Textual silences and the (re)presentation of black undergraduate women in higher education journals: a critical discourse analysis

Kimberly Deion Everett

Iowa State University

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Textual silences and the (re)presentation of black undergraduate women in higher education journals: A critical discourse analysis

by

Kimberly Deion Everett

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Natasha Croom, Major Professor
Nancy Evans
Connie Hargrave
Robert Reason
Steve Mickelson

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2015

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DEDICATION

To my mother for teaching me resilience, resourcefulness, and how to othermother all who need it. To Marquia and Jaiya for inspiring me to push through. Thank you all for earning this degree with me. Your sacrifices were not in vain.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of earning this degree has been filled with a variety of thoughts and emotions. The many years that have passed in this process have been marked by many changes, some welcomed and some unforeseen. One thing has remained constant throughout—I have had incredible people in my corner cheering me on and pushing me through. While there is no way for me to individually name each of them, please know that I am grateful. I will take a moment to give special recognition to just a few.

To My Family:

First, I must thank my family for enduring this process with me—we have all earned this degree. I have told her and I want the world to know that there is no way this would have been possible without my mother, Mary Davis. My mother has been the inspiration and motivation for all good I have ever done. She always told me that she wants me to do better than she has, but when it comes to giving love, support, and encouragement, no one can surpass her. She has walked with me through all of the good and the bad, and I am nothing without her. Looking back I see my mother and looking forward I see my children. I would also like to acknowledge my oldest daughter, my fellow 2015 grad, Marquia. She taught me that whatever pulls you back is preparing to push you forward. Graduation was a hard fought battle for us both, but we did it! I can’t wait to be at your next one. At the age of 10, my youngest daughter, Jaiya, has never known a life where mommy was not working on her doctorate. She has always had just the smile and hug I needed when times got hard. I must also acknowledge my dad, my brothers, my sisters, my favorite cousin, my aunts, uncles and the whole Smith-Moore and Gammage families for helping me remember that I have been doing this for us all. Last but certainly not least when it comes to family, I would like to
thank my person, Lawrence Wilson, for always being there and for filling my life with new
dreams, laughter, and love.

To My Faculty:

I have to thank my sisterfriend/chair Dr. Natasha Croom for dragging me across the
line. I know there were several times when I thought she was going to fire me but she didn’t
give up on me. We began as classmates, became fast friends and I now call you family. We
planned to finish together but life happened. You promised that you would not leave me
behind and you didn’t. I was warned that having a friend as my dissertation chair might not
be a wise move, but I knew that we would be able to do it. In the almost 10 years that I have
been on this journey, my committee has gone through many iterations. I also must thank my
original advisor, Lori Patton-Davis, for putting me on the right path, my first dissertation
chair, Nancy Evans for picking up the baton, and finally, my committee members: Connie
Hargrave, Bob Reason, Steve Mickelson, Isaac Gottesman, Ginny Arthur, Latrice
Eggleston, Ryan Evely Gildersleeve, and John Schuh for the part of the journey they ushered
me through.

To my Village:

My process was communal from start to finish so I must acknowledge my village
starting with Jesica Ranero-Ramirez and Jose Cabrales for being just what I needed to make
my long time in Iowa more bearable. I must also thank Stella Okeke, Shanna Young and
Symone Simmons for countless nights of writing time and keeping me accountable. I would
also like to thank Candace Westbrook and Michelle Boettcher for saying the right words to
ease my spirit and taking the time to read my work and help make it better. I am also very grateful to all of my colleagues from Iowa State University’s Student Support Services Program, to the Pedroso Center at NEIU and now the Office of Multicultural Student Success at DePaul University who have ridden this wave with me through the years. You knew when to ask me about my progress and when to let me be. Your support has meant the world to me.
ABSTRACT

Academic journals serve as a discipline’s official discourse reflecting what has been deemed important in that discipline at a specific point in time. For the better part of 20 years, discourses in the field of student affairs have constructed Black men as a population in need of specific attention. The proliferation of scholarship on Black men and a surface examination of quantitative data have left many with the impression that Black women students are succeeding.

This study problematizes the assumptions regarding the status of Black undergraduate women by examining how the population is discursively represented in higher education journals and how those representations impact discourses of student affairs practice. To answer these questions, the study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the use of textual silences to construct a narrative of the experiences of Black undergraduate women. This approach centers the role of language in the process of social practices and the maintenance and reproduction of societal power imbalances (Gavey, 1989).

The analysis of data in this study resulted in three major themes describing discourses of Black undergraduate women: (1) persistence in the face of adversity, (2) preeminence of interdependent relationships, and (3) Black women as race plus gender. Broad implications from this study directly relate to the need for more varied, nuanced, and intersectional literature addressing the needs of Black undergraduate women. Furthermore, there is a call for student affairs practitioners to critically engage with academic journals as they seek to inform their practice and journal producers to consider the diversity of perspective and encourage innovation in the review process.
CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Throughout history, media portrayals have shaped what is deemed important in a culture and the way people view “others” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Popular magazines, movies, music, and the news provide people with information regarding the needs and behaviors of individuals and groups; therefore, when real-life interactions with these populations are limited, media portrayals can significantly influence perception. Research has shown that in the U.S., media portrayals of people of color, women, and specifically Black women can be one dimensional and skewed, thus providing an inaccurate account of the way these people live (Brooks & Hebert, 2006; hooks, 1992).

Similar to general society, the academy has its own channels of knowledge distribution that serve as the medium through which its messages and meanings are articulated and disseminated. These mediums include, but are not limited to, scholarly books, conferences, the classroom, the co-curriculum, and academic journals. Academic journals have become the official record of a discipline and, like popular media, shape perception (Love & Yousey, 2001). Academic journals, in their role as a discipline’s official discourse, also set the agenda for and reflect what has been deemed important in a discipline at a specific point in time. Issues addressed in the academic journals of applied fields, such as education, influence practice and subsequent scholarship, as practitioners are encouraged to remain engaged so their practice is informed by scholarly research.

For those of us interested in and working to enhance the educational experiences of undergraduate students of color, we notice that, for the better part of 20 years, discourses circulating via conference program books, academic journals, scholarly books, and the overall “buzz” in the field of student affairs and on campuses across the nation have constructed Black
men as a population of particular interest and in need of specific attention (Chambers, 2012; Cole & Guy-Sheftal, 2003; Harper, 2009; Harper, 2012; Miles, Jones, Clemons, & Golay, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). Reflecting on 15 years of this movement, Harper (2014) wrote:

   It seems that from one year to the next, more and more highly educated and seemingly well-intentioned people were convinced that something needed to be done about the alarming underrepresentation of Black men among collegegoers and degree earners.

   Writings about the challenges confronting Black undergraduate men have been plentiful. Scholars, whose aims were to raise consciousness about these students and subsequently ignite a range of institutional responses, have surely succeeded. More has been written about Black male collegians over the past 15 years than any other specific racialized sex group in higher education (including Black women, White undergraduate men, and other groups of minoritized male students) (2014, p. 118)

   As a result, campuses across the country have implemented targeted interventions to include student organizations, living and learning communities, scholarships, and dedicated staff members (Harper, 2014). The evidence in these various forums is unequivocal that Black male students are in need and worthy of scholarly and practical attention, but how does that position the construction of other marginalized populations, particularly that of Black women? In college, both Black men and Black women have similar needs in some aspects of the collegiate experience and divergent needs in other aspects. Addressing the needs of only Black men on campuses will neither result in improved conditions for Black women students nor Black communities as a whole (Bond, 2011).
As the media chooses to foreground particular aspects of social issues, other aspects of these complex issues are typically ignored or assumed to be functioning at satisfactory levels. The proliferation of scholarship on Black men and a surface examination of quantitative data has left many of my colleagues with the assumption that Black women students are succeeding, or at least persisting in their academic pursuits. When pressed on how they came to this conclusion, they do not cite works specifically addressing the satisfactory progress of Black women; it is simply assumed. Aside from a select number of colleagues with a particular interest in the experiences of Black women undergraduates and Black women students themselves, I do not hear conversations problematizing the status of Black women in institutions of higher education.

Harper (2014) summarized this neglect, stating:

Statistical indicators were used as rationale for a 15 year-long focus on Black male students. Little about Black undergraduate women was published, few 1- to 2-day campus summits pertaining to their needs and issues were held, comprehensive Black female initiatives were not created, and they were rarely the topic of discussion at national higher education conferences. Black women’s experiential realities were overshadowed by their statistical comparisons to Black men (Harper, 2014, p. 133).

When Black women are discussed, tropes typically found in the larger U.S. context often inform the conversation. The most popular and widely accepted construction of Black women in U.S. society—and in higher education—is the “strong Black woman” archetype (Harris-Perry, 2011; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). This discourse of the strong Black woman has gone so far as to posit that Black women are the new model minority because of how the population has outpaced Black men in success indicators (i.e., life expectancy, educational attainment, lower instances of
substance abuse, etc.) in the face of much historical adversity (Kaba, 2008). Many would like to assume that those of us working in institutions of higher learning would be conscious of the undue influence of popular portrayals on our perceptions of marginalized populations and would not be as subject to taking these misrepresentations as truth. While this may be somewhat true regarding popular media, is it safe to assume that academic media, including professional journals, are not subject to the same perpetuations of dominant discourses that misrepresent Black women, women, and people of color we find in popular media?

**Background of the Study**

In any culture, norms and values are communicated through discourse. Discourse is defined as “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3). In other words, discourses are the aggregate of speech, writing, thought, and feelings on a topic, or set of topics, that both define and are defined by those topics. The discipline of student affairs has a particular history and culture that must be taken into consideration when examining the discourses found within. An abbreviated history of the development of student affairs and its culture is provided in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

One aspect of this description illustrates some of the profession’s guiding principles. Using these principles, student affairs practitioners work to make a meaningful impact in the lives of the students they work with (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). Ongoing professional development is a customary expectation in the field of student affairs, and practitioners are encouraged to stay current on trends and developments in the field through continued course work, involvement in professional organizations, and by reading academic books and journals focusing on postsecondary education (Allen, 2002).
Similar to the reciprocal relationship between popular media and societal views, higher education journals “both mirror and create” the field of student affairs (Silverman, 1987, p. 4). Academic journals are an archive of what has been deemed important and relevant in a particular field at a given time. They reflect the topics scholars are studying, and also set the agenda for future research and practice. While there are many sources of information included in the full discourse of a discipline, peer reviewed journals have been considered the “formal discourse” of a field (Love & Yousey, 2001). Therefore, as I critically analyze the discursive practices of higher education and its construction of Black women undergraduates, I have focused on the “official record” of scholarly journals.

There have been a number of studies examining the treatment of various populations, including the construction of women, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities, in higher education literature (Hart, 2006; Kuh & Bunsky, 1980; Love & Yousey, 2001; Renn, 2010; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005). While insightful, these studies have been limited to a certain number of “core” or “select” journals. Although it may be a common understanding in higher education that certain journals are considered “top tier,” there are many other publication outlets that fall outside of this top tier boundary (Bray & Major, 2011). Love and Yousey (2001) took a different approach to conducting an analysis of the discourses in higher education by examining professional organizations’ newsletters, periodicals, conference programs, keynote addresses, websites, and other readily available information found within that categorized the discourses. While this analysis was broader in the scope of data sources, peer reviewed journals were purposefully excluded. Additionally, much of the research on the treatment of these topics has not been critical in examining the power dynamics of the knowledge dissemination, legitimization, and agenda setting functions of academic journals.
Moreover, current research on Black students—Black undergraduate women in particular—addresses specific topics in the micro, but there has been little contemporary examination of the corpus of the literature (Sedlacek, 1999). In addition, examination of the role of journals in higher education has also focused on prestige and impact factor (Bray & Major, 2011). This study serves to both critically analyze the literature and illustrate the possible impact this body of literature can have on the practice of student affairs. While the current study uses the construction of Black women as the lens through which to examine discourse in higher education literature, this examination is also concerned with unmasking the normalized, and largely unexamined, truth claims of academic journals, how these claims impact practice, and how they reflect the language of broader dominant discourses.

Statement of the Problem

In a 2003 New Directions for Student Services source book, Mary Howard-Hamilton justifiably echoed the construction of the strong Black woman in the sourcebook’s special issue on Black women when she wrote:

There are approximately 519,870,000 black women around the world. As Sharp (1993) says, “There’s a Black woman on each of the seven continents, in almost every country and in the space program. So no matter where you go, she’s already been there. She travels with forces greater than herself. Her presence is everywhere” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 7).

This quotation provides a clear image of the African American women who surround us on a daily basis. These are women who influence lives and prevail, often in the face of adversity; often they are seen but not heard. Their voices remain unheard because many people assume that issues that pertain to women in general or to African Americans in
The strong Black woman is a popular discourse because it is viewed as positive. However, there are a number of problematic implications associated with constructing the raced and gendered issues of Black undergraduate women students in such a seemingly affirming manner, the most troublesome of which is misrecognition. Based on this misrecognition, Black women’s needs stand to be misunderstood or completely ignored (Harper, 2014; Harris-Perry, 2011).

In this dissertation, I seek to expose this misrecognition by examining how the concerns and needs of Black women have (not) been addressed in higher education journals. The current study provides empirical evidence of the discourses present in higher education journals and how these discourses construct Black women undergraduate students in order to better understand how these constructions impact work in student affairs. This discussion is important because how we make sense of other people influences how we then treat them (McKee, 2003).

Moreover, while acknowledging the agenda setting function of academic journals, it would be worthwhile to critically examine these publications in order to explore the possibility of their perpetuation of discourses that maintain hegemony and the marginalization of Black women undergraduates in higher education. This examination can be accomplished by exploring the ways in which the complexities of Black women’s subjectivities are (mis)represented in higher education literature. Understanding the prevailing discourses present in the literature and the process by which student affairs practitioners consume and employ information found in such academic journals has practical implications for all students. Using the construction of Black women in the literature is a means by which to analyze consumption, subsequent sense making, and the scholarly research informing the daily work of student affairs practitioners.
Purpose of the Study

While this study centered on discourses regarding Black undergraduate women, it also critically examined how discourses in higher education journals shape practice. Through the examination of the construction of Black women in the literature, I was able to better understand the discursive practices found in this genre of text. With this better understanding, I have a clearer picture of its practical impact. This study has provided a critical analysis of the discursive practices of higher education literature by examining ten years (2003-2013) of higher education journals, in order to expose and deconstruct the discourses regarding Black undergraduate women prevalent in this body of literature.

Research Questions

The following questions will guide this research project:

- How have Black undergraduate women been constructed in higher education journals?
- How do these constructions impact discourse on student affairs practices?

Conceptual Frameworks

The epistemology and theoretical framework are foundational elements upon which this study is premised. By employing feminist poststructuralism and Black feminist thought, this study foregrounded the representation of Black women students in order to unmask the hegemonic language influences of academic journals. As a theoretical and analytical framework, critical race feminism provided a lens through which to examine the broader social contexts in which the discursive practices of higher education literature exist.

Epistemology

At their core, feminist theories and poststructural theories reject dominant narratives (Harding, 1987; Prasad, 2005; Strega, 2005). A feminist poststructural epistemology
foregrounds structures in our ways of knowing and acknowledges that the way we understand the world around us is shaped by language of the institutional and social practices in which we exist (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Weedon, 1997). These two ways of understanding knowledge are not a perfect partnership, as poststructural theories resist the liberatory agenda that feminist theories require (Collins, 2000b; Jackson, 2001). Therefore, it is important to note that the current study is more feminist than poststructural because it is committed to the call to action that feminism posits. The deconstructive methodologies associated with poststructuralists are useful in naming power structures and unmasking the taken-for-granted assumptions of master narratives; however, poststructuralism needs feminism because it takes it a step beyond naming a problem toward posing alternative realities, which then lead to taking action to address said problem (Collins, 2000b). Feminist poststructuralism, in the case of this study, calls for centering the depictions of Black undergraduate women in order to deconstruct the dominant discourse as presented in higher education literature. Additionally, feminist poststructuralism debunks modernist conceptions of the self as a static, rational being (Jackson, 2001). Central to understanding the conception of Black women in college is the acknowledgement and exploration of their nonunitary subjectivity, which honors their diverse representations of the self (Bloom, 1998; Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Feminist poststructuralism is a political epistemology in that it is directed at changing the existing power structure as it is made meaningful through language (Jackson, 2001; Weedon, 1997). Therefore, a critical analysis of the discourses surrounding Black undergraduate women in postsecondary education can lead to a change in the way we consume and apply academic journals and, by extension, improve the experience of all students and many others involved in
the higher education enterprise. Black feminist thought is the brand of feminism chosen for this study because it theorizes the shared experience of Black women in the U.S.

Black feminism developed in response to sexism in the Black Liberation Movement and racism in the Women’s Movement. In an effort to meet the needs of Black women who were ignored in both movements, the Black Feminist Movement was formed. All too often, “Black” was equated with Black men, and “women” was equated with white women. As a result, Black women were silenced, and their existence and unique needs were ignored. The purpose of the Black Feminist Movement was to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in Black women’s lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination (Collins, 1989, 2000a, 2000b; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Wyatt, 2008). Scholars, including hooks, Lorde, and Davis have been key figures in this movement. This study centered on the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2000a) and her concept of Black feminist thought.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical race feminism (CRF) served as the primary analytical framework for this study because it centers the combined racialized and gendered experiences of women of color in the U.S. Critical race feminism was born out of critical race theory (CRT), a conceptual framework initially used in legal scholarship to expose and analyze the pervasive role of race, racism, and power in U.S. society. However, women of color in the legal academy found that “existing legal paradigms have permitted women of color to fall through the cracks, so they have become, literally and figuratively, invisible under so-called neutral law or solely race-based or gender-based analyses” (Wing, 2003, p. 3). Women, such as Adrien Wing, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Harris, and Lani Guinier, postulated that, while race continues to be of profound concern to this
country, it is also vital to consider the role of gender, class, disability, and sexual orientation in order for a more nuanced and complete analysis to occur (Crenshaw, 2003; Harris, 2003; Wing, 2003). Additionally, CRF simultaneously draws from the works of feminist theorists, emphasizing the gender oppression found in patriarchal systems while imploring feminist thinkers to give credence to the prominent role race plays in the experience of women of color, including how white women have been just as culpable as white men in maintaining a white supremacist power structure in this country (Harris, 2003; Wing, 2003).

Building upon the primary tenets found in CRT, CRF emphasizes the ideals of antiessentialism and intersectionality. At its core, CRT is liberatory, transformative, and provides a technology to address systemic racial injustices. The origins of CRT can be traced to law and legal scholarship, but it has since been applied across a variety of disciplines, including education (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Taylor, 2009). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) described critical race theorists as “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p. 2). In addition to their critique of the role of race and racism in U.S. power dynamics, CRT scholars insist that praxis—an intentional and practical application of knowledge to the pursuit of racial and social justice—is necessary to bring about the empowerment of people of color in order to eliminate racism and all other forms of domination (Bell, 1987; Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001).

Since its initial conceptualization in 1970s legal scholarship, CRT has undergone many evolutions, but most commonly, the work of CRT scholars shares many key features: 1) the acknowledgement that race is a social construct and that racism is endemic and an ingrained part
of American society; 2) a challenge to the dominant ideologies of meritocracy, objectivity, race-neutrality, and colorblindness; 3) accounting for the contextual and historical factors that affect the law, thereby challenging ahistoricism; 4) recognizing and centering the importance of experiential knowledge and the voice(s) of people of color; 5) a commitment to interdisciplinarity; and 6) working towards eliminating oppression based on race, class, gender, and so on (Bell, 1987; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker et al., 1999; Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Taylor, 2009).

As a distinguishing feature of CRF, antiessentialism is resisting the assertion of a universal female (or Black) experience. This essential female voice typically represents the lives and experiences of white, middle, and upper class women (Harris, 2003; Wing, 2003). While CRF scholars resist making broad generalizations, they do engage in a practice of strategic essentialism by speaking in terms of Black women, Asian women, Latina women, and so on, in order to describe groups of women. However, it is understood that there is vast diversity within these groups (Harris, 2003).

To understand antiessentialism, Crenshaw (2003) stressed the importance of intersectionality. The concept of intersectionality calls for attention to be paid to the intersection of race and gender, as well as other social identities. As Wing (2003) remarked, “women of color are not merely white women plus color or men of color plus gender. Instead, their identities must be multiplied together to create a holistic one when analyzing discrimination against them” (p. 7).

By combining feminist poststructuralism, Black feminist thought, and critical race feminism, I was able to deconstruct the normative and unchallenged influence of dominant discourses in higher education academic journals. By employing the deconstructive properties of
poststructuralism—and the liberatory position of feminism, Black feminist thought and critical race feminism—I was able to illuminate the discursive practices in higher education journals. Feminist poststructuralism, critical race feminism, and Black feminist thought are of value to this study because they all recognize that all discourses exist within a specific cultural and historical context and are subject to being complicit in the maintenance of racist, patriarchal power structures.

**Summary of Research Approach**

Thus far, I have discussed epistemological and theoretical frameworks that call for a political agenda. Therefore, by extension, the chosen methodology should provide a vehicle for “change through critical understanding” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) involves the careful reading of texts in an effort to illuminate discursive patterns. This approach centers the role of language in the process of social practices and the maintenance and reproduction of societal power imbalances (Gavey, 1989). Teun van Dijk (1991) insisted that critical discourse analysis is not a research methodology; rather, it is “an academic movement, or a socially and politically committed attitude when doing social analysis” (van Dijk, n.d.). While I agree with van Dijk’s assertion that critical discourse analysis is a standpoint from which to view the social world, for the purposes of this study, it served as a methodological framework by which I deconstructed the representation of Black undergraduate women in higher education literature.

Unlike many traditional ways of conducting social research, CDA has no standard formula or essential methods. Instead, it is a “broad theoretical framework concerning the nature of discourse and its role in social life, along with a set of suggestions about how discourse can best be studied and how others can be convinced findings are genuine” (Potter & Wetherell,
1987, p. 75). As I used this approach to analysis, I simultaneously attended to the detail of the language of texts, the context in which they exist, and the larger social contexts in which they occur (Gavey, 1989).

In this critical discourse analysis of the construction of Black undergraduate women, I used both feminist poststructuralism and Black feminist thought, combined with critical race feminism, to explore how the material reality of discursive practices shape the perception of this population and, by extension, shape the actions and attitudes of those working with Black women undergraduates (Jackson, 2001). To locate literature on Black undergraduate women, I used Bray and Major’s (2011) list of 49 higher education journals across all three tiers. The goal of my data collection was to locate both conceptual and research-based writings published between 2003 and 2013 in these 49 journals, the years subsequent to the publication of the groundbreaking edition of New Directions for Student Services that focused on Black women in higher education.

Once this body of literature was defined and identified, I searched for a “hidden layer of signification lying beneath the obvious, taken-for-granted surface” (Lupton, 1992, p. 145). The examination began with the content of articles, noting what scholars construe to be the current state of Black undergraduate women. I then examined the ways in which topics and themes invite readers to actively and imaginatively decode the contents of the article, making sense of and attributing meaning to its message (McKee, 2003; van Dijk, 1993). This first level of analysis included examination of the discourse on practice in order to make explicit the impact that discursive constructions have had on discourses regarding practice. The second level of analysis examined the illuminated themes within student affairs culture with specific regard to how the identified themes are manifested within the production and consumption of higher
education journals. Finally, at the third level of analysis, I related the identified themes “to various properties of the social, political or cultural context in which they take place,” as outlined by the hallmarks of CRT and CRF (Lupton, 1992, p. 147).

**Significance of the Study**

This study aimed “to get more insight into the crucial role of discourse in the reproduction of dominance and inequality” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 253). It is important to understand the role of discursive practices in higher education literature because social power shapes knowledge, which in turn shapes the manifestations of power. In the case of this study, social context shapes the production and content of academic scholarship, which then influences how individuals consuming this scholarship work with, for, and against the interests of Black undergraduate women. The current study adds to the knowledge base on the role of academic journals through informing the work of practitioners in the field of student affairs. It serves as an impetus for consumers of higher education literature to critically examine the messages within the pages of these journals, and heighten their awareness in order to build a critical consciousness of how these messages shape consumers’ perceptions of those they work with. Working toward a critical consciousness will also promote the development of better-prepared faculty and administrators. Most importantly, this study provides insight into the representation of a group often rendered invisible, silenced, misrepresented, and ignored. Armed with an increased awareness of the discursive construction of Black undergraduate women, faculty, and administrators can work to improve these circumstances where they have influence. If discourses are socially constructed (informed by shared meanings and practices), revealing and challenging those practices is at the core of critical inquiry and necessary for meaningful transformation (Hughes & Giles, 2010).
Researcher Positionality

According to van Dijk (1993), “critical discourse analysts (should) take an explicit sociopolitical stance: they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large” (p. 252). With this in mind, it is important to be transparent about my social locations and identities. As I consider this research project, I have to be aware of and account for—while not attempting to control—the tensions of my multiple subjectivities in this process.

Within My Discipline

I am a scholar practitioner and I approached this study from that standpoint. McClintock (2004) described the scholar practitioner as “an ideal of professional excellence grounded in theory and research, informed by experiential knowledge, and motivated by personal values, political commitments, and ethical conduct” (p. 1). As such, my epistemological, theoretical, and analytical frameworks all value the combination of formal training and lived experience in the creation and representation of knowledge. Therefore, my work has been based in the foundational work of other scholars and drawn directly from empirical research, the lens of my developed practical expertise as a practitioner, and my membership in the study population at one point in my life, which is an essential component of my analytical process.

Within Society

I am a Black woman in college in the end stages of a graduate program. I work with Black women in college as a part of my professional responsibilities. I am the mother, friend, aunt, and so on of current and future Black women in college. I am also an emerging scholar with a specific interest in the educational experience of Black women. As such, I have a vested interest in the subject matter at hand and make no claims of neutrality or objectivity. I will use
my voice as a member of and advocate for this population to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession as a whole (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Hughes & Giles, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker et al., 1999; Taylor, 2009). Most importantly, it is noteworthy that being a Black woman makes me especially qualified to conduct this research because existing at the margins allows me to see and articulate how the status quo is perpetuated because from that vantage point. I have a view of the texts and discursive practices that those in the center cannot or refuse to see acknowledge or understand (Alfred, 2001; hooks, 1990a; Strega, 2005; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Thompson & Dey, 1998; Turner, 2003).

Unlike more positivist-oriented inquiry, CDA involves a reflective reliance on the researcher’s experience of the world, and this is not done from a supposedly separate analytic standpoint; it is done as a participant rather than as a spectator. As such, in the course of this study, I remained aware that the world, including the world of this project, is a discursive construction that I am constantly engaged in shaping and being shaped by.

Collins (2000b) noted that the use of exclusionary language in postmodernism and in general deconstructive methodologies, such as poststructuralism, is incongruent with the frames of Black feminist thought and therefore a barrier to deconstructive methodologies being useful to improve the lives of Black women. As such, I hope to make the findings of this study both intellectually stimulating, practically useful, and accessible; therefore, I take issue with and resist the use of exclusionary language. Although I am proposing this dissertation to partially fulfill the requirements of obtaining a Ph.D., and individuals who have earned Ph.Ds. will be evaluating my product, a Ph.D. will not be required to understand this work.
Organization of this Dissertation

In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of this dissertation, including the background and purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, methodological overview, significance of the study, and a commentary on researcher positionality. Chapter 2 serves as a review of key literature related to the role of media in the sensemaking process, academic media and the field of student affairs, and a historical and contemporary examination of the experiences of Black women in higher education. The focus of Chapter 3 is on the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological frameworks. In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the current study and analytical discussion. In Chapter 5, I provide a variety of implications of the findings as well as recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide context for the critical analysis of academic literature regarding Black undergraduate women by examining relevant interdisciplinary literature and research findings. This review of the literature shares information related to historical and contemporary perspectives of Black women in higher education, the process of sensemaking and the role of media as a driver of sensemaking and discourse formation within the context of student affairs.

On Being Black and Female

Historically and contemporarily, “the American system of education has been a microcosm of the larger society, reflecting and reinforcing its strengths and flaws” (Zamani, 2003, p. 7). As such, stereotypes and inequities continue to exist and create formidable roadblocks for Black women as they attempt to gain educational and economic parity. The title of the Black women’s studies anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, articulates the struggle to situate Black women at the intersect of race and gender (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). With a cursory glance at the literature on women and Blacks in college, it might seem as if all the women are white and all the Blacks are men. Despite being marginalized and systematically ignored, Black women have redefined what it is to be in the double bind that results from discrimination based on race and gender (Stanley, 2006). In her review of literature on marginalized persons, Alfred (2001a) found that while historically marginality had been conceptualized as a negative, this did not necessarily need to be the case.

The combined experience of being Black and female is characterized by a number of themes that can be summarized as being a part of the whole but outside the main body (hooks, 1990a; Thomas, & Hollenshead, 2001). This means that Black women are a part of higher
education but they exist at its margins. Marginalization of Black women undergraduates often translates into a feeling of invisibility compounded by the devaluing of their social and academic needs and challenges.

Bond (2011) and Kaba (2008) examined the two sides of the proverbial coin of Black women’s success. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Kaba positioned Black women as an emerging model minority in the U.S. Taking inspiration from the model minority myth associated with East and South Asian immigrants, Kaba claimed that Black women are gradually becoming a model minority. This idea is based on the fact that despite experiencing historical and contemporary oppression in the form of slavery, racism and gender discrimination, Black women have made tremendous gains as a group. Kaba cited a number of examples to include: 1) higher college enrollment and degree attainment rates; 2) lower death rates as compared to Black males, white males, and white females; 3) longer life expectancies compared to Black males and whites males; and 4) lower rates of suicide and substance abuse.

In her discussion of Black women’s experiences at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Bond (2011) reverberates Kaba’s acknowledgement that Black women have achieved a number of gains. However, Bond (2011) begged the question of whether Black women have become victims of their own advancement, creating a “paradox of success” (p. 135). Although Bond (2011) specifically addressed the scarcity of resources across HBCUs, institutions of all types have experienced dwindling financial resources and difficult decisions when allocating financial and human resources. Since Black men have been constructed as being in crises and Black women have been constructed as successful, resources are more likely to be funneled where there is a greater perceived need. Specifically, Bond (2011) noted: “Administrators often have to allocate funds where the need is perceived to be the greatest. An
example is the development of programs that primarily address the needs of black men to the exclusion of black women” (p. 133).

**Black Women in Higher Education**

Black women faced a number of individual and structural barriers when first gaining access to higher education. Due to generations of systemic exclusion based on gender and race, the earliest Black undergraduate women had little experience in public or community affairs and may have internalized patriarchal ideas about women’s roles, which could have led them to adopt a self-defeating perspective on life (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b). Despite these challenges, between 1920 and 1950, the number of Black women earning college degrees grew so dramatically that by mid-century, it surpassed the number of Black male college graduates and the percentage of college degrees awarded to women was far greater among Black women than among white women (Bertaux & Anderson, 2001).

For researchers and practitioners seeking information about this important sector, academic journals serve as one source of information. For those seeking to learn what topics are important in the study of Black undergraduate women and what are appropriate ways to research these topics, academic journals are vital. Hence, critically exploring how Black undergraduate women are constructed in the literature is essential. Based on recent history, it would be reasonable to ascertain that Black women have found the keys to success in college. According to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBHE)* (2003), “In 2001 Black women earned 66 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, 70 percent of all master’s degrees, and 64 percent of all doctorates awarded to African Americans” (p. 14). In addition, *JBHE* (2003) reported that from 1990 to 2007, Black women’s college completion rates rose from 34 percent to 48 percent.
Numerically, Black women are outpacing their male counterparts, but this has come in spite of a lack of systematic support services designed to help them overcome the obstacles that persist in their collective post-secondary experience. Black women undergraduates have been constantly studied in comparison to Black men, and thereby ignored as a population with distinct issues worth studying (Miles, Jones, Clemons, & Golay, 2011; Robinson & Franklin, 2012; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Without specific attention to the unique needs of Black women undergraduates, it is difficult to design intentional environments to support their development. Interestingly, Black women are rarely studied in comparison to other women. This observation will be further explored later in this dissertation.

Due to the apparent success of Black women undergraduates, colleges and universities are not as enthusiastic to invest in specialized interventions that take into account the intersection of their Black and female identities. As a result, despite being heavily engaged in campus life, Black women students continue to describe their experiences as isolating and painful, articulating feelings of discrimination based on the intersection of their race, gender and class identities, as well as a lack of mentors and role models with whom they identify (Chamber & Poock, 2012; Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2009; Miles, et al., 2011).

Surface assessments based solely on measurable outcomes (enrollment, retention, graduation) can paint a misleading picture. In order to improve the experiences of Black women undergraduates, we must first understand those experiences. As previously discussed, student affairs practitioners are trained to turn to the field’s scholarly journals as a primary resource. This study provides a comprehensive, critical understanding of the discourses regarding the needs and experiences of this often-neglected population found within the pages of these journals. Misunderstanding the needs of Black women renders them invisible and their needs
unattended. Are Black women indeed invisible in the scholarship or do the higher education’s dominant discourses simply refuse to really see us? In order to empirically assess the constructions of Black women undergraduates, it is important to first understand the process of sensemaking, the role media—specifically academic media—plays in sensemaking, and how those sensemaking processes are operationalized within student affairs culture.

**The Role of Media in Sensemaking**

Sensemaking is the process by which people construct discourses or shared meanings for the social world and their place in it. In sensemaking, people generate a social schema and then interpret their experiences based on these schemas. This process involves constructing features of the world that then become available to confront and interpret new information (Gephart, 2007; Hammersley, 2003). Thus on a cultural level, sensemaking involves the observation and interpretation of utterances, actions, written text, and events; producing shared interpretations and creating assumedly shared or collective cultural meanings (or discourses) for important phenomena. Sensemaking and discourse formation is retrospective, contextual, social, ongoing, and grounded in identity (Potter, 1987; Gephart, 2007).

The findings of this study provide concrete examples of the interplay of new information and existing constructs in the sensemaking process, similar to how neuroscience teaches us that reality depends less on what information is coming in through our eyes or ears and more on what is already inside our heads. This process was demonstrated by asking study participants to quickly look at a painting with a great deal of detail (Wagner, Schacter, Rotte, Koutstaal, Dale, Rosen & Buckne, 1998). At first glance, most only perceived a small portion of what is happening in the picture. Pointing out specific things or asking pointed questions called upon study participants to fill in the blanks left in the original impression based on a cursory
This tendency to see a portion of what is happening in the painting echoes the finding of this study by providing an experimental approach to studying sensemaking.

Just as visual images were central in consuming the content in the experiment described above, language plays a critical role in the sensemaking process. In written texts, the language and mechanisms used to discuss higher education are important because they reflect society’s collective thinking and also contribute to a construction of shared reality. A structured analysis of this language reiterates the perspective that discourse is never neutral. In academic media, some perspectives are included and legitimized; others are excluded (Townsend, et al., 2005).

Media is used here to mean the institutional system through which social meanings are produced, stored, distributed and consumed on a mass scale. The goals of any particular form of media beyond that process vary based on the nature and content (TV ads, newspaper editorials, talk shows, movies, news reports, etc.). In this study, I analyze one form of media: academic journals that are used to produce, sustain, maintain, protect, and occasionally challenge social meanings in the study of higher education.

Media has become a major focus of attention as it has superseded other institutions in the cultural production and dissemination of knowledge. Bell and Garrett (1998) cited several important reasons to study and analyze media discourse. First, media discourse is readily accessible data that provides rich sources for research, studying, and teaching. Second, media discourse not only represents producer and consumer attitudes towards language but also influences them. Third, the formation and expression of culture, politics, ideological beliefs, and social life are not only reflected in the media, but are also influenced and created by it. Fourth, because of what it represents, media discourse can reveal a great deal about social meaning and stereotypes embedded in, produced, and reproduced throughout modes of communication.
In order to examine the role academic journals as a form of media play in the construction of Black women students, we must examine the role of media in the broader U.S. cultural context. Therefore, we must understand just how media drives sexism and racism in American society and the ways racism and sexism exist within the very foundation of all U.S. social institutions. From smaller institutions, such as family and community, to the largest of institutions, such as religion, education, and government, media is one of the most powerful tools used to maintain as well as legitimize forms of oppression through its use of negative stereotypes regarding race and gender difference (van Dijk, 1989). Individual as well as institutional levels of oppression are influenced by media representations. After all, it is through popular culture (mis)representations in mainstream media that individuals receive their earliest messages about who they are, who they should strive to be, and who “others” are in the world around them.

Historically, negative stereotypes and archetypes have been used to identify and isolate groups within society. The subsequent marginalization of these groups based on media portrayals has led to their continued exploitation in social institutions and has rendered them easy targets for discrimination, causing them to be disproportionately impacted by cultural imperialism and a severe lack of life opportunities including quality healthcare, housing, and education. Though these forms of oppression play out similarly for all oppressed groups within American society, Black women are impacted especially by ideologies that since this country’s founding have subordinated women and dehumanized Blacks (Harris-Perry, 2011). Despite the insistence of popular culture that we now live in a post-racial and gender equitable world, Black women are still shown images and depictions of themselves that at best fail to accurately represent who they are as a people and at worst, continue to use stereotypes that were once used to justify slavery and the rape of Black women. By critically analyzing the depictions of Black women students in
academic journals, I have illustrated the ways in which professional literature mirrors the continued use of media portrayals of Black women as a way to legitimize and maintain continued subjugation and a denial of resources.

**Academic Media and the Field of Student Affairs**

Many scholars have underscored the essential role journals play as a source of knowledge on the multitude of topics in any academic discipline and/or professional field as well as their function of reflecting the agenda for that discipline (Allen, 2002; Bray & Major, 2011; Hart, 2006; Hood, 1984; Louve & Yousey, 2001; Renn, 2010; Roper, 2002; Silverman, 1987; Suls & Martin, 2009; Townsend et al., 2005; White, 2002; Twombly, 1993; Woodard, Love & Komvies, 2000). Journals in an applied field such as student affairs should be expected to disseminate knowledge intended to influence the thinking and behavior of practitioners. Therefore, the content pertaining to a certain segment of the college population or a lack of attention to specific areas in the core literature suggests that those with no specific, specialized interest may not become aware of those aspects of higher education. The current study has taken inspiration from other educational researchers in the reimagining of what higher education literature can do for student affairs practice. This reimagination involves changing the way we approach, conduct, disseminate, and consume academic literature (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004).

**Academic media production.** Within the genre of academic journals, peer reviewed journals hold the most prestige (Bray & Major, 2011; Marsh & Ball, 1989; Robergs, 1990; Suls & Martin, 2009). Peer review is a highly esteemed process in many academic disciplines in which the “goodness” of a manuscript is evaluated for publication. The process of peer review is not especially complicated, but can be quite lengthy and involved. A manuscript is submitted for
publication to a journal’s editor-in-chief. The editor may assign the manuscript to an associate editor that has some knowledge of the research topic or may continue to personally facilitate the peer review process. The editor or associate editor is then responsible for overseeing the review of the manuscript, which involves the selection of reviewers who research similar topics to that of the manuscript. Depending on the journal, the manuscript can be reviewed with the reviewers not knowing the authors (blind review) or with author information provided. The reviewers are charged with details of a review process using specific criteria to assist them in the review process. Based on the reviewers’ comments, the editor or associate editor makes a decision after the first review to allow continued revision and resubmittal or to reject the manuscript. In either case, the reviewer and editor comments are returned to the author (Robergs, 1990; Marsh & Ball, 1989).

More than a quarter of a century ago, Hood (1984) and Silverman (1987) articulated the need for higher education to examine the field’s academic journals in order to engage its members—both practitioners and researchers—in meaningful discussion regarding knowledge production and dissemination. Both Hood (1984) and Silverman (1987) noted the diverse roles journals play in the field of student affairs. These roles range from serving as a repository of the topics of importance and a resource to inform practice, as well as a venue for publication for academics in the faculty reward processes of promotion and tenure.

While the content of higher education journals has evolved to reflect the historical context in which they were produced, White (2002) observed that “our profession continues to regard ‘good’ scholarship primarily as that which supports traditional notions of the discovery and dissemination of ‘truth’” (p. 160). White (2002) went on to suggest that a perusal of higher education journals will yield a preponderance of quasi-objective, prescriptive methodologies and
standardized models that are presented as results and conclusions. Furthermore, despite efforts to diversify the scholarship of student affairs, many journals still expect and value a type of rational and structural reasoning that is aligned with dominant discourses, often lacking diversity of subject matter, thought, design, and epistemological orientation (White, 2002). As a result, higher education literature tends to perpetuate hegemonic notions within student affairs discourses.

Theoretically, having a diverse pool of peer reviewers who are abreast of a multitude of approaches to scholarship would help to ensure variety in the body of knowledge. While the peer review process is the gold standard in academic media, it is not without criticism. The process was initially designed to provide feedback to authors and has evolved to ensure rigor in scholarship, but because humans and their biases and fallibilities are involved, the process can be highly problematic. Some critics say that reviewers harshly judge manuscripts with which they are not familiar, thus limiting innovation and maintaining hegemony. As noted earlier in this dissertation, research centering on Black women is scarce in higher education literature, thus leading to slim chances of reviewers being familiar with (or interested in) this line of inquiry. Additionally, reviewer anonymity negates their accountability and does not allow for the public examination of privilege in the power and position of gatekeeper. The peer review process has also been said to privilege well-known authors or those from institutions perceived as prestigious. Lastly, in an effort to control for bias in the peer review process, multiple reviewers evaluate each manuscript; however, reviewers often render conflicting evaluations (Suls & Martin, 2009).

It is important to contextualize the peer review process for practitioners because these consumers of higher education literature customarily publish in peer review journals. As such,
they are not likely to know the process and understand the potential for some topics to be foregrounded and others to be backgrounded in the knowledge dissemination process.

**A Snapshot of Student Affairs Culture**

In order to analyze the discourses of higher education journals, it is important to place them in the context of student affairs cultures focusing on the underlying assumptions, values, and patterns of behavior (Baird, 2011). A nuanced discussion of the constructions of Black women undergraduates within the context of student affairs culture is provided in the analytical discussion in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. This section provides a backdrop of aspects of that culture.

The field of student affairs was born in 1870 when Harvard president Charles Elliot appointed the first student dean of higher education (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). Initially, this move was an effort to provide relief to the president and faculty from the increasingly complex administration of the institution as access to college began to increase. The first deans of men and women were established in order to manage the out of class behaviors at early colleges and universities. Through the years, the functions of student affairs have become more diversified and specialized, organizing around functional areas that include housing, judicial affairs, multicultural student services, and many more.

As the original purpose of student personnel workers has evolved tremendously, the field has continually defined and articulated its contribution to higher education. Since its early days, individuals working in the field of student affairs have developed many iterations of documents that endeavor to define the field and crystallize its purpose and objectives. Reason and Broido (2011) grappled with the debate as to whether or not student affairs needed to further define itself with the adoption of a unitary philosophy and concluded that such a core statement of philosophy
is not necessary, and the foundational documents provided throughout the profession’s history may continue to guide practice. Woodward, Love, and Komives (2000) summarized the espoused beliefs found in those documents and suggested additional values as follows:

- A belief in the dignity, uniqueness, potential, and worth of each individual.
- A belief that our role is to enhance student learning and student development.
- A belief in the development of the whole person, including the importance of intellectual, social, emotional, ethical, and spiritual elements.
- A belief that learning occurs in diverse places and in diverse ways.
- A belief that ultimately students must take responsibility for their own learning.
- A belief in individuation and community, recognizing the powerful role of community in learning and development.
- A belief in caring for students by setting and communicating high expectations for learning and behavior.
- A belief in communities where diversity is desired, where mutual respect is expected, and where ideas and assumptions are to be explored and questioned.
- A belief in encouraging conversation and communication, instead of stifling it, no matter how offensive the ideas may be to some.
- A belief that the mission of student affairs flows from the mission of the institution.
- A belief that higher education and student affairs have roles in assisting in the transformation of our society into a learning society.
- A belief that professionals must exhibit individual initiative and seek to collaborate with colleagues and others.
• A belief in personal and departmental self-examination, reflection, and continual improvement of administrative practice (pp. 21-23).

Woodard et al. (2000) described the list above as ideals in order to indicate that this set of beliefs are values that student affairs practitioners strive to embody; our lived realities, however, may look quite different. As with any culture, there are inherent contradictions in the espoused beliefs and day-to-day practices. The authors went on to discuss what they describe as myths and heresies within student affairs cultures. These myths and heresies illuminate where student affairs practice deviates from these espoused beliefs (Woodard et al., 2000).

The narrative of student affairs culture most striking and relevant to this study is that despite espousing a belief in student development, growth and learning, student affairs professionals are not critical of our own understandings of knowledge, beliefs, values, students, faculty, and organizational functioning. This lack of routine critical analysis demonstrates the need for the proposed study. By examining the official discourse of the field, I hope to contribute to a holistic examination of what has become the canon of the field and the process by which information becomes widely accepted as unchallenged truth.

Additionally, despite an espoused belief in the diverse settings in which learning takes place and the role of student affairs in transforming our society, when juxtaposed with the perceived importance of our academic affairs counterparts, the field has developed “a self-marginalizing, disempowering, self-pitying culture, resulting in student affairs professionals who have a victim mentality and a sense of powerlessness” in the academy (Woodard et al., 2000, p. 18). Furthermore, although student affairs professionals profess to focus on the whole student and the big picture of the higher education experience, research indicates that student affairs, as a
profession, has primarily focused on the psychosocial experience of college, and mostly within the realm of the functional area in which they work (Woodard et al., 2000).

The contradictions between the espoused values and lived experiences of student affairs practitioners are compounded when the breadth of daily expectations are taken into account. As with every aspect of society and culture, much has changed in the daily lived experience of student affairs practitioners since the birth of the field. Allen (2002) commented on the increased complexity of the work of student affairs. She noted the following shifts in the work lives of practitioners:

- From a world where one has an ability to prioritize to a leveling of tasks where all communications seem to take on a sense of urgency.
- From a world where communications were two-directional to a world where communications come at us from all directions.
- From a world where relationships are bounded by departments to one that is permeable and relationships transcend departments, divisions, and organizations.
- From a world that made sense of things by focusing on the parts to one that can only be understood through a systems view (p. 149).

Given the shifts in the demands for practitioners’ time and attention, it is imperative that when they do prioritize the time and energy to go to the literature to reflect on and inform practice that the literatures serve a purpose.

The brief description of student affairs culture provided above is certainly not an exhaustive treatment of the vastly diverse field and certainly does not apply to all of its practitioners. There is always danger in making generalizations, but a baseline understanding of
the cultural context of a profession based in the literature will help to understand how sensemaking processes may be applied by those immersed in student affairs culture.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, U.S. higher education was in a state of rapid change. These changes included: (1) an increased internationalization with the rise of reciprocal student exchange; (2) increased availability and use of distance and online education; (3) an increased awareness of the role of spirituality in the student experience; and (4) an increased enrollment of veteran students in addition to an increasingly diverse (broadly defined) student body (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). The 2005 Report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education convened by George W. Bush’s Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, made clear a call for higher levels of access, affordability, accountability and quality in higher education. The field of student affairs responded by foregrounding student learning and articulating how their work contributed to the preparation of globally aware and competent students through an emphasis on assessment and measurement (Dungy & Gordon, 2011).

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of relevant literature summarizing historical and contemporary understandings of the status of Black women in higher education. In order to provide context for a critical analysis of this literature, I also explored the process of sensemaking and the role of media in student affairs and the process practitioners undergo as they engage in sensemaking. The next chapter builds upon this summary of the relevant literature. I describe in detail the theoretical and methodological considerations driving this project.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I provide a detailed explanation of the research design for this project. This study is grounded in a feminist poststructural epistemology with a particular emphasis on Black feminism. Furthermore, critical race feminism serves as the theoretical and analytical framework with critical discourse analysis as the methodology. This research design is divided into three primary subsections (1) epistemology, (2) theoretical framework, and (3) methodology.

Epistemology

As I took on the process of critical discourse analysis (CDA), there were many considerations. While there is no prescriptive theoretical framework associated with CDA, there are fundamental epistemological assumptions. The primary assumption is a subscription to social constructionism (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Powers, 2007; Prasad, 2005; van Dijk, 1993). As critical discourse analysis seeks to expose the ways discourses shape and are shaped by perceptions of reality, one must believe that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed and not static and absolute (Crotty, 1998). Reality is always contextual and determined by socio-cultural influences including but not limited to time, geography, cultural dynamics, and point of view. McKee (2003) stated that “no single representation of reality can be the only true one, or the only accurate one, or the only one that reflects reality because other cultures will always have alternative, and equally valid, ways of representing and making sense of that part of reality” (p. 32).

Feminist Poststructuralism

The lens of feminist poststructuralism serves as a tool to problematize the taken-for-granted truth of academic journals and the constructions of Black women undergraduates within
their pages. The theoretical underpinnings of feminist poststructuralism are transdisciplinary in origin but have relevant ties to education in general and higher education specifically (Gavey, 1989). Poststructuralist theory has a variety of definitions and is informed by the work of many scholars. The applications of poststructural theories can range from the apolitical deconstruction of literary works to the examination of power dynamics in labor disputes. However diverse the use of poststructural theory, the common factor of analysis is language (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Language is the place where reality is defined and reified, but it is also the place where reality may be deconstructed and contested.

Whereas poststructuralism may not necessarily be political, feminism is a politics, and has a specific agenda to expose and dismantle patriarchal structures. A feminist perspective of poststructuralism is a lens through which scholars are able to unmask, critique, and resist patriarchy in order to imagine a different world. A feminist iteration of poststructuralism provides a means by which to center the influence of language and gender in the perpetuation of hegemony. While the originators of poststructuralist theories may not have been particularly interested in a feminist application of their work, armed with the foundations of poststructuralism, feminist scholars have a second epistemological layer that allows for the demystification of discursive practices that privilege men and subordinate women in higher education literature (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Weedon (1997) described feminist poststructuralism as “a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (pp. 40-41). A feminist poststructuralist agenda endeavors to understand “the mechanisms by which men and women adopt particular discursive positions as representative of their interests” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 12).
Black Feminist Thought

Employing a lens that questions, and usually rejects, the dominant narrative in this study and centering the discursive constructions of Black undergraduate women will allow for examination of the symbiotic nature of language and reality in student affairs. While feminist poststructuralism provides a powerful tool by which I can examine the role of language in the perpetuation of hegemonic notions of objectivity in academic journals, it needs to be placed in a proper context and be viewed from an appropriate standpoint in order to be most effective. Black feminist thought provides this essential layer.

In Black Feminist Thought, Collins (2000a) crystallized a concept that addresses what it means to be both Black and female with special attention to how class, sexuality, age, and citizenship status, among other identities, collide to create an interlocking system of oppression. Black feminist thought is a framework that addresses the standpoint of Black women in the U.S. She asserted that societal forces create “a particular marginality that stimulates a particular Black woman’s perspective” (Collins, 2000a, p. 27). Collins described a multifaceted conception that aims to deconstruct the various ways in which Black women are oppressed and marginalized. Black feminist thought details how the intersection of being both Black and female creates an entirely different identity that cannot be adequately understood by examining the experiences of women or the experiences of Blacks separately.

It is important to note that the framework of Black feminist thought is not meant to be exclusive to uplifting the state of Black women. There must be careful attention paid to the universality of what can be learned when using this lens. By examining the discursive construction of Black undergraduate women in higher education literature through the lens of
Black feminist thought, we are able to understand the potential impact of scholarly journals in student affairs practice. We can also reexamine widely accepted practices that go largely unchallenged and leave many different groups, not just Black women, at a disadvantage.

Black feminist thought has six primary tenets, the first of which is the idea of a collective experience of being a Black woman. While asserting a shared experience, Collins avoided essentialism by noting that although not all Black women have the same experiences, there are some recurring patterns of differential treatment for Black women. Secondly, Black feminist thought recognizes a collective history of struggle for Black women but more importantly, Collins noted the great diversity of how Black women have responded to and participated in that struggle.

A third feature addresses the importance of active resistance, which emphasizes Black feminist thought as a practice, not just fodder for intellectualizing. Toward that end, the fourth feature outlines the responsibility of Black women intellectuals to resist separating social theory from social action. Collins posited that Black women are committed to the advancement of Black people and the pursuit of social justice, while it may simply be academically trendy for others.

The final two features call for Black feminist thought to be reflexive and continually examine how effective it is at addressing its transformative agenda. The fifth feature stresses the need for a constant evolution of the entire framework. As social conditions change, the framework must continue to grow and evolve as well. The final feature returns to its emphasis on dismantling interlocking oppressions. While being a Black woman may be the most salient identity emphasized in this study, it should serve as an entry point for the advancement of social justice in the broadest possible terms.
Theoretical Framework

Discourses are unique to particular communities of practice, contributing not only to the identities of community members but also to the definitions of problems they address and the ways these issues are treated. In an effort to examine practices and processes embedded within the discourses of higher education literature, it is important to use theories that explore the taken for granted, ingrained racism and sexism that is assumed to be the natural order of things because while socially constructed, racism and sexism certainly have real effects on Black undergraduate women and the student affairs practitioners working with them. Critical race feminism (CRF) is a theory that supports the premise of reality’s social construction, as well as the importance of positionality and voice from non-dominant perspectives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Critical Race Feminism

In congruence with feminist poststructuralism and Black feminist thought, critical race feminism (CRF) is liberatory and transformative in addressing systemic injustices. Critical race feminism is a set of concepts originating in legal scholarship designed to address the paucity of frameworks to adequately explain the combination of racial and gender discrimination in U.S. jurisprudence. CRF emerged from critical race theory as a result of raced and gendered legal scholars feeling overlooked by Black male and white feminist legal scholars. CRF scholarship includes the tenets of CRT as detailed below, but departs from some critical race theorists by centering gender in its antiessentialist agenda (Wing, 2003). As Wing stated, “our antiessentialist premise is that identity is not additive. In other words, Black women are not white women plus color, or Black men, plus gender” (p. 7). Antiessentialism recognizes the multiple social locations and identities that women inhabit. A second distinguishing feature of CRT is intersectionality. Intersectionality, as a concept, recognizes the relationships among multiple
social locations and how a subject is constituted by all of their social locations. Notable pioneers in critical race feminism include Adrien K. Wing, Kimberle’ Williams Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, Angela Harris, and Lani Guinier.

Critical Race Theory. Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework used to expose and analyze the pervasive role of race, racism, and power in U.S. society. Since its initial conceptualization in legal scholarship, CRT has been used to critique power dynamics in many disciplines, including education (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, et al., 1999; Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Taylor, 2009). Hughes and Giles (2010) applied the concepts of CRT to academic life and took us on a “critwalk” through three gated communities representing three aspects of the faculty experience. They defined critwalking as CRT with legs. Using critical race theory and critical race feminism as a theoretical and analytical framework, this study will critwalk through higher education literature wearing glasses designed by feminist poststructuralism with Black feminist thought- tinted lenses.

Critical race theory has evolved since its legal scholarship origins, but the current literature shares six primary tenets. In their primer, Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) described the basic tenets of critical race theory as: 1) racial realism and the rejection of colorblind ideologies; 2) interest convergence or material determinism; 3) the social construction of race; 4) differential racialization; 5) intersectionality; and 6) an acknowledgement of the lived experience and the unique voice(s) of communities of color.

Simply defined, racial realism acknowledges the fact that race and racism continue to be pervasive and have become internalized and institutionalized so much so that it is an ingrained
part of everyday life. While we can argue that our college campuses deplore and deal swiftly with overt acts of racism, racial microaggressions are often explained away (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). Racial microaggressions are the subtle, sometimes unconscious, attacks on people of color—the little comments that make you pause and ask, was that racist?

The concept of interest convergence asserts that dominant groups will only take action in the interests of oppressed groups when it also serves their own interests or at least will not cost them anything materially or psychologically. As long as the interests of the dominant group are being served, the interests of the oppressed group may be allowed to proceed. If at any point those interests diverge, those gains may be dialed back. Bell (1979) provided a classic example of interest convergence in the landmark case of the Brown v. Board decision of 1954. Bell argued that the decision to integrate public schools in the U.S. did not come from an altruistic realization that all children should have access to quality education. Instead, Bell argued that the decision was made as a symbolic gesture of benevolence to appease the newly returning Black GIs who had served in foreign wars and as an appeal for alliances with developing countries around the world during the Cold War. In this case, Black school children received the promise of better opportunity, and the U.S. was able to perpetuate the image of justice and democracy for all.

CRT also reiterates that races are products of social construction, are not fixed or objective, and have no significant basis in biology. Because we acknowledge that race is a social construct, why can’t we choose to ignore it, thus removing its power? Although race is a construct, racism is very real and has very real consequences, thereby making a choice to be colorblind only slightly possible for people in positions of privilege. A consequence of the arbitrary construction of race is the fact that attitudes regarding race and the concomitant actions
may change in different ways and impact different groups in a variety of ways. Differential racialization refers to the way dominant groups treat members of marginalized groups at a given point in time based on specific interests. This is often done without regard to nuances in identity within communities of color. Toward that end, CRT scholars reject the blanket categorization of marginalized groups.

One of the critiques of CRT and its branch movements, including CRF, is that they are too esoteric and have limited practical value. Although praxis, or a call to action, is universal in the writings of most critical race theorists, people seem to want CRT to provide a prescription or a toolkit from which people can draw and apply. As helpful as this may be for the busy practitioner, CRT requires us to do a little more, be a little more active in the problem solving process. CRT is about exposing and unmasking the realities of race and racism so that people can have a more complete understanding or so that we know better. As a child, I was taught that when you know better you should do better. Armed with the clearer understanding that a CRT lens provides, we are able to adjust our practice so that the needs of our students are better served.

The language and concepts of CRT and CRF informed by feminist poststructuralism and Black feminist thought provide a framework in which a critical discourse methodology can be operationalized. A cohesive epistemology and theoretical framework provides an overall orientation in which research is rooted (Creswell, 1998). While CDA does not have a specified set of associated methods, in the following section I describe my methodology and how it was applied in this study with the aforementioned theoretical framework.
Methodology

Locke (2004) explained that the aim of a critical analytical approach is “not to reveal some sinister and manipulative hand aiming to impose power over others, but to provide opportunities for critical detachment and review of the ways in which discourses act to pervade and construct our textual and social practices” (p. 89). Using this critical approach may uncover the (mis)representation of Black undergraduate women and the (re)production of dominant ideologies buried within discourse, and serve as a tool for critique and to call for a change in the status quo (Lupton, 1992).

While conducting this study, I was not searching for a grand conspiracy that directly set out to destroy the opportunities for Black undergraduate women to succeed in college. Rather, the approach of critical discourse analysis when combined with the aforementioned conceptual framework provided a mechanism to explore two primary research questions. (1) How have Black women undergraduates been constructed in U.S. higher education journals? (2) How have these constructions impacted discourses in student affairs practices?

Critical discourse analysis is particularly concerned with the fact that language use is a form of action, and on this basis, specifically rejects the representational model of language (Hammersley, 2003). In other words, language is not neutral or static. Instead it is an act of social agreement that happens within a specific cultural context in such a way as to appear to be objective matters of fact. Therefore, a central focus of critical discourse analysis becomes how and why social phenomenon are constructed in the way they are, and this must be done within the social context in which they exist (Luke, 1995; Lupton, 1992; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In the case of this study, Black undergraduate women are the phenomenon being studied. By describing the discursive construction of this population against the backdrop of
student affairs culture and academic journals, I illuminate hegemonic tendencies within academic journals that go largely unchallenged due to the social agreements regarding the role of scholarly journals in academia.

**Origins and Purposes of CDA**

The roots of CDA can be traced to the 1970s in Fowler, Hodge and Kress’s (1979) work on power, ideology, and control. Their work focused on how language works in the social context and how it is related to power and ideology. Additionally, Halliday’s (1978) work on language as a social semiotic and how language shapes and is shaped by social and cultural context further called on scholars to examine in depth the language/ideology relation. CDA is not a school of one trend but rather an approach through which scholars can find many trends; therefore, a simple, unitary definition of CDA is impossible to pinpoint. Approaches under CDA are distinguished by their goals rather than by a prescribed set of techniques and tools of analysis. At its core, CDA endeavors to uncover socio-political inequalities, whether based on political, economic, educational, cultural, racial, religious, or gendered grounds that exist in a society. According to Fairclough (1995), CDA is the study of:

- often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony. (p. 132)
Here, Fairclough proposed an approach to CDA in which the researcher is aware of the social and cultural phenomena, the discursive practices that produced them, the dialectical relationship between them, and the role discourse plays in human interaction with the world around them. All of these factors are a product of the social and discursive practices colluding in producing and sustaining social relations of power and ideology. Expounding on this function of, Huckin (1995) described CDA as “a highly context-sensitive, democratic approach that takes an ethical stance on social issues with the aim of improving society” (p. 95). In summary, CDA strives to explore and expose how nontransparent relationships are crucial in securing and maintaining power and hegemony, and draws attention to forms of domination, social inequities, and other injustices so as to compel people to corrective actions (Fairclough, 1993). From both Fairclough and Huckin, I have concluded that CDA is a means to show readers how to be aware of the guising and indoctrinating ideologies that may manipulate their thinking and behavior.

It is important to understand that CDA is different from other approaches to discourse in that it is critical in its analysis. CDA does not focus solely on formal properties of the text (i.e., syntax, grammar, etc.); rather, it situates the text in its wider social, political, and historical context and critically examines how this text relates to other texts, how it is constituted by the existing social practices, and it is constitutive of other new social practices. According to Wodak (2007), critical could be understood as “embedding the data in the social, making a political stance explicit, and having a focus on self-reflection as scholars doing research” (p. 209). Being critical also means presetting how “our use of language in particular [is] bound up with causes and effects which we may not be at all aware of under normal conditions” (Fairclough, 1995, p.54).
CDA scholarship, regardless of the particular goals or approach, has displayed five common features. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) summarized these common aspects as follows:

- Social and cultural structures are partly linguistic-discursive. Discursive practices, that produce texts and allow for their consumption, are important factors in shaping social practices.
- Discourse is dialogical in that it both constitutes and is constituted by social relations.
- Language is inextricably bound to social, geographical, historical, and cultural context and must be analyzed within that context.
- Discourses are a function of ideologies. CDA is grounded in the concept that discursive practices create and maintain social inequities between groups based on religious, political, class, racial, and/or gender issues, all of which deal with ideology.
- CDA commits itself to the agenda of social change and uncovering of the manipulative power in society toward the liberation of the oppressed.

**Common Approaches to CDA**

Scholars using critical discourse analysis have employed an eclectic set of methodologies in order to unmask constructions of power and dominance in texts based on a wide variety of approaches. In this section, I focus on three commonly applied approaches: Wodak’s discourse-historical approach, van Dijk’s emphasis on discourse and cognition, and Fairclough’s views on the relationship between language use and wider social structures (Saarinen, 2007). This project foregrounded Fairclough’s approach to analysis that will be explained in greater detail. The other two approaches are discussed briefly below.

**Discourse-Historical.** Wodak is the main figure associated with the discourse-historical approach. Wodak’s research emphasized the contextualized nature of discourse within its present
state of occurrence but also explains the development of this discourse through a historical continuum. Her method involved tracing the history of phrases and arguments by studying original documents and ethnographic research and adopting a wide range of data collection techniques in the analysis of contemporary news reporting and political discourse. According to Wodak (1997), it is not viable to decipher the discursive strategies without understanding the historical/social background against which they were created.

**Cognitive-Discoursal.** The call to include cognitive psychology in CDA research is attributed to van Dijk. Van Dijk advocated an interdisciplinary approach to examining the cognition of the speaker and the processes involved in the production and comprehension of discourse. Van Dijk viewed ideologies as “interpretation frameworks” which “organize sets of attitudes” about modern society. Therefore, ideologies provide the “cognitive foundation” for the attitudes of various groups in societies, as well as the impetus to pursue their own goals and interests (1991, p. 36). Van Dijk and Villano. (2004) argued that “ideologies may be exhibited in many social practices” (p. 3). Among these practices, “discourse, that is, socially situated text and talk” may be considered as “one of the most crucial social practices” (p. 3).

Under this approach, discourse comprehension is an ongoing cognitive process, which operates both at a local or microstructural level and at a global or macrostructural level. At a microstructural level, each utterance is analyzed and encoded into memory; whereas macrostructural processes operate over a series of utterances to form a coherent representation by providing the summary of an extended discourse. Cognitively structured ideologies provide group cohesion by defining membership in a group as well as its tasks, activities, goals, norms, values, social position, and resources (van Dijk, 1995). From this perspective, ideology has both social and cognitive functions and, according to van Dijk (1995), ideology serves as the interface
between representations and processes underlying discourse and action and the societal position and interests of social groups. Understanding ideology in this manner demonstrates the ways power relations can be reproduced and legitimated at the ideological level to control other people and their group attitudes and attitude-producing ideologies (van Dijk, 1991). As a result, consumers of hegemonic discourses will behave out of their own “free will” in accordance with the interests of the powerful.

**Social discursive.** Fairclough’s (1995) social discursive approach is different from both the historical discursive and the cognitive discursive approaches in its emphasis on the dialectical relationship between language and other social practices. Fairclough’s CDA framework deconstructed aspects of society in order to critically investigate possible social inequalities as expressed, constituted, and legitimized by discursive practices, thereby making the opaque aspects of discourse more transparent. This approach emerged from critical theory (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Critical theory analyzes competing power interests between groups and individuals within a society, identifying who gains and who loses in specific situations (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). In accordance with critical theory, privileged groups often have an interest in reinforcing the status quo to protect their advantages. The means and dynamics of such efforts are typically a central focus of critical research.

Fairclough’s approach has primarily informed the research design of the present work. The three levels of analysis in this study are organized around Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional framework: textual aspects, discursive practices, and social practices. Fairclough’s (1992) CDA sought to explain how social injustices are produced, reproduced, and legitimized as well as provide an understanding of the agencies that institutionalize them and, above all, relate these interpretations to wider socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts. As applied to this
Fairclough’s CDA provides a tool to describe (1) how, when, and how often Black undergraduate women are addressed in academic journals, (2) the process by which these texts are produced in the peer-review enterprise, consumed within the context of student affairs culture, and how these discourses have been operationalized in student affairs practice, and (3) how the discursive construction of Black women situates this population in broader society.

Fairclough (1992) prescribed a social theory of discourse with a general methodological guide for critical discourse analysis. The figure below summarizes this blueprint for a comprehensive analysis in three distinct but interrelated levels of analysis: the text level, the discursive practice level, and the sociocultural level. These three dimensions of the model are explained below (Fairclough, 1995, p. 98).

Figure 3.1 Fairclough’s CDA Model (1995)

**Discourse as text.** The first dimension typically examines texts with a focus on the linguistic features of discourse. Choices and patterns in vocabulary (e.g., wording, metaphor), grammar (e.g., transitivity, modality), semantics, cohesion (e.g., conjunction, schemata), and text
structure (e.g., episoding, turn-taking system) should be systematically analyzed. Included in the
text dimension is intertextuality—how a certain text is linked to or interpreted in terms of other
texts or other discourses (Fairclough, 2003; Huckin, 1995).

**Discursive practices.** Discursive practices include all the factors that contribute to the
production and consumption of the text. Fairclough (1995) stated that it “involves various
aspects of the processes of text production and text consumption. Some of these have a more
institutional character where as others are discourse processes in a narrower sense” (p. 58).
Discourse practice refers both to the production and reception of messages within texts.
Participation in patterns of discursive practice constitutes social identities, relations, and cultural
models, but this same participation also allows for discursively driven reproduction or
transformation.

**Discourse as social practice.** This dimension is concerned with the prevalent social,
ideological, and hegemonic practices and how these practices shape and are shaped by discourses
(Fairclough, 1989). CDA at this level seeks to understand the wider socio-cultural, political,
ideological, institutional, and historical context, the structures surrounding the text, including
how they generate and establish power imbalances among groups, as well as facilitate the
marginalization and exclusion of these groups, while simultaneously representing the
possibilities of change and resistance.

**Methods**

There is no canonical way of conducting a critical discourse study. In fact, van Dijk
(1993) said that in order for a study to be most effective, it must draw from many approaches in
order to answer the questions of that project and account for the uniqueness of each context.
However, as stated previously, this study will draw heavily from Fairclough’s CDA.
Data Collection

Some higher education scholars have chosen to examine select journals based on the premise that these core journals were the “go to” sources for generalist information in the field (Hart, 2006; Kuh & Bursky, 1980; Love & Yousey, 2001; Renn, 2010; Silverman, 1997; Townsend et al., 2005). Visibility of topics in these core journals is presumed to be a representation of the visibility of an area or subfield within a broader field of higher education; however, for this dissertation, I was interested in a more comprehensive examination of journals in higher education. Bray and Major (2011) offered a more complete list of higher education journals as they polled faculty in higher education programs across the U.S. and identified a list of 49 publications that focus primarily on issues of concern to the field of higher education (See Appendix A). The premise of Bray and Major (2011) was to establish a measure of prestige among this set of journals, but it also served to compile a comprehensive list of higher education journals that includes generalist, student affairs, and functional area specific publications. The data used for this research were collected from this list of journals.

The corpus of the present study includes any articles addressing Black women undergraduate students. See Figure 3.2 for a list of the applied search terms. Please note that for data collection purposes, the term “Black,” as an identity descriptor was not used because search results yielded reference to the color black. Instead, the key word synonym feature of the database search function was used, and Black as a descriptor of identity was included as synonymous with African American. The inclusive search period is January 2003 to December 2013. Using the UlrichsWeb Global Series Directory (ulrichsweb.serialssolutions.com), I found that 46 of the 49 publications are indexed in one or more electronic databases. The remaining three publications were accessed directly from the publisher’s websites. The electronic
databases used allowed search options to be limiting to include or exclude specific publications, keywords, and time periods. The search terms listed below were chosen in order to render a comprehensive repertoire rather than an incomplete or cursory picture, as was the case when more specific search terms were used.

Table 3.1- Data collection search terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“African American”</th>
<th>AND</th>
<th>“Woman”</th>
<th>AND</th>
<th>Journal Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

For comparison purposes, I began with a broad search of articles addressing women, Blacks, and Black women. This search yielded 540, 242 and 39 results respectively. Upon initial retrieval of the search results regarding Black women, each article’s title and abstract were examined to determine if it specifically addressed undergraduate college students in U.S. institutions of higher education. Titles have served as a critical screening tool for practitioners and researchers. Similar analyses of journal literature have used article titles as found in tables of content in data collection (Buhrke, Ben-Ezra, Hurley, & Ruprecht, 1992; Townsend et al., 2005). Titles, however, provide limited information, and with the use of electronic sources as opposed to tables of content, abstracts were also readily available to provide additional insight into an article’s content. Of the 39 articles found in the search for Black women in these 49 publications, 17 specifically addressed Black women undergraduates in the title or abstract.

In further narrowing the search results, I noticed that two of the articles were book reviews and as secondary discussions of Black college women, they were excluded. An additional article was excluded as it was more pedagogical in focus and did not address any particular student population. The 14 remaining articles represent the dataset for the present
study. This dataset included one best practice article, one editorial, three qualitative studies, four quantitative studies, and five theoretical articles. With regards to prestige, four of the articles were published in Tier 1 journals, two were published in Tier 2 journals, and eight were published in Tier 3 journals. Of the 49 journals identified as higher education journals, these 14 articles were only found in six of them. The largest number of articles were published in 2003 (seven, primarily in the New Directions monograph edited by Mary Howard Hamilton), with one or two published most years up through 2012.

**Delimitations**

The scope of this study is delimited to English language journal articles published in the 49 journals identified by Bray and Major (2011) between 2003 and 2013 and is focused on the discourses regarding Black female undergraduate students in U.S. colleges and universities. The articles to be included will make specific mention of race and gender in the title and/or abstract with Black/African American or female as a primary identifier. For example, articles studying gender differences among Black students or racial/ethnic differences among women may be included.

**Data Analysis**

To prepare the data for analysis, the PDF files retrieved in the search were converted to MS Word documents to be uploaded into Dedoose, a web-based data analysis software package. Dedoose was selected for a number of practical reasons, namely the relatively low cost and flexibility of the web-based interface. Dedoose allows me to upload converted articles, highlight excerpts, and code them using terms I defined based on the theoretical framework and emergent themes. The analytical details of the data analysis process is provided below. Procedurally, the analysis took place in three cumulative phases. Initially, each article was read and notes on
broad themes were taken in order to assess patterns contributing to the idealized reader perspective. Secondly, each article was read once again in order to develop a list of inductive codes. These codes were then applied to the dataset using Dedoose. Finally, the codes were collapsed and merged until I arrived at the final findings.

As I approached the analysis, I did not do so with an instrument designed to evaluate whether or not the constructions of Black undergraduate women in higher education literature are right or wrong. Instead, my role as researcher was “to make choices at each point in the research itself, and make these choices transparent. It should also justify theoretically why certain interpretations of discursive events seem more valid than others” (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 65). Data analysis in this study took place at three levels. The first level described the major thematic constructions found in the dataset, the second level situates these constructions within the discourse production and sensemaking contexts of student affairs practice, and the third level situated the illuminated construction within broader U.S. society.

**Level one analysis.** Level one analysis addresses Fairclough’s first dimension—discourse as text was conducted in two steps (1) the idealized reader perspective and (2) intertextual analysis.

**Step 1a: Idealized reader perspective.** The work of Huckin (1995, 2002) provided a framework for assessing the idealized reader perspective. Huckin’s approach supplemented Fairclough’s CDA in the process of identifying broad themes as CDA is sometimes criticized on the grounds that the data analysis is complicated and requires much more cognitive processing than is practiced by average reader or those who read for a gist (Huckin, 1995). In response, Huckin has developed an approach to CDA that incorporates the standpoint of the average reader in the analysis equation. Huckin suggested that the analyst start by describing text in an
uncritical manner, looking for the general picture of the text prior to rereading the text in a more explicitly critical manner.

**Step 1b: Analyzing textual silences.** The next process in this first level of analysis was intertextual analysis. At this point, I compared one text to the other texts and how the texts draw on other discourses, both explicitly and implicitly (Fairclough, 1992). For Kristeva (1986), intertextuality implies, “the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history” (p. 39). All texts are intertextual, in the sense that each is a link in a chain of communication, or that each text contains within itself evidences of the histories of other texts. However, scholarly writing is required by convention to cite the instances in which the ideas of previous writings are drawn upon (American Psychological Association, 2010). An intertextual analysis in the current work paid specific attention to the less explicit reference to earlier discourses not explicitly citing other academic works. Furthermore, step 1a of analysis explored the authors’ choices with specific consideration given to

- How processes, people, objects, places and other social elements are represented;
- To what extent some elements are foregrounded, backgrounded or omitted;
- How Black women are being addressed and the angle that is being taken, including the most prevalent assumptions and presuppositions evident in the text (Fairclough, 2003; Huckin, 1995).

**Level 1 analytical tools.** The first of the analytic tools employed in level one is the idealized reader perspective. Frameworks suggested by Huckin (1995) and O’Halloran (2007) are combined to look at the data in an uncritical manner, like an ordinary, not purposefully discerning reader might. Typically, the idealized reader is looking for the general picture of the text without trying to position or angle it. In the case of this study, an idealized reader
framework centers the busy practitioner who reads for a gist and may not have either the time to spend or the effort to exert on analyzing the text beyond skimming the abstract and conclusions or, at best, reading the first two or three sentences in the lead in each section of the article.

The second analytical tool used in level one analysis is intertextual analysis. According to Fairclough (1992), intertextuality is “the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth” (p. 84). To paraphrase, intertextual analysis names the ways a text invites a reader to recall previous understandings when interacting with new information. This may be done explicitly by naming a memory or previous piece of knowledge or it may be implied, leaving the reader to fill in omissions based on what they already know.

Intertextual analysis is important because it shows how texts are produced and reproduced in the light of other social and discursive practices. The framework of critical race feminism will be used to provide a language for deconstructing the latent messages found in these narratives. Intertextuality may be demonstrated in two ways, manifest or constitutive intertextuality. Manifest intertextuality addresses the ways quotes or citations of previous works are selected and contextualized. Conversely, constitutive intertextuality refers to the ways texts are made up of undefined connotations and implications. Manifest intertextuality in this study is demonstrated in the conventions of academic writing such as in text citations.

My analysis, however, will focus on constitutive intertextuality in the form of textual silences. Textual silence is defined as “the omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand” (Huckin, 2002, p. 348). Huckin (2002) identified five types of textual silences: (1) speech-act silences, (2) presuppositional silences, (3) discrete silences, (4) genre-based silences, and (5) manipulative silences. Speech-act silence can be characterized as
an intentional silence with the express purpose of communicating a specific point. As stated earlier, this study focused on less transparent forms of intertextuality as the purposeful silence is not a convention of academic writing.

The remaining four types of silences are used to examine the aggregated textual silences present in the dataset as a whole. Presuppositional silences omit pertinent information, thus compelling the reader to access unspoken understandings implicitly understood to be shared and taken-for-granted knowledge between the text producer and receiver. Discreet silences are those that avoid stating sensitive information either to avoid offending the reader or to avoid infringing on the interest or privacy of those affected by the subject matter at hand. Genre-based silences are those that are governed by genre conventions. For example, research conducted in a positivist tradition may routinely leave out those details whose inclusion would foreground the researcher’s positionality for fear that such information may undermine the genre’s aura of objectivity. Finally, manipulative silences are those that deliberately conceal relevant information from the reader in order to further the interests of the writer or speaker. This type of silence relies on the reader’s or listener’s lack of awareness (Huckin, 2002).

**Level two analysis.** The second level of analysis is more interpretive, taking the constructions described in level one and placing them in the context of discourse production and consumption (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Level two analysis focuses on Fairclough’s second dimension—discourse as practice—focusing on the institutional contexts in which the text are produced and consumed as well as sensemaking and application on the part of the reader. At this level of analysis, interpretation is rooted in the researcher’s experiential knowledge and analysis within academic journals, the peer review process, and student affairs culture. This analysis involves situating the text within this wider context that contributes to this production and
consumption of messages about Black undergraduate women. In dealing with discursive practices, the following questions were considered:

- Why are certain issues/concerns rather than others chosen to be addressed?
- Why are topics addressed the way they are?
- What are the factors that influence and/or control scholars in their work?
- What impact may the messages regarding Black women in college have in the daily practices of student affairs practitioners?

**Level three analysis.** In the third level of analysis, Fairclough’s third dimension—discourse as social practice—is explored. Fairclough (2003) suggested that certain key elements in the composition of social practice be examined. This comprehensive analysis assists in understanding and interpreting the wider sociopolitical picture in which certain discourses and ideologies work and interact. Toward this end, I connected the conclusions of the analysis thus far to a wider social and cultural context by examining the discursive construction of Black undergraduate women within the culture of student affairs and the broader U.S. context by using the analytical framework of critical race theory and critical race feminism. The tenets and concepts of CRF facilitated an exploration of the complexities involved in the hegemonic process with regards to the construction of race and gender in U.S. society and its role in social and political exclusion and marginalization of Black women in higher education as well as explaining how the hegemonic process of academic journals persists.

**Methodological Summary**

I first attended specifically to CDA’s level one, description, where I explored the idealized reader perspective and examined textual silences as a tool of intertextuality. From there, I moved to CDA’s level two, interpretation, where I examined the context of the text’s
production and consumption within student affairs culture. Next, I examined CDA’s level three, explanation, where I explained how the authors’ choices reflect sociocultural practices that are situated within a larger discourse.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

The purpose of Chapter 4 is to share this study’s findings and provide an analytical discussion in an effort to address the research questions. The critical race feminism framework used in this study drives the analytical discussion. This chapter is organized in three sections, reflecting the three primary themes discovered in the analysis. Each theme is presented using Fairclough’s (1992) three levels of analysis. The analysis of data in this study resulted in the development of three major themes describing discourses of Black undergraduate women as evidenced in the dataset: (1) persistence in the face of adversity, (2) preeminence of interdependent relationships, and (3) Black women as race plus gender.

Presentation of Themes

While the three levels of analysis may appear to be discrete and linear, there is considerable overlap in the assumed perspectives in each. An excerpt from the dataset that illustrates that finding introduces the discussion of each theme. Please note that all excerpts from the dataset are presented as italicized block quotes. The first level identifies constructions of Black undergraduate women based on vocabulary and framing choices within the dataset. Furthermore, the dissuasion of level one analysis reflects the two distinct steps of analysis: (1) the idealized reader’s perspective, and (2) an analysis of constitutive intertextuality as evidenced by textual silences. The presentation of the textual analysis uses excerpts from the dataset with associated discussion following. The second level is a discussion of the vocabulary and constructions in the context of student affairs practice and the production of academic journals. The third level illustrates how constructions of Black undergraduate women reflect sociocultural practices and are linked to discourses in larger U.S. society. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the findings and discussion presented.
Theme One: Persistence in the Face of Adversity

Historically, the African American female image is resilient and strong. The implication is that she is surviving despite the negative influences of society. (Watt, 2006)

Theme One: Level One Analysis–Textual Practices

The first of the three themes is illustrated as follows.

Idealized reader perspective. Equipped with the messages found in the current dataset, the average reader would likely feel hopeful for the futures of the Black women with whom they work. The data tell the average reader that being Black and being a woman is difficult on a variety of fronts. Black women experience a lack of role models, a scarcity of equally yoked male romantic prospects, and isolation due to the low numbers of other Black women on many campuses. However, in spite of, or perhaps fueled by, all of these circumstances Black undergraduate women continue to enroll and graduate at higher rates than Black men.

These data illustrate the resourcefulness and adaptability of Black women in many collegiate situations. At times, these persistence strategies include maintaining close familial ties, spiritual practices, close friendships with other Black women, and an intrinsic drive to persevere. On occasion, these women will use campus resources such as counseling services, academic support programs, and/or leadership and involvement opportunities. There are instances where some of the Black women who come to campus do not make it to their goal of achieving a degree but so many more do.

Textual silences. Discussing the discourse of Black women’s persistence in the face of adversity, the authors leave it to be presupposed that Black women will continue to find a way to land on their feet—with or without structural or institutionalized supports. It is also left to be assumed that disproportionate adversity is a typical experience for Black undergraduate women.
In an effort to portray a positive image of Black women, authors employ the discrete silence in the fallacy of the “positive stereotype” that all Black women have the asset of being proven “survivors.” Lastly, the discreet silence is also present in the narrative, asserting that if Black women undergraduates do not succeed, it is because they were not strong enough or did not inherit the “survivor” gene synonymous with being female and Black.

In addition to what is presupposed and omitted in the interest of maintaining dignity, there are glaring absences regarding other possible perspectives from this narrative. Most strikingly, little is said about institutional responsibility to fundamentally shift so that the presupposed barriers are removed. The dataset provided many examples of the strategies employed by Black women, but little attention is given to the specific practices of white supremacist patriarchy that have created the current state of affairs. While the dataset is full of comparisons between Black women and many other populations, there is no discussion of what messages of being the example in communities where many are not expected to succeed does to Black women’s relationships with other marginalized groups. Finally, the data do not consider how this narrative impacts the psyche of Black women who struggle to overcome these circumstances and achieve their goals.

*Developing a healthy identity as an African American female is fraught with many challenges. African American college women often turn to spiritual beliefs to cope with the everyday struggles that come with living in a socially and politically oppressive system. For many African American college women, spirituality includes a search for meaning that shapes their identities, which in turn helps them to better cope with the negative messages they receive from society.* (Watt, 2003, p. 29)
Spirituality is only one example of how Black undergraduate women make meaning of and overcome the obstacles in their educational experience. More secular examples from the data illustrate other methods Black college women employ to better cope with the negative. One strategy is the formation of support groups, both organized and informal, where the women can provide support and encouragement to one another. Another mechanism is the encouragement from friends and family, who help to remind these women of why they are pursuing higher education. This motivation is often communal in nature as these women bear the internal and external expectations of being role models, trailblazers, and breadwinners for themselves, their families, and their communities. In essence, they can’t fail because there is too much at stake. The data reflect that, with this heavy burden, Black women undergraduates will gain a specific motivation to fuel them against their challenging circumstances.

Black female college students negotiate challenges beyond those of most college students, which often affect them emotionally, psychologically, and culturally. (Rosales & Person, 2003, p. 56)

All 14 articles in this dataset speak about the oppressive experiences of being Black and being a woman in the white supremacist, patriarchal system of higher education. However, this particular quote illustrates the reality of the specific place where race and gender intersect for Black women. This passage presupposes that Black women, to some degree, will arrive at, matriculate through, and/or depart from our campuses with diminished levels of mental, spiritual, and/or emotional wellbeing. This struggle is pervasive, as the articles—and this quote particularly—articulate. Furthermore, this quote has practical implications in the lived experiences of Black women beyond the challenges that other student populations typically face.
A growing body of research reports that African American students often experience isolation and other burdens relative to being underrepresented on college campuses (Allen, 1992; Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Walpole, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2008, 2009). Despite challenges, African American women have been relatively successful in navigating a pathway to higher educational attainment, outpacing their male peers in college enrollment and graduation (NCES, 2005). (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p. 2)

As addressed in Chapter 2, Black women have been posited as the new model minority because the population has demonstrated gains on a number of success indicators (educational attainment, economic upward mobility, etc.) while facing racial and gendered oppression. This passage and others in the dataset confirm the presence of this narrative in higher education literature. The idea of the positive stereotype is sometimes presented as a perverted representation of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). The difference between the narrative of Black women drawing on cultural wealth and the discrete silence of the positive stereotype, lies in the fact that the community cultural wealth model does not frame the communal assets of a group in opposition to another group. Similar to the original model minority narrative of Asian Americans, the tenacity of Black women is often an exemplar of what can be achieved with perseverance and hard work. Again, the underlying point is that the white supremacist, patriarchal system does not need to change. Instead, those who work hard enough can navigate the system and find a sense of belonging.

Lisa and Ariel eventually left college, in part because of these continual pressures between home and campus and in part because of the sense of “shock” that they felt
as women of color on a White campus....While Ariel and Lisa found the contradictory pressures too intense to let them stay in college, the other 28 women persisted. (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p. 22-23)

Most of the articles in this dataset were narratives of how Black women used varying strategies to mitigate their marginality and overcome, or excel, in the undergraduate experience. Few illustrations portrayed Black women as unsuccessful in this process; thus, the presumption may be that, generally, Black women achieve their educational goals. This passage acknowledges that there are instances where Black women are not able to withstand the experiences they face in college. The omitted text indicated by the ellipses details the specifics of Lisa’s and Ariel’s circumstances that prevented them from persisting. This discussion is followed with the assurance that the others were more successful, constructing the two named students as the exception. This discreet silence may appear to project the positive aspects of achievement but it silences the experiences of Black undergraduate women who are unsuccessful.

The problem with the persistence narrative that is absent from the dataset is the idea that when Black women undergraduates are valorized in such a way, they blame themselves for any indication that they are falling below the standard that is supposed to be their birthright. Based on what is read in these data, the average reader may never consider the true toll of the raced and gendered experience of Black college women. One may never ask what scars were left when Lisa and Ariel abandoned their goals. When readers rely on quantitative metrics of retention and graduation rates, one usually focuses on the statistic and not the full picture. In this case, we focus on the majority of Black female students who are successful and Lisa and Ariel are an afterthought, if they are mentioned at all.
Theme 1: Level 2 Analysis – Interpretation in Context

This narrative of overcoming struggle is taken as a matter of historical and current fact. As previously discussed, little attention is given to the ways institutions should be addressing this issue at a structural level. This lack of attention may be due, at least in part, to another manipulative silence. The social, cultural, and historical factors that have led to this struggle in college and university settings are also silent in the discourse. The literature in the dataset tells us of the historical struggles that have plagued Black women in higher education, but the conversations about the policies and practices that have facilitated these struggles are missing—we are given the what without the why.

Ahistoricism, or removing/misrepresenting the historical context of a phenomenon can be a form of manipulative silence in the “bootstraps” narrative of meritocracy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Ahistoricism works by diverting attention away from the socio-historical structures that made a cultural phenomenon possible. It relies on people’s collective short-term memory and encourages them to look at a situation as it stands in the present. If historical information is given, it is often distorted to share the aspects that support the dominant narrative.

When considering the narrative of persistence in the face of adversity in the process of journal production and knowledge dissemination, the superhero-like construction of the Black woman further silences the exposure of her actual experience. Not acknowledging the qualitative aspects of Black women’s construction of success reinforces the practice of not publishing research on Black women because the narratives tell scholars and editorial boards that there is no need to. Considering that the conventions of scholarly inquiry require that research address a problem, if current research and conventional wisdom have positioned Black undergraduate women as successful, there is no problem to be addressed by studying them.
Theme 1: Level 3 Analysis – Explanation within Broader Context

The expectation for Black women to live in constant struggle can be traced back centuries in U.S. history. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston (2006) crystalized the dreadful reality of the struggle for Black women at the intersection of race and gender when she penned the advice to a young woman from her grandmother, a former slave. In the passage below, Hurston uses the early 20th century dialect of southern Florida to illustrate how this younger woman is being prepared to expect a life of struggle, because she was born female and Black in America.

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (Hurston, 2006, p. 14)

The narrative of Black women college students continues this conversation between Nanny and Janie by telling generations of Black women students, and everyone working with them, how difficult the collegiate experience will be. While Nanny is preparing Janie to expect struggle, other messages assure Black women that they will overcome these struggles (Harris-Perry, 2011). Watt (2003) exemplified how this message is reflected in higher education literature as she highlighted the archetype of the strong Black woman and how she has persevered in the face of every possible obstacle throughout the course of history when she wrote: “Historically, the Black female image is resilient and strong. The implication is that she is surviving despite the negative influences of society” (p. 131).
**Theme Two: Preeminence of Interdependent Relationships**

As previous research has shown, strong social networks are key to the emotional well-being and academic success of African American women (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Jackson & Greene, 2000; Neal-Barnett & Smith, 1997). Sisterhood is a prevailing ethos within African American culture. The special closeness of Black women has been intergenerationally transmitted from its cultural roots in many African societies. (Bradley & Sanders, 2003, p.188)

**Theme Two: Level One Analysis—Textual Practices**

The second of the three themes is illustrated as follows.

**Idealized reader perspective.** Based on the messages in the dataset, the average reader would know that Black college women thrive, in large part, because of how they access and depend on their personal networks. These networks include the family and community of origin, close friends on campus, and also, Black women serving as faculty and administrators in the campus community. The support and guidance that these students find in these circles is essential to promoting their persistence. At times, these women may experience dissonance as they reconcile their role in the home community or family of origin with their new role of being a college student, while establishing a support network on campus.

This interdependence is reciprocal as the women actively give back to these networks by achieving their educational goals and providing support to others. Many of the scholars note that these relationships motivate Black women in the undergraduate experience because they know that their success benefits more than just themselves. The expectation to help others navigate the process—to be an example for others and to show the world that Black women do indeed achieve—can be a double-edged sword. While some find the pressure to be motivating, others
find it to be suffocating. During these times, support systems are crucial. Due to low numbers in some collegiate settings, many Black women have found these networks in ethnically heterogeneous settings, but communing with other Black women is most desirable.

**Textual silences.** The representation of the preeminence of interdependent relationships in the lives of Black undergraduate women presupposes that ensuring a critical mass of Black women at institutions of higher education will provide opportunities for meaningful relationships to flourish. In turn, Black women will continue to be successful. Furthermore, this representation simultaneously presents conflicting discrete silences in an effort to cast the most positive light on the role communities of origin play in a student’s ability to thrive. Some of the articles suggest that staying connected to families and communities of origin helps Black women maintain a healthy identity while others suggest that the inability to sever ties with the home community leads to isolation in the campus community.

While this literature provides messages of how Black women are better served when they are connected to other Black women, there is little discussion of how these relationships are fostered or formed. Is it to be assumed that they are organically established due to the presence and proximity of other Black women, or is there a responsibility to intentionally cultivate them? If they are to be intentionally developed, who is responsible for creating opportunities to make that happen? Furthermore, while there is acknowledgement of the varied experiences of Black women, those differences are not given a nuanced treatment with specific regard to intersecting identities. How do other intersecting social identities factor into the role of relationships for Black college women? Is there a difference among familial and community relationships for queer women, those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds or parental educational level? We, as readers, are unable to answer, because these questions are not explored. Despite the
acknowledgement of difference, the dataset discusses Black women as monolithic, and fails to address a number of issues, such as: (1) the diversity within the Black female experience, (2) the various types of communities from which Black women come, and (3) the variety of relationships Black women have within their communities. By failing to nuance the diversity of Black undergraduate women, this manipulative silence would make it seem that all Black women students experience community, family and relationships in the same way.

_The number of African American women on college campuses is also critically important for retention and success of black women students, faculty, and staff (Myers, 2002). The number of African American women on campus is important in sharing ideas and concerns that may be common to African American women. (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003 p. 98)_

This passage illustrates a theme throughout much of the dataset regarding critical mass. By emphasizing that the “number of African American women on college campuses is also critically important,” it is implied that Black women will find it less stressful to study and work in a place that has this critical mass. To aspire to this critical mass absent of structural change, it is further implied that these women are providing support and mentoring to one another. Thus, once the institution has provided this space for a critical mass, its job is done. The institution has no active role in supporting Black women other than just getting them there to support one another. Furthermore, the implications for practice across the dataset provide promising practices of ways Black women can support Black women.

As is the case with manipulative silences, absent are the strategies for those who do not identify as Black women to endeavor to “[share] ideas and concerns that may be common to Black women.” Even if a critical mass is achieved, does that assume that Black women will only
work with Black women? Black faculty and administrators are expected to teach everyone and Black women students will be expected to learn from everyone. However, even if the numbers on campus allowed for Black women to mentor one another, it still would not be sufficient because the entire campus community must be held accountable at a structural level. Even if critical mass is the answer to supporting Black women undergraduates, how have these relationships taken shape? Is the onus on the students to seek these relationships? Should Black female faculty and staff be seeking out students to mentor? Or, is a cultural shift in the ethos of the institution required?

Ryan described her sense of family responsibility as a desire to bring family along by serving as a representative from her family and her town to attend college: I don’t know if they’re getting inspired or they’re just saying “one of us are doing it,” because that’s sort of how my family works. You don’t have a group that does it. You have a representative. So if one person does it, then everybody gets credit. So if you have a doctor in the family, then your whole family must be smart. (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p. 16)

Contrary to the discourse of finding supportive communities of Black women on campus, we have the changing role of relationships with families and communities of origin. When addressing these types of continued relationships, the dataset is divided. Some scholars (Bradley & Sanders, 2003) indicate that the strong kinship that Black women feel with their families and home neighborhoods anchor them in their identity, which allows them to persist and remain themselves in the collegiate setting. Others scholars (Winkle-Wagner, 2009) insist that Black women undergraduates will best grow into their new identity as college students once they have severed, or at least altered, their relationships with families and home communities. When the expectations of those communities are for Black women to “bring family along by serving as a
representative,” it can be presupposed that this expectation motivates Black women toward completion of their degrees. Alternately, it can also be presupposed that this expectation is a burden that can paralyze students and restrict the likelihood of their retention, persistence, and graduation. Without additional context regarding the possible harmful impacts of familial expectations, this discreet silence would lead the average reader to assume the positive.

When considering the role of family and community of origin, the authors in this dataset do not address how other social identities factor into the importance or influence of these relationships. We know from other student affairs scholars that queer students, students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, or students with parents with varied educational level enter the college experience with different lenses. A non-critical examination of these data would read Black women as monolithic because the articles are not nuanced to address the diversity of the Black female identity. The various types of communities Black women come from, and the variety of relationships they possess, have gone unexplored. From these data, it would seem that all Black women students experience community and family relationships in the same way.

**Theme 2: Level 2 Analysis–Interpretation in Context**

The narrative of the primacy of interdependent relationships in the success of Black undergraduate women, specifically relationships with other Black women, is also present in the discourses on student affairs practice in this dataset. As is customary in academic writing, each article enumerates how the insights of the work may be applied in practice and additional research. The discourses on improving student affairs practice for Black women exploits the narrative of relationships by suggesting add-on services that rely on other Black women to provide the remedy such as group approaches to therapy, convening sister circles, mentoring programs, and simply ensuring a critical mass of Black women. Instituting these interventions
allows colleges and universities an opportunity to demonstrate the ways in which they help Black women but still perpetuate hegemony as the default. When student services are not explicitly identity conscious (multicultural student affairs, LGBTQ student services, etc.), mainstream becomes code for normative whiteness. My experience tells me that Black women currently enrolled as students and Black women currently serving as faculty and staff are excited to have something in the form of limited support for these interdependent relationships rather than nothing. That said, these solutions focus solely on Black women teaching other Black women to navigate white- and male-privileged institutions, rather than institutional change to support Black women in every level of the organization. This is a clear case of interest convergence or the proverbial win-win situation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

However, as is typical with interest convergence, these efforts to provide space for Black women to support one another are in jeopardy when the interests of the university change and there is a new trending marginalized population (i.e., Black men, undocumented students, women in STEM, etc.). Without a radical reimagining of what it means to take active responsibility, institutions will be unable to foster a supportive atmosphere for all students and practitioners will continue to develop programs and initiatives that will patch up one cohort of Black women after another in the hopes that they will be among those who “make it” or in other words conform enough to successfully graduate from systems designed for white, male students.

In The Miner’s Canary, Guinier and Torres (2009) proposed that students of color are like the canary in the coal mine, more sensitive to the ills of the academy than most other student populations. Guinier and Torres’s thesis was that the academy is poisoned, and students of color are the most severely impacted population; furthermore, all members of the community experience negative consequences of white supremacist patriarchy. They went on to argue that
many of the interventions in place to support the needs of marginalized populations amount to fitting the canaries with little gas masks as opposed to really understanding and changing what makes the environment toxic. The literature in this dataset details the Black women’s symptoms and also offers suggestions for ways to fit these women with little gas masks. What is clearly absent is a call for institutions to be critical of their fundamental structure in terms of policy, practice, and customs.

The call to action that is missing in the discourse of institutional responsibility begins with increased access to and application of critical, scholarly examinations of the experiences of Black undergraduate women and how various relationships impact that experience. If journals focus on Band-Aid approaches to identifying and solving how Black women students are (not) being supported, future scholars and practitioners do not have the information needed to explore the issue in its historical context. Furthermore, without reflection in the official discourse, journal producers make it difficult to acknowledge the legacies that racism and sexism have, perpetually, on the lives of Black women students. Without the opportunity to reference diverse perspectives from the literature, scholars and practitioners must attempt to understand the current experience of Black women undergraduates in a vacuum. Ideally, this ahistoricism will be alleviated by more complete characterizations in higher education journals of how institutions may address the needs of Black undergraduate women as opposed to recycling ways that Black women can help themselves.

**Theme 2: Level 3 Analysis–Explanation within Broader Context**

The articles analyzed for this study connect the ability of Black women to overcome struggles with the idea of connectedness with other Black women. The premise purported through this literature idealizes the ways in which Black women support one another through the
obstacles inherent in the white male systems of higher education. These relationships are, according to this literature, essential to the success of Black female college students (Bradley & Sanders, 2003; Watt, 2003).

Historically in the U.S., the survival of Black people has often depended on the collective work of the communities and access to extended social networks. Carol Stack (1975) termed these networks as fictive kinships. Fictive kin is a framework used by anthropologists and ethnographers to describe forms of kinship or social ties that are not based solely on biological relationships. This deconstruction of what it means to be a part of a family takes the concept of a community a step further, extending the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of family to those with whom there is a shared experience, origin, or ideology.

The benefits granted to this extended network are to contribute to the rearing of children, encouragement of educational achievement, being an advocate, and providing support in times of need. In return for what is taken from the collective, all members are expected to contribute their gifts and talents to the network. The prospect and pressure to give back to the network can be motivating to some members as it provides them with a sense of purpose and a belief in something bigger than oneself. Stack (1974) also found that these expectations could also be overwhelming and a source of great stress. The push and pull of this sense of obligation was also reflected within the constructions of Black female undergraduates in this study. As the following excerpt from the Black feminist blog, ForHarriet.com illustrates, there were very clear implications for the role of relationships among women in fictive kin networks.

As black women we are both blessed and a blessing to others. And often, we choose to share our blessings with one another in the form of sisterhood. This sisterhood in action is witnessed by taking care of each other...I offer that it is when we place value in our
ability to bring a moment of peace and connection to another sister in distress. After all, we never know when the tables will turn and we’ll find ourselves needing a sister’s hand. We should do this for and with each other from the heart and with good intention, for good returns good.

Our kinship through sisterhood is deeply rooted in generations of mystical relationships that served to help us survive life’s many challenges: from family dysfunction; to rumors and mean-spirited ploys (real and imagined); and anything else that threatened to impede our growth. We must accept and reclaim the traditions that black women before us used to build community. By doing so, this will bring us closer to our purpose. By following the examples of our ancestors—who were able to build and sustain through incredible odds—we can accomplish so much. (Williams, 2015)

Bradley and Sander (2003) echoed the presence of the narrative of the primacy of Black women’s associations with others, in college and in broader society, in the quote introducing Theme 2. Specific priority is given to relationships among Black women—sisterhood. The tendency to congregate in these ways is perceived to be almost innate, having been “intergenerationally transmitted” similar to how eye color or hair texture may be transmitted genetically. The narrative of the interdependent and relational nature of Black women as persistence presupposes that success of (some) Black women undergraduates will happen as long as they have another for support. Missing from the narrative of the role social networks play in the persistence of Black women are reasons why Black women must rely on one another as opposed to being able to identify and access institutional support systems that meet their specific needs. Missing from the narrative is the responsibility institutions have to these women.
Theme Three: Black women as race plus gender

Understanding why the experiences of African American women are different from those of other women and those of African American men is steeped in the historical progression and ideology of black people in the United States. (Howard Hamilton, 2003b, p.19)

Theme Three: Level One Analysis—Textual Practices

The final of the three themes is illustrated as follows.

Idealized reader perspective. Experiencing race and experiencing gender are precarious processes for Black undergraduate women. Coming to understand how to be Black and how to be female are often treated as separate tasks, to be addressed in that order. The struggle to establish one’s ethnic and gendered sense of self occurs in addition to the developmental and transitional issues faced by all college students. Informed by these 14 articles, the average reader would understand that the most salient identity for Black women is race. As such, racial identity is the most appropriate lens through which to begin to examine the historical and contemporary conditions of Black women in college. While Black women may occupy other social locations including gender, class, and sexual orientation among others, race is foremost.

Textual silences. When I take a deeper look at what is not explicitly stated in the race first narrative, I see that race is used most often, but at times race and gender are used interchangeably to foreground the racialized experiences of Black women in college in a manipulative silence that distances Black women from gendered association with other women. Furthermore, while all of the authors in this study acknowledge the intersectional identities of Black women to some degree, there is a clear hierarchy of identities with race being the default
as most salient. Implicit in the narrative of the primacy of racial identity is that this condition is terminal as living with this disaggregation of identity and the subsequent disequilibrium is a given in the lives of Black women throughout their undergraduate experience.

The genre of academic writing requires authors to situate their work within existing scholarship; perhaps the insistence of using race as the point of analysis for Black undergraduate women is based in the paucity of writings in higher education centering the intersectional identity of Black undergraduate women as well as the virtual absence of literature situating Black women in the context of gender. Given the centrality of race in discourses of Black women, their gendered experience is backgrounded as a result of this genre-based silence. The manipulative silence of how Black women experience gender leads us back to the presupposition that discourses of gender oppression are absent or within; a racialized context is reserved for white women.

Their voices remain unheard because many people assume that issues that pertain to women in general or to African Americans in general pertain to African American women in the same ways. (Howard Hamilton, 2003a, p. 1)

The scholars in this dataset drew, interchangeably, from discourses of race and discourses of gender in order to account for the raced and gendered experiences of Black women. Yes, Black women are Black. Yes, Black women are women. However, it is dangerous to assume and perpetuate the idea that Black women experience their raced and gendered identities in the same ways as Black men and other women.

There are many references in the text to women and students of color, women and minorities, women and Blacks as a means to provide background information on the phenomenon of Black college women. By not explicitly addressing the unique standpoint at the
intersection of race and gender, it is presupposed that readers should add together what is known about these two social locations to explain Black women. The conventions of academic writing, specifically the requirement of providing context via a literature review make it easy to fall into the trap of additive thinking with regards to Black women. We give information on Black people, we give information on women, and the two added together gives us an understanding of Black women. While there has been a dearth of truly intersectional theorizing in higher education literature, there is a considerable body of work in Black feminist scholarship (Collins, 2000a; hooks, 1990; Lorde, 1984). Howard-Hamilton (2003b) demonstrated an effort to illuminate this dataset by presenting Black feminist thought and critical race theory as an option, but even in doing so, she made race the primary identifier with gender as a modifier of race.

_Systemic racism is perhaps the most serious obstacle faced by African American women in higher education._ (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 100)

This statement effectively sums up the race plus gender narrative of Black undergraduate women by asserting that race (above gender or any other identity) accounts for the current condition of Black undergraduate women. Such a statement totally silences the gendered experience. Gender seems to be an add on in discourses about Black women and a cursory one at that. Based on the data, the best choice is to contextualize Black women in comparison to Black men and, occasionally, white women—two subjugated populations.

What’s missing in this discourse of race and gender is an examination of Black undergraduate women’s experience in the context of the bastion of race and gender privilege in this country—white men. So the narrative of race plus gender serves the needs of patriarchal white supremacy by providing a false sense of achievement and model minority to divide and conquer. While it is problematic that Black women are not theorized in terms of our own
intersectional experience, this concern is further compounded by the attention being diverted from the clear and present lag behind more dominant groups.

Since so many studies compare Black women to Black men, of course it seems like we are doing just fine. When writers compare any group to the population that has been systematically underserved for years, they are bound to appear in a more positive light; however, when the context is expanded beyond race and Black women are compared to white women or white men, we see just how ok we are not. I wonder how these context-setting discourses might be different if gender was centered and race the additive. That’s not appropriate either but it would speak to how we contextualize discourse and the difference it makes in how it’s consumed.

As hooks (1981) discusses, African American women often choose their race over gender to align with African American men in the struggle for racial justice. (Watt, 2003a, p.330)

This final argument arises more from the silences that illuminate the presuppositions. Because Black women in this dataset are contextualized centering race over gender, the discourse of womanhood is framed as being reserved for white women. Black women are Black, and their racial identity is able to stand alone, but Black women cannot be framed as women without the “Black” qualifier. Understanding that discourses are socially constructed, I question the assertion credited to bell hooks in the quote above. Black women may not know that choosing gender and aligning with other women is a possibility.

**Theme 3: Level 2 Analysis–Interpretation in Context**

The narrative of race plus gender provides justification for comparing within racial group as a means of understanding the experiences of Black undergraduate women. Analysis within
racial group also justifies why scholars and student affairs practitioners have not prioritized the needs of Black women. Construction of experience situated in such a simplistic way does not allow for the subject to be examined from all possible perspectives. Most often, Black undergraduate men are the group in opposition to Black undergraduate women in the literature. This comparison presupposes a pathological deficit among Black men. The other side of the proverbial coin to the shining example of the Black woman is the cautionary tale of Black men. After all, the two groups come from the same communities and suffer the same racial discrimination. All Black students face adversity, yet Black women are doing great; if only Black men could be more like them.

What does it do to the fabric of Black communities on college campuses to use this approach? The process of differential racialization can help us understand this. With this concept, critical race scholars have drawn attention to the ways the dominant society racializes different minoritized groups at different times, often in response to shifting needs such as the labor market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Typically, this concept is considered across oppressed racial or ethnic groups but it also applies within a single racial group manifesting itself instead along gendered lines. The differential construction of Black men and Black women in student affairs practice creates an atmosphere of comparison, priority and competition among Black women and men as evidenced by the number of specific comparisons of Black women to Black men in the dataset. As alluded to earlier in this dissertation, this constant comparison has manifested in student affairs research and practice in the form of more than 15 years of studies, awareness campaigns, and interventions in response to the state of emergency of Black men.

Additionally, by constructing Black women undergraduates in contrast with Black men in discourses of student affairs, practitioners also internalize the narrative of the identity of women
defaulting to the experiences of white women. As such, interventions designed to address or remediate gender-based discrimination are not often accessed by Black women. Women’s centers, women’s retreats, women’s leadership programs, and research on women have defaulted to a normative assumption of whiteness. For example, the data collection process in this study retrieved more than 500 articles about women. Some of these articles did address the racial identity of the participants but it was not a primary unit of analysis; it was simply a descriptor. The research was about a single woman’s experience, and it happened that some of the women were Black (Linder & Rodríguez, 2012; McAtee, 2006).

**Theme 3: Level 3 Analysis–Explanation within Broader Context**

Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde eloquently highlights the complexity of intersectionality. For Lorde and other Black lesbians, one’s identity as a Black lesbian is the meaningful whole; it is not a mere addition of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and sex/gender. Lorde (1984) stated, “I find that I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying the other parts of the self” (p. 120). For the purpose of narrow scope, this study focuses on the intersection of race and gender; however, clear acknowledgement is made to the variety of social locations Black women hold. The narrative of Black women being race plus gender works to actively negate the intersectional realities of Black women.

The discourse of Black women’s identity as being additive establishes a justification for contextualizing Black women and their needs in terms of Black people with a secondary, often superficial acknowledgment of gender and other social identities. Symptomatic of the race plus gender narrative, readers are to understand that both race and gender are at play in the lives of Black women but insist that the only way to broach those experiences is by exploring the
experiences of Black people. Discourses of pervasive racism and its impact on Black people who are women are extensively explored in this dataset. However, discourses of patriarchy’s role, both in the broader society and within Black communities, is acutely deficient.

As strange as it sounds, if one read the dataset in this study or consumed the mass media message regarding Black women, they may think that Black women were not actually women. The Victorian discourse of the cult of true womanhood and the virtues of femininity and the historical definition of femaleness were reserved for white middle class women, or at least off limits to Black women. Sojourner Truth's speech to the Akron Convention in 1851 articulates the absence of a reflection of Black women in what it meant to be a woman at the turn of the 20th century.

Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gib me any best place!” And raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, "And a'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm!” (and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power). "I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear de lash as well! And a'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chile and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And a'n't I a woman? (Truth, 1851)

Fast forward more than 100 years and hooks (1982) asked the same question, “Ain’t I a woman?” as indicated by the title of her volume on Black feminism. I often recall this commentary given by Sojourner Truth and the work of hooks addressing how Black women have
been systematically excluded from feminist discourse as it is so representative of what I continue to see in mainstream feminist discourse and popular media treatment of women’s issues. Frequently, there is a refusal to acknowledge and at best, willful ignorance the hardships facing Black women in their races and gendered experience. Ultimately, feminism without intersectionality is an exercise of maintaining hegemony. Women who seek to remediate parietal practices, but who are indifferent to racism and their own racist practices are looking out for themselves or at most, trying to protect the privilege their racial identity affords them.

A satirical treatment of this reality can be found in the Saturday Night Live sketch that aired originally in April of 2015. This sketch spoofed the movie, *A League of Their Own*, depicting an experimental professional baseball league for women during World War II while the men were away fighting.

Male coach: You dang girls. How am I supposed to coach this team? You’re nothing but a bunch of dang girls. (woman cries) Are you sobbing? There’s no sobbing in baseball. This is pathetic. I’m going to go drink a Coca-Cola that still has cocaine in it.

White woman 3: Don’t let him get you down Kat. He’s just a big ole bully.

White woman 2: Well maybe he’s right. Maybe girls shouldn’t play baseball.

White Woman 3: Of course he’s not right.

White woman 4 (male actor): Yeah, we should be allowed

White woman 5: We can play this game as well as any man

White woman 2: You mean that?

White woman 3: I sure do. Now say it-women can play baseball

White Woman 2: Women can play baseball (everyone repeats).

Black Woman 1: So can I play baseball?
(Long pause)

Black Woman 1: What? What is it?

White woman 1: Its just, we already have the woman thing, ya know? And we don’t want to complicate it

Black Woman 2: Oh I get it, it’s because I’m Black

White Woman 3: No, no, no, no, it’s not that

Black Woman 1: Then what is it?

White Woman 3: No, it is that

White woman 2: People are actually pretty ticked that we’re doin it. Imagine if… ya know

Black Woman 1: No I don’t know

White Woman 4 (male actor): Doll, face it. It’s because you’re not a classic beauty like the rest of us.

White Woman 2: That’s not it.

White woman 1: Look we’re gonna pave the way for Black women in professional baseball but it’s gonna take time.

White Woman 3: You know the plan- first white women are allowed to play baseball, then Black men are allowed. Then all women are allowed to play. Underhand, with a big ball like a child.

White Woman 4 (male actor): That’s a good plan

Black Woman 2: What about me? Can I play?

White Woman 3: This blows because we could really use her on the team

White Woman 5: Forget about the team, we could use her in the war
White Woman 4 (male actor): Yea, send her overseas to kill some krauts

Black Woman 2: So you’re saying I can play?

White Woman 1: Ok. Here’s the thing--while our husbands are away, we’re the racists

Black Woman 1: Look ladies, whether you like it or not--Black, white, we’re all women and we’re all in this together

White Woman 3: Hey maybe she’s right girls. Maybe they should be allowed to play

Black Woman 1: Really?

Yea (cheers from all the women)

Male Coach: Listen up. I got some good news. The war is over. The men are coming back. So get off the field and don’t ever come back.

(“Their Own League,” 2015)

Scholars have identified racial humor as an important site that might disrupt the impasse created by the unchallenged acceptance of dominant narratives (Rossing, 2012, 2014). This five-minute sketch was ripe with raced and gendered discourse. The primary being a blatant acknowledgement of the racial and gender hierarchy of the U.S.—whites before Blacks and within racial groups, men before women. Similar to the messages during women’s suffrage, Black women must wait their turn. There is also insightful commentary on the Eurocentric ideal of beauty as one of the characters notes that the Black women can’t play because they don’t meet constructions of classic beauty. I am certain that it was rather intentional that this line was spoken by a male actor in a dress—even a white man in a dress has more claim to be beautiful than Black women. Lastly, these women took very seriously their role of holding down the racist fort in the absence of white men further reinforcing the race/gender hierarchy of white supremacist patriarchy.
Summary

The analysis of data in this study resulted in the development of three major themes describing discourses of Black undergraduate women as evidenced in the dataset: (1) persistence in the face of adversity, (2) preeminence of interdependent relationships, and (3) Black women as race plus gender. The idealized reader, who takes things at face value, has an unchallenged trust in the truth of what has been presented by the authors in regard to these three themes and thus unknowingly carries away a reinforced meganarrative about the experience of Black undergraduate women. The introduction of the critical lens in this dataset removed the idealized aspect with the hope to inspire a critically conscious perspective on the part of the text producer and consumer.
CHAPTER 5 OVERVIEW, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this final chapter is to articulate key conclusions based on the findings of this study. The goal is not only to provide answers to this study’s research questions, but also to provide implications and conclusions for higher education. To achieve this goal, the chapter consists of four sections. First, I present an overview of the study. In the second section I focus on providing answers to the research questions, directly followed by implications. In the third section, I situate this study in the context of existing—and potentially future—scholarship. Finally, after I share the broader picture related to this study, I provide a conclusion and final thoughts.

Revisiting the Research Questions

This study was built around two primary research questions related to the depiction of Black undergraduate women in higher education journals and the impact of these depictions. In this section I revisit each of these questions and provide answers based on the analysis conducted and the critical lens through which these journals and articles were examined.

How Have Black Undergraduate Women Been Constructed in Higher Education Journals?

In seeking to answer this first question, a number of themes emerged. One of the aims of critical discourse analysis is to name the unarticulated understandings present in text. A second aim is to connect those constructions to the larger context of the society in which they exist. In this study, that meant connecting narratives of Black undergraduate women to narratives of Black women more broadly. As higher education is situated in a U.S. context, the narratives of the broader U.S. are reflected in higher education literature. Based on the finding of this study, I was able to link common narratives of Black undergraduate women to broader narratives of Black women in the U.S. The three primary constructions identified by this research project were (1) persistence in the face of adversity, (2) preeminence of interdependent relationships,
and (3) Black women as race plus gender. These constructions are not clearly demarcated and serve to reinforce one another.

In the narrative of persistence in the face of adversity, the authors present Black women’s ability, and necessity, to be resourceful and resilient in their higher education experience. Under this narrative, readers of higher education journals learn that Black undergraduate women face disproportionate barriers in college, and despite a lack of systemic supports, the population has been able to persist and succeed. The construction of the strong Black woman manifests itself in the theme of persistence in the face of adversity. Similar to the ways the strong Black woman construction has led to an erasure of the struggles and vulnerabilities of Black women in this country, the persistence in the face of adversity narrative has led to a minimization of the needs for concerted interventions for Black undergraduate women on campuses across the country.

The second theme in this study is the narrative of the preeminence of interdependent relationships. According to the data, Black undergraduate women are most successful when they have a close support network. These networks provide space for Black undergraduate women to receive and provide support and are formed without substantial institutional provision. As historians and researchers have indicated throughout U.S. history, the authors in this study have also noted the role community and close networks play in the experience of Black women. The narrative of the primacy of interdependent relationships highlights the necessity for Black women to develop deeply rooted relationships with one another because no one else recognizes their plight or demonstrates an investment in providing assistance.

In the narrative of Black women as race plus gender, the data show that the experiences of Black undergraduate women are most often rooted in the context of gender differences within race—with race being the most salient marker of identity. The histories of racism and sexism in
this country have not typically established space for the intersectional experiences of Black women. When considering racialized and gendered experiences, women defaults to white women and Black defaults to Black men. Efforts to center the experiences of Black women, however, remain rooted in the experiences of Black people and rarely in the experiences of women. Thus, Black women have been constructed as Black people who are women, or as race plus gender.

Each of these narratives reinforces and builds upon the others in the ways Black undergraduate women are constructed in higher education journals and beyond. The narrative of the prominence of interdependent relationships reinforces the narrative of the strong Black woman because it perpetuates the notion that Black women are only able to depend on themselves and as such, must be able to persevere and do not have the space to experience vulnerability, insecurity, or doubt. The narrative of Black women as race plus gender reinforces the need to build heterogeneous networks of Black women because members of other groups are unable or unwilling to understand the unique standpoint of the intersection of race and gender and allow Black women to live fully in both social locations without pressure to align themselves more closely with their race or their gender. The interplay of these narratives has clear consequences for discourses of student affairs practice.

**How Do These Constructions Impact Discourse on Student Affairs Practices?**

In addition to naming the themes in the literature, I sought to dig more deeply into the “so what” piece of this study. Why does it matter how Black undergraduate women are depicted? Again, in exploring this question I identified multiple themes. The priority given to race in the identities of Black women and the insistence on comparisons within race prevents student affairs professionals from having an accurate picture of the state of affairs of Black women. When
compared to the group that is constructed as in a state of emergency—Black men—almost anything looks like success. Furthermore, these narratives of Black women have constructed Black undergraduate women as a niche to be filled only by Black women. Under this construction, no one else has to learn about the needs of Black women as evidenced by the absence of literature on Black women in generalist publications. As long as discourses of student affairs practice understand Black women in these ways, nothing has to change. Resources, both human and financial, are allocated based on perceived need. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, discourses of other student populations (Black men, undocumented students, women in STEM, etc.) in higher education journals have resulted in the allocation of resources to address their needs. Based on these constructions, there is no perceived need. In these narratives, coupled with seemingly positive quantitative success metrics, student affairs scholars and practitioners have placed a low priority on the qualitative experience of Black undergraduate women as reflected by the absence of systemic institutional interventions or fundamental shifts in policy and practice in the discourse of student affairs practice.

The Findings and the Process of Sensemaking

This study sought to call attention to the opaque subtext of the constructions of Black women undergraduates by providing insight into the representation of a group often rendered invisible, silenced, misrepresented, and ignored in higher education and broadly. These findings also provide significant insights for understanding sensemaking processes.

The findings of this study provide concrete examples of the interplay of new information and existing constructs in the sensemaking process. As previously mentioned in this dissertation, brain science teaches that reality depends more on what we already believe than what is being learned (Wagner et al., 1998). When we examine findings of this study in cognitive terms, we
learn that the text producer and the text consumer each construct a shared image based on their personal experience and collective social agreements. Without the prompt to be reflexive in how messages are interpreted, readers are not likely aware that they are subliminally recalling dominant narratives as they intake journal articles. As a result, when student affairs practitioners read messages that construct Black undergraduate women as persistent in the face of adversity, dependent upon interdependent heterogeneous relationships, and as race plus gender, readers are unwittingly drawing upon narratives of the strong Black woman, innate sisterhood, and not “really” women (Gephart, 2007; Hammersley, 2003).

Understanding the sensemaking model as described here makes it possible to identify discourses and the related social agreements in order to disrupt power dynamics because discourse is never neutral (Townsend et. al., 2005). Much of the sensemaking process appears to be individual and subjective, allowing for a great deal of variation. However, public discourse is ideologically shaped, drawing on well-established social orientations, attitudes, values, and other group beliefs in the same ways we do so as individuals (Gephart, 2007; Potter, 1987).

**Implications**

The implications for this study relate to the experiences of Black undergraduate students but have meaning for those who work with and support those students. The primary beneficiary population for the findings of this project will be Black women undergraduates. While it is not likely that many undergraduate students will read this document, it is my sincere hope that calling attention to how we know what we think we know about this population will, in time, improve the experiences of Black undergraduate women. Centering Black women specifically in this project designed to question the production and dissemination of knowledge claims is
important because Black women traditionally have been preceded by white men, white women, and Black men in importance and standing.

While this may not be a revelation to many, we must continue to call it out and must not allow ourselves to be desensitized to this truth. The conditions for Black women in our institutions are not simple matters of unchangeable fact. The reality is that the circumstances experienced by these students do not have to remain stagnant. If higher education as a system is reimagined with a critical consciousness, it can be transformative. As a result we have the power to create a new normal. This new normalization provides benefits and opportunities not just for Black undergraduate women, but for all of those in higher education and—by extension—provides benefits and opportunities within the larger society. By rejecting these constructions of Black women, we disable a tool of white supremacist patriarchy that keeps different groups across intersectional identities from connecting in ways meaningful to all involved.

This study sought to call attention to the opaque subtext of the constructions of Black undergraduate women. This study provides insight into the representation of a group often rendered invisible, silenced, misrepresented, and ignored in higher education and broadly. As a result of the exposition of the influences of dominant narratives in higher education journals, I am able to provide significant insights for student affairs practice and higher education journal production as well as further research.

It is worth noting that this critical analysis shines a spotlight not on what is missing alone. Rather, through this study I sought to dig deeply into what is said rather than what is left unsaid. While silence marginalizes individuals and groups, putting language to the experiences of different populations can also be marginalizing.
For Future Practice

While there are broad observations related to these implications, there are also specific areas that can be informed by this study. First, student affairs practitioners can benefit from thinking more broadly and holistically and less categorically about the experiences of Black undergraduate women. Looking for the individual story and experience, rather than categorizing and boxing in these students, will empower them to move beyond and to exceed expectations. Second, it is important that journals look more carefully at what truth (or myth) they are perpetuating. Are editors and boards looking simply to replicate what has been shared and “proven,” or are they looking for broader pictures, experiences, and datasets that can tell additional truths about the experience of Black undergraduate women?

In journal production. Words matter. The words and language journals ascribe to the experiences of Black female undergraduates most definitely matter. It is imperative that journal producers be more cognizant of the role of language, discourse, and context. With this knowledge, they may make greater effort to provide a balanced variety of perspectives and remedy the paucity of truly intersectional literature, specifically with regards to Black women. Additionally, editorial boards should be more mindful of trending topics and publication bias as research has shown that scholars will choose research or attempt to publish only studies or portions of studies that confirm the prevailing discourse (de Bruin, Treccani & Della Sala, 2015). At the next step in the publication process, reviewers and editors may be more likely to reject manuscripts that do not confirm the persistence in the face of adversity narrative because it is inconsistent with previously published works. If only works that confirm what we think we know about Black women are published, we will never have space for diverse ideas and will miss the opportunity to develop new understandings. Following trending topics in the
publication of academic journals may chill innovation in scholarship, research design, and
promising practice. This chilling effect is likely because scholars existing in a publish or parish
paradigm may cater their research agendas to issues that are likely to get published (i.e., Black
men, undocumented students, STEM). As a result, researchers may not even bother to study and
write about subjects that do not fall within that narrow construction of one trend.

In student affairs. Part of the purpose of academic journals is to inform future practice.
In the Editor’s notes of the New Directions for Student Services that prompted this study, Mary
Howard-Hamilton (2003a) noted that the recommendations for practice found in the series’ 1985
women’s sourcebook continued to be relevant in 2003. Similarly, I found that the same issues
discussed in 2003 persist in 2015. What has prevented a marked shift in student affairs practice
addressing the needs of Black women? Conversely, the Cuyjet (1997) sourcebook on Black men
has been a part of a movement inspiring much action in addressing the needs of Black men, both
in research and practice, as previously noted in this dissertation. The same call to action is listed
in the pages of the 2003 sourcebook but subsequent action has not occurred. Although student
affairs espouses a value of diversity and social justice, it may be difficult for the people in
decision-making roles to prioritize needs to which they do not relate. The white supremacist,
patriarchal power structure does not appear to relate to Black women in terms of race or gender,
so the issues of and implications for this group are abstractions whereas the issues and strategies
for supporting privileged students are much more concrete.

If what is currently found in the pages of journals guides future research, and if student
affairs practice is supposed to be informed by scholarship, the lack of diversity in messages does
not encourage carefully considered, innovative research studying experiences of or interventions
for Black women undergraduates. Because we know that discourses are socially constructed and
informed by shared meanings and practices, revealing and challenging those practices is at the core of critical inquiry and necessary for meaningful transformation in practice (Hughes & Giles, 2010; Love & Yousey, 2001).

**For Further Research**

The research presented here opens the door for further exploration in various directions. The following is a list of some suggested topics. The present study analyzed articles from a list of higher education journals as identified by Bray and Major (2011). However this list did not include several publication outlets with an express mission to address issues of diversity, equity, and social justice in higher education. A future study of this same type would benefit these publications. That study could be revealing in terms of comparing the results of this dissertation.

Additionally, the analysis of this study explored the likely messages practitioners may glean from reading these 14 articles. A future study could involve collecting data from practitioners regarding their on-going professional development practices and their interpretations of the narrative of Black undergraduate women, and, subsequently, how those messages inform their work. Further research centering the daily practice of student affairs professionals and their consumption and application of scholarly work would also add to the findings of this dissertation.

**Limitations**

As with every research project, there are limitations to this one. First, the construction of race and gender in this body of work is narrow and discrete. There is no acknowledgment of a person identifying with more than one racial or ethnic group. Additionally, gender is constructed as a binary with only Strayhorn (2011) acknowledging this narrow definition. In addition to the 14 articles in the dataset, race and gender are similarly constructed in discrete and finite
categories. Throughout the course of this project I found myself troubled with these narrow constructions, but the nature of the project and its methodology required me to work with the current discourse. While work on trans* people is forthcoming, it is not widely available to date and absent from the texts collected.

Second, there are academic journals specifically dedicated to the study of populations historically marginalized in higher education that were not included in this study. The choice to use the set of journals listed by Bray and Major (2011) provided focus for the scope of this project resulting in the exclusion of outlets where scholars are likely to submit manuscripts addressing the needs of Black women and other marginalized populations as well as the resources practitioners may access in order to find information on diverse student populations.

Lastly, another potential limitation is that I did not go back to ask for clarification from authors in the study regarding their selection of what to include and how discursive choices were made. In some projects, researchers may elect to gather additional data regarding intent by asking for verifiability, to ensure validity of representation. This was not my aim. In looking at texts, I analyzed it as it was divorced from the author; the text was a reality on its own (Bakhtin, 2010).

**Conclusion**

The 2003 *New Directions for Student Services* was an impetus for thought on the needs of Black women and posed a call to action, but it is time for a new movement to center the experiences of Black women in theoretical perspectives, research approaches, and in practice. There are a number of works on Black women available and more in process, but scholars and practitioners need to reopen the discussion on the accepted narratives on Black undergraduate women and take a closer look at how that narrative is being formed. We need a body of
literature that centers Black women and is rooted in discourses of Black women, not discourses of Black people plus gender.

As I was working on this analysis, I saw a parallel to the peer review process in the grand jury process. Take for example the grand jury proceedings of Darren Wilson, the Ferguson, MO. police officer responsible for the death of Michael Brown in August of 2014. In November of that same year, a representative of the St. Louis County Prosecutor’s office held a press conference detailing the supposed facts of what happened the day of Michael Brown’s death. Due to his role as an authority figure, his possession of the social identities that affirm his position of power, and the fact that he was on television, his account was taken and passed on as truth. This discourse was carefully crafted to become our collective understanding of the truth distributed via the most powerful platform available—popular mass media.

Similar to the way the popular media constructed the truth of Michael Brown’s death, the peer review process and the platform of academic journals constructs a truth about Black undergraduate women. This truth found within the pages of academic journals becomes the official discourse and is passed to future scholars and practitioners as what mattered in higher education. No other accounts of the story will be given any credence or remembered. Like the grand jury, because of the rigors of the peer review process, practitioners are supposed to trust the content of academic journals to inform their practice. We are supposed to trust that the reviewers have done their due diligence and we are supposed to forget that these are people and that these people bring to the process their own social locations, socially-constructed perspectives, and lived experiences. We are supposed to believe that this process protects us from misinformation and guides us toward truth, in this case, one universal truth about all Black undergraduate women. This analysis reminds us to question everything, but this is not typically
what happens in discourses of student affairs practice, particularly in the context of the use of peer-reviewed literature and scholarship.

The framework of critical race feminism informed by feminist poststructuralism and Black feminist thought provided language and concepts that allowed me to operationalize critical discourse analysis in this study by providing an overall orientation in constructions of Black undergraduate women found in higher education literature that could be examined within their proper context of student affairs culture and the academic journal process with specific attention to how these constructions mirror dominant narratives of Black women. The illuminating properties of poststructuralism, the liberator requirements of Black feminist thought, and the critical lens and call to action of critical race feminism provided the ideal set of perspectives to see what has gone unseen, say what has gone unsaid, and acknowledge what has gone unacknowledged.

**Personal Reflection**

In conducting this research, I do not claim researcher objectivity, and at times I wondered if I was too close to the subject matter. There were moments when it was imperative for me to step away. In fact, there were times when I was not sure if I could or should finish this dissertation. Yet, my critical qualitative approach—including my identities, vulnerabilities and insecurities—embraces this concern as an important element of the research project. I am not merely professionally invested in this project; I am personally invested in the pursuit. While I can do my best to be transparent in my analysis, my own lens stems from my social identity. As mentioned above, because this project stems from a critical qualitative methodological tradition, it is expected that I bring my experiences and interests. Rather than feign objectivity, I strive instead to achieve catalytic validity (Lather, 1986). This concept refers “to the degree to which
the research process re-orient, focuses, and energizes participants in what Freire (1973) terms "conscientization," knowing reality in order to better transform it” (p. 67). Therefore, this study is my interpretation, reflective of my social location, my varied relationships, and my goals as a scholar/practitioner. Ultimately, the implications and future of this work are the implications and future of my lived experience.
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APPENDIX A: Bray & Major’s (2011) List of Journals in Higher Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal Title</th>
<th>Journal Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education</td>
<td>Journal of Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>College and University</td>
<td>Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>College Student Affairs Journal</td>
<td>Journal of Hispanic Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>College Teaching</td>
<td>Journal of Marketing for Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community College Journal of Research and Practice</td>
<td>Journal of the Professoriate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community College Review</td>
<td>Journal on Excellence in College Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>NACADA Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Education Management and Policy</td>
<td>NASPA Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education Policy</td>
<td>New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education Quarterly</td>
<td>New Directions for Community Colleges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research</td>
<td>New Directions for Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative Higher Education</td>
<td>New Directions for Institutional Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education</td>
<td>New Directions for Student Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet and Higher Education</td>
<td>New Directions for Teaching and Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Applied Research in the Community College</td>
<td>Perspectives on the History of Higher Education</td>
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# APPENDIX B: The Dataset

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<td>Contextual Counseling With Clients of Color: A &quot;Sista&quot; Intervention for African American Female College Students</td>
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<td>Harper, S. R., Carini, R. M., &amp; Bridges, B. K.</td>
<td>Gender Differences in Student Engagement Among African American Undergraduates at Historically Black Colleges and Universities</td>
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<td>Strayhorn, T. L.</td>
<td>The Influence of Diversity on Learning Outcomes among African American College Students: Measuring Sex Differences</td>
<td>Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice</td>
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<td>Watt, S. K.</td>
<td>Come to the river: Using spirituality to cope, resist, and develop identity</td>
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<td>Zamani, E. M.</td>
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APPENDIX C: Annotated Bibliography of the Dataset


The authors explored associations among relationship harmony, perceived family conflicts, relational self-concept, and life satisfaction in a sample of 169 African American and Asian American college women. As hypothesized, higher relational self-concept, or the extent to which individuals include close relationships in their self-concepts, and relationship harmony scores were predictive of greater life satisfaction, whereas perceived family conflict was associated with lower life satisfaction. Implications for counseling African American and Asian American college women are discussed.


The authors argued that college counselors need to consider culturally appropriate adaptations of traditional counseling. They described a counseling intervention for African American female college students and presented a case study to illustrate the effectiveness of this counseling strategy.

Retrieved from

This chapter provided information about personal, academic, and vocational concerns of African American college women and offered culturally relevant counseling frameworks and interventions for working with this population.


This study investigated differences between male and female student engagement at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Data were obtained from 1,167 African-American undergraduate students from 12 HBCUs. The findings revealed that female African-American students at such institutions no longer lagged behind their male counterparts in social and academic engagement experiences and that there were no significant differences between the engagement levels of male and female participants. These findings counter previous research concerning gender gaps on HBCU campuses.


Retrieved from
This introduced a sourcebook on African American women in higher education. It identified and explored the critical needs of African American women as students, faculty, and administrators on college campuses; It also provided recommendations and suggestions for meeting those needs.


Applying appropriate theoretical frameworks for black women is challenging because many theories are very general and do not consider multiple identities and roles. Critical race theory and black feminist thought are suggested as appropriate frameworks and applied to the needs of black women in higher education.


This chapter continued and expanded the dialogue regarding the oppressions experienced by African American women in higher education. Stakeholders of postsecondary education are invited to use this dialogue to become more aware of the needs of African American women on college campuses, as well as African American people in general.

This study used case study analysis to explore the ways that Spelman College, a historically Black women’s college, promotes the attainment of African American women in STEM fields. Although limited to one institution, the findings shed light on the ways that institutional characteristics, policies, and practices may mitigate the barriers that limit attainment of African American women in STEM fields. Drawing on the findings, the paper concludes with recommendations for improving policy and practice as well as recommendations for additional fruitful research.


An overview and context of holistic practices for serving African American women was presented. The needs, expectations, and aspirations of this population are addressed. Examples of and recommendations for programs and services are provided.


National survey data from 594 African American college students were analyzed using
descriptive and multivariate statistical techniques to measure the impact of diversity on educational outcomes. Two research questions guided the present study: (a) How do interactional diversity experiences affect learning and development outcomes for African American undergraduates attending 4-year institutions? (b) Does this relationship vary between Black men and women? Its results suggest that interactional diversity experiences are positively associated with perceived student learning across all six domains; interactional diversity is one of the strongest, consistent predictors of perceived learning included in the statistical models. Models explain different proportions of the variance in dependent variables, ranging from 16% to 23%. Implications for future policy, practice, and research are discussed. (Contains 5 tables and 2 footnotes.)


This chapter described and discussed spiritual lives of African American female college students, including elements of coping, resisting, and developing identity.


A study examined the racial identity attitudes, womanist identity attitudes, and self-esteem of 111 African American college women attending two historically Black higher
educational institutions, one coeducational and one single-sex. Findings revealed that preencounter and encounter attitudes of racial and womanist identity are correlated with each other but negatively correlated with self-esteem and that womanist or racial identity attitudes do not mediate self-esteem.


The article discussed a study of the tension between the familial or community relationships and university relationships of African American women college students. It mentioned the influence of family relationships on the initial transitions of students into college. The study involved 30 African American women including 24 first-generation college students at a Carnegie Research Extensive institution of higher education called Midwest University. Among the validation techniques employed to ensure a trustworthy data analysis were peer debriefing and member checks. Results indicated the pressure facing the students to limit familial ties in order to achieve college success.

This chapter provided an overview of the historical roles and contemporary educational challenges and opportunities for African American women.
## APPENDIX D: Analysis At a Glance

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