority,

and institutional expectations. Existing literature emphasizes how GTAs are frequently positioned in ambiguous roles that lack clear support and guidance, placing them in a state of liminality where they are expected to perform as both learners and teachers without full legitimacy in either role and this precarious position is particularly evident for international GTAs, who report feeling disoriented by unfamiliar academic expectations and institutional norms in host countries (Zhou & Zhang, 2023). One participant shared how students would often question their competence based solely on their accent or perceived foreignness, reinforcing how linguistic and cultural difference is frequently interpreted as pedagogical inadequacy. The pressure to “prove oneself” as a legitimate educator is further amplified for GTAs with minoritized sexual or racial identities. As Keldsen, M. (2023) outlines, racialized GTAs often experience isolation in classroom environments where dominant cultural norms, particularly whiteness and cisheteronormativity, are unspoken benchmarks for legitimacy and authority. Participants in their study described efforts to establish credibility while also shielding aspects of their identity to avoid bias or dismissal. One GTA noted that students were more receptive to peers who mirrored dominant identities, leaving them to constantly navigate feelings of invisibility and marginalization. Despite these experiences, many GTAs expressed a strong commitment to teaching and mentoring, even when institutional structures failed to support them. Several GTAs in Zhou and Zhang’s (2023) study shared how they adopted individualized strategies—such as over-preparing lesson plans or modifying their teaching styles to manage perceived deficits and establish classroom authority. However, these coping strategies often came at the cost of emotional and mental labor that remained unrecognized by institutions. These narratives reinforce what the research consistently shows: that GTAs at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities require intentional, identity-affirming support (Zhou & Zhang,

2023). Beyond generalized professional development, what is needed are mentorship structures, pedagogical training, and institutional practices that affirm their cultural, racial, linguistic, and gender identities—rather than forcing them to assimilate into pre-existing, dominant norms of academic legitimacy.

Limitations of the Study

Understanding the lived experiences of students of color in predominantly white educational institutions is critical for recognizing the complexities of their challenges and the factors influencing their wellbeing. By exploring these perspectives, researchers can identify key dynamics that affect their academic and personal growth. While the findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of students of color in predominantly white institutions (PWIs), several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and drawn from a few institutions. This limited geographic and institutional scope reduces the generalizability of the findings (Creswell et al., 2016). Although the richness of qualitative narratives allows for in-depth exploration, the singular context may not reflect broader patterns in other educational settings, particularly those with differing levels of diversity and inclusion infrastructures. Second, the gender distribution among participants leaned more heavily toward female-identifying students, potentially shaping the thematic outcomes. As research indicates, gender can intersect with racial identity in unique ways, influencing one's perception of belonging and access to support networks (Patton et al., 2017). The absence of a balanced representation across the gender spectrum may have inadvertently limited the range of perspectives. Lastly, the age range of participants skewed toward traditional college-age students, limiting the insights from non-traditional, older, or returning as well as graduate students whose experiences of belongingness and resilience may be mediated by additional life

and career contexts. Literature suggests that non-traditional students may face compounded challenges related to balancing responsibilities and integrating into campus culture (Giancola et al., 2009), which was not fully explored in this study due to the sample's demographic composition.

Recommendations for Further Research

Building on the findings and limitations of the current study, several recommendations are proposed to guide future research and institutional practices aimed at better understanding and supporting the experiences of students of color in higher education. First, future research should broaden participant samples to include multiple institutions, such as public and private universities, a wider range of PWIs, and colleges across diverse geographic regions. Expanding the sampling frame in this way would provide a more nuanced understanding of how different institutional contexts shape students' sense of belonging and ego-resiliency. Additionally, distinguishing between undergraduate and graduate student experiences is essential, as these groups often encounter distinct academic, social, and institutional challenges that uniquely affect their sense of belonging and resilience.

Second, incorporating an intersectional framework within the demographic questionnaire can provide valuable insights into the complex and overlapping experiences of marginalization that students face. By examining the interplay of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, immigration background, and disability, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex identities and experiences that influence students' engagement and well-being in higher education.

Finally, conducting quantitative and mixed-methods studies that build on the qualitative findings of this research can yield comprehensive insights. Quantitative approaches could

systematically examine relationships among key variables such as campus climate, faculty and peer support, identity affirmation, and experiences of marginalization, and their impact on outcomes, including sense of belonging, ego-resiliency, and psychological well-being. Such empirical data would enhance the evidence base, enabling institutions to develop and evaluate targeted interventions that foster inclusive and supportive environments for students of color. Future studies could also explore how the integration of culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks within counselor education programs impacts the development of graduate students' multicultural competence and ethical awareness, especially in clinical mental health settings.

Implications for Education and Practice

Implications for Higher Education Institutions

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for higher education institutions, especially PWIs, aiming to create inclusive and supportive academic spaces for students of color. Participants' narratives validate existing research on equity and deepen discussions on representation, cultural connection, and institutional responsibility. As Markey et al. (2023) note, diverse learning environments enhance students' connection and engagement, reflected in participants' feelings of affirmation when their cultures are visible in academic settings.

Institutions must move beyond surface-level inclusion by increasing faculty diversity, offering culturally responsive mentorship programs, and providing training in cultural humility and trauma-informed care. Establishing peer-led, identity-affirming spaces also promotes emotional well-being and academic persistence. Central to these efforts is involving students of color in designing campus programs and policies, ensuring relevance and fostering ownership. Faculty and staff should engage in professional development focused on inclusive pedagogy and cultural humility to create affirming environments. Institutional accountability also requires

structural changes such as diversifying leadership, expanding culturally informed mental health services, and conducting equity audits. Supporting and sustaining cultural centers, affinity groups, and identity-based mentorship is crucial for student validation and resilience. Future research should include demographic measures reflecting intersecting identities (gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, immigration, disability) to better capture the layered experiences affecting ego-resiliency and belonging.

Implications for Counselor Educators

This study's findings also have significant implications for counselor education programs preparing future counselors to serve diverse students in PWIs. Embracing cultural humility, counselor educators should develop frameworks integrating racial, cultural, and systemic awareness, train future counselors to address diverse needs, and advocate for institutional change. Leppert et al., (2023) emphasize that faculty diversity boosts student identity affirmation and engagement, a sentiment echoed by participants who valued mentors sharing their cultural experiences.

Intersectionality-informed pedagogy and supervision are essential, recognizing that students' experiences of marginalization span multiple identities like race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation. Counselor educators should embed intersectionality into coursework, classroom discussions, and supervision practices to fully support students' identities. Systemic institutional efforts, including culturally responsive orientation programs, accessible services, and community-building must complement faculty efforts to challenge biases and microaggressions. Practicum and internship placements should also provide students with experience serving diverse populations with supervisors trained in reflective, intersectionality-based supervision models. Encouraging counselor trainees to develop identity-affirming groups

and interventions bridges theory and practice, further promoting student belonging and resilience.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of students of color as they navigated their sense of belonging and ego-resiliency within a predominantly white institution. Participants shared powerful narratives that illuminated the intricate balance between internal strengths, such as perseverance, self-advocacy, and identity affirmation and external challenges, including racial isolation, systemic inequities, and limited faculty representation. Despite these barriers, their ability to adapt and persist highlights ego-resiliency as a critical protective factor in high-stress academic environments (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Zhang et al., 2022). By situating these findings within the broader discourse on equity and student development in higher education, the study underscores the need for structural reforms that move beyond symbolic inclusion. Creating environments where students of color can truly thrive requires intentional support systems, a diverse and representative faculty, and institutional commitment to cultural humility.

Ultimately, fostering inclusive educational environments is not only a matter of equity but a necessary step toward improving academic outcomes and well-being for all students. By integrating inclusive practices into the fabric of higher education, institutions can contribute meaningfully to the personal and professional growth of students of color, ensuring that spaces of belonging are not only created but sustained.

Chapter 5: Manuscript

Introduction

“Treating different things the same can generate as much inequality as treating the same things differently.” –Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991).

The landscape of higher education has witnessed a notable surge in the enrollment of racially underrepresented students, particularly individuals representing various nonwhite racial or ethnic identities. While universities acknowledge the importance of contextual diversity in their mission statements, given the evolving diversity of the student body, the real-life experiences of these students remain complex. There has been a significant increase in the enrollment of racially underrepresented students in higher education institutions, at historically high rates (Ponjuan & Hernández, 2021). Research indicates that of the 15.9 million graduate students enrolled in fall 2020, some 8.1 million were White, 3.3 million were Hispanic, 2.0 million were Black and 1.1 million were Asian (Irwin et al., 2022). These enrollment figures underscore the significance of acknowledging and addressing the educational experiences of students of color and minority groups in colleges and universities. College students who belong to nonwhite racial or ethnic groups in the United States, and who represent a broader nonwhite political identity on campus often face subordination (Harper, 2010).

"Students of color" is another term commonly used in academic literature to refer to individuals who belong to similar nonwhite racial or ethnic groups. While there is no single, universally accepted definition, it generally encompasses students who are not of Caucasian or white European descent. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes the need for educational practices responsive to the cultural diversity of students, particularly those from similar underrepresented and marginalized communities. Even though contextual diversity is often acknowledged in

mission statements across universities, it does not necessarily decode real life experiences of the community especially with the constantly evolving diversification of student body (Stephen Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022). Like for example, studies suggest that despite a significant presence of Black students in predominantly White higher education institutions, there remains a limited and imprecise understanding of the factors influencing fluctuations in minority student enrollment (Allen et al., 1992). A lot of research in the past have demonstrated a link between educators upholding cultural competence and its correlation to favorable outcomes for students with the goal of promoting fair opportunities and amplifying the voices of those often overlooked (Samuels, A.J., 2018). This study aims to voice the perceptions of sense of belonging and ego resiliency among graduate students of color in PWIs. This study used a phenomenological approach, drawing on in-depth interviews with eight graduate students of color to explore how they perceive ego-resiliency and a sense of belonging within the context of academic life at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

Literature Review

Students of color

Students of color represent unique cultural and ethnic orientations which are specific to their identity. During a graduate student's life, both on and off campus, students go through a transition process which involves leaving home, making new associations, and facing diverse stressors such as loneliness, anxiety related symptoms, financial insecurity, and inability to adapt to changing circumstances, among many others (Misra et al., 2004). As individuals navigate through various life transitions, be it personal or professional, they undergo a spectrum of adjustments that can significantly impact their emotional equilibrium (Fischer, 2007). However, amidst these shifts, one phase stands out—the transition into college life. Research spanning

several decades has consistently highlighted the pivotal importance of this period in shaping academic destinies (Gall et al., 2000; Hurtado et al., 1997; Padilla et al., 1997; Terenzini et al., 1994; Tinto, 1987).

Factors impacting wellbeing among students of color

Students' academic and social environments are shaped by a range of social, political, and personal factors. Understanding how these elements interact and influence mental well-being offers insight into the spaces, both virtual and physical in which students of color operate (Allen et al., 2021). Two key factors influencing adjustment to new environments are ego-resiliency and belongingness. Ego-resiliency, defined as “resourceful adaptation to changing circumstances” (Block & Block, 2014, p. 48), has been shown to inversely correlate with vulnerability to mental health issues (Friborg et al., 2003). Cummings (2017) further described it as an internal drive that enables individuals to thrive amid adversity and transition. Similarly, the pursuit of belonging is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1957), with high-quality social connections linked to greater contentment, social competence, academic success, and reduced stress (Bagwell et al., 2018). Social attachments foster emotional closeness and support, which in turn enhance mental wellness (Holland et al., 2012). In academic contexts, these factors are critical in shaping students' capacity to adapt, manage challenges, and maintain positive mental health throughout their educational journey.

Belongingness

Belongingness is a fundamental psychological need, referring to the human desire to connect, feel accepted, and be part of a social group (Allen et al., 2021). Rooted in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, belonging is a subjective experience shaped by innate social predispositions. Over the past two decades, it has become central to discussions on college

student retention and persistence (Museus et al., 2018). From a sociological perspective, belongingness is linked to group affiliation and can be observed through behaviors such as participation in social networks (Hagerty et al., 1992). These connections may involve individuals, groups, institutions, environments, or spiritual elements, though perceptions of belonging remain deeply personal (Martin et al., 2017). Allen et al. (2022) noted that these perceptions evolve over time and significantly influence psychological well-being. Despite its benefits, fostering belonging for students of color remains challenging. When academic environments fail to reflect or validate their cultural identities, students of color often experience isolation and disconnection (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Turner & Zepeda, 2021). Creating inclusive spaces requires intentional, sustained efforts to ensure all students feel valued and acknowledged.

Ego-resiliency

"Resilience is not about avoiding life's challenges; it's about confronting them head-on and growing stronger in the process" (Richardson, 2002, p. 308). This concept of resilience, especially ego-resiliency, underscores an individual's capacity to adapt to adversity, maintain psychological well-being, and achieve personal growth despite external pressures.

Ego-resiliency, first conceptualized by Block and Block in the late 1950s and further formalized in 1980, has since been recognized as a key element in stress management and health promotion (Block & Block, 2014; Windle et al., 2011). This dynamic personality trait enables individuals to flexibly adjust their impulse control in response to different social demands (Farkas & Orosz, 2015). According to Block's theory, ego-resiliency refers to the ability to adjust one's level of control temporarily in response to specific situations. This adaptive flexibility allows people with high resiliency to experience positive emotions, possess greater self-assurance, and achieve better psychological well-being than those with lower resiliency levels (Letzring et al., 2005).

The concept of resiliency was first conceptualized in the 1950s and later postulated as a psychological construct by Block (Farkas & Orosz, 2015). Today, resilience is recognized as a stress-protective and health-promoting factor that enhances psychological development, well-being, and a high quality of life (Windle et al., 2011).

Predominantly White Institutions

Predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are defined as colleges or universities where white students make up 50% or more of the enrollment (Lomotey, 2010). These institutions often reflect a historical and ongoing emphasis on whiteness in their policies, practices, and culture (García-Morales, 2021). This demographic and cultural dominance can negatively impact students of color, affecting their sense of belonging, campus integration, and academic success (Strayhorn, 2018). Despite efforts to promote inclusion, PWIs have a longer history of exclusion (McClain & Perry, 2017). Students of color frequently report feelings of isolation due to a lack of culturally relevant support and representation (Hurtado et al., 1997), compounded by systemic biases and microaggressions that harm both academic performance and mental health (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Wellbeing

Well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing life satisfaction, health, and overall quality of life (Diener et al., 2018). It extends beyond the absence of illness to reflect positive physical, mental, and social functioning (World Health Organization [WHO], 1948). Increasingly recognized across disciplines such as psychology, public health, and economics, well-being is essential to understanding and improving quality of life. Diener et al. (2018) expanded traditional views by defining subjective well-being as comprising life satisfaction, positive emotions, and a sense of meaning and purpose. This framework emphasizes that well-

being involves not only feeling good but also living meaningfully. The authors also highlighted the adaptive nature of well-being, noting that individuals tend to return to a stable baseline after life changes—a process linked to ego-resiliency. While persistent negative emotions can impair psychological functioning, positive emotions such as happiness, engagement, and affection enhance it (Huppert, 2009). Diener et al. (2018) also acknowledged cultural variations in how well-being is pursued and experienced, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive approaches—particularly in designing interventions that support the well-being of students of color.

Methodology

This research study employed a phenomenological methodology within a qualitative research framework to explore the lived experiences of students of color in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Rooted in the philosophical tradition of Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, this approach is well-suited for examining how individuals make meaning of their experiences within a specific context (Dowling, 2007; Husserl & Moran, 2012).

Phenomenology acknowledges the existence of multiple truths and emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through individuals' unique lived experiences. Guided by this perspective, the study conducted a systematic investigation of social phenomena in a natural setting, grounded in established philosophical and theoretical frameworks (Creswell et al., 2016). Phenomenological inquiry focuses on uncovering the inner meaning and structure of participants' experiences (Burns & Peacock, 2019), making it an appropriate method for examining themes of belonging and ego-resiliency among students of color in PWIs. The goal of this approach was to generate thematic insights that deepen understanding of these students' experiences and inform the development of inclusive academic practices that support their success and well-being.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the lived experiences of students of color at PWIs?
 - a) How do students of color perceive sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency while attending PWIs?
 - b) What are some of the resources available for students of color to better support their sense of wellbeing?

Procedure

Participant Sampling and Recruitment Techniques

The study utilized purposeful sampling to identify participants who self-identified as students of color currently enrolled in graduate programs at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Following Creswell (2012), who emphasizes sample sizes of 2 to 25 for phenomenological research, and Korstjens & Moser (2017), who suggest fewer than ten interviews for saturation, the goal was to recruit 5–10 participants to achieve thematic saturation. In alignment with Creswell et al. (2016) guidance, the final sample included eight participants, sufficient to explore the phenomenon in-depth. Eligibility criteria included individuals who: (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) self-identified as students of color, (c) were currently enrolled in a program of study at a PWI, and (d) consented to participate in a single, audio-recorded Zoom interview. Participants who were minors, did not self-identify as students of color, or declined audio recording were excluded from the study.

All procedures involving human subjects were reviewed and approved by Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approved protocol included the research design, recruitment strategies, informed consent process, interview questions, and data security measures. Recruitment was multi-faceted and inclusive: email invitations were sent to faculty

and department contacts at Auburn and other institutions, while flyers with QR codes linking to a Qualtrics screening survey were posted in high-traffic campus areas. The study was also promoted on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to reach a broader audience. Interested participants contacted the principal investigator (PI) via Auburn email and received an information letter, demographic questionnaire, and contact details. Once eligibility was confirmed through the questionnaire, interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview protocol, developed by the researcher and grounded in existing literature, served as the primary instrument for exploring students of color's experiences with belongingness and ego-resiliency at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). This format ensured consistency while allowing flexibility to probe individual narratives. Interviews were conducted via Auburn Zoom, lasted 20–45 minutes, and focused on personal experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Zoom's automated tool, followed by manual review. Participants received an information letter outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality, and their rights, including the option to withdraw. Implied consent was given by proceeding with the interview. A brief demographic questionnaire provided contextual background. Identifying information was stored separately, and all data were secured on a password-protected device. Unique codes were assigned to maintain anonymity, and all identifying details were removed during transcription and analysis.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Following IRB approval, participant recruitment was conducted using email distribution, campus flyers, social media outreach, and direct contact with departments and faculty. Once

participants were identified and eligibility confirmed, they were provided with an information letter and scheduled for interviews. Interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom in a secure environment, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. This occurred after eight interviews, at which point no new themes or codes emerged. Interviews highlighted consistent patterns related to marginalization, ego-resiliency, and belongingness, supporting the decision to conclude data collection.

Reflexivity and Member Checking

As a student of color, the researcher's positionality was shaped by personal and professional experiences, particularly navigating the intersection of Asian cultural heritage and Western academic norms. While these experiences enriched the research perspective, they also introduced potential subjectivity. To address this, the researcher employed strategies such as bracketing, peer debriefing, member checking, and ongoing reflexivity to ethically manage biases and assumptions. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document thoughts, reactions, and potential biases, ensuring transparency and grounding the analysis in participants' perspectives. Member checking was conducted post-analysis by sharing selected transcript excerpts and preliminary interpretations with all eight participants. Five responded, with one offering clarifications that were incorporated into the final analysis. Additionally, a peer review by an experienced qualitative researcher helped reduce bias and enhance the study's credibility and trustworthiness.

Findings

In conducting the thematic analysis for this study, I aimed to comprehensively explore sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency among students of color at predominantly white

institutions (PWIs). The choice of thematic analysis was applied as it allowed me to identify recurring patterns and codes in the narratives collected from semi-structured interviews. Through this approach, I sought flexibility to capture the nuances of participants' experiences and gain a deeper understanding of how they navigate belongingness and resilience in these academic environments.

In the present research study, there were a total of eight participants, all of whom identified as students of color currently enrolled in graduate programs at a predominantly white institution. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured Zoom interview to share their lived experiences navigating sense of belonging and ego-resiliency. The participants included four females and four males, all within the 25–35 age range. Seven participants were pursuing doctoral degrees, while one was enrolled in a master's program. Table 1 (Demographic Details of Participants) provides an overview of the participants' age group, gender, and degree enrollment.

Table 1

Demographic Details of Participants

Participants	Age Group	Gender	Year Of Study	Ethnicity
Participant 1	25-35	Male	PhD	Asian
Participant 2	25-35	Male	PhD	Middle Eastern
Participant 3	25-35	Female	PhD	Latina
Participant 4	25-35	Female	PhD	Hispanic

Participant 5	25-35	Female	PhD	African American
Participant 6	25-35	Female	PhD	Asian
Participant 7	25-35	Male	Masters	Asian
Participant 8	25-35	Male	PhD	Asian

Through a phenomenological approach, five central themes emerged from the analysis, each reflecting the lived experiences of students of color within predominantly white institutions (PWIs). These themes include fostering belongingness through representation in academic spaces, navigating acculturative stress, utilizing social buffering as a coping mechanism, demonstrating ego-resiliency through social adaptability, and confronting implicit biases as barriers to inclusion. These themes were identified through a careful, iterative process that prioritized the voices and narratives of participants. Recurring patterns and emotionally resonant accounts guided the thematic development, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' meaning making rather than externally imposed categories.

The theme of belongingness emphasized the importance of representation and visibility in academic environments, where students of color often seek affirmation through faculty and peer diversity. Acculturative stress emerged as a significant challenge, particularly for international students, who described the emotional toll of adapting to unfamiliar cultural norms, language barriers, and social expectations. Social buffering, including support from family, peers, and institutional resources, was consistently cited as a vital mechanism for managing stress and fostering resilience. Participants also demonstrated ego-resiliency by adapting socially and emotionally to their environments, often through proactive engagement and self-care

strategies. Finally, the presence of implicit biases—particularly those related to race, gender identity, and cultural background—was identified as a persistent barrier to full inclusion, contributing to feelings of marginalization and emotional fatigue.

These themes collectively illustrate the complex and dynamic processes through which students of color navigate identity, belonging, and well-being in higher education. By centering participants' lived realities, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the personal and systemic factors that shape their academic journeys and underscores the need for more inclusive and supportive institutional practices.

Discussion Of the Themes

Fostering Belongingness- Representation in Academic Spaces

The findings from the semi-structured interviews suggests that students of color often felt a strong sense of belonging when surrounded by peers or mentors from similar cultural or ethnic backgrounds, making collaboration and communication more natural. Shared identity, particularly with advisors, helped ease their academic journey. However, limited representation in administrative roles was seen as a barrier to feeling fully included. Conversely, some students experienced isolation due to cultural or identity differences, and subtle exclusion in classroom interactions further impacted their confidence.

Yeah. So, before I came here, I was pretty skeptical about it that how much I would be able to fit in with everything, because, coming to a new country at this age is not easy decision to make. But from the very moment that I came here, everyone around me made it easier for me to adapt, especially faculties in my department. Many of them are of people of color themselves. So, when I came here, I talked to few of them, they made it easier for me from the very beginning. Here in Auburn, specifically, in my department,

there are a lot of people who came from Bangladesh. So, it was easy for me to collaborate with everyone else, but not everyone is from Bangladesh. So, a lot of people are native here, and some of some are from different countries. So, I didn't feel, anyhow, that I am from a different country, and had trouble to communicate with someone.

Participant 4 reflected on the dissonance between surface-level interactions and a deeper absence of connection within their environment which further illustrates how a welcoming environment does not always equate to a genuine sense of belonging:

Yeah, so I have to admit that one of the things that I have not really loved about Auburn is that I haven't really had too much of a sense of belonging. On the one hand, as a graduate student. I mostly just interact with my departments where people are generally pretty cool. Even though I can't relate to a lot of people they're at least welcoming and very nice. But it's weird not being able to relate to anyone when I see them so frequently, and we have so little in common. Part of it is because most of the people in the department are either white domestic students or their international students, who I don't have a lot in common with either. The other part would actually be because I am queer, and basically no one else in the department is. I was like the first trans person they had ever met in their lives. So that also adds this extra layer of like otherness, where I just even though everyone's very friendly and I enjoy them all. It's hard because we don't have a lot in common.”

Participant 7 shared similar experience within their department:

If I talk about my connectivity, being here from foreign country for almost two years so it's a bit difficult to feel the connectivity at the level of my own country. But I have a few privileges, like my advisor is from the same region where I'm from, so we speak the same

language and there are so many other people in my department, and also in my lab who are from the same ethnicity or the same nationality. So yes, I can talk in the same language that I'm where I belong. So, this is kind of gives me the sense of belongingness here that okay, maybe I'm not too far from home. And I think it's also depends on the personal level of homesickness. I'm not such a homesick person. So, it's okay for me. I have my friends. I have my both from my country and my international friends here whom I can actually hang around with, and I have very few obligations or restrictions because of the nationality or the relation. So many other things. People have many restrictions.

These insights underscore the importance of diverse and inclusive representation across all levels of academia to foster true sense of belonging. The in-depth interviews with participants further illustrate these themes, revealing both the benefits of representation and the challenges that arise when it is lacking.

Navigating Acculturative Stress

Students of color highlighted the emotional and practical challenges of adjusting to life in a new academic and cultural environment. Many had to quickly adapt to independent living, unfamiliar customs, and new social norms without prior guidance or support systems. This transition often came with a sense of added pressure, particularly when navigating daily responsibilities alongside academic demands. Financial hardships and cultural gaps further intensified feelings of stress and isolation, making the early months especially overwhelming. These reflections emphasize the need for tailored support to ease acculturative stress and foster resilience among international and marginalized students.

Participants spoke about the challenges of adjusting to a new academic and social environment without prior support. Participant 1 shared:

I would say that the education system in general is quite different than how I'm used to. So, from the very simple things like using canvas. I didn't use canvas before and the assignments and everything that they have on a regular basis. That is quite different from the education system from our country. So, in the first few semesters, I guess in the 1st few months of the 1st semester it took me time to adapt.

Participant 2 when asked to share their experiences of adjusting to a new environment responded saying:

I would say, you know, the 1st few months going from your home country to a new country, especially the US. I had to essentially like learned how to take care of myself more responsibly grocery shopping you know they're taking care of the room or the door I'm living in. The manual stuff that may mainly all students deal with the extra part, maybe was I would call it maybe a sense of extra added pressure.

Participant 4 reflected on the pressure to adapt their behavior and appearance in order to navigate their current environment. They expressed a sense of disconnection from their authentic self, noting that their identity, particularly as a queer and trans individual:

“I would say that I've had to change a lot about how I act and how I dress while I'm here in particular like. I think that if my friends from undergrad or my friends from high school saw me, while, like the way I act when I'm here they would be really surprised, because just the type of person I was before I came here, I feel like doesn't really fit in. And that's mostly again the queer aspect of like being trans being by like participating in that sort of environment. When I came here, I had a lot of issues with people accidentally

misgendering me and calling me the wrong pronouns and things like that, and I realized that the only way that I could fix that was for me to dress a way that was different. Like I had to dress more masculine. I had to act more masculine. I had to sort of put aside that part of me so that it was easier for the people around here to you know, call me by the right pronouns, and to treat me right? So, I do think that that was like a big change is, I've got an entire half of my closet that I can't wear anymore. Because if I do, people are going to assume things about me and treat me differently.”

Participant 7 described multifaceted challenges they faced as an international student, highlighting the cultural, linguistic, and economic adjustments that shaped their early experiences:

Most of my struggles were from migration from my country to here. So, a lot of students might not have the similar kind of challenges like mine. When I came here, I came with limited resources. So, I had to understand everything, the new customs, new values, new society system. This is one kind of challenge in the beginning, and also there are few economic challenges, because I had to manage all of my stuffs here at my home and all the other things.” And continued, sometimes the initial days the main challenges were I couldn't understand what they're talking about, because they would talk really fast. So, first of all, the language barrier, I completely didn't understand what they're talking about. The second thing is that their way of looking at things and mine was a bit different at that time, and I could didn't understand so many little things which maybe they were noticing which sometimes I felt a little bit judged or less confident.

These narratives illustrate how acculturative stress affects students in deeply personal ways and emphasize the importance of institutional support in facilitating smoother transitions. With limited guidance or existing support systems, they were often left to navigate independent living, unfamiliar social expectations, and academic pressures on their own. Financial instability and cultural unfamiliarity heightened their vulnerability, often resulting in intense feelings of stress and isolation. The accounts highlight a pressing need for culturally attuned, proactive support systems to mitigate acculturative stress and promote a sense of belonging and resilience among international and marginalized students.

Social Buffering as a Mechanism for Coping

Students of color often relied on social connections, both from home and within their new environment as a key source of emotional resilience. Regular communication with family, friendships formed locally, and engagement with counseling or peer networks helped ease feelings of isolation and supported a sense of belonging. The responses overall underscore the importance of social buffering in students' academic journeys, highlighting how personal connections serve as an anchor in times of stress.

Participant 1 emphasized the role of family support:

My strongest support system is my family and friends. Every day, I talk to my mother no matter how busy I am. The friends that I have both in Auburn and back at home. So, for me, I need at least one good conversation with a nice group of people every day. And it can be for 5 min. It can be for 5 hours doesn't matter, but it has to be there, and luckily, after coming to Auburn, I have found such wonderful friends who live right around me, and every day they come over to my place, and we hang out. At least sometimes, that actually keeps me going, doesn't necessarily have to be related to my academic things,

because I know they're from different departments, and even if I'm facing some academic challenges, they won't be able to suggest me or anything with that. But I have my advisors for that. But what I need my friend for is like just to vent sometime.

Similarly, Participant 2 shared how staying connected with loved ones lessened the burdens of isolation:

I try as much as possible to check on my friends and family. I'm thankful to have family in the U.S. who frequently call and ask if I need anything. Their support significantly reduces both financial and emotional burdens.

Participant 3 expressed getting support through networking and counseling services, besides social support systems:

I've gone to counseling services through the university. I've talked to the graduate student Coordinator in my department and then also like maybe to create those like networking opportunities. For myself, I've looked for professional associations where I've, enrolled in like mentoring programs and things like that, where I found, people from the industry that have more experience and that are willing to share those like experiences with me. So, I will say it's been a combination of all those things, and maybe like older grad students as well. And then for personal challenges, I will say my family, my boyfriend, and friends in general.

Whereas Participant 4 shared coping with stressors internally with minimal support seeking:

I probably don't have as many support systems as I should have. I do largely like rely on myself but over the years that I've been here I have managed to build up a network of friends. There are some friends here at the University who I can count on even though it's not as big of a group or as close as of a group as I would like to have as I experienced in

my undergrad or in high school. They still do help a lot, even if it's just someone to vent to. You know, complain about my frustrations to, that's still really important to me. The other thing is, I have tried to stay in touch with people who I knew before I came to Auburn, who I have common with, and who just understand me a lot better. And I make sure to stay in touch with those people. One group of friends we actually hang out on a phone call for. And just you know, talk about the things that we can't really share with anyone else, or that no one else really understands. And I think that, like that group of friends has been really important to helping me stay sane while I'm here. Yeah, mostly any difficulty I have, it's going to be either – I just keep it to myself, and I just deal with it. And you know, I have come to peace with it myself, or yeah, I have groups of friends who I, even if they don't necessarily give me direct help, then they can at least listen to my complaints, so that I'll feel better afterwards.

These reflections emphasize how vital social bonds were in helping students of color cope with the challenges of adjustment. Whether through staying in touch with loved ones back home, building friendships in their new surroundings, or accessing peer and counseling support, these connections offered emotional grounding. Such relationships played a protective role, reducing feelings of loneliness and fostering a sense of belonging. The participants' experiences highlight the powerful role of social support as a buffer against stress during their academic transitions.

Ego-Resiliency through Social Adaptability

Participants described specific strategies for navigating academic and cultural challenges. One adjusted to a new education system by learning tools like Canvas and understanding

classroom expectations. Others spoke about overworking to meet academic goals, which led to frustration and self-doubt. To cope, some accessed university counseling services and joined professional associations and mentoring programs to build support and guidance networks. Resilience was also described as a mindset similar to choosing not to give up despite stress and setbacks and instead trying new approaches to succeed which highlight the role of ego-resiliency in students' ability to persist through difficulties.

Participant 1 shared one of their personal challenges:

The most challenging thing I faced after coming here was probably last fall. I had a serious accident at the very beginning of the semester and had to undergo surgery. I was on complete bed rest for about three months. Obviously, I couldn't attend classes or participate in anything during that time. But from the moment the accident happened, I texted my professor and let them know I needed to go to the medical center. Everyone was incredibly supportive. They understood I wouldn't be able to meet the usual expectations and provided the support I needed—not just physically, but emotionally and academically as well. It wasn't just about recovering from the surgery—it was also about coping with the stress of falling behind. As a grad student, when you miss even a week, catching up can be overwhelming. There are TA responsibilities, coursework, research—everything piles up quickly. Learning new tools for data analytics in a short time was difficult, but I pushed through. But it went through somehow, I guess. All ended well, but I think this I am pretty greedy. I would say so because once I think that I need this, or I will overcome this. Anyhow, I'll do it, so that gets me going. You have to keep going and need to be motivated. And that's what every grad student, I guess, have to hear once

they leave their own space and like come to a new country. I believe that rewarding yourself in grad school is crucial because external validation can take a long time.

When asked to share about their experiences of successfully navigating a challenging situation, Participant 2 shared:

The whole graduate experience is not an easy one, especially in my case - like every small success I get whether it's coursework teaching assistantship (TA), or even research. I kind of feel proud of myself that despite the difficulties I'm trying as much as possible to make the most out of the opportunity I was given, and it also makes you feel grateful sometimes and thankful because you can always sit yourself. It can be worse. But for now, I always try to give my best and also even if it's in a small part, reward myself either by enjoying sometime, like alone, or like taking a walk in the park, or even participating in some of the club activities in Auburn.

Participant 3 reflected on overcoming struggles:

I put a lot of work into like getting things done, and faster, and I will like overwork myself. Just to achieve that one objective. And then, when I couldn't achieve that, I think it was very like frustrating, because I have a lot of self-doubt. I've gone to like counseling service through the university. And then also like maybe to create those like networking opportunities. For myself, I've looked for professional associations where I've been like, enrolled in like mentoring programs and things like that, where I found, like people from the industry that have more experience and that are willing to share those like experiences with me.

Similarly, Participant 5 described resilience as a mindset:

Not giving up or finding a way. I mean, I think I did want to give up. But instead of that, I was like all right I'm going to try one more way and then I'm going to give up. And so, I guess my tenacity and my I guess openness. I really try to make friends. I tried different, you know, like hanging out with different people to try and find folks that I could connect with on different things. I mean, try and find shared interests. Yeah, so just really pushing into my interpersonal skills, I think was the biggest thing. And yeah, leaning into my interpersonal skills and thinking about my different interests, and one of them was like language and culture, and those two things together, I think. But it was really survival. I'm would not say I ever thrived. I don't even think I would say I was okay, but I was just getting through.

Participant 7 emphasized that their sense of connection stemmed more from their own openness and adaptability than from the environment itself.

I feel that I am open to so many things. So, this is what helps me to kind of attach with so many persons. Regardless of their nationality, relation, race, or anything, or age even. So, yes, there is a certain level of connectivity here. I will give some credit to myself as well rather than the place, because I am open to so many things. Auburn is good. It is a college town, it has this community vibe. People are nice here. There is so many social aspects here, which is very nice. But being the authentic self that you talked about it's a bit tricky. I think it depends on the whom I am interacting with, because I am not the same person if I'm talking to my parents or my friends or my advisor. So, when I'm being with my people of my country, I'm being oneself. And when I'm interacting with someone from here, U.S.A. or any other country, I'm being a different person. So, it's also a kind of relative experience being the authentic self. But I have my own time, and I have my

friends whom I can share about my feelings and also, I am hanging around with friends outside the academic arena. So yes, it is working okay for me. I don't feel bad at all. It's kind of good I feel connected.

Participants shared a range of adaptive strategies for managing both academic and cultural hurdles, like learning digital platforms like Canvas to adapting to new classroom norms as part of their adjustment. Others pushed themselves to work excessively in pursuit of academic success, which at times led to emotional fatigue and self-doubt. To manage these pressures, several students turned to campus counseling, joined mentoring initiatives, and became involved in professional organizations to create support systems.

Implicit Biases as A Barrier to Inclusion

Several participants reflected on their roles as teaching assistants, revealing the complexities of navigating classroom dynamics in a predominantly white academic setting. Their narratives shed light on both the personal and professional challenges they faced, including feelings of exclusion, self-doubt, and the evolving sense of confidence that developed over time. These reflections illustrate how teaching experiences are deeply intertwined with issues of identity, inclusion, and belonging.

Participant 4 reflected on the contrasting experiences of navigating peer interactions at the graduate level and engaging with undergraduate students as a teaching assistant. While graduate peers tended to remain distant and reserved, teaching brought its own set of challenges, including encountering overt antagonism from some undergraduate students.

When I got here it was almost all white students or international students. The one thing that is still a bit lacking is again, almost everyone in the department is straight and cisgendered. So even though things are starting to improve as a student of color as a

queer student. I do still feel pretty alone. Continued, the only other issues, I would say, are, there are some students, both graduate students and undergraduate students who have been a bit I guess, rude or bigoted. At the graduate student level most of the other graduate students keep that sort of thing to themselves, and we just don't talk to each other. But sometimes when I'm teaching classes, I'm teaching undergrads I have had a couple of issues with students being hateful towards me. On the plus side. They usually don't make any bad comments until near the end of the semester, because they know that, you know I could give them a bad grade, but it has left a bad taste in my mouth.

Participant 6 reflected on the emotional impact of navigating predominantly white classroom spaces as a teaching assistant. They described feeling excluded by students who tended to gravitate toward peers of similar racial backgrounds, which led to moments of self-doubt and questioning their own competence:

Yeah, I guess that was one that I have briefly explained that in my teaching experience I sometimes feel like students in my department. I mean to whom I teach. They are mostly white, and they try to get along with someone who is from the similar race and that sometimes caused a mental trouble for me like, am I not good enough? Or sometimes even I am teaching the right way, and my other Teaching Assistant, that the person is also an undergrad student. I cannot blame her, but students prefer to go to her and talk to her and get the instruction. And then at the end, when I'm telling them the way you have done was wrong. They vent out the frustration on me. That was something I really struggled. I would say that was the most struggling thing I ever experienced in Auburn. And the other thing I would say, in one class, where there were no people who were out from the except me, who were out from the Us. When they used to talk about different context of

education. I couldn't really relate to them. It's because they always used to talk about their experiences and the Instructor (for the course) were aware of their experiences, and they used to elaborate on that issue more. But in that class, I really had to struggle a lot because that class used to talk about education system in school, in college in here, and also about the political situation. So, in that class I really struggled to connect, because I barely had any idea about the education system here, or how they kind of arrange an event, or how the political changes influence the background of the higher education or primary education. So that is something I struggled, I would say.

Participant 8 shared similar experiences while teaching undergraduate classes as a teaching assistant, while they also emphasized how their confidence and comfort level evolved over time, contrasting their initial experiences in their first year:

So, 80% I would say positive. And 20% I can say negative. So apart from a very few cases, but in grad level. When you are going to a class of undergrad in your 1st year, as against when you are in your PhD. 4th year, 5th year. There's a huge contrast. You expect something, and that's not happening. I mean, not just with undergraduates. I forgot to mention with faculty even. I felt like I am not accepted, I felt demotivated. I felt bad.

Several participants spoke candidly about their experiences as teaching assistants, highlighting the nuanced challenges of working within predominantly white academic spaces. Their stories revealed a blend of personal and professional struggles, ranging from moments of self-doubt and marginalization to gradual growth in confidence and authority. These accounts emphasize how teaching roles can become positions where identity, inclusion, and belonging

intersect, shaping both their development as educators and their sense of place within the institution.

Limitations of the Study

Understanding the experiences of students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) is essential to recognizing the challenges affecting their wellbeing and growth. This study offers valuable insights but comes with limitations. The small sample, drawn from a limited number of institutions, restricts generalizability (Creswell et al., 2016). The predominance of female-identifying participants may have influenced the themes, as gender intersects with race in shaping belonging and support (Patton et al., 2017). Additionally, most participants were traditional college-age students, limiting perspectives from older, non-traditional, or graduate students, whose experiences often differ due to added life and career responsibilities (Giancola et al., 2009).

Discussion

This research sheds light on the nuanced experiences of students of color in predominantly white institutions, as it relates to their sense of belonging and resilience. While existing research highlights common challenges such as discrimination and a lack of attachment (Britt et al., 2014), it remains clear that more effort is needed to foster inclusivity both on and off campuses.

The themes identified in this study were— Fostering Belongingness- Representation in Academic Spaces, Navigating Acculturative Stress, Social Buffering as a Mechanism for Coping, Ego-Resiliency through Social Adaptability and Implicit Biases as A Barrier to Inclusion - align with and expand upon existing literature. These themes emphasize the

significant role of social support, identity negotiation, and institutional integration in fostering resilience among students of color.

This study sheds light on the nuanced experiences of students of color and international students within predominantly white institutions (PWIs), emphasizing the interplay between identity, belonging, and institutional support. Faculty diversity emerged as a critical factor in fostering student engagement and retention. When students see their identities reflected in faculty, they report stronger feelings of belonging and academic motivation (Umbach, 2006; Turner et al., 2008). However, ongoing disparities in representation continue to shape institutional climate and access to resources, underscoring the need for systemic change (Garcia et al., 2018). Participants' narratives revealed varied experiences of cultural disconnection and adaptation. For instance, Participant 7 described the discomfort of navigating unfamiliar social settings without cultural peers, highlighting the tension between collectivist values and the individualistic norms of U.S. academia. Others, such as Participants 2 and 5, reported persistent emotional disconnection despite outwardly inclusive environments. These accounts reflect the distinction between structural inclusion and psychological belonging (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016), and support Strayhorn's (2018) assertion that belonging is a fundamental educational need.

Acculturative stress was a recurring theme, driven by language barriers, financial strain, and cultural dissonance (Choy et al., 2020). Participant 1 described the emotional toll of adapting to local customs, while Participant 4 shared the burden of modifying their gender expression to avoid misgendering. These experiences underscore the emotional labor required to navigate cisnormative academic spaces and the chronic stress associated with identity misrecognition (Nadal et al., 2015; Woodford et al., 2018).

Social buffering—supportive relationships that mitigate stress—proved essential for student well-being. Participants relied on family, friends, counseling, and institutional resources to manage academic and emotional challenges (Hennessy et al., 2014; Misra & Castillo, 2004). Strategies included daily communication with loved ones, leisure activities, and proactive engagement with peer and professional networks. These findings align with research on ego-resiliency and the importance of both personal initiative and institutional support in promoting long-term adaptability (Zhang et al., 2022; Fredrickson, 2001).

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) of color faced unique challenges at the intersection of identity, authority, and institutional expectations. Positioned between student and instructor roles, many GTAs—particularly those who are international or racialized—reported feeling pressure to conform to dominant norms while striving to establish credibility (Bell & Golebiowski, 2020). Despite limited support, many remained deeply committed to teaching and mentorship.

Implications

This study offers important insights for PWIs striving to foster inclusive environments for students of color. Participants' narratives reinforce existing research on equity and highlight the importance of cultural visibility, representation, and institutional accountability (Markey et al., 2023). Meaningful inclusion requires diverse faculty, culturally responsive mentorship, training in cultural humility, and peer-led, identity-affirming spaces. Institutions must involve students of color in shaping policies and programs, diversify leadership, support cultural centers, and expand culturally informed mental health services. Future research should reflect intersecting identities, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and immigration status to better understand belonging and resilience.

Counselor education programs must prepare future counselors to support diverse students through culturally informed frameworks. Faculty should integrate cultural humility, intersectionality, and systemic awareness into teaching, supervision, and advocacy efforts (Leppert et al., 2023). Embedding intersectionality into coursework and practicum experiences helps trainees understand layered marginalization and develop identity-affirming interventions. Supporting inclusive pedagogy and reflective supervision equips future counselors to challenge systemic biases and foster belonging among marginalized students.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of students of color as they navigated their sense of belonging and ego-resiliency within a predominantly white institution. Participants shared powerful narratives that illuminated the intricate balance between internal strengths, such as perseverance, self-advocacy, and identity affirmation and external challenges, including racial isolation, systemic inequities, and limited faculty representation. Despite these barriers, their ability to adapt and persist highlights ego-resiliency as a critical protective factor in high-stress academic environments (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Zhang et al., 2022). By situating these findings within the broader discourse on equity and student development in higher education, the study underscores the need for structural reforms that move beyond symbolic inclusion. Creating environments where students of color can truly thrive requires intentional support systems, a diverse and representative faculty, and institutional commitment to cultural humility.

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Appendix A. Information Letter

NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS AN IRB APPROVAL STAMP WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN APPLIED TO THIS DOCUMENT.

INFORMATION LETTER For a research study entitled,

***Where Do I Belong?* – Exploring How Students of Color Perceive Sense of Belongingness and Ego-Resiliency at Predominantly White Institutions**

You are invited to participate in a research study where we wish to understand how students of color perceive sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency at predominantly white institutions. This study is being conducted by Sahana Sen (M.A., M.SW.), a doctoral candidate at Auburn University's Special Ed-Rehab-Counseling program at the College of Education, under the guidance of Dr. Jinhee Park, Associate Professor (Special Ed-Rehab-Counseling) (email: jzp0095@auburn.edu). You are invited to participate because you are 1.) 18 years and above 2.) Currently enrolled in an graduate or graduate program at a PWI, 3). Are willing to commit to one audio recorded interview reflecting on how students of color perceive sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency in relation to their wellbeing.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, informed consent document, and one audio recorded semi-structured interview. Your total time commitment will be approximately 40-60 minutes. Your identity will be kept confidential. Your personal narrative will be collected and analyzed for themes of your lived experience. All data collection and transmission will be protected by secure technology.

Are there any risks or discomforts? There are minimal risks associated with

participating in this study. It is the right of the participant to stop the interview at any time they would like. To further minimize any unforeseen risks, we will assess the participants comfort level and stop the interview any time we foresee risk or harm. During the interview minimal invasive questions will be asked to explore your experience with sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency. Discomfort may come in reflecting on your experiences, however if you experience severe discomfort, do not hesitate to end the interview if you would like. The protocol is developed to probe questions relating directly to the participants' attitudes and beliefs about the lived experiences of students of color at PWIs. Due to this being a qualitative study where interviews will be completed, there is a risk for breach of confidentiality. In an effort to protect your confidentiality during the study provisions have been made for additional precautions. The demographic information will be reported collectively as group data. Information collected through your participation will be used for future publication in a professional journal, dissertation, and/or professional conference.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? Your participation in this study, will help to fill gaps in the literature regarding the lived experiences of students of color at PWIs. You will assist in contributing to the literature by sharing your lived experiences. If you enroll for this study, you could qualify for a lucky draw of 20\$ Amazon gift card.

Will you receive compensation for participating? If you enroll for this study, you could qualify for a lucky draw of 20\$ Amazon gift card.

Are there any costs? No, there are no costs to participate in the study. If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be

withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University or the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling. Should you choose not to participate simply notify the researcher. If you do wish to withdraw, please contact Sahana Sen at (email: szs0293@auburn.edu).

Any information collected in your participation in this study will remain confidential. Your privacy and data provided will be protected. All audio recorded interviews will be deleted immediately following transcription and analyzation by the researcher. The records will be maintained in a secured technology platform, Box, housed by Auburn University which is protected electronically with a two-factor authentication password. No individual identifiable information about you or provided by you during the research will be shared with others without your permission, unless required by law. You will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym or be assigned one, for the purpose of data collection, analysis and reporting. The recordings of the interviews and pseudonym code will be destroyed after data collection is complete. Information obtained through your participation may be published in a professional journal, dissertation, and/or professional conference, however, your name and identifying information will not be used.

If you have questions about this study, please ask them now or contact Sahana Sen at (email: szs0293@auburn.edu) or Dr. Jinhee Park, Associate Professor (Special Ed-Rehab-Counseling) (email: jzp0095@auburn.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)- 844- 5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO. THIS LETTER IS YOURS TO KEEP.

"The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from

Month Day, Year to Protocol 24-784 EX 2403

Appendix B. Recruitment Email

For a research study entitled

***Where Do I Belong?* – Exploring How Students of Color Perceive Sense of Belongingness and Ego-Resiliency at Predominantly White Institution**

Hello,

You are cordially invited to participate in a research study aimed at understanding how students of color perceive their sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency within PWI. This study is being conducted by Sahana Sen (M.A., M.SW.), a doctoral candidate in Auburn University's Special Ed-Rehab-Counseling program at the College of Education, under the guidance of Dr. Jinhee Park, Associate Professor (Special Ed-Rehab-Counseling) (email: jzp0095@auburn.edu).

To determine your eligibility for participation, please review the following criteria:

1. You are at least 18 years of age or older.
2. Currently enrolled in an graduate or graduate program at a PWI.
3. Willing to dedicate time to one audio-recorded interview, reflecting on your experiences regarding sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency at PWIs.

If you meet these requirements and are eager to contribute, please sign up for the study by reaching out to Sahana Sen at szs0293@auburn.edu.

For any queries or clarifications about the study, please don't hesitate to contact Sahana Sen via email at szs0293@auburn.edu or Dr. Jinhee Park, Associate Professor (Special Ed-Rehab-Counseling) (email: jzp0095@auburn.edu).

Your involvement could make a significant difference in advancing our understanding of the experiences of students of color in academic settings. Thank you for considering this invitation.

We look forward to the opportunity to learn from your perspective.

Warm regards,
Sahana Sen, M.A.(M.F.T.), M.SW.
Doctoral Candidate
Special Ed-Rehab-Counseling
Program College of Education
Auburn University

Appendix C. Recruitment - Social Media Posts

Opportunity to Participate in Academic Research: Calling Graduate Students of Color at PWIs!

Hey there!

Are you a graduate or graduate student who identifies as a student of color currently working towards a degree? Your insights could greatly contribute to our latest research endeavor! We are embarking on a study aimed at comprehending how students of color perceive their sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency within PWIs. Your participation could shed invaluable light on this important aspect of academic life.

To determine your eligibility for participation, please review the following criteria:

1. You are at least 18 years of age or older.
2. Currently enrolled in an graduate or graduate program at a PWI.
3. Willing to dedicate time to one audio-recorded interview, reflecting on your experiences regarding sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency at PWIs.

If you meet these requirements and are eager to contribute, please sign up for the study by reaching out to Sahana Sen at szs0293@auburn.edu. For any queries or clarifications about the study, please don't hesitate to contact Sahana Sen via email at szs0293@auburn.edu or Dr. Jinhee Park, Associate Professor (Special Ed-Rehab- Counseling) (email: jzp0095@auburn.edu). Your involvement could make a significant difference in advancing our understanding of the challenges and triumphs faced by students of color in academic settings. Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to academic research.

Warm regards,

Sahana Sen

Appendix D. Participant Demographic/Eligibility Questionnaire Administered via Qualtrics

Eligibility Criteria

1. At least 18 years or above.
2. Currently enrolled in an graduate or graduate program at a PWI.
3. Are willing to commit to one audio recorded interview reflecting on how students of color perceive sense of belongingness and ego-resiliency at PWIs.

Demographic Details

What is your current age?

- a) 18-24
- b) 25-34
- c) 35 and above

Which of the following genders do you most identify with? Select one.

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Transgender
- d) Non-binary
- e) Prefer not to answer.
- f) Other (please specify)

Please specify your ethnicity.

- a) Caucasian
- b) African-American
- c) Latino or Hispanic
- d) Asian
- e) Native American
- f) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- g) Mixed
- h) Other/Unknown

What is your current year of study?

- i) Freshman

- j) Sophomore
- k) Junior
- l) Senior
- m) Fifth year or beyond
- n) Masters
- o) PhD

Please provide your email address and phone number so we can contact you for the interview.

Email:

Phone:

Appendix E. Interview Protocol

*Opening script: “Hello, my name is Sahana Sen, and I am a doctoral candidate in Auburn University's Special Education-Rehabilitation-Counseling program at the College of Education. Under the guidance of Dr. Jinhee Park, Associate Professor (Special Ed-Rehab-Counseling), I am undertaking this dissertation study to shed light on the lived experiences of students of color. Thank you for considering participation in this research. I want to confirm that you have received and read the information letter and also understand that you must turn your video camera off when we begin the Zoom interview.”

- *Allow participant time to respond. Once they say “Yes”, move forward with beginning the interview.

Please read the questions carefully and select the best answer for yourself.

1. Can you share your experiences with feelings of belonging at your university/college?
2. In what ways do you feel faculty and staff impacted your sense of belonging?
3. In what ways have other students impacted your sense of belonging?
4. What challenges or barriers have you experienced at your university/college?
5. Tell me about a time when you had to adjust to a new or unexpected situation during your college experience. What skills or approaches did you use to adapt effectively?
6. How did you feel about yourself when you were able to successfully navigate a challenging situation or when you could not?
7. What support systems or resources do you rely on when facing academic and personal challenges?
8. Can you share any advice or recommendations for improving the experiences of students of color at PWIs? Is there anything else you would like to add or like me to know.