



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Doctor of Education Capstones

Dept. of Educational Leadership

2024

Belonging at a Historically White Institution: Understanding the Men of Color Experience

Riley Cain Sisk
Virginia Commonwealth University

Tara J. Hefner
Virginia Commonwealth University

Kelsie N. Potter
Virginia Commonwealth University

Nicholas A. Williams
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/edd_capstone



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

© The Authors

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/edd_capstone/30

This Doctor of Education Capstone is brought to you for free and open access by the Dept. of Educational Leadership at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Education Capstones by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Belonging at a Historically White Institution: Understanding the Men of Color Experience

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Riley Cain Sisk
MBA, The Citadel, 2020;
B.S., University of South Carolina, 2014

Tara J. Hefner
Cert., Longwood University, 2023;
Cert., Regent University, 2015;
MAT., James Madison University, 2009;
B.S., James Madison University, 2008

Kelsie N. Potter
M.A., The New School, 2018;
B.A., University of Kentucky, 2016

Nicholas A. Williams
M.E., University of Virginia, 2015
B.A., University of Virginia, 2014

Chair: Beth E. Bukoski, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Educational Leadership

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
April 9, 2024

© Riley Cain Sisk, Tara J. Hefner, Kelsie N. Potter, Nicholas A. Williams, 2024
All Rights Reserved

Abstract

Sense of belonging is a vital need that supports an individual's journey of becoming. Studies have shown the positive impact sense of belonging can have on education outcomes, especially for underrepresented communities. Consulting with the Assessment Office in the Division of Student Affairs (The DSA Assessment Office) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), the research team sought to understand how men of color make sense of belonging at historically white institutions (HWIs) such as VCU. This qualitative, instrumental case study utilized a subjectivist approach grounded in Strayhorn's (2019) definition of 'sense of belonging' paired with Baxter Magolda's (2014) theories of self-authorship. The case study design included understanding the sense of belonging journeys of 18 undergraduate students who identify as men of color through both individual interviews and focus groups. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and Dedoose research analysis software the research team identified six core themes that emerged from the study along with various subthemes. The research team found that the intersectional nature of identity is transactional to find safety and security in places, spaces and people. Participants focused heavily on the perception and reality of safety as they sought to present their authentic selves. Participants showed high levels of self awareness and highlighted the importance of breaking monolithic tropes surrounding identity, social & cultural norms, and sense of belonging at HWIs. Recommendations developed from the study focus on increasing awareness about the impact of spaces, places and people on the men of color experience, offering keen insights and best practices.

Acknowledgements

To our Capstone Chair Dr. Beth Bukoski, thank you for guiding us through the intricacies and complexities of this process from start to finish. Your expertise in this topic and field aided immensely in our successful navigation of this journey.

To our Capstone Committee Members Dr. Jorge Burmicky and Dr. Jeffery Wilson, thank you for providing rich perspectives and insights to both challenge and affirm our research and perspectives.

To our capstone partners Yiyun Jie and Rachel Sieftring, thank you for presenting this problem of practice to be further researched and explored, in hopes that the findings bring a greater sense of belonging for all students at VCU.

To our capstone project participants, thank you for your authenticity, transparency, and genuine insights and perspectives. You were our “why” throughout this process and it is our hope and belief that your contributions have paved the way to increase a sense of belonging for men of color at VCU for years to come.

Dr. Riley Cain Sisk

This work would not have been possible without the collaboration, dedication, and understanding from each of my teammates, Nick, Kelsie, and Tara. Our vulnerability and openness with each other is an experience that I have learned so much from. To my LC24 cohort, I will truly cherish our two years together forever; thank you for teaching me so much. Thank you to Dr. Bukoski for challenging me individually through coursework and this project to think broader and be confident in my thoughts and feelings. Thank you to my mother, Lynne, for giving me an appreciation for education. Thank you to my sister, Taylor, for being my mentor within higher education. I’m appreciative of all family, friends, and colleagues who have encouraged me over the last few years. Lastly, thank you to my wife, Blakeley, for showing me grace, patience, and encouragement throughout this entire process. I’m the proudest to be your partner!

Dr. Tara Hefner

I am deeply thankful to my family, friends, and colleagues for their unwavering support throughout this journey. To my Capstone Team, Riley, Kelsie, and Nick, thank you for your invaluable support and dedication throughout this process. Your collaborative efforts, individual strengths, and unique perspectives have greatly contributed to the success of this endeavor, and I am truly appreciative of your perseverance and commitment to this work. To my husband Josh, thank you for always elevating me to be the best version of myself, and for not only believing in my potential, but always pushing me to reach it. To my parents Julie and Bruce Heintz, thank you for instilling in me the belief that I can accomplish anything and everything that I set my mind and heart on. I hope to instill this same sense of confidence and assurance in my own children. And lastly, to my children Joshua and Juliana, you were never an excuse to not accomplish this goal, but always my reason for it. May this serve as one of many positive examples to you. May it also serve as an inspiration for you to develop a love for learning and a

thirst for education. Remember that the goal of obtaining an education is not to simply become educated, but to use your acquired knowledge to do good in this world.

Dr. Kelsie Potter

I wish to express my gratitude for our capstone chair, Dr. Bukoski. I am grateful that through Dr. Bukoski's support, I was empowered to express and explore queerness while a member of this cohort. To Riley, Tara, and Nick, thank you for your dedication to growing and learning as we navigated this work together. To my mother, Bonni, who taught me to question everything, to use my voice for the voiceless, to challenge unrighteous norms, and to fight to make the world better for all, thank you. You were my first and best teacher, and I am able to educate others because of you. To my father, Gary, who raised me to be independent, fierce, and resilient, to be an angelic troublemaker, and to be true to myself. Your humor and your belief in me has propelled me forward. To my brother, Trey, who is my colleague and ally in mentoring youth for positive change, thank you. You are my inspiration. To the countless friends and colleagues who have supported me and cheered me on throughout this process, thank you. Finally, to Elsie, whom I never met, but whose sacrifice I will always remember. Köszönöm!

Dr. Nick Williams

Jeremiah 29:11: *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

To God be all the glory for this would not be without His unparalleled love, care and covering throughout the entirety of my journey of becoming. To my family, friends, colleagues and peers, thank you for your support and patience through this process. This journey was not easy, but I am blessed to be surrounded and supported by those who care about my wellbeing and who support my goals, dreams and aspirations. To my Uncle Willie, Uncle Chalk, Papa and Frasier, while you may not have been able to get to the finish line with me, your belief, love and support always served as fuel to my pursuit. To my parents, Sonja Johnson and Eric Williams, thank you for opening doors for me to walk through and being the wind behind my flight. I wouldn't be here if you didn't believe in the power of education, but also give me the space to become who I am called to be. I love you all. To my Ed.D. cohort, thank you for these amazing years, you all have truly become more than just colleagues, but family and mentors who continue to inspire me daily. Lastly, to my capstone team, Riley, Kelsie and Tara, through all things we stayed true to our desire to make a positive impact through our work and together we did just that, pushed the needle forward for positive change. Thank you all for being a safe space for me to unapologetically myself, I am honored to have done this work with you all.

“I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul.” - William Ernest Henley

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	2
Dr. Riley Cain Sisk	3
Dr. Tara Hefner	3
Dr. Kelsie Potter	4
Dr. Nick Williams	4
Table of Contents	5
Chapter 1 - Problem of Practice	7
Significance	11
Methods Overview	11
Summary	12
Terminology	13
CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review	15
Sophomore Slump	15
Sense of Belonging	17
Identity	19
Masculinities	20
Racial Identity	23
Ethnic/cultural Identity	24
Community Support Services	27
Summary	33
Theoretical Framework	34
CHAPTER 3 - Project Design	34
Project Design	35
Methods	36
Project Site	36
Sampling and Recruitment	37
Data Collection	38
Individual Interviews	39
Focus Groups	40
Data Analysis	40
Ethical and Quality Considerations	41
Trustworthiness	42
Limitations and Delimitations	47
CHAPTER 4 - Findings	48
Themes	51

Experiencing Identity	51
Challenges	62
Racism	72
Mental Health	74
Sense of Belonging at VCU	81
Belonging at VCU - Beneficial	84
Campus Support	90
Physical Spaces	94
Sense of Belonging at VCU - Adverse	99
Summary	106
CHAPTER 5 - Analysis and Conclusions	107
Interpretation of the Findings	107
Recommendations	113
Chapter Summary	122
Appendix A	126
Appendix B	127
Appendix C	128
Appendix D	130
Appendix E	130
Appendix F	133
Appendix G	135
Appendix H	136
References	142

Chapter 1 - Problem of Practice

Belonging is a basic human need and motivation toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). All humans experience the need for connection and a sense of belonging. In the context of higher education, students develop belonging when they feel socially supported, respected, and accepted on a campus by faculty, staff, and peers (Strayhorn, 2019). A sense of belonging is important for students to experience as, without it, they may not be motivated to attend courses, stay enrolled, or participate in the larger campus community (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). Without the basic need of belonging met, students may feel isolated or alienated, which can contribute to a decline in mental and physical health (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Sense of belonging contributes to higher education outcomes such as retention, graduation, academic success, and self-esteem for college students (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019; Krause-Levy et al., 2021). For underrepresented groups, such as students of color, a sense of belonging can be a critical component of group identity and academic success (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Institutional settings that are supportive of students racial identity contribute to their connection to the institution and can make underrepresented groups feel resilient when facing discrimination (Boston & Warren, 2017). Understanding a student's ethnic identity and how they find meaning through cultural groups and traditions can inform what aspects within spaces either increase or decrease connectivity within the institution (Gummadam et al., 2016). Students of color who perceive their institution's administration as sensitive to their needs or concerns can help students believe that they can succeed (Kuh et al., 2006). Without a strong sense of belonging, underrepresented students may choose to dis-identify with academics and the university or campus, resulting in underachievement in course work or withdrawal

(MacNear & Hunter, 2023). It is important for student affairs practitioners to better understand the intricacies of how underrepresented students develop a sense of belonging, as belonging can be a crucial piece in human motivation and outcomes such as graduation and retention (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Maslow, 1943; Strayhorn, 2019).

The influence of identity on the psychological adjustment of underrepresented college students, such as students of color, is vital, as it impacts their sense of belonging and experiences within the university setting (Gummadam et al., 2016). For example, a strong ethnic identity for students of color is linked to positive outcomes and resilience, enabling students to navigate university challenges with confidence (St. Louis & Liem, 2005). Students develop cultural or ethnic belonging when they are able to connect with others from their community, receive mentorship, and are supported by the campus (Boston & Warren, 2017; Gummadam et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2019). However, the lack of representation in curricula, faculty, and institutional leadership makes it challenging for students to envision themselves as integral members of the academic community (Chesin et al., 2014). Further challenges arise due to feelings of isolation, discrimination, and lack of meaningful representation (Chesin et al., 2014). Embracing diversity, promoting inclusivity, and facilitating cultural connections can cultivate an environment where all students, regardless of their ethnic background, experience a sense of belonging and an enriching educational journey.

Institutions of higher education play a vital role as centers for education, personal growth, and social integration. When students from underrepresented backgrounds experience a sense of belonging, they are more likely to excel academically, emotionally, and socially (Avci, 2023; Krause-Levy et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2019). Institutions that successfully create a sense of belonging for underrepresented populations may offer acceptance, understanding, social

interaction, academic support, and financial resources through their core programming (Foxx, 2021; Museus et al., 2016). Furthermore, identifying how various groups define a sense of belonging can increase how universities shape the programs they implement (Avcı, 2023), which benefits not only the individual but also the collective experiences of all students on the college campus.

To further investigate belonging, particularly in how students of color make meaning of belonging, our team has partnered with The Assessment Office in the Division of Student Affairs (The DSA Assessment Office) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). The DSA Assessment Office has completed research into how students at VCU perceive a sense of belonging through surveying the student body. This office seeks to support student affairs offices with data-supported practices. Through assessment of the student body, the DSA Assessment Office supplies VCU with evidence-based reports and resources based on VCU's student population. However, the collected quantitative data regarding sense of belonging did not allow for students to elaborate or share their lived experiences, which are vital to both understanding a sense of belonging and providing context to the individualized experiences of each student (Brooms, 2018; Clark & Brooms, 2018). The DSA Assessment Office has noted that quantitative methods may not share the full scope and diversity of students' perspectives, as subgroups of students (such as first generation, students of color, LGBTQIA+, etc) may experience a sense of belonging differently. While the DSA Assessment Office's surveys included open-ended questions, this was only a glimpse into how students, especially students of color, experienced belonging on campus. We intend to build upon the work that the DSA Assessment Office has completed by exploring how an underrepresented population makes meaning of belonging. By capturing more in-depth stories from students of color, this project can shed light upon ways that

members of the same racial and/or ethnic groups experience a sense of belonging on college campuses (Esie & Bates, 2023).

Upon examining the data from the partner's report, 41% of the data came from those who identify as White or European American; African Americans reported 21%, Asian Americans reported 14%, Latinx reported 9% and Multiracial 11%. The reported data illustrates the gaps in data reporting from underrepresented populations within higher education. The data further suggest that 70% of the information gathered came from those who identify as female. With White or European American female voices serving as the majority representation within an institutional study, additional research is needed in order to fully understand the lived experiences of underrepresented populations. Using this information, our team understood that the experiences of men and, more specifically men of color, were not captured to the extent of other subgroups. For the purposes of this paper men of color are defined as persons who identify as Black/African American, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Latinx and Native American (Huerta et al., 2021).

The purpose of this capstone project is to explore how men of color at a four-year historically white institution (HWI) describe the phenomenon of sense of belonging. The project will follow qualitative approaches to research, being an instrumental case study. To understand how men of color at VCU experience and make sense of their experiences of belonging, we ask three research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. How do men of color experience sense of belonging?
2. How do participants describe their racial identity, ethnic identity, and gender identity as it relates to finding belonging on VCU's campus?

3. How do men of color prioritize resources and spaces to create a sense of belonging at VCU?

Significance

The partner had a desire to better understand the experiences of underrepresented populations at VCU. After consulting with the partner, we chose to focus this project on men of color because they continually report a lack of sense of belonging on college campuses, especially at universities who are made up of students that are primarily white (Dancy, 2011; Duran & Garcia, 2023; Foxx, 2021; Griffith et al., 2012; Williams & Flores-Ragade, 2010). According to 2020 data from the National Center of Education Statistics, male undergraduate students are already graduating at a lower rate than their female counterparts (The NCES, n.d.). Further data shows that fewer than 15% of bachelor's degrees earned in the U.S. are by members of underrepresented populations (Huerta et al., 2021; Pérez Huber et al., 2015). Understanding how men of color make sense of belonging while attending historically white universities, which are institutions of higher education that have predominantly served and enrolled white students throughout its history, can assist in the development of recruitment, retention, and graduation rates for men of color in higher education.

Methods Overview

Our team's research aims to understand the sense of belonging for sophomore men of color at VCU. We selected sophomore men of color as second-year students' have experienced a significant amount of time on campus that may or may not have led to the development of belonging. Unlike freshmen students, sophomores are not heavily targeted by retention efforts and may feel adrift as they enter their second year of college (Vaughn & Parry, 2013). We also identified sophomore men of color as to avoid as much influence by the COVID-19 pandemic on

the campus experience as possible. Our project will be framed around subjectivism, as our team will be focusing on interpreting men of color's understanding of belonging on campus, rather than seeking a definable truth (Priya, 2021). With our team's use of a qualitative research approach, we will use non-probability sampling strategies, including purpose and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling will allow our team to select students who have different experiences and identities (Sampson, 2019), including self-identifying as a man of color and a sophomore or second-year undergraduate student at VCU. From the sampling method, we will hold focus groups with participants to gather their feedback on their sense of belonging at VCU. Individual interviews will also be conducted as an alternative based on availability and comfortability. Our team will compare data collected from the focus groups and interviews using a code book created by our team.

Summary

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the project scope surrounding how men of color in their second year experience a sense of belonging. Within this chapter, we first introduced our partner's desire to understand how underrepresented groups, such as students of color, find a sense of belonging at VCU. We highlighted the gaps in research surrounding the experiences of men of color at historically white institutions, noting the need for further expansion. This chapter next introduced the core themes of racial, ethnic and gender identities as cornerstones for shaping our capstone project. Lastly, this chapter set the foundational context for addressing a sense of belonging and the challenges confronted by men of color within historically white institutions. Below, we include terminology that is vital to navigating this project. The next chapter of this project presents relevant literature that will guide our research surrounding our core topic.

Terminology

The following is a list of key terms that appear throughout this capstone project. We provide the definition associated with each term:

1. **Men of color:** men who identify as Black/African American, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Latinx, Middle Eastern and/or Native American
2. **Masculinity:** socially constructed identity based often on heteronormative views for defining “men” within society
3. **Masculinities:** highlights the many different ways that manhood is explored, represented, and socialized
4. **Racial Identity:** a socially constructed identity that points to an individual’s physical appearance and how they see themselves in the world
5. **Ethnic Identity:** an enduring aspect of the self, involving a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the associated attitudes and feelings (Phinney, 1996)
6. **Social Norms:** highly prevalent attitudes, behaviors and actions accepted by the majority of society as the standard of functioning in society (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020).
7. **Racial Socialization (Anderson et al., 2019):** the verbal and non-verbal methods used to explain race, racial differences and other social norms associated with a racial identity
8. **Invisible Tax:** describes the complex experiences of people of color as they seek spaces of affinity that create cultural safety while also building protective measures to preserve these spaces from acts that threaten the longevity of safety; this “tax” can often overburden minoritized communities with the responsibility of creating and maintaining inclusive spaces at the expense of always serving to help universities become more diverse due to mutually beneficial outcomes (Givens, 2016).

9. **Social Negotiation:** the act of conforming to social norms and attitudes of the majority in both professional and social spaces in order to fit in, while also managing the invisible taxes of being a part of an underrepresented group (Malaku, 2022).
10. **Monolith:** an infrastructure that has the same qualities, traits, strengths and weaknesses; assumes a “one size fits all” framework.
11. **Historically White Institutions (HWI):** institutions that have had a consistent history where the student population is predominantly white or Caucasian; an institution that has maintained a white or Caucasian student population greater than 50% of the total university enrollment over the majority of the institution’s existence.
12. **Stereotype:** traits assumed to be the same when applied to a singular group of people.
13. **Discrimination:** the act of unequally treating a person or thing based on either the group they belong to or distinguishable traits they carry in lieu of individual value.
14. **Safe space:** an environment free of judgment, discrimination and persecution that provides emotional and physical safety for individuals or groups of people.
15. **Sense of Belonging:** the state in which an individual feels connected to, valued by and supported through people and places that create emotional and physical safety.
16. **Minority Serving Institution (MSI):** a Federal and state distinction that characterizes a university as having at least one minoritized population make up at least 20% of the overall university population.
17. **Sophomore student:** an undergraduate student in the second year of their collegiate journey. Typically a student with this designation has completed at least two full semesters at an institution or have completed at least 24 credit hours to progress to this academic level.

18. **First Generation college student:** students who are first in their family to attend college; a student whose biological parents have not attained a post-secondary college degree in the U.S.
19. **Pell Grant eligible:** an individual who is actively enrolled, undergraduate in a degree seeking program that meets the core criterion for the federal pell grant which includes: (1) have demonstrated financial need via reported household income as determined by the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and (2) have not completed a bachelor's, graduate or professional degree.

CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review

To contextualize a sense of belonging for men of color, our team completed a literature review. Using VCU's libraries search engine and online databases such as SAGE, we collected peer-reviewed research articles relating to men of color's sense of belonging as undergraduate students. As we read the literature, we found three recurring topics: Sense of Belonging, Identity, and community support services. The following chapter will cover the topics of the "sophomore slump" and sense of belonging. Then, we will review identities that affect men of color, such as racial identity, cultural/ethnic identity, and masculinities. Finally, the chapter will explore examples of support services that have been implemented to foster community and therefore a sense of belonging for men of belonging. The following literature review creates a foundation of knowledge regarding the concepts that are integral to our research.

Sophomore Slump

For the purposes of our capstone project, we chose to focus on sophomore men of color. Sophomore students can feel more pressure and a lack of support that culminates into a phase called the "sophomore slump" (Vaughn & Parry, 2013). The concept of "sophomore slump"

emerged during the 1950's because of the adjustment stressors that sophomore students face, as institutions offer limited services to this group of students (Vuong, 2010). There has been a growing interest in the retention and attrition of students as more than one fourth are leaving their 4-year institutions after their first year (Capik & Shupp, 2023). As students reach their second year, they are no longer targeted by focused retention efforts, such as specialty college introduction courses, living-learning programs, or on-campus events. Webb and Cotton find that around half the cases of student attrition occur after year one, indicating that second year students' intention to drop out stems from their experiences in their first two semesters (Webb & Cotton, 2019). Sophomore students are often viewed as the group of students with less attention and support even while being the group that is more likely to leave the institution (Capik & Shupp, 2023).

The "sophomore slump" can have a significant impact on men of color at the university level. For many students, the sophomore year can be a challenging time as the initial excitement of college begins to diminish, and the pressures of academic and personal life start to intensify. Men of color may face additional obstacles and pressures due to systemic barriers and societal expectations (Wade, 2020). They might experience feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, and a lack of representation, making it more difficult to navigate their second-year college experience.

One of the main challenges that men of color face during the "sophomore slump" is a sense of isolation. They may find it challenging to connect with peers who share similar experiences and backgrounds, leading to feelings of loneliness and alienation. This lack of connection can impact their overall well-being and academic performance, as having a support system is crucial for success in college (Evans, 2012). Another factor that exacerbates the

“sophomore slump” for men of color is imposter syndrome. They may doubt their abilities and feel like they do not belong, especially in environments where they are underrepresented. This can lead to self-doubt, anxiety, and a fear of failure. Overcoming imposter syndrome requires building confidence and resilience, but it can be especially challenging when faced with societal stereotypes and expectations. Mentoring relationships can assist in mitigating these challenges (Evans, 2012).

Peer connections can be vital to the retention of sophomore students and their overall satisfaction with the institution. Sophomore students, specifically, find connections with peers as they navigate their personal values and academic direction (Blekic et al., 2020). As institutions acknowledge the importance of avoiding the “sophomore slump”, they are investing in programs that focus on social engagement, student-faculty interactions, career exploration, sense of community, and leadership (Tobolowsky, 2008). Tobolowsky recommends that first-year and senior initiatives can be applied to sophomores, but that the approach to sophomores needs to be embedded into campus culture and the campus mission (2008).

In summary, the “sophomore slump” can disproportionately impact men of color at the university level due to feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, and a lack of representation (Wade, 2020). Recognizing and addressing these challenges is crucial to support their success. Sense of belonging, as will be discussed, is a key component to retention. By focusing on sophomores, we hope to identify the ways in which belonging may or may not influence a man of color to remain in college.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging for college students is defined by the perception of social support on campus, feelings of connectedness, and their feeling of being an important part of the campus

community (Lemley, 2014; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). A fundamental component of a student's belonging is understanding who they are, what they do, the value they put on their experiences, and how satisfied they are with those experiences (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). Without a sense of belonging in the landscape of higher education, students can potentially lack in their academic performance or alter plans to stay in school, with the increased stress of not belonging negatively affect student motivation and engagement over time (Allen, 2020; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Yeager et al., 2013). Ahn and Davis (2020) conclude that social and psychological functioning, college activities, self-confidence and academic achievement can dictate a student's sense of belonging in higher education, in addition to their social recognition and the support they receive. With these factors in mind, it is important to examine personal identity, personal connections with others, and connections to places as belonging contributes to successful healthy functioning for humans in society (Allen, 2020).

In order to understand the full scope of belonging, we must understand how and why sense of belonging is affected positively or negatively. For example, perceived negative factors such as a difficult transition to higher education, academic stress, loneliness, and changes in university life can all contribute to a lack of sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Strayhorn 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Baumeister and Leary (1995) found that a lack of belonging can cause deprivation and ill effects, such as mental or emotional distress or isolation. Benefits from students' sense of belonging can lead to improved mental health, a buffer from stress, and deeper engagement in their studies (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). These benefits can lead to students using campus resources and to greater success. When students feel a greater sense of belonging, they are more likely to be more engaged with their institution (Chu et al.,

2000). Belonging can also differ for students with diverse experiences, with first-generation and racial-ethnic minorities reporting lower sense of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020).

Strayhorn (2019), a prominent investigator of belonging, focuses on the experience of underrepresented students and how strengthening a student's sense of belonging is important to their success. To create a sense of belonging, it helps for students to have more frequent interactions with diverse students (Supiano, 2018). Hurtado and Carter (1997) questioned whether underrepresented students perceive themselves as marginal to the majority of campus students. Institutions that also have a robust college transition program for first-generation and low-income students directly relate to their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Supiano, 2018). With a diverse student population, it will be beneficial to focus on students within an underrepresented group to examine trends amongst that sample population. Previous studies have shown that sense of belonging can play a role in student retention, showing an even greater need for understanding for institutions. It is important to understand student success through their belonging for groups who have historically been excluded and now included more diverse institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Identity

To understand how underrepresented students, such as men of color, experience a sense of belonging, it is important to consider the population's identities and how they influence a student's interpretation of phenomena. Our project focuses on men of color. Men of color, which we define as men who identify as Black/African American, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Latinx and/or Native American, are affected by their masculinities, their racial identity, and their cultural/ethnic identity. These specific identities were chosen because of their inclusion in minority serving institution standards. Masculinities refers to the many different ways that men

make meaning of masculinity or construct “how to be a man.” Racial identity refers to the physical skin color of an individual and associated socially constructed norms within society. Cultural/ethnic identity refers to specific attitudes, rituals and feelings that create a deeper sense of connectivity to a group. Often racial and ethnic identities can become intertwined due to aligned norms and rituals, however, these two identities can operate culturally as opposites based on factors such as upbringing or geography. Masculinities, racial identity, and cultural/ethnic identity were recurring topics in the literature, and these facets of identity were highlighted by men of color themselves who participated in previous studies related to sense of belonging (Avci, 2023; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Boston & Warren, 217). We found it important to highlight men of color’s reflections and self-authorship that emerged in the research, as we hope to capture similar expressions of opinion and internal voice through our project.

Masculinities

Masculinities, which encompasses the gender performance and socialization of manhood, influence men of color as they move through a four-year institution (Thangaraj, 2022; Catalano et al., 2018; Harris, 2010). We use the term *masculinities* instead of masculinity, as the singular word *masculinity* does not fully capture how different individuals uniquely construct meaning around “being a man.” The individual understanding of masculinity and what it means to be a man in society is constructed by familial guidance, cultural or ethnic surroundings, societal stereotypes or expectations, prejudices, and more (McGuire et al., 2014; Thangaraj, 2022). This socialized categorization of masculinity often influences how the masculine identity is constructed, perceived, and experienced within society even before incorporating other identities (Crenshaw, 2018; Fleming et al., 2014; Shields, 2008). Understanding the nuances of gender

identity and how it layers upon the construction, perception, and experience of other identities is vital to understanding men of color.

Nolan et al. (2021) suggest that while the literature often notes the influence of masculinities upon men of color in college, gender is often considered fixed and less of a cause of men of color's struggles in higher education than race. For men of color, literature notes the interplay of gender, race, and ethnicity that influences how individuals are guided to conform to socialized norms defining masculinities (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Le et al., 2022). The literature does not diminish the impact of the patriarchy on society and the power structures that give privilege to masculinities. Rather, the literature acknowledges and considers how patriarchy and sexism also harms men, particularly men of color, as they assimilate into social spaces (Nolan et al., 2021).

Within the college space, research notes that men of color may be more likely to engage in risky behaviors that are harmful to their health, such as self-harm or avoiding health services while in college (Griffith et al., 2012). This behavior may be tied to numerous factors such as fear of systematic inequalities including unequal care due to racial and gender bias (Bañales et al., 2022), inter- and intra-personal stressors in their lives (Reohr et al., 2023), or the perception of unequal power dynamics within the spaces they occupy (Le et al., 2022). Men of color are also less likely to ask for academic help or to use campus resources such as academic advising or tutoring services, even when they are free and readily available (Dancy, 2011; Foste & Davis, 2018). These actions often appear as an attempt to mask their desire for help (Edwards & Jones, 2009) to avoid appearing feminine, which has been socialized to be viewed as weak in relation to masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Additionally, men are often not placed under the

same educational pressures or expectations as women (whether from parents or faculty) and are assumed to be more likely to fail or drop out (Dukakis et al., 2014).

Several studies note (Duran & Garcia, 2023; Griffith et al., 2012; McGuire et al., 2014; Williams & Flores-Ragade, 2010) that men of color in higher education are self-aware of their masculinities. Men of color in a college setting may feel pressure to conform and perform their masculine identities in ways that align with race and ethnic identities due to the influence of cultural expectations (Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016). Such pressures to perform may also limit ways that men of color choose to be vulnerable and thus trust in college systems and administrators seeking to support their needs (Smith, 2023). They are reflective upon the ways in which gender impacted their education and experiences at a college campus, but may lack the tools to combat it. Other gender identities related to manhood, such as individuals who identify as masc and/or transgender, should also be considered.

As gender identity is not monolithic (Esie & Bates, 2023; Sampson, 2019), the same can be applied when discussing other identities such as race and ethnicity. In particular, research about gender identity serves as a foundation for observing how the performance of identity is shaped through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 2018; Le et al., 2022). Men of color, for example, operate not only through a gendered lens, but must also navigate the complexities of their racial and ethnic identity (McGuire et al., 2014; Thangaraj, 2022). In order to better understand how men of color are impacted by the interplay of multiple identities, our team also reviewed research on race and ethnicity/cultural identities (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Givens 2016).

Racial Identity

Racial identity is defined as a socially constructed aspect that points to an individual's physical appearance and how they see themselves in the world; often race and ethnicity are intertwined together as both are nurtured through social (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020) and cultural norms (Durkee et al., 2020). Literature highlights the experience of racial identity by suggesting that racial identity is developed through socialized spaces such as an individuals' home and school environment (Anderson et al., 2019). Racial socialization is defined as the verbal and non-verbal methods used to explain race, racial differences and other social norms associated with a racial identity (Anderson et al., 2019; Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Despite socialization of racial identity creating clarity of self, this phenomenon also exposes individuals to new experiences that cause personal stress; some examples include racial discrimination and other forms of prejudice (Willis and Neblett, 2020). In current research, new studies have begun connecting mental health to racial identity development as individuals perform socially accepted norms. Literature further reveals that for some racial groups, the designation of *whiteness* can create complex layers of isolation even within race and ethnic groups. The negative connotation of "acting white," as researchers Durkee, Perkins and Smith (2020) point out, draws attention to the fear of being invalidated within society if an individual performs counter to social norms of their perceived identities.

As men of color navigate a college campus, their development of a sense of belonging requires both knowledge and awareness of how their identities can be freely expressed within their new environment (Clark & Brooms, 2018). Especially on HWI campuses, men of color have to consider how prejudice plays a role in how their racial identity is perceived around the institution (Foxx, 2021). The reality for men of color on college campuses is that they cannot

avoid facing prejudice on college campuses, especially HWIs (MacNear et al., 2023). Even within racial groups, finding a sense of belonging can have its challenges because ethnic identity customs may counter racial identity norms (Durkee et al., 2020; Foxx, 2021; MacNear et al., 2023; Willis & Neblett, 2020). Walton and Cohen (2007) draw attention to a survival mindset that links the intersection of gender, race, and ethnic identities when performed in socialized spaces; this desire to fit in can cause students to choose which identity dictates their performance and how they may use identity as a protective mechanism to avoid negative experiences. Boston and Warren (2017) articulate how academic achievement values can vary based on the pressures within schools that influence identity performance. For students of color, the challenge of underrepresentation of race amongst faculty, staff, and the student body are factors that further exacerbate the paradoxical experiences in college.

While literature has discussed racial and gender identities as cornerstones to understand how men of color navigate the college environment, the research also highlights ethnic identity as an equally important concept for illuminating non-monolithic behaviors that drive student pursuit of belonging in higher education (Esie & Bates, 2023; Sampson, 2019). As our team reviewed the multifaceted aspects of identity and its influence on sense of belonging in academic settings, it became evident that a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics must also include ethnic/cultural identity. Ethnic/cultural identity serves as a cornerstone for students, offering them a source of pride, resilience, and a connection to their heritage.

Ethnic/cultural Identity

Phinney (1996) defines ethnic identity as an enduring aspect of the self, involving a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the associated attitudes and feelings. Ethnic identity plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's sense of belonging at the college/university level

(Gummadam et al., 2016). Ethnic identity also influences psychological adjustment of underrepresented college students. Stronger ethnic identity has been associated with positive outcomes, including higher self-esteem and stronger psychological adjustment and alignment (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). This positive association has been consistent across different ethnic groups, such as Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans (Kane, 2019; Nguyen, 2018; Nunez, 2009). Students with a strong and positive ethnic identity often feel a sense of pride and connection to their cultural heritage (St. Louis & Liem, 2005). This pride can serve as a source of strength, enabling them to navigate through the challenges of university life with confidence. These students may actively seek out cultural clubs, events, and organizations that celebrate their ethnicity, providing them with a space where they feel valued and accepted.

Several studies have been conducted to explore the relationship between school belonging, academic outcomes, and retention among ethnically underrepresented college students. Particularly noteworthy are interventions designed to enhance the sense of school belonging among African American college students (Kane, 2019), which have revealed correlation between a strong sense of belonging and improvements in their grade point averages (GPAs) over time (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Additionally, the project revealed potential links to improved physical health and self-reported happiness (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

However, students who belong to underrepresented ethnic groups often face unique challenges (Chesin et al., 2014). Feelings of isolation or discrimination due to their background can lead to a weakened sense of belonging (Chesin et al., 2014). These individuals may struggle to find representation in the curriculum, faculty, or campus leadership, which can further increase their feelings of alienation (Carey et al., 2023). However, universities that actively promote diversity and inclusivity can foster a more welcoming environment, encouraging a stronger sense

of belonging among students from all ethnic backgrounds (Carey et al., 2023). Additionally, ethnic identity can influence social circles and friendship networks at university (Boston & Warren, 2017). Students may naturally gravitate towards peers who share a similar background, language, or cultural experiences, as it provides a sense of familiarity and comfort (Syed, 2010).

The existence of cultural stereotypes and prejudices can also impact how students perceive their sense of belonging. Access to resources due to systemic differences in teacher quality, high school courses offered, and school funding can lead to differences in belonging for different identity groups (O'Brien et al., 2020). Negative stereotypes or biases can cause students to feel unwelcome and undervalued, hindering their ability to fully engage in the university community. In contrast, an inclusive campus culture that actively addresses and challenges these stereotypes can create an environment where students feel valued for their unique contributions (Chesin et al., 2014).

Ethnic identity significantly influences students' sense of belonging at university. Embracing and celebrating diversity, promoting inclusivity, and providing spaces for students to connect with their cultural background are all vital in creating an environment where students from various ethnic backgrounds can feel a strong sense of belonging (Phinney, 1996). If institutions elevate the priority of promoting, retaining, and advancing underrepresented groups, they can better promote support for these students (Whittake et al., 2015). By acknowledging and addressing the challenges faced by ethnically underrepresented students, universities can foster a more inclusive atmosphere and enhance the overall educational experience for all students.

Intersectional Identity

Understanding the intersections of gender, race, and ethnicity helps not only create understanding of the lived experiences of men of color, but also draws further questions about

ways that this group seeks belonging at an institution (Crenshaw, 2018; Le et al., 2022). Various researchers have pointed out that men of color seek avenues that acknowledge socialized and cultural norms (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020) and create familiarity (Durkee et al., 2020; Syed, 2010;). Additionally, research has confirmed deterrents to men of color feeling a sense of belonging include both discrimination and prejudice (Bañales et al., 2022; Chesin, et al., 2014; Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016; Willis & Nebblett, 2020). While research presented thus far showcases the complexity of identity, further research is needed to understand what is being done to support men of color at the college level and how to mitigate infringements on their pursuit of belonging. Expanding on this foundation, our focus now shifts to the critical connection between identity and the physical environment within college campuses, emphasizing the intricate interplay between identity, culture, and the spaces in which students learn and grow (Baedke & Buklijas, 2023). This exploration aims to review ways in which the college environment impacts the experiences and outcomes of underrepresented students, specifically men of color, while also seeking strategies and support services employed by universities to foster a stronger sense of belonging (Duncan et al., 2023; Huerta et al., 2021; Lott et al., 2023; Museus et al., 2017).

Community Support Services

As research helps us understand men of color through the lens of identity, we found the research also reviewed the ways that support services impact students' ability to connect and create community (Baedke & Buklijas, 2023). It is important for our team to understand what community support services are available and how they have or have not influenced men of color's sense of belonging, as it will allow the team to develop a holistic understanding of this phenomena. What has, for example, increased sense of belonging for men of color, and has this

influenced their desire to remain on a campus? Data collected amongst institutions in the U.S. note that less than 60% of students who go to college complete their bachelor's degree between 4-6 years (Museus et al., 2017). Museus, Yi and Saelua (2017) collected further data to showcase greater issues in degree attainment for people of color compared to their White counterparts; Black, Latinx, American Indian and Alaskan native populations in particular were shown to be at the greatest risk of not finishing their degree in a timely manner, but intervention such as community support services can help. In their own words, men of color have reported that mentorship and community have contributed to their desire to stay enrolled at university (Bañales et. al, 2022). Due to these factors, understanding ways that support service impacts the matriculation of students of color needs to be explored.

In recent years, universities have taken an increased interest in the journeys of men of color and as a result have sought unique ways to better support this particular population (Duncan et al., 2023; Huerta et al., 2021; Lott et al., 2023). One method of supporting men of color is through programs that connect culture, identity, and university resources. Universities have built and continue to develop such initiatives because of the national crisis of low persistence amongst men of color within higher education (Huerta et al., 2021). These community support services have become quintessential to institutions' attempts to better retain and support men of color at the university level as they provide mental and emotional support (Duncan et al., 2023), ease the transition from pre-college environments to the university spaces (Lott et al., 2023) and, especially in historically white spaces, create intentional visibility of cultural and ethnic representation (Booker and Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Locks et al., 2008; Lott et al., 2023; Merriweather, 2008). Underrepresented communities need to witness environments that are both culturally engaging and culturally relevant (Kiyama et al., 2015; Museus et al.,

2016) in order to help alleviate fear induced pre-dispositions caused by prior negative experiences (Locks et al., 2008).

Participating in extracurricular activities plays a vital role in nurturing a sense of belonging among university students (De Sisto, 2022). These activities provide an opportunity for students to connect with like-minded peers who share their interests and passions. Religious and interfaith groups, school choirs, athletics and intramural sports provide outlets for men of color to connect with each other. Through shared goals and experiences, students form deep bonds and friendships, creating a support system that extends beyond the classroom. This sense of belonging not only enhances the overall university experience, but also contributes to personal growth and mental well-being. Students who feel connected to their university through extracurricular involvement are more likely to excel academically, as they have a network of support and a stronger motivation to succeed (De Sisto, 2022). Additionally, students may find a sense of belonging by utilizing community support services that formally link students with the university and the greater local community through the foundation of identity. The following section reviews community support services that have focused on men of color and promoting a sense of belonging specifically for this population. The services highlighted are all anchored at four-year institutions.

Project Males at the University of Texas (2010)

Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success) was founded in 2010 at the University of Texas at Austin. The core mission behind this initiative was to increase the retention of males of color at the university; this initiative was established with an even greater desire to support the Latino male population. The core foundation of this entity has operated with an understanding that Latino males are not progressing through the educational

pipeline as their peers, leading to a decrease in retention and positive educational outcomes (University of Texas at Austin, 2023). Key elements of this initiative include a research backed mentoring program that infuses culturally relevant practices to support the holistic success of students who participate.

My Brother's Keeper (2014)

A nationwide program created by former President Obama in February 2014, was designed to address social inequities that influence the success trajectory of men of color. The inequities addressed include poverty, discipline, employment and crime. The untimely death of Trayvon Martin inspired the foundation of this entity with the vision to dismantle systems that oppress and empower success through community support. The heart of the program set the pace of student success through six milestones, backed by research. The first milestone of the initiative is focused on helping young men of color in their early education years. This focus includes supporting healthy home environments, increasing quality health care, and creating equitable and non-discriminatory discipline systems in schools. The second milestone centered on helping men of color read at grade level by the end of third grade. By increasing reading comprehension and literacy, students will have a higher chance of success as they continue to navigate the P-20 education pipeline. The third milestone is to help men of color graduate from High School. By obtaining their High School diploma, men of color are able to open doors of opportunity to expand financial stability. Furthermore, this diploma opens the pathway to college, the fourth milestone. This milestone is focused on helping men of color discover the pathway that will best serve their long term goals. Whether a student attends a four year institution, community college, or trade school, this initiative will support students throughout their journey to obtaining their desired degree. The fifth milestone, seeks to remove barriers of

entry into the workforce with a goal to ensure that every young man of color gains employment that progresses them towards success. The final milestone of this initiative hones in on addressing the social inequity of violence and crime. As one of many barriers to sustainable success for men of color, this focus area challenges many social issues such as fostering positive relationships between the police and local communities. Furthermore, this milestone also stakes a commitment to remove barriers that prevent those convicted of crimes from reentry into society. As shown, my Brother's Keeper is an example of an expansive approach to support men of color throughout their journey in education.

University of Pennsylvania - RISE Boys & Men of Color (2015)

The RISE (Research, Integration, Strategy, and Evaluation) Boys and men of color initiative was started at UPenn in February 2015 to address the barriers of success for boys and men of color. In particular, this initiative first began as a means to centralize all siloed efforts to support this particular population in order to land on sustainable long term interventions. Unfortunately, this initiative failed to sustain itself and is no longer present at the university.

University of Illinois – Men of Color Initiative(2019)

At the University of Illinois, the institution first established the Black Male Initiative (BMI) in 2010 in order to support black male persistence. As the university became increasingly diverse and a rapid need to support more underrepresented communities on campus, in Fall 2019 the BMI evolved into what is now called the Men of Color Initiative. This program focuses on recruiting, educating and retaining men of color through academic support services, a peer mentoring program, and career development seminars. Through these efforts, this program has expanded its reach from the 10 to over 100 males who participate in this initiative.

VCU – Men of Color Initiative (2020)

Lastly, at VCU, the Men of Color Initiative (MOCI) started out as a class, “Dynamic Principles of Professional Development: Men of Color” in 2013 designed to teach male students of color basic life skills that will help them find success in college and beyond. Due to the popularity and positive results of the course, the students who finished the class then built a student organization, Developing men of color (DMC), in 2018 as a means of maintaining the relationships they built through the class. Since its inception DMC now has well over 500 members. Furthermore, to expand the reach of the MOCI, additional programmatic support systems were established. For example, there are men of color STEM study sessions designed to increase academic success of students studying STEM in their freshman and sophomore years. The MOCI also established the men of color Community Connections Initiative by offering professional opportunities for networking and creating a sense of belonging; this entity also connects the students to the plethora of additional support services offered at the university. Leaning on research, the MOCI is grounded on four key pillars of success: sense of belonging, academic achievement, career and professional development, and social capital. Furthermore, through a unique partnership with the DMC student organization, students who enroll in the aforementioned class will also get a peer mentor from the organization. This peer to peer relationship is designed to increase a student’s sense of belonging through culturally relevant programming and representation at all levels of the collegiate community: faculty, staff, students and alumni.

Each of these examples of programs offer a different perspective on the long journey of supporting men of color both externally and internally while they complete their degrees. In order to better support this population, key initiatives must be both accessible and complex in nature in order to present a robust support system that sustains student success over time

(Sanacore, 2017). Exploring the variety of initiatives present around the U.S. confirms that context matters and impacts the sustainability of the programming design (Lott, et al., 2023). The style and format of an initiative with the same mission can look different at a Historically Black College & University (HBCU) compared to a Predominantly or Historically White Institution (P/HWI). Framing this project with context in mind will help understand student expectations, needs, and desires as they choose to engage within VCU. As our capstone project explores how men of color students define, create and experience a sense of belonging, we are also likely to learn how community support services shape student experiences.

Summary

Chapter 2 focused on diving into research that helps us shape our project about how men of color make sense of their belonging at HWIs. First, we navigated through research to define what we meant by sense of belonging. The research defined a sense of belonging as perceived support that creates connectivity to the college environment (Lemley, 2014; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Next, we turned our focus to understanding identity. In particular, we looked into research that helped us understand identity through the lens of gender, race, and ethnicity. Through these three spokes, we confirmed that in order to understand men of color, our project cannot simply isolate these variables. Research suggests that in order for men of color to be able to tell their most authentic stories, we must approach our research through a framework that incorporates gender, race, and ethnicity. This understanding will help our team maintain a consistent and true telling of how men of color experience belonging. Lastly, we sought research to understand what is being done to support men of color at the college level to create a sense of belonging. Through research, we found that methods included programs, initiatives, and informal groups that offered support for the intersectional identities. While the literature review informs

our capstone project, our team aims to explore influences that impact how men of color experience belonging in college. In particular, by looking at men of color in their second year at VCU, our team will be able to gather anecdotes that help describe the essence of this experience (Billups, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

In addition to Strayhorn's sense of belonging definition (2019), this capstone project will draw from Marcia Baxter Magolda's (2014) theories of self-authorship. Baxter Magolda (2014), who expands upon Kegan's (1994) self-authorship theory, asserts that cognitive, identity, and relational development are threaded together and that individuals "construct meaning in context." As researchers, we believe that our participants are holders of knowledge and experts of their lives; we trust their reflections and their "internal voice" as they relay their experiences to us (Baxter Magolda, 2014). However, Baxter Magolda (2014) notes that college age students, who are in transformative periods of life, may rely more heavily on external authority and may not have developed their own internal voice. As we construct our interview and focus group questions, it will be vital to understand how our process is promoting self-authorship, which may provide richer descriptions of personal opinions and lived experiences in regards to a sense of belonging on VCU's campus. We will learn from participants what their experiences encompass based on their responses to interview and focus group questions.

CHAPTER 3 - Project Design

The epistemology for the capstone project was subjectivism. In approaching this work, we followed that meaning, in this case belonging, is created by the individual and their unique experiences and that reality is subjective (Priya, 2021). We were not seeking a single, definable and objective truth; rather, we were interested in interpreting men of color's understanding of belonging on VCU's campus. This was to explore *their* understandings that are based from *their*

own unique contexts. We used this framework when generating research questions and continued to use subjectivist approaches, such as self-authorship, to interpret the results of our project.

The intention of the project was to explore the phenomenon of sense of belonging for men of color at a HWI such as VCU. As such, an instrumental case study approach was appropriate. We used an instrumental case study to understand belonging for this specific population in a real-life context that is unique to this group. Sense of belonging for men of color depends upon their experiences and perspectives; therefore, an instrumental case study understanding, which seeks to understand the phenomena deeply rather than broadly, was appropriate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We used a case study approach to look at men of color as a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Our bounded system was men of color at VCU in their undergraduate studies, rather than specifically sophomore men of color as intended. This challenge and alteration is explained below.

Project Design

Our team chose to conduct a qualitative research project in order to capture the lived experiences of men of color on VCU's campus. The original proposal narrowed the population of study to sophomore men of color on VCU's campus, but due to challenges in recruiting, the project included all undergraduate men of color at VCU. Billups (2021) notes that qualitative research allows us to uncover truth through in-depth conversation and storytelling. Our research methods were designed in alignment with our framework of self-authorship and subjectivism to capture narratives from our target population and explore how they make meaning of their experiences. Data was collected through individual interviews and focus groups. Our subjectivist approach to understand the lived experiences of men of color at VCU allowed our team to expand beyond monolithic ideologies surrounding race, ethnicity and gender (Esie & Bates,

2023; Sampson, 2019). The goal of our project was to capture descriptions that allow our team to examine and share the experiences of men of color and their sense of belonging (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Methods

Project Site

The site of our project was Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). VCU is a public research institution set in the city of Richmond, Virginia that has a value of promoting its diversity and accessibility. VCU was named a Diversity Champion by INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine out of only 18 others. In 2022, VCU was named a minority serving institution (MSI), gaining access to federal funding sources that support minoritized communities at the university (Porter, 2022). According to a 2007 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for an institution to be considered an MSI they must “enroll at least 25% of a specific minority group” (Xi, 2007). VCU gained the MSI designation because of the particular focus on supporting low income students and the Asian American and Pacific Islander populations (Porter, 2022). There are currently 28,408 (21,270 undergraduate) students at VCU with the number of alums being over 216,000 (VCU, 2023). In 2021, VCU’s population was 63.7% women and 35.8% men. Representation from 48 states and 102 countries made up the student body. One third of VCU’s student population identify as first generation, one third are pell grant eligible, and one third are within a minoritized population at the university (Porter, 2022). Lastly, VCU has a 48% four-year graduation rate from eleven schools and three colleges (US News, 2023).

Sampling and Recruitment

Our team's original plan was to only recruit sophomore or second year students. Due to a lack of participation, we opened the project to all men of color. Our recruitment period was heavily during fall and winter breaks and could have affected our ability to spread the word about the project due to staff and student vacations. Once we opened the project to other students, we saw more interest and were able to recruit 18 participants. During the recruitment period, one of our team members was also able to speak, in-person, to classes within the Developing Men of Color Initiative. This exposure helped greatly with our participation as several students signed on to participate directly following.

Due to the nature of the qualitative research and our goal to work with a specific population, our project used non-probability sampling strategies to shape our sampling methods. One technique that we used was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allowed us to select a sample of students so that we could explore a range of experiences that could exist within this population. In particular, we wanted to avoid making generalized inferences that perpetuate monolithic ideologies about gender, racial and ethnic identities (Esie & Bates, 2023; Sampson, 2019). One method we used was maximum variation. Maximum variation is a method that allows our project to capture as many different lenses as possible so that we may understand how men of color experience belonging through different aspects of VCU's campus (Billups, 2021). All potential participants will meet the following criteria to be considered for the project: (a) self-identify as a man of color and (b) are undergraduate students at VCU.

In order to identify participants who fit the aforementioned criterion we utilized a snowball sampling technique. Through the use of a snowball technique, interviewees connected our team to additional participants that both fit our criterion and could fill any gaps in our

understanding of the men of color experience at VCU. We also connected with offices on campus (such as academic advising, the men of color Initiative, Student Success, and individual program departments) to disseminate our intake survey and identify students willing to participate in our project. Email communications were sent out between October 2023 and February 2024, calling for participation in interviews and focus groups. The email (Appendix A) that we sent to students contained a link to a Google form (Appendix B) with questions asking if they are willing to participate. Furthermore, we designed flyers and electronic images that we posted up on TV screens and posterboards around campus; we focused these efforts in areas where students were more likely to occupy (i.e. the library, department buildings and the student activities center). The Google form asked demographic questions to confirm the appropriate sample of students to participate in the interviews and focus groups. The demographic questions helped us ensure that participants for the focus groups and interviews were undergraduate men of color. Any students willing to participate in the focus groups and interviews were then contacted via email after their responses had been recorded.

Data Collection

Our team's qualitative approach used two methods of data collection: 18 virtual individual interviews and 5 virtual focus groups. An interest form survey was sent to students asking for voluntary participation and from those responses, our research team was able to conduct both the individual interviews and focus groups. Our team utilized Zoom as a tool to conduct virtual interviews, as this approach allowed our full research team to participate while offering students a more accessible space.

Our team first individually interviewed students to gather information on their experiences. From our interest form, we had 36 students express interest in participating with 20

actually scheduling their individual interviews; we had 18 students fully complete their individual interview. After the individual interviews, the same 18 students each participated in one of the five focus groups. This allowed our team to observe how a culturally engaging space will affect responses. Our research team was successful and scheduled five focus groups with three to four students in each one; students only needed to participate in one focus group session. The sequence of conducting individual interviews followed by focus groups gave our team the opportunity to hear from students on their personal experiences first. The focus groups then offered students the opportunity to engage in more conversations and dialogue with other participants.

Individual Interviews

A total of 18 individual interviews were conducted between December 2023 and March 2024. To recruit participants for the interview, our team created an interest form that was distributed via email, campus flyers, and in-person presentations. Out of 36 participants who completed the interest form, 16 did not respond to outreach to schedule an interview time and 2 did not show up for their selected interview time. The 18 participants who completed the one-on-one interview each participated in a focus group. Grounded in addressing the core research questions, our team sought to understand each interview first at an individual level before placing participants in a focus group. Figures 4.0 A & B (see Appendix H) illustrate how participants chose to identify when completing the initial interest form. Further dialogue during the individual interviews offered our team deeper meaning and understanding to each participant's experiences through the identity they initially shared at the beginning of this process. Our team completed a total of five focus groups with all 18 participants who signed up for and completed an individual interview.

Focus Groups

The structure of the focus group removed the capstone team as the primary guide through the questions at hand. Instead, participants served as the interviewers and led the discussion among their peers as the capstone members observed and took notes. Our choice of having participants lead discussion in the focus group allowed our team to better observe if participants would reiterate or change what they shared if they had more autonomy; we also observed the ways that the focus group makeup influenced dialogue. Each participant guided discussion under the following themes: background, identity, sense of belonging, and a few summary questions. During the focus groups, which were conducted virtually on Zoom, we observed participants draw upon their own experiences and express validation from hearing shared experiences.

Data Analysis

As we used a subjectivist approach, we recognized that as researchers, we would be interpreting the results of the interviews and focus groups. We followed interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) processes as our goal was to understand the content and meanings that are expressed during the research process. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a qualitative approach that aims to understand how specific individuals in specific contexts make sense of the world, rather than making broad generalizations (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The process of IPA that we used is described as follows: We each were assigned transcripts to review. Due to time constraints, each member of our team did not read every single transcript. As each researcher individually analyzed their assigned transcripts they noted core themes and patterns. We used Dedoose to aid in the organization and analysis of our transcripts. Dedoose (dedoose, n.d.) is a web-based, qualitative and data analysis software that allows researchers to efficiently organize, analyze, and collaborate on qualitative and

mixed-methods research projects. After each member of our research team concluded their individual analysis, we came together and shared our notes. We then created a shared code book using start codes that align with key words associated with our research. Our team reviewed and grouped themes based on connections. Finally, our team moved from the emergent themes to the write-up of our analysis (Smith & Osborne, 2021).

Upon completion of the interviews and focus groups, our team coded a total of 1108 statements into 38 codes. Some excerpts received multiple codes. Codes were created using inductive processes as we generated in-vivo codes based on the participants' own words and explanations. Codes that appeared less frequently were merged with similar codes after the first-round coding process was completed and transcripts were recoded to fit the finalized codebook prior to presenting the findings. After our team concluded analyzing the findings, we identified several themes: Experiencing Identity, Challenges, Sense of Belonging, Beneficial Sense of Belonging at VCU and Adverse Sense of Belonging at VCU. Table 3.1 in Appendix I shows the themes and subthemes, along with their frequency.

Ethical and Quality Considerations

Ethical considerations are vital in any research endeavor, and this proposal demonstrates a commitment to ethical conduct in its research design. Firstly, our project acknowledges the specific population it aims to look at, who are men of color at VCU. This recognition is integral as it respects the agency and autonomy of the participants, ensuring their experiences are neither tokenized nor generalized. By setting clear inclusion criteria based on self-identification, year of coursework, and undergraduate status, the researchers strive to maintain a focused and targeted approach in the project. The project's collaboration with many offices and programs, such as academic departments, the Men of Color initiative at VCU and the TRiO program showcases an

ethical approach to recruitment. By involving multiple stakeholders and allowing various avenues for recruitment, the project minimizes the potential for coercion or undue influence.

In terms of informed consent and confidentiality, the researchers provided participants with comprehensive information about the purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Allowing participants the choice to opt out at any point during the process respects their autonomy and safeguards their well-being. The careful collection of demographic data and self-identification helped ensure that participants are accurately represented and respected in the analysis. To address the potential emotional impact of the research on participants, the project took steps to establish a safe and respectful environment. This included ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, which are essential for creating a space where participants can openly share their experiences without fear of negative repercussions (Bañales et al., 2022; Huerta et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2011).

Trustworthiness

The foundation and design of our project to capture authentic stories through focus groups and interviews draws forth threats to the trustworthiness of this pursuit. In particular, bias and reflexivity can impact not only how our team engages with participants, but also the depth in which participants share their experiences. The essence of this qualitative project leans on authentic storytelling to make sense of lived experiences. In alignment with our self-authorship and subjectivist framework, our work maintains trustworthiness through the use of three core qualitative criteria: credibility, confirmability, and authenticity. Credibility is the quest to seek truth in order to capture the full picture of what is being studied (Billups, 2021).

Through the use of a survey to first confirm that participants fit our criterion, our project was able to increase the credibility of our findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) while also

ensuring that there is authentic representation of our target population within the project (Billups, 2021). We further increased credibility as participants who completed the survey self identified their racial and gender identities, enabling our team to ensure that we represent each individual accurately throughout the project. Our project also utilized the constructs of confirmability and authenticity through the use of triangulation; our project used both focus groups and 1:1 interviews to capture participant stories (Elo et al., 2014; Billups, 2021). Confirmability is the pursuit of accuracy of findings whereas authenticity focuses on ensuring that all realities of the participants are represented within the project (Billups, 2021). In order to ensure that our team gathered consistent and accurate data, we utilized various techniques such as member checking and peer briefing. Member checking is a technique that allows our team to confirm the validity of our findings from various participants to ensure that our findings reflect what the participant had stated (Billups, 2021). Peer debriefing is a technique that allows researchers to compare conclusions gathered during the research process in order to identify bias, errors, competing interpretations, and emerging themes (Billups, 2021). As our team built a positive relationship with participants while mitigating the impact of bias, we were sure to explain the purpose of the project, answer questions that participants may have and acquire their informed and ongoing consent; participants will be given the opportunity to opt out at any point in the process. Through providing vital information and acquiring consent, we were able to build trust with our participants and create a space for them to be vulnerable while sharing their experiences (Smith, 2023).

Ensuring trustworthiness in our research involved not only establishing a strong foundation and making thoughtful design choices to maintain research integrity, but also remaining aware of potential biases that could compromise the authenticity of the narratives we

aim to uncover. As literature has suggested that the perception of bias can negatively affect men of color in spaces, our team was vigilant in minimizing such pressures as we conducted this qualitative project (Bañales et al., 2022; Foxx, 2021; Le et al., 2022; Reohr et al., 2023). We recognized that bias, both implicit and explicit, can affect the research process and, consequently, the emotional safety of participants (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2020). In order to combat bias in the project, our team set the tone of each interview by reading through a non-discrimination disclosure (see Appendix D). Through this disclosure, our team stated the goals, our desire to create an inclusive space, and our willingness to support participants in the project. Through verbal affirmation to create clarity and acknowledge the threat of bias, our team further built trust with participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) .

To further cope with bias within our research findings, multiple team members coded transcripts from interviews and focus groups to ensure that confirmation bias was avoided. In order to have a consistent understanding of the data, multiple perspectives from researchers were used, using the investigator triangulation method. This involved our researchers coding the data separately and comparing the findings after to ensure we are gathering different perspectives and comparing similar. We used peer debriefing to share our reflections and findings in order to identify commonalities, but to also catch if any factors such as bias are impacting how we collect and interpret the data. Lastly, our team asked for external review of our questions from additional peers within the Ed.D. cohort. This allowed for a fresh perspective in examining if questions need modification and are understood from those not currently working with the same problem of practice.

Team Member Positionality

Our team is composed of four individuals who have differing personal, academic, and professional backgrounds. The goal of the project is to work collaboratively to complete the research in a way that is trustworthy and ethical. Our team includes Riley Cain Sisk, Tara Hefner, Kelsie Potter, and Nick Williams. Each team member's unique perspective and expertise contribute to a well-rounded and thoughtful investigation. Sisk's observations and dedication to the concept of belonging, Hefner's experience with underrepresented student populations, Potter's expertise in advising underrepresented students, and Williams' deep connection to the men of color initiative at VCU all play pivotal roles in our research endeavors. This diverse team composition ensures that the project remains grounded in multiple perspectives and remains ethical throughout the research process.

Riley Cain Sisk is a cisgender woman who identifies as LGBTQ+. Sisk attended a HWI for her undergraduate education and completed graduate studies virtually. Sisk's professional experience in a higher education setting has primarily focused on athletics and fundraising so her view of the undergraduate experience has been from an observation role and not one that works with students. Sisk's personal and professional commitment to fundraising comes from the observations of inequities in her collegiate experience, as well as what she has seen from working at institutions. Sisk has a passion for understanding a student's sense of belonging in their college experience and how that will lead to their engagement as alumni.

Tara Hefner is a cisgender woman who is the ESOL Instructional Coach for Spotsylvania County Schools. Hefner brings rich experiences related to underrepresented student populations to this project. Her passion and experiences involve working with first generation, immigrant, international, and students of color to increase high school graduation and post-secondary acceptance rates.

Kelsie Potter is a White cisgender woman who identifies as Queer or LGBTQIA+. She is also Jewish, a first generation college graduate, and attended a HWI for her undergraduate education. As an academic advisor, Potter is interested in supporting underrepresented student populations such as men of color to improve graduation and retention outcomes. Her experience working with college students from underrepresented populations may assist her in communicating with participants. She also has a strong connection to the staff and faculty at VCU, which may be beneficial in terms of distribution of surveys and/or recruitment. While Potter is White and cisgender female and is therefore unfamiliar with the lived experiences of men of color, her research background includes gender and queer studies, which will assist in exploring gendered experiences in the project.

Nick Williams is a cisgender African American man who navigated both public and private HWIs throughout his P-20 educational journey. Williams' experiences could help identify how pre-college events influence the college journey for men of color. Williams is an adjunct professor teaching a student success course aimed at increasing retention of men of color at VCU. Through this class, students are equipped with personal development tools, cultural connection activities and academic support resources that also lead to positive post graduation outcomes. Williams' connection to the men of color initiative at VCU, strong connections amongst faculty, staff and students around the university, and job as the Assistant Director of Student Engagement in the VCU School of Business will support participant recruitment efforts for this project. Williams also offers a keen insight into mental health as a man of color which can support team efforts to create a safe space for participants to be open and vulnerable when describing their journeys. Williams is committed to building safe spaces for men of color to talk through their experiences and to feel fully supported in their journey of becoming.

In conclusion, this project demonstrated a conscientious approach to ethical considerations. From recruitment to data collection and analysis, the researchers were committed to upholding the rights, autonomy, and well-being of the participants. The acknowledgment of potential challenges, such as power dynamics and bias, ensures an intentional approach to maintaining the integrity of the research process while providing valuable insights into the experiences of men of color at VCU.

Limitations and Delimitations

This capstone project explored the experiences of men of color using qualitative methods. However, several key challenges and limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, there was a risk of sampling bias in the research strategy, as the project predominantly reached out to willing participants, potentially leading to an incomplete representation of the diverse experiences within the target population. Secondly, acquiring participants, particularly sophomore men of color at VCU, was challenging, potentially impacting the recruitment and participation rates in focus groups and interviews. Furthermore, conducting focus groups presented its own set of challenges, including participants' reluctance to speak up if they feel less engaged with the topic and the risk of discussions becoming controlled by researchers. Because of the setting, not all participants may have been vocal in their responses if they felt they were not as involved with the topic (Ho, 2006). Ho (2006) also finds that focus groups may not allow for in-depth responses and understanding of experiences from all participants because of them being group discussions. Our research team remained vigilant in maintaining a natural flow of questions and conversations as focus groups can become unnatural with the discussions being controlled largely by the researchers (Kitzinger, 1995).

The project also recognized the need to address power dynamics and potential biases among researchers, such as a member teaching in the Men of Color Initiative. To mitigate these biases, a rotation system for conducting interviews was used, which involved two team members interviewing together. Although complete elimination of bias is impossible, this approach helped mitigate bias, as the team members collaborated and discussed the results of the interview together.

While the project holds promise in shedding light on the experiences of men of color at VCU, it is vital to acknowledge its limitations, including potential sampling bias, informant bias, and researcher bias. These limitations were considered when interpreting the findings, especially in contexts different from VCU. Strategies like transparent sampling techniques and the use of a rotation system aimed to enhance the trustworthiness of the project within its defined scope and context (Simkus, 2023; Yarborough, 2021).

Summary

In this chapter, our team outlined the theoretical framework and methodology that we used to guide our project. Our epistemology and theoretical framework is suitable for qualitative research, as we are interested in personal reflections and stories from our participants. We also described our methods and our approach to data collection/analysis. Lastly, we described the limitations and delimitations the capstone team encountered as we conducted the project. Moving forward, we will share the capstone process and results once our work has been completed.

CHAPTER 4 - Findings

This chapter reports the findings of data collection completed from December 2023 to March 2024. Through the recruitment of undergraduate students, who identify as men of color,

our team individually interviewed as well as hosted focus groups for participants. Our team conducted 18 individual interviews and 5 focus groups with a total of 18 undergraduate VCU students who identify as men of color. The focus groups had between 3-5 participants, all of whom completed the initial individual interview first. This qualitative approach allowed the capstone team to hear individual perspectives and note if particular aspects were shared between focus group participants. Our goal was to ensure that we captured rich, authentic stories from our participants while unveiling the core themes that help address our research questions.

The research design was focused on answering the following research questions, using two layers of qualitative data collection to understand how men of color at VCU experience a sense of belonging. Research question (1): How do men of color experience a sense of belonging? The individual interviews offered our team the ability to understand the individual perspective of sense of belonging, probing interviewees to not only describe their experience, but also define sense of belonging in their own words. The focus group then allowed us to hear how each individual expressed similar or different thoughts about their sense of belonging at VCU. RQ (2): How do participants describe their racial identity, ethnic identity, and gender identity as it relates to finding belonging on VCU's campus? The individual interviews revealed how participants chose to identify and they shared specific instances that depict their experience at VCU. The focus groups allowed our team to see the similarities and differences between each participant's description of their core identities. The focus group also allowed us to observe how, if at all, participants may alter or limit what they share about their identities when speaking with others who identify as men of color. RQ (3): How do men of color prioritize resources and spaces to create a sense of belonging at VCU? The individual interviews offered participants the chance to highlight the particular resources and spaces they choose to access to find meaning at

VCU. The focus groups allowed our team to understand patterns across the individual choices, giving rise to resources and spaces that resonate most potently with undergraduate men of color at VCU.

Table 4.0 C below lists the demographic breakdown of the participants, their self-identified race, their grade level, and additional identities that the participants shared. The names listed are pseudonyms for the actual participants to ensure confidentiality.

Table 4.0 C

Focus Group Demographic Breakdown (n = 18)

Focus Group 1 (n = 3)	Core Demographic Data (Race)	Grade Level	Additional Identities
Matthew	Black or African American	Sophomore	Queer (Transgender)
Robert	Asian/Asian Pacific	Sophomore	
Jeremy	Black or African American	Sophomore	
Focus Group 2 (n = 4)	Core Demographic Data (Race)	Grade Level	Additional Identities
Christopher	Black or African American	Sophomore	
Johnathan	Hispanic or Latino	Junior	
Louis	Hispanic or Latino	Sophomore	
Tyrone	Bi-racial (Black or African American/White)	Senior	
Focus Group 3 (n = 3)	Core Demographic Data (Race)	Grade Level	Additional Identities
Nelson	Black or African American	Senior	
David	Middle Eastern	Senior	Russian
Kevin	Black or African American	Senior	African
Focus Group 4 (n = 4)	Core Demographic Data (Race)	Grade Level	Additional Identities
Joseph	Black or African American	Junior	
Cody	Bi-racial (Black or African American/White)	Junior	Jamaican
Richard	Black or African American	Junior	
Jordan	Black or African American	Sophomore	

Table 4.0 C*Focus Group Demographic Breakdown (n = 18)*

Focus Group 5 (n = 4)	Core Demographic Data (Race)	Grade Level	Additional Identities
Juan	Hispanic or Latino	Sophomore	
Mark	Bi-racial (Black or African American/White)	Freshman	
Martin	Black or African American	Senior	
Jackson	Hispanic or Latino	Junior	

Grade level did not negatively impact the flow of discussion as participants approached the space with respect and support for one another. We did observe the ways that upperclassmen would at times offer advice to underclassmen while sharing their specific experiences at VCU. In the focus groups where all participants were at the same grade level, however, we did see some commonality. In focus group 3 for example, participants tended to focus more on their specific major of study and post graduation plans because they were all preparing for graduation. Furthermore, participants in this group would openly share their emotional response about graduation such as anxiety, stress, excitement and uncertainty. As a parallel, focus group 1 contained all sophomore students who focused less on their post-graduation plans or career interests and focused on their attempts to find belonging around the university. Such patterns are important to note as it highlights that self authorship is relative to the most current context of an individual and could evolve over time. The next section will elaborate on additional findings revealed during the interviews and focus groups.

Themes

Experiencing Identity

Across the individual and focus groups our team uncovered that experiencing identity was a vital theme to understand stories of our participants. Through analyzing each transcript we

identified five core codes that expanded our understanding of how men of color at VCU make sense of belonging through the lens of identity. Our codes included racial identity, gender identity, ethnic identity, religious identity and man of color. While participants spoke towards these sub themes throughout their experience, each individual story highlighted how the fluidity and intersectionality of identity is not monolithic. Table 4.2 (see Appendix I) lists the sub themes and their frequency. Finding meaning across the layers of identity helps us understand ways to support students through curated means instead of a one size fits all approach. Each participant pointed to the variations in which they gave certain identities dominance in their daily navigation throughout society. While many found similarities and differences, the interviews and focus groups emphasized that supporting men of color must take into consideration the prominence of individual experiences regarding identity.

As shown above through Table 4.2 (see Appendix I), racial and gender identities were the two most frequently noted by the participants, covering over 60% of the conversations shared during the data collection process. The questions asked of participants did focus primarily around racial, ethnic and gender identities. However, even when given the space to self-select which identities were important to them, participants still highlighted race, gender and ethnicity as core to how they experience the world and VCU. Some participants did bring up religion as a component of their lived experience, but more so as a supplement rather than a primary identity.

Racial Identity

During both individual and focus group interviews, participants discussed their racial identity. Matthew, sophomore, shared that “...Being African American really affects everything else that I go through like I can go through homophobia and transphobia, but racism is always around.” Matthew highlights a vital experience of participants as skin color, physical attributes,

and other features that are physically seen impact how individuals experience the world around them. Many participants discussed their racial identity as a means for finding community. Some participants who identified as biracial often discussed their racial identity as two halves in which they have to consciously choose which side shows up to find connectivity. In many instances, participants shared negative experiences with their racial identity due to impacts of factors such as stereotypes, bias, and overall being ridiculed (see Challenges theme). For many of the participants, negative experiences in relation to their racial identity stemmed from experiences prior to their arrival to VCU (see Pre-VCU Experiences theme).

One participant spoke about racial identity as a way to describe the diversity in their neighborhood and the lack of consciousness towards their own racial identity:

I feel like I don't really think of my skin tone to be like a huge part of my identity. I grew up in a place with people of all kinds of different races and just outward appearances. It never really was in my mind that it was something that held that much of a weight.

(Louis, sophomore)

In this excerpt, Louis, a Hispanic identifying male, points out that he does not think about his racial identity in spaces due to the diversity within spaces he has lived. Louis's perception that racial identity does not have as much influence in how he sees himself offers a different perspective. Louis uses the term "skin tone" which highlights how racial identity is discussed and experienced within society as a means of categorization.

In a focus group, another participant, Tyrone, who identifies as half Black and half White, used the term "racially ambiguous" to describe the experience of being racially profiled as a means of categorizing him within society. He stated, "I am a bit racially ambiguous. So I get a lot of people, you know, speaking Spanish to me all the time. Some people think I'm like Puerto

Rican or Dominican and I definitely see it” (Tyrone, Focus group). Tyrone describes the color of his skin as used by others as a means to place him within a racial category as he navigates society. Tyrone’s challenge, however, is that because he is biracial and people associate specific skin tones with both racial and ethnic identities, he’s often mis-categorized. For many bi-racial participants, each expressed stronger feelings of isolation and ostracization. These negative feelings are due to not feeling like they belong within groups that allowed them to connect with one of their racial identities. Because bi-racial students appeared “racially ambiguous”, as many described, their peers would not fully accept them as members of the racial identity groups that students would seek belonging from.

Additional participants throughout the interviews shared experiences of their racial identity as a way for acceptance into spaces that they enter to find belonging. However, the interviews and focus groups revealed that even in the performance of their racial identity, the participants do not feel like they can fit in as seamlessly as one perceives. One participant stated, “I lived in a black neighborhood, but I went to a white school. So when I'm back home, I'm too white. But when I go back to my school, I'm too black” (Nelson, senior). The concept of rejection linked to racial identity appeared to resonate with a majority of participants both during the individual and focus group interviews. Participants used terms such as “white passing” and “black passing” to further illustrate the ways that racial identity is experienced. Table 4.3 (See Appendix I) shows additional excerpts from participants describing how they experience their racial identity, but also how each participant navigates the tension brought by their identity. The anecdotes shared by participants point to feelings of “isolation” and “fear of being the only person of color” in spaces they navigate both inside and outside of the classroom. As the

interviews continued, we uncovered how participants experienced their gender identity and ways that even their racial identity shaped their experiences.

Gender Identity

Across both individual and focus group interviews, gender identity for most participants was experienced as an afterthought mostly due to perceived privileges men have in society. When describing masculinities, participants often spoke about the benefits of being a man: “I don't know, I want some respect and dignity. Yes, you should be in touch with your emotions, but don't cry about every single thing...Cook on the grill. Go cut some grass. But, misogyny and stuff... Some of y'all just really just, hate women, bruh” (Nelson, senior). Nelson, however, spoke about how some men take matters to the extreme to show discrimination towards other genders. Participants noted different perspectives towards gender identity, highlighting the nuances and cultural implications that racial and ethnic identity have on the experience of gender identity. One participant stated, “I feel I'm a special case because I transitioned from a black woman to a black man and in the community it's different structures of living” (Matthew, sophomore). Matthew presents a transgender perspective that expands conversation about gender experiences showing that even gender is not monolithic nor binary. One participant's experience with their gender identity pointed to the complexities of social interactions among different genders:

Because, when you're not dealing with your own gender, trying to say the right thing or express yourself is going to be definitely more challenging because you don't know how they're going to respond. You know, I mean, granted that's the case in general, but with someone who's not your gender, there's that extra layer, you know? It's like, we don't relate on that level. (Mark, freshman, Focus Group)

Participants expressed difficulty of knowing how to function within their masculine identity because of the risk of being perceived as a threat. Another participant shared this same sentiment by discussing their fear of being stereotyped. In particular, he noted the negative impact of generalizations used to describe men:

I mean, it's nice. I would say socially, I think being a man is more challenging on our campus mainly because of what we have to carry. Think of how bad our history as men in society is all throughout... That weight is still carried by us today, even if not every man is like how they used to be, or not like that at all. It's the fact that they don't know who we are or how we could act because those bad apples end up acting as the face for the rest of us. (Mark, freshman, Focus Group)

Mark points to the ways in which history has shaped how masculinity is perceived as a monolith, creating less consciousness towards the identity as a whole, but instead a focus towards the actions performed through the lens of gender identity. The social construction of associated habits and actions linked to gender identity highlights the unspoken tension that men face within society. Lastly, one participant furthers the discussion about gender identity pointing to the ways that gender roles and norms can be reinforced by different relationships and social spaces:

I just wanted to shave my legs. I just wanted to be a bit more comfortable. But that was one of the few times where my dad questioned me on my sexuality over things I'd rather just be comfortable about. My mom has questioned my masculinity over shaving my armpit hair. Like, 'oh no, don't do that'. Guys are supposed to have that. I was like, well. I wanna be comfortable... Oh, my parents are questioning me like, oh, my parents think I'm gay. I was like, is that okay? I mean my friends think I'm gay too. Just because of

what I want... I wanna shave some of my hair off. I'm now feminine. Is that okay? Am I okay? And I proceeded to question. (Jeremy, sophomore)

Here, Jeremy describes the ways that norms for his gender identity are not only socialized, but also managed; the experience of having one's identity norms policed by others creates doubt and for some damages their sense of belonging in spaces that question individual presentation of their identity. Many participants such as Jeremy highlight how their gender identity experiences involve scrutiny no matter their sexual orientation and how such pressures often created negative experiences. For other participants, their gender identity was focused on positive experiences, but not without recognizing the inequities experienced by some in society. One insight that will be shown through some of the anecdotes include the descriptors of being "tough," "strong," and able to handle anything. Such tropes of masculinities were frequent mentions throughout each interview and focus group discussion. Table 4.4 (see Appendix I) offers additional excerpts to show how participants experience their gender identity.

Ethnic Identity

Participants often linked their ethnicity with their race when explaining how they experience this particular identity. One participant highlights cultural aspects that offer connection to their ethnic origins:

Just because of the culture I was raised in, my parents are immigrants, first generation. The first language I heard was not English. When I come home from school, my mom doesn't speak to me in English. She'll speak in Twi. My dad will speak to me in English, but that's just the language that flows through this house all the time. I go to church, everybody speaks the same language, I'm on the phone with friends or family. It's just the language that we know. (Kevin, senior)

This experience shows how ethnic identity incorporates aspects of culture such as language and traditions to foster meaning and belonging. Another participant discusses how the experience of ethnic identity can influence cultural norms and reinforce socially constructed archetypes such as gender roles:

So it's constantly getting reinforced. Identity of men and women in Russia is a lot more black and white than here. So, or like in Lebanon, even crazier, god, you can't even compare. But you live a lot of your life in an Arabic country or Russia, this stuff kind of gets drilled in. (David, senior)

As shown in additional excerpts below in Table 4.5, participants primarily connected their ethnic experiences to the immigrant stories of previous generations such as their parents. Participants who had family that immigrated to the U.S. spoke more frequently about how such experiences influenced how they navigate their other core identities such as race, gender, and religion.

Table 4.5
Experiencing Identities Subthemes - Ethnic Identity

Theme	Example quote
Ethnic Identity	<p>“So I did take pride in my culture, as a Colombian and Spanish person. But I wouldn't say that I let it completely rule who I was. It was the way that I am.” (Jackson, junior)</p> <p>“I mean, in a way that, if we're talking about identity, in a sense of, where I come from, you almost get higher expectations of you. Which is a good thing for me, but it's reinforced time and time again, professors, students, and everything.” (David, senior, Focus Group)</p> <p>“You know, I come from an immigrant family. I speak Spanish and back at home and stuff.” (Johnathan, junior)</p>

As highlighted in Table 4.5 ethnic identity operates as a means to reinforce socialized norms and cultural heritage. The connection to one's ethnic identity also creates community and helps individuals have a sense of who they are and where they come from. The sense of self that

is reinforced through a connection to culture and heritage is important to understand how individuals find meaning at the intersection of their core identities.

Being a Man of Color

For the participants, the intersectional nature of identity is experienced as social currency in exchange for gaining a sense of belonging in spaces. The nature of such transactions and the concept of code-switching often garners the ability to flow between identities that could increase the chances of gaining positive connection without negative consequences. Often, participants point to ways that they have had to risk safety in their identity in order to connect with others who may not share certain identities. Furthermore, the experiences participants shared highlight race, gender and ethnicity as core or primary identities that direct the ways in which they navigate the world while supplemental identities such as religion are more secondary; secondary identities can carry larger weight for some individuals than others. Through discussion, religion did appear to be a salient lens that many participants used as a way to find community, develop their personal values and uphold gender, racial and cultural norms. Table 4.6 below offers some quotes from participants that showcase how they interplay religion in the experiences of their core identities.

Table 4.6

Experiencing Identities Subthemes - Religious Identity

Theme	Example quote
Religious Identity	<p>“I’m a man of faith. I’m a man of color, I identify as black, African American. I am a straight male. I feel staying true to yourself and kind of embracing who you are is very important.” (Joseph, junior)</p> <p>“Muslim identity...I’m not completely this or completely that. It’s all on a spectrum... I don’t care about what people think. I don’t care if somebody thinks I’m black enough, Muslim enough, or man enough, or creative enough.” (Nelson, senior)</p> <p>“As far as work and volunteering at my church, I just don’t want to miss out on those things. I’m trying to just be a part of it and be present in everything. I feel like it’s good for me</p>

mentally and emotionally just to be around this group of people.” (Kevin, senior)

As shown through the above anecdotes, religion offers clarity for individuals to feel centered and affirmed in their primary identities. Often, religious spaces allowed participants to feel seen, heard and valued because of how religious practices incorporate cultural traditions.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2018) reveals the complex nuances of identity as it relates to social and cultural norms. If an individual’s presentation of their identity is out of socially accepted norms of the religion and culture they affiliate with, one may feel conflicted or isolated even if they find belonging in the practice of their religion and cultural heritage.

When taking into consideration secondary identities such as religion in relationship to the primary identities such as gender, race, and ethnicity, we began to understand how participants navigated the term ‘man of color’. In particular, one participant called the label ‘man of color’ impersonal showing a strong dislike compared to his peers: “I’ve always had a little bit of an issue identifying myself with my color. So part of the issue of seeing it, men of color... It sounds so impersonal” (Jeremy, sophomore). In a focus group, another participant expressed opposite feelings towards the term ‘man of color’:

Well, for me, man of color, it can be empowering. It can be an empowerment term in terms of social justice issues that's going on in this country based on how certain people view us minorities, based on police brutality, and all that stuff. But overall, I feel like it's very empowering for me at times, as long as you give me an equal opportunity to express how intelligent I am as a human being. So, for the most part, it's positive. (Martin, senior, Focus Group)

Martin chose to focus on how the term ‘man of color,’ a culmination of his core identities, resonates power and motivation to create change. Upon reflecting on the experiences of men of

color, some participants felt like the term was more of a generalized umbrella label and did not fully encompass who they were as an individual:

I don't personally have any negative connotation to the term. Just being a man of color is...it's very generalized. I don't have any negative feelings about it. I'm pretty indifferent towards that. If you call me a man of color. So, I mean, I'm even in an organization that's called Developing Men of Color. So it's hard to be upset about people calling me a man of color. (Kevin, senior)

Despite the term 'man of color' including the intersection of racial, ethnic, and gender identities, participants mostly used the term due to the context of VCU. Conversations surrounding 'man of color' did reveal ways that participants used the label as a means of finding connectivity. In particular, many participants often referred to the Developing Man of Color (DMC) student organization as a positive safe space for students who identify accordingly. Table 4.7 below shows additional experiences surrounding the theme 'man of color.'

Table 4.7
Experiencing Identities Subthemes - Man of Color

Theme	Example quote
Man of Color	"I'd say man of color doesn't have a negative or positive connotation. I just see it as a classification... The term doesn't get thrown at me very often, I think because I am Latino, but I'm on the lighter side of it." (Juan, sophomore, Focus Group)
	"For me, Man of Color, if I'm being honest, instantly goes to what the negative connotation of it had meant in the past, and how it's different now in this timeline that we're living in." (Mark, freshman)
	"I would say for men of color, the expectations are a lot less, like they wouldn't expect much out of you." (Cody, junior)
	"I am a man of color, but I guess in the context that they were using it and in the environment that I was in, it felt a little weird. I didn't take offense to it, but it was... Because I was the only man of color in that setting and they highlighted that. So it kind of put me in the spotlight a little bit. Just a little anxious, I guess, not really offended or anything." (Kevin, senior)
	"I feel like there's a difference between you know...what I am because yes, I'm a man of color, it

describes what I am, but never really describes who I am.” (Jeremy, sophomore)

The experiences shared by participants in Table 4.7 shed light on important aspects of how men of color experience identity. First, Kevin describes feeling ‘anxious’ and being placed under a ‘spotlight’ when talking about the term ‘man of color.’ Such strong feelings point to how labels born from the core identities do not always carry a level of pride for individuals; in some ways participants appeared to have concern that umbrella terms like ‘man of color’ diminishes their overall identity. Jeremy shares in his anecdote that the term ‘man of color’ does not get to the core of who he is as an individual; some participants shared similar sentiments even when describing their experiences through their primary identities of gender, race and ethnicity. Participants expressed a strong desire to be seen as more than the labels of identity. In the next section we further unpack the experiences of participants by discussing the various challenges they have faced while seeking belonging in their journey.

Challenges

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants described how they experienced challenges and barriers to finding a sense of belonging. In many cases, these challenges and barriers were related to their identities. The participants frequently described these challenges with explanations related to parental expectations, cultural expectations, negative stereotypes/biases, homophobia, racism, and mental health. These subthemes were identified in understanding how men of color experience challenges that may affect their sense of belonging.

Parental expectations

Participants described how parental expectations shaped their understanding of self, society, and their university experience at VCU. Parental expectations were connected to participants’ selection of college, selection of major, and their developed perceptions of self and

others. Participants highlight how parental expectations are closely tied to traditional gender roles and societal norms. Johnathan, for instance, describes how his perception of his role as a man within his family influences his self-perception and career aspirations. This suggests that parental expectations not only shape academic decisions but also influence individuals' sense of identity and purpose. "So definitely throughout my college career and even before, I sort of got this expectation where the man has to provide for the family. I guess my family is trying to project that on me" (Johnathan, junior). Additionally, interviews revealed how some students attend college primarily to fulfill their parents' wishes rather than pursuing their own personal goals. Jeremy's statement reflects this sentiment, emphasizing that his decision to attend college was primarily driven by parental expectations rather than intrinsic motivation. This suggests a tension between individual desires and familial obligations, impacting students' engagement and priorities within the academic setting.

The reason I went to college was for my parents. I didn't really care. I wanted to be educated, I guess, but my main reason wasn't to get the best grades possible... It was never really about achieving a 4.0. But my parents wanted me to be educated and open as many opportunities and as many doors as possible, which has been a little bit of a constant theme of academics between me and my parents. (Jeremy, sophomore)

The interviews also revealed the pressure placed on students to excel academically, driven by the desire to fulfill their parents' aspirations for success. Martin articulates how the expectation of individual achievement is linked to the well-being and reputation of the family unit: "One expectation is for you to be successful, because if you're not successful, you're affecting your family. I mean, that's what my family had placed expectations on me when I attended VCU, to be

very successful” (Martin, senior). This quote highlights the intergenerational transmission of values and the perceived importance attached to academic performance within familial contexts.

Furthermore, the socio-economic dynamics related to parental expectations, particularly within immigrant or historically disadvantaged communities was also revealed. Tyrone's observation sheds light on the aspirations of parents who, having faced limited educational opportunities themselves, strive to provide better prospects for their children. However, this pursuit can also lead to detrimental consequences such as burnout and academic fatigue among students, as they navigate the pressures of familial expectations and societal demands.

A lot of students that come to VCU, a lot of black students... Their parents were immigrants, or their parents never really had an ample opportunity to go to college, so they always push and strive for their kids to succeed whether it's being a lawyer, doctor, whatever in STEM... That's what they really strive for them to do. And I've seen a lot of my friends get burnt out from that. (Tyrone, senior)

Table 4.8 includes additional quotes from participants describing how parental expectations influenced them.

Table 4.8
Challenges Subthemes - Parental Expectations

Theme	Example quote
-------	---------------

Parental Expectations	<p>“But they know that it’s really hard to go to college. And it’s like, you know. It’s okay if you don’t. Just get a good job that pays well and provides for your family and your kids.” (Johnathan, junior)</p> <p>“But sometimes, I guess with my own mom. Even when I try to explain that. Sometimes it doesn’t feel like she’s fully understanding what I mean, which I don’t blame her, of course, but yeah, it doesn’t feel that great. To not have to not feel under or to feel misunderstood.” (Jeremy, sophomore)</p> <p>“What my biological mother sees people as their labels. So she would tell me about where it can be like, oh, this lesbian couple. Oh, this gay guy.” (Matthew, sophomore)</p> <p>“Our parents care for us deeply for sure, but it’s definitely a certain type of expectation that they have for you, whether it’s you, like I feel black parents are just very like you have to be this way or that way. Whereas if I came to VCU and things are very diverse you may have a man wearing a skirt and stuff like that. You won’t really see that in a black household and if you do it won’t be until that kid has moved out of home.” (Richard, junior)</p>
-----------------------	---

Throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants articulated their experiences with parental expectations. They discussed how their upbringing and the expectations placed upon them by their parents influenced their self-perceptions and views of others. Furthermore, participants highlighted how these parental expectations impacted their sense of belonging at VCU. In the subsequent section, the themes and subthemes related to how cultural experiences have influenced participants' sense of belonging at VCU will be discussed.

Cultural Expectations

Participants also faced cultural expectations that influenced them and their understanding of belonging. Cultural expectations, including how society views men of color and/or how specific cultures/heritages pressures men of color to behave, was connected to participants’ belief systems, self-perceptions, and peer relationships. The interviews revealed the influence of racial stereotypes and biases on interpersonal dynamics. Cody's experiences illustrate how cultural expectations can lead to lower expectations and diminished perceptions of capability among peers. His observations suggest that assumptions about race can influence how

individuals are perceived and treated, with implications impacting their sense of belonging and self-worth within academic spaces:

But I can tell the way they speak to me, that they don't expect much out of me. I guess for white men, people almost automatically assume that they come from a better place.

(Cody, junior)

He also shared how his race caused others to undermine his abilities and have lower expectations of him: “I would say for men of color, I was saying the expectations are a lot less. They had people, they wouldn't expect much out of you” (Cody, junior). Additionally, participants also highlighted the complex intersectionality between ethnicity, culture, and academic expectations. David's reflections illustrate how certain cultural backgrounds may lead to heightened expectations from both peers and professors, potentially creating stereotype threat through additional pressures and responsibilities for individuals to fulfill perceived stereotypes. This suggests that cultural identity can simultaneously shape perceptions and foster opportunities, while also imposing burdensome expectations.

If we're talking about identity, in a sense of where I come from, you almost get higher expectations of you. And it's kind of, which is a good thing for me, but it's reinforced time and time again, professors, students, and everything. Oh, you're Arabic, you're coming here, you're pre-med or pre physical therapy. (David, senior, Focus Group)

Additionally, a participant expressed that he feels unwelcome in “less diverse” spaces and, in turn, needs to appear “extra smart” to compensate for that:

I feel like I have to be a little bit extra boisterous, a little bit smarter and a little bit more ahead of the curve. Not just because I want to, but I often feel that I am not as welcome in these places or areas that are less diverse. And in order to make up for that, I feel that I

need to be extra loud and extra kind and extra smart when it comes to approaching anything, whether that be a group project or a simple quiz. (Robert, sophomore)

Table 4.9 includes additional comments from participants regarding cultural expectations and pressures.

Table 4.9

Challenges Subthemes - Cultural Expectations

Theme	Example quote
Cultural Expectations	<p>“And usually people look at black men as, I wanna say, not as intelligent in a sense. The same thing could apply to a female of color as well, compared to a white man, just because of their cultural background in a sense or their upbringing.” (Christopher, sophomore)</p> <p>“People expect nothing out of you. So it's like you put on through yourself to show that people should understand how great you really are because they don't think much of you. Because they don't see you as competent. It's something that's not something not natural to them. They just expect a lot less, you know. And I feel that is kind of what bothers me as well.” (Cody, junior)</p> <p>“I love my white friends, but I can tell when they speak to you sometimes, they don't expect much out of me.” (Cody, junior)</p> <p>“As far as cultural expectations there are a lot of things that are expected of us that I don't agree with. Not just in the society that I grew up in, but as a Ghanaian man.” (Kevin, senior)</p> <p>“I guess for Black men we're always seen as tough. So I always feel like if we show stuff attributes or traits as if we like softer things. Like, the color pink. And it's just like man are you even black? Like, you're soft? You're not into smoking? You're soft. Why won't you drink with us? You're a mama's boy. And if you show weakness, especially if you show emotion. You're weak, you're feminine, you're a girl.” (Jeremy, sophomore)</p>

Throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants expressed their experiences with cultural expectations. They discussed how their cultural background and the societal expectations placed upon them influenced their self-perceptions and attitudes toward others. Additionally, participants emphasized how these cultural expectations influenced their

sense of belonging at VCU. In the following section, the themes and subthemes concerning how negative stereotypes/biases impacted participants' sense of belonging at VCU will be presented.

Negative Stereotypes/Biases

Participants described how negative stereotypes/biases impact their relationships and comfort level on campus. Negative stereotypes/biases from peers, staff, and faculty on campus impacted the participants' perception of self and feelings of belonging at VCU. Interviews revealed the prevalence of racial profiling and discrimination experienced by students of color on campus. Juan's experience of being perceived as suspicious while walking at night underscores the heightened scrutiny and vulnerability faced by individuals from marginalized communities, particularly in public spaces. This suggests that negative stereotypes not only shape perceptions but also influence behavior and safety concerns for affected students. "Like me walking at night. To people I could be perceived as something else, you know, and even in Monroe park." (Juan, sophomore). Participants also revealed how assumptions based on racial or ethnic identity contribute to feelings of alienation and cultural insensitivity. Johnathan's account of being automatically associated with immigrant status highlights the tendency to group diverse identities and overlook individual experiences. Similarly, Juan's anecdote about resorting to self-deprecating humor to cope with the lack of representation demonstrates the impact of systemic disparities on students' sense of visibility and belonging within academic spaces.

"Definitely when I say Hispanic, they think, oh, then, where are you from? They assume that I'm from an immigrant family" (Johnathan, junior). Another Hispanic identifying student expressed how the lack of hispanic representation, in students and faculty at VCU, causes him to make his ethnicity the center of jokes to make others feel comfortable:

I used to make this running joke. I said, oh, there's Hispanics at VCU. And I said, literally on VCU, you know, fixing the roof or doing some maintenance work. I don't like that. I was there's plenty of people like me, but they're literally on the campus, not in academics or anything. (Juan, sophomore)

Robert's acknowledgment of being stereotyped as exceptionally intelligent due to his Asian identity reflects the stigma and bias of marginalized groups. This highlights the pressure on individuals to conform to racialized expectations and the internalization of stereotypes as a means of validation and acceptance. "Being a southeast Asian man, there's obviously a lot of stereotypes about me instantly being the smartest person in the room. I'd like to think that I live up to those" (Robert, sophomore). Furthermore, a participant who identifies as Black explained how his mother prepared him to face and protect himself against stereotypes and biases:

Every day that I wake up. Even since I was a kid, my parents always said, you're black. You're a black man. You have to act accordingly. When you are walking down the street pull your pants up. Don't be saggin.' When you walk around anywhere. You know jaywalking is pretty normal at a college campus, but, at the end of the day you're black, so you could be caught up walking even though someone else crosses the street who may be a different race is doing the same thing, but they're going to get you and target you. That's just the reality of it. So as in my everyday life, just knowing that anything could happen, just the fact that I'm black. (Jordan, sophomore)

Throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants shared their experiences with negative stereotypes and biases. They discussed how these societal prejudices shaped their self-perceptions and attitudes towards others. Additionally, participants highlighted how these negative stereotypes and biases impacted their sense of belonging at VCU. In the following

section, the themes and subthemes surrounding how experiences with homophobia influenced participants' sense of belonging at VCU will be discussed.

Homophobia

Participants described how homophobia influences their relationships and comfort level on campus. While not as frequently appearing as other themes, instances of homophobia influenced several of the participants. Participants highlight the intersectional nature of homophobia, particularly within marginalized communities. Christopher's reflection on being a gay man in the black community reveals the unique struggles faced by LGBTQ individuals navigating multiple layers of identity and societal expectations. This shows that homophobia makes existing discrimination worse, making LGBTQ individuals feel more vulnerable and isolated. "Being a gay man in the black community, definitely can be a struggle at times. I think just being gay in general can be a struggle" (Christopher, sophomore). Additionally, participants revealed the lack of LGBTQ representation within certain academic fields, contributing to feelings of invisibility and marginalization. Joseph's (junior) observation regarding the lack of LGBTQ individuals in engineering highlights the systemic barriers and exclusionary practices that limit diversity and inclusion within educational and professional domains: "I don't see a lot of gay men or any really LGBTQ people, not too many of them in engineering." Matthew's account of feeling compelled to withdraw socially due to a lack of acceptance and understanding reveals the impact of transphobia on individuals' sense of safety and belonging. "Socially, I feel like I've had to take a step back. There's not a lot of people who are ready for trans black men and on top of that plus size trans" (Matthew, sophomore). In the broader campus environment, black trans women encounter internal tension resulting from the intersectionality of their racial and gender identities, as they navigate conflicting societal norms and their own sense of self. Additionally, they face external pressures in the form of systemic discrimination and violence,

perpetrated by both individuals and institutions, fostering an atmosphere of fear and animosity. Their experiences frequently go misunderstood and unrecognized, which increases their susceptibility to harm and perpetuates cycles of injustice within campus settings.

Table 4.10 includes additional quotes describing how homophobia impacts the challenges faced by the participants.

Table 4.10

Challenges Subthemes - Homophobia

Theme	Example quote
Homophobia	<p>“Culturally, it is very difficult. My family is very divided on it, with some people being very open and understanding and accepting, and others being less open and willing to understand.” (Robert, sophomore)</p> <p>“Her first reaction was, what are you talking about? You're too young. You don't know what you're talking about. And then she continued to like nitpick over the years like, oh, so you date a trans woman. I need love too.” (Matthew, sophomore)</p> <p>“I remember when we were younger people used to say “that's gay”, in a bad way, and then used to say the R word a lot. Where I'm from, we used to say that all the time, but as you get older and people tell you hey, this is actually pretty offensive.” (Tyrone, senior)</p> <p>“A lot of people that were openly like gay or openly bisexual. And there were a lot of homophobic people where I'm from. And also, if you were a black man or black woman where I'm from you obviously wouldn't really get the same treatment when it came to liking the same things that other people liked.” (Tyrone, senior)</p>

Throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants shared their experiences with homophobia. They discussed how societal prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals influenced their self-perceptions and interactions with others. Moreover, participants discussed how homophobia affected their sense of belonging within the VCU community. The presence of supportive networks and inclusive communities emerged as protective factors against feelings of isolation and alienation. Participants emphasized the importance of LGBTQ+ student organizations, allyship initiatives, and

supportive faculty and staff members in fostering a sense of belonging. In the subsequent section, the themes and subthemes surrounding how racism impacted participants' sense of belonging at VCU will be presented.

Racism

Participants described how racism influences their relationships and comfort level on campus. Racism from other students, staff, and faculty was depicted as a commonly shared experience by participants. Tyrone's account illustrates the persistence of racial slurs and derogatory remarks directed at black students, even in public spaces like the library. His experience highlights the distressing reality of enduring racially motivated harassment, contributing to feelings of alienation among targeted individuals:

Students are still poking fun at black people here on campus. I've heard.... I've personally heard crazy things in that library... I still hear people call us slaves in the library. I'm like, are you serious right now? It really is just like that... They say things like monkeys...at the library. You can't control what people say, what comes out of their mouths. But it's really disheartening. (Tyrone, senior)

Another participant shared how: "Even now people, being biracial, people would make jokes. Like people say, oh you're white but you have black skin" (Cody, junior). Richard's experiences reveal the systemic nature of racism within social and academic environments. His exclusion from a fraternity party based on his race reflects the perpetuation of racial biases and exclusionary practices within campus social circles. Similarly, his observation of preferential treatment towards white peers by professors highlights the disparities in educational experiences and opportunities based on race.

Freshman year I was trying to go into a white frat party and they told me that the party was at capacity. And then there was a group of 3 white women and they literally came behind me going up. I was already talking to the guy that wouldn't let me in and they came behind me and he just let them right in. (Richard, junior)

That same participant has also experienced racism and preferential treatment of white peers by his professors: “I've had certain professors or teachers that didn't really show me the same type of love that they showed other students because of color and my skin” (Richard, junior). Table 4.11 includes additional quotes from participants describing how racism impacts the challenges faced by the participants.

Table 4.11

Challenges Sub Themes - Racism

Theme	Example quote
Racism	Matthew, sophomore: “But also being African American really affects everything else that I go through. Like I can go through homophobia and transphobia, but racism is always around.”
	“People will even make jokes. For doing black history month and they would say I only get half a month because I'm half light and that would rub me the wrong way.” (Cody, junior)
	“I was the darkest one. So I stood out and our uniforms were white. Of course I stood out... My actual name, they would mispronounce it all the time. So they made it like it was a funny thing.” (Kevin, senior)
	“ It's like going into some of the shops around here, some of the markets, and they're just gonna follow my darker friend around. And compared to me, just cause I'm lighter... their mindset is like, oh, he's lighter, he can't be bad.” (Tyrone, senior)

Throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants shared their experiences with racism. They discussed how racial discrimination and biases affected their self-perceptions and interactions with others. The absence of diverse representation in academic faculty, leadership positions, and mentors emerged as a significant concern among participants. Many expressed frustration with tokenistic diversity initiatives that failed to address systemic

inequalities or provide meaningful representation. The lack of role models and mentors from similar racial or ethnic backgrounds increased feelings of isolation and disconnection.

Additionally, participants discussed how racism impacts their sense of belonging within the VCU community. In the following section, the themes and subthemes surrounding how mental health impacted participants' sense of belonging at VCU will be discussed.

Mental Health

Participants described how mental health impacts them socially and emotionally. Mental health impacted participants' feelings of self worth, relationships, and overall contentment at VCU. Nelson's perspective illustrates the fluctuating nature of mental health, describing the highs and lows that affect his confidence and sense of accomplishment. His interview revealed the importance of recognizing and managing these emotional fluctuations to maintain a positive outlook and self-perception:

I gotta remind myself to be dumb confident, bro. But it's challenging. It's high highs and it's low lows, bro. Some days I feel on top of the world. Like, right now, in this second, I feel good. I feel like I can do anything in the world. And some days I just feel like, bro, like, damn, I ain't even doing shit for real, bro. (Nelson, senior)

Additionally, Jordan's reflection on the need for intimate and adult-facilitated safe spaces emphasizes the importance of supportive environments for discussing mental health concerns. This suggests that traditional student-led support groups may not always meet the diverse needs of individuals, particularly those students seeking more structured and confidential settings for sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Creating that bridge between the groups with a faculty member to where they can just open up and talk. Creating that safe space because DMC is a pretty big club, so it's kinda

hard. And then I don't wanna talk to kids about my problems all day either. I want to talk to an adult sometimes. (Jordan, sophomore)

Jeremy's perspective highlights feelings of isolation and loneliness experienced by students who may struggle to connect with their peers or engage in campus activities. This reveals the challenges of building social connections and finding a sense of belonging within the university community, particularly for students who may struggle to engage and participate. As Jeremy, a sophomore, explains,

As kind of sad as it is to say, I don't have that many friends here at least. I don't, I'm not into any clubs nor am I in any organizations. And I kind of keep to myself if I have to so I don't really have too many people to hang out with.

Upon observing participants in each focus group, we found that even this space served as a pathway for participants to feel like they belong and connected to one another. For many of the participants who consider themselves more introverted rather than extroverted, navigating social spaces, even ones that align with their identities, can be overwhelming. Jeremy's experiences highlight the need for more formalized spaces that help initiate social connections in more approachable settings. While Jeremy identifies a small friend group as a challenge, Robert extends the idea that it's not just about a friend group, it's about the need for more inclusive spaces overall. Robert's discussion on the struggles faced by men of color in expressing themselves emotionally emphasizes the need for inclusive and empathetic communication practices that validate diverse identities and experiences, facilitating a sense of authenticity and emotional well-being (see subthemes of Authenticity and Isolation):

I think the biggest thing is listening. I'm not sure if this is a universal experience, but I know that a lot of men of color struggle with expressing themselves. And finding ways to

healthily communicate their ideas and their emotions. For me, the biggest thing and one of the most important things to help me feel validated is knowing that someone is listening and understanding and willing to step into a slightly more uncomfortable state in order to work with me. And in order to make sure that I am doing well, or being my authentic self. (Robert, sophomore)

Additionally, Tyrone's reflection on the stigmas surrounding men's mental health highlights broader societal norms that discourage emotional vulnerability and expression among men. This reveals the importance of challenging gendered stereotypes and promoting open dialogue about mental health to combat stigma and prevent adverse outcomes such as suicide. Men of color frequently face added obstacles in showing vulnerability as societal norms in their communities prioritize toughness, making it more challenging for them to seek emotional support and address mental health concerns. Tyrone, a senior, explains,

I think the biggest one that we see a lot now is men's mental health. And I'm really, I'm really big on that. We're designed to have this playbook. Whatever happens, it happens, you're not supposed to cry. You're not supposed to really speak on it. You're supposed to just let it build up inside internally and not really talk about it. And eventually it blows up. And that's why you see the male suicide rates are higher especially nowadays when the economy in this world has been really crazy. I know suicide rates have been a lot higher than in the past and post pandemic. I really, really think that the hardest thing about being a man is just speaking on the fact of mental health.

Throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants shared their experiences with mental health. Participants highlighted the importance of access to mental health resources and support services in fostering a sense of belonging at university. Those who were able to

access counseling, therapy, and/or peer support groups reported feeling more supported and connected to the university community. In the following section, the themes and subthemes concerning authenticity, isolation, culture, and representation will be discussed.

Experiencing Sense of Belonging

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants described how they conceptualized a sense of belonging. The participants repeatedly used adjectives, phrases, and anecdotes related to feeling comfortable, seeking authenticity, and moments of isolation. Our team sought to understand how undergraduate men of color describe the phenomena broadly as we believe this would provide insights into how belonging is understood by this population. Our team found that participants were easily able to describe what belonging meant to them personally, suggesting it is a phenomenon they have considered in the past. It was not a new concept to any of them. Below, these descriptors of belonging as expressed by the participants are explored further.

Feeling Comfortable & Authenticity

Participants shared that in experiencing a sense of belonging, they often sought to feel “comfortable” and to “be themselves.” Comfort was tied to feelings of safety, understanding, and positivity. The sense of comfort was usually in reference to how other people made the participants feel, which then reflected how the participants understood their own sense of belonging. One participant shared how belonging for them meant both feeling comfortable and the ability to be oneself:

I guess it's a feeling of comfort. The hard one to [describe] without just saying belonging. But I feel like... Yeah, feeling comfortable, not feeling like you have to put up a disguise. You can be yourself, without any fear of judgment. (Louis, sophomore)

While most participants referenced a general sense of belonging being created by their peers, another participant noted that faculty and staff can play a role in creating comfort in the classroom: “That’s one of the reasons that I place a lot of importance on educators creating this comforting environment because that motivates someone like me to do more” (Robert, sophomore, Focus Group). Robert’s comment reinforces Strayhorn’s (2019) notion that belonging can support student academic success. Comfort was often related to feeling understood, suggesting that “safety” in being oneself is important to the participants when conceptualizing their place on campus.

Our team used authenticity as a way to capture participants’ comments related to being genuine, true to themselves and their values, and/or being able to express themselves freely. Authenticity also captured concepts of being open-minded and “free of judgment.” Participants placed emphasis on finding groups and spaces in which they could be their “authentic selves.” Robert, a sophomore, shared,

For me, the biggest thing and one of the most important things to help me feel validated is knowing that someone is listening and understanding and willing to step into a slightly more uncomfortable state in order to work with me. And in order to make sure that I am doing well, or being my authentic self. (Robert, sophomore)

Robert’s comment highlights the importance of outreach and understanding. Some participants expressed a sense of isolation, which will be explored further in a later section, but Robert’s excerpt displays a need to be “worked with.” Participants were eager to find others that they could feel comfortable around, as there was anxiety expressed around men of color being able to be authentic. One participant shared: “I feel people also have to try to hide who they are because they don’t really know how our peers will react or what people will say about them” (Richard,

junior). While several participants used the words “comfort” and “comfortable” to describe a sense of belonging, there were many who commented on how belonging was not always positive. For some, they experienced a sense of isolation which was associated with a lack of belonging.

Isolation

Several participants indicated that as a man of color, they experienced feelings of isolation. Isolation was referred to as affecting participants’ general sense of belonging negatively. Multiple participants reported feeling that as a man of color, they struggled with how to create connections. Matthew, a sophomore, described that based on his physical appearance, assumptions were made about him and it was “hurtful.” As a result, he felt he had to distance himself from his peers in order to “deal with it”:

I feel like they're walking on eggshells. I'm a very open person. I love talking about anything. So it's a little hurtful. And I've gotten a lot of, oh, I thought you were an asshole. Like I thought you were mean when we first met. And it's just like... Thanks. I don't know what to do with that. But yeah, I've dealt with it by separating myself a little bit. (Matthew, sophomore)

Several participants shared that they felt pressured to “separate themselves” due to assumptions based on their physical appearance as a man of color or stereotypes based on men of color. Participants described the conflict of how their true selves (authentic self) did not always align with these assumptions, such as being perceived as “aggressive” or “mean” when they saw themselves as friendly or approachable. This led to general feelings of isolation, usually in an attempt to avoid conflict. Furthermore, in both one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants mentioned “cliques” or groups of students that were already established friends. This led to feelings of being alone. As Juan, a sophomore, described,

I remember this one time where I really felt isolated. I was by myself. And then I saw everybody... like every time I walk out of class, I'll be reminded of all these cliques of students, and they'll all be just, you know, hanging out, all that kind of stuff... I just didn't have anybody. So, yeah, it was pretty upsetting. (Juan, sophomore)

Participants who discussed what negatively affected belonging often brought up feeling “by themselves” due to a lack of community or friends. As Juan’s excerpt suggests, men of color may struggle to develop connections, particularly as freshmen, when they already feel alone and incapable of being themselves. Juan’s quote also highlights acute awareness of themselves and their surroundings, which is a common notion regarding men of color that is present throughout each theme. Table 4.13 includes more participant quotes regarding isolation.

Table 4.13

Experience Sense of Belonging Sub Themes - Isolation

Theme	Example quote
Isolation	<p>“It's like a person of color, you know, man of color. I'd say sometimes it could be isolating, but sometimes it's alright.” (Juan, sophomore, Focus group 5)</p> <p>“It's a little weird. I'm kind of solitary. My roommate dropped out. So I'm kind of alone and off in my own world.” (Robert, sophomore)</p> <p>“As kind of sad as it is to say, I don't have that many friends here at least. I'm not into any clubs nor am I in any organizations. And I kind of keep to myself if I have to so I don't really have too many people I hang out with for feeling super included.” (Jeremy, sophomore)</p> <p>“ I'll go like a day to a week where I'm just going to class, going back home, getting food. And the campus just seems so gray and monotonous.”(Jeremy, sophomore, Focus Group 1)</p>

As seen in table 4.13, participants were able to conceptualize what a sense of belonging felt like, but several participants shared that they did not have friend groups or felt alone. This suggests that a sense of belonging is tied closely to social relationships; friendships or a community were integral to positive descriptions of the phenomena. Without these connections, participants felt isolated, which negatively impacted their wellbeing. Feeling comfortable and authentic amongst

a group seems to define a sense of belonging for participants. If a participant felt uncomfortable, unable to be themselves, and/or alone, they felt a lack of belonging.

Throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants described their sense of belonging based on levels of comfort and authenticity. Additionally, participants mentioned moments of loneliness or isolation that affected them. These subthemes revealed how participants broadly experienced belonging. In the following section, the themes regarding the participants' sense of belonging specifically at VCU will be presented.

Sense of Belonging at VCU

Pre-VCU Experiences

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants described their Pre-VCU experiences. The participants provided explanations and reflections on their K-12 education, transfer experience, and communities. These experiences influenced their current feelings and sense of belonging at VCU. When referencing academic moments occurring prior to coming to VCU, our team coded it as “Pre-VCU experiences” to capture how experiences during K-12, and at other colleges, may stay with students through their experiences as university students. K-12 education serves as the foundational building block for college experience, shaping one’s academic skills, relational building, and self-discovery. The knowledge and habits instilled during those formative years lay the groundwork for success in higher education. Additionally, the social and interpersonal skills developed in K-12 settings contribute to one’s ability to navigate the diverse and collaborative environment of college life. Participants reflected on the differences between their high school and college experiences. Mark described the transition from the structured environment of high school to the more independent and diverse setting of college. This quote reveals how pre-college experiences influence students’ expectations and adaptations to the university environment:

High school is different because you're bound into a different level, you know. You don't have the same level of freedom, you're bound to just those classes that you choose to have and the people in them, and that's really it. You go to class and transition to another and to another and then lunch and all that. You're leaving after that. So college, it's different because you're leaving, but you're not leaving, leaving. (Mark, freshman, Focus Group)

One fundamental difference between K-12 and university experiences is the sense that campus is now where you go to school and also where you live your life. VCU has a low number of commuter students, which means that this group of students is typically not prioritized and their needs can often be left unaddressed as a result. Additionally, while there is an expectation for freshmen to live on campus, commuter students often struggle to build the same connections as their peers who reside on campus, as many relationships are developed in the dorm space.

The formative impact of early educational experiences on a student's sense of identity and belonging influence their outlook and interactions within diverse environments like VCU. Jeremy discussed his experience of being one of the few people of color at his private elementary, middle, and high schools. This reveals how early educational experiences can impact a students' sense of identity and belonging, which shapes their perspectives and interactions within diverse settings like VCU:

For me, I've dealt with being... In elementary school, middle school, and high school, being maybe one of about five people of color, especially in my school. Especially for elementary school, because I went to a private school when I was in elementary school, I was one of two in the entire school who had even a lick of melanin on their skin. (Jeremy, sophomore, Focus Group)

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the social and relational growth of current VCU students. Attending high school during the onset of the pandemic, compared to peers who experienced a more traditional pre-COVID schooling experience, highlights the impact that external factors played in shaping individual socialization experiences. Jordan reflected on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected his social and relational development during his senior year of high school.

I don't know if it's because of like COVID and all that stuff. Cause I went to high school as soon as COVID hit, like that was my senior year. So everyone that I went to school with they went to school pre-COVID and they were normal, you know, [those who attended during or after COVID] are not as socialized. (Jordan, sophomore, Focus Group)

Other participants discussed their experiences at different colleges and universities before attending VCU. While their reasons for transferring differed, they all shared how their experiences at VCU are different from that of the previous school they attended. Jordan expressed the importance of diversity at VCU, indicating how the university's inclusive environment aligns with his values and needs:

That's what I transferred here for is because of the diversity. I've never met someone, I never met Bengali people before I moved to VCU, to Richmond. All those different types of people and different flavors, never experienced in my life. And that's what the school is kind of supposed to foster a little bit. And if they're not reaching that initiative, then it's going to be a little alarming to me. That's why I came here. (Jordan, sophomore, Focus Group)

Therefore, pre-VCU experiences significantly influenced students' transition to college and their ability to navigate social environments effectively.

Table 4.14
Challenges Sub themes - Pre-VCU experiences

Theme	Example quote
Pre-VCU experiences	<p data-bbox="375 268 1382 390">“Or I'd get called Oreos a lot. Which is common. Way more common than a lot of people think. And that was all throughout. I'd say elementary school. I'd say late elementary school to even high school. But in college? It's way less frequent now than it used to be.” (Jeremy, sophomore)</p> <p data-bbox="375 422 1382 543">“I think middle school is a baseline. That's where bullying and all that kind of stuff happened. So it was with the boys, it was brutal. It was bullying. And eventually, you gotta stand up for yourself or make a sort of statement. Maybe fight or something like that.” (Juan, sophomore)</p> <p data-bbox="375 575 1382 695">“I would say something that I like about VCU would be the professors, just compared from what it was at NOVA in those community colleges. And what it is here at VCU you just see that they care more about what they're teaching and they care if we're actually getting that knowledge.” (Jackson, junior, Focus Group)</p>

Throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, participants described their Pre-VCU experiences. Table 4.14 includes additional quotes from participants describing how Pre-VCU experiences influenced them prior to their college experience at VCU. Participants discussed how their K-12 experiences and other Pre-VCU experiences shaped their perspectives and perceptions of self and others. Additionally, participants described their Pre-VCU experiences as contributing to their overall sense of belonging at VCU. In the following section, the themes and subthemes regarding the beneficial experiences that have contributed to participants' sense of belonging at VCU will be presented.

Belonging at VCU - Beneficial

In discussing their time at VCU, participants mentioned several items that affected them positively and improved their belonging: professional development, mentorship, and beneficial relationships with staff, faculty, and other students. Participants frequently discussed careers, which suggests that this is a topic that is important to this population. It was also mentioned as a way of finding belonging, such as career development through student organizations. Mentorship was linked to career prospects and many participants shared that a mentor often guided them,

which contributed to their sense of belonging at VCU. Finally, relationships with others at VCU seemed to be at the core of what determined whether or not a participant felt a sense of belonging at VCU specifically. Table 4.15 shows more quotes from participants related to these topics.

Table 4.15

Sense of Belonging at VCU - Beneficial

Sub theme	Example quote
Mentorship	<p>“I sit there and I'm like, these kids are so knowledgeable... It's nice knowing someone that you can actually talk to and relate to a little bit more than your professor.” (Jackson, junior, Focus group 5)</p> <p>“I try to encourage the freshmen that I talk to, especially in DMC, to try and get ahead of the pack because people will take notice of that. People will see that if you try to make connections now, you try to start networking now and try to jumpstart your career a little bit.” (Nelson, senior)</p> <p>“If I go to a youth sports game, I can go, hey, I'm with NAACP and at least 3 to 4 parents are gonna come flock to me and try to get their kids to call me. They tell me, Hey, can you help my son or my daughter like this? and I go, yeah I can.” (Jordan, sophomore)</p>
Relationships - Beneficial	<p>“You just see that they care more about what they're teaching and they care if we're actually getting that knowledge. They don't just pass every student by... I really like seeing that change of heart and teaching.” (Jackson, junior, Focus Group 5)</p> <p>“Lucy said, I would rather you share a personal story and make sure that you are explaining yourself rather than having a shallow essay that doesn't reflect who you are. That was a very validating experience for me. It made me realize just how much a professor can do for their students and should be doing.” (Robert, sophomore)</p> <p>“They challenge me to think as well. That challenge makes me feel like I belong here because it's like, well, your mind can actually think on a deeper level. You could think like a scholar. I felt like I belonged in the classroom debating a teacher over a topic.” (Jordan, sophomore)</p> <p>“She was one of the first people I told when I legally changed my name fully. She was like, oh my god, I'm so glad to hear it... She's one of those people that I want to share my goals with because I know I have a long way to go. So just to get that joyous feeling from someone else feeling it. She's definitely like one of my rocks at VCU.” (Matthew, sophomore)</p>

As demonstrated in Table 4.15, participants often discussed professional development at VCU, such as resumes, leadership, career exploration, how to tie a necktie and more. In a focus group, participants agreed that VCU was a “resume school.” As Jeremy, a sophomore in the

focus group, indicated, “There's a lot of leadership opportunities here, which does help your resume.” Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants indicated that the career and professional development found at VCU was valuable to their experiences of belonging. One participant described career development with other men of color students at VCU:

People just saying, ‘Hey, if you guys need help with resumes, LinkedIn, or even learning how to tie a tie, um, get with us.’ It was just a lot of... Like, we're here to help. No question is a dumb question. This is for you. This is for us. (Kevin, senior)

Kevin mentioned this experience while describing his participation in an organization for men of color. This excerpt highlights how men of color were able to support one another professionally, providing career mentorship that stimulated belonging. Another participant, Nelson, began focusing on his career towards the end of his academic career at VCU, but found value in attending professional events:

Lately, I've been going to the panels and the workshops at the business center. Like, oh my god, I wish I would have been doing that...Like I wish, like as long as I've been here, all them fucking emails I got...I waited till the last minute, but I'm still soaking up so much game and connections...I was like, brother, this is actually like fun and it feels professional. Like it feels like, okay, I'm in school for a reason. Like I'm actually engaging, you know what I'm saying? (Nelson, senior)

Nelson went on to describe how he was able to network and speak to other students to collaborate with at these career events. As Nelson was able to work with other students and be “professional,” pursuing higher education felt more meaningful to him. Nelson’s described experience suggests that connecting with others via career development opportunities is one way that this population can develop a sense of belonging at their chosen institution. Participants

shared that networking was important to them, and that relationships at VCU were reasons for positive senses of belonging

Beneficial Relationships

Participants shared repeatedly that mentorship played a role in shaping their sense of belonging at VCU. They cited professors, staff members, teaching assistants, and peers as mentors. While mentorship played a role in career development, many participants shared that mentorship included talking about one's feelings, tutoring for coursework, and being supportive of one's goals. In addition, several participants mentioned moments in which they themselves acted as mentors and gave advice to fellow men of color. Several participants even found mentorship to be an aspiration, as they looked forward to “giving back” to younger men of color in the future:

Being a man of color, you have to give back mentorship. You have to give back to the community. And that is the direct link to that philosophy I feel because I'm able to, you know, go to mentorship programs. (Jordan, sophomore)

Jordan's quote is an example of the responsibility that this population feels towards one another; several participants remarked that they sought to give back through their student organizations and looked forward to helping freshmen in the future. Similar to professional development, mentorship was a recurring theme that was top-of-mind for participants.

When asked to describe their sense of belonging at VCU, one student remarked “I think for me, the biggest thing is professors. I feel like professors make or break [men of color] interactions with VCU” (Robert, sophomore, Focus group). Participants shared several beneficial moments with faculty and staff while at VCU, which affected their sense of belonging. During a

focus group, one participant shared how a faculty member's energy affected their ability to succeed in the course:

I had this professor at like 11 a.m. I did not want to wake up for that class, but he had an energy and, like you said, he was an educator. It was like this liveliness that really helped me connect, and even now, I'm actually working as an undergraduate teaching assistant for him. (Robert, sophomore, Focus Group)

Robert's experience encapsulates the effect that a faculty member can have on a student who identifies as a man of color. The professor's presence in the classroom "helped" the participant to "connect." In turn, the participant felt belonging and developed academically and professionally. During a conversation about experiences with faculty members at VCU, another participant summarized their connection between positive interactions with faculty and their sense of belonging:

I started taking classes that I enjoyed more and I had professors that I enjoyed more. And that really helped me feel like I belong here. I'm very much motivated by studying here. I think my whole purpose here is to learn, learn, learn. And so when I have good professors, it makes me feel good in turn. (Jordan, sophomore, Focus group)

Similar to Robert's experience, Jordan was able to feel supported in his "purpose" by "good professors." He explicitly states that faculty contribute to his sense of belonging and "motivate" him. Jordan's experience is notable as it supports literature that suggests strong relationships with staff and faculty not only contribute to a student's sense of belonging, but their overall wellness and desire to succeed (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, positive relationships with other students play a role in the sense of belonging that the participants feel at VCU. One

student shared how the diversity of the students he is around plays a role in his sense of belonging at VCU:

I met a big group of people and we're all ethnically and racially different but we click and it's like these are my people, these are like my friends... It feels like we were meant to come together. I belong with these people. These are like people that can teach me things and I get these people that I can teach. (Cody, junior)

Although different from him, Cody still felt comfortable and authentic in a group of diverse friends. Cody also mentioned reciprocal education within his friend group, which further highlights the importance of mentorship for men of color. Shared teaching and education was a catalyst for belonging as they were able to be active contributors to their personal development. Students continuously mentioned their peers as sources of belonging. Participants mentioned several times that they were “surprised” to see so many others that “looked like them,” which contributed to their general sense of belonging. During a focus group, one participant shared, “Even walking to Panda Express, I'll look at the street and I'll be like, oh my god, there's people that look like me” (Jeremy, sophomore, Focus group). It was important for participants to see representation, as in seeing others who looked like them.

When speaking about representation, participants often referred back to comfort and authenticity. They shared that many of their mentors were also people of color. Several participants identified staff and faculty members who are men of color that mentored them personally, often in one-on-one settings. Many participants brought up the same faculty member, who is a man of color that works with several men of color initiatives at VCU. Finding mentors and seeing staff/faculty of color is important for this population and their belonging. For

example, one participant reflected on how they, as a man of color, would be able to connect to an affinity organization for men of color better than a white man:

In comparison to me being a black man, [black men] are like, all right, I'll listen to you young brother. You know, like you actually, you relate to us. On a deeper, personal level.

In comparison, we can actually... We can feel that from you. When you talk to us, we can feel your pain. Because you are talking from our pain too. (Jordan, sophomore)

Jordan's quote shows the value of spaces that are dedicated for men of color; participants were able to relate to one another through shared understanding and similar lived experiences. This also suggests that men of color may be able to feel more naturally comfortable and authentic with one another, which may make it easier to interact and not feel isolated. Unfortunately, while participants shared many instances in which their sense of belonging at VCU was positive, there were several notable themes that negatively impacted their belonging.

Campus Support

During the interviews and focus groups with students, campus support emerged as a theme for students in what aids their sense of belonging at VCU. The campus support comes in the form of student services and the student organizations that they are a part of or know to exist. Over the course of the interviews, participants shared different offices and services on VCU's campus they utilized and deemed helpful with their experience. These services include Career Services, tutoring on campus, and the campus learning center. With regards to Career Services, one interviewee shared their experience with a staff member from career services who he felt he could talk to:

Another teacher, Ms. Tanya Sharp. She and I worked pretty close often at Career Services. Where, you know, she, we talk about this type of stuff all the time where, you

know, you have to be smart about where you're at, you know, but also be proud. (Joseph, junior)

Joseph sharing this relationship with a professor shows the positive impact that staff is having on his experience. Another student being interviewed shared how the representation within Career Services has been positive:

I'm in the school of business. I go into business school, there's a lot of diverse people there. So I haven't felt like, I haven't felt discriminated against going in there, even talking to career services. There's a lot of black advisors and I sit down and talk to Miles a lot. I like Miles. It's a good deal. (Tyrone, senior)

Tyrone explains that seeing representation within his school creates a perceived safer space on campus. Students named specific faculty and staff that are having a direct impact on their relationship. It is important to their sense of belonging that they have staff and faculty who they feel like they can rely on, talk to, and see representation in.

Student Organizations

With our team interviewing a diverse group of students, several different student organizations were named that they are members of. In addition to being members of student organizations, they also identified other organizations that they knew existed. They considered these to be great assets to the student experience, as VCU provides different organizations for different identities of students. One student shared during his interview with regards to the Developing Men of Color organization:

But it's like, it's rare to see that many Black men under one roof, bruh, and it's not a fraternity and it's not I mean, it's kind of fraternal in a way, but it's not a traditional divine

nine organization. It's not a gang. It's not a football team. It's not a basketball team.

(Nelson, senior)

Nelson shares how the Developing Men of Color organization provides a space for Black men that is more commonly associated with a fraternity or sports team. Students also shared their thoughts on student services that would be helpful in their experience, with one student sharing:

The counselors for them are advisors as well. You can have your regular academic advisors and then you can have your just regular advisors. More mentors. I feel at the college level we kind of escape the whole mentor thing. We're trying to create mentors instead of still allowing people to be mentees. In high school, it's like, hey, get a mentor, get him into or get someone who's older than you to learn from them. And in college it's go talk to someone who's younger than you. Well, you know, I may be a legal adult and all that but I'm really still a kid and I don't know anything so I really kind of need people to come talk to me because I'm still a school student. So if they expand that area more, they'll be greatly beneficial. (Jordan, sophomore)

Jordan emphasizes the importance of having mentors and that he could benefit from having that relationship in college. Table 4.16 shares additional feedback from participants on student services they take advantage of and student organizations they are involved with.

Table 4.16

Campus Support Subthemes

Campus Support Subthemes	Example quote
Student Services	“I would say use your, use the resources. Like, um, get to know your professors, office hours, um, campus learning center, the preceptors. Like, I feel like VCU has a lot of resources that A, students don't really know about. And B, students don't really, like, apply themselves...I was like that my freshman year. I was like, Oh, like my teacher sucks. I'm just gonna have to teach myself this. But then I started going to tutoring, like for math and things that I actually struggled on. And it helped a lot.” (Richard, junior, focus group 4)

“I am planning on starting counseling services at some point in the near future, and even simply going to the health center... It was very validating to feel like my medical needs were a priority.” (Robert, sophomore)

“My favorite thing is the amount of resources available. Honestly, after coming from community college to VCU, it's night and day.” (Cody, junior)

“I would say there was this VCU event with the activity programming board. It was drag bingo. I went on my own...I ended up meeting a few people at the table and I ended up talking to them. And it was just this moment where I realized that this is not an experience that I would get out of another university. This is a very distinctly VCU and a distinctly Richmond experience... I understood that as much as I may struggle with this university, ultimately I want to be here. Because Of how, for lack of a better term, vibrant it is.” (Robert, sophomore)

Student organizations

“You know, the opportunities to still grow and still meet new people, join new organizations. New clubs like that's why I feel like, but again, you can do that along any college campus backing like VCU is just a different kind of feeling.” (Cody, junior)

“Times where I feel like myself, um, it depends on which clubs and organizations that will take you for who you are. For me personally, it's like, um, it's CRU at VCU and, um, AMA. Because of how, because of how my peers react when I interact with them in terms of talking about school, school and etc.” (Martin, senior)

“Join campus orgs and get active on campus. So that way you can find out what you like, what you don't like. Things of that sort. Because you may end up changing majors because you joined a different organization on campus and you found out that you really like gardening and agriculture.” (Nelson, senior)

Campus support in the form of events, student services, and student organizations all play a role in these students' sense of belonging. By VCU investing in programs that directly support students in their mental health, academic studies, and activities, they are directly benefiting student sense of belonging. These services and organizations are providing students with more representation for their identities as well as their interests, and helping them achieve in the classroom. Students discussing campus events elaborated on attending a drag bingo event that they felt was unique to VCU and applauded that the campus hosted such an event. Sports were also mentioned throughout the interviews, with many students enjoying the VCU basketball games. Students interviewed also shared that tutoring, counseling services, and health services have positively affected their experience at VCU. Many participants cited specific student

organizations that they have been involved with as a way that they have met new people and discovered their interests.

Physical Spaces

During the interviews and focus groups, our group asked participants if they could identify physical spaces and locations on campus that contribute to their sense of belonging. There were only a few different spaces mentioned, but all covered in this section appeared in responses more than once for the participants. Those spaces include their dormitory, the Academic Commons, Monroe Park, Cary Street Gym, classroom spaces, and Cabell Library. From the comments made by participants, it is evident that physical spaces play a vital role in a student's sense of belonging.

Dorm

With the majority of our participants being upperclassmen at VCU, many do not currently live on campus and utilize campus housing. However, it was mentioned through a few of the interviews that their dormitory is where they feel comfortable on campus. One student shared "I feel like I've had to distance myself a little bit from the rest of the VCU community and I'm very much in the dorm" (Matthew, sophomore). While a different student shared how it provides a space to be themselves by sharing the following:

You can only be yourself so much with the dorm mate. Because, you know, when you're by yourself, it's just you, so who you really are can come out because you don't have to worry about anybody judging you or any of those thoughts because, like I said, it's really only you. (Mark, freshman, Focus group)

Mark's experience illustrates how his dorm and the time he can spend in his own space allows him to fully be himself.

Academic Commons

The Academic Commons on campus serves as a student union featuring space to do homework, meet with peers, and house a food court for student meal plans. Another student elaborated on how the Commons is used as a place where students can meet and see each other, telling us the following: “I’ll say the Commons for sure because we’re all there trying to eat. We’re all there in line. When you’re in line, you’re seeing people you know, you’re talking to people, you might be eating together” (Richard, junior). These students describe how the Academic Commons houses not only dining, but student activities and a place to see people.

Park

Our code of “park” refers to Monroe Park, a public city park located in the middle of campus. In the one-on-one interviews, Monroe Park was mentioned several times as a place associated with campus and where students spend time. One student describes Monroe Park: “They also just have Monroe Park as well. That’s also a bit of a staple for the VCU community is Monroe Park. It’s a nice, decent place to look at” (Mark, freshmen, Focus group). In addition to the scenery, another student describes his favorite places on campus because of the people out: “I mean it’s Monroe Park. The Commons. That gives me a sense of belonging because there’s just so many people walking around” (Johnathan, junior). Monroe Park was described by multiple students as a spot to see other people and enjoy the weather, creating a positive environment for students.

Gym

The “gym” code refers to Cary Street Gym, the gym on VCU’s campus. In addition to being a campus gym with full workout equipment, it is also home to recreational sports that several of our participants referenced in describing their sense of belonging. When asked about

activities he is involved with on campus, one student shared: “So I joined the extracurriculars like the sports one, like a spike ball club, volleyball, all those ones that were kind of folks around the gym” (Louis, sophomore). In addition to involvement, another student shared how Cary Street Gym is where he met his friends:

I met most of my friends going to Cary Street because I like to play basketball and stuff like that. If you just go to groups, or go to specific places. Like things that interest you, you're gonna find somebody that you like. If you like to play soccer, play intramural, you know what I'm saying? Just different things like that. This is what I would tell somebody that didn't know stuff. (Richard, junior, Focus Group).

Richard and Louis both describe the gym as a place to meet others, providing them both with a sense of belonging. Another participant specifically describes the community he has built with the gym, sharing:

My favorite place on campus is probably the gym. Honestly, I mean, I'm there six days a week. So you guys ever seen me there and you say what's up. But it's really like a community there, everybody there is just trying to get their work in and you don't really see people bashing other people on how they lift or what they lift, and everybody there is just really trying to trying to get healthy and trying to be in a betterplace and you can have a lot of good conversations there. (Tyrone, senior, Focus Group 2)

The community aspect shared by Tyrone describes how the gym provides a safe space for students, free from judgment and a communal space for students to better themselves. Another participant describes the gym as specifically providing him with a sense of belonging:

I have recently started going to the gym. And for me, that gives me a lot of sense of belonging. I'm a very purpose-driven person. So once I find something to do, I will start

doing it. Because I feel that it fulfills. The gym is one of those big things. (Robert, sophomore)

From the interviews and focus groups, it is clear that Cary Street Gym provides a sense of belonging for students through community, activities, and purpose.

Library

An additional campus space on campus is the Cabell Library, located in the center of the Monroe Park campus. The library was mentioned more than any other physical location on campus, mostly being described as a favorite place on campus or one that provided a sense of belonging. When asked what locations at VCU provide a sense of belonging, one student describes, in detail, what he enjoys about the library:

I think for me, it's the library, on the third floor, they have this, glassed off room called the reading room. And if you sit in there, it's absolutely silent and you can, you kind of. You can see people walking back and forth underneath, to and from the commons. But it's so nice because it feels like a spot where I can relax and unwind. But also a spot where I can study if I want to, or I can read a book. It's just a room where I feel like I can do a lot of things and either be productive or take time to recharge. (Robert, sophomore, Focus group)

Cabell Library is described as a place to enjoy silence but also observe others on campus. The third floor mentioned by Cody is the quiet floor of the library. Having a spot on campus to relax benefits a student's sense of belonging in knowing that they have access to a common campus space that services different purposes.

Classroom

The classroom was used as a subtheme in identifying times when interviewees referenced a space where they have experiences with other students and faculty. When asked about locations on campus where they feel belonging, one student shared the following:

In the classroom 'cause the teacher. And they challenge me to think as well. That challenge makes me feel like I belong here because your mind can actually think on a deeper level. And you could think like a scholar. I felt like I belonged in the classroom debating a teacher over a topic. (Jordan, sophomore)

While some students shared on their experiences with professors, there were other comments regarding the quality of the spaces:

The labs that we use for biology courses and health science courses and everything are really nice physical therapy facilities. One of the best in the country. There are no complaints about VCU's resources being great. (David, senior)

Spaces on campus such as the classroom, Cabell Library, and Cary Street Gym were referenced many times by participants as spaces that they feel a sense of belonging on campus. Cary Street Gym provides community for some of our participants, but also a space to play sports and find purpose. In addition to Cabell Library providing a quiet space for some students, it was also mentioned that the hours of operation and the charm of the library is appreciated. The classroom serves different purposes for participants. Some made mention of how being in a classroom makes them feel because of their interactions with other students and professors, while another student mentions how the classrooms and labs they have been in have contributed to the greatness of VCU's resources.

Sense of Belonging at VCU - Adverse

During the interviews and focus groups with the participants, students shared different factors with our team that do not provide a sense of belonging on VCU's campus. We were able to break down subthemes within the adverse category for sense of belonging by the factors mentioned most in comments by participants. The main subthemes that emerged were crime/safety, lack of representation, lack of school spirit, lack of promotion, and adverse staff and faculty relationships.

Crime/Safety

During interviews and the focus groups, students mentioned VCU Alerts that they receive and how that can sometimes feel like the campus and city is unsafe. VCU Alerts is an opt-in alert program that sends students, staff, and faculty alerts via email and text regarding crime, impacts on traffic, and more. Because of the comments made about VCU Alerts and crime notifications, we determined these to have an adverse effect on students' comfort and belonging. One student shared the following in a focus group:

Sometimes it can be a problem, I guess, in terms of crime stuff. You see a lot of stuff on the VCU alert like theft and things like that. I mean, it can get a bit much in that sense.

(Joseph, junior, Focus group)

Additionally, when asked what advice the participants would give to freshmen, one shared the following:

What advice would I give to freshmen? I think the first thing, buy pepper spray. You might not need it, but you should definitely have it. Living out in Cary and Belvidere, I've seen some crazy things. (Robert, sophomore, Focus group)

By answering the question of what advice you would give to a freshman, this student highlighted the feared lack of safety on campus and in the city of Richmond. Feeling the need to own pepper spray illuminates student fear for their surroundings on campus and in Richmond. VCU Alerts helps notify students of any activity on campus, but one student made mention of the alerts creating alarm when being notified of everything.

Lack of School Spirit

Through the interviews and focus groups, comparisons were made by students between VCU and other campuses that they have either attended or have connections with. One area that was mentioned throughout focus groups with the students was a lack of school spirit that they have observed on VCU's campus from students. Homecoming and Athletics were mentioned in the code of lack of school spirit. Homecoming had just taken place when the focus groups were being conducted so it was top-of-mind as a topic for many participants. VCU does not have a division I football program and students felt that this contributes to the lack of spirit that they feel on campus.

Comments about the lack of school spirit that students feel on VCU's campus were only shared in focus groups. A lack of school spirit negatively affects belonging if students do not feel as much attachment and spirit. The following was a shared sentiment within one of the focus groups conducted: "I feel like once basketball season's over there's no school spirit. People are just going to school and we don't have that excitement and spirit as much as like other schools" (Joseph, junior, Focus group). Another student shared his thoughts on why there seems to be a lack of school spirit:

I know VCU is more of just an educational school, like a research school, they're big on just figuring out more information about a lot of things and that might be a part of why it's not as school spirited in a way. (Jackson, junior, Focus group)

By lacking school spirit, students will not share their pride in VCU with their peers or others, resulting in a lack of affinity towards their alma mater. Another participant elaborated on the comparison to other institutions in Virginia:

I never really heard of VCU, like, I heard of Tech, I've heard of JMU, so I feel like there's a lack of school spirit, I would say. Just because I don't really see people wearing the black and gold. I don't see people going to a lot of these events, where other schools in Virginia like tech or even Virginia State University right here in Richmond as well, you see a lot more of that school spirit and just like wanting to be a part of something more there. (Jackson, junior, Focus group)

The issue with a lack of school spirit is important to note because it is important for VCU to continue to build its brand for recruitment and retention. Students should feel ownership in their spaces on campus and without school spirit, they will not feel as strong of a belonging.

Staff & Faculty relationships - Adverse

While students can be positively affected by having good experiences with faculty and staff, participants shared unpleasant experiences that they encountered at VCU. During an interview one student shared the following experience he had with a previous professor:

I had one chemistry professor that wasn't really, I don't know, just the way he talked didn't really resonate with me and I went to seek help and he was very dismissive. I don't know if that was just the kind of person he was. I'm not going to say that it was because of my race or anything like that. But he just had one of those personalities. He wasn't very receptive. He wasn't very approachable either. (Kevin, senior)

This experience shows that relationships with professors can have a negative effect on a student's experience. Additionally, it was shared during a focus group how the classroom environment can become unpleasant:

I can tell which teachers are phoning it in and which teachers aren't. And it becomes so awkward when I don't feel like I'm doing my best in the class, but it doesn't feel like the professor is either. And it just becomes kind of gray in the classroom, for lack of a better term. (Robert, sophomore, Focus group)

Robert shared that his lack of effort can be the result of feeling like the professor isn't putting in as much effort. Students openly sharing that they feel a lack of effort will negatively affect retention efforts and will have a direct impact on the sense of belonging for students if they are feeling like they don't need to try. It was observed that students shared more examples of their faculty and staff interactions within the focus group.

In addition, one student alludes to racism within the classroom, which will not assist in creating safe spaces for students or contribute to their sense of belonging:

I remember my fall semester, I did not feel like I connected with the campus at all. I had a very, I don't want to legally put it out there that he was racist, but he had some very questionable ideals when it came to the work ethic of people...I didn't feel like they were making an earnest attempt to be a teacher. And that's something that I've noticed with a lot of the adjunct professors, which kind of sucks. (Robert, sophomore, Focus group)

In addition to Robert's experience, another participant shared, "I've had certain professors or teachers that didn't really show me the same type of love that they showed like other students because of color and my skin." (Richard, junior) In the space where students are supposed to be learning, they should not be experiencing racism or feeling like professors do not care about their education. These feelings will only hinder their students' belonging if they feel that others do not care about their education.

Lack of Promotion

During interviews and focus groups, participants acknowledged that VCU provides programming for students and that activities are often happening, but there was feedback that some of these programs are not advertised and promoted. One student shared in a focus group the following:

I feel like so much of the organizations and stuff like that from VCU is student made. They should be showing their students' work off. Instead of whatever else they're posting, but if they want their students to feel they belong, that's the easiest way...they send out emails every single morning of whatever's going on. They could be sending out like a general body email for, you know, whatever organization. They have Instagram so they could be making posts on their story (Instagram) or whatever. (Joseph, junior, Focus Group)

Joseph shares that while there is communication out to students, he feels that there could be more to promote student-specific work or events. Promoting student work will help foster an environment that celebrates students and puts value on the work that they are doing. Another student within a focus group shared the following in regards to learning about organizations:

They could do, like, a better job advertising and marketing for where we could find spaces. I would say, for me at least, I really had to kind of go out my way and really push and try to find black organizations and black clubs. Just based on doing my own research and then also talking to people. That's how I got involved with DMC. At the end of the day, there is only so much that one organization or one club can do to really promote themselves and there's only so much VCU could do to promote the organizations. But there's probably still a little bit of work that might need to be done. (Jordan, sophomore, Focus group)

Jordan describes how it can be difficult to find out about clubs and organizations and that greater promotion of the clubs can benefit a student's sense of belonging. If students do not know the organizations and resources they have available to them, they will struggle to find their belonging on campus. While VCU hosts student organization fairs, it is apparent from our interviews that not all students are aware.

Lack of Representation

With our participants identifying as men of color, we heard from several in the interviews and focus groups of a subtheme of "lack of representation." This lack of representation was mainly associated with staff and faculty and was related to race but also cultural. A student within Engineering shared the following as it relates to his sense of belonging:

Thinking about being a man of color I actually would say I don't feel I have that sense of belonging. And I think that has to do with the fact that most of the faculty and the engineering department are white. Or it's, I don't wanna say whitewashed, but it's like that. (Johnathan, junior)

Johnathan describes how his sense of belonging is lacking due to most of the faculty that he interacts with being white. Tyrone, a senior, shares “there weren't a lot of black professors, and there weren't a lot of black faculty for me to resonate with.” (Tyrone, senior) If a student does not see their representation or faculty members that they can resonate with, they are not going to feel understood and will feel like outsiders, rather than belonging. Another student who grew up in Russia, and is also Arabic, described the cultural differences between him and other VCU students and Americans. His experience is different because he is not around others that are as like-minded and similar culturally:

It's not anything wrong with VCU, but I have very different work ethics and I have very different goals. Since I spent the whole time in VCU, you don't fully feel at home. You're not ever fully able to walk when other people are not walking or anything. We look at the same things very differently. We have very different goals in life. We have very different values and everything like I can't say there are not too many people in VCU or the United States in general that have the same values. (David, senior)

As a Russian and Arabic student, David can lack a sense of belonging due to the cultural differences between what he has grown accustomed to and what he experiences on an American campus. Students with similar backgrounds need spaces where they feel more common cultures, or at least an attempt to understand the differences.

Lack of representation, lack of promotion, and adverse staff and faculty relationships all contribute to a lack of sense of belonging with students interviewed explaining their experiences. With adverse staff and faculty relationships, we saw examples of a student identifying class size as a contributing factor, as well as an example of an adjunct professor not showing as much work ethic as others. One student also felt that he was treated differently because of the color of his skin, leading to not feeling belonging. With lack of promotion, many students explained that they feel VCU could do a better job of promoting the events that are happening and the clubs they can be a part of. In lack of representation, participants interviewed feel that VCU is diverse, but there could be more representation among faculty and staff members to make them feel more belonging.

Summary

Chapter four provides the findings from the one-on-one interviews and focus groups that were rooted in our research questions, centered on the sense of belonging, for students identifying as men of color at VCU. There were 18 individual students interviewed and they all took part in a total of 5 interviews. The individual interview questions revolved around themes that were created from our research questions trying to understand how men of color experience their sense of belonging, how their identities relate to their belonging, and how they make sense of their sense of belonging as it directly relates to campus spaces and services. The focus groups allowed our team to observe participants engaging in deeper conversation about these themes, allowing us to receive more feedback on their identities and experiences at VCU. While positive feedback was shared with our team, there is an opportunity for VCU to grow in creating a sense of belonging for men of color students at VCU. Chapter 5 will provide discussion of the findings in relation to the extant literature and recommendations for the partner organization and VCU.

CHAPTER 5 - Analysis and Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative capstone project was to investigate how undergraduate men of color at a HWI (Virginia Commonwealth University) experience a sense of belonging. This chapter will discuss the findings as related to the literature on sense of belonging and how men of color experience this phenomena. We will also provide interpretations, recommendations, and suggestions for future research. The chapter will close with a summary of the work completed and key findings. Our research questions were as follows:

1. How do men of color experience sense of belonging?
2. How do participants describe their racial identity, ethnic identity, and gender identity as it relates to finding belonging on VCU's campus?
3. How do men of color prioritize resources and spaces to create a sense of belonging at VCU?

To investigate these research questions, our team completed individual interviews and focus groups with undergraduate men of color. Upon reviewing the findings, the following themes emerged: experiencing identity, challenges, sense of belonging, and sense of belonging at VCU. Each of these themes contained factors that the participants identified as important to their understanding and experience of the phenomena, such as what influenced their belonging positively or negatively. The following sections will address these themes, as well as what our findings suggest for future research and practice.

Interpretation of the Findings

Experiencing Identity

Aligning with the literature, participants noted that their identities, including their race, gender, and ethnicity, directly impacted their sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Allen,

2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019; Supiano, 2018; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Yeager et al., 2013). Participants noted examples of racism and negative biases towards men on campus that adversely affected their sense of self and belonging. Alternatively, participants shared that affinity-based student groups, such as Developing Men of Color, made them feel understood and “comfortable” on campus. Relating to masculinities, none of the participants described avoiding activities, such as academic resources, to avoid appearing feminine as Edwards and Jones (2009) suggested. However, several participants reiterated the desire to “be themselves” and that traditional gender norms, while expected of them by others, did not fit their own sense of self.

As Strayhorn (2019) suggests, a student’s identity has an effect on whether or not they feel they belong or are supported on campus. In the case of men of color, they are self-aware of their identities and are vigilant in sensing whether or not a space is psychologically and physically “safe” for them, based on their skin color and/or gender (Bañales et al., 2022; Billups, 2021; Chesin, et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016; Willis and Nebblett, 2020). While identity was an important aspect of the participants’ daily experience, many also emphasized the importance of hobbies, research interests, and career development. Additionally, these individuals confronted various systemic barriers and biases that hindered their sense of belonging and overall well-being and created challenges they faced on campus.

Challenges

The literature suggests that students who do not feel a sense of belonging at their institution are more likely to withdraw, fail coursework, or suffer emotionally (Allen, 2020; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Yeager et al., 2013). Our participants shared that they have experienced racism, sexism, and homophobia while on campus, which has

been attributed to a negative sense of belonging (Chesin et al., 2014; Esie & Bates, 2023; Sampson, 2019; Walton and Cohen, 2007). Additionally, participants explained that stereotype threat presented challenges. Stereotype threat increased concerns about fulfilling negative stereotypes, and in turn, resulted in lower academic performance and increased uncertainty about belonging. With stereotype threat implying that minority students underperform because of pressures created by negative stereotypes, it also intensified impostor syndrome and negatively impacted academic achievement, posing obstacles to acquiring full realization of potential within the academic space (Owens & Massey, 2011). For some of the participants, negative experiences of belonging did not just come from white peers, as common sense might suggest. Some students experienced stereotyping and bias from peer students of color. The implications of not being accepted by other people of color impacts a sense of belonging just as much, if not more deeply, than experiences with white peers; further research is needed in order to better understand this experience.

Participants also reported that expectations from parents and society, such as how a man of color should “behave,” created pressures that affected them and their ability to engage. The impact of “boy code” often added layers of pressure to reinforce social accountability and norms (Le, et al., 2022; McGuire et al., 2014; Thangaraj, 2022). Mental health also emerged as a recurring theme that presented a challenge to students, as participants shared feelings of isolation and judgment from others while on campus (Chesin et al., 2014). There is a common thread among participants' experiences, emphasizing the importance of feeling understood, “at home,” and comfortable in order to develop a sense of belonging within their academic environment.

Sense of Belonging

Our team discovered throughout the course of the capstone project that belonging, while a personal feeling that is influenced by an individual's unique experiences (Strayhorn, 2019), has common elements as described by our participants. Many participants described a sense of belonging as feeling "understood," "at home," and "comfortable." When asked directly what they thought of belonging, participants used "comfortable" and phrases such as "be yourself" to describe their need for feeling secure in the ability to be themselves. Without the space to be safely authentic and to feel comfortable, participants may become isolated or feel unmotivated (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2007). All participants displayed a high level of self-awareness and desire to be authentic, reinforcing notions of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2014).

Belonging is a phenomena that is top-of-mind for undergraduate men of color and our project reaffirms that they are acutely aware of when they do or do not "fit-in" (Strayhorn, 2019; Bañales et. al, 2022; De Sisto, 2022). Therefore, for the success of men of color at undergraduate institutions such as HWIs, it is vital that their belonging is ensured. Considering the ways that students self-author their story at VCU, this project highlights that a one size fits all approach is detrimental to student sense of belonging on a college campus, especially for men of color. While identity-based spaces such as *Project Males* or the Men of Color initiatives at various institutions around the country support the self authorship journey of men of color seeking to find a sense of belonging, we uncovered that even these spaces can succumb to monolithic thinking. Programs and initiatives must consider strategies that are inclusive to the spectrum of identities that exist within these coveted spaces.

As observed through our project, many students who did not identify as being Black or African American felt less connected to the label "man of color" perhaps due to differing

historical contexts and cultural connections with the term. Research must offer a more holistic lens that creates connectivity for non-White students. Often in the attempt to counter the majority White contexts that systematically influences the overall university culture at HWIs, identity based organizations too can cause some members who do not fit the socialized norms of particular identities to feel isolated. This project, for example, highlighted the importance of programs to consider the experiences of “bi-racial” individuals as this lived experience becomes more common within society over time; as participants expressed having to “choose” which identity they lead with in spaces. In order for identity based spaces to be a space of belonging, they must challenge socialized norms assigned to individual identities and embrace the increasingly complex relationship between belonging and identity. In the context of VCU, these revelations could offer insight to how even student services can become more approachable to underrepresented populations such as men of color.

Sense of Belonging at VCU

Importantly, the participants were aware of what level of support they had as a man of color on campus, suggesting that visibility and promotion of resources created specifically for this population is important. Student organizations played a major role in sense of belonging, as many participants listed student-led groups that had uplifted them and their experiences. The implications of this project included a greater emphasis of taking into consideration student voices when creating spaces for them. Spaces such as Developing Men of Color (DMC) were often mentioned in positive regards as students noted where they found belonging. At the same time, students also pointed to the lack of accessibility, to find and access the groups, if you did not know the “right” people. Stories shared by participants highlighted the need for spaces to be less monolithic and more holistic in representing the diverse diaspora of identities.

Physical spaces were also important to the participants. For example, the gym was cited as a space in which men of color met friends and created community, thus promoting a sense of belonging. However, several participants noted that the promotion of resources, groups, and events for men of color was lacking at VCU. They found it difficult to know about events or find groups that fit their needs. Additionally, the lack of representation on campus through staff and faculty, particularly in advising and mental health spaces, was a concern for the participants.

Project participants heavily noted the ways that their classroom experience impacts their desire to engage in the classroom. Participants shared how faculty's implicit and explicit biases made students of color feel invisible. Some participants expressed fear or intimidation in approaching faculty who were perceived as harsh or who did not look like them. The lack of representation in the classroom impacted how students engaged in the class they were taking. Throughout both the focus groups and individual interviews, students highlighted the desire for faculty to share more of their authentic selves within the classroom; the more a faculty member talked about their family, hobbies and other matters of interest, the more students felt safe and willing to participate in the class.

Summary

We found that this project provided insight into the lived experiences of men of color at VCU. Our focus on the men of color population at VCU highlights the importance of diving deeper than identity to create meaning and a sense of belonging. Participants unanimously mentioned the desire to be seen as more than just their racial, gender and ethnic identities; many participants emphasized that their interests and hobbies are important aspects to understanding who they are and how they find belonging at VCU. We learned that creating spaces at the university that challenge monolithic tropes of identity makes men of color feel seen, heard, and

valued. Our findings also highlighted how rich and nuanced identity is; the often unintentional result of identity-based spaces and organizations is that they create belonging for some, but also isolation for others. The interviews and focus groups revealed the need for identity-based spaces to be more inclusive to all variations expressed through specific identities and to look at the cultural practices that establish social norms. Through analyzing our findings and considering the core implications of this project, our team next offers strategic recommendations that could improve men of color's sense of belonging at VCU.

Recommendations

The capstone team sought to explore and better understand undergraduate men of color's sense of belonging at VCU. As a result of this project, our team was able to identify ways that participants feel a sense of belonging, gather their feedback on challenges they face on campus, and understand how their identities affect their experiences. While participants identified ways in which they felt belonging on VCU's campus, our team recommends the following strategies to increase belonging for this population, as well as suggestions for future research.

Recommendation 1: Increase Awareness of Resources for Men of Color

Participants were asked directly how they felt belonging for men of color could be improved at VCU. A recurring issue was that the participants felt a lack of awareness when it came to resources, events, and groups for men of color. While information regarding popular organizations, such as fraternities and Developing Men of Color, is often shared via word of mouth, many participants felt that younger students were unaware of what resources existed for them on campus. This includes student organizations, counseling, and multicultural events on campus. Presently, VCU promotes campus activities and services via flyers, emails, and social

media, but we recommend the following changes be implemented to better reach this population and hopefully increase their belonging.

Firstly, we suggest that a listserv that targets men of color be created with the option for students to unsubscribe from the list. If men of color are enrolled in the listserv as freshmen, they may be more likely to become aware of events, groups, and services that are available to them. The Office of Multicultural Student Affairs has an email newsletter that includes multicultural offerings, but we suggest a targeted list with routine sendings that highlight student stories of success and opportunities across campus. The participants stressed the importance of early outreach, as many participants in their senior year expressed regret of “missing out” because they were unaware of what was available to them. Early and targeted outreach may increase belonging, which in turn could improve retention.

Secondly, VCU can better promote diversity events by increasing the amount of fliers that advertise these events in high-traffic areas such as the Commons, the library, and various academic buildings. Several participants discovered the capstone project due to physical flyers displayed in common areas. Additionally, VCU can increase the visibility of events and resources by posting on social media, sending through VCU Telegram, and collaborating more closely with student organizations and academic offices to increase communication efforts. While the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs (OMSA) and multiple sub-identity groups do currently send out communication regarding these sponsored events, VCU’s partnership with these organizations will increase exposure in spaces where students look to see what is happening around campus. Actively encouraging faculty to promote various cultural events in their classrooms can also elevate awareness of diversity events on VCU’s campus. Academic offices, such as the Campus Learning Center and Academic Advising, can also be encouraged to

promote directly to students during appointments and tutoring sessions. Efforts to promote visibility and awareness are essential in cultivating a campus culture where men of color feel valued, respected, and empowered to thrive at VCU.

Recommendation 2: Promote Positive Relationships with Staff, Faculty, and Peers

Throughout the interview and focus group process, participants routinely cited their experiences with staff, faculty, and peers as having a strong impact on whether or not they felt that they belonged at VCU. Research shows that supportive connections on campus can help students develop belonging and persist to graduation (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Kuh et al., 2006; Strayhorn, 2019). For men of color who do not have a supportive relationship on campus, whether with a staff member or a peer, they may be less likely to feel a sense of belonging at VCU. To foster a community in which faculty, staff, and students are supportive of men of color, we suggest the following strategies: connecting men of color, training for faculty and staff, and creating more student-centered events.

When asked about their involvement on campus, several participants in our project shared that they were part of student organizations centered around identity. Some were involved in Developing Men of Color or fraternities. However, a majority of the participants remarked that they found VCU to be a “separate but equal” campus. For example, some participants shared that men of color tended to stay within their own group without much crossover or that VCU was made up of “cliques.” This made it difficult for a handful of participants to connect, leading to feelings of isolation. We suggest that VCU work to assist students in creating bridges and connections across groups. One way to do so is to create multicultural round-tables or events specifically for men of color to meet, network, and interact with one another. Professional development opportunities specifically for men of color, but not limited to only a handful of

majors or one specific college, may be helpful. Another suggestion is to promote identity-based organizations to the same level as Developing Men of Color, especially those that are entirely student-run.

Several participants shared stories of feeling ostracized in the classroom by their faculty members. Some even shared that they felt that due to their identity as a man of color, that they were experiencing racism based on how their professors treated them. To combat discrimination in the classroom, we suggest that VCU work to create training with student voices to show the impact that faculty and staff interactions have on men of color. While VCU offers several trainings regarding student populations (such as Green Zone for military and veteran students and Safe Zone for LGBTQIA+ students), these are optional and may not be completed by the majority of staff or faculty that men of color interact with on campus. We recommend that instead of optional training, that anti-racism and anti-bias professional development be a requirement for staff and faculty during the onboarding process and to be completed at least once-a-year.

There are several topics that would be imperative for VCU staff and faculty to explore and develop expertise in to better support this population, such as harmful stereotypes and creating a welcoming classroom for all students. We found through our capstone project that implicit bias surrounding gender and race is commonplace in the classroom. Men of color are aware of the stereotypes or biases that staff and faculty may have about them regarding their masculinities and race, such as being less capable or held to different standards than their white peers. We suggest that a training around gender bias and stereotypes be implemented. Anti-racism should be promoted through all training.

To create such a training, we recommend that VCU consider creating interactive online modules that can be completed at the participants' own pace and in their own space. We also encourage centering student voices to increase the sense of belonging and ownership of their experiences. For example, a man of color could be interviewed in a video about how they would and would not find belonging in the classroom. This project revealed the extent to which men of color are self-aware and willing to engage in exchanges of knowledge. We recognize that students opted into participating in this project and were more likely to contribute to discussion because of that. If such a project were to be pursued, we also stress the importance of compensation for students' time and emotional labor. Faculty could also be given a survey to gauge understanding or perceptions of their students' experiences.

We recommend highlighting men of color's stories in information that is distributed to the campus at large. For example, a panel event featuring men of color could be hosted for academic advisors and faculty. Men of color could be featured on VCU's website or social media marketing. This can involve more faculty-led seminars and student-facilitated discussions on such topics. By amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized students, VCU can begin to address systemic racism, promote diversity and inclusion, and create supportive environments where men of color feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. Efforts to combat microaggressions, enhance representation, address structural inequities, and foster inclusive environments are integral in cultivating a university culture that embraces diversity and promotes belonging for all students (Walton, & Cohen, 2007).

Recommendation 3: Increase Representation on Campus

Participants expressed a lack of racial and ethnic representation in the faculty and staff at VCU. VCU can cultivate diversity by increasing representation in their staff through strategic

hiring practices that prioritize diversity and equity. This involves ensuring job postings reach a wide range of candidates, actively seeking out underrepresented groups, and providing support for applicants from diverse backgrounds throughout the hiring process. Additionally, VCU can diversify its search committees and interview panels by including members from different backgrounds and perspectives to help mitigate unconscious and implicit biases and ensure that diverse candidates receive equitable consideration. While increasing representation in staff is integral and impactful, VCU must also prioritize retention and advancement for diverse faculty and staff members by creating supportive work environments, offering professional development opportunities on cultural competency and implicit bias, and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for career advancement (Whittaker et. al, 2015). By integrating these approaches and placing a focus on diversity in its hiring procedures, VCU can foster a more inclusive and dynamic academic community that is more representative of the student population that it educates and serves.

Recommendation 4: Develop and Support Mentorship Opportunities

To enhance the sense of belonging on campus, VCU can prioritize student and faculty mentorship opportunities. We recommend that VCU implement structured mentorship programs that pairs students with faculty and staff members who share similar academic or personal interests to foster meaningful connections and support networks. Additionally, VCU can encourage and place expectations on faculty and staff to actively engage in mentoring roles, not only to offer students guidance in their academic pursuits, but also to provide valuable social and emotional support. Students expressed that they would like to be mentored by faculty and staff that represent their own diverse identities. VCU currently offers several existing mentorship programs such as the Business Mentoring Program, African American Alumni Mentoring Circle

Program, and Engineering Pop Up Mentoring. While these mentorship programs have been instrumental in supporting students' professional and personal development there is an evident need to expand mentorship opportunities to support groups that are not adequately represented within these existing programs. By broadening the scope of mentorship initiatives, VCU can better address the diverse needs and experiences of men of color (Sanacore, 2017).

Mentors at VCU are experiencing burnout due to being stretched thin across various mentorship programs and exacerbated by the already low representation of faculty and staff of color in higher education. As mentors play a pivotal role in guiding and supporting students, the strain on their capacity to adequately serve the needs of a diverse student body is evident. Representation matters greatly in mentorship, as students often find comfort and understanding in mentors who share similar backgrounds and experiences. However, in instances such as the Developing Men of Color (DMC), where there is a significant disparity between the number of mentors and the students they serve—like the staggering ratio of one person to over 700 men of color—students may not receive the personalized support they require. This highlights the pressing need for VCU to address mentorship capacity issues and enhance efforts to recruit and retain mentors from diverse backgrounds. Through investing in mentorship programs and enhancing representation among mentors, VCU can more effectively nurture the academic, personal, and professional development of its students, thereby cultivating an environment of inclusivity on campus.

Participants also shared their own interest and passion for mentorship. Some felt a responsibility to give back to younger men of color. In addition to faculty and staff mentorship, we recommend a structured peer mentorship program between men of color. We recommend considering a mentorship program that could begin as part of the freshmen experience. For

example, a group of students that identify as men of color could opt-in to being paired with a mentor, such as a junior or senior, who also identifies as a man of color. Given the active membership of Developing Men of Color, student-driven initiatives such as peer mentorship can improve personal and professional development for this population, which was demonstrated as a high-priority during our project. Mentorship also acts as an avenue for self-authorship, especially for freshmen, as reflective exercises can be built into the requirements of a formal initiative.

Recommendation 5: Counseling & Mental Health

Finally, by understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of men of color, VCU can better address the intersectionality of mental health and identity, combat stigma, and enhance access to support resources. VCU can improve mental health support by offering more accessible counseling and therapy services, both in-person and virtually. Recognizing that traditional counseling settings may not always facilitate emotional openness among this demographic, it is crucial to acknowledge the impact of the environment on mental health support. Men, specifically men of color, often require spaces they perceive as safe and secure to feel empowered to be emotionally vulnerable (Smith, 2005). One approach to address this need could involve allowing students to select the space where they feel most comfortable for appointments, which would offer autonomy and choice in their mental health support efforts. Additionally, to improve self-authorship, counseling sessions could include reflective essays or reflective activities, along with open-ended questions, that allow the students to guide sessions. These strategies could also be shared with Academic Advisors. While not counselors, academic advisors often have one-on-one meetings with men of color that could be impactful and beneficial to their belonging.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this project provided our team with a better understanding of how students make sense of their sense of belonging at VCU with regards to their identities, relationships, challenges, and the services that VCU provides. Based on feedback and comments shared from participants, there are recommendations for conducting future research that would benefit VCU and its students of color. Given the complexities in understanding the sense of belonging for many students on VCU's campus, a longitudinal study would be beneficial to measure success of students who feel a strong sense of belonging at VCU in comparison to those who struggle with a sense of belonging.

A longitudinal study would be beneficial as it would allow researchers to establish ongoing relationships with participants, gaining more insightful information (Derrington, 2019). A longitudinal study would give VCU a better understanding of student experiences over multiple semesters and years in school rather than students being interviewed over the course of two months. A longitudinal study would also provide a better understanding of the programs that contribute to a better sense of belonging as they are introduced at VCU. As VCU continues to add more support services, programming, and improvement of facilities, it would be beneficial to see how these changes would affect the sense of belonging for students. When considering the focus of a longitudinal study, in particular at VCU, some of the sub-themes our project uncovered could be a great starting point. For example, spaces such as the gym and library were mentioned often amongst participants in relation to a positive sense of belonging at VCU. Participants often described the gym and library as a way that they have fostered connection and built community. A longitudinal study following men of color experiences within these spaces could reveal the evolving deeper meaning to the student relationship with the gym and the

library. Overall, such a study could capture the full experience of Men of Color at VCU as other factors change during their time.

During the interviews and focus groups, it was mentioned by participants that some of them were not as familiar with the term, “men of color.” When asked if he had been referred to as a man of color in the past, Louis, a sophomore, shared “I never really heard in regards to me being called that” and was recruited to this project through a team member speaking to his class. With our difficulty in recruiting participants, it potentially would have helped to provide our definition of who we were seeking to participate. In future research, we recommend defining “men of color” when recruiting participants and emphasizing the diversity of this identity.

Chapter Summary

The project’s findings produced five recommendations. First, VCU should increase awareness of events, resources, and groups for men of color via multiple modes of communication. Access and exposure to such resources should be made as early in the student’s journey as possible, but also on a frequent basis in visible spaces. Communicating resources should be made in more spaces that men of color occupy such as the classroom, the Commons, the gym and the library. Secondly, VCU should promote positive relationships with staff, faculty and peers. This recommendation is necessary to help the full VCU community embody a sense of belonging. VCU should require training sessions that increase confidence in cultural competency amongst faculty and staff both inside and outside the classroom. VCU should also create more student-centered events such as faculty-led seminars and student-facilitated discussions on such topics; this strategy will create spaces of connection between members of the VCU community. By amplifying the voices of marginalized groups such as men of color, and

creating more visibility of their experiences, more trust that diversity is genuinely celebrated at VCU could be cultivated.

Thirdly, VCU should increase representation on campus through a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy. Recruitment strategies involve marketing job postings in spaces that support underrepresented communities. Retention strategies should incorporate professional development that fosters a supportive work environment. Fourth, VCU should develop and support mentoring opportunities. While some mentorship programs do exist at the university, there is an opportunity to expand the availability of formalized mentorship programs that meet the needs of underrepresented communities at the university. Finally, VCU should seek to improve mental health access, awareness, and flexibility to support men of color, and therefore their sense of belonging. Through implementation of these five recommendations by the university, we hope VCU can improve the student experience and increase a sense of belonging for underrepresented communities such as men of color.

Conclusion

Tasked with further investigating the sense of belonging on behalf of the Assessment Office in the Division of Student Affairs (The DSA Assessment Office) at VCU, this capstone analyzed the context of VCU, utilized a review of literature, and presented a qualitative analysis of a case study. Using literature, the team initially sought to solely understand the experiences of undergraduate sophomore men of color. Due to limitations in the project's recruitment process, the team expanded the scope of the targeted population from sophomores to the experiences of all undergraduate men of color at VCU. This pivot allowed the team to conduct 18 individual interviews and 5 focus groups. The rich descriptions shared by participants both confirmed findings from literature and offered new insights to aid future research pursuits.

Derived from the context of VCU, our project confirmed that VCU has advantages that support the higher levels of diversity existing at the university compared to many other peer HWIs. Participants shared that, despite such advantages, VCU still has aspects to the university culture that are detrimental to long-term sense of belonging for men of color. Students expressed challenges with finding belonging because of the lack of curated exposure to resources that could aid them in their journeys. Because freshman participants have not yet completed a full year at VCU, their specific anecdotes were more limited than that of the upperclassman participants. Seniors offered the most fruitful descriptions of their sense of belonging at the university due to the amount of time they had been at VCU; many of the seniors often spoke from a spirit of excitement, frustration, and regret as they recollected their different experiences of the university. Further research such as a longitudinal study could help expand discussion around evolving sense of belonging over time.

Despite differences in how participants shared their experiences, each participant confirmed the depth of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2018). Our findings showed how men of color navigate the duality of perception as it relates to intersectionality. Some participants who were able to maintain a sense of belonging over time often employed code switching to fit in; the risk of code switching was the loss of authenticity and a lower sense of self. Writings by African American author, W.E.B. Du Bois (1994) amplifies the lived experience of our participants as he shares that perception and performance of identity leave one at war within themselves to find belonging:

Born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, –a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of

always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, –an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The tension of identity as a transactional experience paired with the unique context of VCU highlights the need to further study. Understanding identity can create connectivity, but more aspects are needed to help alleviate the internal turmoil that Du Bois describes (1994).

Even though VCU has Developing Men of Color (DMC) designed to support the needs of men of color, this capstone project shed light on the need for a more holistic approach. Even during the outreach and recruitment process of this project, our team found that the faculty and staff we reached out to across different offices saw DMC as the sole space for reaching men of color at the university. While DMC did help in our reach, we found that about half of the participants did not often engage with DMC because they did not know about the organization, found it to be difficult to “fit in” due to “cliques”, or did not feel connected to the label “man of color”. Such sentiments justifies the need for all faculty and staff to see the impact of interpersonal relationships across the university when supporting underrepresented communities. Through understanding student experiences and empowering faculty and staff, VCU can better identify the means of creating a sense of belonging and sustaining it for the entirety of a student's journey.

Appendix A

Participation Email (to students)

Hey there,

We hope your semester is going well! We are looking for students to share their experiences at VCU and their experiences of belonging (or not belonging). We want to hear from you! Do you feel like you belong here? Whether your experiences of belonging at VCU have been positive or negative, we want to hear your stories and thoughts!

The purpose of our capstone research project is to understand how men of color experience a sense of belonging at VCU. We are interested in interviewing you and then having you meet other men of color to discuss your experiences about belonging at VCU.

Interviews and focus groups will take place over Zoom and will require approximately an hour of your time in December of 2023 and into early 2024. The Zoom sessions will be recorded so that the capstone team can review them later as part of the project.

Students who opt to participate and complete an initial individual interview will be entered into a raffle for the chance to receive an additional gift card. Participants who complete *both* an interview and the follow-up focus group will receive a \$30 gift card upon fulfillment.

If you are interested in speaking with us, [please complete this Google Form](#). Your information and anything you share with us will be confidential. By completing the Google form you are signifying that you consent to participate in the project.

Thank you again for your time and we look forward to learning more about you and your experiences here at VCU.

Sincerely,

[Research Team Names]

Appendix B

Google Form (Intake) Survey

See electronic form here: <https://forms.gle/y2qHAUrDp61VfTyG8>

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project. The purpose of our project is to see how men of color make a sense of belonging at VCU. We are interested in interviewing men of color at VCU who

(a) are **undergraduate students**

(b) and are a **freshman, sophomore, junior or senior**

If you fit these criteria and are interested in participating in this project please complete this 2 minute form. Please note that this project will involve: **one 1:1 interview and one focus group**. Those who are interviewed and complete **both** the 1:1 interview and focus group will receive a monetary prize in the amount of a **\$30 e-gift card**. Those who participate in project at any point, regardless of interview completion will also be entered into a raffle for an additional e-gift card.

Note that each interview will typically will be **an hour** in length for participants to have time to share their experience.

*Once completed, expect to hear from our team confirming your participation in the project along with any next steps. Should you have any questions for our capstone team, please email us at **tcresearchteam4@gmail.com**.*

****IRB not applicable - this capstone project is for academic purposes****

[Interest Form Questions Section]

What year are you **currently** at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU)?

- a. Freshman
- b. Sophomore
- c. Junior
- d. Senior

Please indicate with which you identify (multiple choice):

- a. Man
- b. Woman
- c. Trans
- d. Nonbinary
- e. Prefer not to answer
- f. None of the above

Please indicate with which you identify (multiple choice):

- a. Black or African American
- b. Asian
- c. Hispanic or Latino
- d. American Indian or Alaskan Native
- e. Middle Eastern and North African
- f. Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- g. White/Caucasian
- h. Two or more races
- i. Other
- j. Self-identification (short answer)

If you selected the "self-identification" option in the previous question, please elaborate here how you choose to identity (short answer)

[Contact Information]

Name (short answer):

VCU Email (short answer):

Phone (short answer):

Appendix C

Informed Consent Statement Form

See electronic form here:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeS3flsPH9ZP_oSm-Iv2VhdmwNIuCWpMpmjGpgcdrAoThW99A/formResponse

Please read the following and then answer accordingly:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in our research project.

The interview will be no more than *90 minutes* and will be audio **recorded** for data gathering purposes. The core purpose of this research project is to understand how sophomore men of color at Virginia Commonwealth University explore a sense of belonging at the university. Our research project will ask the following questions:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. How do men of color experience sense of belonging?

2. How do participants describe their racial identity, ethnic identity, and gender identity as it relates to finding belonging on VCU's campus?
3. How do men of color prioritize resources and spaces to create a sense of belonging at VCU?

All potential participants will meet the following criteria to be considered for the research project: (a) self identify as a man of color, (b) are a freshman, sophomore, junior or senior, and (c) are undergraduate students at VCU.

Because you completed our intake form and fit the parameters for the research project, you were asked to participate in a 1:1 interview and focus group. After completing the interview and focus group, participants will receive an optional survey to provide any additional thoughts. Know that at any point, you are welcome to change your mind about your participation. The findings for this interview are solely for doctoral program educational purposes, and will solely be viewed by our capstone team to include our doctoral chair. Through this interview, we will obtain audio, video and word transcripts. Should you desire copies of any and all of these items, please also, **let us know**. You do not need to prepare for this interview, but we do have some helpful tips to help you have an enjoyable experience as well as some questions that help move things along if need be. The nature of this conversation is going to be free flowing where we would like for you to offer your honest and true perspective along the way. The chief risks to participating in this research project is that you may be potentially triggered with certain experiences if you relay anything that may cause that, hearing anything that resonates, etc. Should this be the case for you and you desire to remove yourself from the research project, our team is happy to oblige. Anything captured from you will be deleted and destroyed at the point you decide to no longer participate in the project.

After reading through and hearing the estimation of the research project please click "**next**" to either confirm or deny your consent to participate in the project.

Should you have any questions for our capstone team, please email us at tcresearchteam4@gmail.com.

****IRB not applicable - this capstone research project is for academic purposes****

Consent Statement

After reading through and hearing the estimation of the research project, the risks involved, and the process of the interview, do you still wish to participate in this interview?

- **Yes:** After reading through and hearing information about the research project, the risks involved and the process of the interview, I agree to participate in the research project.

- **No:** After reading through and hearing information about the research project, the risks involved and the process of the interview, I do not agree to participate in the research project.

Appendix D

Non-Discrimination Declaration Statement

As representatives of Virginia Commonwealth University, our project stands against discrimination of any kind, as stated in the VCU Anti-Discrimination clause:

“Virginia Commonwealth University does not discriminate in admissions, treatment, employment or access to its programs or activities on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin (including ethnicity), age, sex (including pregnancy, childbirth and related medical conditions), parenting status, marital status, political affiliation, military status (including veteran status), genetic information (including family medical history), sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or disability, as required by Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; Titles VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008; the Virginia Human Rights Act; the Virginia Personnel Act; and other state or federal laws and university policies. VCU prohibits sexual harassment and sex-based misconduct, including sexual assault and other forms of interpersonal violence. VCU also prohibits discrimination against employees or applicants for employment because they have inquired about, discussed or disclosed their own pay or the pay of another employee or applicant.”

In compliance with this statement, we, the capstone team, confirm that this research project will be void of discrimination and bias and agree to create a safe and inclusive environment for all participants who choose to participate in this research project. We confirm that should a participant feel uncomfortable during the interview process they are free to stop the interview and/or remove themselves from the process entirely.

[research team member signatures here]

Appendix E

Interview Protocol Design

Interviewee Name:

Interviewer Name:

Introductory Protocol:

My name is [researcher]. I am here today to learn about your experiences at VCU. Specifically, I am interested in understanding your sense of belonging at VCU as a man of color. This interview will last approximately one hour.

The aim of this capstone project is to better understand how men of color define and experience a sense of belonging at VCU. I will ask you about ten questions to learn more about your experience.

Please note that you have the option to stop the interview at any time or to not answer any questions. Participation in this interview process is voluntary. Your name will be kept confidential and your responses will be anonymous.

I will be recording the interview today so that our team can create a transcript of the recording and ensure that your words are accurately captured. After the project, the recordings will be destroyed. There will be no identifying information kept in the transcripts. If you look in the chat, I have an informed consent document for you to sign

I am starting the recording now.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

I would love to get to know you better.

A. Background

- a. How is your semester going so far?
- b. What brought you to VCU?
- c. What influenced you to stay at VCU?

Now I am going to ask you some questions about identity and how your different identities have influenced your experience at VCU. In particular, I will ask about your racial identity, ethnic identity, and gender identity and welcome you to speak as honestly as you feel comfortable.

B. Identity -

- a. Have you heard of the term “man of color” before?
 - i. This is the definition that I will be using for “man of color” during this interview: Men of color are people who identify as a man or masculine and who identify as Black/African American, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Latinx and/or Native American.
 - ii. How do you react to that definition?

- iii. Have you been referred to as a man of color in the past? How did it make you feel? (probe: more or less belonging)
- b. What identities are most important to you?
- c. How would you describe your identity to someone who doesn't know you?
 - i. What identities have the strongest effect on how you perceive yourself?
 - ii. What identities have the greatest effect on how others perceive you?
- d. Think back to a time in which your gender and racial identities mattered. Describe that to me.
 - i. In your example, how do your race, ethnicity and gender identities intersect?
- e. Do you identify strongly as a man? Why or why not?
 - i. What cultural expectations are there for being a man?
 - 1. Probe as necessary - Ex: Can you elaborate?
 - ii. In what ways are the expectations different for a man of color than other students, such as women of color or white men?
 - 1. Probe as necessary - Ex: Can you elaborate?

Now that we have discussed your identities, I would like to ask you some questions about any bias or discrimination you may have encountered while on VCU's campus.

C. Bias and Discrimination

- a. How have you encountered stereotypes or biases while at VCU?
 - i. What about stereotypes or biases as it relates to your race and ethnicity while on campus?
 - ii. What about stereotypes or biases as it relates to your gender while on campus?
- b. In what ways do you feel like your identity either aids or limits your sense of belonging on campus?

Thank you. I would like to next understand how your identities impact your sense of belonging on campus.

D. Sense of Belonging

- a. How would you define a sense of belonging?
- b. Think back to a time when you felt like you belonged while you were at VCU. Please describe that moment for us.
- c. Think about your identities as a man of color,
 - i. Have VCU staff or faculty made you feel that you belong? If so, how? If not, why?

- ii. Have other VCU students made you feel that you belong? If so, how? If not, why?
- d. What resources, programs and/or locations at VCU provide a sense of belonging for you? Please describe them to me
 - i. Have there been resources, programs and/or locations that have not provided a sense of belonging for you? Please explain further for me.
- e. If VCU faculty & staff wanted to ensure men of color felt that they belong at VCU, what advice would you give them?

Closing

Thank you for your participation in our capstone project. Do you have any questions for me?

How did you hear about participating in this study?

Do you know anyone else that you could refer?

The second part of our project includes your participation in a virtual focus group with 4-5 of your peers. We will follow up with you via email within one week of this interview to schedule a time for a focus group. Remember that upon fully completing 1 focus group, you will earn a \$30 e-gift card. Your participation so far has also entered you into a raffle to earn another e-gift card.

Appendix F Focus Group Protocol Design

Interviewees:

Interviewers:

Introductory Protocol

Our names are [researchers]. Each of you have participated in a 1:1 interview with our research team and your thoughts have been helpful in this process. The purpose of today's focus group is to deepen our understanding of how you make sense of belonging at VCU as a sophomore man of color. This focus group will last approximately one hour to two hours.

Please note that you have the option to leave the focus group at any time. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your name will be kept confidential and your responses will be anonymous.

The expectation of this dialogue is that views and opinions will be respected. Our team is seeking to understand everyone's experiences and there are no right or wrong answers.

We will be recording the focus group today so that our team can create a transcript of the recording and ensure that your words are accurately captured. After the study, the recordings will be destroyed. There will be no identifying information kept in the transcripts.

We are starting the recording now.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

We will be asking you each to read some of the questions provided. We will go around the table and each person will read questions within each category to the group, answer, then everyone will share. Then the next person will read the next set of questions.

Introduction

A. Background Questions

- a. What do you like about VCU?
- b. What do you not like about VCU?
- c. How would you describe VCU to someone who has never been a student here?

B. Identity Questions

- a. When you hear the word “man of color”, what do you think or feel?
- b. What is it like to be a man on VCU’s campus?
- c. What is it like to be a person of color on VCU’s campus?
- d. Please share the times when you feel like you can be yourself on VCU’s campus?

C. Sense of Belonging Questions

- a. What words would you associate with your feeling of belonging at VCU?
- b. What’s your favorite place on campus and why?
- c. If you could suggest ways to VCU to make a student feel like they belong, what would you say?

D. Summary Questions

- a. What do you feel like hasn’t been mentioned so far as it relates to your experience at VCU?
- b. Pretend the person next to you is a freshman. What advice would you give them regarding college?

Closing Statement

Thank you for your participation in our study. Do you have any questions for us? As a result of your participation in both a 1:1 interview and this focus group, you have earned a \$30 e-gift card that we will send directly to you. Your name has also been entered into the raffle for an

additional e-gift card. We will draw the raffle once we have completed all focus group interviews. Once we have concluded the analysis of the data we collect, we will be sure to share our findings with each of you. Should you have any questions at any point, please don't hesitate to reach out to our team. Thank you again and we hope you all have a great rest of the day.

Appendix G Interest Form Demographic Breakdown

Figure 4.0 A

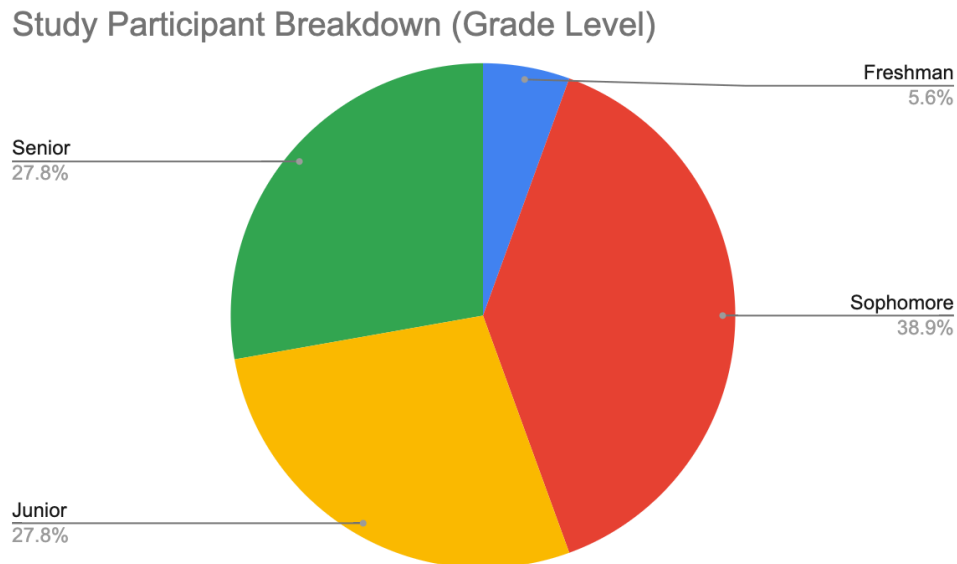
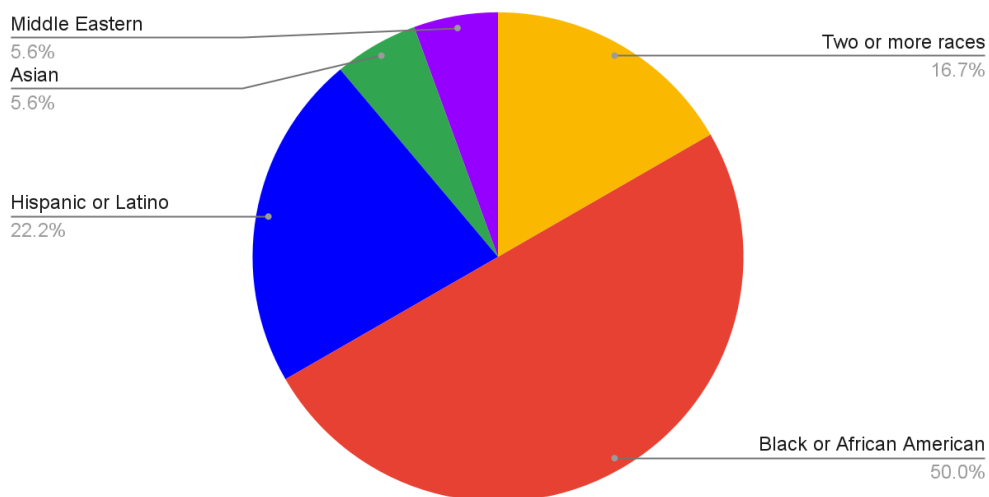


Figure 4.0 B

Study Participant (Racial Identity)



Appendix H Additional Anecdote Charts

Table 4.2

Experiencing Identity

Subthemes	Frequency and % of total, n = 374	
	n	%
Racial Identity	136	36.3
Gender Identity	112	30
Ethnic Identity	44	11.8
Religious Identity	21	5.6
Man of Color	61	16.3

Table 4.3
Experiencing Identities Subthemes - Racial Identity

Experiencing Identity Subtheme	Example quote	Frequency, n
Racial Identity	<p>“Yeah, I feel like that. Really, you really got just about everybody in that. I myself identify as black or African American. I am biracial, but I am very black passing, so I just identify with my black side more than the other side of me.” (Tyrone, senior)</p> <p>“It's kind of hard to fit in at first, because you don't know what side is gonna really take you in. So I will say it wasn't necessarily hard for me to find friends just because I would try to be polite. But I always did kind of gravitate more towards the black side of me and my black friends, just because of that area that we grew up in.” (Tyrone, senior)</p> <p>“My dad is black. My mother is white. So it's a little bit different for me. I really had to kind of figure out and do my own research on the disparities and everything that black people face within this country.” (Tyrone, senior, Focus Group)</p> <p>“I have I fear that I'm gonna be like, the darkest person in that room.” (Jeremy, sophomore, Focus Group)</p> <p>“People will even make jokes. They were saying during black history month that oh I only get half a month because I'm half white and like that would kind of rub me the wrong way.” (Cody, junior)</p>	

Table 4.4
Experiencing Identities Subthemes - Gender Identity

Experiencing Identity Subtheme	Example quote	Frequency, n
Gender Identity	<p>“Having a beard, I guess. People would assume that I'm hyper masculine or every masculine which I don't think I am especially like when I get myself talking and I talk about all these nerdy things and cracking jokes I feel like I perceive myself as more like goofy and childish which to me is, not the complete opposite of being masculine.” (Johnathan, junior)</p> <p>“I think what's very interesting is because this campus is very involved with the queer community and it's just generally in close proximity to it. There's a lot less pressure to have a decisive gender role or specific actions that you take. Personally, I'm a man. I like it. I love hearing that I'm a man. It makes me very happy. I don't know why, but it does. And being a man on campus is very, I don't want to say strange, but there's this kind of push and pull where sometimes I'll be walking down the street and I'll feel like, yeah, I'm completely safe. I'm a man, I'm big, I'm strong. And there's other moments where I'm on campus and I'm like, do I really feel comfortable here?” (Matthew, sophomore, Focus Group 1)</p> <p>“Being a man, you gotta take the lead. You gotta take the bullet first. If any type of violence happens, everybody is looking at you. Like, bro, you gotta handle that. You can't be too emotional. You just gotta be like a punching bag, bro.” (Nelson, senior)</p>	

Table 4.5
Experiencing Identities Subthemes - Ethnic Identity

Experiencing Identity Subtheme	Example quote	Frequency, n
Ethnic Identity	<p>“But as I got older, I did kind of learn about my heritage. I'm about half Colombian, my grandparents immigrated here and started their life and my mom was from Spain, so I've had a lot of exposure to different cultures through that. So I did take pride in my culture, as a Colombian and Spanish person. But I wouldn't say that I let it completely rule who I was. It was the way that I am.” (Jackson, junior)</p> <p>“I mean, in a way that, if we're talking about identity, in a sense of, where I come from, you almost get higher expectations of you. Which is a good thing for me, but it's reinforced time and time again, professors, students, and everything.” (David, senior, Focus Group 3)</p> <p>“You know, I come from an immigrant family. I speak Spanish and back at home and stuff.” (Johnathan, junior)</p>	44

Table 4.1*Themes & Subthemes*

Themes and Subthemes	Frequency and % of total, n = 2036	
	n	%
Experiencing Identity	374	18.4
Racial Identity	136	6.7
Gender Identity	112	5.5
Man of Color	61	3.0
Ethnic Identity	44	2.2
Religious Identity	21	1
Challenges	419	20.6
Expectations, parental	49	2.4
Expectations, cultural	117	5.8
Negative Stereotypes/Biases	135	6.6
Homophobia	12	0.6
Racism	70	3.4
Mental Health	36	1.8

Themes and Subthemes	Frequency and % of total, n = 2036	
	n	%
Experiencing Sense of Belonging	327	16.1
Feeling Comfortable	66	3.2
Authenticity	101	5.0
Expressions of Isolation	31	1.5
Culture	80	3.9
Representation	49	2.4
Sense of Belonging at VCU	80	3.9
Pre-VCU experiences	80	3.9
Sense of Belonging at VCU - Beneficial	458	22.5
Academics	118	5.8
Career Development	48	2.4
Diversity	60	3
Mentorship	33	1.6
Faculty & Staff Relationships - Beneficial	55	2.7
Student Relationships	144	7.1
Sense of Belonging at VCU - Adverse	93	4.6
Crime/Safety	14	0.7
Lack of representation	24	1.2
Lack of school spirit	15	0.7
Lack of promotion	20	1
Staff & Faculty relationships - Adverse	20	1
Campus Support	172	8.4
Campus events	26	1.3
Student services	33	1.6
Student organizations	113	5.6
Physical Spaces	113	5.6

Themes and Subthemes	Frequency and % of total, n = 2036	
	n	%
Dorm	14	0.7
Academic Commons	18	0.9
Monroe Park	9	0.4
Cary Street Gym	19	0.9
Cabell Library	28	1.4
Classroom	25	1.2

References

Advancing Equitable Educational Outcomes for Male Students of Color. Project MALES.

(2023). <https://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/>

Ahn, & Davis, H. H. (2020). Four domains of students' sense of belonging to university. *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*, 45(3), 622–634.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1564902>

Alert. VCU Alert. (n.d.). <https://alert.vcu.edu/>

Allen, K. A. (2020). *The psychology of belonging*. Routledge.

Anderson, R. E., McKenny, M. C., & Stevenson, H. C. (2019). EMBRace: Developing a racial socialization intervention to reduce racial stress and enhance racial coping among Black

- parents and adolescents. *Family Process*, 58(1), 53–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12412>
- Avcı, M. (2023). Belongingness, social connectedness, and life satisfaction in college students after COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Happiness & Health*, 3(2), 23–36.
<https://doi.org/10.47602/johah.v3i2.43>
- Baedke, J., & Buklijas, T. (2023). Where organisms meet the environment: Introduction to the special issue “What counts as environment in biology and medicine: Historical, philosophical and sociological perspectives.” *Studies in History & Philosophy of Science Part A*, 99, A4–A9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2022.09.008>
- Bañales, J., Pech, A., Pinetta, B. J., Pinedo, A., Whiteside, M., Diemer, M. A., & Romero, A. J. (2022). Critiquing inequality in society and on campus: Peers and faculty facilitate civic and academic outcomes of college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 63(4), 589–609. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-021-09663-7>
- Baxter Magolda, M. (2014). Self-authorship. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2014(166), 25–33. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20092>
- Berger, J. B., & Braxton, J. M. (1998). Revising Tinto’s interactionalist theory of student departure through theory elaboration: Examining the role of organizational attributes in the persistence process. *Research in Higher Education*, 39(2), 103–119.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018760513769>
- Bhattacharya, K., & Kim, J.-H. (2020). Reworking prejudice in qualitative inquiry with Gadamer and de/colonizing onto-epistemologies. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26(10), 1174–1183.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418767201>

- Billups. (2021). *Qualitative data collection tools: design, development, and applications*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Blekic, M., Carpenter, R., & Cao, Y. (2020). Continuing and Transfer Students: Exploring Retention and Second-Year Success. *Journal of College Student Retention : Research, Theory & Practice*, 22(1), 71–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025117726048>
- Booker, K. C., & Campbell-Whatley, G. (2019). Student perceptions of inclusion at a historically Black university. *Journal of Negro Education*, 88(2), 146–158. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.88.2.0146>
- Boston, C., & Warren, S. R. (2017). The effects of belonging and racial identity on urban African American high school students' achievement. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research*, 13. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1150199>
- Brooms, D. R. (2018). Exploring Black male initiative programs: Potential and possibilities for supporting Black male success in college. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 87(1), 59–72.
- Buckley, T. R. (2018). Black Adolescent Males: Intersections among their gender role identity and racial identity and associations with self-concept (Global and School). *Child Development*, 89(4), e311–e322. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12950>
- Burnard P. (1991). A method of analyzing interview transcripts in qualitative research. *Nurse education today*, 11(6), 461–466. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917\(91\)90009-y](https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917(91)90009-y)
- Cairns-Lee, H., Lawley, J., & Tosey, P. (2022). Enhancing researcher reflexivity about the influence of leading questions in interviews. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 58(1), 164–188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00218863211037446>

- Capik, & Shupp, M. (2023). Addressing the Sophomore Slump: First-Generation College Students' Completion of Year Two of Study in a Rural Bachelor's Degree Granting College. *Journal of College Student Retention : Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(3), 632–656. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211014868>
- Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., DiCenso, A., Blythe, J., & Neville, A. J. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncology nursing forum*, 41(5), 545–547. <https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.545-547>
- Catalano, Wagner, R., & Davis, T. (2018). Approaching masculinities through a gender-aware practice framework. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2018(164), 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20279>
- Carey, Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani (2023). *College campuses are becoming more diverse. but how much do students from different backgrounds actually interact?* Kellogg Insight. <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/college-campuses-diversity-student-interaction>
- Chesin, M.S., Jeglic, E., & Smith, K. (2014). Minority college student mental health: Does majority status matter? Implications for college counseling services. *American Psychological Association. Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 42(2), 77–92. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-12233-003>
- Chu, Lien, C.-H., & Cao, Y. (2019). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on WeChat: Examining the influence of sense of belonging, need for self-enhancement, and consumer

- engagement on Chinese travelers' eWOM. *International Journal of Advertising*, 38(1), 26–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2018.1470917>
- Cislaghi, B., & Heise, L. (2020). Gender norms and social norms: differences, similarities and why they matter in prevention science. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 42(2), 407–422. doi: 10.1111/1467-9566.13008
- Clark, J. S., & Brooms, D. R. (2018). “We get to learn more about ourselves”: Black men’s engagement, bonding, and self-authorship on campus. *Journal of Negro Education*, 87(4), 391–403. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.87.4.0391>
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>
- Crenshaw, K. (2018). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics [1989]. *Feminist Legal Theory*, 57–80. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>
- Dancy. (2015). Men of color and masculinities: Researching the postsecondary education and identity development nexus. *Culture, Society and Masculinities*, 7(1), 1–.
- Dancy, T. E. II. (2011). Colleges in the making of manhood and masculinity: Gendered perspectives on African American males. *Gender and Education*, 23(4), 477–495. doi:10.1080/09540253.2010.508454
- Derrington, M. L. (2019). *Qualitative longitudinal methods : researching implementation and change*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1994). *The souls of black folk*. Dover Publications, INC.

- Dukakis K., Duong N., Ruiz de, Velasco J., Henderson J. (2014). College access and completion among boys and young men of color: Literature review of promising practices. *John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities*.
<https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/college-access-and-completion-among-boys-and-young-men-color-literature-review>
- Duncan, S., Horton, H., Smith, R., Purnell, B., Good, L., & Larkin, H. (2023). The restorative integral support (RIS) model: Community-based integration of trauma-informed approaches to advance equity and resilience for boys and men of color. *Behavioral Sciences (2076-328X)*, 13(4), 299. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13040299>
- Duran, & Garcia, C. E. (2023). Narratives of queer men of color in culturally-based fraternities making meaning of masculinities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 36(2), 203–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2020.1828652>
- Durkee, M. I., Perkins, T. R., & Smith, R. E. (2021). Longitudinal effects of the “acting white” accusation and racial identity development among black college students. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 32(1), 191–207. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12708>
- Edwards, K. E., & Jones, S. R. (2009). "Putting my man face on": A grounded theory of college men's gender identity development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(2), 210–228. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0063>
- Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative content analysis. *SAGE Open*, 4(1), 215824401452263.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014522633>
- Esie, P., & Bates, L. M. (2023). Dismantling the monolith: ethnic origin, racial identity, and major depression among US-born Black Americans. *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric*

- Epidemiology*, 58(9), 1293–1304. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02412-w>
- Evans, T. C. (2012, December). Combating the sophomore slump through peer-mentoring among African American students at predominantly white institutions.
<https://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1410&context=etd>
- First and second year experiences and Transitions*. Men of Color Initiative - First and Second Year Experiences and Transitions - Virginia Commonwealth University. (n.d).
<https://fyesye.vcu.edu/men-of-color-initiative/>
- Fleming, P. J., Lee, J. G. L., & Dworkin, S. L. (2014). “Real men don’t”: Constructions of masculinity and inadvertent harm in public health interventions. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(6), 1029–1035. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301820>
- Foste, Z., & Davis, T. L. (2018). “Am I doing this right?”: A qualitative exploration of how college men make meaning of gendered expectations. *Men and Masculinities*, 21(5), 583–602. doi:10.1177/1097184X17696188
- Foxx, K. (2021). Cultivating a Sense of Belonging: Black Students at a Predominantly White Institution. *Negro Educational Review*, 72(1–4), 107–129.
- Givens, J. R. (2016a). The invisible tax: Exploring black student engagement at historically white institutions. *Berkeley Review of Education*, 6(1), 55–78.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5070/B86110039>
- Gopalan, & Brady, S. T. (2020). College students’ sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 49(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19897622>
- Griffith, Gunter, K., & Watkins, D. C. (2012). Measuring masculinity in research on men of color: Findings and future directions. *American Journal of Public Health (1971)*, 102(S2), S187–S194. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2012.300715>

- Gummadam, P. (2016). *School belonging, ethnic identity, and psychological adjustment among ethnic minority college students*. *The Journal of Experimental Education*.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00220973.2015.1048844>
- Harris, F. III. (2010). College men's meanings of masculinities and contextual influences: Toward a conceptual model. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(3), 297–318.
 doi:10.1353/csd.0.0132
- Ho, Debbie. (2006). The Focus Group Interview: Rising to the challenge in qualitative research methodology. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*. 29. 10.2104/aral0605.
- Holloy, L. C., & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(1), 49–64.
<https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2005.200300343>
- Huerta, Ph.D., A. H., Romero-Morales, Ed.D. , M., Matias Dizon , J. P., Salazar, M. E., & Nguyen, J. V. (2021). *Empowering men of color in Higher Education: A Focus on Psychological, Social, and Cultural Factors*.
<https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11265.38244>
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70, 324-345.
- Improving outcomes for boys and men of color: New national*. Penn GSE. (2015, February 19).
<https://www.gse.upenn.edu/news/press-releases/improving-outcomes-boys-and-men-color-new-national-collaborative-aims-identify-a>

- Kane, A. (2019). *Race, sense of belonging, and the african american student experience at predominantly white institutions*. Duquesne Scholarship Collection | Duquesne University. <https://dsc.duq.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2864&context=etd>
- Kapoulas, A., & Mitic, M. (2012). Understanding challenges of qualitative research: Rhetorical issues and reality traps. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 15(4), 354–368.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Khan, & Fisher, D. (2014). *The practice of research : how social scientists answer their questions*. Oxford University Press.
- Kitzinger J. (1995). Qualitative research. Introducing focus groups. *BMJ (Clinical research ed.)*, 311(7000), 299–302. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299>
- Kiyama, J. M., Museus, S. D., & Vega, B. E. (2015). Cultivating campus environments to maximize success among Latino and Latina College Students. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2015(172), 29–38. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20150>
- Krause-Levy, S., Griswold, W., Porter, L., & Alvarado, C. 2021. The relationship between sense of belonging and student outcomes in CS1 and beyond. *In Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on International Computing Education Research (ICER 2021)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 29–41. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3446871.3469748>

- Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J., Bridges, B.K., & Hayek, J.C. (2006). What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature.
- Le, T. P., & Iwamoto, D. K. (2022). Racial discrimination, gender role conflict, and depression in college men of color: A longitudinal test of the racist-gender stress model. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 23(1), 4–12. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/men0000378>
- Leary, M. R., & Baumeister, R. F. (1995). The need to belong. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.
- Lemley, David A. (2014) "College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 13: No. 13, Article 8.
- Li, X. (2007). Characteristics of Minority-Serving Institutions and Minority Undergraduates Enrolled in These Institutions (NCES 2008-156). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.
- Locks, A. M., Hurtado, S., Bowman, N. A., & Oseguera, L. (2008). Extending notions of campus climate and diversity to students' transition to college. *Review of Higher Education: Journal of the Association for the Study of Higher Education*, 31(3), 257–285. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2008.0011>
- Lott, J., Bauman, K. M., & Yeh, T. L. (2023). Men of color programs at public baccalaureate institutions: A typology of institutional context & diversity. *Research in Higher Education*, 64(5), 740–764. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-022-09726-3>

- MacNear, & Hunter, C. D. (2023). Racial identity and sense of belonging: Moderators of Black college students' institutional race-related stress and anxious arousal. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000609>
- Major Theoretical Perspectives on Student Success in College. (2007). *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 32(5), 13–20.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>
- McGuire, K. M., Berhanu, J., Davis, C. H. F., & Harper, S. R. (2014). In search of progressive Black masculinities: Critical self-reflections on gender identity development among Black undergraduate men. *Men & Masculinities*, 17(3), 253–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X13514055>
- Melaku, T. M. (2022). Black women in White Institutional Spaces: The invisible labor clause and the inclusion tax. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 66(11), 1512–1525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211066037>
- Men of color initiative*. men of color initiative | University of Illinois Springfield. (2022). <https://www.uis.edu/diversitycenter/programs/men-color-initiative>
- Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation (Fourth edition.)*. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriweather Hunn, L. R. (2008). Proof in the pudding: Does Guiffrida's cultural advancement of Tinto's theory apply to African American graduate students? *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 2(4), 255–263.
- Museus, S., Zhang, D., & Kim, M. (2016). Developing and evaluating the Culturally Engaging

Campus Environments (CECE) Scale: An examination of content and construct validity.

Research in Higher Education, 57(6), 768–793.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-015-9405-8>

National Center for Education Statistics. IPEDS. (n.d.).

<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/viewtable?tableId=32472&returnUrl=%2Fsearch>

Nguyen, L. (2018). *Fostering a sense of belonging: The asian american student experience*.

University of San Diego.

<https://digital.sandiego.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=soles-mahel-action>

Nunez, A. (2009). *A critical paradox? Predictors of latino students' sense of belonging in*

college. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232538765_A_Critical_Paradox_Predictors_of_Latino_Students'_Sense_of_Belonging_in_College

Obama Foundation. (n.d.). *About the my brother's keeper alliance*. Obama Foundation.

<https://www.obama.org/my-brothers-keeper-alliance/about/>

O'Brien, Bart, H. L., & Garcia, D. M. (2020). Why are there so few ethnic minorities in ecology and evolutionary biology? Challenges to inclusion and the role of sense of belonging.

Social Psychology of Education, 23(2), 449–477.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-019-09538-x>

- Ocampo, A. C., & Soodjinda, D. (2016). Invisible Asian Americans: the intersection of sexuality, race, and education among gay Asian Americans. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 19(3), 480–499. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1095169>
- Owens, J., & Massey, D. S. (2011). Stereotype threat and college academic performance: A latent variables approach. *Social Science Research*, 40(1), 150–166.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2010.09.010>
- Pérez Huber, L., Malagón, M. C., Ramirez, B. R., Gonzalez, L. C., Jimenez, A., & Vélez, V. N. (2015). Still falling through the cracks: Revisiting the Latina/o education pipeline. CSRC Research Report. Number 19. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.
- Person, D., Dawson, R., García, Y., & Jones, A. (2017). The intersectionality of gender and race—programs to support men of color in education. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2017(179), 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20263>
- Phinney, J. (1996). *Understanding ethnic diversity: The role of ethnic identity*. Sage Journals.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002764296040002005>
- Porter, M. (2022). *VCU receives minority serving institution eligibility status*. VCU News.
<https://news.vcu.edu/article/2022/05/vcu-receives-minority-serving-institution-eligibility-status>
- Priya, A. (2021). Case study methodology of qualitative research: Key attributes and navigating the conundrums in its application. *Sociological Bulletin*, 70(1), 94–110.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920970318>
- Reohr, P., Irrgang, M., Loskot, T., Siegel, L., Vik, P., & Downs, A. (2023). Stress and mental health among racial historically marginalized and advantaged undergraduate students. *Psi*

Chi Journal of Psychological Research, 28(3), 180–190.

<https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN28.3.180>

Sampson, C. T. (2019). Disengaging from the monolithic Black myth: The quest for coalition in Americanah and we need new names. *Journal of American Culture*, 42(4), 312–325.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jacc.13094>

Sanacore, J. (2017). Will Obama's My Brother's Keeper and similar initiatives have a positive impact on low-income students? *Clearing House*, 90(4), 152–158.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2017.1330591>

Shields, S. A. (2008). Gender: An intersectionality perspective. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 59(5-6), 301–311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9501-8>

Simkus, J. (2023). *Sampling bias: Types, examples & how to avoid it*. Simply Psychology.

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/sampling-bias-types-examples-how-to-avoid-it.html>

Smith, D. L. (2023). “Not You Too”: Drake, heartbreak, and the romantic communication of Black male vulnerability. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 40(1), 41–54.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2023.2204132>

Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black Men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress.

Journal of Negro Education, 80(1), 63–82.

Smith, & Shinebourne, P. (2012). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 73–82). American Psychological Association.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-005>

- St. Louis, G.R., & Liem, J.H. (2005). Ego identity, ethnic identity, and the psychosocial well-being of ethnic minority and majority college students. *Identity: An international journal of theory and research*, 5(3), 227–246.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532706xid0503_1
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.
- Supiano, B. (2018, April 14). *How colleges can cultivate students' sense of belonging*. The Chronicle of Higher Education.
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-colleges-can-cultivate-students-sense-of-belonging>
- Syed, M. (2010). *Developing an integrated self: Academic and ethnic identities among ethnically diverse college students*. American Psychological Association.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232538765_A_Critical_Paradox_Predictors_of_Latino_Students'_Sense_of_Belonging_in_College
- Thangaraj. (2022). Masculinities. *Feminist Anthropology* (Hoboken, N.J.), 3(2), 254–262.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12104>
- Thompson, C. P., Anderson, L. P., & Bakeman, R. A. (2000). Effects of racial socialization and racial identity on acculturative stress in African American college students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 6(2), 196–210.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.6.2.196>
- Tobolowsky, B. F. (2008). Sophomores in transition: The forgotten year. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2008(144), 59–67. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.326>

- Vaccaro, A., & Newman, B.M. (2016). Development of a sense of belonging for privileged and minoritized students: An emergent model. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(8), 925-942. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0091>
- Vaughn, & Parry, P. (2013). The Statement of Purpose Speech: Helping Students Navigate the “Sophomore Slump.” *Communication Teacher*, 27(4), 207–211.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2013.798016>
- Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) - profile, rankings and data. US News. (2023).
<https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/vcu-3735>
- Virginia Commonwealth University. (2023). *Get to know VCU*. Virginia Commonwealth University. <https://www.vcu.edu/about-vcu/facts-and-rankings/>
- Vuong, M., Brown-Welty, S., & Tracz, S. (2010). The Effects of Self-Efficacy on Academic Success of First-Generation College Sophomore Students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(1), 50–64. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0109>
- Wade, G. M. (2020, December). *ScholarWorks: Walden University Research*. Retaining African American Male Sophomore Students at a Historically Black University.
<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=11100&context=dissertations>
- Waling, A. (2019). Problematizing “toxic” and “healthy” masculinity for addressing gender inequalities. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 34(101), 362–375.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1679021>

- Walton, & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(1), 82–96.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.1.82>
- Webb, & Cotton, D. R. E. (2019). Deciphering the sophomore slump: changes to student perceptions during the undergraduate journey. *Higher education*, 77(1), 173–190.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0268-8>
- Weick. (2001). *Making sense of the organization*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Weller, S. C., Vickers, B., Bernard, H. R., Blackburn, A. M., Borgatti, S., Gravlee, C. C., & Johnson, J. C. (2018). Open-ended interview questions and saturation. *PloS one*, 13(6), e0198606. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0198606>
- Whittaker, J. A., Montgomery, B. L., & Martinez Acosta, V. G. (2015). Retention of underrepresented minority faculty: Strategic initiatives for institutional value proposition based on perspectives from a range of academic institutions. *Journal of undergraduate neuroscience education : JUNE : a publication of FUN, Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience*, 13(3), A136–A145.
- Williams, K. L., Russell, A., & Summerville, K. (2021). Centering Blackness: An examination of culturally-affirming pedagogy and practices enacted by HBCU administrators and faculty members. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46(6), 733–757.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10755-021-09562-w>
- Williams, R., & Flores-Ragade, A. (2010). The educational crisis facing young men of color. *Diversity and Democracy*, 13(3).
<https://www.achievethecore.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/CollegeBoard-The-Educational-Crisis-Facing-Young-Men-of-Color.pdf>

onal-Crisis-Facing-Young-Men-of-Color-January-2010.pdf

Willis, H. A., & Neblett, E. W. (2020). Racial identity and changes in psychological distress using the multidimensional model of racial identity. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 26*(4), 509–519. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-79338-001?doi=1>

Yarborough, M. (2021). *Moving towards less biased research*. BMJ open science. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8647571/>

Yeager, D., Walton, G., & Cohen, G. L. (2013). Addressing achievement gaps with psychological interventions. *Phi Delta Kappan, 94*(5), 62–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171309400514>