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# African American college men holding leadership roles in majority white student groups

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**African American college men holding leadership roles in majority white student groups**

by

**Terrence Lanier Frazier**

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:  
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2009

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**DEDICATION**

To God

To my ancestors

To my current family

To my future children and family

To my wife Nikki Thompson Frazier

To March Onward and Upward my Brothers and Sisters

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## **ABSTRACT**

Examining the experience of African American college men has been a subject of many higher education scholars. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to be aware of the lived experience of seven African American college men who hold/held leadership positions in a majority White student group. Using symbolic interactionism and phenomenology as my framework in order to better understand how these men make meaning of their experience leading a majority White group, four themes emerged from this study: natural transition; the pull between Black and White environments; perfectionism; and power and influence.

Implications for student affairs at PWIs include is the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of the students' past high school experiences and helping those African American men in leadership roles to balance their responsibilities as a leader of a majority White organization and their desire to support the Black community. This study also brought to the forefront that student affairs professionals are many times only encouraging African American students to be involved with Black Student Associations or NPHC groups. As professionals we must never limit a student's leadership but but rather encourage them to sharing their abilities with a variety of student groups on campus.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the United States of America elected its first African American president and a few short months later on January 20, 2009, the world watched as Barack Obama was sworn in as our country's 44<sup>th</sup> national president. Personally, I always believed it could happen; however, I never dreamt it would occur in my lifetime. And if by chance it did, I imagined witnessing this world-changing event on my death bed as a last and final act before meeting my Father in heaven. Watching America give birth to this history filled my spirit with hope; hope in knowing African American men can step up and lead any organization and more importantly, people will recognize their worth and thus take them seriously as leaders. Moreover, Barack Obama is now a symbol of what is possible for African American men; they too can lead and lead well.

If colleges and universities across this country are serious about educating African American men, they must also be serious about developing their leadership skills which, in turn, has the potential to increase their retention and graduation rates. Previous research has shown the benefits of African American students being engaged in out-of-classroom activities; such involvement positively affects their identity development and college retention (Cokley, 2001; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Flowers, 2004; Fries-Britt, 2000; Harper, 2006b; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008). There are excellent African American male student leaders in college; however, most of them hold leadership positions within their cultural groups as opposed to majority White student organizations (Harper 2006b). It is only natural that when these students decide to become involved, they typically seek leadership

positions within Black Student Associations (BSA), historically Black Greek letter organizations, or other African American cultural groups on campus because there is a sense of comfortability not easily found in majority White student groups.

Often, the environment at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) does not reinforce the identity or the personal worth of African American men (Hughes, 1987). As a result, African American men are more at risk in their adjustment to college than any other group of college students (Hughes, 1987). One of the prevailing perceptions African American men hold is that majority White student groups are irrelevant and unwelcoming to minority student participation (Harper 2006b; Harper & Quaye 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). This perception may contribute to African American men being unwilling to seek leadership in these groups. According to Brown (2006), African American men perceive majority White student organizations as less honest and open, which creates frustrations, tension, and anxiety. Only when we discover ways to minimize these real or perceived barriers will we see a rise in the number of minorities leading predominantly White student groups.

Because some African American men hold less than favorable views about majority White student organizations, they become anxious at the thought of assuming a leadership position within groups such as Student Government Associations (SGA), University Programming Boards (UPB), and other campus-wide student organizations that serve the entire student body predominantly made up of White students (Brown, 2006). They are often reluctant to join heterogeneous student organizations that require them to cross racial lines (Brown, 2006; Nettles, 1988). For instance, African Americans have reported feelings of alienation and unwelcome by peers (Allen, 1992). In addition to the factors noted in the

literature, there may be other possible reasons, which have yet to be identified, for the lack of African American male leadership involvement in majority White groups.

In addition to asking how to increase African American male leadership within a majority White group, one must also ask how to increase African American male leadership – period. African American men are not only underrepresented in majority White student groups but, even more disturbing, they are also underrepresented within their own cultural groups. When it comes to holding elected or appointed positions within their own cultural groups, these men are less involved than their African American female counterparts (Harper, 2006b). If these men are not leaders within majority African American student groups, how then, can we expect them to be leaders in majority White student groups?

#### Purpose

This study examined the experiences of African American men who hold/held leadership positions within majority White student groups at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The goal of the study was to increase the knowledge of the lived experience of African American college men who decided to assume leadership positions within a majority White student group. The study was designed to clarify for student affairs professionals the decision-making process each participant underwent as he sought and secured a leadership position within a majority White student group. Moreover, the intent of this study was to provide needed information to assist student affairs professionals in the promotion of African American male leadership within campus-wide organizations.

#### Research Questions

The research questions were designed to obtain information that will help student affairs professionals understand African American male college students who assume

leadership positions in majority White student organizations. The overarching question asked in this research is: “How do African American college men make meaning of their unique experience of being a student leader in majority White student organizations?” Specifically, the following questions sought to discover similarities among these men as they sought and held leadership positions:

1. What motivates these men in their desire to assume leadership in majority White student groups?
2. How do African American men negotiate access to leadership roles within majority White student groups?
3. What benefits do they perceive from their involvement in majority White student groups?
4. During their leadership in a majority White student group, with which stage(s) within the Black Identity Model do these African American men most align?

#### Rationale

Individuals continue to divide people based on their race. Even when deciding to become involved in campus organizations, race seems to play a major part in determining the groups in which a person will seek to assume leadership positions. Hughes (1997) stated that African American men are the most oppressed ethnic group, and based on retention alone, they have the highest need for student services and involvement. Theoretically, these students would most benefit from assuming leadership positions as the research clearly points to a correlation between campus involvement and retention.

Many universities are working to become supportive multicultural campuses (Strayhorn, 2008; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001); yet when it comes to many groups on campus

(outside of cultural groups), the leadership and membership are still predominantly composed of White students. I have chosen to study African American men who hold leadership positions in majority White student groups because I believe by bringing light to this issue – the extremely low percentage of African American men holding leadership positions - more colleges will focus on increasing multicultural involvement and leadership in majority White student groups. Additionally, by sharing the stories of African American men who decided to become leaders in a majority White student organization, this study sought to address past research questions about “Black men belonging.” Where do they belong? How do we help them feel as if they belong?

Belonging occurs when a people goes from feeling like “outsiders” to feeling like “insiders.” African Americans, specifically men, are at more risk in their adjustment to college than any other group (Addison & Westmoreland, 1999; Cuyjet, 2006; Fleming, 1984; Hughes, 1987; Wester, Vogel, Wei, & McLain, 2006). In this study, I examined the lived experiences of African American men who successfully made the adjustment into a leadership role in a majority White student organization. I chose to interview African American college men who hold/held leadership positions in majority White student groups because their stories about cross-racial interaction would answer questions about how their leadership can positively affect college campuses. One way to measure its effect is through retention. Sedlacek and Brooks (1972) “found that Blacks who made this transition were more likely to stay in school than were Blacks who did not” (as cited in Sedlacek, 1987, p. 485). Some of the men in this study had already graduated and the rest were on the right course toward graduation. For those yet to graduate, only time will tell what impact their leadership experiences had on their ability to obtain a college degree.

Researchers have examined the reasons behind African American men leaving college and not being actively involved in leadership but there has been little research on those African American men who are involved on campus and successfully matriculate through the university system. In this study, each participant shared his unique experience of how he made meaning of being a leader in a majority White student group. Their perspectives will help student affairs professionals develop a plan for majority White student groups to become more inviting to the non-White students on their campus. This information will also help to widen the views of all students attending PWIs by their interactions with other cultures across campus.

According to Harper and Hurtado (2007), White student “campus-wide” leaders were presumed to have an understanding of the campus environment, yet they were unaware of the negative outlook that minority students had toward the institution. Campus-wide student organizations need to have diversity within their leadership ranks to enhance the cognitive, psychosocial, and interpersonal life of all students (Antonio et al., 2004; Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Pike & Kuh, 2006; Saenz, Ngia, & Hurtado, 2007).

Increased African American male involvement is pivotal because as Astin (1999) suggested, a variety of out-of-class activities positively affect a student’s learning and cognitive gains. Getting more African American men to participate and assume leadership in student government, learning communities, academic honor societies, and other organizations will positively affect their development as students, which in turn impacts their graduation rates (Astin & Sax, 1998; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Harper 2006b; Kuh, 1995; Kuh & Lund, 1994; Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001; Villalpando, 2002). Secondly,

increasing diversity in student organizations is a driving force behind increasing African American male involvement. This diversification will ultimately assist in bringing communities together. Through exposure to different cultures, communities have the opportunity to understand each other (Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001; Strayhorn, 2008). Essentially, increasing the leadership involvement of African American men in majority White student groups promotes student development and diversity by expanding the knowledge and personal development of everyone involved in these groups. Providing African American men the opportunity to hold leadership positions in majority White student organizations would therefore result in a positive outcome for all involved: the student, the organization, the members, and those served by the organization. The African American male student leader would gain valuable leadership experience while the members of the organization and those it serves would hopefully be exposed to ideas that would broaden their perceptions regarding the needs of minority students on their campus and affirm their ability to lead. These outcomes are valuable to colleges and universities that strive to develop open-minded citizens.

Given the goal of this study, which was to examine the phenomenon of African American college men who are leaders within majority White student groups at a PWI and explore ways to increase the leadership of African American men in campus-wide organizations, the results are important for universities in determining how to improve retention and graduation rates of African American men. According to Astin's theory on student involvement, the more students are involved and make connections to the institution, the more likely they will graduate from that institution. Having students connected to the university is important and necessary to help them become successful (Astin, 1993;



Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Traditionally, African Americans have found support in culturally based student organizations such as Black Cultural Centers, Multicultural Affairs, Black Student Unions, and historically Black fraternities and sororities (Hall, 1999; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Watson et al., 2002). While important, these cannot be the only connections that African American students make during their college career. College is a time for students to expand beyond what they already know and their comfort zone. The “real world” is not made up of just one culture and African American students need to be able to connect with others who do not look like them. This period in their lives is the perfect opportunity for training and learning how to work with those who are not from their same racial background. Like their collegiate peers, African American students have equal access to campus resources; therefore, they need to tap into and utilize all resources and opportunities available to optimize success during their college career.

#### Significance of the Study

My study reduces the gap as it relates to literature on African American men and college leadership. Specifically, this study evaluated the experience of African American men who hold leadership positions in majority White student groups. Given the lack of knowledge about how and why some African American male students choose to take part in leadership roles in majority White student groups, this study shines a light on an issue that has been left in the dark. This study can assist student affairs practitioners in motivating and supporting African American men in their leadership journeys. African American men need to see themselves as a vital part of the entire university, which can be reinforced through encouraging their involvement in majority White student groups. In addition, if more African American men assumed leadership positions in majority White student organizations, it

would help to change the campus climate (LaVant & Terrell, 1994). For example, by serving in campus-wide leadership roles, these men have the power to influence programming and help other African Americans – both male and female – feel more comfortable and connected to the larger campus community. It is up to practitioners to help African American men feel comfortable leading not only their cultural community but also the campus-wide community.

### Theoretical Perspective

For the purposes of this study, I used Jackson's (2001) Black identity development model (BID) and Astin's (1993) involvement theory. I chose to use Jackson's BID because the five stages - 1) naïve, 2) acceptance, 3) resistance, 4) redefinition, and 5) internalization – were the most appropriate for explaining the identity development process that occurs for African American men in college. Jackson's theory includes a transitional point between stages, suggesting that a person can be in two stages simultaneously. Most of the participants were in a transitional time in their development. These participants, specifically, had to maneuver between the White and Black communities on their campus, thus exacerbating the typical transitional time most students experience. BID explained how the participants responded to their role in the university community based on their stage(s) of development. This theory has guided educators, behavioral scientists, and change agents in developing interventions and techniques to facilitate the process of individual, group, and system development (Jackson, 2001). Using this theory assisted me in understanding the stages my participants were in as they made meaning of their leadership experience. The BID model helped me to understand each participant's views about himself. These different stages of development also helped to explain why they accepted leadership roles in a majority White student group.

The second theory I used to understand this phenomenon is Astin's theory of student involvement. This theory refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the college experience (Astin, 1993). According to Astin (1993), being engaged with an institution will increase a student's success in college. This hypothesis is particularly relevant for African American men given their historical disconnection from institutions of higher education and low graduation rates. These two theories – BID and student involvement – provided a framework in which I viewed the phenomenon of African American men at PWIs who hold/held leadership roles in majority White student groups.

#### Researcher Perspective

“SCOUTT WINS” was the headline story for Ohio University's student newspaper in the spring of 1995. SCOUTT stood for “Students Changing Ohio University Today and Tomorrow”; it was a student political party. I was a member of that party and our win made me the first African American male to hold the position of Student Government Association (SGA) president. At the start of my presidency, African Americans constituted roughly 60% of SGA leaders but within a few short months, by the end of the first quarter, only 5% of SGA leaders were African American. This extremely high attrition caused me to question why so many African Americans quit SGA after initially deciding to become a leader in SGA. My first thought on this phenomenon was that African American men were not used to such a hostile environment. This was the starting point of my current research interest.

My personal experience as an African American male leader in a majority White student organization and my professional experience in the field of student affairs fueled my desire to study this topic. Personally, I knew the reasons for my desire to seek leadership in

majority White student groups. I also witnessed the declining number of African Americans interested in such leadership roles both as a student and currently as a professional in student affairs. Professionals in student affairs face challenges when encouraging African American students to assume leadership roles outside of their cultural groups. Therefore, this is a critical issue for me. As a student and later a student affairs professional, I would encourage African American men to run for SGA positions or join the University Programming Board; yet, many decided not to seek leadership positions. During my five years as a student affairs professional, two of my African American male students served on the SGA executive board. However, I wanted to know why other men did not want to step up to the positions. They were all strong leaders and helped their cultural organizations grow successfully. I could easily see these students accomplishing great things for any group they chose to lead. This made me ask, is it the students or is it the cultural dynamics of the groups that keep African American men from becoming leaders in majority White student groups?

#### Tentative Presuppositions

I had two primary presuppositions about the students and this study. First, I assumed all study participants decided of their own volition to become a leader in a majority White student group. Second, I assumed they all found a positive benefit to being a student leader in a majority White student group.

I came to find out that that the participants did decide on their own to be a leader; but most of that desire came from a need to continue on to be a leader from high school to college. In addition they decided to lead a majority White group in order to influence the campus community. All of the students had a good experience being a leader of a majority White group and would encourage other African Americans to get involved.

## Definitions

This section defines key terms that were used throughout the study. **African American** implies people of African heritage born in the United States who are also the descendants of slaves (Jackson, 2001, p. 14). Although Black and African American are not technically the same, for the purpose of this study the two terms were used interchangeably (e.g., the BID theory uses Black to mean African American; Jackson, 2001). **Black Cultural Groups (BCG)** refers to groups whose primary focus is the needs and interests of African Americans or whose membership consists primarily of African Americans (Mitchell & Dell, 1992). **Leader** is defined as an individual holding a position of authority, either elected or appointed (Johnson & Johnson, 2006).

## Summary

In this study, I provided student affairs professionals and educators with information and recommendations to motivate and support African American college men at PWIs to become leaders in majority White student groups. In the context of the study, I discussed how their racial identity relates to their leadership experience. The study contributed to student affairs professionals' understanding of how African American college men view their roles on campus and their rationale for doing so. The study also demonstrated the benefits of having African American college men in leadership roles in majority White student groups.

In Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the literature pertaining to African American male college students. The chapter details the history of African Americans in college, characteristics of African American men in college, and their involvement in the higher educational system. Lastly, in chapter 2 I examine theories examining the racial identity development of African Americans.

In chapter 3, I describe in detail the methodological approach I used in this qualitative study. I present the research approach, participants, data collection procedures, data analysis procedure, trustworthiness criteria, limitations, and delimitations.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the profiles of the seven men who participated in this study. These profiles allow the reader to gain a deeper understanding of who these men are as individuals and as student-leaders.

The findings from this study are presented in chapter 5. The four emerging themes - natural transition, pull between Black and White communities, perfectionism, and power and influence – are discussed in depth. The break down of each participant's Black identity development is also provided in this chapter.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the findings from the study and provide connections to the related literature. In this chapter, I also discuss implications for student affairs professionals and provide recommendations for practice. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers and practitioners alike have contributed to the literature on the academic and social experiences of African American college students in general; however, there is less research on African American male college students and their leadership involvement (Harper & Quaye, 2007). This literature review serves as the framework for establishing the importance of this study and comparing the results from previous related research with the findings in this present study (Creswell, 2003). The literature review will first cover the history of African Americans in higher education. Within the literature review, the discussion will focus on the retention and involvement of African American students. Second, the literature review will cover the development of Black racial identity theories, including both Cross's nigrescence model and Jackson's Black identity development model.

### Early History of Education for Blacks

For many Americans, the principle path to success begins at the doors of higher education. Some of the most prestigious careers are achievable only after a person earns a degree from an institution of higher education. In the early days of higher education, African Americans were limited in their pursuit of a college degree. Only a few schools, such as Oberlin College in Ohio and Berea College in Kentucky, allowed these minorities to matriculate (Fleming, 1984; Wilson, 1998). Realizing most colleges were unwilling to accept them as students, African Americans began to teach each other. This forward thinking gave birth to what are now called Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Before the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, HBCUs came into existence: Cheyney University in 1830 located in Pennsylvania, Lincoln University in 1854 located in Pennsylvania, and

Wilberforce University in 1856 located in Ohio (Brown, 1999; Fleming, 1984; Wilson, 1998). Despite the challenges and laws against educating slaves and/or Black people, HBCUs provided higher education to those the other colleges shut out. These colleges were private colleges funded by the Freedman's Bureau, Black churches, local communities, private philanthropists and northern missionaries (Brown, 1999). It was not until the second Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890 that federal lands were given to states for the purpose of educating the newly free slaves (Fleming, 1984). Some of the private colleges established before the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890 had to find ways to work within the new model of African Americans in higher education and many of them became public state-supported schools (Davis, 1998). Bowles and DeCosta (1971) noted:

Many of these institutions were initially founded as nondegree-granting schools focusing primarily on agricultural, mechanical, and industrial pedagogy. Of the 17 Black colleges established under the second Morrill Act, none offered a liberal arts education before 1919, and only 2 provided 4-year degree programs. (as cited in Davis, 1999, p. 146)

HBCUs for some time were the best way for African Americans to gain a formal education in the United States. However, toward the end of World War II many Black colleges suffered low enrollment and inadequate financial resources, which forced many of them to close their doors (Davis, 1999).

#### African Americans Attending PWIs

Over time, PWIs warmed up to the idea of educating African Americans; with the GI Bill of World War II and the passing of the civil rights laws, more African Americans attended PWIs (Wilson, 1998). But only after the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of*



Education, outlawing racial segregation in public education was there a substantial growth in African Americans attending a variety of PWIs (Brown, 1999; Fleming, 1984; Harris & Terborg-Penn, 2006). Today, African Americans attend every type of PWI. Although more African Americans are accepted and attend, they continue to experience racial tension and inadequate social lives, which causes them to feel a sense of alienation (Allen, 1988; Cuyjet, 2006; Fleming, 1984). In the past, studies have sought to uncover the experiences of African Americans at PWIs; however, these studies failed to analyze possible gender differences (Allen, 1988; Allen, 1992; Cokley, 2001; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Flowers, 2004; Fries-Britt, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Rather, these studies focused on the experiences of African American male and females viewed as one group.

Flowers's (2004) study looked at the impact of educational outcomes for African Americans in college. The "results of the study indicated that in-class and out-of-class experiences positively impacted student development for a nationally representative sample of African American students who completed the College Student Experiences Questionnaire" (Flowers, 2004, p. 633). Flowers's (2004) research covered "a broad range of control variables for student background characteristics, institutional characteristics, as well as students' college experience" (p. 634). Yet, these control variables did not break down the difference between male and female African American college students and their involvement on campus.

Fries-Britt's (2000) qualitative study was designed to discover how African Americans felt when they attended a PWI versus a HBCU. Fries-Britt (2000) suggested "that learning how to build confidence in Black students by creating personal and institutional systems of support is crucial" (p. 326). The idea of support is built upon the decades of

research about the academic and social experiences of Blacks in college (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984). Although relevant information, Fries-Britt (2000) does not investigate the different needs of African American males and females. For the purposes of this study, I specifically focused on African American male undergraduate students who attended a PWI because currently there is limited research and data on this population. As a result of this study, I was able to shed light on their experiences as student leaders of majority White student groups.

According to Davis (1999), “There is virtually no race- or gender-neutral school context for Black males in higher education” (p. 134). This statement supports the need for a study that specifically examines the experiences of African American men, especially given that the enrollment and graduation of Black women continues to increase, bypassing the number of Black men enrolled in higher education institutions (Cuyjet, 2006; Roach, 2001). This disparity between male and female enrollment and graduation is not limited to PWIs. At all public four-year institutions – both PWIs and HBCUs - the gap between African American men (31.3%) and women (42.6%) who graduate is substantial (JBHE Weekly Bulletin, 2007). Unfortunately, the low graduation rate of African American men is not a new trend; the rates have barely increased since 1977. Over a 26-year period beginning in 1977 until 2002, the proportion of African American male college graduates has only increased by an average of 0.2 percentage points (Porter, 2006). According to Cokley (2001), African American females are more motivated about being in college than African American male college students. The participation and experience of African American male students are concerns for many institutions of higher education (Cuyjet, 2006).

Choosing to study only African American men is appropriate since African American men have different needs than African American women. These two groups view their experience differently; therefore, it is not always wise to study them together (Bonner, 2001; Cokley, 2001; Cuyjet, 2006; Davis, 1999; Wester, Vogel, Wei, & McLain, 2006). Previous research by Kuh, Vesper, Connolly, and Pace (1997) using the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) led to the conclusion that African American men and women had substantially different responses to a range of topics. For example, African American women often or very often took detailed notes in class whereas fewer than 45% of the African American male students did, and twice the percentage of men as women indicated they never took detailed notes in class. Another noted difference is that while one-third of African American male students often or very often played games in the student union/center, less than one in five women were involved in such activities. Furthermore, the CSEQ indicated that 12.5% of African American women were receiving grades lower than a C, whereas African American men were receiving grades lower than a C at 18.9% (Cuyjet, 1997). The most telling data as it relates to my research is that African American women are also more willing to take part in campus-wide activities (Cuyjet, 1997), which begs the question, why do African American men shy away from campus-wide leadership roles? These previous studies have provided some good quantitative data but do not offer a rich description of the African American male experience. In particular, more research is needed on the experience of African American men because they have the lowest success rate in the higher educational system. For example, in response to the findings noted above, there are still lingering questions: 1) why men do not take detailed notes; 2) what is attracting them to play games in the student union/center; and 3) why they are not involved in extracurricular activities?

The literature includes studies about African American college students, yet most of them compare the adjustment of African Americans to the adjustment of members of other racial groups. Research needs to more closely examine the African American college population itself rather than focusing only on comparisons of the experiences of African American students to students of other races (Allen, 1992; Antonio et al., 2004; Astin, 1982; Davis et al., 2004; Fleming, 1984; Guiffrida, 2005; Hall, 1999; Jenkins, 2001; Kim, 2002; Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quaninoo, Williams, & Homes, 2007; Nettles, 1988). In addition, existing studies do not explore gender differences within the African American community. There may in fact be a direct correlation between the pressure African American men face regarding gender roles and their inability to excel in comparison to their female counterparts. Given the situation of African American college men and the limited research conducted specifically on their collegiate experiences, there needs to be more research on African American men (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007). I next review the literature specifically examining retention and involvement of African American men at PWIs.

### *Retention*

According to past research, there are several factors contributing to the low retention rate of African Americans men at PWIs: alienation, low socioeconomic status, lack of preparation for college, financial factors, lack of mentors, and a hostile campus climate (Allen, 1992; Bobb, 2006; Bonner, 2001; Bonner, 2001; Bourne-Bowie, 2000; Cuyjet, 1997; 2006; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Davis et al., 2004; Ervin, 2001; Fleming, 1984; Garibaldi, 1992; Guiffrida, 2005; Hall, 1999; Hood, 1992; Kimbrough, Molock, & Walton, 1996; Patitu, 2000; Rowser, 1997; Steele, 1999; Wyche & Frierson, 1990; Yvette, 2001). African American men do not fare as well as White men or African American women in

persistence, academic achievement, post-graduate studies, and overall adjustment to college (Allen, 1992; Astin, 1982; Cuyjet, 2006; Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1988). According to Harper (2006a) “more than two-thirds (67.6 percent) of black men who start college do not graduate within six years, which is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education (p. vii). This leaves African American men with the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial groups in higher education. “Only 1 out of every 4 African American males completes his degree” (Wilson, as cited in Strayhorn, 2008, p. 502).

### *Involvement*

According to Astin’s theory on student involvement, the more students are involved and make connections to the institution, the more likely they will graduate from that institution. Having students connected to the university is important and necessary to help them become successful (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Astin’s theory of student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1993). He hypothesized that the greater the student’s involvement in college the greater amount of student learning and personal development that will occur (Astin, 1993, 1999).

African American college students have reported being more involved in clubs and organizations than White students as a way of finding support (DeSousa & King, 1992). African Americans in college have historically received support from culturally based organizations such as Black Cultural Centers, Multicultural Affairs, Gospel groups, Black Student Unions, and historically Black fraternities and sororities (Brown, 2006; Harper 2006b; Harper & Harris, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Messer, 2006; Rodney, Tachia, &

Rodney, 1997; Rooney, 1985; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). Sutton and Terrell (1997) discovered that African American men with leadership positions in a historically Black fraternity are more than likely involved in majority White student groups. They also noted that many of the respondents felt the university provided few leadership development programs for them. “Because of their unfamiliarity with specific leadership techniques (such as following parliamentary procedures, developing an agenda, and presiding at meetings) black male involvement in campuswide organizations is generally limited to nonleader membership” (Sutton & Terrell, 1997, p. 61). LaVant and Terrell (1994) also reported that African Americans identified a lack of leadership training and development for them at PWIs. Harper (1975) stated that many African American men choose to develop their leadership skills within the African American community rather than campus-wide organizations, such as student government (as cited in Sutton & Terrell). African American men are trying to find a way to “fit in” and be involved particularly at a PWI. Without a sense of belonging, many Black men will depart from the institution (Strayhorn, 2007). It becomes critical that African American men feel as if they belong on the campus.

“The preference of any African American men who participate as leaders within minority student groups could be related to their racial identity and attitude” (Sutton & Terrell, 1997, p. 57). Mitchell and Dell (1992) found that as students become more comfortable with their racial identity, they are more likely to display interest to both dominant and non-dominant cultural groups. Scholars have written that there is a benefit to having a racially diverse student body and interacting with diverse peers (Chang, 1999). “Much of what we learn in college is a result of the people with whom we mix” (Sternberg, 2005, p. 6). Chang’s (1999) study found that students who socialize with peers of another

race and discuss racial issues outside of the class reported higher levels of college satisfactions than those who did not interact with their peers. African American men are looking for ways to belong while they are attending a PWI. Some of them find a way to “fit in” by becoming a leader on campus.

Evidence of leadership within the African American community begins as early as elementary school. Each experience as a leader or a follower in the family, school, church, or community is an opportunity for learning and developing leadership potential (Bass, 1990). Research has found that African American leaders who are “attracted to black activities that value the Negro race as such, were more esteemed by fellow blacks than were those who were indifferent to black activities” (Grossack, as cited in Bass, 1990, p. 743). Another study found “that college students who were accepted for group leadership and external leadership positions were those who identified themselves with their own racial group” (Kirkhart, as cited in Bass, 1990, p. 743). According to Bass (1990), African American college students place a greater emphasis on being helpful to others and society compared to White college students. Research clearly shows African Americans are involved in cultural activities, but little has been written about their involvement in activities outside of their culture/ethnic group and community. We know African Americans are involved in cultural groups and do develop their leadership skills but how can they expand those skills into non-cultural groups?

According to LaVant and Terrell (1994), ethnic minority participation in student governance at PWIs is lacking in college as a result of ethnic minority students’ experiences during high school. The difference between Black students’ and White students’ collegiate experience, in general, is that Black students are less satisfied with the collegiate experience because activities do not directly relate to their lives (Pounds, 1987). Students’ past

experiences with organizations have an effect on what they will become involved in during their college career. Being involved in student government implies student participation in a wide variety of purposeful and meaningful leadership activities, which may have an important indirect effect on the student's persistence and overall sense of satisfaction with the university (Kuh & Lund, 1994). Governance can benefit all stakeholders; however, no one will completely benefit from having African Americans only participate in culturally based programs and organizations. This lack of connection to the broader campus will further decrease their sense of belonging (LaVant & Terrell, 1994). Black students who try to get involved with majority White student groups find "conflicts between entering the mainstream and preserving their cultural identity" (Bowman & Woolbright, as cited in LaVant & Terrell, 1994, p. 62) hold many Black students back from getting involved. This conflict was expressed by the participants in this study. They all had to work to balance their role in both Black and White communities as leaders of majority White student groups.

Lacking in the literature are studies that examine the experiences of African American college men as they develop into leaders and how they manage their racial identity. If African American men can become more involved in leadership roles outside of their cultural groups, it could be inferred that those men would experience a deeper level of personal development. To get African American college men to assume leadership roles outside of their cultural groups, they must feel that their contributions are valued by the university (Sutton & Terrell, 1997).

Sedlecek (1987) found that African American students who are involved on campus are more likely to stay in school. Mitchell and Dell (1992) did a quantitative study on the relationship between Black students' racial identity and participation in campus



organizations. They found that the more comfortable African Americans are with their racial identity the more open they are to joining non-cultural groups (Mitchell & Dell, 1992).

Mitchell and Dell (1992) also found that more Black men than Black women were in cultural academic and professional organizations. They suggested that Black men are more in need of support from people similar to them than are Black women (Mitchell & Dell, 1992). This study did not look at the motivating factors for students to be involved in majority White student groups or separate the Black students by gender. Rather, this study focused only on the significant relationship between types of involvement and racial identity.

Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) looked exclusively at the involvement and racial identity of Black men. They found that for African American men, “greater campus activity involvement apparently contributed to higher stages of racial identity development” (Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995, p. 333). Taylor and Howard-Hamilton’s (1995) study supported the findings of Mitchell and Dell (1992) regarding student involvement.

Strayhorn (2008) conducted a quantitative study examining the interaction of Black males and their sense of belonging on campus as defined by the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). Strayhorn (2008) found that “Black men who became acquainted or socialized with peers of a different race or who hold different interests were more likely to report higher levels of belonging to campus” (p. 513). The study supported previous findings that cross-racial interactions increase satisfaction and self-concepts of Black men since they feel connected to campus. Strayhorn (2008) along with Villalpando (2002) both reinforced the belief that cross-racial interactions benefit White collegians as well as minority students. Although the data are compelling, this study is missing the lived experience of Black men as they interact with White peers.

Harper and Quaye (2007) completed a qualitative study involving African American male students to look at their involvement in both predominantly Black and majority White student groups and how they express “Blackness.” They found that no matter which type of group a man was leading, he had a “commitment to uplifting the African American community and devoted himself to dispelling stereotypes, breaking down barriers and opening new doors for other African American students on his campus” (Harper & Quaye, 2007, pp. 134-135). All the men were able to keep a sense of their Blackness while developing a care for other marginalized groups. The missing part of the Harper and Quaye (2007) study is looking at Black men who are leading majority White student groups and how they balance their racial identity. All the Black men in their study worked with White students but did not necessarily lead a majority White group. Harper and Quaye’s (2007) study is a good start for advisors of majority White student groups as they begin to look at ways they can create space for African American men to be leaders. My study provides a deeper understanding of what those spaces look like to African American college men who are involved at a leadership level of majority White student groups.

#### Black Racial Identity

In the United States, race is generally understood to be biologically based; a group of people share the same “characteristics, such as skin color, eyes, nose, mouth, body type and hair texture” (Willie, 2003, p. 121). Race can also be identified as social and political differences among people, which are constructed by social forces (Winant, 2001). People define their race, in this case being African American or Black, by society coming together to decide what it means to be Black (Willie, 2003). Race cannot be identified just by the individual’s performance of acting Black or White; it also is determined by societal and

political forces (Willie, 2003). African American college men involved in mainstream student groups are often perceived as acting White or assimilating to White society (Brown, 2006). Depending on how these men view their racial identity they might want to be or not be viewed as assimilated Black men.

The question that arises is how do we identify a person's Black racial identity? According to Helms (1990), "racial identity actually refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one's *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). Black racial identity theories and models were developed during the civil rights movement of the early 1970's (Helms, 1990; Jackson, 2001). "Black racial identity attempts to explain the various ways in which Blacks can identify (or not identify) with other Blacks and/or adopt or abandon identities resulting from racial victimization" (Helms, 1990, p. 5). Black identity models in the 1970's were commonly referred to as nigrescence models; nigrescence is defined as the development process associated with "becoming Black" (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Jackson, 2001). The process of nigrescence occurs in stages. Theorists proposed that individuals move from one stage to another as they develop and understand their Black racial identity. While there are several different theorists, such as Thomas, Banks, and Gay, who all proposed stage development models of Black racial identity, most of their models are modifications of Cross's nigrescence model and Jackson's Black identity development model (Helms, 1990; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). William E. Cross Jr. and Bailey W. Jackson III are considered the two major theorists who contributed to the understanding of Black racial identity (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). Both theories were developed to help

explain how African American people understand their racial identity as they move through stages.

Researchers use Black racial identity development as a way to conceptualize intragroup difference. Racial identity refers to people's beliefs and attitudes about their own race and that of others (Mitchell & Dell, 1992). Cross introduced the nigrescence model in 1971 to explain psychological nigrescence, also known as the process of "becoming Black." Cross's theory describes how Blacks transform their worldviews from non-Africentrism to Africentrism to multiculturalism (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995). Also during the 1970's, Jackson developed his Black identity development model (Jackson, 1976, 2001). Jackson's Black identity development model (BID) has five stages: naïve, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization, with transitions between each stage (Jackson, 2001). Jackson's Black identity model is more about the experience of Blacks as they respond to society, whereas Cross's theory is more about how Blacks develop their self-concept and self-esteem (Jackson, 2001).

### *Nigrescence Model*

Cross's original nigrescence theory can be characterized in five stages of Black racial identity: (1) pre-encounter, (2) encounter, (3) immersion-emersion, (4) internalization, and (5) internalization-commitment (Cross, 1971).

Blacks who identify with mainstream White values are described as being in the pre-encounter stage. During this stage, Blacks are believed to have a pro-White identity and anti-Black view of themselves, which can take the form of self-hating. When Blacks start to reexamine their belief systems about race and start to question the role of race in America, they enter into the encounter stage. The immersion-emersion stage is a twofold stage. At the

start of this stage, persons immerse themselves in everything that is part of the Black culture. They develop a strong pro-Black, anti-White identity. Toward the end of this stage, persons reevaluate their position and become calmer. They rationally examine their experiences and racial identity which leads to emersion from stage three into stage four. At stage four, internalization, Blacks begin to accept being Black both intellectually and emotionally. Blacks who become involved in social change and civil rights issues enter into the fifth stage, called internalization-commitment (Cross, 1971; Vandiver, 2001).

In 1991, Cross published a book, *Shades of Black*, where he revised his nigrescence theory. The revised nigrescence theory includes the same ideas as the original nigrescence theory with regard to sequence. The changes he proposed included the existence of multiple identities within each stage and a separation of Black self-esteem from Black identity development. Instead of five stages, Cross's revised nigrescence model had only four stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization.

Cross (1991) examined a spectrum of Black identities (Cross, 1995; Vandiver, 2001; Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhaghen-Smith, 2002) and explored the idea that there are two major components to understanding self-concept: personal identity and reference group orientation. Personal identity involves the general personality development experiences of all human beings - the universal components of behavior. Reference group orientation involves the concerns of multiple social groups people belong to and which preferred social affiliations they identify with as African Americans. Both of these concepts are explored during the pre-encounter and internalization stages of Cross's revised nigrescence theory (Cross, 1991). Cross (1991) developed the concept "race salience." Race salience is the level

of importance race holds in one's life. Race salience can range from low to high and have a positive to negative value.

Cross and Vandiver (2001) expanded the revised nigrescence theory to have three stages - pre-encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization - with subscales within each. The pre-encounter stage from Cross (1991) depicted aspects of miseducation and self-hatred as integral to the anti-Black identity. In the expanded nigrescence theory, assimilation, miseducation, and self-hatred were considered subscales (Vandiver, Fhaghen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell, 2001). Pre-encounter miseducation focused on belief in the negative stereotyping of African Americans and pre-encounter self-hatred was defined as personal dislike of themselves being Black (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). The immersion-emersion stage has only one subscale - Anti-White (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). The internalization stage has two subscales that were not in Cross's earlier model (1991,1995) - Black nationalist and multiculturalist (Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Vandiver, Fhaghen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell, 2001). The Black nationalist subscale can be viewed as a nationalist ideology of being Afrocentric. The multiculturalist subscale focused on the positive images of being Black and acceptance of other forms of diversity (Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

The nigrescence model can be used to interpret development across the life span of African American people in six sectors: Infancy and Childhood, Preadolescence, Adolescence, Early Adulthood, Adult Nigrescence, and Nigrescence recycling (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 1996, 2001; Cross, Strauss, & Fhagen-Smith, 1999). This life span model incorporates Erikson's stage development as a reference. Erik Erikson is a person many consider to be the original proponent of the idea that human development occurs in stages (Wright, 1982). Erikson observed human behavior and identified eight stages of human

development: Infancy, Early Childhood, Play, School, Adolescence, Young Adulthood, Adulthood and Old Age (Erikson, 1997), which align with Cross's life span of African Americans. Erikson described psychosocial development as a sequence of development in which biology and psychology converge as people develop (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The life span nigrescence model describes the development of people as they move through the stages of childhood, adolescence, and on into adulthood. Cross suggested that, as adults, people gain an even deeper understanding of what it means to be Black.

Cross's theory is helpful in counseling settings and can be transferred into educational settings. Yet, in Cross's model (1971, 1991, 1996, 2001) the stages do not have transitional periods where African Americans can be between stages as they develop. This feature is included in Jackson's (2001) Black identity development model.

### *Black Identity Development*

Jackson's Black identity development model (BID) has five stages: naive, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization with transitions between each stage (Jackson, 2001). According to Jackson (2001), "this theory was meant to guide educators, behavioral scientists, and change agents in developing interventions and techniques that facilitate the process of individual, group and system development" (p. 10). The BID was developed based of two premises: (1) the identity of Blacks in America is strongly influenced by racism and oppression in American society, and (2) the process of developing a positive identity as a Black person follows a definable sequence (Jackson, 1976). The original Jackson (1971) BID theory only had four stages described as: (1) passive acceptance, (2) active resistance, (3) redirection, and (4) internalization (Jackson, 1976). Later, Jackson added the naïve stage as

the first stage and kept the other stages the same, just changing the name of redirection to redefinition (Jackson, 2001).

The naive stage is the point in development, early childhood, in which there is little or no conscious social awareness of race. In the transition from the naive stage to the acceptance stage of consciousness, children began to learn about and adopt an ideology about their race. Children are constantly bombarded with covert and overt messages that lead them to believe Black means less than, and White equals superiority (Jackson, 2001).

The acceptance stage represents the internalization, consciously or unconsciously, of an ideology of racial dominance and subordination that touches all facets of one's private and public life. At this point, Black people have internalized what it means to be Black in the United States. Blacks have accepted their role as laid out in White social, cultural, and institutional standards. They devalue anything that is associated with being Black. Transition from acceptance to resistance stage is often hard and painful. This transition occurs over time, usually triggered by a series of events that leads them to question their views about racism. At the time they are about to exit the acceptance stage to resistance, they may be reluctant to do so because they would have to acknowledge their own victimization within society (Jackson, 2001).

At the resistance stage, individuals become painfully aware of how covert and overt racism impacts them daily. They become hostile toward White people and other people of color who conspire with White people. This stage is difficult because persons understand that if they fully embrace the resistance stage they might lose the benefits they received in the acceptance stage. At this stage Blacks want to learn as much about racism as they can and strategize to "stop colluding in their own victimization" (Jackson, 2001, p. 22). The way



Blacks work to stop their own victimization is by acts of civil disobedience. They discover that as individuals they can get the system to respond to them. This is usually their first lesson in personal and social power. The transition from resistance to redefinition occurs when Black persons realize that their blackness has been defined by a White racist environment when they are seeking to reject everything White (Jackson, 2001).

At the redefinition stage, persons are concerned with defining themselves in terms that are independent of the perceived strengths and/or weaknesses of White people and the dominant White culture. The experience of being Black at this stage comes with a feeling of pride created by reclaiming their heritage and culture. In the redefinition stage, people are very Black centered but not viewed as militant as they were in the resistance stage. Rather they are self-segregating. Non-Blacks might find it difficult to interact with people who are in this stage. During this time, many relationships in a person's life are reevaluated. The transition from redefinition to internalization occurs when individuals integrate their new value system into all aspects of their lives. This is the transitional period that is based on growth and development from the four previous stages (Jackson, 2001).

When persons reach the internalization stage, they no longer feel a need to explain, defend, or protect their Black identity, although they may recognize that it is important when the environment continues to ignore, degrade, or attack all that is Black. This stage is built on the previous stages of acceptance, resistance, and redefinition. Each previous stage contributes to greater sensitivity, power, and self-definition, which enables persons to adopt a multicultural perspective of the world (Jackson, 2001).

I used the BID model because it is intended to be used by educators (Jackson, 1976). This study took place with the background of an educational environment. I therefore found

that BID model, rather than the nigrescence model, was a better fit in this study. The BID model helped me understand the viewpoint of the participants on why they decided to lead a majority White student group. BID has space for transitional periods between stages and I found the participants often transitioning between stages as student leaders. Cross's nigrescence model does not have a transitional section that would explain the different views the students had in different contexts. The participants in my study were between stages in their development both as college students and in their Black identity. The transition and growth of the participants was evident as college is a time of change, self discovery, and development. The participants in this study talked specifically about how they maneuver between the White and Black communities on their campus; thus exacerbating the typical transitional time most students experience. I was able to identify where they were in their Black identity as they spoke about their experiences as leaders of majority White student organizations.

My study added to the body of research and knowledge regarding African American college men. From past research, we know that the more interaction a Black male has with cross-cultural peers the more satisfied he is with his college experience (Strayhorn, 2008). We also know that the further along a Black person is in developing his/her Black identity the more likely s/he is to become involved in cross-cultural activities (Harper & Quayle, 2007). My study, however, provides more insight into the lived experience of Black men who are highly involved with majority White student groups.

### Summary

This chapter has focused on the literature pertaining to African Americans and African American male college students and their involvement with higher education. A

review of the literature suggested a gap; there is little research pertaining to African American college men who assume leadership roles in majority White student groups. In addition, literature on Black racial identity, including Cross (1971, 1991, 1995, 2001) and Jackson (1976, 2001), illustrated two models of Black racial stage development models. For the purpose of this study, the Jackson (2001) model was used to identify the stage of Black identity each participant demonstrated.

In Chapter 3, I describe in detail the methodological approach used in this study, methodological approach, philosophical assumptions, research approach, participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness, delimitations, and limitations.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of African American college men who hold/held leadership roles in a majority White student group. This chapter provides information on the philosophical assumptions of this study, the research approach, information on the participants, data collection, analysis procedures, trustworthiness criteria, delimitations, and limitations of the study. Prior to collecting data, applications to conduct research involving human subjects were submitted to the Office of Research Compliance at Iowa State University. I received approval for this study from Iowa State University on July 3, 2008.

### Methodological Approach

I chose qualitative methodology which allowed each student to voice his experiences as a student leader in a majority White student group. Qualitative research is a tool used to learn how individuals experience and interact with their social world (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Thus, “qualitative researchers try to understand the meanings of social events for those who are involved in them” (Esterberg, 2002, p.3). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) explained that qualitative methodology “refers in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data- people’s own written or spoken words and observable behaviors” (p. 7).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined qualitative research as

a situated activity that locates the observed in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. As this

level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Esterberg (2002) described how “qualitative researchers... look at their own lives to see if they can find anything interesting to study, an unusual angle, or puzzling event or phenomenon” (p. 26). It was through my own lived experience as the first African American president of the Student Government Association at Ohio University that I settled upon the topic of my dissertation. I was curious to uncover how others similar to me—African American men holding leadership positions in majority White student groups—made meaning of their experiences. In this study, I sought “to understand the ways in which participants in the setting under study make meaning of – and so understanding – their experience” (Whitt, 1991, p. 407). “Effective qualitative inquiry requires that the researcher be familiar not only with qualitative research methods but also with the phenomenon under study” (Crowson, as cited in Whitt, 1991, p. 408). As a former leader of a majority White student organization, I came to find that my “insider status” was beneficial to the study. The participants were very forthright with me and they felt that I could relate to their experience.

For the purpose of this study, I chose a basic interpretative qualitative approach. In basic interpretive research, “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the research as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 6). This approach allows the researcher to identify common themes that cut across the data from the participants. Participants in this study provided rich descriptions

of their experience as leaders on campus. Qualitative research information can be completely unanticipated by the researcher yet it can give the researcher information about the quality of campus life from students' perspectives (Manning, 1992).

Use of qualitative research is growing in the field of student affairs. Patton (1991) noted that "qualitative approaches to research provide methods for raising and answering questions about college students through the investigation of their participation in socially organized interactions" (p. 393). Taking qualitative classes and reading qualitative articles in student affairs assisted me in choosing to write a qualitative dissertation. Ultimately, I found that qualitative research methods have much to offer the professional field of student affairs. Qualitative research can help to make sense of complex questions we ask about in student affairs, address the ways students make meaning of their present situations, and help student affairs professionals understand another's perspective (Manning, 1992). For the purpose of this study, I sought to understand the perspective and make meaning of the experience of African American male college student leaders when leading a majority White student group.

Manning (1992) noted that "multiculturalism is an important area of student affairs about which staff can gain knowledge through qualitative research" (p. 133). This study focused on the experiences of African American men at a PWI. I traveled to three different PWI campuses to collect my data.

### Philosophical Assumptions

The goal of this study was to make meaning of leading a majority White student group on campus as an African American male. The philosophical assumption underlying this study is constructionism. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as "the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices,

being constructed in and out of interactions between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). Broido and Manning (2002) noted that in the constructionist paradigm:

1. The researcher-respondent relationship is subject, interactive, and interdependent.
2. Reality is multiple, complex, and not easy quantifiable.
3. The values of the research, respondents, research site, and underlying theory cannot help but undergird all aspects of the research. (p. 436)

Constructionism was appropriate for this study because I wanted to understand the unique journey of an individual experiencing a phenomenon (Crotty, 2004). I wanted to understand, through dialogue with the participants, how they made meaning of their leadership experience. In addition, the constructionist paradigm has become widely accepted in the educational practices, including higher education and student affairs (Broido & Manning, 2002).

### Research Approach

To “understand how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon; this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 6). This study addressed how the African American men I interviewed construct meaning of their experiences as student leaders of a majority White student group. With symbolic interactionism and phenomenology as my theoretical perspectives, I was able to probe into the minds of these students and uncover similarities and differences in their journeys to leadership and what one can glean from this information in an effort to improve African American male personal growth. Furthermore, researchers who draw from phenomenology and symbolic interactionism in

particular are interested in addressing the following: (1) how people interpret their experience, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experience (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

Symbolic interactionism, according to Blumer (1969), “has come into use as a label for a relatively distinctive approach to the study of human group life and human conduct” (p. 1). “Symbolic interaction emphasizes social process rather than social structure as the imagery appropriate to the study of ongoing human group life” (Lal, 1995, p. 423). As suggested by Schwandt (2007), symbolic interactionism is a method to understanding the process of meaning making. The researcher watches carefully the overt behaviors, speech, and particular circumstances in which interaction takes place. Using symbolic interactionism was useful when analyzing the data about the role played by race and ethnicity in African American men’s interactions in a White environment as leaders. Symbolic interactionists are “interested in the meaningfulness of ordinary lives in everyday local situations such as family, work, school, and neighborhood” (Prasad, 2005, p. 23). To symbolic interactionists, making meaning is one of the major elements in comprehending human behavior, interactions, and social processes (Jeon, 2004).

Blumer (1969) offered three premises about symbolic interactionism:

1. “The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (p. 2).
2. “The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows” (p. 2).



3. “The third premise is that these meanings are handled in and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2).

Interpretive symbolic interactionism “attempts to make the world of lived experience directly accessible to the reader” to “capture the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied” (Denzin, 1989, p. 10). Symbolic interactionists use in-depth interviewing techniques as a method to collect data. Prasad (2005) explained, “They ask fewer questions about “what” is or was taking place and more questions about “how” interviewees make sense of specific situations” to “explore issues of self-identity by asking subjects how they see themselves and others in different social situations” (p. 25). The most important part of using symbolic interaction is the object of self and how persons make meaning of their lives (McCall & Becker, 1990).

My other methodology is the phenomenological perspective. Merriam and Associates (2002) pointed out, “The defining characteristic of phenomenological research is its focus on describing the ‘essence’ of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it” (p. 93). Phenomenology focuses on the structure of the lived experiences (Merriam & Associates, 2002). The goal for this study was to explain the experiences of African American men who are leaders in majority White student groups, thus enabling student affairs professionals to understand the journey and begin encouraging more African American college men to seek campus-wide leadership positions. Phenomenology “involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Moustakas explained that

in phenomenological studies the investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specified topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives the findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflections. (p. 47)

In addition, Moustakas pointed out that

in a phenomenological investigation the researcher during the course of the study, becomes an expert on the topic, knows the nature and findings of prior research, has developed new knowledge on the topic, and has become proficient enough in recognizing the kind of future research that would deepen and extend knowledge on the topic. (p. 162)

After completing this study, I acquired an understanding of the experience that these African American college men had when leading a majority White student group.

#### Participants

“Qualitative researchers usually choose research participants for the specific qualities they can bring to the study” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 93). Creswell (as cited in Mayhew, 2004) described two sampling strategies characteristic of qualitative research: “(a) criterion sampling (which guarantees that students have experienced the phenomenon) and (b) maximum variation sampling (which involves the intentional selection of students whose experience, when analyzed in the aggregate, provides the fullest description of the experienced phenomenon)” (p. 653). I used both criterion sampling and maximum variation sampling in the selection of all the participants. The participants had to have served in their leadership position as least one semester and to align with specific requirements to be a part of the study. An additional sampling technique discussed by Patton (1990) is known as

purposive sampling. He noted that “information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposive sampling” (p. 169).

For this study, I interviewed seven African American male college students who hold or held a leadership position in a majority White student group. I utilized purposive sampling, which occurs when researchers “sample research participants for the specific perspectives they may have” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 93). Participants in this study provided me with rich information about their experiences as a student leader. In order to be a participant in the study they were required to meet the following criteria: (1) Identify themselves as African American and/or Black, non-Hispanic; (2) Attend a predominantly white four-year public university in an rural environment; and (3) Be a leader in one or more majority white student group, meaning they were elected or appointed leaders (i.e., any e-board/chair position) of a student organization where the membership is 51% or more white. Essentially, study participants were African American men with a title and/or leadership position within a majority White group (e.g., student government, university programming board, a historically white fraternity, hall council, or any other student group where the membership is 51% white). These individuals could also be leaders in some lesser known group as long as the organization’s membership was 51% white and they held a title/positional leadership role.

### *Campus and City*

The campuses I selected for this study was chosen for a few reasons. First, each university is a PWI, located in the Midwest in a rural community. The student population of Alpha University (AU) was 20,350 in 2007 (AU Fact Book, 2007). African American students

make up 4.5% of the student population at AU (AU Fact Book, 2007). According to Census 2000, the population of the city where AU is located was 21,342 with 3.8% of population being African American. Beta University's (BU) student population was 19,849 as of 2007 (BU Fact Book). African American students made up 6.4% of the total student body at BU (BU Fact Book). The city where BU is located has a population of 67,430 with 11% of the city being African American (Census, 2000). Gamma University's (GU) student population was 17,824 as of 2007 (GU Fact Book). African American students at GU make up 9.3% of the total student population (GU Fact Book). The city where GU is located has a population of 29,636 according to the 2000 Census with 2.8% of the population being African American. Thus, the participants in the study all attended a university where the African American student body was less than 10% of the total student body and the city in which their university was located had an African American population of less than 12%.

#### *Gaining Access to Participants*

Access to African American college men in leadership positions in majority White groups was important to this study. "Because interviewing involves a relationship between the interviewer and the participant, how interviewers gain access to potential participants and make contact with them can affect the beginning of that relationship and every subsequent step in the process" (Seidman, 2006, p. 40). Fortunately, access to participants was made easier because of professional relationships I made at each one of the three universities. Student affairs professionals at each one of the campuses were able to forward an email to men who fit the criteria of the study. After the participants received the forwarded email, they each responded back to me directly to confirm their interest in being part of the study. I had eight men respond back to me; they were intrigued and interested in the study. Only

seven of the men completed all three 90-minute interviews. One person dropped out of the study after the first interview.

### Data Collection Procedures

This section describes the data collection procedures I used to gather information from the participants on being a leader of a majority White student group.

#### *Interviewing*

Qualitative researchers use variety of methods to gather data. For this study, I used the method of interviewing to collect data. Janesick (as cited in Esterberg, 2002) defined an interview as a “meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas though questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic” (p. 83).

Seidman (2006) stated that interviewing begins with an interest in understanding the experiences of other people. An interviewer wants to make meaning out of those experiences and listen to their stories. The stories of worth in this study came from the participants in the story. Rubin and Rubin (2005) made the following suggestions for conducting qualitative interviews: identify

interviewees who know about your research problem from first-hand experience or direct knowledge, ask them questions about their experiences and knowledge, and list intently to their answers. Then keep questioning until you have a good, rich, and credible answer to your research problem. (p. ix)

There are several types of interviews, including structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Specifically, I conducted semi-structured interviews as I found them useful in exploring the lived experiences of the participants more openly, which allowed the

interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words. Using this format, I was able to “listen carefully to the participant’s responses and to follow his or her lead” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87).

There are several formats an interview can take. How an interview is formatted depends largely on the goal of the research. To fully understand each participant’s experience, I chose the three-interview series designed by Dolbeare and Schuman (as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 17). Seidman described the three-interview series:

1. “Interview One: Focused Life History – In the first interview, the interviewer’s task is to put the participant’s experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time” (p. 17).
2. “Interview Two: The Details of the Experience – The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants’ present lived experience in the topic area of the study” (p. 18).
3. “Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning – In the third interview, we ask participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience” (p. 18).

During the initial interview, I collected data on each participant’s life story. Using pre-established open-ended questions, I gathered information that set up the context for each of the following interviews. Those questions allowed me to develop a rapport and trust with the participants. Interview two focused on the study and their experiences as leaders of a majority White student group. In interview three, I provided the participants with some emerging themes and asked them to reflect on those themes.

Therefore, I collected data by conducting individual, 90-minute, in-depth interviews. The reason to use this approach is to have the participants reconstruct their experience, put it into the context of their lives, and reflect on what it means to them. Anything shorter than 90 minutes for each interview seems too short (Seidman, 2006). I was able to place the phenomenon within the context of the participants' lives and those around them. Framing the interviews within this context gave me the room to explore the meaning behind each experience of these African American college male student leaders. Without this context, it would prove virtually impossible to gain understanding.

Seidman (2006) suggested spacing interviews from three days to a week apart. Due to travel conflicts, I had to conduct some of the interviews two to three days apart. I conducted three of the participants' first interviews on one day, then waited two or three days to conduct the second interviews. A week later I returned to speak with the three participants to conduct a face-to-face third interview. With the other four participants I conducted the first and second interviews face-to-face with two or three days spacing between each. The third interview was held a week later via telephone with these four participants. Seidman (2006) suggested that alternatives to the three-interview structure are acceptable as long as structure is maintained. The structure must allow the participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives. Because my time was limited for travel and the students were busy, alterations to the three-interview series were necessary. I still was able to sustain the credibility gained through the three-interview series to collect rich descriptive data from the participants. Before starting any interviewing each participant read and signed an informed consent form.

The interviews I conducted were phenomenological in nature. According to Tesch (as cited in Attinasi, 1992), “Phenomenological interviewing is to gain access to the meaning an individual makes of his or her own experience” (p. 63).

Kvale (as cited in Attinasi, 1992) described six possible phases in phenomenological interviewing as follows:

1. “The interviewee describes his or her life-world with respect to the phenomenon of interest” (p. 63).
2. “The interviewee discovers new relations, sees new meaning in his or her life-world on the basis of the spontaneous descriptions” (p. 63).
3. “The interviewer during the interview condenses and interprets the meaning of what the interviewee describes and, perhaps, sends the interpreted meaning back for confirmation or clarification” (p. 63). I did send a copy of my interpretations to the participants and they all agreed I captured their story accurately.
4. “The interviewer or another person alone interprets the completed and transcribed interview on three different levels: (a) the self-understanding of the interviewee; (b) a common-sense interpretation that involved extending the meaning of what the interviewee said by reading between the lines and by drawing in broader contexts than the interviewee did; and (c) more theoretical interpretations, based on, for example, an existing social or sociopsychological theory” (p. 63).
5. “The interviewer gives the interpretations, based on his or her analysis of the completed interview, back to the interviewee in a second interview” (p. 63).
6. “There may be an extension of the description-interpretation continuum to action” (p. 63).



During the third and final interviews, the participants and I reflected on the interviews and the overall study and how their experience as a leader in a majority White group affected their lives and others around them. It is important to note that this study did not include all six phases, and that the stages did not need to be followed in chronological order.

### *Insider/outsider Status*

As mentioned previously, my “insider status” was instrumental in my ability to connect with the participants and build trust quickly. Schwandt (2007) described the differences between insider and outsider perspectives:

An internalist or insider perspective holds that knowledge of the social world must start from the insider or social actor’s account of what social life means. To know the world of human *action* is to understand the subjective meanings of that action to the actors. In contrast, an externalist or outsider perspective argues that knowledge of the social world consists in causal explanations of human behavior. (p. 152)

Griffith (1998) elaborated on the insider/outsider status:

Where the researcher enters the research site as an Insider-someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched - that tacit knowledge informs her research producing a different knowledge than that available to the Outsider - a researcher who does not have an intimate knowledge of the group being researched prior to their entry into the group. (p. 361)

I acknowledge that my insider status as an African American male, who once was president of his university’s SGA proved fruitful. These past experiences provided me with opportunities to which other researchers may not have had access. Because of my insider

status the students seemed to be willing to share deeper thoughts with me. Having lived the experience of the participants afforded me insight that others cannot fully comprehend.

Although being a former undergraduate leader increased my insider status, participants could have also seen me as an outsider because my collegiate experiences differed from what leaders may experience today.

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is “the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 111). Moustakas (1994) described a method of organizing and analyzing phenomenological data derived from methods suggested by Stevick, Colaizzi, and Keen (as cited in Moustakas). The following steps are presented in the order of analysis:

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon.
2. From the verbatim transcript of your experience complete the following steps:
  - a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
  - b. Record all relevant statements.
  - c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
  - d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
  - e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into *a description of the textures of the experience*. Include verbatim examples.

- f. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variations, construct *a description of the structures of your experience*.
    - g. Construct *a textural-structural description* of the meanings and essences of your experience.
  3. From the verbatim transcript of the experience of each of the other co-researchers, complete the above steps a through g.
  4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers' experiences, construct a *composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience*, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole. (p. 122)

Moustakas's (1994) method of organizing phenomenological data assisted me in coding and analyzing the data I collected from African American college men leading majority White student groups. In addition, it provided me with a useful format to complete data analysis. I started to analyze data after my first interviews on August 11, 2008, and continued through my last interview on October 12, 2008. Throughout the interviews, I reflected on my own experience and the interactions between myself and the participants. I began transcribing the audio-digital interviews between interviews. I also transcribed the four audio-taped interviews I conducted over the phone once I was back in Iowa. After I completed transcribing, I began open coding, "working intensively with the data, line by line" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 158), developed tentative ideas, and placed them into "invariant meaning units and themes" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Specifically, I made notes in the margins of my transcripts and used a variety of different highlights in Microsoft Word; each color

represented an emerging theme. Also I placed the content of each emerging theme into a Microsoft Excel worksheet, which allowed me to sort data. Through inductive data analysis, these units resulted in themes that lead to interpretations and findings (Whitt, 1991).

#### Trustworthiness

A key component of qualitative research is the concept of trustworthiness. The issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) were addressed throughout the study. Marshall and Rossman (1995) explained that the goal of credibility “is to demonstrate that the inquiry was constructed in such a manner as to ensure that the subject was accurately identified and described” (p. 143). Credibility was maximized through the process of member checks and peer debriefing. I utilized member checks by asking each participant to review the data and my analysis in order to determine the accuracy of my interpretations and findings. Maxwell (2000) stated that member checking “is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on” (p. 111). I began member checking right away by sending the participants transcripts of each individual interview. I received only a few responses from the participants. In addition, I sent each member their individual participant profiles; of the eight, three contacted me with corrections to their profiles. Member checks provide participants the opportunity to comment on my interpretation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam 2002). Moreover, I conducted several peer debriefing sessions with two of my fellow doctoral student peers. During this debriefing, I presented my findings and asked them to question and comment on the study. They both give me positive feedback and could follow how my themes were developed.

Transferability was completed via rich and thick descriptions of the data collected. It was my goal to provide detailed information about the experience of African American college men who lead majority White student groups. Such detailed information and analysis is designed to “transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences” (Cresswell, 2003, p. 196). Transferability was assured by interviewing men with similar experiences at three different universities.

Dependability is achieved when the researcher “attempts to account for changing conditions in the phenomenon chosen for the study as well as changes in the design created by increasingly refined understanding of the setting” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 145). The phenomenon in this study is the experience of African American college men leading White student groups. Two of the participants were recent alumni (within a semester of receiving their degrees) from their institution when this study was conducted. I had to conduct their interviews at their homes, while the other participants were interviewed on campus. The location of the interviews did not make too much difference in the data collection process. All of the interviewees felt comfortable and spoke openly about their experiences. The participants whom I interviewed on campus selected the location (e.g., private room in campus library and office space in the student union).

Confirmability refers to whether the findings of the study can be confirmed by others. A major technique in establishing confirmability is the confirmability audit or audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using computer folders and envelopes, I created an audit trail, which included all raw data, including tape recordings and field notes, from the interviews. An additional aspect of confirmability is reflexivity on the part of the researcher. I kept a journal that included all personal notes and reflections from the study.

### Delimitations

As noted in chapter 1, this study only examined African American male students at four-year public universities in a rural environment; however, this study could definitely be replicated by examining the experiences of African American male students at four-year public universities in an urban environment or at four-year private universities.

### Limitations

The principle limitation surrounding this study is the number of participants. Given the lack of African American men who fit my research criteria, it was difficult to find participants who all attended the same institution. Part of the reason I decided to conduct this study was the fact that there is a limited number of African American men who fit the criteria. Even at the three institutions, I was only able to find two or three men to interview and they did not all serve in their leadership positions at the same time.

### Summary

This study was undertaken to better understand the experiences of African American men who hold positional leadership roles in majority White student groups. This chapter included a review of the qualitative methodology for the study: epistemology of constructionism; theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology; and methodology using phenomenological interviewing procedures. I used the three-interview series of phenomenological interviewing to collect data from seven participants. I analyzed the data using open coding to develop themes designed to answer the research questions:

1. What motivates these men in their desire to assume leadership in majority white student groups?

2. How do African American men negotiate access into leadership roles within student groups that have historically not been led by individuals who are non-White student leaders?
3. What benefits do they perceive from their involvement in majority white student groups?
4. During their leadership in a majority white student group, with which stage(s) within the Black Identity Model do these African American men most align?

Chapter 4 is dedicated to presenting and discussing the profiles of the seven men who participated in this study. These profiles allow the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the men as individuals and leaders of majority White student groups.

## CHAPTER 4. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This chapter provides insight into the lives of the seven African American men who participated in this study, allowing the reader to gain a deeper understanding of each man as an individual, student, and leader in a majority White student organization. At the start of this study, each participant chose a pseudonym, which will be used throughout the chapter to identify each person.

The profiles, while comprehensive, will only provide a small glimpse into the lives of each participant. The information presented here reflects their experiences prior to college, during college, and as a leader in a majority White student college organization.

### Roland

During Roland's senior year at Alpha University (AU), he became the first African American president of Inter-fraternal Council (IFC). Roland has since graduated from AU and is working in corporate America. Roland grew up in the suburbs and attended a majority White public high school so attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) was not a major culture shock for him. Roland's parents are still married and neither one of them finished college. "I am actually a first generation college student, so that [was] one thing that drove me all through my college years; not only to make myself better but also to show my parents that I am a product of them."

Roland's passion for leadership and school involvement began long before college. In high school, he was actively involved in student council, choir, and the drama club. "I was involved in anything and everything. I think my involvement in high school set up the foundation for what I would take advantage of in my college years." Roland was very open



to meeting and learning from a wide variety people. “I think that part of my interactions with people carried over from high school. Being able to interact with people from all types of cultures. And [the] diversity of people kind of carried over to my interaction in college.” With that mind set, Roland looked at ways he could expand his circle of influence.

Roland wanted to get the most out of his four years of college. “My overall goal was to get involved in as many organizations as I can. I wanted to network and meet people to build strong relationships and take on leadership positions and graduate in four years.” The first few organizations Roland joined were Black Cultural Groups (BCG). “That [leadership in a BCG] gave me a strong foundation to be able to know that I can do that [lead IFC].”

Based on the advice of his BCG advisor, he decided to explore IFC fraternities and consequently joined one. “She never said yes or no if I should do it but just gave me the pros and cons of the organizations.” In addition to the pros and cons his advisor shared, he had his own thoughts. Immediately, he realized an obvious con: if he became a member of IFC, he would have limited role models within the system who looked like him. “Especially being a White organization that historically looking back at composites that are in the fraternity house and not seeing any people of color.” Despite the obvious cons, Roland decided to join IFC because he had plenty of Black friends and wanted to find a way to network with other cultures. “Why not expand myself; why not expose myself to something different maybe, have a different type of outlook, different type of lessons I can take away from my college career by being a part of this organization.” He wanted to show that African Americans can be leaders in and out of the Black community. Also, he realized the Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO) system was in need of major improvements and, personally, he did not like the idea of “burning out” in an attempt to help improve the system. He wanted to be

a part of something that was moving forward at a faster pace. “At the time NPHC (National Pan-Hellenic Council) had some work to do and I felt that if I was a leader on campus and joined a NPHC chapter I would limit my opportunities and growth.”

Roland saw the value of IFC and BGLO working together on campus. He wanted to have a more unified Greek community. “Being an African American student I could relate to the NPHC groups and knowing the terms and traditions which I could incorporate into IFC programming and events to bridge the gap.” During his IFC presidency, he called upon his already established relationship with the NPHC president, which he forged during his leadership in BCG. The two discussed ways NPHC and IFC could collaborate. The outcome of efforts to bridge the gap was satisfactory, but at the end of his term he acknowledged that the initiative still needed some work.

Being the first African American president of IFC, Roland wanted to achieve great success and leave a lasting impression on the council.

I wanted to start something or help improve the organization. I was actually the first African American to be the IFC president but also a strong African American leader in a majority White organization and able to give feedback to administrators and peers and do an effective job with bridging IFC and NPHC.

Roland received a lot of support from his fraternity brothers for being IFC president. He was not sure how the African American community was going to react at first. But, over all, Roland found them to be supportive. “I have not seen any negative attitude or things happen to me from that community in response [to] me being in that position.” He believes his position helped strengthen both the White and Black communities at AU. It was helpful that

he was a part of a BCG before he became president of IFC. “I am able to relate to the African American community at AU because I was active in the community.”

Roland knew going into the position as an African American that he might face challenges so he prepared himself for any rejection he might face. “All of those Caucasian people who interviewed me and I [had to] prove to them I was able to handle the position.” He led IFC by following the constitution and by-laws of IFC. “I think that showed the type of person I was, my integrity level in term of being consistent following the guidelines.” Roland built trust and respect among the members of IFC. He found the strongest motivation coming from people continuing to tell him he could do this. “Knowing that my fraternity brothers and advisors believed in me. [That] helped me to continue to believe in my own ability to do the job.” He wanted to debunk the myth that African American men aren’t leaders on campus. While trying to disprove this belief, he did feel that sometimes people who did not like his leadership style used his race as a way to discredit him.

It was more about ignorance and stupidity. People who don’t like change. I was an easy target because I was African American and those who did not like change would say things that might offend and affect my ability to lead.

Roland would later tell me that most of those thoughts were in his head and he did not act on them. He believed that some of the push back might have resulted from his being an African American. He still thinks, however, that most of it came because he was doing his job, enforcing the rules. A lot of those thoughts were confirmed to Roland when he had the opportunity to meet other African American IFC presidents at a national conference. They too had some similar thoughts about push backs from their peers. Hearing those stories made him feel as though he was doing the right thing. “Actually seeing other IFC Black presidents

at PWIs at the conference was a good feeling.” Roland now knows he was not the only one and could find other Black men who shared his experience.

At times, Roland did feel like the token Black person. “I was the only Black at many social events or playing sports and being the token guy in terms of being able to participate.” Even with that image, if people got to know him they would learn he was very passionate about his culture. “I was able to show that African American students can lead this group and could create change. I was not going to live up to those negative stereotypes about African American men.”

Roland wanted to be challenged as a leader. “I know I could have gone over to BSA and led that group, if I had a passion for it, with no problem.” He wanted to really show the campus that no matter what the skin color of the persons he was working with, he could lead the group. The challenge of leading IFC excited Roland and he embraced the opportunity. He saw the benefits of leading IFC to be the development of his communication and team building skills. “Getting to work with a variety of people was great. I got to work with people who think differently than me, who grew up differently than me, act differently than me.” Roland would encourage other Black students to join BCG but also participate in at least one organization that is majority White. “I think to be successful you need to be able to interact with people from all over the world, not only within an organization but in the work place.”

In 2008, Roland is glad AU has elected its second African American SGA president. He helped the young man with his campaign team last year and looks forward to hearing how he fares in the position. He hopes that the current SGA president will “make a positive impact not only in the African American community but campus over all.” Roland saw the larger benefit of one unified campus.

## Victor

Victor was the Vice Commissioner of the Student Activities Commission (SAC) for the Student Government Association (SGA) last year and currently he is the Commissioner of SAC. Victor is a junior attending Alpha University (AU). He grew up in the suburbs and graduated from a majority Black public high school. He did attend a suburban majority White high school in ninth and tenth grades and was home schooled his eleventh grade year. Both of Victor's parents (mom and step-father) earned college degrees. His step-father, the person he calls father, while not his biological father, has been a major influence in his life since he was seven years old. "Nobody would even know that he was not my father unless I told them."

Unlike at college, Victor was not that heavily involved in extracurricular activities during his high school days. "I really was not an active engaged student at all. Teachers knew me, students knew me, but if I was not in class I did not want to be in high school at all." Things changed his senior year of high school after he attended a national youth leadership forum in Washington, D.C. That experience became a defining moment in his life and set him on a new path to leadership. "That was definitely that light bulb that when on for me to get involved. I got to college and did a complete 180. My biggest regret in high school was that I was not involved."

Months after the leadership forum, Victor arrived on campus determined to get involved. Quickly, Victor found a place to serve in SGA and Black Cultural Groups (BCG). As a freshman, Victor became involved in SGA and BCG, securing a position with SGA immediately. Although he is highly involved with the BCG, he does not hold any leadership position. "SGA, I jumped in full steam freshman year starting off as an intern for SAC."

Victor wanted to get as much experience and meet as many people as he could. It was not about the group being majority White, but rather, SAC matched up with his personal interest in business.

When he first came to college, he noticed that AU was a segregated campus. “You have AU [and] then you have AU, the minority edition.” Victor could see the division down racial lines with student organizations, events, and programs offered on campus. “I wanted to help bridge this gap because it looks huge to me and I don’t think people are looking at the big picture when it comes to graduating from here.” He felt that SAC would be a great start to working on building the bridge. “I recognized early on that you cannot stay in your own comfort zone in order to be really successful.” He did not want to just be a Black male who is a leader in a Black group.

I tell people all the time I am a leader of an organization and I am Black. Whereas being a Black student leader is a little bit different. I mean being the president of BSA you have a different mind set where you are the leader on Black issues on campus. I wanted to be a leader of the campus.

There was one other African American male who was the SAC commissioner at the time Victor joined but he did not get along with him. He felt that he could do a better job as commissioner. Although he did not have an ally in SAC, Victor did find other support from the Black Affairs Commissioner of SGA, who helped him to adjust to the SGA culture. “We were learning together; kind of there for each other.” It is very hard for Victor to find people who understand the struggles he has in SAC. Sometimes the Black community thinks he has turned his back on them.

I know a lot of student leaders but they are all leaders in Black organizations, which comes with a different set of rules, sort of speak. They could not relate to being Black and being in a majority White organization, being a leader and balancing the Black community feeling that I turn my back on them and the White community to think I am not about business and only helping the Black students.”

He feels that at times he is being attacked by both White and Black peers at the same time.

Victor knew that working in SAC he had to be twice as good. “I’ve never gone into anything thinking because I was Black I would be held back from doing it. I recognize I have to work harder and be twice as good.” He did not want to validate the perception that Black men are lazy and unprofessional. He would double check to make sure when he entered the room for a SAC meeting that he was the most prepared person in the room. For Victor, being prepared was his way to break down those negative stereotypes so the next person does not have to deal with them. “I want to make it easier for the next person.”

Being involved in SAC, he realized that there are big cultural differences between SAC and BCG. Victor talked about his experience in SAC when he would raise his voice and his White peers would assume he was upset and really mad. “I noticed when I was frustrated I would raise my voice but I was not upset or angry, just frustrated. Yet the SAC members would think I was angry and my feeling was hurt.” That was not the case; he was just expressing himself. When he did the same thing in a BCG it was not taken that way. “It was just us having a disagreement. But that was normal and we would all go out for wings after the meeting.” He values the experience of being a member of SAC because it helps him understand a majority White environment. He is still trying to find a balance and develop ways to express his frustration constructively in SAC.

When Victor is in SAC, he maintains a very professional disposition so he can be viewed as creditable.

A prime example would be an organization comes in all ready to talk to the top person. I would tell them that I am the commissioner; and they would ask who else they can talk to. I am like, “Me; the buck stops here; I am the final word on the issue.”

At first, these individuals did not believe he was the one in charge because he was a Black man. After that experience, he decided to begin dressing the part. This way, his peers would view him as credible. By contrast, he experienced times where his professional dress turned off some of his Black peers. “Many of my Black friends just don’t understand that I can’t dress hip-hop all the time. I have business meetings all day and don’t have time to go home and change.” The BCG are more laid back and not as structured so Victor feels more relaxed in those meetings. “I can still go to a BSA meeting and wear sweat pants and a t-shirt and be just fine. Now that would not fly in SAC.”

“What the Black students feel and think about me matters to me more than what White students think about me.” But he knows he has a job to do and does his best to be fair to all student groups. Victor had to learn to balance his business and his social time and learn about the art of informal conversation within and out of the different groups. At times, the Black student groups would want a “hook-up” on their application. Victor would do what he could within the rules of SAC.

Like, they would turn in their paperwork without the advisor signing it. I would call the presidents up; tell them to come back, pick it up. That’s how I helped. They want



me to let them turn in the paperwork later. When I say no they just get mad and think I [am] not helping them out.

He assists them out by alerting them that they need the correct signature or informing them of ways they can co-sponsor an event to receive more funding. Anything he does is within his privileges as Commissioner. He happily helps because he knows the officers and can easily contact them by cell phone.

Victor wants to do a good job in this position so the next Black male student leader does not have to deal with so many stereotypes.

After I finish my term, I want people to say that they remember Victor and he did a great job. He was always well dressed and on point with his information. I want to set a new degree of standards.

For Victor, the best part about the position was the ability to learn about the entire university. "SAC just exposed me to the entire working of the university." Victor learned to function in an environment where he was one of a few Black leaders. Given this experience, he is now able to serve as a role model for younger students. "I kind of set a path for Black males especially if they want to do some of the things I did."

#### George

George is a recent alumnus of Beta University (BU) who is currently pursuing his masters and PhD in history at another university. George was the vice president (VP) of the Student Government Association (SGA) and very involved with Black Cultural Groups (BCG) and his Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) fraternity. Also, George was active in variety of majority White student groups - Excellence in Leadership (EIL), ODK honorary

society [leadership group], and Order of Omega [Greek leadership honorary], building his leadership experience to later be VP of SGA.

During George's high school years, he attended a majority White suburban high school where he was active in the marching band, wrestling team, and student council. "I was in a lot of AP classes there, involved with wrestling team, and they all saw me for who I was, not my color." Outside of school, George was active in the Prince Hall Mason youth group which was made up of all African American men. "Now that has to be the biggest catalyst as far as me being active. I was around strong positive Black men."

Once George arrived at BU he wanted to get involved in a variety of different organizations so he could "spread my wings." Within days of arrival, George joined his first group: the Hall Council. It was the first invitation to a meeting he received. During that meeting, he learned about SGA. Immediately, he declared that one day he would lead that organization. As his thoughts drifted to the future, he also reflected on something one of his former high school teachers told him: he had the ability to transcend his leadership, not just within the African American community, but in the larger world. "I think it was easier to get involved with White student groups for me because I was already involved and my high school was majority White." George realized this ability to transcend race early in life. In middle school, he participated in a geography bee. It came down to two finalists and he was one of them. At that point, he heard students of all colors chant his name in support of him. They wanted him to win the geography bee. "They really showed me support. At that moment I had transcended race."

Even with his past experience of being involved with majority White groups, George still was aware that people watched him closely and looked to him as the example of how a

Black man should be. “I guess being involved in majority White organizations [you] just kind of have to like carry the brunt of the African American community on your shoulder.”

Whether White or Black, George was involved in various groups he believed could help improve the entire campus. “I was involved in majority White groups not necessarily because they are majority White. It was just because it was something I wanted to do and the fact they were majority White, hey, that was not [going] to stop me.”

Realizing his gift for leadership, he decided to increase his influence and assume a leadership position with SGA.

It [SGA] is the highest government body at the university for students and I definitely wanted to be involved. You can’t complain unless you actually do something. SGA, to me, was one of the best ways to get involved and actually get something done. Coming into SGA, George felt he had to work harder because there were not many people who looked like him in SGA.

I felt I had the brunt of the community [African American community] on my shoulders. I always had to work harder, not only for myself but to shine a positive light through my actions on the Black community. Not that I had to, but I figure, you know, if I did well it would not come back negatively, such and such did so bad in SGA, and I did not want that to be the case and have folks look down on those who came after me, that looked like me.

George felt it was very important to remain guarded. He shielded himself to avoid falling into any negative stereotypes about Black men during his tenure as VP of SGA. He felt a responsibility to prove that a Black man can be a leader in SGA so that the next Black person would not have to jump through as many hoops.

He was not the first person of color at BU to hold a leadership position in SGA executive board. Knowing someone else has already achieved what he hoped to accomplish encouraged him. “Hey, I can do it too. The reason I got involved was because I saw somebody that looked like me do it before.” He believes those before him helped break down many barriers he otherwise would have had to overcome. “Maybe some of the early Blacks in SGA might have had harder issues. Maybe due to time it has become a little easier for me to deal with that.” Before George was elected VP of SGA, there had been a person of color on the executive board the past four years.

I had been to the executive SGA office before where there are pictures of previous SGA officers. You know I was inspired to think that I am one of a few people to ever hold the position as VP and been trusted enough as well [as] fortunate to be in such a position. Just add satisfaction that I was only the third Black person to be in such a position.

George understood the history and the importance of him being in such a leadership position. He wanted to take this opportunity to continue to break the glass ceiling of leadership at BU.

George did feel a difference between being part of a Black Cultural Group (BCG) and SGA. “It’s like comparing apples to oranges. BCG and SGA, you need to keep it professional in both groups but they have a different group to serve.” George views BCG as a group that addresses Black issues and concerns only, whereas SGA represents the larger campus community.

They [SGA] do more and look at more of the larger picture of things, such as roads on campus and financial things of that nature on campus. Then you have minority organizations that focus on making sure that the minorities are doing well on campus

and give them the opportunities to express their culture and expose the larger university population to cultural events.

George wants to be involved with the larger success of all students at BU. “SGA has always been one of the best organizations to improve the conditions on the campus.” He also wants people to step up to the plate and be leaders. George feels he is not special; rather, he simply decided to make a difference.

I would like to say I am a leader in the sense that anybody can be a leader if they step up to the plate. I am not saying I am a success story or anything like that. I am just the type of person who is trying to go through school and do the best that I can do.

Being involved in both White and Black groups, George felt support and respect from everyone.

Especially, I had a lot of support from the African American community. Even those White organizations saw the hard work and had a lot of respect for me. I had a bigger plan in my mind than just the concerns of the BSA and other minority groups, but a lot of these issues were not about one group but help everybody. Those were the issues I place value on.

Respect was earned across racial lines. For George, he felt more at home with BCG than SGA. “Going to a BSA meeting felt like I was coming home.” George believes that this helped him to stay connected to his culture and become an advocate for African American issues in SGA.

Trying to find a balance of being involved with BCG and SGA was a challenge at first. George was trying to stay involved with the BCG and champion some of their concerns, while keeping his focus on the position as SGA VP. He needed to look at what would be best

for the larger campus community. He was trusted in the African American community and active before getting his position in SGA, so he found a lot of support from his Black peers. “When it came down to it, it was not really that hard for me to stay active, especially since the African Americans were a strong base and support for the SGA slate that I ran on anyway.” The close relationship he had with the African American community gave the community a feeling that he was one of them and they could trust him at the VP of SGA. “So being a Black man on campus I felt a responsibility to at least bring [African American] concerns in front of SGA. I was an asset to SGA, not just because of my race but including my race.”

He felt pressure from the Black community and believed they held him to a higher standard. “You can’t really party or have too many beers. It is just a different plane that you are on and every little thing was looked upon under a microscope.” A lot of African American men did not feel comfortable working under that type of pressure and chose not to seek leadership in SGA. George believes such feelings stem from a lack of understanding. Black people are unsure about SGA and what the organization actually does. “Just because there are so few Black males and females involved before. Not being aware of what it does is a big portion of why a lot of Black males don’t get involved with such organizations.” For George, he felt Black men were not pushed to join SGA; instead they were pressured to only get involved with BCG. Because few Black men held leadership positions in SGA, he felt even more pressure – whether self-imposed or otherwise – to become the best SGA VP. “As a Black male I need to show ourselves in a good light. I took some of the negative going on about Black men and brought a positive view of Black males to SGA.”

George's leadership in SGA enabled him to learn how to effectively operate as a leader in a predominantly White environment, which would prove fruitful after graduation. One of the main things he learned and believes will help him professionally is compromise. "You have to do things for the betterment of the larger campus community to be taken seriously as a leader to everybody." As VP of SGA, he viewed people not based on color but rather their ability to lead and, in turn, he hoped others would do the same.

### John

John attends Beta University (BU) where he is currently a junior. John is the president of Residence Hall Council (RHC) on campus. He is a bi-racial male student who self-identifies as African American.

"My Mom is White northern European and my dad is Black and a number of other things." When John was young, his parents divorced after which he moved with his mother to her hometown, a small rural town in the Midwest. The strain of divorce, distance, and a combination of other factors affected his relationship with his father, which he does not view as a healthy one. "My dad and I had an interesting relationship. I kind of hinted early that we are not very close." Despite his father's absence, John developed a general understanding of his cultural identity as a Black man. "I did have a mom who wanted me to learn some of what [it means to be an African American] whether it was through reading books about those kinds of things [African American history/culture] or exposing me to music or art."

John's mother realized the need for exposing her son to his African American heritage since his father was no longer in the home and there were few African Americans living in his hometown. John's high school was surrounded by three corn fields and he could count the number of fellow African American students on one hand. From fourth grade

through high school, he attended school with the same students, most of whom were White. Consequently, he became completely comfortable in this predominantly White environment.

He quickly learned there were two types of people in this school: those who were highly involved in extracurricular activities and those who were not. For John, his level of involvement rather than his race set him apart from the masses. He was involved in drama club, quiz team, National Honor Society, and served as the senior class officer for Student Council. In addition to his extracurricular activities, he excelled in the class room. Learning came easy for John. He admits he was a good student – completing AP courses and earning some college credits – but at times, he was a goof-off and refused to take life so seriously.

During high school, there were times when race was an issue or surfaced in conversation but he never allowed himself to focus on it. In fact, he was simply not interested in discussing race or learning more about his heritage. “I was never all that interested in [African American history/culture], not at that time in my life.” John never took his race seriously and often brushed off comments and situations as opposed to confronting them. It was not until recently [junior year of college] that he began to take a critical look at how race affects his life and decision making process. “I knew I was Black and I know I had that history. I never really put two and two together to really think about what that meant.”

When John initially started school at Beta University (BU), he had no desire to “get involved” or assume any leadership roles. His primary concern was making sure he kept up with his demanding college course load. Other than academically, he did not find the adjustment from high school to college challenging given that BU mirrored his home environment. “I was one of a few Black students there and I am one of a few Black students here. Nothing’s real different to be honest.”



Once he felt comfortable academically, he decided to get involved. John joined the Residence Hall Council (RHC) second semester of his freshman year as the treasurer. It is a majority White student organization; however, he did not seek it out for that reason. He thought a good place to start would be the place where he lived; it was one of the relevant parts of his new campus life. “If you are living on campus and if there are things you want to get done or have an opinion about, how something should be done or changed or you want to keep a good thing going, then it is important your voice is heard.” In the short time he lived in his new “home,” he identified a few things he wanted to change or create. He quickly realized RHC had the money and oversight to make things happen. John views his involvement with RHC as a benefit because he has the ability to influence policies and improve overall life in the residence halls.

For John, his ability to lead a majority White student group had more to do with his skills than his race. “I guess in the building I earned my respect by the work I did in the group before I got the position. Race was not a part of my experience to becoming president of the group. And, I don’t think that race would hold me back from doing the job.” At that point in John’s life, race was not a relevant part of his conscious awareness. He never felt compelled to make race an issue in any situation because he never saw it as an important factor in judging a person’s ability and/or character.

Although he self-identified as African American, he was not involved in any Black Cultural Groups (BCG). “I just really never felt the desire to get into [a BCG].” He gravitated toward organizations he knew about and he simply did not know much about BCG or the black culture on campus. In fact, John had little interaction with other African American peers on campus with the exception of two African American Resident Assistants

(RA) who lived in his building, one male and one female, and both of whom he spoke with from time to time. He had little interaction with the female RA but he engaged in a few discussions with the male RA. This male RA, John believed, viewed him as an Uncle Tom. “I felt that he had issues with me for not being knowledgeable about ...Black culture.” This RA was a member of a BGLO and an officer in the BCG. John felt this person looked down on him because of his leadership and involvement in a majority White student group. “I think he saw that [not being involved with BCG] as a betrayal...I guess he believes that I devalue being Black by not participating in groups he is a part of.”

John’s interaction with that RA discouraged him from becoming involved in a BCG. He did not see the benefit of getting involved in BCG if other African Americans would mischaracterize him as well. John did not have any other positive interactions with African Americans at BU until he took an RA class.

Before that I always felt like...I must be honest, I was more comfortable around White people just because it seems like the Black people I was around kind of looked down upon me because I was not sharing in the culture in the way they shared in it. I felt more comfortable around White people.

Although John was comfortable around White people, he had a burning desire to break down stereotypes about Black people. As a leader in a majority White student group, John felt he could show another side of the African American experience to both Black and White peers. “I think it was one way of breaking a stereotype. Even the people who had been around more minorities than I have been, I don’t think they expected somebody like me.”

The African American students in the RA class, who were also BCG leaders, helped him to feel more comfortable with himself and the issue of race. “It led me to be more

comfortable being around other people of different races and made me want to know more about ... you know, trying to figure out how I define myself.” It was not until after this class that he started to view himself in the context of race. Before meeting these BCG leaders he did not see the benefit of being involved in any BCG.

John believed that students get involved in things they see a benefit in joining. “If I don’t see the benefit, why join the group, no matter if it’s Black or White.” Still, John is not a member of any BCG because he believes that his best way to influence change at BU is through being a leader in RHC. He is now looking into attending some BCG meetings and events so he can have that experience. “I am just now trying to understand my race and how it affects me. You came at a good time to help me dig even deeper about the race issue.”

John noted, “During my time in RHC race was never an issue.” However, after interviewing for this study and reflecting upon his interactions with the BCG leaders, he admits he might have missed something because he had blinders on when it came to racial issues.

#### Roger

Roger is a sophomore and currently serves as president of his Residence Hall Council (RHC); a position he has held since his freshman year. As a freshman, he also joined an Inter Fraternal Council (IFC) fraternity and he currently serves as historian of his chapter. He grew up in the suburbs outside of a large Midwestern city and attends Beta University (BU).

Roger grew up in a two parent household. Both his parents are immigrants from the Caribbean; however, Roger self-identifies as African American because he was born and raised in the United States. Both of his parents attended college. His mother holds a master’s degree and his father a doctorate. Even though Roger’s father passed away during his senior

year of high school, just over two years ago, he still credits his father as being his biggest role model and mentor. “Just watching him until I was 17, watching him being a leader in the church and around the community, I knew I had to be something great.”

Roger grew up in a neighborhood that could be classified as high socioeconomic status (SES) yet he considers his family upper-middle class. His dad was a minister and his mom is a high school principal. Roger attended one of the largest public high schools in his home state. His school is a suburban, majority White, high SES school. “Everything was majority White at (name of his high school). It is just a bunch of very privileged kids and they were not even close to reality.” He was very involved in many school extracurricular activities during his high school days. Roger was active in Student Council, choir, and newspaper staff. During his freshman year, he played football and participated in a Christian youth group. “I got too involved there.” Getting involved was just a natural thing for him in high school; after all, he wanted to follow in the leadership footsteps of his father. “I just kind of did it. I did not really think about it and it did not matter to me that I was Black and a leader in my high school.”

When Roger arrived at BU, he was excited and immediately sought ways to get involved so he first joined the Resident Hall Council (RHC). “I did student council in high school; I just guessed I might as well keep it up in college. Resident Hall Council seems just like high school student council.” He felt that being in RHC he could make some changes and influence policies. He was always looking for ways to be a leader in any environment.

Roger did not like for others to place labels on him. He saw himself as a leader who happens to be an African American.

One thing that a lot of African Americans in leadership positions get is a whole lot of labels placed on them, being White sort of speak. If you are doing something like hall council or programming board or historical White fraternity, any group where the make-up is majority White, people would then label you [White].

He picked student organizations to become involved in by how much influence and power they had on campus.

I kind of just have this mind set of one that, do everything and take over. It kind of just carried over [from high school]. Well, how can I take over Greek Row? Well, join the biggest house on Greek Row. How can I take over the residence hall? Well, maybe I can be elected to the highest position in the residence hall. I mean...that's what drew me more...just the ability to gain influence. It seems the majority White organizations give you more influence on campus.

Roger was not involved in any Black Cultural Groups (BCG) because he felt that he could get more opportunities by being involved in majority White student groups. His view of BCG was that they had little influence on campus. "It was not about joining a Black fraternity or White fraternity. It was more about what I saw on campus. What groups did I see having influence on people and how can I be part of that." When he spoke with his family about joining a historically White fraternity, they told him that he might isolate himself from the Black community. Roger was not concerned about that but was looking at how he could gain more power and influence to make BU a better place, regardless of race. Roger has considered joining BCG; however, he currently has a class that conflicts with BCG's scheduled meetings. Although he has yet to join BCG, he is involved with the campus

Caribbean student group. This group, he noted, is loosely organized and involved around campus.

Roger recalled his first RHC meeting. He attended with another African American male friend and they were the only two Black students. His friend attended two more meetings before dropping out and leaving Roger to be the only African American in the group. Within his fraternity, there is one other African American man; he is bi-racial with an African American father and White mother. “He [bi-racial fraternity brother] does not have a lot of Black influence in him.”

Roger relishes his leadership position in RHC. Roger enjoys having the power to delegate responsibility, especially when it comes to organizing their big events. He also enjoys contributing ideas and planning events that outshine the rest. “I am very ambitious. I can imagine and create, think outside of the box, think of things that people would not usually think of.” Roger hopes other African American men will see the benefits of leadership in a majority White organization.

Black men need to see that joining an organization like this is not necessarily about becoming White or losing their identity but realizing you are at a school that if you want to have your voice heard you need to join organizations like these [majority White organizations].

With the benefits come challenges. Mainly, Roger found people do not always take him seriously. Roger believes that many of his White peers viewed him as the goofy entertainer type Black man who is not a serious leader.

I guess the biggest challenge would be overcoming the image of the goofy, friendly Black guy. A lot of White people especially view Black men in two mind sets, either

a scary Black guy or a friendly Black guy. Neither one do you think of in a leadership role.

Secondly, he finds it difficult, at times, to lead RHC because his White peers have never interacted with or been led by a Black man. “A lot of kids come from really small towns where they never encountered anyone Black before and who knows what kind of things their parents are saying to them.”

He knows that his laid back, playful personality combined with his peers’ limited interaction with Black people may affect their perception of him. Some may view him as unprofessional and unqualified. To combat this image, he decided to make sure he was always prepared for every meeting, in fact, over prepared. “Preparation is the best way to overcome some of those stereotypes.” To further prove he is more than just a goofy Black guy, Roger talked about being “up on his game” and making sure he was better than anyone else, leaving no room for anyone to question his qualifications and ability to lead. “I was able to be in that leadership role and make a statement about how it is possible and okay for a Black man to be in a leadership role like that.”

In spite of his efforts, there are times when racism trumps leadership. One of the biggest shocks he encountered was when he introduced himself as president of RHC and some students looked shocked that a Black man held the position. “I mean it was just frustrating, but it’s not something that’s going to stop me from doing what I want to do.” In RHC, he has experienced some racism, usually playful jokes that were socially acceptable.

In that there are still these expectations, that a Black man fit these models, and it is frustrating, really frustrating. If you try to be or want to be active in your community and have these leadership roles, you are viewed as being White.

Roger works hard to refute the belief that Black men are not strong leaders. He wants people to respect him for his ability to lead regardless of his race. Consequently, he is constantly fighting labels placed on Black men. “I felt that I was more of an individual. I was kind of going beyond the role that society places on Black men.”

From this experience, Roger has gained more confidence in his ability as a leader. “I realize how good of a leader I can be.” If he can lead a group of students who are racially different than him, he feels confident he could lead a group of students of his same race.

I think if it was an all Black group it would not be as much of a cultural difference that I would have to overcome. Maybe I would have personality differences in the group that I would have to work with. I don’t think I would have to deal with as many preconceived notions about how to take a Black man.

Although Roger is not currently active with a BGC, he still wants society to view African American men positively and recognize their abilities as strong leaders.

JL

JL is the former Student Government Association (SGA) president at Gamma University (GU). He is currently a senior at GU. JL is also a founding member of an Interfraternal Council (IFC) fraternity on campus. He was raised in a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. For high school, he attended a public majority Black school for inner city gifted and talented students. However, as a sixth grader, JL had a very different school experience. He lived in West Virginia and attended a majority White school for one year. In high school, JL found himself immersed in extracurricular activities. He served as the editor and chief of his high school news magazine, which he also founded; he worked on student council and was an officer in a YMCA youth government program.



When I asked JL if he was African American, he said that he preferred to be called Black; however, if Black was not a category listed on a given form, he would check African American. Shortly after 9/11, he and a group of friends began discussing race and as a result of that conversation, he now considers himself a Black American rather than an African American.

Someone made a comment about to the effect, I never been to Africa. I'm like neither have I, so why do I call myself African American? I would prefer Black American. I don't make a big deal out of it but if I need to check the box African American I am okay with that.

He has always been very proud of his Black roots and the city in which he grew up. "I am in love with my culture and recognize that I am Black. But at the same time I embrace the ideas of mainstream society too." JL's experiences as president of SGA helped him gain a stronger sense of who he is as a Black man. "I am comfortable with myself. I am comfortable with the person I have become and [am] still becoming."

JL does not like for people to place him in a box or put labels on him. He strives to remain honest and real in his dealings with others. "One of my fraternity brothers made the comment that I was the guy around campus that everyone talked to and did not discriminate more or less." Regardless of what others think, he feels self-assured and confident in his abilities. "I know who I am and it can be totally different than [what] you think about me but I am comfortable with me."

JL is a first generation college student. His mother did attend college; however, she did not graduate and his father never went to college. His parents divorced when he was 12 years old. Although he lived with his mother, his father was still around. "I am a huge

mama's boy like none other. Like my dad...he is an interesting person but I just had a strong[er] bond with my mother than my dad."

Since he was actively involved in high school, he felt it only natural to get involved in college. As a college freshman, he joined a leadership program designed to help students develop their leadership skills. He knew he wanted to achieve great things in college. While a senior in high school, he recalls contacting the then SGA president at GU. "I emailed that guy (pointing to a formal SGA president picture on the wall) senior year of high school to ask him information about SGA." Once on campus, JL began attending SGA meetings, which set him on the road to becoming SGA president.

What motivated me to run for president was that guy before me (pointing to a picture on the wall) who is also a former Black president of SGA. It came to the end of my freshman year and I felt he was so unproductive and unprofessional.

JL felt he could do better than him and wanted to prove it.

In addition to SGA, JL was involved with the sailing club, fashion club, Habit for Humanity, the GLBT group, and Latino student union. Those were groups that interested him. He is not involved with the BCG at GU because he did not feel they were an inviting or well-organized group. "I just don't have time for it; just don't have time for something that is not going to be in order or some group that does not even want you there." This hurt JL because he really wanted to see Black people be better than that.

Where I grew up, there were tons of Black people. I was not comfortable with the way they treated me -- even the way my own family treated me -- extended family, cousins and what not. I was always made fun of when I was young because I am not athletic. I tried to play basketball a couple of times to no avail. In their eyes, I could

not dance, like. And, I was the fat kid growing up. Frankly that is how Black people are. We love to make fun of each other and I did not want to deal with that on [a] regular basis.

Soured from his childhood experiences, JL found yet another reason not to become involved with BCG. In sum, JL did not like to deal with people who did not respect him. At GU, he felt that was most of the African Americans students. “Those who really supported me were intellectually sound enough to realize the type of things my family did and said was just inappropriate and unnecessary.”

JL enjoyed the continued praises he received for doing a good job from both Black and White peers. “I must be frank; I like attention. I feel that me being the only Black person, or one of the only, I get a lot of attention.” He wants to be a stand-out no matter where he goes and he knew being involved in majority White groups would help him to stand out.

As president, he tried his best not to fall into negative stereotypes like always being late. “I would miss meetings with the Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA) on a regular basis but I don’t think it was because of race. Yet, I feel people might have taken it that way.” JL had to learn to keep his emotions under control when sitting in a meeting.

There was a heated meeting with the VPSA and Dean of Students about meal plan dollars where SGA and the administration were not on the same page. I think if I was a little more “hood” I would have ended up throwing someone out of that room. It was a very heated meeting in terms of words and body language.

He confidently reflected on the meeting, realizing how he has grown and admitting he might have handled the experience differently a few years ago. “I realize growing up in the inner-city we tend to be a little more hostile.” Being the president of SGA helped JL learn to be

more comfortable working with a diverse group. JL does not believe he needs to “change” in order to lead a majority White group but he does realize the need for both White and Black people to work together in an effort to better understand each other. He was here to be a student leader not just a Black leader.

As president he encouraged good people to be on SGA with him. His cabinet was mostly Black students; however, that was not his intent. He was simply looking for people who could do the job and they fit the bill.

I took office and all these Black people came out of the woodworks and started applying for these positions. I don't think it was a conscious decision that I picked them. They might have just felt comfortable coming forward, seeing I looked like them.

JL was open to appointing the best person for the job, not just choosing them because they are Black. He does see how his race could have influenced more Black people to apply for a position because they were comfortable, seeing themselves in him.

During his time as SGA president, there was a small group of student senators who wanted to impeach JL. He was not sure if it was because he was Black or simply because they did not like the way he was leading the group. “One thing I did learn was you need some tough outer shell to lead SGA.” He still thinks in the back of his mind it was hard for some people to take orders from a Black man. “I wonder from time to time if they were afraid of me. I always told people to come and talk to me about concerns. Don't be afraid to bring them to me.” JL believes the best solution is to communicate and work things out, to come to a compromise so the organization can continue to move in the right direction.

This experience helped JL to see the larger picture of GU. “I would say this was a good experience because it gives me an opportunity to really see what was going on.” He wants to leave a legacy behind for other Black men to follow. JL believes anyone has the power to make a difference and change the environment if s/he is willing to work at it.

### Sidney

Sidney is the past Executive Director for Student Government Association (SGA) at Gamma University (GU). He grew up in a large metropolitan city. He attended a majority White public high school, which has a strong performing arts program. His high school was an AP school and the only one with an Olympic-size swimming pool. Sidney graduated from high school and entered college with 12 college credits. Sidney grew up with his mother, who attended college but did not complete her degree.

In high school, Sidney admits that he was a nerd. “First two years I did not really talk. I was on the bowling team, wrestled one year, and part of the marketing club.” Of the three, he was most involved with the marketing club. He served on the marketing club’s regional and national leadership team.

When he started college, Sidney was not quite sure if he wanted to get involved. “I really did not think about what I was going to do. Not even for leisure. I was just like, ‘Hey, I don’t know what it is going to be like, but it’s going to be great.’” His personality is much like, “let’s go with the flow.” He was open to trying anything and everything and before long he found a fit. He joined the American Marketing Association which proved short lived. However, he was off to his next adventure. During the second semester of his freshman year, he became an RA for his residence hall.

I got my feet wet so to speak by learning background information about the university. I became one of those students that were privileged to information that certain students don't know or they don't have administrators or people telling them the information. I had people continuously telling me things that are changing at the university.

In this job as RA, he began to understand more about the university and how things operated.

As a sophomore, Sidney joined Black Cultural Group (BCG) where he immediately found himself an officer. "I just wanted to do the future leader program with BSU, shake a few hands, and move on. The VP of BSU dropped out of school and I was appointed her replacement." He was a leader in BCG; yet, he honestly did not find it satisfying. "It was frustrating; I felt that I was wasting all of my time." He was frustrated because students would not come out to any educational events. As VP, his programming was relegated to coordinating basketball tournaments and securing locations for people to listen to music. Sidney wanted to do more. He felt that BCG was not the best avenue on campus to create change. He wanted to show that African Americans can do more than be an athlete and dance. "Our generation gets such a negative representation of not doing positive things, especially African American males. I had to find other males who were interested in doing some decent things." Because of Sidney's involvement in BCG, many students from the Black community supported him. "Being a part of the community before I joined SGA helped me build trust that I was one of them." The support was great from the African American students who cared about moving the community forward with positive programming.

During this time, an African American male student was running for SGA president and Sidney decided to apply for a cabinet position. "I always wanted to lead. Be a part of or responsible in creating change or a part of doing what needs to be done." He knew SGA would place him in a better position to influence change on campus. Being on SGA was great. Sidney had fun working with all the different people, but still felt closer to the people in BCGs. "It was just a good atmosphere to just hang out with people. I did not feel that same comfort level in SGA, like in BSU. BSU was much more comfortable and I did not feel like I had to be on guard." With his new found position, he realized the importance of focusing and "being on top of his game" even in the fun environment. "We were all friends but I still understood that I am a Black man in this White group. SGA was the last stop on the organization ladder and it was on a different level."

With the fun came challenges. As Executive Director of SGA, Sidney found it difficult to motivate people to do their job. Sidney found himself doing other peoples' work and, in the end, his actions upset some of the senators. To solve this problem, Sidney established a system that would walk senators through their responsibilities for SGA. "Being blunt in SGA did not go over as well as it did in BSU. I had to come up with a more subtle approach."

Sidney paid no attention to racial issues and refused to let his race interfere with the work at hand. "So a lot of things do not even bother me. So things might have happened because of race but I didn't notice them. I am not going to waste my time trying to figure it all out." There may have been racial tension; Sidney doesn't deny that. However, he never allowed those issues to worry him. "Things were always in super early with me. I never turned stuff in late because I did not want them to talk about that Black dude turn in stuff late

all the time. That was not going to be me.” Sidney did everything in his power to eradicate the myth that Black men can’t lead and serve as a positive Black role model. “There were not that many of us so it was my duty to show the positive side of Black people.”

He did find it hard to do his job sometimes because the president he served under was also a Black man. At times, people would view them as the same. So the negative thoughts that people might have about the president would rub off on Sidney. “It would be that (name of current president) is thinking that way and we don’t like that so we don’t like you. That was the feeling I got some times.” On the other hand, Sidney enjoyed serving along side a Black man because he felt someone had his back. He felt supported and comfortable knowing there was another African American serving with him.

One of the lessons Sidney took from this experience was to give people a chance to prove themselves and be willing to prove yourself to others. “I want people who met me to remember that I did a good job. So in the future when they meet other African Americans, they can remember me and give that person a chance to be successful.” Also, he has become more comfortable with his identity as a result of this leadership experience. “I am more comfortable being around people who might not look like me, might not think like me, but I know how to handle myself and get my point across.”

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the reader to the seven different men who participated in this study. All of the participants shared various commonalities: most of them attended or graduated from a majority White high school, grew up in the Midwest, had supportive family members (at least their mothers) and were active as high school leaders. In addition, they all felt some pressure from both White and Black peers to be a certain way. In



particular, the seven men had one distinctive thing in common: They all wanted to represent the African American male student in a positive light.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings from this study. Four themes emerged as having been the participants' lived experiences: Natural Transition; The pull between Black and White communities; Perfectionism; and Power and Influence. Each theme is discussed in the next chapter, along with the participants' Black identity development.

## CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

Chapter five is dedicated to presenting the findings from the research study. The findings were derived through phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994), which suggested four different themes: 1) Natural Transition; 2) The Pull between Black and White communities; 3) Perfectionism; and 4) Power and Influence. I will discuss each theme in detail, with supporting data to illustrate said themes. I will also examine each participant's Black identity development, again drawing on participants' responses to support the analysis.

### Themes

#### *Natural Transition*

The participants all noted their foundation in leadership came from their experience within a predominantly White environment early in life. That experience made it easier for them to attend a predominantly White university. George described how his interactions with the White community helped him to be comfortable at BU.

I was involved in a lot of activities. One of biggest ones was the marching band and you mention being in a majority White environment. I stood out like a sore thumb there. Well, most of the organizations I mentioned to you in high school were the catalysts [for my college involvement].

George decided to “make the best of the situation and made the best of the experience as well.” This attitude created his foundation to be comfortable working with White people. It was nothing new for George to be the only Black person in many activities when he was in high school, which served him well in his college experience. “It was easier for me because I was already involved since my high school was majority White.”

Roger echoed these sentiments. He felt his high school experience with White people helped him to be comfortable working and leading majority White groups.

Honestly, my leadership roles here [are] just a continuation from what I did in high school. The fact I did student council in high school, I just guessed that I might as well keep it up in college. Hall council seemed to be similar to student council in high school.

It was normal for Roger to be a leader around people who did not look like him.

John talked about how smooth a transition it was for him to go to a PWI. “Going from a situation where I am one of the few Black students to where I am [again] one of the few Black students, it was nothing different to be honest with you.”

All the participants wanted to continue that feeling of “leadership and power” they gained in high school. They all were leaders at majority White high schools so it was hard for them to walk away from leadership when they went to college. Roland described his experience:

In high school, I felt as if I ran the place to be honest. I mean I was involved in anything and everything. Everyone knew my name both in my grade and lower grades. All the administrator type [of] people all over the school system knew me as well. I built relationships from middle school all the way to high school. I think my involvement in high school set up the foundation for me to take advantage of [all the] college activities. So being involved then, taking leadership positions carried over because as soon as I hit my freshman year [of college] that is when I started to get involved.

All of the participants had previous experience leading or at least working with majority White groups in high school. They couldn't readily identify any major differences between their majority White high school groups and majority White college groups.

As he transitioned to college, Sidney took his high school experience with the majority White marketing club and leveraged the knowledge and skills he gained to secure his collegiate leadership roles.

What I did in high school might be bigger than what a lot of people do in college.

Before me there was nobody from my school that was elected to represent the region or anyone a person can remember. And then being an African American male at that.

Most people at my high school were White and most of the schools we interacted with were White.

Once again, Sidney was exposed to leading White peers at an early age which supplied him the confidence needed to seek and obtain a campus-wide leadership position at his institution of higher education.

These participants experienced the effects of "culture shock" early in their childhood. By the time they reached college the "shock" of being a minority in a majority White environment was second nature. Victor discussed the first time he experienced culture shock and realized not everyone lives, thinks, and behaves like him. During his freshman year of high school, he learned a valuable lesson in cultural diversity.

So it's like just the little things, like name brands people wear. American Eagle at the time versus FUBU. I knew what FUBU was [but not] American Eagle. I really thought it was a car. I really thought it was a car the first time I heard it. Another cultural difference happened after a homecoming dance. They were talking about,

“yeah, let’s all go to Starbucks.” I was thinking and asked them, “Why we are going to the bank?” They all laughed. I asked what [was] so funny. They told me it was the best coffee ever. Just having that experience and then coming to AU made it a smooth transition for me.

JL, who went to a majority Black high school, spoke about the influence of his interaction with the White community during his 8<sup>th</sup> grade year when he was living in West Virginia. “When we were in West Virginia we both just completely sunk into that culture. Ride our bikes everyday, hill hopping and stuff. But then that was a majority White culture; it was easy for us to get into it.” Once he knew about White culture he was more open to step outside of his personal comfort zone.

These early experiences prepared each participant for life and leadership at a PWI university. Each participant arrived at college able to relate to and speak about some similar experiences as their White counterparts.

#### *Pull between Black and White communities*

All of the participants felt that they had to find a balance in their interactions with White and Black peers. All of the students had a positive experience with their White peers. Yet, some of them received backlash from their Black peers. They all felt that their position in a majority White student group made them stand out from their Black peers and they had to find ways to balance their leadership role on campus and their role as an African American college student.

John, Roger, and JL were not very involved with the Black community although all three still felt a need and desire to be connected with the Black community. They felt that their position at the university and personal background were barriers that held them back

from getting very involved within the Black community on campus so they did their best to show African American males in a positive light within their sphere of influence.

John talks about how not dealing with his race had an effect on him. “Until recently I have not really been viewing myself in the context of race, of being a Black student.” Because John did not recognize and embrace his race, the Black community perceived him as an outcast or “sell-out.” He talked about his experience with an African American male student in his building.

I think in [a] way he thought of me as an ‘Uncle Tom.’ It was that he had his way to celebrate being Black and you know. While I was fine with whatever he decided to celebrate being Black, but the way I express my Blackness, he had issues. I feel he had issues with me for not being knowledgeable about that part of Black culture. Now there is a part of me that wants to be more knowledgeable about those types of things but [it was] not one of those things I felt compelled to get involved with. Because of that, I think he saw that as a betrayal or a kind of, you know, you’re not a real Black man.

John continued,

I guess he thinks that I devalue being Black by not participating in activities like him. There would be days where he would ask me Black history questions and I would not know them. He would get upset and tell me, “If you don’t this or that then you are just being ignorant and being disrespectful.” I just don’t see the reason for myself to know those aspects. [It] was not interesting to me. He was in a Black fraternity, did stepping; I think he was active in one of the Black student leader groups. You know, he was into everything ‘Black.’ You know, pretty much from activities to hip hop

culture, to his speech, just all of it. He really embodied himself into it to the point where he could not see somebody 'Black' not being a part of that life style. He got angry when he came across me because I was not interested or knowledgeable about that part of Black life.

As a result of these interactions, John was turned off by the Black community and had no desire to develop relationships with his Black peers. Currently, he sees no immediate benefit of involving himself in the Black community. As of now, he continues to be a leader in a group where he believes he is supported and his needs are met. "It was not the fact of being in a White group; it was the benefit of being in a group that affected where I lived and where I was in my life at the time." A lot of times it was not about the participants being in a White group but more about what they were interested in doing. At times, the participants' interests did not reflect the Black community's needs or desires.

Roger did not know too many Black student leaders. He was not active in any African American groups. "I have Black friends but the only like major Black organization I am in [is] the Caribbean student group. So I really don't have any leadership role in any majority Black organizations." He has a desire to be active but his class schedule would not allow him to be part of any BCGs. Roger understands that his race plays a role in all his interactions with people. "Racism is racism. I think it has changed into this more politically correct thing, granted it's not politically correct, but like it's more or less not that in your face type of racism; [it is] less obvious." Roger continued to talk about racism: "I mean it blows my mind the amount of power and influence racism still has even though it has taken on this subtle form."

It was difficult for Roger to understand why other African American students are not more involved with majority White groups, or why it was such a big deal for him to be a leader in a majority White group.

A lot of time if I was to introduce myself as hall council president, a lot of people would give me this look of shock on their face. I mean they were obviously shocked a Black man is doing it. I mean it's just frustrating, but it is not something that is going to stop me from doing what I want to do.

Despite Roger's lack of involvement in the Black community, he still strives to serve as a positive example.

For JL, his reasons for not wanting to associate with a large group of Black people stem from the hurts of his past, which he said were inflicted by family members and others he knew growing up.

Growing up in the inner-city, there where tons of other Black people I was not comfortable being around. The way that my own family treated me; extended family, cousins, and what not always made fun of me when I was younger because I am not athletic. I tried to play basketball a couple of times to no avail. In their eyes I could not dance, and I was the fat kid growing up. In my family I was always picked on and I know... frankly that is how Black people are. We love to make fun of each other and I did not want to deal with that on a regular basis.

JL continued to talk about family and support from Black peers.

I never had any interest in being around people like my family again. The people who were intellectually sound enough to realize the type of things my family did and said was just inappropriate and unnecessary. Those are the type of people who are ready



for a change and [that is where I] found my support from the Black community.

Although I have all these conversations about how much I can't stand being around

Black people, I love my culture.

In spite of the hurts he experienced, JL wanted nothing more than to advance the position of Black people in a positive way, even if at times he believes the Black community does not fully support him and his lifestyle.

John, Roger, and JL spoke passionately about their desire to assume leadership positions in the African American community; however, that desire was short lived when they realized the Black community was not always supportive of their leadership in a majority White student group. John, Roger, and JL might not have had direct leadership and interaction with the Black community but they still wanted to be involved with both White and Black leadership roles on campus. They all still wanted to leave a good impression of Black men in leadership roles.

Victor and Roland saw themselves as leaders in both the Black and White communities. Given this, they felt they had to balance working between "two worlds." Although both men felt a strong connection to their Black peers, they also felt a sense of loneliness in their leadership roles.

Victor talked about an atmosphere of two universities on his campus: one for the White students and another for Black students. "You have AU and AU the minority edition." He does not feel the two communities wanted to be one university. He talked about a homecoming event at AU.

I was talking [to some White friends] and I was asking if people were going to the coronation. And they asked me, "What is the coronation?" You know the dinner

where there is homecoming court and stuff. They asked [if they] were allowed to go to that. “What do you mean?” “Well [BCG], that is their thing. Is that just for the Black Students?” I said, “No, I am going to go to the parade”; UPC put that on. So I was like, “WOW, you don’t feel as if you can attend this university event.” That was one example.

This was a hard concept for Victor because he enjoyed all the events that AU had to offer.

Victor continued to talk about the divide between Black and White students.

A friend was having a little get together. So I asked some of my Black friends if they wanted to come with me. They told me, “We are not going to go to a White party.” So I quickly learned that the Black people kind of just want to hang with the Black people and the White people do not think they are allowed to hang out with the Black people and I did not like that at all.

Victor learned to adjust his interactions when working with Black peers compared to working with White peers. Victor had to understand the pull and push of being in both environments.

So when I got upset or frustrated I might raise my voice a little bit but I am not upset and angry. The first couple of times I was a little frustrated... [I had a White peer say], “I am sorry. Did not mean to hurt your feelings.” I was like, “You did not hurt my feelings.” We had a little bit of a disagreement but that is normal. Whereas my Black friends would not take it like that. We would have discussed it, might have gotten a little bit heated, and it would have been over. It would not have been “I hurt your feelings, I am sorry you got so mad” [like White peers]. That is something you have to learn; nothing a book can teach you. You have to be in that experience. So I

learned to express my frustration differently when I am in that predominantly White environment vs. when I am in a comfort zone [of the Black community].

Victor learned the cultural norms of the White environment on campus while at the same time trying not to lose some of the cultural norms of the Black environment. Even though he could live in both communities, at times he found it hard to balance being a leader in a majority White group yet support the Black community.

I really did not get that much support from other students; not because they were against me. They just did not have the same struggle that I had. I know a lot of student leaders but you're a leader of a Black student organization which comes with a different set of rules sort of speak. They could not relate to being Black and being in this majority White organization being a leader and balancing it out. I don't want the Black community to feel I turn my back on them. [Yet] I don't want the White community to think I am not about business and only helping out the Black students. Nobody really had that experience.

Victor went on to talk about how even the way he dressed changed depending on the environment.

The energy that you have to put out there to be a leader of a White group is so much. Sometimes I feel like there is a whole suit [that] I have to put on. I put on my shirt and tie. With that comes a way to speak so that people understand where I [am] coming from. There is an attitude, there is a demeanor, that goes into being a leader of a White group. Whereas, I don't have to [put on a suit] when I am hanging out with my Black friends or at a Black organizational meeting. Even if I don't do all of that, I am regular old [Victor], who has on jeans and t-shirt; my opinion still matters.

Whereas, [if] I just don't have a total suit on, I will not have the same impact on SAC or [at a] SGA meeting.

Victor continued to talk about trying to still be supportive of the Black community while at the same time gaining the respect of the White community.

As a person sitting on SAC, being Black, and now having to relate back to the Black student organizations what they need to do [in order] to receive more money. I tell them they might want to make sure you are collaborating, if you want to be a priority one. I can give you that advice and technically that advise I can give anybody. I am just going out of my way to give it to you. I felt as if the Black student groups expect really special treatment. [Black groups would tell me] "So my SAC pack is due on Friday by 5; can I turn it in next Wednesday?" "No, no you cannot"; or they might not have [the] advisor's signature on it. "Can we turn it in?" "No." It's sort [of] like them asking me, "Can you hook me up?" "Yes, I want to help you out." It has been challenging because people would say, "Man, he got into this position of power and he crossed over and is not willing to help us out." "No, I am not doing that, my way of helping you out is ...." We have 350 student organizations.... So if each one of them turns in a SAC pack, I have at least 350 SAC packs and who knows how many programs they are trying to put on in a quarter. If I am looking though [them] and I [see that] you don't have any advisor signature on there and it is 1 o'clock on Friday, I might just give you a call to say "Hey, you need to come in here, pick up your SAC pack, and get you advisor signature." That is me helping you out. Now the Pokemon club that is all White; I might not know anyone from their group. I might not look at it until it is time to go over SAC packs. They are ineligible because no advisor

signature. That is me helping you out. It has been my experience that the Black students don't see it that way.

Victor gave another example of how he balanced his attempt to live in both communities and follow the SAC rules.

I might not have lived up to what the White students felt I would be on SAC executive board. They thought I was going to be easier on the Black student organizations, mainly [BCG] and NPHC, but when I told their representatives, "You miss another meeting you will be put off," it shocked them.

Staying fair was important to Victor and all the other participants. They were personally offended and deeply hurt when members of the Black community looked down on them or spoke negatively about them due to their leadership within a majority White student organization. This really hit home for Victor. It was difficult for him to reconcile how, at times, he felt more respected by White people than Black people.

What the Black students feel and think about me matters to me more than what White students think about me. To hear, "You don't care about us, we look to you as a leader, and you are not there," that's the one that kinds of hurts.

Victor knew he had to distinguish himself from his Black peers to make it as a leader in a majority White student group. Many times they did not understand how in his role, he was also serving as a leader to the Black community.

I am not into some of the same things that a lot of the others [are], especially Black males; so there is already a disconnection. Five days out of [the] week you see me at least business casual or in some type of shirt and tie. Black people would ask me, "Can you go one day without a shirt and tie?" And so there is a disconnect right there.

Bringing together the two communities was a goal for Victor. He admitted it was difficult. When he supported issues the Black community cared about, they adored him. On the other hand, when he supported issues they opposed, he became the outcast and no one wanted to befriend him. Victor continued to work to balance AU and AU the minority edition.

At some level, each participant shared the same sentiments. They all felt the pull between White and Black communities. They all struggled to find ways to work effectively between the two communities. Roland and George both had interactions similar to Victor's with Black and White peers. They too were a part of the larger Black community and White community yet struggled to get the two communities to work together.

Roland felt he received more respect from his White peers than from his Black peers. "To be honest, a lot of people looked up to me, especially people in my chapter." He still felt respected by the Black community but the people who saw the larger impact of him being a leader were his White peers. "People could have thought something but no one ever said anything to me. I have not seen any negative attitudes." He thought this was because of his previous involvement with the Black community.

[In BCG], I was a general body member and the time commitment conflicted with my involvement with IFC. So I could no longer be a member of [BCG]. I think I did it for a full year. I was also treasurer in [BCG], which is also an all African American organization, on the executive board for three years. I made some good relationships and [positive] interaction on the executive board, advisor as well as general body members. At the time, they all knew when I took on the president position; they were all proud of me.

Even with this past experience, he had little interaction with the general Black community with his position on IFC. “The average Black student, I really did not have any interaction with them. If anything, I would think it was positive. To be honest, I don’t think anyone knew that I was IFC president.”

Roland tried to get all the Greek councils to work together as a start to bring the entire campus together. He felt getting the two Greek communities to work together would be the best opportunity to bridge the racial gap at AU. The presidents of the council worked together fine but it was difficult to get the general membership to do programs together.

[I was] hopeful [to] bring some unity within the communities, not only within Greek life. Like, for example, my position on SAC. [I got to] bring [together] other organizations on campus. Just [me working at] being more together [with groups] brings that kind of link between the African American community, which I am a part of, and the majority community in term of [AU] student population. It was hard to get the general body and communities to see the value of working together.

George also felt the pressure to balance his interaction with both White and Black peers. Like Roland and Victor, George was active in BGC before he was a leader of a majority White student group. He first got his major support from the Black community to be VP of SGA because of the relationships he had in BGC: “Especially I had a lot of support from the African American community.” White students also found respect for him as did the other participants. “Even those in majority White organizations saw that love [to serve the campus] and had a lot of respect for me.” George kept his connections with the Black community by trying to attend BGC meetings.

Fortunately a lot of the leaders and people [African Americans] on campus made it easier for me to be able to balance. I still tried to attend the BSA meeting or some of the meetings/events going on in the MC and I enjoyed going. That is one of the things that keeps me going [and my spirits up]. Being a Black man on the campus, the African American community at least to me was very supportive of all my efforts. It made it easy for me [to lead]. I really wanted to come back and stay active in the organizations [that] I have already been active in before. So when it came down to it, it was not really that hard for me to stay active, especially since the African Americans was a strong base and support for the SGA slate that I ran on anyway. Attending African American meetings and events was like “coming home,” according to George. This was his way to balance the two environments. Continuing those strong relationships with the BCG groups helped him to navigate both communities in order to make changes.

All of the students had to find their individual way to balance the expectations between the two different environments. For some of them, it was easier to just work within the White environment and not try to be directly involved in leadership roles in the Black community. Others had to find a way to balance the pull from the Black community and the White community. Overall, all of the participants truly believed that they were making a difference in how African American men were perceived on their campus. They each were leading and promoting the Black community in a positive light, even if the community was not totally in support of them.

*Perfectionism*



The participants all shared the feeling that they have to be perfect as representatives of the African American race. All the participants felt as if they could not make any mistakes. Each one of the participants spoke about how he had to be a role model for those who might follow in his footsteps as leaders.

George felt a strong responsibility to not humiliate himself or his race. He saw himself as the only one holding up the Black community on campus.

The brunt of the community [is] on my shoulders. I always want to not only work well for me, but definitely wanted to make sure I show [Black people in] a positive light though my actions. I know that I stand out a little bit so I definitely wanted to make sure I reflected the community in a good light as well. They saw me as a Black leader on campus so no time for [me to] mess up.

George continued to talk about how he needed to make sure people were looking at him and other Black males in a good light.

As a Black male, I thought not only [did I have] to represent for myself but for everyone else. Being a Black male I need to show us in a good light. I took some of the negative going on and brought out the positive things to SGA. I guess being involved in majority White organizations [you] just kind of have like to carry the brunt of the African American community on your shoulder.

Roland also agreed that he felt he had to show people that African Americans can be leaders.

I was able to show that African American students can lead this group and also we could create positive change and that I was not living up to [stereotyped] thoughts

they had about African Americans or that I fit the ideas on which they grew up learning.

Roland continued,

I can definitely see myself as role model in terms of helping African American students take advantage of all a college campus has to offer. I would definitely agree with that. I currently don't have a role model. I should not say that; a role model that has had the experience I had. You know, I am setting the foundation so that potentially I could be a role model for incoming students who grew up in the same community [as] I [grew] up in. Who might have the experience of becoming a member of a White organization and lead a White organization. I would want to share and be a role model. [The] African American community in general [should be] sharing those types [of] experiences and hoping that person's experiences would encourage them to get involved outside of their comfort zone.

Both George and Roland wanted to prove that African American men can do the job and become role models for future African American men.

Victor wanted to have African American men seen in a positive light. He knew it was going to be hard to change people's views. "I recognize I have to work harder and recognize I have to be twice as good." All of the participants talked about working harder, either consciously or unconsciously. Victor said,

Self consciously, I have said to myself that I am not going to go into this meeting or go into any situation under prepared or average prepared. I really try my hardest to know all the information. Just because I want them to know that I know what is on it.

I want people to know that I have all the information and if I don't know I will find the answer. I feel that is the only way to be on an even playing field.

The need to work hard was conveyed by all the participants so they would not make any mistakes. Victor said,

Number one thing to do is to stay on top of your game, so to speak, at all times. I think that they are sort of waiting for you to slip up and how you are going to deal with that. How big of a slip up it's going to be.

Roger also dealt with his need to be perfect by being more prepared.

I have to be more prepared and more serious than possibly a white person would need to be as a leader. I want to do a better job just because I know I may be perceived in a certain way. So it made me better prepared for a meeting. I guess preparation would be the biggest thing.

Eyes are always on these students, waiting for them to make a mistake.

Sidney talked about how few people have any faith or belief in his generation. "Our generation gets such a negative rep of not wanting to do positive things. Especially African Americans and African American males for sure have a negative perception." This brings extra pressure on them to be perfect so they do not fall into the stereotype of a lazy Black man. JL talked about trying to break stereotypes.

There is a stereotype that Black people are always late. I was late a lot (laugh). I don't think it was because I was Black; I think it was my schedule was far too compact and I was trying to run from one place to another. I was late a lot. Honestly, I can say being Black has nothing to do with it. Just some miscommunication between my calendars because I sink my calendar and outlook at home and at work the secretary

was putting stuff on my calendar so I would miss it. I really did not want people to think Black people are always late.

Even when things were out of their control, the participants still felt as if they had to be perfect all the time.

The students knew it is not easy to be perfect but they all felt the same way as JL did: “Being successful and have it all; I can do that. I really can have it all. Just you have to work for it; it’s not going to be easy.” They knew if they wanted to be successful with all the negative baggage society places on African American males, they had to be perfect. This quest for perfection, in many regards, drove their success. They sought to debunk negative stereotypes and one way to accomplish this is to avoid making mistakes or in essence to be perfect.

### *Power and Influence*

Participants viewed majority White student organizations as having more power and influence than BCGs. They all joined to gain some type of power and influence on campus. Their desire to join White organizations was not about the group being majority White but rather about which groups had influence on campus. Roger talked about why he joined a majority White student group.

As [for joining] majority White groups, I guess I did not even really think of it like that. I just kind of got involved. I walked down [Greek Row], saw the [Greek house name] house, and like it was huge. Then, they did a lot on campus. I kind of have this mind set of doing everything and take it over. Well, how can I take over [Greek Row]? Well, you know, join the biggest house on [Greek Row]. How can I take over the resident hall? Well, maybe I can be elected to the highest position in the resident

hall. I mean that is what drew me in, the ability to have influence. It seems like the majority White organizations give you more influence on campus.

Roger continued to explain his point of view,

It was more about what I saw on campus. I saw [majority White groups] having an influence on people and how can I be a part of that. The fact was that I saw it as a way to get more power on campus [and] more influence.

For Roger, this was one of the main reasons he got involved. He wanted to make a difference and was attracted to those groups who he believed to have the most influence and power on campus.

I believe the way that it is, the groups that run things on campus, the most powerful groups as far as influence, are majority White groups. Be it your RHA, SGA, and hall council who basically are the student voice on campus. They are all majority White organizations so I think a lot of Black men need to see that [and] join an organization like that. If you want to have your voice be heard, you need to join organizations like these.

George also saw majority White groups as a way to gain power and influence.

George's viewpoint was that the more involved you got with majority White groups, the more you could learn how to make changes on campus.

It is the highest government body at the university for the students and I definitely wanted to be involved. You can't complain unless you actually do something. Then you learn the inner workings of the campus. SGA to me was one of the best ways to get involved and actually get something done.

George continued to talk about how majority White groups have direct contact with the upper-level administrators and other groups do not. “A group like SGA brings a lot of different groups and issues together so it is easier for them as a group to represent everybody and administration can just talk to them.” George understood the need to be in a group that had access to upper-level administrators to make changes on campus. He felt that just being in a BCG was not going to provide him with the opportunity to really influence policy change on his campus.

Victor knew that he had a strong role of influence on campus, since he was one of two Black leaders on campus in a majority White student group. He only wished there were more Black leaders at his university. “I don’t want to be one of two or three Black male students that they [administrators] know they can count on. Know you can count on a lot more of us. It is about getting more people engaged with White groups.” Victor continued to talk about how scared some Black people were of having power and influence on campus because they knew people would hold them accountable. “[It is] intimidating [at first] but empowering after you [have] been a leader in [a] White group.” Victor wanted to share his knowledge with other Black men so they would want to gain power and influence as well. All of the participants talked about wanting to be a role model and encouraging others to do what they did on campus.

Even today I had a freshman and a sophomore come up to me and ask my advice about issues about their student organization and how to deal with being the only Black in their classroom. I think now that they see how I function in the two major leadership roles I have on campus, they want to have that type of influence.

Role modeling is very important to the participants to share the power of knowledge. “Other people, especially Black males, need a path to follow if they want to go and do something with White students.”

JL talked about influencing his campus and forging a path for others to follow. JL believed that if you want to make a difference you have to get involved with the groups that have the power to make a change. For him, those were majority White student groups.

[I am] leaving a legacy. Things are not going to change unless you change them, frankly. If people can continue to think that life is going to go on and things are going to just change that is true but that is not the same thing as [making a] change. In order for something to truly change in a positive way you have to be the one to create the change by getting involved outside of your comfort zone.

He felt that one of his roles as a Black man leading a majority White group was to influence the student body at the highest level. He enjoyed showing people that race does not matter but rather that the skills to be a leader are truly the important part.

Sidney wanted to be that student with all the information. He learned that through being in a majority White group he could get that power and influence.

I became one of those students that was privileged to information that certain students don't know or they don't have administrators or people to tell them the information. I had people continuously telling me things that are changing at the university. So since my 2<sup>nd</sup> semester I always knew what was going on around campus. I just became that guy; I was the one who would know what was going on. I would be a student that could help. If I don't see things going in the right direction for the student body, I could speak up for the students.

He wanted to move from just being an average student to one with power and influence. “I wanted to go to the next level in my opinion, which was the SGA, which I really wanted to do.” Sidney continued to speak about how he used his influence as the student leading a majority White group to help support BCGs. “I have been active and involved and given a lot of advice to their president [BCG] last year.” All of the participants felt like Sidney once they came to campus. They all wanted to be highly involved and make a difference, not only within the African American community but also campus-wide. Sidney expressed why he got involved,

I am not a person who can sit back and just watch things happen. I am the type of person, I want to lead and be active. I just wanted to be in a spot where I can influence change. I want to inspire others.

Sidney, like the other participants, viewed majority White groups as the top level of influence and power. “SGA was the last stop in organizations. It was on a different level.”

The idea of being the big man on campus also resonated with Roland, who stated, “I just wanted to have a big position on campus.” Roland enjoyed his power and influence.

[I like] to give feedback to administrators and peers and do an effective job with it. It was an honor to have that and go to back to homecoming. To be able to tell stories and share with other people, that I had that opportunity to lead [IFC].

Roland sees the impact of having African Americans in leadership roles within majority White groups because it can help build a better understanding of cultural differences and views of campus life. He believed that his example as IFC president was a small factor in the election of an African American SGA president at AU.



That is a pretty big position on campus and for him to be an African American male. I hope he makes an impact not only on African Americans but the overall community. Another African American student who is in this high leadership position that is doing the job and going to do the job well. So hopefully it will motivate people in smaller organizations that they are in to take on those leadership positions and be able to work with students who are not like them or who are Caucasian or majority in the university community.

All of the participants wanted to make the campus better for everyone. They hoped through their leadership that they could leverage the power and influence that comes with it to bridge the racial divide on campus. They all mentioned at some point that being involved in a majority White group helped them to gain power and influence. I think Roger said it best.

I can do things in the African American community that a Caucasian student can't do. I have the ear of both sides of the community. I know I could have gone over to [BCG] and be an outstanding leader but would not have the same influence as I got in a majority White group.

These students felt that to make a difference on campus, they had to be a part of a White student group. They needed to be within the system to change the system.

### Black Identity Development

Using Jackson's Black Identity Development model (BID), a person can be in any of the five stages or transitioning between stages depending on the context of their lives (Jackson, 2001). These stages do not always flow in a linear direction; rather, each person can exhibit a combination of stages. In general, I believe my participants transitioned mostly

between stages of *Acceptance*, in which Blacks accept White views of Black people and attempt to conform to White standards and norms; *Redefinition*, in which Blacks reaffirm their Blackness; and *Internalization*, in which Blacks adopt a multicultural perspective to bring world views together. They all strive to be at the *Internalization* stage; through their actions, they seek to cultivate an inclusive environment as leaders of majority White groups.

To better explain the stages through which the participants transitioned, I will examine the responses of each one of the participants with regard to the stages to demonstrate where they fit or do not fit in the Black Identity Development model (BID). Again it is important to note that a participant can be in several stages at once.

Based on my analysis of the data, I found that none of the participants were at the Naïve stage of BID. The Naïve stage is when a person has little conscious social awareness of one's race. However, I believe John is in a transition phase from *Naïve* to *Acceptance*. John talked about how he is just now starting to think about how race has affected him. "Really you asking me to do this [study] is right around the time I've been thinking about myself and what race means to me." John also exhibits aspects of the *Acceptance* stage, where the prevailing White perception of Black culture is right. Based on his interactions with an African American male RA in his building, he believed that he does not fit into the social construct of the Black image in society. "I almost feel in a weird way less accepted from other Black people than White people. Because I am not Black how they think it should be."

Roger is at the *Acceptance* stage of wanting people to view him and other Black people as just people. "I just feel that I was more of an individual. I kind of like going beyond the role that society places on me." He believes it is important to lead a majority

white student group in order to gain power and make changes on campus. He also shows evidence of the *Redefinition* stage because he is rethinking views of Black men and sees that he may have a role in helping to change perceptions. “I guess my impact is to make people a little bit more open minded to realize a young Black man is just as capable if not more capable [than] his White counterparts to lead a group.”

George is at the *Redefinition* stage where he is proud to be African American and even more proud of his accomplishments as a leader. He wanted to be seen in a positive light as a Black man. George reflected,

I figure, you know, if I do well it would not come back negatively on the community.

I did not want that to be viewed in a negative way, which would cause folks to look down on those [Black men] who come after me.

He wants to redefine some of the negative stereotypes placed on black people, specifically black men. He works hard not to embarrass himself or his race. One of his goals is to preserve and serve as an example of positive black manhood. He believes his leadership in SGA is one way of accomplishing this, while also blazing new trails for other minorities to follow.

Roland was at the *Acceptance* stage because he was looking for a group that was more aligned with his personality. “[I am] showing who I am [and] what I have to offer; you know, seeing if my goals align with the organization’s goals.” Roland found that a White organization, IFC, was the group that best aligned with his personality and goals. Like his fellow study participants, he wants to shine a positive spotlight on African American men. He believes he accomplishes this through his interaction with White peers.

Also like Roland, Victor is at the *Acceptance* stage. Victor learned that he needed to expand his circle in order to be successful. “I recognized early on that you cannot stay in your own comfort zone in order to be really successful.” He saw the “low value” society placed on Black cultural groups and felt the only way to gain power was through leadership in a majority White student organization. As a leader of a majority student group, he decided to dress up regularly in hopes of gaining the respect of his White peers. “[They] thought I was going to be the new GA (Graduate Assistant) because I came in professional dress to the first meeting.” Unlike some of his black and white peers, he decided to avoid wearing jeans and t-shirts, choosing instead business and/or business casual apparel.

Based on JL’s interviews, I believe he is at the *Redefinition* stage. During the *Redefinition* stage, a person is not clear about what it means to have membership in a racial group personally. JL only wants to be around African American people who think positively. He made a conscious choice not to associate with African Americans who he believed did not positively present the race. JL is starting to become comfortable with his identity. “I am comfortable with myself, I am comfortable with the person I have become and am still becoming.”

Sidney is in the *Acceptance* stage where he is working to gain power and influence on campus. He saw majority White student groups as the conduit necessary to make a difference on campus. “I was spending like 25 hours a week just on BSA stuff. In my mind it was not really fulfilling. I did not see any results.” Sidney thought that people needed to work harder and not worry about racism stopping them.

A lot of things don't even bother me. A lot of things might have happened and I don't notice them. I really don't notice things like that because it's not a part of my consciousness. I really don't think about it in a racial manner, unless it is very overt.

In general, each participant showed some aspects of being in the Acceptance stage; some more than others. As a leader in a majority white student organization, all of the participants fully understood and embraced the notion that their leadership in these organizations would be their "ticket to resources." For them, access to resources can help them redefine the perceptions others have of African Americans. Overall, they all are striving to be at the *Internalization* stage by working to achieve a more unified college campus. They all recognize their "blackness"; yet individually, they are still working to define what it means to them.

### Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings of the study. I identified four major themes from the data: 1) Natural transition; 2) Pull between Black and White communities; 3) Perfectionism and 4) Power and Influence. When presented collectively, these themes provide an understanding of the experiences of African American college men leading majority White student groups. Based on my conversations with the participants, I was able to provide a detailed description of their experience, which helped to explain their Black Identity Development.

In Chapter 6, I provide a summary of the study, present the findings as they relate to my research questions, and discuss the findings in light of previous literature. The chapter also includes a discussion of implications for student affairs professionals as well as suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I discuss the four themes within the context of the existing literature. I then summarize the study and use my findings to answer the research questions that guided the study. Moreover, in this chapter I highlight implications and recommendations for student affairs professionals as they work with African American men. Finally, I suggest future research related to this topic and close with a short personal reflection.

### Discussion of the Themes

The four major themes that emerged from this study were natural transition, the pull between Black and White communities, perfectionism, and power and influence. The first theme, *natural transition*, emerged because all of the participants discussed how significant their past leadership and exposure to the White environment was in making them feel comfortable in assuming leadership positions in predominantly White college organizations. They used past experiences to better adapt to the cultural shock that many students of color experience during their time at a PWI. Those past experiences helped them to translate and to better understand their role as an African American male. This natural transition or continuation of leadership roles fits with propositions found in Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and Astin's (1993) theory of involvement. The participants talked about past experiences in high school that helped to shape their willingness to be active at the collegiate level. Once they came to campus, they felt an overarching desire to be involved. This involvement freshmen year follows Astin's theory of involvement, in which he stated that the greater the "student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development" (Astin, 1999, p. 529). As the students in this study become more involved in larger campus groups they talked about the benefit of gaining

a well-rounded college education. All of them would encourage other Black men to become involved with a majority White group. They came to campus freshman year wanting to be involved and made connections. The connections these men made validated Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, in which he stressed that universities should "strive to promote both student learning and retention through actively involving students in some cooperative/collaborative fashion that builds both learning and community membership" (Tinto, 1993, p. 169). The participants were able to make strong connections with the campus so they felt supported and, in turn, wanted to improve the entire campus life by being a leader in those majority White groups perceived to have power and influence. They all wanted to continue to make a difference like they did during their high school years. Participants discussed a variety of rich examples that highlighted how their early life experiences assisted them in their journey to becoming a leader in a majority White student group.

As described in chapter 4, the participants spoke about their past experiences with the White community, which helped them to adjust to a PWI. Because of their relatively easy adjustment, they felt comfortable in becoming leaders of majority White student groups. This finding confirms the findings of LaVant and Terrell (1994) that ethnic minority students' experiences during high school will affect their involvement in governance at PWIs. Having this level of comfort, they found it easy to negotiate space as a leader.

Each one of the participants spoke about the division of their campus by race. It was hard to be in the middle of this campus racial divide. Thus, being *pulled between the Black and White communities* emerged as a theme in the study. All of the participants had some level of conflict in balancing their role as a student leader in a majority White group and the social pressure to support and be a part of the Black community. In chapter 5, I presented my

analysis of where each participant fell in relation to the BID theory (Jackson, 2001). Each of these men appeared to shift between the *Acceptance* and *Internalization* stages of development, a finding that aligns with Mitchell and Dell's (1992) study. Mitchell and Dell (1992) discovered that "as people become more comfortable with their racial identity (i.e., holding predominantly Internalization attitudes), they are more likely to display interest and openness in both cultural and noncultural activities" (p. 42). This finding also aligns with Taylor and Howard-Hamilton's (1995) suggestion that a higher level of out-of-class involvement creates a stronger racial identity development. In my study, I discovered that five of the participants were in the *Acceptance* stage and two of them were in the *Redefinition* stage. My research contradicts previous research that the more advanced a person is with regard to Black identity, the more likely the person is to be involved with majority White student groups. I discovered that an African American male college student can be a leader in a majority White group as long as he finds a value or an interest in the organization no matter what BID stage he exhibits.

All of the participants had overall positive interactions with the White communities but some of them experienced a negative reaction from the Black community to their leadership role in a majority White student group. The students found it difficult, at times, to be supportive of the Black community without compromising their leadership position in the majority White group. The men worked to negotiate access to a leadership role within a majority White group by bringing a diverse point of view to those majority White student groups. They all worked hard to be the link between the Black and White campus communities through their leadership roles. They all had the desire to be a part of or find ways to support and be accepted by the Black community. Some were more accepted within



the Black community than others but each one had to find their own balance in the two communities. They are able to balance out the two communities because of their desire to achieve the *Internalization* stage of the BID.

The third theme to emerge was *perfectionism*. None of the men wanted to leave a negative image for the next Black person to overcome. As a result, they believed they had to be perfect. They did not want to succumb to the negative stereotypes associated with Black men: lazy and irresponsible. Over and over, the men talked about carrying the Black race on their backs. Similarly, Harper and Quaye's (2007) study about African American male students examined this challenge African American men face as leaders. They too found African American male leaders "articulated a commitment to uplift the African American community (both on campus and broadly defined) and devoted [themselves] to dispelling stereotypes, breaking down barriers, and opening new doors for other African American students on [their campus]" (pp. 134-135). Even though participants in my study held leadership roles in majority White groups, they were compelled to uplift the African American race; this is a direct reflection of their BID stage. In my study, students are striving to redefine what it means to be Black and bring the Black and White communities closer. You can see this in the *Redefinition* and *Internalization* stages of the participants. The best example of the students striving to bring the Black and White communities together would be the issue of having two different homecomings. At AU and GU, there are "Black homecoming events" and "White homecoming events" on campus. Victor at AU, as well as JL and Sidney at GU, has been working to create only one homecoming at which every student feels valued. The three of them felt that having a Black and White homecoming was driving the two communities farther apart. All of the participants wanted to redefine their

Blackness to be something positive on campus and in order to do that they got involved in majority White student groups. Harper and Quaye (2007) went on to say that participants in mainstream student organizations join the group because of the inadequate representation of Black students and their issues. In contrast, in my study I found that that rationale was only part of my participants' motivation. They also sought to positively change the community for all students on campus.

The final theme to emerge in this study was the men's desire to *gain power and influence*. Each participant perceived that leading a majority White group was a way to gain power and influence on campus. They wanted to make a difference on campus and felt White groups had more power and influence than cultural groups. Continuing on the same path of reasoning, Harper and Quaye (2007) found that many of the men in their study joined mainstream groups in order to gain influence. The difference between the two findings is that Harper and Quaye's participants were interested in gaining influence to support Black groups on campus while the men in this study wanted to gain influence to help change the entire campus. Another difference between the two studies is that the men in my study were leaders of majority White groups and Harper and Quaye did not make clear if their participants held any leadership roles in majority White groups or were just active members of these groups. The men in my study had to work within an agenda that would work out best for the entire group and not just what was best for the Black community. Their hope was that what they did would be best for the entire community.

#### Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of African American college men leading majority White student groups. The study was

conducted with seven African American men from three different institutions located in the Midwestern part of the United States of America. Utilizing a phenomenological perspective, data were collected through three individual interviews with each participant. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, and then transcripts were analyzed using the phenomenological analysis approach outlined by Moustakos (1994).

#### Discussion of Research Questions

I will examine how the findings relate to each of the primary research questions guiding the study: (a) What motivates these men in their desire to assume leadership in majority white student groups? (b) How do African American men negotiate access into leadership roles within student groups that have historically not been led by individuals who are non-White student leaders? (c) What benefits do they perceive from their involvement in majority white student groups? and (d) During their leadership in a majority white student group, with which stage(s) within the Black Identity Development model do these African American men most align?

*What motivates these men in their desire to assume leadership in majority White student groups?*

Motivational factors for these men to take on leadership roles in majority White student groups come from their past experiences. Each one of the participants had past experience working with White peers. It was only a natural transition for them to become involved once they came to college. Many of them felt the responsibility to continue their leadership roles from high school into college. They had a desire to gain power and influence to make a difference on their campus. They saw on their campus that majority White students groups had most of the power and influence. They understood from past experience that

becoming a leader in one of those majority White groups would place them in a position of power and influence.

*How do African American men negotiate access into leadership roles within student groups that have historically not been led by individuals who are non-White student leaders?*

To access leadership roles of majority White groups, each of the participants had to find ways to balance their relationship with the Black community and the White community. Each man had his own way of finding balance but the one thing they all had in common was that they wanted to present Black men in a positive light. Each man wanted to help move the Black community forward by showing the White community that Black men are good leaders rather than reinforcing the negative stereotypes that society presents. They had added pressure in the leadership role of a majority White student group to be perfect. They felt that they needed to be perfect in the eyes of both the Black and White community. This need to be perfect made the men feel alone at times because they could not just be an average college student. To combat the low expectations that society has of Black men, they took it upon themselves to live up to their personal expectations of perfectionism.

*What benefits do they perceive from their involvement in majority White student groups?*

Each participant articulated that they would encourage other Black men to get involved in majority White student groups. They saw a variety of benefits by being involved in a majority White group. One benefit they talked about was having a well-rounded college experience. The participants would have not changed their experience for anything. They felt that they were making a difference on their campus and moving the university farther along in accepting Black men as campus wide leaders.

Another benefit of being involved was gaining leadership skills. They learned how to work with people from a different culture. Having a cross-cultural engagement experience was a benefit for the students as they learned to view the world through a multicultural lens. This wider view of the world has helped the men who have completed their degrees within their new work settings. Even those students still in school could see the difference in their experience in college versus that of their Black peers. They all felt that more opportunities were presented to them to interact with top level administrators than were available to other Black students. This interaction was a benefit to them in having those cross-cultural experiences to expand their mind. By leading a majority White student group, the participants were able to gain power and influence to make a difference on their campus. *During their leadership in a majority White student group, with which stage(s) within the Black Identity Development model do these African American men most align?*

The Black identity development of these participants most aligned with the stages of *Acceptance* and *Redefinition*. All of the participants had accepted some basic components of how the majority White culture views Black people, characteristic of the *Acceptance* stage. At this stage, what is part of the White culture is valued over aspects of Black culture. This stage coincided with the start of the participants' journey into leadership. They each bought into White norms, values, and definitions of success. Using these definitions, they sought leadership in majority White student groups, seeing these organizations as ones that could provide them with more power and influence than Black cultural groups.

Yet, each of them at some level is working to redefine what it means to be Black to incorporate a more positive point of view. In the *Redefinition* stage, the participants feel alone because their behavior is viewed negatively by both White and Black people. The

students are working to find that balance between White and Black communities. They are attempting to define how their Blackness affects their life. Once they have made meaning of being Black for themselves, they can then become an effective leader in a majority White student group.

Overall, these men are working to create a more inclusive campus culture. They are all striving to be at the *Internalization* stage. The participants know and feel that by working within the majority White student groups that have power and influence, they can make their campus climate more accepting of difference ethnic groups. For reasons that seem logical, the participants did not appear to be in either the *Naïve* stage or the *Resistance* stage. In the *Naïve* stage, individuals are simply unaware of their race and the benefits of leadership in a majority White group would not be apparent. At the *Resistance* stage, a person is anti-White and would have no interest in leading a majority white organization. They would be unwilling to accept the cultural environment of White student groups. Rather, they would be more interested in advancing the causes of African Americans through Black organizations such as BCG. The participants in this study became interested in being a leader of a majority White group at the stages of *Acceptance* and *Redefinition* with a goal to be at the *Internalization* stage, working for inclusion of all students on campus.

#### Limitations and Strengths

As highlighted in chapter 3, this study had one major limitation: the lack of African American men who were came from the same institution. Not having all the men from the same institution made it difficult for me to compare experiences. Each campus had its own unique campus culture which had an effect on each participant's experience. Another limitation was that some of the students were not currently students at the institution; they

graduated the semester before I started my research. Those students had to think back to their experience instead of talking about the experience as it was happening.

In spite of limitations, this research study also had some strengths. First, I was familiar with all the university sites because of colleagues who worked at the institutions and several personal visits to the institutions prior to this study. As a result, I understood the campus environment. Knowing the campus environment of each institution I could ask questions that would relate directly to the students. With my knowledge of the institutions' recent history, I would ask the participants how those events affected their decision to become a student leader in a majority White student group. My insider status as a former leader of a majority White student group also afforded me the ability to personally relate with the students and build a stronger relationship. The participants in the study were very forthcoming with their responses, and I believe it was because they knew I was once in the same position as an undergraduate student and could relate to their feelings and experiences. Despite not having all the participants coming from one campus, a strength of the study was that I did interview at least two students who were leaders on the same campus. I was able to get a richer understanding of the campus and their experiences, which helped to develop my themes.

#### Implications for Student Affairs Practice

Findings from this study suggest various implications for student affairs and higher education administrators. The findings from this study demonstrate the power of high school exposure to leadership and the battle African Americans face between balancing their responsibilities as leaders of White organizations and supporting the Black community.

Student affairs professionals need to look closely at the high school experiences of incoming freshmen. Students with prior leadership experience in a majority White group could be encouraged to continue their leadership at college. Student affairs professionals can encourage these students by connecting them with the right people and resources to fuel their leadership desires. Many times, student affairs professionals will only encourage African American freshmen to getting involved with BSA, NPHC, and other cultural groups. These professionals are on the front line and must never limit a student's leadership capabilities but rather expand them by sharing with them a variety of ways to become involved on campus.

Not every African American male student will arrive at college with prior experiences leading a majority White group. Student affairs professionals can assist students without such experiences by encouraging them to step outside of their comfort zone. The men in this study felt comfortable being in a majority White group. When asked why their peers were not involved, the response was that other Black students did not feel comfortable in those groups. By increasing the comfort African American men experience when working with White peers, African American men would be more likely to continue serving along side them. I would suggest that the university create a leadership workshop that would speak to the needs of African American men who desire to become effective leaders. Such a workshop would help Black men to see that leadership is leadership regardless of a person's race. By attending the workshop Black men would gain new knowledge about working with different people of a variety of cultures. Administrators also need to step outside of their comfort zone and recruit Black men to be part of majority White groups. One recommendation is to meet and talk to Black men where they congregate. We cannot expect students to leave their comfort zone if we are not willing to do the same. We must role model leadership and building



comfort levels for our students. We must show them that we are here to support them and will not let them fail as a leader if they are willing to step into a new experience. Having an African American male presence in majority White student organizations will likely attract even more men of color. With increased numbers, African American men will find support among each other and not feel as if they are alone in the organization. More often than not, students are unwilling to try new things, especially if they are the only one trying it.

Establishing a mentorship program is another way to improve African American male leadership across campus. For example, an African American male with past high school experience working with majority White peers could be paired with a student who arrived at college with no prior high school experience in this area. To do this, student affairs professionals really need to take the time to get to know the students; however, a simple freshman questionnaire could generate enough information to start the process.

Student affairs professionals must reexamine why majority White groups on their campuses make African American men feel uncomfortable. One way to find out why African American men feel uncomfortable is to conduct a campus climate study with a focus on student organizations. Having more Black men involved in majority White groups, I believe, will help with the overall educational experience of the university. The more interactions college students have with other cultures, the more they will be encouraged to reflect on multicultural issues and grow during their college experience. The responsibility of an institution of higher education is to develop well-rounded, educated members of society. Having Black men in majority White groups would only enhance the institution's mission in this respect. As White students see more Black men in majority White groups, they would focus less on their racial differences but rather look deeper into their ability to lead. These

experiences with Black men in college would carry over into a post-graduation outlook on society. Once we understand the reason behind Black man not being involved, we can work toward opening those groups up so that universities can truly be diverse educational environments.

Understanding the battles African American men struggle through as they attempt to balance their lives between the Black and White communities is very important. As student affairs professionals, we need to be aware of those struggles when we ask our African American student leaders to support or not support different university issues. We must make sure the students are ready for the social fall out of the decisions they make as a student leader. Students need to know that leadership does not equate with perfection. Student affairs professionals must remind these students that it is okay to make a mistake and that they are only human. This means reminding students that they are student-leaders not leader-students. African American men at this level of leadership feel alone with the burden of the race on their shoulders so support from another source is critical, especially support coming directly from the university.

This study also points to the need to gain an understanding of why people believe only majority White groups on campus have “power and influence.” Student affairs professionals should look at how they promote and support a variety of campus organizations. How does this sense of superior student groups develop? How can student affairs professionals make every group feel as if they have some level of power and influence? Universities and colleges desiring to bring equality to all campus groups should ensure that they all receive the same resources and advisor support from the student affairs professional staff.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This research study helps to fill the gap in the literature about African American college men. As mentioned in chapter 1, there is a lack of research about the experience of African American college men. There is even less research on African American men who have successful college experiences.

Future research is needed about African American men who attend or graduated from a majority Black high school and go on to attend a PWI and become leaders within majority White student groups. Student affairs can not just rely on one type of student to assume leadership positions but must work to develop all students who enter higher educational environments. In my study, only JL had attended a majority Black high school and he had previously experienced living and going to school in a predominantly White environment. Would the experiences and views of the students differ greatly if they had not attended a majority White high school? Another research topic building on this research would be to find out how these Black male leaders of majority White student groups are perceived by others. Additionally, research should compare the experiences of African American men with those of African American women leading majority White groups. Future research should also explore the experience of other non-dominant students in leadership positions, such as Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, LGBT students, etc. Researchers should also investigate why students believe that they can gain power and influence only through majority White groups. How and why does that idea play out on college campuses? What can be done to combat it?

As I began my research, President Barack Obama had begun his bid for the presidency of the United States of America. Although on a much larger scale, his experience

as a leader is similar to those of the participants in this study. President Obama's presidency and path to the White House offers encouragement for future research on African American men and their abilities to lead. For example, researchers could compare the pre- and post-Obama eras and measure the effects of his presidency on African American male leadership on campuses across the country. Now that African American men have witnessed first-hand what is possible, will they step outside of their comfort zone and lead?

### Conclusion

Through my research, I have uncovered the lived experience of African American college men who are leading majority White student groups. In my conversations with each participant, I realized something: each one enjoyed his leadership experiences and held no regrets. They felt that they were able to maintain their "Blackness" and still successfully serve as a campus leader. A part of preserving their "Blackness" may be found in their unwavering support of the Black community. They all attributed their experience as a leader in a majority White group to their growth as a person. More importantly, they felt that their experience as a leader was not about being Black or White but serving as just a good leader on their campus. Without this experience all of the participants felt that they would not be as successful as they are. Some of them felt that their role on campus is the reason they have continued their education.

I was able to compare the experiences of these Black men as campus-wide leaders to my own. Like the participants, I also wondered if anyone else had the same experiences as me. Luckily for me, I did not have to wonder long. I was blessed to meet Jeff Burgin, who served as SGA President at University of Cincinnati the same year. Although we were separated by miles and served two different campuses, we each provided support for the

other. He was going through some of the same issues on his campus as I was on mine. My experience, and Jeff's, led me to explore this research topic, which gave birth to this dissertation.

I recall researching and reading everything I could find about Black men. To my dismay, I could only find research about the failed experiences of African American men (i.e., lack of involvement, increasing drop-out rates, low GPAs, etc.) and little about their successes. I wanted to know more about Black men, like me and Jeff, who were successful at a PWI. I wanted to uncover their experiences and share their stories. I wasn't sure what I would find. I knew Jeff and I could not be the only ones; my goal, through this research, was to give African American men hope and let them know that they are not alone.

Lastly, I wanted to conduct this research after spending five years in student affairs at Ball State University. During my time there, I observed African American men. I watched them and I mentored them. I watched them shy away from campus-wide leadership roles. Why I asked them why they were not leading, they did not have a concrete reason. Mostly, they stated, "I am not uncomfortable working with White people" or "working with that many White people." I realized these men needed encouragement to break through these perceived barriers. So I began to encourage them. Over time, a few of them joined SGA and University Programming Board. After they graduated, they were grateful to have had that experience. I could see the growth in these men. Yet and still, others would not take me up on the challenge. Every man I met had the ability to lead but only a few answered the call.

I chose this study as a dissertation topic because it was an ongoing interest of mine: students of color and leadership. The goal of this research and other studies I am sure will

come after this is to help student affairs think about how they can turn a PWI into a PMI (Predominantly My Institution) for all students.

## APPENDIX A. LETTER OF INTRODUCTION OF STUDY

My name is Terry Frazier and I am a Doctoral Candidate at Iowa State University in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS) with a concentration in Higher Education. My dissertation work is about African American college men who attend predominantly white institutions and hold leadership roles within majority white student organizations.

At this point in my research, I am seeking individuals who are willing to participate in three rounds of one-on-one interviews. Specifically, I need participants who meet the following criteria:

- (1) Identity themselves as African American, Black, non-Hispanic
- (2) Attends a predominantly white 4 year public university or college in an rural environment
- (3) Are leaders in one or more majority white student group(s) – meaning they are elected or appointed leaders (i.e., any e-board/chair position) to a student organization whose membership is 51% or more white. These African American male participants should have a title and/or positional leadership role within the group (i.e., student government, university programming board, a historically white fraternity, hall council, or any other student group where the membership is 51% white). They can be leaders in some lesser known group as long as the organization’s membership is 51% white and they hold a title/positional leadership role.

If you know of any African American men who fit these requirements and would be willing to participate in this research project, please forward this email to them along with my contact information: email address [tfrazier@iastate.edu](mailto:tfrazier@iastate.edu) and cell phone number 765 228-5061. If you have any questions or need more details, please feel free to contact me. Thank your for your help in identifying individuals for this important study.

Regards,

Terrence L. Frazier  
Doctoral Candidate  
Iowa State University  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

## **APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The first interview will focus on the participant's life history.

Sample questions:

- What type of high school did you attend?
- What type of activities were you involved in during high school?
- Who were some of your biggest influences growing up?
- How do you feel that your high school experience prepared you for college as a leader?
- Why did you decide to go to college?
- During your high school days did you feel supported to go to college?
- What did you expect when you first came to the university?
- What was your goal when you first started college?
- What type of activities did you plan to be involved in during college?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I did not ask?

The second interview will focus on participants' experience as an African American male college student leader within a majority white student group.

Sample questions:

- What leadership roles do you hold on campus?
- What part of your leadership role do you enjoy the most? Why?
- What was your first leadership role on campus? Why did you choose to get involved in this role? What did you learn from this experience?
- How did you view your leadership compared to others?
- How did you get involved with a majority white student group?
- What motivated you to get involved?
- Who influences you now as a student leader in a majority white student group? Why? In what ways are you influenced?
- When you first came to campus did you think you would be involved with any majority white student groups? Why or why not?
- How many other Black male leaders do you know who are in majority white student groups? Do they attend your university or at another university?
- Why do you think there are so few Black male in this type of leadership role within a majority white student group?
- How do you see yourself as an effect leader for a majority white group?
- Tell me some of the positive comments people have made about you as a leader? What are some of the negative comments?



- Where do you get support for being a leader in a majority white student group? Who within the student group supports you?
- Describe for me your first day on the job as a leader in a majority white student group. How did you feel?
- Outside of your leadership roles what other activities are you involved in around campus?
- Why did you choose not to be a leader in a BSA?
- How did if feel to be a leader?
- What was the best and worse thing about being a leader of a majority white group?
- Did you find support from peers? (white and Black)

The third interview will focus on a reflection of their experience.

Sample questions:

- What has your experience as a leader in a majority white student group been like?
- What challenges has it posed?
- What rewards has it provided?
- What has it meant to you to be a Black man in a leadership position in a majority white student group?
- What have you learned about yourself from this experience?
- What have you learned about others?
- What part of the leadership role have been most challenging?
- Do you feel supported by the African American student community? If so in what ways? If not why do you think they do not support you?
- What impact, if any, do you believe your leadership in a majority white student group has on your campus? (White students; Black students)
- What are the differences that you see between your leadership compared to past leadership within the group?
- Why do you think most Black men do not get involved in majority white student groups?
- In what way have you personally Changed by being apart of a Majority white group?
- Would you encourage other Black males to get involved in a majority white student group? Why or why not? If so how would you encourage them?
- If you could give advice to African American men in majority white student groups what would you tell them?

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