

**WHO STOLE THE SOUL: BLACK STUDENT SOCIOPOLITICAL
SOLIDARITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT**WHO STOLE THE SOUL: BLACK STUDENT SOCIOPOLITICAL
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Brian F. Peterson

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The 1960s and '70s marked the most historic transformational period of Black college student enrollments and sociopolitical presence at predominantly White institutions in the United States. Research on Black student solidarity and social movements typically refers back to this era, with very little attention given to the ways that today's Black college students – the beneficiaries of the previous Black campus activist efforts – continue this work. This study explores contemporary Black student sociopolitical solidarity and the role that the institution plays in shaping it.

The following questions guided this study: *How has Black students' sense of activism evolved from the post-Civil Rights era to the present day? How do Black students engage social and political issues that have historically and contemporarily impacted them on campus? How do the practices, policies, and culture of predominantly White postsecondary institutions shape Black sociopolitical solidarity?*

Qualitative research methods were used within a case study of a selective research institution. The study site was chosen because of its representative history of racial conflict and Black student activism, along with its prominent continued commitment to diversity efforts. Fifty-two undergraduate students, faculty members, administrators, and alumni participated in semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Analysis was also conducted on archival material including institutional reports and campus newspaper articles.

The findings show that a complex interplay of factors, including the increased selectivity of university admissions and the institutionalization of student protest, has transformed the ways that students perceive and participate in sociopolitical activities. Further, for “the Black community” at the institution (students, faculty, and administrators), the findings reveal an exceptional level of additional “burdens” (stressors, commitments, and barriers) that often go unrecognized by both the individual experiencing them and the wider community, but can drastically influence daily experiences on campus and broader sociopolitical engagement. Recommendations are offered for how the insights gained in this study may be used to enhance student development and institutional diversity initiatives through more informed and strategic community-building efforts.

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CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW OF STUDY

Contemporary literature pertaining to Black student experiences in predominantly White higher educational institutions typically falls under four broad themes. First there are explorations into the origins and factors that contribute to the weaker on-campus performance (e.g., lower GPA, greater retention challenges) of Black students (and in particular, Black males) (see Cuyjet's edited volume *African American Men in College*, Steele's work with stereotype threat, and Charles, Fischer, Mooney, and Massey's *Taming the River*, among others). Second are studies and historical reviews outlining how Black students have adjusted to (or resisted) campus life (see Biondi's *The Black Revolution on Campus*, Exum's *Paradoxes of Protest: Black Student Activism in a White University*, Glasker's *Black Students in the Ivory Tower: African American Student Activism at the University of Pennsylvania, 1967-1990*, and Willie's *Acting Black: College, Identity, and the Performance of Race* for examples). The ways in which Black students still experience racism and/or "otherness" on campus make up the third category (see Feagin, Vera, and Imani's *The Agony of Education: Black Students at a White University*, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students" from Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, and other critical race and campus climate works). Finally, there is literature regarding efforts to provide additional access and support to Black students (and in particular those who come from lower-income backgrounds, are first-generation college goers, hail from weaker academic high schools, have lower SAT scores and/or high school grades, and/or have lesser pre-college exposure to our contemporary examples of collegiate cultural norms; see the many works of Shaun Harper, Sylvia Hurtado, Lori Patton, and William Tierney, among others).

This inventory is not exhaustive, nor is it rigid. Some of the literature can easily work within more than one of the categories and there are certainly additional themes that extend outside of the above framework. The larger point is that embedded within much of the work that can be described by one or more of these four themes is a particular perception of the Black college student as “other.” For critical race scholars, understanding this as a reality of the “permanence of racism” presents the opportunity to more intricately explore the literature, its applications, and ensuing experiences and questions (Bell, 1992; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; S. R. Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; hooks, 1994).

Consider the example of an “average” Black male student at an urban public high school, and his weaker SAT scores in comparison to some, not all, of his White peers from another more resourced school. Most observers would not wonder how the Black student actually scored so *highly* when he did not enroll in an expensive prep course, did not know how to properly study (and thus did not adequately prepare), was not sufficiently exposed to the exam’s content in the classroom, did not fully understand the scope and format of the exam beforehand, and was quite conscious of the fact that few, if anyone, expected him to do well on this exam that was not designed with him in mind (Anderson, 2004; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; “The Widening Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT College Admissions Test,” 2005). Instead of unpacking these details and shifting the critical analysis to explore one or more of these elements, it is much more likely that educational researchers, or even casual observers, would either normalize or problematize the Black student’s outcome, furthering the consistent narrative about “the way things are supposed to be” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Whether we realize, the questions that we ask (or do not ask) are often reflections of power dynamics and operational frameworks deeply embedded within the ways of the

world. The research questions around contemporary Black higher educational experiences often develop from a particular point of reference, carrying a consistent set of assumptions. This is a research problem *and* a practice problem, with both spectrums informing one another. In other words, if, for example, a practical intervention was developed to help a significant number of Black young people dramatically increase their SAT scores to well above the national average, this would likely prompt both a spread of this program and a different set of research questions to be developed to understand this phenomenon. Alternatively, scholars *could* study how underserved students, in the face of extreme adversity, intuitively and successfully navigate the SAT and other steps along the confusing college access journey, to inform policy on multiple levels and develop effective student-centered supports. This simple act of asking different questions in different ways invites entirely new realities to be constructed. It is in this spirit that I chose to explore contemporary Black higher educational experiences via a research road not often travelled, investigating present-day ideas of Black sociopolitical solidarity on a predominantly White college campus.

Statement of the Problem

For some time I've wondered why there has been so little scholarship on Black college student activism and sociopolitical engagement beyond the detailed studies of the 1960s and 1970s, commonly known as the period of Black Power. One obvious answer is that Black Power was a most interesting but finite moment, reinforced by an accompanying national mood and revolutionary sentiment, not just in regard to Black issues, but also closely linked with antiwar efforts and other human rights concerns (Biondi, 2012; Joseph, 2003; Rojas, 2007; Thelin, 2011). But after the Black Power era there still existed

substantial numbers of Black students on predominantly White campuses, Black Student Unions, Black Studies programs, institutional racism, and campus conflict, among other points of interest. There were still protests, sit-ins, marches, rallies, and major headlines. There were still tense localized struggles and critical national and international concerns (e.g., affirmative action, South African apartheid, Hurricane Katrina, and racial profiling, among others). Students were still Black and some still wanted to acquire some version of power, but yet somehow, by the latter 1970s, the idea of Black Power, and most certainly the phrase itself, lost its punch (Van Deburg, 1992).

Thus, the limited research on Black activism and sociopolitical engagement after the Black Power movement was not in response to a disappearance of either Black students or of activism, because both were, and still are, clearly present. In fact, in many ways, the very things that were demanded by Black students during the Black Power era – additional Black students and faculty, Black Studies programs, Black Cultural Centers, community engagement programs, and more – were at least partially acquired during this struggle or afterwards (L. D. Patton, 2005; Rogers, 2012; Rojas, 2007). So, what happened to “Black Power” as an idea and a named reality? Or, at the very least, what happened to Black sociopolitical engagement, solidarity, and activism as efforts worthy of academic research? Were the students not loud enough? Or were the scholars simply not paying attention? Were there questions that perhaps needed to be asked in different, less obvious ways?

W.E.B. Du Bois, following in the intellectual footsteps of Martin Delaney, wrote often about a conceptualized Black nation; in his 1940 autobiographical text, *Dusk of Dawn*, he framed it as “The Colored World Within” (Du Bois, 1996; Rabaka, 2006; Shelby, 2007). Throughout his scholarship and activism, Du Bois imagined a paradigm where Blacks, through liberal arts education, sociopolitical engagement, institution building, and self-

development, propelled themselves to higher ranks in American society (D. P. Alridge, 2008; D. Alridge, 1999). Understanding that White institutions protected and served White interests, Du Bois sought to identify a critical mass of Blacks who could play alongside these elite Whites, but in a virtual parallel universe, with their efforts striving to boost the colored world within, ultimately for the wider world's benefit (Du Bois, 1996; Shelby, 2007).

The challenges that Du Bois encountered in nurturing this idealistic model were numerous and formidable. Du Bois's evolving politics and interests alienated him from other Black leaders and mainstream America, eventually branding him a communist during an era of extreme intolerance (Levering Lewis, 1993). On a more pragmatic level, Du Bois realized that the simplicity of his initial model for Black social uplift – commonly known as “The Talented Tenth” – neglected to adequately prioritize and foster a richer sense of compassion and commitment among the rising Black business, religious, and political leaders whom Du Bois wanted to mobilize (D. P. Alridge, 2008; Du Bois, 1903). The type of Black leaders Du Bois envisioned, and required, would have to be remarkably civic-minded, focused on using their resources and access to develop expansive structural and social infrastructures for lesser-off Black Americans, rather than just for personal gain. The end goal would be for “the Negro group in the United States [to] establish, for a large proportion of its members, a co-operative commonwealth” (Du Bois, 1996, p. 712).

This cooperative networking did not unfold organically in Du Bois's view, largely due to the selfishness of the limited number of Blacks who were finding economic and social success in the nation. Du Bois reintroduced a “planned program” in his 1948 “Talented Tenth Memorial Address” where a new theory, “the Guiding Hundredth” was outlined. The goal was to teach the new generation that “the object of the world is not profit but service and happiness” (Du Bois, 1996). After dismissing college fraternities as a possible launching

pad, due to their youthful ideals, Du Bois turned to the Sigma Pi Phi (also known as the Boulé), the Black professional fraternity of which he was affiliated, which was also the audience for this address. Du Bois challenged the Boulé to actively develop and recruit younger Blacks and grow to 30,000 quality members by 1960 (representing one-hundredth of all Negro families). They would then apply his Marx-influenced platform of character-based, thoughtful education, work, family-building, and living to “preserve Negro culture... not simply for the social movements of America, but for the greater world of human culture” (Du Bois, 1996; Rabaka, 2006).

Today there does not exist on any meaningful scale a pipeline program to create progressive Black leaders and institutions that will work solely to address Black concerns, or put another way, to build a Du Boisian cooperative commonwealth, or Black nation. There are certainly still those who hold Black nationalistic ideals, and even among this “community” there is a wide divergence regarding what Black nationalism actually is (Shelby, 2007). There are also many – scholars, educators, business leaders, political figures, community activists, and others – who dedicate their lives to Black communities and Black issues. But despite these efforts there is no tangible Black agenda, nor an institution dedicated to carrying out this nonexistent agenda, nor a training ground to maintain a critical mass of people to fuel this nonexistent institution.¹ Thus, over a century after *The Souls of Black Folk*, seventy years following *Dusk of Dawn*, and sixty years after the little known Guiding Hundredth idea was introduced, the colored world within is still largely adrift.

¹ One could make the argument that the National of Islam, the NAACP, the National Urban League, or the Black church could dispute the claim regarding the lack of a Black institution and/or Black agenda. Each case can be deconstructed and subsequently dismissed individually, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. As a group, however, I offer this: with all due respect to their accomplishments and commitment, would the sum total of these organizations’ efforts be what Du Bois would have imagined for Black people in 2013? No, it would not.

For many Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity, the very mention of a “Black Nation” is intimidating (Marable, 1997; Shelby, 2007). How and why would Blacks separate themselves from America? Would they seek to somehow rise up and create some sort of ruckus, parading around with guns and Black berets?² Would they physically isolate themselves in their own communities and attend their own schools and places of worship? Would there be a separate life for Blacks in this nation within a nation, and how might it compare to the life possibilities of other groups? Why would Blacks even want to consider doing such a thing, especially now, after a full term under President Barack Obama and another term just off the ground? Can we all simply try to get along, to make due as best as we can, now that we all have the same opportunities to succeed (as the reality of an Obama presidency would lead us to believe)?

These hypothetical queries around a hypothetical “Black Nation” highlight the numerous very real ironies of our time. In 2013 it is quite unlikely that there will be any mass voluntary relocation of Black Americans to the Dakotas, any West African countries, nor anywhere else (Shelby, 2007). And despite this, we still already have a very clearly divided country, with Black neighborhoods, Black schools, and Black churches (Lacy, 2007; Orfield, Marin, & Horn, 2005; Robinson, 2011). Some of these neighborhoods, schools, and churches are quite nice (Lacy, 2007). Many, however, are not, structurally, and will never be without a massive rebuilding effort (Robinson, 2011). They are the products of multi-generational poverty; the legacy of institutional slavery, Jim Crow, and the systematic denial of opportunity. They are the forgotten, or “the abandoned” as Robinson phrases it in *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (2011). These are the communities that Du Bois sought to invest thought, action, and resources, to strategically recreate a new reality, a

² Biondi, Jefferies, and others remind us that many people equate Black Power with violence and anti-Whiteness, and nothing more.

stronger nation within the nation that would ultimately strengthen the American as well as the global economy, both materially and spiritually. Instead, arguably because we do not have a tangible example of Du Bois's ideals at work, we have a nation of poverty trapped inside of a nation of surplus. This present reality cuts across color lines much more than in Du Bois's day (though, even in Du Bois's time, he witnessed, understood, and wrote about the shared oppression of the American underclasses, Black and White (Du Bois, 1998)), due to immigration patterns and structural inequities that impact the have-nots, regardless of ethnic background or national origin (Bell, 1992; Marable, 1997; Orfield, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 2012; Wilson, 2012). However, as the data consistently reflects, Blacks are still the primary inhabitants of the poorer America ("Blacks See Growing Values Gap Between Poor and Middle Class," 2007; Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011; Robinson, 2011).

In Du Bois's earliest ruminations on the Talented Tenth, higher education, grounded in a rich liberal arts experience, would provide the training necessary for future waves of Black leaders and concerned citizens to address the nation's social issues from multiple perspectives. They would build this Black nation, and their work would be the example for all others to follow. While Du Bois expressed concerns about the maturity level of undergraduate students and the programs of instruction offered to them, he still pushed forward, calling upon a wider distribution of leadership development, and for universities to be "not simply a center of knowledge but a center of applied knowledge and a guide of action" (D. Alridge, 1999; Provenzo Jr (ed.), 2002).

What about the modern era's Black college students? When they mobilized and demanded more fellow Black students in the 1970s were they fighting in order to further a nation-building effort? When students in 2013 rally around affirmative action, greater representation, and additional faculty diversity, are they doing so with "guided action" and

the future Black nation in mind, or are they more concerned about recommendation letters for a consulting internship or a fellowship program? If it is the latter, is that sufficient? Can nation-building happen through greater representation in the American middle class (with selective school students' aspirations of one day rising to the upper middle class, if not the truly wealthy)? Is that Black power? If so, what should be done with it? How will Blacks in poverty, who likely will not have access to selective higher educational institutions (nor will their children, or their children's children, statistically speaking), benefit? Are these even fair questions to ask? If so, then why are we not asking them more often and more publicly? Or maybe we should be asking whether there is value in considering any sort of conceptual Black nation? Did Du Bois have it all wrong – should Black folks be seeking to get their money and run, not worrying about what other Blacks are able to do (or not do)? Is “the struggle” over? Was it ever relevant to enough people to begin with?

What of the higher educational institutions' roles in this discussion? Throughout the country, college mission statements, underlying purposes, and structural values typically include fostering democratic participation, creating the next generation of leaders, impacting communities, and elevating society (antonio & Clarke, 2011). Within these institutions there is often some recognition of America's unfortunate past of race-based denial of access, discrimination, harassment, and mistreatment. At the same time, there is increasingly more hesitation around making any specific declarations about or commitments to race, fueled by a national emphasis on egalitarianism (Alon & Tienda, 2007; antonio & Clarke, 2011; Chang & Ledesma, 2011; S. R. Harper et al., 2009). Diversity on today's campuses enters an undefined realm where one could argue that it places the benefits to the institution over the opportunities it creates for the students who have been

historically marginalized, and it is more about policies and numbers, and less about fostering mutually advantageous interactions (antonio & Clarke, 2011; Chang & Ledesma, 2011; Stevens & Roksa, 2011).

Certainly, increasing Black student access to selective schools over the last four decades has yielded wide benefits, but at the same time, Black poverty proportionally has grown (Marable, 1997; Robinson, 2011). Black students have still experienced discrimination on campus, and are still underrepresented (S. R. Harper & Patton, 2007; Willie, 2003; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004). Should Black students be doing more to address campus, national, and international concerns? Should the institution be doing more to foster these dialogues and ensuing actions? Do institutions of higher education (and in particular, predominantly White institutions) have a “Black agenda” and is it in line with one that Du Bois would propose, or do institutional policies and cultural norms run in opposition to Du Boisian ideals of Black nation-building? Do these institutions foster Black solidarity and/or sociopolitical engagement or do they – directly or indirectly – impede it?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project is to explore concepts of present day sociopolitical solidarity among the Black undergraduate student community at one selective higher educational institution. By “sociopolitical solidarity” I mean the ideas and values students have regarding social issues (e.g., poverty, education, healthcare, urban development) and political concerns (which may overlap with social issues in some students’ views, hence “sociopolitical,” but could also include specific political aspects such as government policies, international political concerns, educational policy, civil rights legislation, etc.), and in particular those that either heavily impact the Black community at-large or receive

prominent coverage in Black-oriented media (e.g., BET, TV One, special features on mainstream networks such as CNN, *Ebony Magazine*). This would include such things as the criminalization of the Black male image in the media, racial profiling, and conceptions of Black identity or Blackness.

Solidarity is determined by whether students are considering similar issues (or if themes can be drawn across them), and/or whether they are coming together to discuss and/or work on these issues. I do not imply that students have to share the same ideals or positions, nor that they have to be mobilized in any real sense. In other words, “solidarity” does not mean that students need to be united in a single organization working toward a specific purpose, but rather that they recognize some degree of common histories, present realities, and shared experiences, and there is a sense of affinity that draws them together socially, and/or in response to any larger concerns that may arise. This notion also applies to the construction of the “Black community” on campus; from the perspective of Black students, it is a semi-organized collective, often tied through social exchanges, friendship networks, and student activities. Outsiders may hold a less sophisticated view, assuming that all Black students at the institution comprise “the Black community.” That is only true when preparing institutional reports on diversity, and even then it is not as clear-cut as the numbers would appear; some Black (and other) students intentionally do not indicate their racial/ethnic background on applications, others may fit within multiple communities, and, as will be discussed later, there is also debate about the influx of Black immigrant students at selective institutions, and how they identify (Massey, Mooney, Charles, & Torres, 2007; “Student Applicants to Selective Colleges and Universities Are Showing Increasing Reluctance to Disclose Their Race,” 2008). My construction of the “Black community” for this study is in line with the student-centered perspective. It certainly does not include

every Black student (and may be extended to non-Black members who identify with the community), nor does it require any real mobilization. While organized activist efforts are not a necessity, I am interested in identifying any such activities that students may engage in as a result of their sociopolitical analyses, and, taking a step back, how they even define for themselves the word “activism.” What do they see as activist activity? What notions do they hold about 1960s and ‘70s Black activism, and do they see similarities or differences in the activities they pursue today?

Within all of this I seek to explore how the predominantly White institution engages, directly or indirectly, Black sociopolitical solidarity. For example, have student recruitment patterns influenced the possibilities within the Black community on campus? Has the institution’s public commitment to diversity and/or social justice made any impact, perhaps drawing students with those interests and/or helping to mobilize them on campus? Does the presence of an academic unit dedicated to Black scholarship matter? Does the intense pre-professional focus of the institution affect students’ willingness to engage in cultural and/or activist experiences? Is student solidarity stronger in regards to career aspirations and other individualized ideals more closely associated with the elitism of the institution, particularly in the twenty-first century?

These and many other queries inform the primary research questions for this project, which are as follows:

How has Black students’ sense of activism evolved from the post-Civil Rights era to the present day? How do Black students engage social and political issues that have historically and contemporarily impacted them on campus? How do the practices, policies, and culture of predominantly White postsecondary institutions shape Black sociopolitical solidarity?

Significance

This study is valuable for several reasons. First, it begins to fill a literature gap and presents a substantive look at Black student sociopolitical engagement in the twenty-first century. This reaffirms that this type of engagement is still alive in various forms, and perhaps is meaningful to the development of Black students as campus and world citizens. It will also allow scholars and administrators to begin ascertaining how to best frame these contemporary activities contextually (i.e., is it activism, is it responsive or progressive), and whether this type of engagement impacts students in the classroom – positively, negatively, or at all – and how it may correlate with various other related campus experiences (e.g., peer relationships, mentoring, recruitment efforts, or Black presence in Black and mainstream organizations).

Secondly, and much more broadly, this study allows us to consider the ways that Black students position their education, and in particular their decision to attend a selective postsecondary institution. When they say, as some do, that they are pursuing a prestigious degree in order to “change the world,” what do they truly mean? Do they implicitly or explicitly see themselves as part of a Talented Tenth conceptualization, and if so, how? If not, why? Do they intend to use the collegiate experiences as a foundational point for developing their sociopolitical self or do they see that as a component for later in life, or perhaps not at all? From whom have they taken their cues? How conscious are they of their decisions and ideals concerning Black empowerment? How do they value their classroom experiences in comparison to other developmental opportunities connected to the college experience? In what ways do they build solidarity and what does this mean for their overall college careers, and perhaps beyond?

Third, in this moment of vast diversity within Black communities in higher education, particularly at selective schools, this study allows us to look at the possible different ways that Black students of various backgrounds conceptualize sociopolitical concerns. Is a first-generation Ghanaian student focused more on issues in Accra (where her grandparents and extended family lives, and where her family considers “home”), Brooklyn (where her now parents live), the east coast city of her selective school where she now may tutor underserved African American children at an afterschool program, or not at all? Does this student share similar sociopolitical ideals with other Black students? Does she identify at all with other Blacks not affiliated with the institution – does she see their plight as hers as well, and if so, how does this impact her? Does socioeconomic status play a role in this identification? What other factors may contribute?

Fourth, this study allows higher educational institutions broadly, and specific units within the institution (namely Black Studies programs, cultural centers, civic engagement offices, and perhaps others as well) to better understand how Black students conceive their sociopolitical selves, and how diversity efforts, cultural programs, and other campus practices and policies may impact this.

Fifth, this study will ideally prompt further inquiries into this subject matter. For example, in the K-12 sector, rather than the continued emphasis on the testing and achievement gaps of underperforming, mostly “minority” schools, perhaps through findings from this research, schools and programs can model ways that high school students’ sociopolitical identities can be nurtured to develop a motivational powerbase (helping them to leverage their majority status in their schools and become change agents in their communities). In higher education, this study only begins to seriously engage the question of Black sociopolitical solidarity. Future research could analyze what happens at historically

Black colleges and universities in regards to contemporary Black sociopolitical solidarity, how community partnerships and/or direct faculty mentoring may help develop stronger cultural awareness (and what benefits this may produce), what effect an institution's cultural programming has on student solidarity, how Black student solidarity compares with that of other underrepresented students, whether "Black student solidarity" is the best framework or is group solidarity more closely aligned within specific ethnic populations (e.g., Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian), and various other considerations.

Finally, this study encourages the further imagination of different, and perhaps unpopular questions. In the preface of *We Who Are Dark*, Harvard professor Tommie Shelby asks whether "black solidarity can lead to a more just society and world" (2007, p. ix). Within that context, I often wonder whether "nation-building," as dangerous³ as that may sound, can address Black poverty more concretely than past and present initiatives. And if so, might programming and resources be organized – through or in partnership with higher educational institutions – to move forward with such an agenda? Or, put another way, if Black poverty is growing, why are we not applying strategic nation-building and solidarity strategies as outlined by Du Bois, among others, to attempt a new approach since whatever is being done now is not working on a broad scale? If our young, idealistic college students have these sorts of notions in their heads already, might we all be better served to truly nurture them, particularly in our selective institutions where we unquestionably have access to the necessary resources and capacity to do so, so that they actually *can* change the world as a direct component of their postsecondary experiences? This final question is

³ Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone comes to mind as a less intimidating frame for this work. "Zone-building" certainly contains elements of nation-building, particularly in Canada's comprehensive approach. If he were to have initially pitched it as a "nation-building" effort however, I suspect that he would not have received the same level of corporate backing and public support. Which again raises the question, why is Black nation-building, or culturally-specific development, viewed in such a negative light, particularly if its focus is to positively enhance communities? Are Black communities not supposed to be improved and empowered? Or is it that they can't be improved and empowered on their own terms?

beyond the scope of this particular project but nevertheless is worth, at minimum, our consideration.

Definition of Terms

In the previous section I provided my interpretation of “sociopolitical,” “solidarity” and “Black community,” three terms central to this study. Others that may warrant additional clarification are as follows:

Black and African American. In this paper use the term Black rather than African American for two reasons. First, it is in deference to the significant population of Black students at selective schools such as the one in this study who do not directly identify with African Americans. These students often first claim their Caribbean or African heritage, even if they are American-born. Their maintained links with their countries and cultures of origin sustains their identification. “African American” for them is often not a catchall term (though they may subscribe to it when necessary), but specifically applies to Blacks who have been in the United States for multiple generations, likely dating back to the slave trade. The term “Black,” while carrying its own baggage and limitations, is better suited as a catchall for the wide range of students who identify as members of the African diaspora, whether they claim their roots to be American, Caribbean, African, or bi/multiracial. “African descended,” “African diasporic,” or simply “African” were other considerations, but these were not as fluid or historically grounded, and could potentially complicate matters more than help.

Secondly, in the spirit of this study, Black is used to pay homage to the Black Power era, and the intentional move of Blacks to cease answering to “colored,” “Negro,” and other terms.

While some scholars choose not to capitalize “Black” (and when they do in direct quotes featured in this paper, I have left it as “black”), I believe that the tradeoff from African American to Black should not reduce the strength of the word. Further, just as I capitalize the proper name of an individual, I capitalize the names of groups of people.

Finally, when “African American” or another term is used in a direct quote, I have left it as is. At times “African American” refers to all Blacks (including Caribbean and/or African self-identified Blacks) and at other times it just refers to Black Americans. When the implied meaning is not clear in the quote I have inserted a footnote.

Culture. This is a system of shared values, practices, and beliefs.

Race. My focus on race looks at the social constructions and applications (and the ways that these social constructions are applied via supposed biological or phenotype differences).

Ethnicity. Often now seen alongside race in demographic queries, ethnicity refers more to geographic and/or specific cultural links. Thus, for this study, one can be of the Black race, and ethnically be Caribbean, or more specifically, Trinidadian, for example.

Racism. This is the systematic oppression of people of color by the dominant White culture. The social constructions and applications of race perpetuate this system.

Diaspora. This refers to the dispersal of African people throughout the globe, largely through the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Underrepresentation. The general rule of thumb for this project is in comparison to United States census data. Thus, if a racial/ethnic group is 10% of the U.S. population but only 2% of a school or organization, that racial/ethnic group is underrepresented in the school or organization. Overrepresentation uses the same logic.

Dissertation Overview

The next chapter presents literature relevant to this study, including the pathway to and through selective colleges for today's Black students, and issues and concerns they may experience as they build community on campus. Chapter three outlines the research methods used in this study and describes the setting and participants. In chapter four I present the study's findings, grouping the various participant responses into several themes. In the final chapter I discuss the findings and present recommendations.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Today, among the over nineteen million students enrolled in America's two and four-year higher educational institutions, Blacks make up more than two and a half million. History serves as an essential and blunt reminder that this type of access for Blacks is quite recent. This literature review begins with a historical recap of Black presence in higher education, from the early 1600s through today. Particular attention will be given to the 1960s and 70s, a critical period in increasing Black student enrollment, political activity on campus, and Black scholarship. Following this is a discussion of critical issues pertaining to the enrollment and experiences of Black students in today's predominantly White four-year colleges and universities, including the ways that recent African and Caribbean immigration patterns disrupt age-old notions of affirmative action and the "Black community." A summary of contemporary Black sociopolitical concerns and social justice efforts, as presented in the literature, is also included. The review concludes with a discussion of theoretical models guiding this project's analysis, and a brief synthesis of key points to concisely outline how and why this literature is relevant to the research questions.

Race and Higher Education

Roots, 1636-1953

The earliest days of higher education (and education in general) in the United States looked very different than our modern-day manifestations. Historian James Anderson reminds us, "From the founding of Harvard College in 1636 to the 1830s, no American institution of higher education opened its doors to Black students. A powerful structure of racial exclusion was constructed in slave states by state governments and legal mandates

and in the free states by practices of institutionalized racism” (2002, p. 4). As colleges and universities erected their initial buildings and developed curricula to serve their mostly upperclass, White male students through the 18th and 19th centuries, the common practices and policies of the day restricted Black Americans from formal education, minimized organized meetings, and prohibited even informal attempts at literacy (Anderson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Thelin, 2011; H. A. Williams, 2005). In both the north and the south, when the law and public practice did not send a strong enough message, acts of terroristic violence destroyed Black meeting places, injured and killed Blacks and their sympathizers, and effectively diminished the potential for mass Black mobilization and uprising (Hahn, 2008; H. A. Williams, 2005; Willie, 2003). Faced with the perpetual threat of injury or death, Blacks regularly feigned ignorance as a survival strategy, allowing the socially-constructed intellectual hierarchy of the day to go unchallenged (Willie, 2003).

As the nation began to consider extending educational opportunities to Black Americans, the perceived inferiority of Blacks and the desire of Whites to separate the races led to the creation of Black colleges and universities, commonly known as HBCUs. Now open to any student regardless of racial or ethnic origin, HBCUs were originally (or historically, as the “H” denotes) designated for Black students only. Most were founded in the south following the Civil War, through the efforts of White missionaries and philanthropists, but three northern schools – Cheyney State College and Lincoln University, both in Pennsylvania, and Wilberforce University of Ohio began prior (Pifer, 1973; Willie, 2003). After the Civil War, additional HBCUs were constructed in the southern states largely to provide agricultural and industrial education. In some of these cases, while an institution carried the title “college,” it provided an extremely limited educational program, with little to no extended liberal arts opportunities (Anderson, 1988; Thelin, 2011).

W.E.B. Du Bois, educated at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin, was the prominent voice of Black liberal arts education during the 20th century. This, he felt, was the means through which a mobilized “Talented Tenth” could be developed, ultimately leading the Black masses toward America’s greater promises (Du Bois, 1903; Shelby, 2007; Willie, 2003). Booker T. Washington, a graduate of Hampton and champion of the Tuskegee Machine, advocated for Black self-reliance, and eventual social acceptance by White America, through manual education and labor (Shelby, 2007; Washington, 1972). This was the more socially accepted view of the era, and hence the most prominent and publicly funded, but even still the public funds received were far less than the separate and superior predominantly White institutions throughout the South (Anderson, 2002; Fleming, 1984; S. R. Harper et al., 2009; Willie, 2003).

Opportunities for Black students at traditionally White liberal arts colleges were also rare. Oberlin College in Ohio was among the few schools that allowed Black students to enroll in the mid-19th century (Anderson, 2002; S. R. Harper et al., 2009). By and large, the few Blacks who were able to attain any sort of post-secondary development would be faced with a *Plessy v. Ferguson* sanctioned “separate but equal” experience at an HBCU. Receiving substantially less funding and government support, and offering a limited set of academic opportunities, HBCUs were certainly separate, but rarely equal structurally (S. R. Harper et al., 2009; Willie, 2003). Further, Black citizens and institutions faced the additional social burdens of the era’s overt racist practices, continually reaffirming their second-class status (Anderson, 2004; Shelby, 2007; Tuck, 2010; Willie, 2003). Whether a Black man had a college degree or never set foot in grade school, shortly following the Civil War through

1965, Whites – socially and legally – called him “Jim Crow”⁴ and held him in place, in the rear.

Rights, 1954-1964

Black college student enrollment grew well into 20th century, largely through the efforts of HBCUs and their previous graduates who entered the education profession, ministry, or other fields to serve Black interests (Pifer, 1973; Willie, 2003). Blacks had gained further access to predominantly White institutions, but by the middle of the century they still comprised less than one percent of the entering students across these institutions (S. R. Harper et al., 2009). The historic *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case – one of several educational battles waged by the NAACP in the nation’s courts in the 1950s – ruled that “separate educational facilities were inherently unequal” (Patterson, 2002). Despite this unanimous Supreme Court decision, southern states openly resisted integration efforts, requiring further civil and legal action (Patterson, 2002; Willie, 2003)

The years following the *Brown* decision were among the most prolific for Black Americans in their quest for full citizenship. Rosa Parks’ ignition of the Montgomery bus boycott; the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; the organizing of numerous marches, sit-ins, and voter registration drives; and monumental school desegregation efforts such as that of James Meredith at the University of Mississippi in 1962 were among the many events that captured national attention (Patterson, 2002; Tuck, 2010). The nation, already changed by the 1920’s Great Migration of southern Blacks to the north in search of new opportunities,

⁴ “Jim Crow” was a demeaning term for Negro, or Black man in particular. The term became directly linked with laws and common practices that separated the races and suppressed Black life through 1965.

was changing yet again, and it was the Civil Rights movement that pushed with the required deliberate speed (Lemann, 2011; Tuck, 2010).

For higher educational inclusion, the necessary legal action came through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Bowen, 2005; S. R. Harper et al., 2009). By “invoking the powerful metaphor of people in chains for 350 years, or ten generations, being required to engage in a foot race with people who were (and had been) free of restraints,” President Lyndon B. Johnson’s affirmative action measures in higher education called for “vigorous, proactive steps... to broaden and increase access for previously excluded, underrepresented groups” (Allen, 2005, p. 1; Anderson, 2002). This opening of new doors ushered in unprecedented numbers of Black students to predominantly White institutions. With their arrival came new race-based conflicts and campaigns, some so explosive that they demanded immediate attention, shutting universities down until it was received.

Revolution, 1965-1989

In the decade following 1964, Black college enrollments increased from 300,000 to 900,000 (Teddle & Freeman, 2002). By 1990, after a slight decline during the ‘80s and then another rise, this number reached nearly one-and-a-quarter-million (NCES, 2010; Teddle & Freeman, 2002). This growth came with costs and challenges.

One substantial cost was paid by HBCUs. Between 1960 and 1990, Black enrollment patterns shifted from seventy-five percent at HBCUs to this same proportional majority attending PWIs (Allen, 2005). Further, as a result of NAACP-led accusations of HBCU inferiority, along with intense public scrutiny regarding the continued existence of HBCUs, some of these institutions faced closure or forced mergers with local PWIs – a trend that

still continues (Duncan, 2010; Gasman, 2007; Teddlie & Freeman, 2002). But as Thelin writes, *sometimes* a Howard or a Hampton could compete against a Princeton or a Harvard in the expensive bidding war over exemplary Black students (2011, p. 348). Subsequently, despite shifts in enrollments, shutdowns, and other struggles, HBCUs have continued to produce a disproportionately high number of Black graduates, particularly in the STEM fields (Gasman, 2010; Thelin, 2011). This sustained success in the face of financial challenges and negative perceptions speaks to both HBCUs' unique cultural appeal and programming, as well as a tangible amount of Black distrust in predominantly White institutions' ability to foster safe and supportive campus communities for diverse student populations (Gasman, 2007; Hale, 2006; Thelin, 2011). This lack of faith was certainly not without precedent.

The sudden arrival of Black students in predominantly White spaces in the latter '60s produced immediate and formidable racial tensions. Bowen writes, "One serious mistake made by many colleges and universities was to fail to appreciate that it was not good enough simply to enroll more minority students" (2005, p. 143). As consciousness-raising calls for Black Power emerged following the Civil Rights movement, the growing Black college student populations throughout the country became increasingly frustrated with campus and national sociopolitics, particularly in the lack of campus inclusion and the persistence of racial hostilities (Bowen, 2005; Glasker, 2009; J. L. Jeffries, 2006; McCormick, 1990; Williamson, 1999). The assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Vietnam War, institutional racism and underrepresentation on campus, were among the many vital concerns. Organized demonstrations emerged, at times erupting in violence.

In the fall of 1968 a protracted student strike began at San Francisco State College in response to students' "non-negotiable" demands – delivered through a coalition of Black

Student Union and Third World Liberation Front members – being declined by then school president, Robert R. Smith (Rojas, 2007; Rooks, 2007). Among these demands was the establishment of a school of Ethnic Studies, and within this school, a department of Black Studies led by twenty full-time faculty members (Rooks, 2007). The coalition sought to position this desired school within, but separate from the college, and in partnership with community agencies outside of the college’s Board of Trustees’ control (Rooks, 2007). Among other demands were the replacement of the current White financial aid director with a Black person, and admission of “all Black students who wish” in 1969 (Rojas, 2007, p. 69). The struggle was marked by violence between students and the police, the temporary shutdown of campus, and the resignation of president Smith (Rojas, 2007).

Violence had already turned to bloodshed and death in Orangeburg, South Carolina earlier that year when three students protesting a segregated bowling alley were shot and killed by police (Biondi, 2012; Rogers, 2012). Several others were injured. Two more Black men were killed by police during a campus protest at Southern University (Biondi, 2012). Biondi writes, “police officers nationwide had highly negative attitudes toward students, African Americans, and radicals” but student movement protests at HBCUs “faced a greater likelihood of police occupation and invasion than Black protestors on majority white campuses” (2012, p. 157).

As examples, in April, 1969, as “a culmination of a two-year campaign to force Cornell to open a college, department, or center of Black studies on campus” one hundred Black students, some armed, occupied a campus administration building (Rooks, 2007, pp. 56–57). At the University of Pennsylvania, years of student mobilization and protest followed by sluggish university-commissioned attempts at appeasement prompted a central administration building to be firebombed in April, 1970 (Glasker, 2009). These and other

acts of occupation and destruction on Penn's campus were attributed to "simmering discontent over admissions, inadequate financial aid, an ineffective academic support system, and the long-delayed Black studies program by a segment of the Black Penn community" (Glasker, 2009, p. 97).

Glasker's commentary offers an important, but sometimes neglected point. Not *all* Black students on campuses participated in any sort of demonstration efforts. Further, these uprisings were not exclusive to *just* Black students. Various other groups – some multi-ethnic and others predominantly White – mobilized around campus concerns and national issues at schools throughout the country – (Rogers, 2012; Thelin, 2011). Additionally, while possibly the source of added tension, White students and associations worked, in some instances, alongside Black groups for Black causes (Glasker, 2009). As Rogers writes, "students crusaded at upwards of one thousand colleges and universities, in every state except Alaska... with differing activist ideologies that ranged from moderate to radical nationalists" (2012, pp. 2–3).

Each of these institutions took cues from the heightened protest culture of the era (Van Deburg, 1992). Over time, strategies would shift, employing more pragmatic approaches. Thelin writes, "One enduring legacy of the organized student movement was recognition by students of their rights as consumers and members of the campus community" (2011, p. 326). As empowered customers and democratic participants, students sought to it that their rights to assemble and make demands of their institutions in regards to the direct campus experience, broader administrative and financial practices of the college, and/or national or international affairs, were respected and exercised.

Though it has received limited academic attention, Black student protest and activism continued through the 1980s in various forms. While Spike Lee's 1988 release

School Daze depicted students' cries for divestment in South Africa at a fictionalized HBCU, students from actual colleges and universities across the country mobilized in the mid-80s, built shanties on campus, and actively demonstrated against apartheid (Abebe & Ryan, 2011; Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Lisman, 1996). These protests included higher-profile Black, White, and multiracial efforts at predominantly White institutions (particularly selective schools), as well as Black student and community-based anti-apartheid work at HBCUs. Of student activism at two HBCUs, Howard and Spelman, Jackson writes,

“...students also considered black South African liberation, and their support of it, as a continuation of Civil Rights struggles and tied apartheid to a host of issues that beset the African American community in the 1980s. As a result of this process, students developed a critique of global Black oppression that allowed them to create international Black identities centered within the African Diaspora and universal experiences of racial inequality” (2009, pp. 55–56).

Over the course of the revolutionary decades, manifestations of Black Power permeated multiple aspects and sites of culture including spoken and written word, music, sports, film, fashion, and more, furthering the reach and regularity of revolutionary messages (Edwards, 1970; J. L. Jeffries, 2006; Van Deburg, 1992). The Black Arts Movement, which produced reflective plays, poetic performances, visual arts, books of poems and critiques, and gatherings of the mind and spirit, meshed with pro-Black soul sounds and a growing tide of self-expression and racial consciousness (Collins & Crawford, 2006; Neal, 1999). On campuses, students were nurtured by the evolving cultural awareness and sense of revolutionary community. They pushed forward, continuing the calls for Black studies programs, cultural spaces, and representation in institutional decision-making processes (Biondi, 2012; L. D. Patton, 2005; Rooks, 2007; Van Deburg, 1992). They also continued to respond to racial incidents, whether they occurred on their campus or elsewhere in the country or world.

Remix, 1990-Present

As stated at the outset of this paper, one the primary reasons for undertaking this project was in response to the limited literature centered around contemporary Black student sociopolitical engagement. There has been research highlighting leadership development and Black student organizations, with some discussion of the social benefits of these endeavors (Guiffrida, 2003; S. Harper & Quaye, 2007; S. R. Harper, 2005; Museus, 2008). There has also been literature around campus racism and microaggressions, with attention given to the ways that students have organized and responded (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Some of the service learning literature and wider educational research through Critical Education and Youth Participatory Action Research projects demonstrates the ways that college students of color have become sociopolitically active in communities and schools (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Green, 2003; Jones, Dixon, & Umoja, 2005). In the national media, in response to issues such as the Jena 6 and the Trayvon Martin tragedy, college students are viewed as partners in protest, while the nation's embracing of the annual Martin Luther King Jr. holiday provides a public reminder for campus publications and communities to reflect on social progress and service (CNN.com, 2007; Martin, 2012).

Over the past two decades, amid the backdrop of attacks on affirmative action, Black male underrepresentation on campus, and persistent social disparities between Blacks and Whites, we know little about how Black college students have felt or responded. Their eclectic real-time soundtrack of progressive hip-hop, so-called "gangsta rap," trap music, braggadocio mainstream hits, and commercially pop fusions sends mixed signals about how

today's young people are continuing the struggle, and whether their generation is equipped to produce its own songs of freedom (Kitwana, 2002; Perry, 2004).

Campus Experiences

In the previous section I provided a historical synthesis of Black presence in higher education, divided into four major periods. This necessary perspective demonstrates the initial exclusion of Blacks in the higher educational process (among virtually all other general ways of freely “being” in the United States during the colonial and post-colonial eras), and the rising tensions as Black higher educational access increased in the latter 20th century. The forthcoming section explores more closely the experiential realities of being a Black student on a predominantly White campus today, from the process of getting in (which begins well before one submits an application) to a look at what happens on the other side, post-graduation.

The previously featured history informs the present day reality covered in this section. As will be discussed, there are still widespread access issues rooted in the generations of Black opportunity denial. There are also numerous new challenges, often blurred or ignored by our popular and convenient push toward “colorblindness.”

While it is certainly true that the Black college student experience today is much different than that of the 1970s, it is also important to consider the ways that it may in fact be quite similar, and why this might be so. Keeping the central research questions in mind, the literature reviewed investigates how today's Black students not only experience the campus, but how they build solidarity with each, how they respond to sociopolitical occurrences, how they perceive and possibly engage in activist efforts, and how their institutions help them to develop as students and democratic citizens.

Getting In

Over the last two decades admission into selective higher educational institutions has become increasingly more competitive. Fueled by both a significant growth in the number of applicants annually and the pressure for institutions to remain near the top of annual lists such as “*U.S. News and World Reports Best Colleges*,” schools now find themselves turning away tens of thousands of high school graduates each year. Stanford, for example, reported nearly 37,000 applications for the class of 2016, up 7% from the class of 2015 pool, to identify 1672 admits (Israni, 2012; Shapiro, 2012). In recent years Ivy League schools have reported lowering admit rates, some as low as 6-8% (Giambrone, 2012; Webley, 2013). As a result, it is not uncommon to find the headline “Most Selective Class Ever” in campus dailies year after year at some of the nation’s top schools.

In the face of this explosion of applicant numbers over time, and despite the various diversity efforts of college and university recruiters across the country, there are still considerable challenges for Black students to make their way to these top institutions. A significant number of Black youth are all but removed from the conversation before birth as a direct result of poverty. It was reported in 2007 that one of every three Black children in the U.S. lived below the poverty line, as compared to one in ten White children (Aud, Fox, & Kewal-Ramani, 2010). Of those families in the bottom income quartile in the U.S., less than 40% move on to college, and less than 40% of that number will go to a four-year school (Orfield et al., 2005, p. 36). An analysis done on the high school graduating class of 2004 found that at selective higher educational institutions the next year, the aggregative first-year class was less than 4% Black students (Reardon, Baker, & Klasik, 2012).

Third-party programs such as the Posse Foundation, A Better Chance, Prep for Prep, QuestBridge, and Gates Millennium Scholars help to create access pipelines for minority and/or low-income students, aiding schools in identifying promising candidates (Bial & Rodriguez, 2007; Carlton, 2007). The combined efforts of these programs still produces a relatively small number of Black students able to attend a selective school. For some Black students, the steady emergence of access and opportunity for their parents has helped to open the doors for them. Parents may have been graduates of the school that the student is applying to, possibly aiding their chances as a “legacy,” or the parent(s) may have attended another high level college and/or built a strong, financially rewarding career that has helped them get their children into “the right” schools, neighborhood, and network (Howell & Turner, 2004; Reardon et al., 2012).

In comparison to the Black students who entered the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960s and 70s, hailing mostly from Philadelphia’s public schools due to Penn’s limited Black admissions outreach initiatives at the time, Glasker writes,

“Over time Penn became more adept at identifying good ‘feeder schools’ and recruited a greater proportion of its African American students from such sources. In addition, as more African American middle-class parents sent their children to private preparatory schools, the pool of potential students from such schools has grown...[and] it became possible to recruit 150 African American students without having to tap inner-city public schools. But part of the legacy of the Black Power movement at Penn was the demand for diversity of class as well as race (or ethnicity), and the critique of traditional definitions of merit, qualification, and equality of opportunity... This challenge was not unique to Penn. It was confronted by almost all universities across the nation” (2009, pp. 112–113).

Today’s Black students in the nation’s selective schools are the most diverse group in history. As will be discussed in more detail, they come from a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, geographic locations, school types, and more. Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer write,

“Picking a black student at random, however, one would be hard-pressed to make an accurate guess about his or her background. He or she could be the heir to a sizable fortune, the child of affluent, married professionals, the son or daughter of high-school-educated, working-class parents, or the child of a single welfare mother who dropped out of school in the tenth grade” (2003, p. 200).

Remarkably this vast diversity and increasing access comes in a moment when institutions are in such greater demand. Despite the strides in gaining access, some Black students face challenges on campus. As will be discussed in the next section, Black students’ education on campus consists of the curricular elements which they signed up for, and a hidden curriculum steeped in racialized constructs and class differences (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Getting Schooled

As mentioned previously, the initial higher educational experiences for Blacks in America were primarily facilitated by HBCUs. The broadening of opportunities in the mid-1960s for Blacks to attend PWIs was unquestionably an advancement not only in United States’ race relations, but also in the development of the nation itself. It expanded the pool of future professionals, paved the way for additional diversity initiatives, and fulfilled the American ideal of choice, finally providing access to a cornerstone of the first-class citizenship possibilities of other Americans. This increase in access and opportunity for Black students did not come without its challenges, however. Today still, students of various cultural backgrounds, including Black students, express concerns about how they will be (or have been) treated and perceived on campus, and how they will best adapt. Thus, the higher

educational experience for Black students today – even those who elect to attend an HBCU⁵ – involves not only the formal processes and rituals of coursework and campus extracurricular activities, but also exercises in navigating complex racialized exchanges that have the potential to produce quite detrimental outcomes.

A number of studies have been conducted that bring attention to the various ways that students of color may be marginalized and/or victimized just by their very presence at a PWI. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso's study of thirty-four Black students across three PWIs revealed that respondents often felt invisible in the classroom, while other times they had to carry the undue burden of being the "spokesperson" for the entire Black race. Some students felt discounted from participating in study groups because they were Black. Further, they were aware that some of their White classmates felt that they did not necessarily belong on campus – that "affirmative action" was the only reason they were admitted. The discomfort spread outside of the classroom into various campus halls and the library, as well as social events that were often racially segregated, with Black functions having different rules and restrictions.

One student in the study responded,

"It's not fair on the African American students. [I have] to be on my guard every time I go in to talk to a professor, every time I go in and talk to the advisor, every time I go and talk to anybody. I'm like, are they really here to help me or are they going to lead me down the path that I don't want to go down?" (2000, p. 69).

Sharon Fries-Britt in her study of Meyerhoff Scholars (a STEM program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County) writes,

"High-achieving black students must master a baffling balancing act that they experience as they manage their intellectual ability. On the one hand,

⁵ As an example, attention surrounding a decade-old ban on locked and braided hair styles for men in a business seminar at Hampton University (an HBCU) raises the question of how Blackness is defined, and limited, visually (Smith, 2012).

they find it necessary to conceal their intelligence, yet on the other hand, they feel that they have to go out of their way to prove that they are smart. Often the pressure to prove that they are capable is not just for personal reasons; as members of the extended black community, they feel a responsibility to prove that blacks in general are intelligent” (2000, p. 57).

Linked to campus climate and student performance, particularly for the high-achieving Black students that Fries-Britt writes about (who are certainly the ones accepted into selective institutions) is the notion of stereotype threat. Defined as the risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s particular group, scholars have shown how this threat can produce significant anxiety, impede performance, and even drastically reduce the amount of effort a student puts in, possibly to the point of academic shutdown (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Beasley, 2011; C. M. Steele & Aronson, 1995). This phenomenon – this additional layer of stress that students of non-marginalized groups do not experience – is particularly concerning because it impacts the “vanguard” students, those who hold the most performance potential but are also the most concerned about their grades (Beasley, 2011; C. M. Steele, 1997).

The ways that institutions incorporate “affirmative action” or diversity efforts into their institutional practices can positively or negatively impact Black students’ schooling processes and performance. For example, Charles, Fischer, Mooney, and Massey’s findings among a sample of Black students at 28 schools indicated that in situations where these students were identified as requiring some sort of remediation, it was easier for them to connect this to their minority status (and to the heavy implications of affirmative action, presumed to be a prominent factor in them gaining college admission) (2009).

Insecurities and doubts may remain present throughout a Black student’s four years of school. Successful students employ a range of coping mechanisms including forming nurturing peer and resource networks, as will be discussed in the next section.

Getting Together

Harper, Guiffrida, and others have written about the importance of student groups as sites for leadership development, peer collaboration, racial solidarity and social support (Guiffrida, 2003; S. R. Harper, 2005; Museus, 2008). Patton's work documenting the relevance of Black Cultural Centers underscores their continued need at predominantly White institutions (2006a, 2010, 2012). These centers date back to the late 1960s when Black student populations spiked at PWIs. Many were directly linked to Black Student Unions, serving as spaces to strategize and unwind. At institutions without specific cultural spaces for BSU members to gather, students met where they could, creating informal centers of culture.

As Black presence at PWIs continued to grow in the 1980s, additional Black student groups emerged alongside the BSU. Black Greek organizations, most of which dated back to the early 1900s, were able to establish new chapters (T. L. Brown, Parks, & Phillips, 2005). Cultural arts and academic groups were developed to provide Black experiences for students and the wider campus community, and to also counter mainstream spaces on campus that may have used discriminatory practices to exclude or marginalize students of color. Black students were "drawn" to these affinity groups to "create their own sense of community and belonging" (Glasker, 2009, pp. 15–16). These organized activities have helped to define the Black experience for today's college students, and in some cases, as will be described, have aided in the continuation of student sociopolitical engagement.

While scholars such as Harper, Patton, and Kuh have called for colleges and universities to be more intentional about the ways that they shape and leverage co-curricular opportunities, particularly for students from traditionally underrepresented

groups, the reality is that much of this engagement will be student-initiated (S. R. Harper & Antonio, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; L. D. Patton & Hannon, 2008). Thus, the ways that students get involved on campus often serve the dual function of enhancing their overall campus experience and personal skillsets while connecting them to each other in substantive and lasting ways.

Getting Involved

This section explores the ways that Black students remain engaged with important social, cultural, and political concerns, whether they be campus based or situated more broadly.

As previously stated, what we know about this area is that we do not know much. We can speculate that the existence of Black Greek organizations, NAACP chapters, Black Student Unions, and similar groups on campuses throughout the country allows for critical discussion and valuable community service to take place. One organization, the National Society of Black Engineers, has made a significant commitment to youth STEM education through its college student members getting directly involved in schools and after school programs. Numerous campuses throughout the country have established service-learning and community outreach components, but little is known about Black-specific participation and impact.

In the internet age we know that there are critical sociopolitical issues that students are discussing and/or supporting online such as, most recently, marriage equality and gun control. In the Black community there's still online dialogue regarding the 2012 Trayvon Martin tragedy and the violence plaguing Black communities such as in Chicago. There are other localized issues, whether they be racial incidents on a campus, or conversations about

public school shutdowns, such as in Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia. It is unclear in the literature whether Black college students, even through possibly sharing news clips online, truly feel a sense of ownership for and connection to these issues, and how that may impact their experiences on campus.

Arguably, one of the missions of Black Studies was to aid students and campuses in remaining engaged in critical community-based discourse and action. As Black Studies programs nationwide have diversified their objectives, there has been some debate regarding how they operate and what sorts of commitments Black faculty can and should make to activist work for and with their students (Baker, 2008; Gates & West, 1997; Hord, 2005; James, 2000; Kilson, 2000; Rooks, 2007).

As will be discussed in the theory section, in the most ideal sense from an institutional / student development perspective, student activities will be campus-based and will be aligned to support a student's quest toward graduation. Previous era's Black sociopolitical engagement was at times in conflict with that goal. It is unclear how this may translate today, and whether a Black student's intellectual and social engagement with sociopolitical concerns is a motivating and supportive factor as a college student, or whether this takes them further away from their classroom responsibilities. The next section reviews literature on completion overall, and some of the underlying concerns that have been presently identified.

Getting Through

Generally speaking, Black students are not sufficiently completing college. Across all four-year colleges, Black students – and in particular, Black males – have a considerable six-year graduation rate gap in comparison to the overall average. In 2001 the six-year

graduation rate for all students at four-year schools in the United States was 57.3% (NCES, 2009). Black students in this same national data set had a graduation rate of 41.5%, the lowest of the four largest racial/ethnic groups measured. The Black male graduation rate was 34.6%.

At selective institutions, six-year graduation rates are much higher across all racial groups. A study from the American Enterprise Institute, looking at data from the entering class of 2001, showed that of the six levels in the Barron's selectivity index, the Most Competitive schools had a 87.8% graduation rate, followed by Highly Competitive (75.2%), Very Competitive (62.3%), Competitive (48.6%, and serving the largest portion of students in the study, at 41.5%), Less Competitive (39.6%), and Non-competitive (34.7%) (Hess, Schneider, Carey, & Kelly, 2009). While at times slight, particularly in recent years, performance gaps still exist between racial groups at selective schools. The two tables below provide a look at six-year completion rates of five highly selective schools.

TABLE 1. Six-Year Completion Rates at Five Selective Schools, 2002 and 2010.

2010⁶

	Overall	White	Black
Columbia	92.5	93.0	89.1
Georgetown	92.5	93.9	82.0
Harvard	97.4	97.1	96.9
Penn	95.5	95.7	90.8
Stanford	94.7	95.7	92.8

⁶ Data for both tables is as reported by The Education Trust's CollegeResults.org.

2002

	Overall	White	Black
Columbia	91.8	93.3	87.3
Georgetown	93.8	94.5	87.8
Harvard	97.2	97.5	93.5
Penn	91.8	92.1	81.6
Stanford	92.5	93.6	87.2

Other selective peer institutions' measures typically fall in line with these figures.

As shown, Black graduation rates at four of the five sample schools increased over the nine-year range. While the schools that rose may point to any number of initiatives connected to their specific diversity efforts (increase in faculty diversity, improvement of support services for underrepresented students, positive enhancement of campus climate, etc.), the answer may be most closely aligned to the increased selectivity of the admissions process, as previously described.

While this example data shows that there are persistent gaps, and in some cases *widening* gaps, it only provides a glimpse of the story. Embedded within the completion conversation is another critical issue recently brought to light by Maya Beasley in her study of Black students at Stanford and UC Berkley. Beasley argues that Black students may be graduating from selective schools at fairly high rates, but they are not sticking with the more difficult majors (pre-medicine, engineering, etc.) that they initially selected (2011). Instead, they are shifting into lower-paying career trajectories where Blacks are overrepresented. The numbers in STEM professional fields reflect this finding, as well as the relatively low numbers of Blacks who pursue STEM-related areas for graduate school.

In addition to the under-diversified job portfolios of Blacks after receiving their bachelor's degrees, Beasley's research sheds light on two other major areas. First, there is limited study on what she terms "the Black elite." Second, there are various forces at work

on campuses that push Black students away from the more difficult majors. Beasley places particular emphasis on stereotype threat, describing it as the “missing link.” Her analysis provides another way of looking at this phenomenon; not only can it potentially impact a student’s chances of graduating, dissuade feelings of connection to the institution, and prevent students from doing as well as possible in their courses, but it can also shift the student’s career path. This point connects directly to the first – the limited focus on the Black elite – because as Beasley notes, it is the “vanguard” of the race that is most susceptible.

By just focusing on the completion data, particularly at selective institutions that have had comparative success with Black student graduation rates, we fail to explore numerous additional issues (are students getting jobs after graduation and in what sectors, have students received an affirming cultural experience through their institution, do students feel like full members of the campus community, are students aware of and prepared for the rich alumni experiences that can result from attending a selective school, and more).

Additionally, Beasley discusses the ways that institutions attempt to support Black students, and how these may in effect funnel social networks and opportunities into more concentrated circles. In most cases these limited options do not include STEM. The Meyerhoff program is mentioned as one exemplary framework to produce STEM graduates, but Beasley notes that no selective institutions have such a program.

Black students at selective institutions are getting through to graduation, unlike in previous eras, but still, not all is well here. Beasley’s analysis shows that much more study is required.

Twenty-First Century Black

This section explores the complex ways that Blackness is imagined, viewed, constructed, embodied, regulated, attacked, and performed in the twenty-first century, and the ways that previous notions largely linked to what many erroneously believe to be the beginning of Black history – the Trans-Atlantic slave trade – have continued to drive the conversation in the face of game-changing realities. This wider lens of Blackness informs the interests, ideas, and experiences of today’s Black college students, and is thus pertinent to this study.

The most visible and powerful Black man in 2013, President Barack Obama, provides the perfect example to introduce the three themes within his section – The Color Line, The Diaspora Next Door, and Black Like Me.

Obama’s historic election (and re-election), and the various actions against him – from the peculiar questioning of his birth certificate and similar well-covered incidents, to the much lesser publicized dramatic rise in popularity of White supremacist groups and hate crimes following the 2008 election – demonstrate just how central race is in American culture, and how divisive a factor it can be (AP, 2008; Goff, 2012; Kennedy, 2012; Levin, 2012; Sugrue, 2010). In Chicago, America’s urban color lines produced Black neighborhoods for Obama to do community-organizing work in the ‘80s. Early in 2013, Obama was “called home” to address the steady stream of senseless murders of Black young people in those same, still largely impoverished Chicago communities (M. P. Jeffries, 2013; Obama, 2007).

Obama’s paternal lineage reminds us that today’s immigration conversations are not just about the growing Latino population in the U.S., but also include significant numbers of Africans entering the country in search of better opportunities. And just as Obama was able

to attend Columbia and Harvard, the children of today's African immigrants are also gaining access to the nation's most selective college and universities at remarkable rates.

The Obama story also highlights the many ways that one can "be Black," or the multiplicity of Black experiences that are now possible. Few would imagine a "typical" Black boy having a Kenyan father and White mother, living in Indonesia and Hawaii, and being named "Barack Hussein." They certainly would not have imagined that this atypical young man, or any other Black youth, would be elected president of the United States. And yet, in *Dreams of My Father*, even with his unique background, Obama describes encounters with racism and isolation, being the only Black face in the room (2007).

Those stories of marginalization are consistently among the experiences of Blacks who attend predominantly White higher educational institutions, whether their parents attended Ivy law schools or they are climbing out of poverty, pushing through college on full scholarship (Fries-Britt, 2000; S. R. Harper, 2005; Solorzano et al., 2000). Thus, despite the increase in interracial marriages, the various ethnic groups making up today's Black neighborhoods, the socioeconomic gains of some Blacks, and the many other layers of Black diversity, there are still shared struggles and an extremely complicated and often misunderstood Black sociopolitical historical narrative (Joseph, 2010; Robinson, 2011). As will be discussed in this section, even with Obama's rise and the many scholars and journalists who have written extensively about race and the Obama phenomenon, race is still an exceedingly slippery subject to candidly discuss and build policy and programming around. This is just as true for Obama as it is for the rest of us.

The Color Line

Contemporary scholars across various disciplines often cite W.E.B. Du Bois's 1903 proclamation – “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” – as a clairvoyant testament to the depth of racial strife in America. Yet, at the turn of the twenty-first century, in the glaring shadows of statistical evidence that continued to underscore Du Bois's point, a new phrase emerged: *post-racial*. Obama's 2008 election was one obvious marker. The mainstream success of other prominent Blacks – the Oprahs, the Beyoncé's, the Jay-Zs, the Lebrons – offered additional fuel. And thus far, the notion of post-racial has pushed a considerable number of citizens to at least ask, “well, are we?” while others have begun to proceed as if the answer is “yes.”

Meanwhile, researchers, institutes, activists, writers, artists, journalists, and others continue to study and address the many crises that continue to create chaos within Black communities across the country. Public intellectuals such as Melissa Harris-Perry, Michael Eric Dyson, Marc Lamont Hill, and James Peterson have balanced their academic professions with TV host positions and/or regular featured guest spots. They have shed light on numerous national and international stories, but often pay particular attention to race-heavy issues such as contemporary voter suppression, stop-and-frisk policing abuses, educational access, and more. Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* outlines the highly racialized statistics within today's prison system, bringing attention to, among other things, the vast overrepresentation of Blacks and Latinos for drug offenses, and the limited rehabilitative options available to them once in the system (2012). Gary Orfield and his research team at Harvard's Civil Rights Project have written extensively about the resegregation of American's public schools and the impact that this has on society. Recent reports and efforts from The Knight Foundation, The Council

of Great City Schools, The Schott Foundation, and others, highlight the critical importance of engaging Black boys early and often. Other demographic studies and scholarly works cover vast (and in some cases, growing) gaps between Blacks and Whites in wealth, earnings, college going and graduation, employment, health, life expectancy, and more (Beasley, 2011; Bishaw & Iceland, 2003; Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Cook & Pullaro, 2010; Gonimah, 2012; Kochhar et al., 2011; Lee & Bean, 2007; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). Shaun Harper and Sylvia Hurtado have produced and edited a large body of work covering race in higher education, most recently the third edition of ASHE's *Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Higher Education*, featuring issues such as racism in the classroom, under-representation of Black students in the STEM fields, lack of faculty diversity, overwhelming additional stressors on faculty of color, limited institutional accountability on implementing explicit diversity initiatives, underdeveloped support plans for students of color, and more. Tim Wise has written and lectured extensively about White privilege and the dangers of supposed colorblind policies and practices.

All of these efforts and more have sought to continue the race-sensitive work so necessary in a nation that used race for over three centuries to develop itself as a world power, on the backs of oppressed and marginalized people. In response, conservative voices point to ideals of meritocracy and fairness, as they seek to "re-form" America with little regard to historical context or current realities. From the forthcoming *Fisher v. University of Texas* Supreme Court decision, questioning the continued legality of factoring race into college admissions, to the infamous hidden video of then presidential candidate Mitt Romney stating that there are "Forty-seven percent of Americans who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims..." (Corn, 2012), it would seem that race itself is very much at the core of post-racial pursuits, and the goal is to take away as much as

possible from those of the darker hue, who, coincidentally do not have much to take. This effort is aided by Black conservative voices such as Shelby Steele, John McWhorter, Juan Williams, and others, who paint Blacks as shiftless victims wallowing in their own, self-designed “culture of failure,” blaming others for their despair (McWhorter, 2001, 2005; S. Steele, 1991; J. Williams, 2007).

Derrick Bell’s words from two decades ago perhaps say it best:

“Lulled by comforting racial stereotypes, fearful that blacks will unfairly get ahead of them, all too many whites respond to even the most dire reports of race-based disadvantage with either a sympathetic headshake or victim-blaming rationalizations. Both responses lead easily to the conclusion that contemporary complaints of racial discrimination are simply excuses put forward by people who are unable or unwilling to compete on an equal basis in a competitive society... Whites eagerly embrace black conservatives’ homilies to self-help, however grossly unrealistic such messages are in an economy where millions, white as well as black, are unemployed and, more important, in one where racial discrimination in the workplace is as viscous (if less obvious) than it was when employers posted signs ‘no negras need apply’” (1992, pp. 4–5).

In many ways today’s sudden shift to post-racial discourse is a continuation of the assault on black humanity that Cornel West highlighted in the 1997 essay “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization.” The removal of Blackness from productive sociopolitical conversation and action furthers the “fundamental condition of black culture – that of *black invisibility and namelessness*” (Gates & West, 1997, p. 80). This is just as true on today’s campuses. While campuses publicly embrace the ideals of diversity, at times their actions reveal mostly inaction, or moves towards meritocracy and/or colorblindness that actually run counter to diversity and social justice. Blacks remain underrepresented on campuses, Black faculty significantly so. Black Studies programs and cultural centers often are the sole spaces for students to engage Black faculty and administrators (Beasley, 2011; Rooks, 2007). When it suits the institution’s interests, these spaces are spotlighted as valuable

partners in building cultural understanding. Other times, they are reminded of their marginality and/or required to prove the legitimacy of their scholarship and presence. Occasionally, their Blackness is erased, bundled into a multicultural mix or simply shutdown all together (Hefner, 2002; Hord, 2005; L. D. Patton, 2006b; Rooks, 2007). But as the next theme explores, emerging patterns within Black student populations, particularly at selective colleges and universities, demonstrate that Blackness itself is multicultural, raising even more questions about how institutions can best embrace them, and how these students view themselves and their community(ies) on campus.

The Diaspora Next Door

In the 1960s when Black enrollments at PWIs throughout the country began to increase, there were about 125,000 Black immigrants in the country, or less than one percent of the total Black U.S. population (K. Brown & Bell, 2008; Gibson & Lennon, 1999). Prior to that, the most significant shifts in Black culture occurred via the Great Migration, as upwards of six million Black Americans moved from the South to cities like New York, Washington, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and Oakland between 1910 and 1970 (see Lemann's *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* and Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, among others, for detailed accounts). This wave of internal migration paved the way for Black cultural icons such as Motown, the Apollo Theater, and the Black Panther Party. With the decline of industrialization in many of the major cities where Blacks relocated, this migration also inadvertently led to substantial urban unemployment and cyclical poverty.

Today's Great Black Migration is international, with scores of foreign-born Blacks now entering the United States. By 1990, the 1960 total of 125,000 foreign-born Blacks had

multiplied over ten times to nearly 1.5 million Blacks, or 4.9% of the total Black U.S. population (Gibson & Lennon, 1999). Fifteen years later the number nearly doubled again to 2.8 million, 8% of the Black total (K. Brown & Bell, 2008). It was projected to have grown to 4.5 million, or 12% of the Black population, by 2010 (K. Brown & Bell, 2008).

Significant recent attention has been given to the rise of African immigrants in the U.S. This total is still not nearly as large as the number of Caribbean immigrants annually (and both pale in comparison to Latino immigration figures), but has grown considerably over the past decades. A 2005 *New York Times* headline noted “More Africans Enter U.S. Than in Days of Slavery.” Best scholarly estimates of slave trafficking directly to the United States totaled half a million Africans, or 30,000 annually during the peak years (Roberts, 2005). Legal immigration of Africans today was estimated to be about 50,000 per year, many being students, refugees, and family members seeking to reunite (Roberts, 2005).

Like the Black American story, the African immigrant story is by no means monolithic. Forty years ago the U.S. saw heavy waves of Ethiopian and Somali refugees entering the country, while today Nigerians and Ghanaians are among the most-represented (Roberts, 2005). The education levels of African immigrants also vary widely, according to family background and their reason for immigrating; some are well-off, coming explicitly to gain access to additional elite education opportunities while others are fleeing war (but typically still have their eyes on education) (Gordon, 1998; Robinson, 2011). Their ultimate geographic landing spots in America also vary widely. Urban cities had been the popular choice, but now there is a spreading into suburban and rural areas.

Caribbean immigration to the U.S. opened widely in 1965 when laws were reformed ending country quotas (K. Brown & Bell, 2008; Thomas, 2012). The largest numbers of Black Caribbeans in the U.S. hail from Haiti and Jamaica, and they are much more likely to

settle in New York or Florida than any other parts of the country (Thomas, 2012). While their prior educational attainment has typically not been as strong as today's African immigrants entering the U.S., Black Caribbean's longer history in the country and, for some, their entering knowledge of English, has enabled them to fair better than native Blacks and African immigrants in the U.S. labor force (Thomas, 2012). As Mary Waters has documented, and additional statistical data confirms, Caribbean-rooted Blacks have been able to reach America's selective colleges and universities in significant numbers in recent years (Massey et al., 2007; Waters, 2009).

We are still learning, particularly in regards to the educational aspirations and achievements of the diverse groups of Black immigrants today. Lani Guinier offered the following thoughts: "Like their wealthier white counterparts, many first- and second-generation immigrants of color test well because they retain a national identity free of America's racial caste system and enjoy material and cultural advantages, including professional or well-educated parents" (K. Brown & Bell, 2008). This is one story, but certainly not the only one. As America grows more diverse, and as globalization becomes more localized and familiar, numerous other stories continue to rise to the surface, extending the discourse of "difference" and "norms."

Black Like Me

Coupled with the diasporic differences of the last theme are additional layers of difference within the Black community – differences that have been present for generations but are now becoming more obvious due to widening gaps in socioeconomic standings, debilitating poverty, increased violence, and social decay.

Robinson's *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (2011) provides a useful framework to view the current situation. Four specific groups of Blacks are outlined: The Transcendent (Black elites and wealthy), The Mainstream (the Black middle class), The Emergent (which Robinson covers in two parts – a growing Black immigrant population and a growing mixed-race group with Black ties), and The Abandoned (the Black poor, particularly those isolated in depressed, urban communities).

Because of the difficulties of introducing and sustaining a productive race conversation, and the complicated, systemic marginalization of Blackness in America, the realities of the various Black groups described above are all tempered by varying degrees of continued racism. As Robinson writes, across each of the Black groups, "it's hard to believe that half a century after Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published, we'd still be talking about invisibility. But we are" (2011, p. 93). This is especially true for the Black middle class, or the Mainstream, whom Robinson says differs from the broader American middle class experience because,

"Despite all the progress that's been made, there's still a nagging sense of being looked down upon, of being judged, of being disrespected. What keeps this difference alive is that these suspicions aren't always paranoia. They're not always justified, either, but there's enough reality behind them to keep alive a sense of separate but not-quite equal - enough to make many people seek safety, acceptance, and solidarity in numbers" (2011, p. 81)

Other scholars from Du Bois to Gates have alluded to such divides within the Black community previously. Nevertheless, perhaps due to the relatively small population of Blacks in America, the prevalence of slavery and Civil Rights discourse, racism, and the perpetuation of the many commonly held stereotypes about Blacks, there is often just a singular view of Blackness – a delimiting othering, similar to the quote from Robinson above. On today's campuses this is much more perplexing. A Black student may get along with other Blacks on campus from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds

because they are “Black like me.” But when speaking with a White friend later in the day, that same Black student may hear the words “you’re not like most Black people.” What does that mean for Black student solidarity and broader Black solidarity? Further, what does this mean for the Black student’s individual sense of identity, support, and comfort on campus when they feel divided and conquered on multiple fronts (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt, 2000; Solorzano et al., 2000; Willie, 2003)?

To close, consider the following passage from Randall Kenan’s *Walking on Water*:

Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century:

“What does it mean to be black? I know now, after a great deal of work and worry, that none of the obvious answers to that question hold much water. Yes, to be black is to be composed of three essential ingredients: political, cultural, and emotional. You don't need to look long at the history, and the present, of Black America to be convinced of the ongoing political necessity for some unity among black folks, if nothing else, to band together against discrimination, to fight for parity, to safeguard against injustice inherently aimed at a person solely because of his or her skin color.” (2000, p. 638).

The next section of this paper introduces the theoretical tools that were used to explore Black solidarity at the study site.

Theory

Three theoretical models provided the framework for this study, both in its design and in the analysis of the data. In this section, each model is discussed.

Social Movement Theory

As discussed in the previous sections of the literature review, Black students, beginning in the mid 1960s and taking cues from the protest culture of the day and national/international events occurring around them (to include the rising Black Power movement), mobilized on campuses across the nation to demand recognition, fair treatment, greater access and opportunities, and the power to define their own community-based destinies. Social movement theory provides an analytical tool to situate and assess uprisings or mass mobilization efforts such as this. Via social movement theory, one can better understand whether a series of events is even best viewed as a “movement,” and if so, how it evolved, and how and why it achieved (or did not achieve) success.

The term “social movement” was first used by German sociologist Lorenz von Stein in response to the uprisings of the French masses to spark the French revolution (Herble, 1951). It refers to mass collective efforts aiming to “bring about fundamental changes in social order, especially in the basic institutions of property and labor relationships (Herble, 1951, p. 6). The movement is not just a product of “unpredictable historical forces, but also carefully planned, collective actions” (Marable, 1997, p. 8). Tilly emphasizes that social movements are driven and sustained by masses “living under the jurisdiction” of identified “powerholders,” and who challenge the powerholders through “repeated public displays of their numbers, commitment, unity, and worthiness” (Giugni, McAdam, & Tilly, 1998; Tilly, 1978). Among the prominent theorists and applications there are various schools of thought regarding when something is a movement (as opposed to a trend or a group), how much organization is necessary (versus how much activity is spontaneous), and other sub-theories about the movement’s rationales, sustainability, and outcomes. Some of the debate is pushed by the uniqueness of each movement; social movement theory has been applied

to a range of sociopolitical engagements including feminist movement work, labor movements, gay rights activism, environmental work, antigovernment uprisings, and the civil rights and Black Power movements (Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Giugni et al., 1998). Within these differing segments, specific movement instances are driven by various political climates, geography, historical trends, advances in technology, and the broadening of perspectives around the movement itself (Giugni et al., 1998).

For the purposes of this project, the four-stage model fusing the works of Blumer, Mauss, and Tilly, provides an ideal structure to situate the analysis (Blumer, 1971; Mauss, 1975; Tilly, 1978). In the first stage, the movement *emerges*. There is not yet an organized demonstration or any tangible activity or mobilization, but rather a shared sense of discontent across a number of individuals and/or groups. In the second stage, *coalescence*, the discontent of the concerned individuals or groups moves toward some sort of organized collective action. Participants realize that in order to address their anger or disapproval, they will need to strategically and collaboratively make the powerholders aware of their presence and sentiments. They gather together to outline their course of action and then they begin to act. The third stage, *bureaucratization*⁷, takes the organizing to the next level, and for some movements, quickly leads to the fourth and final stage, *decline*. If the movement is not able to sustain the energy, logistical maintenance, and commitment to its defined goals – either through a core of capable volunteers and/or in connection with a formalized Social Movement Organization (SMO), which will have full- and part-time staffers to support its mission – then decline is likely imminent. Otherwise, the bureaucratization stage continues, providing consistent engagement activity, increased negotiating access, or furthering the movement’s efforts in other ways.

⁷ If a series of events does not get to this stage, it likely is not a movement. For example, a group can coalesce and hold a one-time demonstration, with no intention of taking further action.

All social movements enter the decline stage at some point, but this is not necessarily a defeat. The “decline” of the movement could indicate that the movement’s objectives were reached, and thus the movement is no longer necessary. Alternatively, the movement can fail, either by falling short of its goals, structurally unraveling, and/or being repressed by outside forces. The movement can also be co-opted, essentially following the adage “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” The dominant powerholders can use their influence to lure movement leaders to their side, granting them “advisory” roles for example, or can co-opt certain elements and initiatives of the movement, but do so on their own terms and perhaps with different intentions. This expansive range of “success” definitions makes social movement theory complex to apply, and at the same time highly intriguing, particularly for this study. What qualifies as success may vary from person to person across the aisle and on the same side of the struggle, and may change over the course of the movement. As will be discussed, when viewed through a critical race lens, the notion of interest convergence has played a central role in shaping the Black Power movement on campus and Black student protest culture in general, particularly over the last decade.

Pragmatic Black Nationalism

“Can black political solidarity lead to a more just society and world? If so, what form must it take to produce this result? ...Historically, political unity among black Americans has contributed to the cause of social justice. It was essential to the abolition of chattel slavery. It was instrumental in bringing down Jim Crow segregation. It played a crucial role in the establishment of constitutional and legislative guarantees of equal civil rights for all citizens. But now, in what has come to be dubbed the “post-civil rights era,” does black political solidarity have any purpose to serve? Many people, including a growing number of blacks, would answer with a resounding no. But my answer is yes, and in this book I offer my reasoning.”

The above passage opens Tommie Shelby’s 2005 work *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*. The title of the book is taken from “Criteria of

Negro Art,” an essay written by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1926 which reads, “We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?” Much in the way that Freire calls for the oppressed to save the oppressor, Shelby, through Du Bois, reasons that Blacks’ experiences with racial discrimination best position them to lead the effort to end racism and injustice (Freire, 2007; Shelby, 2007).

Shelby’s meticulous research and analysis traces the Black nationalist thought of Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Du Bois, and considers contemporary interpretations and responses from the likes of Paul Gilroy, K. Anthony Appiah, Lani Guinier, and William Julius Wilson. Shelby wrestles with notions of nationalism as separatist and anti-White, which is the underlying message perceived by many who only engage the periphery of the Black Power era imagery. He looks at the ways that nationalistic platforms have been employed in various forms to be both a means (toward social justice and equality) and an end, in some cases (creating separate institutions). He also tackles a more complex internal struggle, that of essentializing Blackness. Ultimately he offers a philosophical framework rooted in Pan-African Du Boisian consciousness that he terms “Pragmatic⁸ Black Nationalism.” Under this framework, there are no essentialized elements of Blackness from a cultural perspective, or, as Shelby describes, no “thick collective identity.” In other words, it is not about color complexion (a former stumbling block that went both ways for Blacks; the “paper bag” test stamped some as “too Black” for certain social circles while in other circumstances, fairer-skinned Blacks could be accused of “selling out” or being a “wanna be” simply due to their lighter complexion), income level, birthplace, knowledge of all things Afrocentric, dancing abilities, whether one has married

⁸ Shelby is careful to note that he does not mean “pragmatic” in the philosophical sense, but rather that his model for Black nationalism is simply a more practical and accessible form (2007, p. 30).

within the race, or other discriminating factors. Shelby notes the many layers and challenges in attempting to construct any sort of Blackness rubric, and suggests that today's Black community is far too fragmented (physically, ideologically, socioeconomically, etc.) to create a shared agenda based upon "Blackness." The historic connection of Blacks to experiential injustice is the sole qualifier for Shelby's pragmatic solidarity, and the end goal of this solidarity is to nurture social justice projects to end racial inequalities. This work is to be inclusive; for Shelby, Blacks come well-versed to guide the efforts, but other concerned individuals and organizations can and should participate, reminiscent of elements of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition of the 1980s (Joseph, 2010). Various class bases should be represented in the social justice mobilization as well, and within the combined movement, power should be evenly distributed to avoid, for example, a vast majority of Christian Black heterosexual male upper-income voices.

Shelby is quick to point out that his text is not an agenda, nor any sort of organizational structure or action plan. Nevertheless, it serves as one of the most well-crafted and compatible intellectual articulations to imagine how a social justice agenda – and one with ties to Black nationalism – can operate in America. For this study in particular, Shelby's work provides an opportunity to explore how Black college students and graduates view themselves both in relation to the Du Boisian and Black Power linkages of the past, and in Shelby's philosophical social justice program for the future. In this sense, one objective of this study's analysis is to gain further insight into the ways that today's Black students see themselves and their work in regards to the previously discussed social movement theory discourse, using Shelby as a bridge. As will be discussed in the next section, student engagement theories can perhaps serve as an alternate bridge to an entirely different location, disjointed from Blackness and/or social justice, or, on the other extreme, can

provide additional supports on Shelby's bridge, helping Black students be academically and culturally engaged on campus, while also developing as change agents. And of course, there is a vast middle ground where student engagement and social justice solidarity may simultaneously compliment and compete with other.

Shelby's non-essentialized ideal for Black identity does raise some questions in regards to applicability for college students. As will be discussed later, while the students and alumni who participated in this study offered no hard and fast list of requirements for "Blackness," there were notions of "Black community" and "Black culture" that were at times not explicitly outlined but were implied. One example that some of the participants discussed would be "stepping," the synchronized performances done by Black sororities and fraternities. This is widely viewed as a "Black thing," familiar to and celebrated by members of the Black community, those in Greek-lettered organizations and not (though certainly, step show audiences are not exclusively Black). This is but one simple point, but it raises the question, which shall be explored later, as to whether a common history of racialized injustice is enough to facilitate Black solidarity for today's Black college students, or whether students find solidarity in other ways, some of which may have nothing at all to do with past oppression, social justice, or even identifying as Black.

Student Engagement Theories

Astin's groundbreaking student support work defines a highly involved student as "one who devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (1999, p. 518). In Astin's student involvement theory, more involved students are more likely to persist on campus. Harper pushes Astin's involvement

model to a more connected and interactive level – *engagement* – and urges universities to play a more active role in creating engagement opportunities for diverse groups of students (2008). Both Astin and Harper highlight the many campus connections necessary to effectively support students, with Harper providing a much more comprehensive set of recommendations to reach the many different types of students on today’s campuses (Black males, low-income, LGBT, transfers, part-time students, White students attending HBCUs, and more). This explicit and culturally relevant approach reminds us that, without intentional efforts and connections to bring minority women to STEM career fields, for example, deeply ingrained stereotypes would undermine any possible organic opportunities.

Critiques of Tinto’s widely-cited student departure research follow a similar pattern. Tinto initially posited that students who assimilated best into the cultural values of their campus communities – even at the expense of cutting potentially detrimental home ties – would fair well on campus (Tinto, 1975, 1994). Calling such a notion “cultural suicide,” Tierney wrote, “Rather than a model that assumes that students must fit into what is often an alien culture and that they leave their own culture, I argue the opposite. The challenge is to develop ways where an individual’s identity is affirmed, honored and incorporated into the organization’s culture” (1999, 2000, p. 8). In revisiting his previous model, Tinto more recently offered the following,

“...the study and practice of student retention has undergone a number of changes. First, our understanding of the experience of students of different backgrounds has been greatly enhanced as has our appreciation of how a broader array of forces, cultural, social, and institutional, shape student retention. Take for instance the research on the retention of under-represented students and the so-called stages of departure. Whereas we once assumed that retention required students to break away from past communities, we now know that for some students the ability to remain connected to their past communities, family, church, or tribe, is essential to their persistence” (2005).

These updated and expanded theoretical positions underscore the need to factor difference and cultural-sensitivity into the ways that colleges and universities support their students, as this is the only way to truly address the many unique requirements and circumstances of the students that institutions serve.

Black students at both HBCUs and PWIs have a long-established tradition of generating critical student support connections and engagement through cultural groups and campus centers, communal support circles, and informal peer support networks (Cuyjet, 2006; Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008; Hale, 2006; S. Harper & Quaye, 2007; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; L. D. Patton, 2006b). As previously mentioned, Black student organizations and campus spaces at PWIs initially offered students an opportunity to fellowship when similar possibilities for them within mostly White organizations were limited (L. D. Patton, 2012; Strayhorn, Terrell, Redmond, & Walton, 2010). These organizations soon became platforms for leadership development and cornerstones of the Black student experience (S. Harper & Quaye, 2007). This role is just as important today, linking undergraduates with peers, graduate students, faculty and administrators, and alumni in richly formative ways.

Efforts to connect Black students to campus work best when they are institutionally embraced, align multiple contributors, and provide meaningful opportunities for extension (S. Harper & Quaye, 2008; Kuh et al., 2010). Living learning programs, service learning, student support services, research fellowships, alumni mentoring, career panels, pre-college orientations, cultural organizations and events, and other initiatives provide numerous opportunities for schools to engage their students, and in turn, benefit from students' engagement in the campus community. Connections should foster both intra-

group relationships and cross-cultural links; just as White students profit from diversity on campus, Black students must also find comfort in the emerging multicultural world. Student engagement theories, particularly when applied in a culturally relevant context, posit that this is much more likely to be achieved when Black students do not feel like periphery guests (or intruders) on campus, but instead are proactively supported in realizing a meaningful model of full membership that they are able to co-construct.

Synthesis

In this chapter I've revisited the racialized roots of Black participation in American higher education. The notion of Black student solidarity is linked to these roots; Blacks entered PWIs in extremely small numbers and as virtual outsiders. In the earliest days, their strength was simply in having each other. Later, specifically in the Black Power era, for some Black students this de facto solidarity became intentional political mobilization to demand institutional change. Such efforts transformed the academy, creating new opportunities for culturally-based academic and student support programs, as well as diverse faculty and student populations. In recent years, this intentionality subsided, at least in comparison to the highly visible and volatile events of the 1960s and 70s. Simultaneously, there have been substantial numbers of Black students entering selective schools and other institutions – a virtually constant critical mass – though a much more diverse (financially, ethnically) critical mass than ever before. There have also been widely publicized recurring patterns of racism, neglect, and inequity, on campus and beyond, particularly within lower income communities of color.

Thus, as I later unpack the data in this study, I do so thinking about how the experiences of the critical mass of Black students at the selective school featured in this

research (and perhaps other schools like it) are shaped when viewed through the three theoretical models described above. What are the various interpretations that will unfold? Is it possible that some Black students consciously or subconsciously subscribe to Tinto's earliest engagement ideas, and shun aspects of their Black cultural selves in order to fit within what they perceive to be the institutional expectations? Is it possible that some students, by way of a higher socioeconomic status, recent roots outside of America, or limited Black cultural exposure do not relate to notions of "Blackness" and/or group responsibility the way that previous generations of Black students have? Has the possible cooptation or demise of the Black student movement furthered a push toward racelessness and/or individuality? Are there pockets of students in an emergence, or a "pre-emergence" stage of a new social movement? If so, will their efforts fall in line with Shelby's notions of pragmatic Black nationalism, or better fit within some other model? How do students currently enact their social justice agendas? Do they feel tension between this work and their identities as students, or have they become more savvy in the ways that they have engaged on campus, fluidly fusing their efforts as students, leaders, and change agents? What roles do institutional elements play in all of this, from the central administration to the various offices, faculty, and partners that students connect with? Can the continuous flow of Black graduates from selective institutions fuel some sort of change for Black Americans most in need? Can it do so without a specific agenda, or will it require more tangible commitment and strategy? Will anyone take up that cause, and be unafraid to name it? Might it be members of our twenty-first century "Talented Tenth," or do they only exist in theory?

The next chapter outlines the methodologies used in creating and executing this study, shaping the process guide to begin answering these and other questions.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter provides an overview of the qualitative methods employed in this study and a brief discussion about why this was the optimal approach. The study's site and participants are also described, along with limitations of the project and the various measures taken to ensure trustworthiness. I conclude with a brief note regarding my role in coming to and conducting this study.

Critical Race Case Study Methodology

Qualitative research methods, broadly speaking, allow for a deeper examination and understanding of the specific experiences, perceptions, and stories of the participants in a study (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; M. Q. Patton, 2002). A case study approach can use qualitative methods to intensely investigate multiple data sources within a single, complex site (Creswell, 2007; Feagin, 1991; Yin, 2009). Central to case study exploration, and of particular interest for the research questions guiding this study, are the firsthand accounts and voices of the participants, providing insights around contemporary phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Feagin, 1991; Yin, 2009). As will be discussed later in this section, storytelling is also a core element of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the methodological lens I used to frame my inquiry. My objective was to develop a research model that would facilitate authentic, race-sensitive dialogue, engaging multiple informed perspectives within an experientially-rich site. The incorporation of CRT within a case study was the ideal methodological path to accomplish this goal.

While this study is by no means an ethnographic project, I did approach it with ethnographic sensibilities, paying particular attention to creating a data collection process

that would provide a thick description of daily activities, patterns, beliefs, interactions, and other behaviors to more comprehensively understand the case study participants and the site itself (Creswell, 2007; Geertz, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Another objective, both in initially framing the topic of study and in constructing the research design, was to be able to translate – as ethnography is positioned to do – the experiences of the Black student community at the research site to scholars and others interested in these and other possibly related communities, but who had not yet heard from these communities in their own words (Creswell, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

In regards to his home discipline, one of the principal theorists for this study, Shelby (discussed in chapter two), writes, “If the subfield of African American philosophy is to flourish, it is also important that philosophers overcome their aversion to historical particularity” (2007, p. 14). Similar sentiments can be (and have been) shared regarding qualitative research, in its design and its application, hence, another reason for my ethnographic lean. Of ethnography, Spradley writes that it “seeks to document the existence of alternative realities and to describe these realities in their own terms. Thus, it can provide a corrective for theories that arise in Western social science” (1979, p. 11).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) presents an ideal means to produce such correctives. Informed by the legal scholarship of Derrick Bell and others, CRT is concerned with the study and transformation of race and power dynamics (Bell, 1989; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT is an interdisciplinary project built upon the following core tenets: 1) Racism is real and is systematically woven into our daily lives, 2) Race and the rules of racism are social constructs, 3) Colorblindness is not a strategy for addressing racism, and meritocracy can easily mirror the passive inefficacy of colorblindness when not carefully critiqued, 4) Racism often will not be confronted for the

simple sake of “fairness.” Interests must converge such that powerholders also gain via their anti-racist actions, and 5) History, context, experiences, and (counter)stories from the perspectives of people of color are essential in producing racial understanding (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; S. R. Harper et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Applied to higher education, CRT provides the opportunity to more critically engage traditional discourse around diversity, “recentering the discussion on the histories and lived experiences of People of Color” (Yosso & Lopez, 2010).

Before moving on to the discussion about the site for this study it is first necessary to resolve a possible perceived tension between one of the theories being explored, pragmatic Black nationalism, and the guiding CRT lens. As mentioned above, CRT posits that racism is *permanent*, “systematically woven into daily life.” Also covered earlier, in chapter two, the far-reaching goal of pragmatic Black nationalism is to *end* racism through a concentrated commitment to social justice work. Is this possible? Can racism end? Certainly anything is possible, but in my opinion (and in line with CRT), barring some sort of cataclysmic world event, I simply cannot imagine that racism, in the insidious ways that it has become ingrained in our daily lives, will ever fully cease.

What is difficult for some to understand, particularly those who hope to one day live in a colorblind world (and those who may feel that that world exists today) is that the question of whether racism ever ends is not the most relevant query. The more pertinent questions, which are embedded into the practical work that evolves through CRT and are made quite explicit in Shelby’s framework for pragmatic Black nationalism are “how are we made more aware of where and how racism exists” and “what are we doing to fight against it.” It is only through actively engaging those questions that we will move toward a more racially just society. Holt writes, “this is the paradox... racial ideologies and constraints are

shaped by the historical-material moment – the *habitus* – of a given era, but that same *habitus* provides materials and means for resistance to those ideologies and constraints” (2009, p. 120). He adds that it is those “acting outside of the dominant racial ideas and constraints” who are best positioned to resist them, and “imagine a different future” (2009, p. 120). That stated, I see no conflict in employing CRT to assess a theory seeking to end racism. CRT’s emphasis on critical consciousness is an essential component of social justice engagement, and thus is fully compatible with the overall theoretical framework of this study (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

Site

Smithsfield University (fictional name) is a highly selective research institution located in a large urban city on the east coast. Today, forty percent of its 10,000 fulltime undergraduate students come from traditionally underrepresented⁹ racial/ethnic groups. Students self-identifying in the admissions category “Black/African American” make up about seven percent of the total undergraduate community. Smithsfield also has thriving graduate and professional programs, with over 11,000 students in several distinct schools including medicine, law, business, and arts and humanities.

Black student presence at Smithsfield dates back to the late nineteenth century in the university’s graduate and professional programs. A handful of Black students pursued undergraduate studies in the early part of the twentieth century, but similar to many other colleges and universities, Black students were not actively recruited and accepted en masse at Smithsfield until the 1960s. Also similar to other institutions, the newly arrived Black

⁹ Asian American students are still counted among the “traditionally underrepresented” population due to their historical exclusion, but in recent years, they have been statistically overrepresented in undergraduate student populations at selective schools. Asian American faculty and administrative staff are still largely underrepresented. Additionally, there are still concerns about racial intolerance and student development within the Asian American communities.

students, in the wake of the civil rights movement and negative experiences on campus, organized to demand a Black Studies department, a space to meet and socialize, jobs for Black citizens from the neighboring community, increased Black enrollments, and stronger support systems on campus.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s student groups at Smithsfield, Black and White, occupied campus buildings and participated in negotiations to produce agreeable solutions to campus climate and social justice demands. Out of these efforts came a Black Studies program, meeting and support spaces, and an evolving institutional commitment to address diversity. Campus protests and organized efforts continued through the 2000s, though less frequently and with reserved fervor. Some were in response to national headlines such as the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles and affirmative action concerns, while others centered around campus-based incidents of racism (e.g., negative comments from a White student or faculty member, or racial-profiling by campus police).

In many ways, Smithsfield's historic and contemporary campus climates mirror its peer institutions. Many have instituted roughly the same comparative racial/ethnic group population shifts for undergraduate students over the past few decades, with Blacks always being underrepresented. To remain competitive, SAT and other entrance requirements (student activities, class standing, caliber of high school, etc.) at these institutions have risen, particularly in recent years as the numbers of applicants to these schools has multiplied. As part of their diversity efforts, many of these selective schools, Smithsfield included, have created significant financial aid opportunities either through the institution itself (via generous "no-loan" policies) and/or in partnership with third-party programs such as QuestBridge and Posse Scholars. These enhancements seem to have at least

partially offset both the occasional overt racial incidents that still occur on campus and the long history of racial exclusion and isolation that is shared across these institutions.

Smithsfield's urban location adds another layer of racial sensitivity, found among other similarly situated institutions. Historically, much of the early Black presence on Smithsfield's campus was "home grown" – products of local public schools. Once public educational outcomes began to critically erode, particularly in racially isolated urban areas, it became much more difficult to enroll even just a few local Black students at the university. By the 1990s, those that did matriculate often came from one of the city's "magnet"¹⁰ schools, while many more hailed from the nation's top private high schools and other high-performing programs. These students arrived at Smithsfield from various cultural, national, and regional backgrounds – Nigerian, Jamaican, Trinidadian, Ghanaian, Californian, and more – but, in many cases, looked like the Blacks who hold the hundreds of hospitality and maintenance positions on campus, as well as the neighborhood youths who could often be seen at popular hangouts off-campus but near the university. This led to substantial but rarely-discussed challenges, both for the Black students struggling to define their Blackness in a way that could simultaneously connect them to and separate them from others (while also adjusting to the highly racialized institutional environment), and the institution operating inside of its own endowment-supported bubble, largely detached from the city's economic and social troubles and the sobering realities therein, but yet still susceptible to all that comes with being in a densely populated, lower-income urban zip code. This complicated balancing act, along with the other previously mentioned historical and current

¹⁰ Magnet schools are higher-performing public schools. They require an admissions process and are designed to attract (hence, the term "magnet") and nurture the highest-performing students across a city or region. Some magnets schools may have a particular emphasis, such as the arts or technology.

elements of the Smithsfield environment and experience, made Smithsfield an ideal site for this project.¹¹

Participants

Fifty-two people, all directly connected to Smithsfield, participated in this study. This total included 30 undergraduate students at the time of the study, 11 alumni, six faculty members, and five administrators.

Purposeful selection was used to identify potential candidates for the study; lists were made of faculty, administrators and offices, student leaders, groups, and alumni who were intimately connected to Smithsfield's Black community and were ideally suited to "provide the information needed in order to answer the research questions" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Invitations to participate in a focus group or one-on-one interview were distributed. The twenty-two faculty, administrator, and alumni participants were among the overwhelming majority of individuals contacted who responded and were able to be scheduled for a session. As will be discussed shortly, many of the undergraduate participants were also initially invited to be a part of the study while others were included through student programming opportunities.

Within the undergraduate community, the majority of the participants (16) were seniors. This was by design, to speak with individuals who either had organizational leadership positions (presently or past) and/or who had a full range of other campus experiences, in and out of the classroom. Seniors best fit this bill. Additionally, early in the data collection process I discovered that seniors, getting ready to transition into various post-undergraduate options, were thinking deeply about how their Smithsfield experiences

¹¹ Participant interviews and archival documents were used to construct elements of this section, particularly the final paragraph.

had positioned and prepared them, and how they wanted to continue (or shift) their engagement with various communities (e.g., the Smithsfield-wide community, the Black community at Smithsfield, the broader Black community, among others) in the future. This provided additional useful insight, and thus more seniors were intentionally sought.

It was also important to hear from underclass students to get a sense of how they were making meaning as they either embarked on their college careers and/or began to take on greater leadership roles. Among the remaining 14 students there was a good mix of juniors (eight) and sophomores (five), and one first-year participant.

This study was not explicitly designed to compare different notions of Black solidarity (e.g., Caribbean solidarity compared to African American solidarity; or first-generation college student's sense of Black solidarity as compared to the Black solidarity felt by more affluent Blacks, who most likely would not be first-generation college students). The limited literature on the topic of contemporary Black student solidarity in general prompted me to approach it broadly, and hopefully set the stage for future, more specific studies. Nonetheless, the undergraduate and alumni participants represented a wide range of backgrounds, and as will be featured in the next chapter, they provided observations and experiences specific to their unique backgrounds and their perceptions of other groups.

Overall, the student and alumni participants more than adequately represented the diversity presently found within Black communities at institutions like Smithsfield. There were some who were funded fully by the university and/or a combination of outside scholarships, and there were some receiving little to no aid. Some identified as African American, rooted deeply in the American south but later spread to other cities, while others were first or second-generation immigrants from the Caribbean or African countries. Some

identified African or Caribbean immediate roots on one side of their family, and African American on the other. One talked about being Black and White in the focus group. At least two student participants were born outside of the United States. Three students identified as gay. Two talked about their Muslim faith. One alumni participant mentioned a family link to the Black Panthers. Several students and alumni had attended private schools. Every student and alumni participant had been active in at least one student group at Smithsfield. Quite a few were actively engaged in multiple groups. Again, as noted, the study was not designed to compare students across any explicit categorical markers. The information described here did not come from a student profile form, as none were distributed in this study. These and other factors emerged in the conversations. As such, rather than attempting to assemble and include a makeshift table now, assigning various labels to each participant, I will mention the pertinent descriptors contextually in the findings section when relevant (and when possible, due to anonymity concerns), just as the descriptors were revealed to me.

Nine of the 11 alumni participants graduated from Smithsfield between 2005 and 2012, one in 2001, and one in 1991. At the time the interviews were conducted the alumni occupations and endeavors included graduate school, nonprofit work, and education (K-12 and higher education). None of the alumni participants were employed in a corporate environment. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapters.

The 11 faculty and staff who participated ranged from starting at Smithsfield in the early 1970s to beginning in the mid-2000s. All had at least five years of experience at Smithsfield. Among the administrators, some had held multiple but generally related positions at the university (e.g., student affairs, academic support, admissions). Of the total faculty and staff, three were female, with two being faculty members. Six of the 12 alumni

were women, as were 19 of the 30 students (very much in line with the higher percentage of Black women pursuing higher education as compared to men).

Data Collection

Conversations with the participants were facilitated in two ways: interviews and focus groups.

All of the alumni, faculty, and administrators participated in a one-on-one interview, lasting 30-60 minutes. About half of these sessions were face-to-face, and half were done over the phone. All were audio recorded, with the participant's consent, and were guided by the semi-structured protocol included in Appendix C.

Students participated in focus groups and one-on-one interviews, also recorded with their consent. Some of the students were in multiple focus groups, others were in a focus group and a one-on-one session, and a small number were only in a focus group or an individual interview. The variety and frequency of conversation opportunities for the students was driven by the study design. Five 60-90 minute focus groups of 3-5 students, targeting primarily seniors and using questions from the protocol in Appendix C, served as the core student data collection phase. The target size and time allowed for students to participate fully and relatively evenly, as opposed to a fraction of the voices dominating the conversation. An additional "interactive focus group" was conducted, consisting of twenty-four students who participated in a series of quick response questions followed by a more in-depth discussion. This will be explained in more detail in the chapter four, but briefly, its purpose was to function as a "live survey" and then provide students with the opportunity to discuss their responses afterwards. It was expected here that some students would be more active conversants than others, hence the smaller focus groups described above

provided a balance. Most of the student participants in the large interactive focus group also were in one of the smaller core focus group sessions.

Five one-on-one student interviews, using the semi-structured interview protocol, were also conducted in order to contrast with the focus group responses. The thought was that the focus groups would generate more of a free-flowing conversation and ideally produce recollections of shared experiences, but also run the risk of diverting toward topics not as meaningful to the core of the study. Individual student interviews allowed for more guided conversation and a deeper inquiry into relevant themes from the focus groups and the central research questions, while also providing a check against the focus group data. Three of the one-on-one interviewees had not been a part of any focus groups, while the remaining two had also been focus group participants.

Ultimately the different conversation opportunities resulted in most of the thirty student participants being included at least twice in the data collection process. From these multiple experiences, I not only got a deeper sense of what the students thought about contemporary Black solidarity and their Smithsfield experiences, but I was able to witness them *building* solidarity and *being* contemporary Black college students.

A supplemental document analysis is also included at the beginning of chapter four. Additional information about the scope, contents, and purpose of that analysis is provided in its introduction.

Data Analysis

Creswell, citing Huberman and Miles, describes data analysis procedures as not being “off the shelf” but necessarily custom-built (2007; 1994). Such was the case in this study, creating (and modifying) a recursive and reflexive approach to not only better

understand the previously collected data but also how to improve upon the process in motion, and ultimately generate even more useful future data (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

Shortly after each focus group or interview, conversations were transcribed and hand-coded. The hand-coding process involved identifying and color-coding key terms and sections, creating memos in the margins to unpack ideas, and logging the chunked / color-coded sections into a database organized by participant type (student, alumni, faculty/administrator) and emergent themes. The database also made note of demographic descriptors shared by participants, divergent themes, unique phrases and anecdotes, and notes about the interview or focus group session. At least weekly, but typically multiple times during the week I typed extended memos about the data (the collection process and areas that I could improve upon, the trending themes, the setting and interactions in the focus group, the evolving connections to the research questions, the additional – and at times, unexpected – elements that came forth, current sociopolitical and cultural events occurring globally and within the Smithsfield community, etc.), revisiting the transcriptions and smaller memos, as well as the database. Some of the memos were shared with my chair for feedback and direction, while others, and related analytical notes about the literature or other relevant content, were more for self-reflection and to deepen my inquiry.

To understand how the observed data meshed with the three theoretical ideas, either in isolation or in some form of intersection, I reviewed the emergent themes against the theories through a series of questions. For example, did students' commitment to Black sociopolitical activist work as they were describing and modeling it lend to a continuation or re-emergence of the Black Student Movement, or had the decline occurred (and if so, what was the cause, as could be deduced through the students responses and through

institutional documents)? Were students engaged on campus? Did their engagement lend to adapting a well-developed social justice agenda for Black advancement, or did their engagement overshadow any sort of serious social justice commitment? Chapters four and five present this analysis in depth.

Trustworthiness and Methods of Verification

One of my primary focus points throughout this study was to ensure that it stayed true to the participants' voices and produced a reliable overall analysis. As Maxwell states, "member checks" or "triangulation" are simply buzzwords; they only become relevant when they are sufficiently thought through and outlined (2005). Thus, I sought to build-in multiple measures to ensure that the data obtained was trustworthy, and the overall study was sound.

By using a combination of interviews and focus groups across several participants (and by speaking with over half of these participants multiple times), and by doing a comparative document analysis, I was able to use these different qualitative sources and opportunities to check for fluidity and identify additional questions. Member checks were incorporated throughout the focus group and interview processes providing sufficient means to re-engage participants, revisit questions, and explore additional related ideas. In several cases, participation evolved into extended conversations across multiple face-to-face meetings, e-mails, phone calls, and text messages. This not only provided additional clarification when necessary, but also gave me a deeper understanding of the current Black college student culture at the study site on levels that extended beyond the central scope of the study, but certainly informed it in numerous ways.

Peer debriefing was also critical throughout the process. I was extremely fortunate to have an accessible committee who informed various stages of this project. I also spoke regularly with student affairs professionals and graduate students outside of the scope of this study who provided additional insightful feedback. These exchanges, in memo form and conversation, shaped the data collection, analysis, and writing phases.

In sum, the triangulation of different voices and perspectives (the multiple participants across different categories) at different times (participation in multiple conversations and/or member checks) in different formats (interviews, focus groups, e-mail, etc.), with the additional document analysis and peer debriefing (conversational and memo) on all aspects of the study has allowed me to present an interpretation of the data that is consistent with the participants' responses and is theoretically sound.

Limitations

From the outset of this project I was well aware that the case study approach would inherently limit the ability to generalize the findings to other institutions (Creswell, 2007). There are variances in culture and experiences at similarly situated schools, and certainly across institutions that are structurally different (e.g., a small liberal arts college in comparison to a large public flagship university). Nonetheless, I felt that as a starting point for this research subject, it would be useful to offer one, deeply-researched example so that perhaps other institutions could see parts of themselves reflected, and future researchers can reference this study as they construct their own.

Another concern any qualitative researcher may have is whether "I have spoken to the *right* people." In this regard, I'm well aware that there are many Black experiences and many perceptions regarding solidarity among today's Black college students, and my study

captures only a few. This study is very much an “insider’s view,” meaning that it included those who had close dealings with the Black community on campus. I did not solicit peripheral perspectives demonstrating what other Smithsfield students thought about the Black student experience, nor did I seek to speak with institutional representatives not intimately linked to Black students to ask their thoughts about diversity or Black student life. Such considerations may be useful for future studies, to contrast perspectives versus reality, and explore the ways that more speculative narratives emerging from wider-view institutional analysis may impact policy decisions, for example.

Among the participants in the study there is also the possibility that their familiarity with the Black community and their similar experiences led to shared views, and other Blacks not as closely connected to the Black activities at Smithsfield would have different responses. While there was a range of backgrounds and interests among the student and alumni participants, including a small number who indicated that they were not as involved with the Black community on campus, perhaps a larger pool with even more Black students not as directly linked to the community would have provided additional considerations. Further, among the pool that did participate, a greater number of first-year students and/or more alumni representation from 1990-2000 may have generated other themes to consider.

Two final factors relate to the ways that information was shared (or perhaps not shared) in the conversations. First, it is possible that in the focus groups students withheld information or views that may have been deemed less popular by the group. It is also possible that, as a Black man asking about Black solidarity, participants felt the need to respond to me in a certain “correct” way, otherwise risk being viewed negatively. The various measures described in the trustworthiness section above, particularly the mix of focus groups and individual interviews, the member checks, and my being intentional about

creating a safe and relaxed conversational space and protocol, ideally minimized these effects, but nonetheless, they are still possibilities. Again, with more research in this area in the future, we will be able to compare and contrast different studies and gain a richer overall understanding through the variety of stories that are shared.

Role of the Researcher

To be a fundamentally sound qualitative researcher, it is essential that one be honest and transparent about their biases, as these are a part of what make us human and undoubtedly impact the work that we undertake (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). Being a Black male who, for the better part of life, has been driven by deeply rooted questions about race, equity, and social justice, I understand and am comfortable with my own interests in Black-specific concerns. I believe, in sync with the tenets of Critical Race Theory, that there is value in the specificity of this race-centered research, particularly as race has been constructed in the United States.

That stated, my role as a researcher is to conduct research. In this project I have attempted to place my biases at the very forefront of the effort, in the selection and development of this intellectual subject. In the execution of the study, I have sought to position myself as a medium to share the voices of the participants. Obviously the analytical process, as well as the data collection, is subjective but I trust that what I have highlighted and the ways that I have framed certain themes and anecdotes remains true to the intentions of the participants and to the spirit of rich, enlightening, and honest qualitative study. That was my objective for this work, and will continue to be my paramount goal as a scholar.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

In this chapter I present excerpts from the interviews and focus group sessions with the fifty-two participants in this study. To start, I provide a brief document analysis (of campus daily newspaper features from 1990-2013 and institutional documents, also in the same time period, pertaining to diversity efforts and related concerns). The document analysis is intentionally broad; the objective is to offer a wide-lens view of the racial climate at Smithsfield over the past two decades, specifically as it has been covered in the student-run campus daily publication, and how the institution has responded in its own reports. The interview portions that follow provide richer details, firsthand accounts, and reflective analysis from the participant pool's many and varied perspectives. The responses are grouped into six themes that emerged from the comprehensive data analysis. As will be discussed, these themes often overlap or mesh with others. All are part of the bigger picture and meant to be understood as a whole, rather than in segments. They have been broken out as themes here as a way to better explore and understand their unique components, and how they inform each other and the broader story.

Document Analysis

As a part of this project, I reviewed institutional documents to gain a better sense of how Smithsfield, and in particular, issues around campus climate and Black student presence there, had been covered in print. My review spanned over 500 articles and features from the student-run daily newspaper. I also read a number of other documents including committee reports and institutional publications on diversity and equity, interviews with and features on prominent faculty members and alumni, reviews of

academic department and curricular changes, governing board and council reports, and more. I also looked at comparative data and reports from over a dozen peer institutions to gain a sense of what issues may have been trending throughout these selective schools, and what may have been particular to Smithsfield. In total, over 600 documents were reviewed, covering 1990 through early 2013. I also conducted a cursory review of additional documents from 1980-89, to review some specific racial incidents that happened on campus.

Because of the anonymous nature of this study, this section will not go into great detail about the contents of the literature reviewed. Instead, some broader observations will be offered, highlighting recurring patterns, critical concerns, and shifts - both in institutional workings and student life. I have broken the content up into four sections: Institutional Trends, Racial Incidents, Black Presence, and Continued Concerns. Each will provide contextual insight for the larger portion of this chapter, reviewing the interview and focus group data.

For me, reading through these documents was highly beneficial in informing the wider literature that I reviewed and in constructing the interview and focus group questions. Also, in conducting the data analysis of the interviews and focus groups, the documents reviewed served as an additional triangulation layer, further underscoring points made by the participants.

Institutional Trends

Like many of its peer institutions, Smithsfield saw a lull in admissions activity in the early 1990s and then began a gradual upward surge that is still growing. It has become commonplace for these top-tier colleges and universities, as well as other thriving schools

across the country, to publish annual headlines to the effect of “Most Selective Class Ever” in their daily papers after the most recent crop of applicants has been admitted. This has been the case at Smithsfield, and because it has become a national trend, it has periodically been covered in a number of major broadcast and print media outlets.

Minority student populations have showed interesting trends across selective and high-profile schools, largely in response to how schools and states have interpreted affirmative action guidelines, and also as a result of the various institutions’ commitments to racially/ethnically diversifying their student bodies. Some schools have become “majority minority” by a thin margin, meaning the combination of all of their traditionally underrepresented racial groups outnumbered the total White student population on campus. Others have moved in the opposite direction, at least for certain racial/ethnic groups, seeing lower representation today than a decade ago. Smithsfield’s Black population has been fairly consistent over the past two decades, between five and eight percent of the total student body. The Latino student population is generally comparable to the Black figures (with a more recent rise), while the Asian American population has risen to just under 20 percent of total student enrollments.

Smithsfield has made a highly visible commitment to diversity through various means. There are cultural centers, culturally specific admissions and orientation programs, numerous student groups and activities, academic programs and courses, and efforts to diversify the faculty. There have also been a number of committees established and reports produced on the recruitment of minority students and faculty, as well as minority retention efforts. Nevertheless, distinct patterns of exclusion, dissatisfaction, and racist treatment have been expressed by students and others over the years, and covered in the student paper and institutional reports.

Racial Incidents

From the 1990s into the twenty-first century, Black students at Smithsfield have continued to voice their displeasure on campus on a fairly consistent basis. In some instances students mobilized to respond to a specific racial incident (e.g. a student of color¹² being verbally accosted by White students, a Black student being detained erroneously by the police, dissatisfaction with campus media representation of Black students and their organizations and events). Black students have also rallied and spoken out about institutional policies and perceived under-commitment to issues such as Black student retention and faculty diversity. Finally, Black students at Smithsfield have responded to broader national concerns such as the recurring legal debate on affirmative action in higher education, and incidents such as the 1992 acquittal of the police officers videotaped beating Rodney King and the 2012 shooting of Florida teen Trayvon Martin.

Black Presence

Among the more interesting things about this document analysis was not what was found, but what was *not* found, particularly in the student-run daily paper. In the participants' interviews to be covered later in this chapter, I learned about the rich experiences and activities that Black students engaged in, and in many cases, activities that they themselves had organized and/or led. Very little of this was reflected in the student newspaper or in institutional documents. Prominent faculty of color and/or faculty who had engaged in scholarly work concerning Black people were rarely featured or even mentioned

¹² I use the term "of color" here intentionally as there have been reports of incidents happening to other students of color outside of the Black community, and Black students were featured in articles providing support to these causes.

in the student newspaper. Further, there were few Black writers, editors, or professional staff on the paper. Some years there appeared to be none at all.

All of this is not to say that Blacks received no coverage in the campus paper or in other institutional media publications, because that certainly was not the case. There were articles about the previously mentioned racial incidents in addition to coverage of select cultural events, prominent Black speakers, and university efforts to address diversity concerns. What I am saying is that one would not get a strong sense about student life in the Black community at Smithsfield by relying on the student paper as a guide, which could lead one to perceive that this community was somehow marginalized and/or disconnected in regards to “the traditional Smithsfield experience,” or it could also cause one to simply overlook this community altogether.

One point that was interesting regarding the student paper’s coverage of Black life at Smithsfield was that in the 1990s there were far more mentions of Black dissatisfaction on campus and coverage of Black political organization to advocate for Black student and community concerns. The paper annually dedicated space to interview newly-elected Black student leaders about their political agendas for the year, and their current assessments of Smithsfield’s racial progress. At times the paper printed a “special series” on racial dialogues and concerns, sometimes asking Black students to serve as guest columnists (since the paper often did not have any on the official student staff).

These features shifted in the twenty-first century. Black student leaders were still occasionally interviewed but they were student group coalition leaders and not political leaders.¹³ The featured interviews highlighted some Black student concerns but more so talked about programming, events, partnerships, and increasing cultural presence on

¹³ This change in Black student groups will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

campus such that the broader Smithsfield community could better understand the Black community's activities. In a nutshell, the tone that came through in previous era's interviews was "why are you angry, what do you want, and what will you be doing about it this year?" More recently it has been closer to "let us know more about yourself, new Black student leader, and give us an idea about what the Black community has been up to these days."

Finally, diversity has been a consistently popular topic in the student paper for decades. Students of all races and ethnicities have weighed in on this topic multiple times each year, each bringing different perspectives. This perhaps mirrors society's inability to truly get diversity right (as there is likely not one right way to do it). Ideas have ranged from forced racially-mixed housing, the dismantling of any specific cultural space and program, the creation of more cultural spaces and programs, the institution of cross-cultural dialogue, the ending of anything resembling race-based affirmative action, and praise to Smithsfield for bringing different kinds of people on campus and letting them work things out on their own. Black students have occasionally shared their opinions on the subject in print, highlighting the importance of critical dialogue, the need to combat racism, the value of safe spaces for all students, and the necessity for institutional and national/international memory. These features, combined with the greater Black presence at Smithsfield in general, consistently produced a handful of Black writers most years in the 2000s, but, as previously stated, there have been some off years, and overall, the paper's staff and editors have consistently been overwhelmingly White.

Continued Concerns

Among the prominent Black community specific issues featured in the campus newspaper over the last couple of years have been faculty diversity, financial aid, the diversity of Blackness, and diversity more broadly. Minimal coverage was given to recent affirmative action dialogues on campus, in response to the pending *Fisher v. University of Texas* case. Two widely known campus-specific incidents of racism happened over the past three years, and both were covered for multiple days. Students' responses to the Trayvon Martin shooting were also featured.

Summary

Throughout the institution's written records there are commission reports, studies, proposals, and reviews of the various Black student concerns and the ways that the university sought to respond to them. There are far fewer documents today than during the 1970s and 80s, but there is still work being done institutionally to address student satisfaction and quality of life. At the same time, the student paper has provided increased coverage of Black students and events, not only when there was a racial issue (as was the case in the 1970s into the '80s). They still have not captured the full story, however, nor do they seem well-positioned to do so. One final related, and possibly telling point, is that Black students are still vocal about certain issues, and silent, at least seemingly so in the media, on others. For example, Black student populations in recent years have been fairly consistent with the figures from thirty years ago. There has been a slow uptick, but Blacks are still underrepresented, and they do not seem to be talking about it in the student paper. One could wonder if there's anything to be read into that.

The next part of the paper presents each of the six themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups.

Access and Transition¹⁴

The question of “why go to a predominantly White school” carried much weight in the late 1960s and early 1970s as PWIs were seeing an influx of Black applicants and matriculates, fueled by legal and social change. Moving into the 21st century the question still remained for some Black students, but was more nuanced, and came from varied sources. Equally nuanced and varied were the ways that students got to Smithsfield and began the adjustment process to the campus and college life. This section explores what the student and alumni participants had to say about their initial experiences with Smithsfield.

Reasons to Seek Admission

A handful of the participants in this study sought out Smithsfield specifically for its prestigious Black cultural history and experiences. Some of the current students and alumni talked about the Black scholarship of the university (and some made reference to the ways in which it spanned the African Diaspora while others found this aspect lacking during their time on campus), and the residential and student life programming that catered to Black students on campus. A majority of the student and alumni participants remarked that they felt “at home” or “comfortable” during their campus visits, and specifically referenced some Black cultural aspect of the campus, whether it was a student performance group that they had the opportunity to see during their visit, a communal residential experience that attracted them (e.g., being hosted by Black students for an overnight visit), the numbers of

¹⁴ In the excerpted quotes that follow in the rest of this chapter and chapter five, some of the names of places and programs have been modified to keep Smithsfield’s true identity concealed.

Black students they encountered on campus, or connections they had made (during their visit or prior) to specific Black students already at Smithsfield. Other students were attracted by Smithsfield's diversity more broadly, both in the student body and in the campus organizational experiences. As one recent alumnus remarked,

"I saw there was a real community there... there were so many avenues to play out your passions that it seemed like a place where you wouldn't necessarily try to fit in but you would just come as you are and do your thing. I liked that. And obviously the diversity as compared to some other competitive schools out there was decent."

Location was another draw. Many of the student and alumni participants were originally from the east coast, so Smithsfield gave them an opportunity to stay reasonably close to home, conveniently (and affordably) able to travel back and forth by bus or train. A handful of participants lived in the same city as Smithsfield. One local alumna remarked, "Smithsfield was the best university in the area," which prompted her to ultimately matriculate after also being accepted to some of the other schools in the region.

Financial aid awards were also an important factor mentioned by some of the participants, both those coming from the east coast and others traveling from further away. One current student from the west coast cited the fact that Smithsfield "pretty much covered all of my expenses" as his primary reason for matriculating. He also mentioned feeling comfortable on campus during his visit, but the financial assistance provided by the university was the deciding factor.

An alumna from the west coast talked about not initially looking at east coast schools, but being exposed to Smithsfield during a summer program prior to her senior year of high school and "falling in love with the campus and the city." She felt that both the urban environment and the campus culture would provide her with the Black experiences that she was looking for, as well as offer her a quality education. A few other participants mentioned

being exposed to Smithsfield or schools similar to it as important factors in helping them understand what it would be like to be a student at a rigorous institution and to demonstrate to them that they were capable of applying and attending.

Other students and alumni made reference to the “best of both worlds” idea put forth by the west coast alumna, combining Black culture with academic excellence. Three participants explicitly compared this attraction to their interest in HBCUs. One participant, a current student, said,

“I kind of got talked into going to Smithsfield. I wanted to go to Howard [an HBCU], honestly. I got a scholarship to go to a private White school for high school, and it was cool, great. But when it was time for college I was like, nah, I needed to be around Black people. When I came here to visit, they took me around, I saw some of the Black programs and people, I saw the [wider] community, I saw some loud cars driving by, and I was like, ‘oh, this is cool!’”

Another participant, a recent alumnus, talked about having a sibling who had attended an HBCU and not wanting to follow in those footsteps. He also mentioned his perception that the HBCU experience would not be “competitive enough academically.” This was a view held by a number of other participants, though they did not explicitly say that they themselves had considered applying to an HBCU. One student mentioned liking his visit to Morehouse (an all-male HBCU) but the college lacked the specific academic program he intended to pursue, so he did not apply.

Overall the most common thread among all of the participants was the academic reputation and prestige of Smithsfield. While some of the participants admitted that initially they did not truly understand just how notable Smithsfield was until late during the college application process, once they became aware they found this to be highly appealing (and for most of them, this, in addition to feeling that there was a strong and supportive Black community, sealed the deal). As will be discussed in the next sections, some participants

received negative comments from others (peers, counselors), both in expressing their interest in Smithsfield and after they gained acceptance to the institution. In spite of those unfortunate events, it was clear during the interviews and focus groups that for the vast majority of the participants, being well-positioned to apply to a place like Smithsfield was a culmination of the road that their parents and others had built for them. Typically the answer to the question, “why apply to Smithsfield” was that they were *supposed to* apply to the best schools in the country. That was what their life experiences had prepared them to do.

Gaining Entry

As the literature review and document analysis demonstrate, admission into Smithsfield and places like it has grown increasingly more competitive in recent years. Institutions like Smithsfield have created a network of quality feeder pathways to attract high-performing students from diverse backgrounds. Student and alumni participants in this study provided examples of some of these entrance pipelines, and also illuminated some of the more nontraditional routes to selective schools.

For some of the participants, admission into Smithsfield looked, at surface level, much like it would for students of other races/ethnicities. These students attended highly selective private or preparatory schools that historically sent their graduates to some of the best colleges and universities in the country. Of the participants who fit this mold and went into detail about their experiences, each was keenly aware of their Blackness in their predominantly White high school space.

Interestingly, two current Smithsfield students talked about organizing Black cultural awareness programming at their prestigious, mostly White high schools (one in the

northeast and one in the south), in response to negative racial experiences they had in the schools. One of the students talked about being on scholarship at her high school, and that being the only way that she was afforded such an opportunity. The other student mentioned both of his parents being accomplished professionals and highly involved with the private school's governing body and parent's association. For this second student in particular, his social capital and access within his relatively small private school environment did not shield him from racism. One episode that he described was being told, as a sixth grader, by the respected head of the school that Stanford may be a reach for him as a college choice, despite his strong credentials and the fact that he was attending a school whose mission was to prepare its graduates for the nation's top colleges and universities, and had *six more years* to do so for this young man. This and other events impacted him so deeply that it moved him to action, constantly publically questioning the school's commitment to recruiting and supporting Black students.

All of the participants who attended selective high schools talked about being involved in a wide range of school activities and outside groups that included cultural and religious programming, student government, athletics and cheerleading, performance arts, and more. For many, there was an awareness that both their extracurricular engagement and their selective high schools would provide a boost for their college applications. As will be discussed later, while the high school choice was often strategic (and typically decided upon by the parents), activities were largely pursued out of genuine interest and not to simply look favorably on their college apps.

Students gained access to their selective high schools through a variety of means. Some were on scholarship through the school, as previously mentioned. Others participated in third-party programs that provided a pathway for "inner city kids" to attend preparatory

schools at little or no personal cost. Some families had attained the financial means to locate to upwardly mobile neighborhoods and acquired quality education through better-resourced public schools. Some financed private or parochial education on their own. These were the common patterns found whether a student matriculated from the other side of the country or lived 10 minutes away from Smithsfield's campus.

Smithsfield's commitment to accepting students local to the institution was largely facilitated through the region's top-ranked high schools. Many are private and have a small number of Black students, some who move on to Smithsfield. One of these feeder high schools is a public magnet school accepting only the top students in the city. This school is more diverse (ethnically and by SES) than the typical highly selective private schools in and outside of the region, but is not reflective of the overall student demographics of the urban public educational system, and certainly not of the lower-performing "neighborhood" high schools. Three of the student and alumni participants in this study were able to access Smithsfield through this pipeline. They were among a cluster of students of various backgrounds in each of their high school graduating classes who moved on to Smithsfield.

Nationally there are successful access and scholarship programs such as Prep for Prep, A Better Chance, QuestBridge, and Gates Millennium Scholars that have enabled minority and/or lower SES students to access selective institutions. Each of these programs was represented by at least one participant in the study. Smaller, regional programs similar to these national models were also part of the some of the students' pathways.

A handful of other participants, in effect, stumbled onto Smithsfield, not via any explicit pipeline, and/or not by attending one of the common high schools in Smithsfield's recruitment portfolio. One current student from a major northeast city had initially begun a college prep program in high school but did not find it to be a strong fit. After ending

participation in this program she remained extremely active in her middle tier public high school, but was not receiving strong developmental support or guidance on the college application process. Her counselor led her, and, according to the participant, the hundreds of other seniors in her class as well, to believe that their only college choice was the non-selective public network of schools in their immediate region. By chance she sought out another college prep program (initially to solely use the college application fee waivers provided by the program to minimize the financial burden on her mother) and was told in the program that she had the academic and leadership profile to apply to the best schools in the country.

Another current student participant from a mostly minority public high school had a similar story. She had not given much thought to or received much school guidance about the college application process. A teacher pulled her aside and told her that with her grades and her financial needs, she could get into a top-notch college and attend cost-free. The teacher challenged the student to prove her wrong. Obviously the student took her up, and fortunately lost the bet.

Sadly, for some of the participants, winning entry into Smithsfield was marred by comments from their high school peers that they “only got in because they were Black.” One participant, a current student, presented me with a huge list of personal accomplishments in high school that included founding and/or leading multiple organizations, attaining several academic awards, being the Student Body president and Homecoming Queen her senior year, and voted Outstanding Senior by the teachers at the school. She did all of this because she “felt like I had to overcompensate in order to be on the same playing field as my counterparts.” And still, with that résumé, she said that many students at her high school felt that she only made it to Smithsfield because of her race.

Her story was not unique. The transition to Smithsfield served as a reminder to some students, and a wake-up call to others, that racialized questions of intelligence, access, power, and identity would remain in the air for the next four years and beyond, sometimes a small shadow in a far off corner, and other times a suffocating dust stifling all progress.

Making the Transition

For any seventeen or eighteen-year-old moving from the known world of high school and their home community to an unfamiliar and ultra-competitive collegiate environment, there will be significant adjustment challenges. As evidenced in the following comments, the student and alumni participants in this study often dealt with compounded transitional obstacles based upon one of more identities as a first-generation college student, a low-income student, a Black person, and a woman, among others, and – by default – a first-time college student.

One alumna from the late 90s talked about entering Smithsfield during a month-long pre-college preparation program that was very multicultural, and then during her first week of fall classes feeling “like everybody was a tall White man.” She felt that, “Black people seemed to be here for the same reasons as White people, but we had different avenues that we would travel to get to those ends.” For her, electing to pursue a business degree at Smithsfield placed her in an environment that felt very racialized and gendered. She spoke about her adjustment process as “infiltrating” academic and professional spaces. “I learned how to cope... I learned male office-speak, male bar-speak... but I also kept the same core friend group that I met in the pre-college program.”

“Belonging” was also a recurring theme critical to participants’ positive transition to Smithsfield. One current male student shared the following:

“I always felt like my [Black] identity made me stand out. I don’t look like a typical Smithsfield student. It was challenging to come to feel like I belong in this community. Not in the classroom necessarily, but more like walking around and people walking away from me or sort of looking at me as I didn’t belong on the campus. It was just those minor, or I guess not minor but major instances that affected my psyche.”

Later, when asked specifically about the classroom, this student talked about being engaged in certain smaller classes in his major, “despite racial differences [among his peers and the faculty],” but in larger classes feeling, “not that I was unwanted, but that I was invisible sometimes.”

Another participant, a recent alumna offered the following:

“I was a low income student and also first generation American, though not college. My parents came to the United States in ‘87. They were both educated here, at least in part. And so while I came in with a degree of educational capital and that ambition was always nurtured and in some ways pushed, I don’t think I was prepared coming from a middle-performing public high school. Not for the difficulty of work, but for just the way that successful students at selective schools navigate the classroom space. My peers didn’t have any trouble speaking up in class, thinking their words were valuable. And then of course they also just didn’t have the distractions that I had. It’s a bit difficult... it’s more than a bit difficult. It’s difficult to concentrate on your coursework and think about next steps when you can’t afford books or you can’t register for next semester’s classes because your bill is unpaid.”

These students and others struggled with constant challenges and daily reminders of “otherness” (e.g., not be able to register for next term’s classes because of a tuition bill, feeling like White students do not want you in their project group simply because of race; both of these stories were shared by multiple participants). As indicated, some of these issues also crossed into class differences. Others were more gendered, and some were a mix of various identities. What was telling was that many of the participants were not overly surprised by the various obstacles that they faced on campus. One recent alumnus said,

“I was prepared for going to a predominantly White college by my high school. I went to a private, and kind of an elite [high] school that was kind of unapologetic in its Whiteness. Socioeconomically, I knew I was going to be

the minority. In terms of the climate, I don't think it was outwardly hostile as much as it was not particularly inviting for students of color. It was kind of like, you're here, find the other ones so you can get along with them, and fend for yourselves."

Another current student talked about her private school experiences preparing her to successfully "maneuver the system." This combination of "finding the other ones" and working the system seemed to be at the core of Black students' transitional strategies, but it was far from easy, particularly with the daunting size and competitive environment at Smithsfield. Another recent alumna said,

"I didn't know what it meant to utilize the resources at Smithsfield and I see that now. I had no idea what was at my fingertips when I was at there or how to even tap into that. That has a lot to do with social capital building and networking and all of those skills that other groups learn early. You know, I just kinda wasn't... I wasn't aware of... I just literally didn't know. So that being said, Smithsfield often boasts that it has all of these things and programs... but they weren't present to me. I really didn't know what to do."

Other participants mentioned summer prep programs, peer mentoring, and early connections to faculty as key factors helping them to establish themselves academically and figure things out early in their careers. There did not seem to be a specific formula, however. As will be discussed later, many of the participants perceived Smithsfield to have a highly entrepreneurial ethos where students were expected to either already know whatever it was they were to know, or to assert themselves and figure it out on their own. As shown in the above example, that was not the ideal model for every Smithsfield student.

Equally complex were the various social adjustments that had to be made by the participants. In addition to learning "on the job" about being on their own as young adults, students and alumni also had to carefully navigate socioeconomic lines and the many nuances of gaining access to social groups and "fitting in" on

campus. In some cases, high school or other past experiences provided assistance.

Consider the following from another recent alumna:

“I feel like my high school background [at a predominantly White private school] helped in that aspect of being able to navigate different types of social situations. You would have like rich White people and rich Black people and you would go to their houses and they would have a pool and whatnot, and you were from the hood. I feel like in high school I didn’t really think about it. You saw it more so at Smithsfield, especially with Black people with money. But I sort of didn’t gravitate toward them. Not that there was any tension, or that they didn’t want to be around me. I don’t know how to describe it. It just happened naturally.”

As will be discussed in much greater depth in the next two themes, the experiences of Smithsfield’s students were largely determined by the different social circles and student groups that they became a part of. Many of these choices did “just happen naturally” during the first-year transitional phase. Much of this natural process was fueled by the campus racial climate, the institutional culture, and the many facets of the Black community at Smithsfield.

Campus Climate

The above excerpts gave a glimpse at the ways that race could inform a student’s journey to Smithsfield and their acclimation to the campus. The following section takes a more expansive look at the day-to-day interactions of students on campus and how race is received, experienced, and woven into the community narrative.

Post-Racialism

The term “post-race” and related notions came up throughout the interview and focus group processes, across each of the participant groups – faculty/ administrator, alumni, and student. The general sentiment was perhaps best summarized by the following

quote from a faculty member: “I meet some really sharp Black Smithsfield students; they are extremely bright. I think that they’re less politically active, however. I know that a handful or more of them think that we’re post-race. I’ve seen as much in my classroom.” Later during the interview this faculty member spoke more about “post-raciality and individuality” being national occurrences – and thus evident at Smithsfield – but counter to the critical thought and “revolutionary” community building that one might find among progressive student bodies. In these remarks, the complex stage is set for the existence of post-racial attitudes in both the broader campus culture and specifically within the Black community. This becomes a central factor in exploring Black student presence, engagement, and sociopolitical solidarity on campus.

As discussed in the literature review, the idea that the country, or even a campus or a community, is post-race stems from the notion that all individuals now have the same access and opportunities, regardless of background. What is being said explicitly in the term “post-race” is that we are *beyond* race, that one’s background no longer matters (as a detriment or as a positive attribute in whatever situation is in question). As the various participants’ comments reveal, the range of thoughts around this supposition shows that many – particularly the faculty and staff – feel that the notion is unequivocally premature (at best), but it is still at least a prevalent perception held by individuals of various racial/ethnic groups, and quite possibly ingrained into aspects of Smithsfield’s culture and practices.

Fundamentally, the post-race idea was connected to the sense that students were more individually focused and less concerned about actively engaging sociopolitical issues. One recent alumna said,

“I do think that at this moment there is a disconnect perhaps between that inheritance [of past Black student activism] and the feelings of students that

we're on a post-racial campus or we live in a post-racial United States. And I think that's where some of the difficulties and affecting change are really carving out an engaged student life. I think that's where the contradiction lies."

In thinking about the roots of this perceived shift, another alumna offered the following:

"I do not feel that the current students have a sense of urgency... because they enjoy a fairly equitable experience at Smithsfield. And they're also coming into Smithsfield with a more equitable experience. I feel like people from my generation were looking at the *Cosby Show* but not living the *Cosby Show*, where a lot of these kids coming in now have lived the *Cosby Show*. So we were aspiring to something. And these students already have been brought up in a particular kind of lifestyle. They do not... they don't have a sense of lack or a sense of loss, I think. Many of them have grown up in environments where they were around higher class Whites. There's a normalcy to wealth that I think Black kids have here now."

Many of the participants, particularly the alumni, faculty, and administrators connected this perceived sense of increased access with students' increased focus on individual pursuits and accomplishments. This will be discussed in more depth later, but in general, participants linked this to the students' own dispositions entering Smithsfield and the culture of the institution, which several participants noted and one student described as "a Type-A school that attracts Type-A personalities." Participants saw the benefits of this increased access, as well as the risks.

One recent alumna noted:

"I think what is refreshing is that a lot of these young Black people don't have a lot of hang-ups about what they feel they can and can't do because they're Black. Which I think older generations did and do. They're allowed to... they just have more opportunities, there's more things made available to them or that they can consider."

Along these lines several student participants talked about not wanting to be defined by previously-conceived racial lines and practices. As one student said, "most of my childhood was defined by race. Some other Black students lack a Black identity coming in

and want to find it at Smithsfield. But you should also be able to expand upon certain other dimensions here. Sometimes it feels like a crime to want to explore.” In this context the student was talking about perceptions he felt from within the Black community on campus. In other conversations he talked about the importance of having a strong Black communal foundation and the need for the institution to better recognize the contributions of students of color on campus. This range of views highlight the complex “both-ands” that students process in their attempt to affirm their presence on campus and fully engage the many opportunities available to them.

In this quest, some of the students also recognized the ways that their increased “post-racial” access complicated traditional ideas of Black social responsibility. As one said,

“We can all have different ideas but I think the thing is sometimes people will privilege one particular affiliation over another that people think is important. There’re a lot of Black people in the U.S. who aren’t in the same place as White people. You have a burden to identify with Black issues. If you’re not willing to privilege that over... like if you want to do your work, you have to study... so someone would say that you’re privileging your grades over your commitment to the community, does that take you out of the Black community? I don’t think that’s fair but I think that’s the way we judge each other.”

Another student in a separate conversation said, “Students have the luxury now of not doing anything political. I can just come in and leave. Get my As, get my job or whatever. But what effects whether you have that outlook or not? Is that just the person, the individual?”

As will be discussed later, many other participants keyed in on these concerns – social responsibility, individuality, defining community, and negotiating race in the twenty-first century. Regarding race specifically, as will be discussed in more depth, the ideal of a post-racial campus or nation significantly impacted students’ abilities and opportunities to truly engage race and racism. As one faculty member noted,

“Frankly we’ve become more mis-educated about the real dangers of racism as we’ve had these diverse opportunities. People are still having moments where they find out that being Black is still a detriment. They’re just not finding it out in the same ways. It’s not like you’re under less surveillance now because you have freedom to access other things, all of which could stop you from enjoying those other things at a moment’s notice if you’re not careful. What we need is better education about what does racial danger looks like now, different than it did 10 years ago, different than it did 20 years ago. You’re not in less danger simply because you have more opportunities. And I think we’re also forgetting that some of us have more opportunities than others of us.”

Diversity

As discussed in the literature review, the term “diversity” takes on numerous sub-texts and applications in today’s higher educational institutions. Many of the students, alumni, faculty, and administrators in this study chose to attend or work at Smithsfield due the institution’s commitment to diversity – either in the different cultural populations and resources evident on campus or the ways that the university asserted in its promotional materials that it would “embrace diversity.” Once participants arrived on campus, however, they began to realize that diversity was largely dependent on the efforts individuals were willing to put forth to define it for themselves.

According to one of the faculty participants,

“I think most places now are using diversity as a way to not do anything too political. So instead of dealing with race you want to deal with diversity. And diversity could mean diversity of ideas. And everybody’s like ‘what is that?’ Well, it doesn’t matter what that is... [loud laughter]. Which idea do you want to be more diverse in the name of diversity? I can’t tell you... So people have politically been using this as a tool to not do anything unless a problem arises. And that’s not prevention. It’s triage or crisis.”

An administrator offered the following remarks:

“Diversity is not part of their [Smithfield’s] professional priority. It is a notch for them to bear. And I think that’s an even message that’s handed out to White students, to Black students. Everybody. ‘All right, be a group of people in the world. Engage them as you will. These are their various aspects. Hope

you meet one and you can compare.’ So while Smithsfield is saying to everybody, ‘hey, meet people,’ it’s also saying, ‘if you don’t, it’s okay.’

Another faculty participant said,

“Where I think we fall down institutionally [is that] we think that it’s all about harmony, can we all get along, and you take the picture with the Black kid, the White kid, the Latino kid, and the Asian kid, and say that it’s all good. But the fact is, diversity is a verb. The tensions, knocking up against each other and the challenges, that’s all part of it. And if you’re institutionally squeamish about that, then certain things won’t happen.”

Students and alumni recognized the institution’s inability or unwillingness to truly define its philosophical approach to *doing* diversity. In many ways, while students knew that there were all sorts of different types of people on campus, they also perceived tangible social barriers, many which created clear divisions across color lines, and there was not much being done institutionally to address this. For that reason, participants felt that the campus was fundamentally segregated, at least in the spaces where students had more of a choice (friendship/social groups, fraternities and sororities, residential opportunities, as opposed to classes). Some participants felt that this segregation cut across socioeconomic lines, in addition to racial. For example, a current student said, “I did have to cut myself off from a few of my friends just because I didn’t have money like they did to go out every weekend, and I didn’t want to keep having to explain myself.”

A recent alumna said,

“The majority of the students in the pre-college orientation program are lower SES or disadvantaged somehow, so being in there you are kind of grouped together, and most of the time wind up being your friends for the whole four years. So it’s kind of like Smithsfield already sets you apart from people who have money or are more advantaged in their schooling or whatever. You have to seek out avenues to be brought together.”

A current student echoed this point about “seeking avenues,” specifically regarding race. She said, “The diversity is opt in. It’s something that you have to have an interest in, or falls into your lap. If you don’t have an interest, it’s very likely that you wouldn’t know.”

Smithsfield provides a number of institutionally-supported opportunities for students to foster cross-cultural dialogue, but these sites – as outlined in their promotional literature – are extremely limited and only reach a small portion of students who elect to pursue them. For the most part, student’s primary social interactions happen through the many student organizations and informal meetings on campus. Within these groups, whether they were predominantly one race or a mixed-race organization, students felt like racial conversations were limiting. As such, substantive cross cultural conversations rarely occurred, thus often making people feel more comfortable sticking within their own racial/ethnic group, and more often than not, a small circle of friends within that group.

Regarding this, one student said, “We’re always surface level. We never talk about really what are the differences. So every so often people say something that may be racially insensitive and they don’t understand why. It’s because they don’t know why.”

Another student said,

“People are uncomfortable talking about race. Part of it is the assumption... we think because we’re all smart people, we all got into Smithsfield, it’s like, ‘You can’t be racist. You can’t be ignorant. We’re all smart.’ And so we don’t talk about it. And I also don’t think that Smithsfield expects it of us. Like there’s not a curriculum that forces us to think critically about culture and identity.”

A third student in the focus group circled back to the notion of racialized social disconnect on campus, following up the previous points on the limited cross-cultural dialogue:

“I think a lot of separation has a lot to do with fear. People don’t want to offend anyone. I wanted to be friends with everyone freshman year. But I had some racial experiences that made feel like I don’t want to go through that again with people, explaining myself. I’d rather be with people who I don’t have to explain myself to, or educate.”

Those sentiments were echoed by other participants and carried into the classroom setting as well. Participants talked about the frustrations they experienced in classes having

to defend certain ideas and perceptions about Black identity, but still feeling the need to carry that burden. As one said, "I always felt like I had an obligation to be a part of discussions about these issues in the Black community at Smithsfield because I had firsthand experience and I feel that's not represented enough on this campus." She later added, "...sometimes I know I would get angry because I've had classes where I just, you know, I just...AAAHHH... and you just want to you yell at them 'you don't understand!' Instead of feeling that way I need to know that that's my duty, that's my job, to help them understand." Another student held similar views:

"My focus is on education... having valid discourse on issues like race. People don't talk about this. Ever! It's important for me to educate so I don't have to define myself every single time I encounter somebody. If you're educated and you have a certain idea about what's going on in the Black community or where we're coming from, just the basics, it would alleviate a lot stress and pressure and judgment that we all feel. And I hate feeling judged. I hate going into a room and feeling like, 'AAAHHH, I'm Black. Here we go.'"

Within these anecdotes we find students who have taken the initiative to foster an interactive diversity that embraces difference to promote mutual understanding and respect. Some participants feared that Smithsfield's unstated approach, fueled by the broader post-racial conversation, was to create "a kind of idealistic multiculturalism where we flatten differences," as one recent alumna suggested. In essence, to not talk about something, like race, is arguably to attempt to be blind to it. The participants in this study found strength in their Blackness and desired an opportunity to have others learn about and understand their many perspectives, not minimize their presence. Simultaneously, participants wanted the freedom to enjoy the increased access afforded to them as they grappled with lingering notions of exclusion and marginalization. As one recent alumnus said,

"...where I think Smithsfield could do a better job, is in not trying to diffuse difference through a sort of colorblind racism but acknowledge what are

these differences, and you know, why are Black students, even despite the fact that they now have the same SAT scores and the same access to the same schools and have the same backgrounds as a lot of White students, why is there still this disparity?"

Being Black on Campus

To close out this look at the racial climate at Smithsfield, I return to the notion that initially prompted the Black student sociopolitical solidarity at predominantly White institutions in the 1960s – the idea that being Black on campus carried a specific meaning and warranted active engagement.

As discussed, participants in this study came from various backgrounds. Each of the student and alumni participants was Black, but some had parents who had only recently immigrated to the U.S. while others were deeply rooted in the American South. Some of the African American's ancestors eventually migrated north or west while others remained below the Mason-Dixon. Some participants grew up in cities while others were from the suburbs. Some went to private schools, some to publics. Some came from money and others were on full financial aid at Smithsfield. The list goes on; each had their own story, their own unique pathway to and through Smithsfield. What joined the 41 students and alumni, beyond attending Smithsfield, was that each of them identified in some way as Black, and for each of them, this Blackness had been a particular burden at points in their lives. They were aware of it and made conscious decisions about it on a daily basis. To say their experiences were "complicated" would be a vast understatement. Consider the group session below:

During the "interactive focus group," a mass gathering of 24 of the students in the study participated in a short ice-breaker activity called "Common Ground." In this game, participants were asked to stand in a circle and step into the inner circle if they responded

positively to the prompt said aloud in the room. If they did not agree with or had not experienced whatever the prompt stated, or if they simply did not want to respond to a particular prompt, the participant stood still on the outer ringer of the circle. After a few moments, the circle would reset and participants got ready to respond to the next prompt. In some instances of this ice-breaker, prompts and responses are discussed during the activity, treating the activity also as an extended interactive workshop. In other instances, there is no discussion, and the prompts are simply cycled through. In this particular session, the prompts were cycled through initially, with a broader discussion after the circle activity was completed (some of which appears in the excerpts throughout this chapter).

The vast majority of the participants stepped into the circle on the following prompts: *I have been the only person of my race to do something, I have been asked to speak on behalf of my race, I have been told that I only got into Smithsfield because of my race, I have felt like I didn't belong in my own racial group, I have been told that I talk "White," I have wanted to disassociate with members of my race, I feel that I have a harder time at Smithsfield because of my race, and I have friends of other races who feel comfortable making jokes about my race around me.* Nearly half of the students had been called a racial slur, were the first Black to accomplish something in their school, and felt that they segregated themselves racially on campus.

Across the different focus groups, students mentioned the term "microaggressions" and discussed their experiences with them, in and out of the classroom. Consistent with the literature and the above prompts, students have been told that they are not like other Black people and later reminded that they were indeed *still* Black. One recent alumna remarked, "I remember the social, silly things, like trying to go to a frat party during my freshman year and being asked for my ID card, or being asked if I'm with this group. You know, stuff like

that continued through the classroom space where people don't want to work with you even if you're outperforming them."

There were several other incidents and examples of both subtle and overt racism experienced by participants on Smithsfield's campus. During the study one student participant became engaged in an unprovoked confrontation in her on-campus residence hall. A White student said that because the participant was at Smithsfield "through affirmative action," she was less deserving of space on the crowded elevator. When asked if this had been her first such experience the participant, a senior, responded, "In such blatant terms, yes. I mean, you kind of always get... like... people will say snide comments or just act like you're not really there and stuff like that. That stuff doesn't really bother me."

An administrator spoke about being called a "nigger" last year on Smithsfield's campus by "a group of White boys" riding past him in a car. He was on his way to a multicultural meeting and said that, while there, "I was trying to pull it together. Somebody was talking to me and I felt myself tearing up. I couldn't let it go."

A faculty member recalled the patterns of racial profiling of Black male students by campus police and the accompanying negative coverage by the campus newspaper:

"Those things are repetitive, year after year after year. After a while we said we need to stop responding to the campus paper. We could just use the same letter that we used five years ago. And frankly, maybe we could even use the same letter today that we used twenty years ago because the same dynamic of viewing Black men as a threat on campus never dissipated any more than it dissipated in society."

In many ways Black students at Smithsfield have far more access on campus in 2013 than they ever have had before. Some of them actively participate in diverse student groups, represent various campus segments on student government, and enjoy sitting on the campus lawns with their classmates of all racial backgrounds on bright, spring afternoons. In other ways, Black students continue to fight the same battles as their predecessors of the

previous decades, being excluded, stereotyped, and psychologically assaulted. There are extraordinary days, both positive and negative. The creation of activities and initiatives to intentionally foster a stronger Black student community at Smithsfield was originally done to counter the negatives experienced by the new waves of Black students in the 1970s. These efforts have evolved to generate numerous positive outcomes that have benefitted Black Smithsfield and the broader campus community as a whole. This and more will be described in the next theme.

The Black Community

Central to this project is the notion of “the Black community” on campus: does it exist, how can it be identified, and how sociopolitically conscious and active are its members? Participants in the study made constant reference to the Black community and provided a fairly consistent view of how it was defined internally, by the community itself. As discussed throughout the subsections of this theme, three interrelated critical factors in the understanding the Black community included identity (or identification), activity, and visibility. Additionally, there were certain norms in being viewed as part of the Black community, and various dynamics across different campus groups (in particular among ethnic clusters, and with faculty allies). Finally, as featured here, the idea of “unity” seemed to be intertwined with conceptions of the Black community, linking back to historical Black solidarity examples and speaking to the multiple Black collective realities in the contemporary moment.

Getting In

At the root, biological identity, or the ability to check “Black / African American” on demographic documentation was not thought to be sufficient enough to be part of the Black community on campus as defined by the community itself. A handful of focus group participants took exception to this idea. One current student stated, “I feel like if you’re Black then you’re in the Black community. If you’re not going to this event or joining that club, that doesn’t make you less Black than the next person.” The majority of participants held another view: “there was something that made you a part of ‘the community,’ that was different than just being Black,” as an alumnus suggested.

The subtle difference was in the separation of “Black” and “community.” Having Black skin made one a Black student, no matter what activities or social groups they decided to engage on campus or how they classified themselves. To be a member of the Black *community*, however, something had to be done (as will be described). Conversely, if nothing was done to establish one as a member of the Black community, then the “not Black enough” or “not really Black” label could be attached, but this essentially referred to one’s community membership status and not their actual racial status. In other words, if a Black student elected, through inaction, to not identify with the Black community, others might say that this student was not really Black but still knew that the person was indeed Black. The fact that they were Black was underscored by the reality of being susceptible to what some of the participants termed a “wake-up call,” or an experience with racism that could potentially cause the individual to seek the support of the Black community, or leave them socially isolated.

To a large degree, participants emphasized specific activities and visibility as the distinguishing factors for community membership. In some ways the two notions came together. For example, as a current student responded,

“This is something that I think a lot of us have thought about. Being associated with Black student groups and Black issues. Taking part in Black events on campus. Being connected in some way. Black academic programs and the multicultural summer orientation – those are big ones too. If people see you around... if you’re hanging out with people who are doing those groups and things [then you’re in the Black community].”

In some instances, community visibility was more challenging to achieve and thus put people within the Black community, but at the margins. Some examples that were offered included members of athletic teams whose rigorous practice and travel schedules precluded them from participating in many of the non-athletic campus organizations and Black programs, and – as one participant said – “the engineering student that we don’t see” (because he or she is in classroom, lab, or library for the bulk of their time). They may identify as Black and occasionally participate in activities but not be consistently and widely identified as members of “the Black community.” A third example provided during a student focus group was a student engaged in community-based social services work that was not directly connected to campus or any student groups. While this work largely served Black people in the extended community, the time put in for such an effort removed the student from visible campus activity and student organizations. This student did not necessarily feel excluded from the Black Smithsfield community, but did recognize that he had not had the same types of campus-based leadership and programming experiences as many of his peers.

The above examples illustrate perhaps the most critical point about the Black community on campus: individual students have the opportunity to self-select into the community via their activities and networks, but the final say as to whether one is “in” or “down” comes from the approval of current Black community members. As one current

student stated, “The Black community is defined by others [within the Black community]. I feel like I can’t necessarily say that I’m a part of the Black community. If other people feel like I’m a part of the Black community, then I’m in.”

While there is no formal application and selection process to gain entry into “the Black community” as there was with some of the specific membership organizations that are prominent within the Black community at Smithsfield, there do appear to be some consistent gateway opportunities that typically pass public approval, as previously mentioned. The process is not fluid for all Black students, particularly for those who do not attend the multicultural pre-college orientation or are otherwise are not well aligned with Black community activities and opportunities.

One student described how difficult it was for her to “find her niche... find her way into the Black community.” She continued,

“Maybe it’s the pre-college orientation, or you’re Greek [in a Black Greek organization], or part of one of the Black groups. Otherwise it’s difficult to enter. I played a sport since freshman year. It’s a predominantly White team. I couldn’t do the pre-college orientation. So it was difficult for me to find my way into the Black community at Smithsfield. I feel that there are barriers put up. I eventually did by joining an organization. But I definitely think it’s difficult to enter.”

As will be described in greater detail in the next theme, the number of student organizations and activities in the Black community provided numerous entry points but also created complications. Students typically could not be a part of everything that interested them, though some tried and paid the price (with lower grades and/or much less sleep). Some groups struggled with sustainability, unable to consistently develop strong leadership, attract constituents, or raise sufficient funds. Natural competitions arose across similarly-situated groups such as Black Greek-letter organizations. There typically did not appear to be major tensions from the participants’ perspectives. Various student groups

often found ways to work together at different times during the year. Still, the strength of the community was consistently critiqued, largely by community insiders. Student leaders sought to maintain a sense of solidarity and a strong Black presence at Smithsfield through their programming, but some participants questioned the overall result. One student said, "...I never felt like the Black community was divided. But I also felt like it was never... I never felt like there was a strong Black presence. I know there are several groups but there was no feeling of unity amongst the Black community."

Finally it is important to note that the Black community did not exist in isolation at Smithsfield. As will be discussed in later themes, the Black community was oftentimes placed in conversation with other multicultural communities as part of Smithsfield's institutional strategy to foster diversity. This presented other sets of challenges and opportunities. And obviously, the Black community at Smithsfield was a part of the broader Smithsfield experience and thus students were constantly straddling various lines, engaging with White peers in the classroom or residence hall and then participating in activities and groups that other students may have known very little about, if anything at all.

With this in mind, we find that despite the Black community experience being situated within the larger institutional context, it was quite possible for a Black student to create their own virtual Black world through this community. When one current student was asked about his sense of the racial climate on campus he remarked, "I feel like I've had a pretty segregated experience. I interact with mostly Black people. That's allowed me to not really see how the racial climate actually is. I've been so deep into one." An alumna who finished in the early 2000s shared a similar story, recalling living with Black students, participating in Black student organizations and programs, and being active in various efforts that positively impacted the extended Black community outside of campus.

“I didn’t really interact with a lot of White students or professors when I was on campus. I made the decision early on that I wanted to study Black culture, and I was still pretty interested in the International piece so I took classes with a couple of continental African professors that I found in one of the departments. I felt like I was able to center my experience around this idea of Black consciousness even though I was at this predominantly White school. When I tell people that they go, ‘huh? At *Smithsfield*? In that elite school?’ And I’m like, yeah, yeah, I feel like I had a very Black experience.”

The Diaspora on Campus

One of reasons that it is possible for a student to elect to engage in an ostensibly exclusive Black social experience on campus is due to the vast amount of programs and cultural experiences available to them. There are multiple institutional spaces dedicated to various aspects of Black culture including international academic programs that explore African and Caribbean history and culture, diasporic academic opportunities that fuse African American histories with the various international influences, courses specifically on African American culture, courses that look at the intersection of Latino and Black cultural experiences, various multicultural spaces including some dedicated specifically to Black culture, and a host of student groups that are connected in some way to the Black community at Smithsfield. Additionally, outside of campus there are various opportunities to connect with diasporic communities whether it is tutoring recent West African immigrants as one Smithsfield partnership engaged in, connecting with East African youth and religious communities as a student participant mentioned, studying Afro-Brazilian martial arts, or volunteering in one of the many area schools that are presently traditionally African American but, in some cases, are also being impacted by various Black immigration patterns.

For some Black students, *this* is diversity. They make a conscious effort to explore these various elements, or key in on specific points of interest. Several of the participants

described learning African dance and drumming, working with Black youth and communities via a culturally relevant lens and gaining a much truer sense of what “urban studies” was all about, and exploring the history and effects of colonialism on various Black cultures. Those things became their points of reference and their personal grounding, and in many cases helped them to establish links to other Black cultural elements and other interests outside of the Black community.

The Black cultural or ethnic differences at times became more evident within the Black community and created minor tensions. As an example, the notion of “flags” came up in a few of the interviews. One recent African American alumnus noted that other students from a Caribbean or African country would proudly display their flags in their rooms, or perhaps on a sticker or a button. “You get cool points for having the Guyanese flag but if you’re just showing up like me... I can probably point to a half dozen flags or more in my lineage from the diaspora... but... I don’t know, it wasn’t cool to be miscegenated,” he said and then laughed. His laughter was telling, which is why it is important to mention here, because among his closest friendship group at Smithsfield he included African and Caribbean-rooted students, in addition to other African American students from various regions. The ethnic differences among the various Black students were not divisive but did allow for specific groups to celebrate their own heritages in formal and informal groupings and activities. In some of the spaces various Black ethnic groups were able to connect with and learn from each other. Another recent alumnus of African heritage added, “Sometimes Black [African American] students would mistake the cultural pride for arrogance... having your flag or just repping all the time, I remember there’d be issues. The ability to take yourself outside of that is good, and to just be able to relate... to take away the labels and have a real connection.”

Within this diasporic conversation the two elephants in the room are typically 1) were African and/or Caribbean students overrepresented in the Black community on campus and 2) did African and/or Caribbean students receive negative messages about “African American culture” in the home. The answer to both questions is subjectively yes. I say “subjectively” for several reasons. Regarding overrepresentation, as mentioned earlier, specific ethnic data was not captured from all of the participants in a systematic way, as that was not a major emphasis of this study. That said, many of the students divulged their ethnic make-up in the conversations, and there were a good number of Caribbean and African students. Two students did not mention any specific ethnic background themselves but I later learned from others that they each had a parent who was from the Caribbean. This raised the question for me about identification: did some students not want to claim African and/or Caribbean roots because they did not feel as connected to them? Were some students comfortable with simply “Black”? Looking back through the data, and in particular the discussion portion of the large group activity where students were asked about racial/ethnic labels, “Black” was sufficient for the vast majority of the student participants. Many were also fine with the term “African American” even if they claimed Caribbean or African roots, because they had gotten accustomed to it through demographic data collection.

Regarding messaging in the home, some of the Caribbean and African participants joked about the strictness of their households, the intense academic pressure, and the warnings about “Black American culture.” As mentioned earlier for the Black Smithsfield students who historically have had to somehow distance themselves from other Blacks in complicated ways for complicated reasons, so too have African and Caribbean immigrants, particularly when they hail from lower socioeconomic communities, as some participants

described. Again, this is purely speculation, but it seems that these shared identity challenges, along with both the African American and the Caribbean / African students' presence at an elite institution like Smithfield, provided a common understanding for them to grow together culturally on campus within the Black community.

For one recent alumna the diasporic conversation provided the opportunity to richly engage new views on Blackness:

“So like it’s literally educating and celebrating those differences so we can shift the national conversation about what it means to be Black because I think people have gotten that twisted, but also saying yes, even in all of these [groups], look how diverse we are, but look at the common threads that are happening all over the world for Black people or people of African descent.”

United?

Most of the participants talked about “the Black community” at Smithsfield, but a handful were careful to make the distinction that there were actually “Black *communities*” in their view. For some this meant the various structural divisions – the undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff. For others it referred to experiential realities and interests within specific student populations on campus, whether it be friendship groups or student organizations, or across academic interests, year in school, socioeconomic divisions, or some combination.

As mentioned and will continued to be discussed in later themes, Smithsfield is highly decentralized. The various departments, student groups, faculty members, and other entities may or may not speak with each other. As one administrator participant said,

“Students get to see another aspect of human nature: when there is no crisis, there is no need to unite. In the time I’ve worked with students I’ve seen students come together to demand that the departments join together to support them during crisis or when addressing a national topic. But when the students don’t call us together, we don’t get together. We check in with

one another, but only when we feel like it. We are only in solidarity when we are in a fight [with others].”

This limited or selective solidarity happens within faculty groups as well. Three faculty and administrative participants referred to different regular and informal gatherings of faculty and other campus and community partners “years ago” and the ways that the Black faculty community was more engaged in Black student life “back then.” Students and alumni also commented on the disconnect to Black faculty. While one alumna mentioned that coming to Smithsfield was her first time ever being in any classroom with a Black instructor, others talked about the lack of sustained interactions with the collective Black faculty on campus. One alumna said,

“We had very little community with non-undergraduates that were Black from this campus. And that included Black faculty. That was something that was really frustrating to me as a Black cultural scholar. Because we the only ones, the few of us – and it was like five us at a time. We were the only ones that were communicating with them, going out to dinner, following them around campus.”

This alumna later explained that by the rest of the Black community on campus not having these opportunities, they not only missed important academic experiences and mentoring, but this also sent a strong message to the students about the type of political disengagement that they should become accustomed to on campus. In her view, the faculty should have been organized and more present. Another alumna shared the sentiment that, “there was really nobody in that department [Black Cultural Studies] that was trying to be revolutionary. It felt very much like ‘MLK I Have a Dream’ all the time.” She later added,

“I’ve heard of other people at smaller schools, or not even necessarily smaller schools, but schools with more intimate Black Cultural Studies departments, where professors take that [undergraduate mentoring and personal cultural development] on as their thing. They make sure that students are nurtured and they’re identifying who students are. So, yeah, I would just say that Smithsfield... Black Cultural Studies just failed miserably at that.”

Within the student community there were also questions about individual commitment to more collective concerns and the students' abilities to mobilize and develop cultural and/or sociopolitical agendas, for those who were interested in such pursuits. One recent alumnus said,

"I know this is a generalization, but in my experience there were a lot of cats who came from money and showed up to sort of sustain that. And there wasn't any interest in building¹⁵. And I guess within the Black community you had the kid who did Prep for Prep and the kid who did Jack and Jill¹⁶. So it's just a weird post-modern, Blackness."

In addition to potential divides based upon interests or upbringing, some of the participants talked about low-level tensions and pettiness between friendship groups as well as possible challenges around relational issues (i.e., tensions between women and men based on aggressive male sexual advances, and tensions within and across women's friendship circles due to, among other things, men initiating relationships with multiple women simultaneously).

There was also minimal space for a rich intersection of identities, not just in the Black Smithsfield community but throughout the campus. Student participants talked about some communities being "ride or die." For example, one student who identified as gay talked about his disconnect with the LGBT community on campus because he did not attend many of that community's specific activities. He felt that the LGBT community wanted all of his attention or none. Another student discussed how some voices at times were silenced over others for the sake of "unity," giving the example of Black feminists taking a backseat to general Black issues. Other participants talked about the strong pull of different academic

¹⁵ "Building" is a term meaning to converse about and/or work together on a project or cause. It oftentimes has social justice connotations, as was the case in this excerpt.

¹⁶ Prep for Prep is a program that helps lower income students of color get to elite preparatory schools. Jack and Jill is a Black elite social club, and where Black elite children, at the urging of their parents, begin to network with each (Graham, 2009).

communities, while others mentioned the intense commitments of different social groups and organizations on campus. Those competing interests at times impacted students' abilities to participate in Black concerns or maintain relevant links with other Black community members and groups.

One final layer of division that some of the participants acknowledged was the separation of Smithsfield's Black student community with the wider Black community surrounding the campus. Several participants mentioned the term, "Smithsfield Bubble," which referred to the ways that their lives revolved around campus activities and concerns, often leaving them disconnected from things going on at home, in the national or international scope, and/or in the Black community neighboring the campus. Some of this was a product of the academic and social intensity that students experienced, but some was also fueled by various layers of disconnect between Blacks at Smithsfield and Blacks in the wider community. While some student participants talked about interactions with area residents through youth tutoring or via friendly exchanges with various campus services and security staff, they and others also discussed the structural divide between students and community members. This will be discussed more in the remaining themes.

With all of that said – the limited communication across various siloed communities on campus, the many different student organizations competing for students' time and attention, the social challenges and evolving maturity levels of young adults in college, the divergent interests and backgrounds, the disconnect with the extended community, *and* the fact that all of this is within the context of a highly competitive and stressful academic environment – there were still numerous examples and stories of unity within the Black community. Participants talked about "soaking up the wisdom" of faculty mentors and connecting with peers in the dining hall or at a meeting. Alumni mentioned seniors who

mentored them when they were underclassmen, and the sense of responsibility that led them to “pay it forward” to someone else during their final years on campus. Current students talked about the need to support and attend all of their friends’ performances and group activities. Faculty mentioned the importance of “seeing my students perform in their shows and to make sure that they see me seeing them.” Alumni and current students reflected on their life-changing community outreach initiatives with youth. These were just some of the signs of unity across the various sectors. But as will be discussed in more depth, throughout the data there are consistent patterns of disconnect and underdevelopment, often clouded by the sheer volume of programming, social networking, and Black student presence on campus. In other words, as will be covered in greater detail later, “unity” may be in the Black Smithsfield community what “diversity” is in the institutional milieu: a loaded term with no stable grounding.

A recent alumna offered the following:

“The Black community at Smithsfield is a complex entity. Um... if I had to use some keywords I guess to start off and describe it I would say that members of the community are distrustful of one another. Both socially and intellectually it seems that... people want to have friends of course, people want to feel like they belong. People often want to date and that makes things difficult. But then people don’t know how to ask for help when they need it. And you can be perfectly cool with someone, think they’re happy and then the next week maybe they’ve gone home for some reason. Yeah, the community is at once really intimate, but sometimes uncomfortably so. And then... just very distant. And there isn’t a lot of support going on. I mean I even remember, in terms of planning programming for the community. You could plan something, put it in a convenient spot for people when they’re coming back from dinner or classes or whatever, and nobody would show up. There were certain issues that were hotter topics than others, I guess, but it was difficult to gather people for justice purposes, which was frustrating.”

In the next theme I take a closer look at how the present Black community at Smithsfield defines and engages in activism, and how the ways that the community operates influences students' academic engagement.

Activities, Activism, and Academics

The previous look at the ways that the Black community at Smithsfield defined itself, and the many questions this raised regarding the current commitment to sociopolitical engagement and student development sets the stage for a closer analysis of what students are doing on campus. In this section I outline the ways in which participants suggested that, in some cases, campus activities have created pathways for activist work at Smithsfield, focusing on student empowerment and broader social awareness. I also discuss the alternative views of some participants, that activism, particularly within the Black community at Smithsfield, has subsided considerably in comparison to previous generations. Additionally, I begin to present (and continue in the theme to follow) the ways in which participants discussed race-based student leadership models on campus, and how they've been shaped by the institution and have impacted sociopolitical engagement. Finally, I discuss participants' thoughts on their academic pursuits, and how that fits within their overall campus experiences.

Defining Activism Today

When asked about the state of activism within the Black community at Smithsfield today, participants' responses across each group – student, alumni, and faculty/staff – fit into one or more of three different categories. One set of participants, which I will term the “traditionalists” held the term “activism” or “activist” in high, almost mythic-like regard. One

student participant took a long time to reflect on the question before finally beginning to speak, and then said, "I don't feel like I'm doing enough as an activist but I think I have it in me to at some point be able to call myself that. I think I have a lot of work to do on myself before I can fight for and advocate for others."

An alumna "traditionalist" said,

"I felt like there were folks on campus that got it, but they were not willing to take it to the extreme that I was taking it. I had this line in my mind of who was really down. And I've learned since then that we all contribute to the struggle in our own ways... not all, but many of us do. And we need each other to be playing our different roles. But at that time [as a student], I was really young and very committed to one particular style of activism and... so that was isolating at times."

A second cluster felt that the Black students on campus who participated in student organizations that represented Black student concerns to the administration and the wider campus community were continuing the Black student activist tradition. Another recent alumna participant labeled this work "coalition politics," based upon the general nature of Smithsfield's various cultural groups being represented at the institutional table by elected student coalition leaders. These leaders simultaneously represented individual students and student groups within each specific culture. It was learned in focus groups and interviews that these student coalition leaders were also typically sought to publically respond to racial incidents if such things had become widely known, whether they be campus-based or national. They were also asked to sit on various committees and working groups, and appear on panels and at public events, as part of the institution's diversity efforts.

Regarding the coalition politics, the alumna said,

"I think something that was really empowering for me was seeing how, again, how institutionalized the student efforts were and how justice became mobilized in a way that was not only radical, but also... mainstream in that

we were able to bring our grievances and concerns to the top administration twice yearly.”

Other student and alumni participants spoke about this access to the campus’s leadership, including some of the challenges that this presented. This will be covered in more detail later.

The third way that participants responded indicated that portions of Smithsfield’s Black community were still critically engaged in community-building efforts that impacted the broader Black community in the city, and this was considered a form of activism for some in the current moment. The most commonly mentioned effort was youth mentoring and educational outreach. These initiatives were deeply rooted in the Black student experience at Smithsfield; the earliest alumni participants mentioned efforts they were involved in or witnessed, while faculty and administrators talked about other such programs from earlier decades. Present students continued the work in multiple ways. One talked about her experiences over the past two years working with elementary school students through a campus program and how that has helped to shape her future outlook. She said, “I want to be that intervening factor in some way in a child’s educational process. I plan on doing this by becoming a teacher in the public school system and then later affecting policy while doing work on the ground.”

Regarding her youth community education work during her time as a Smithsfield student, a recent alumna said,

“This is what activism is like. Learning something, applying it, doing something. Building something sustainable. Always making sure that what you have is directly going back to the community. Being a part of creating something. And so I don’t know if I necessarily saw it like that when I was at Smithsfield, like ‘oh, I’m doing some revolutionary thing,’ but it was the only thing that I felt that sustained me in a way that I think activism could and should. Um... because it was actually being active. I think that people forget the word. *Activism*. You’re doing something. You’re not just yelling or writing

or going to class. You're... you're doing something, and applying what you learned."

The three pseudo-categories – traditionalists, coalition leaders, and community educators – were not necessarily mutually exclusive. The traditionalist first quoted above, for example, was an active community educator but simply did not feel comfortable calling his present work in that area "activism." For him, activism was more of a fulltime lifestyle and a commitment to creating consistent change. He did not see any of the community educators or students engaged in coalition politics as activists in the way that he defined the term for himself.

The alumna who first mentioned "coalition politics" also described her efforts with community education in her interview and mentioned that she is still engaged in related efforts. She did talk about this community engagement and youth empowerment as activist in nature. She also held traditionalist views, wanting to see more mobilization and action around social justice issues. She made a differentiation between "activism" and "activist work," holding the former to a higher standard that was not often a part of the Smithsfield experience in her view:

"Black student activism at Smithsfield... um.... I don't think that's ever a phrase I would have used because that would have required a critical mass. I think there were activist-minded individuals, and I was lucky enough to have found a lot of them, and friends in them, and partners. But... I think... yeah, I honestly can't say that... there was like a sentiment or an ethos of Black student activism en masse. I think it was more located occasionally in some of the organizations and then in Black fraternities and sororities to a degree. But among the student population, I think I'd be reaching."

Other alumni, student, and faculty/administrator participants shared this belief regarding limited mass Black student activism and consciousness on campus. Another alumna said,

"I didn't realize how non-political Smithsfield seemed until I went abroad my junior year. I was around people from other schools who just like,

seemed really militant and had read mad books that I had never heard of and would talk about people and things in Black history that I was just very unaware of. And I didn't realize how conservative even the radicals at Smithsfield were until that experience.

A recent alumnus offered the following:

"One of the harder things was the changing landscape on campus when it came to racial politics and campus organizing. What we would call identity politics in general. I mean, I think I'm used to hearing the narratives about the days when the Black community at Smithsfield was a really thriving environment. A really thriving Black student activist population through stuff like discussion groups and things like that. There were definitely moments when I tried to revive some of that and it fell quite flat. And I think it was in part, me not adequately grappling with the changes that had happened."

The "changes" that the alumnus is alluding to revolved around the various ways that the institution intervened in Black community life at Smithsfield, which will be discussed in more detail in the next theme, and changes within the students themselves, becoming more centered around individual pursuits. Regarding students' present identities and the Smithsfield culture, a current student said,

"Smithsfield definitely nurtures a spirit of activism in the way that students are developed to be worldly thinkers... but I don't think enough people here... I mean, people come here more so focused on themselves and their careers and making money, so I think a lot of people do the talk but not enough are actually seeking out these activist roles outside of college. The Black community here has definitely made efforts to advocate for issues and stand in solidarity with other communities. It's important to recognize that. But at the same time... some people want to take risks and some people need that foundation because they can't afford to not have a good paying job after graduation. There's a balance, but I don't think that members of the Black community while they're here have taken a stand for activism. And after they graduate it's about themselves and not necessarily how they can shape the world."

Alumni and student participants also expressed concerns regarding students' abilities to sustain energy around particular issues even when they were able to successfully initially mobilize. As one alumna said,

“So like I said there was the one good protest every year but aside from that there was not a whole lot of... how do I... I don’t feel like there was a lot of education or sustainable activism. I guess that’s a good way to put it. It was really like, ‘ooooh, something happened. Let’s react, let’s get mad. Let’s wear Black hoodies and storm the campus.’ But then it was like, ‘alright I got a test, I’m out.’ Or ‘that was over, it happened, we made a scene,’ but there was no ongoing dialogue.

A current student had the following to say:

“...during segregation there were signs that said ‘White Only’ or ‘Black Only’ but now things are more subversive or more undertoned, some people think it’s okay and that we’ve progressed. We have progressed, but there are systematic issues still. Like, for Black people, we get together, Trayvon Martin, Sean Bell, then it’s like ‘all right, see y’all later.’ We have to realize that these events, they’re going keep happening if we don’t do something about it. And if the only time we get together is when somebody gets murdered, we’re going to be meeting a lot. And I’m not meeting for that any more.”

Another alumna shared these thoughts:

“It’s interesting last year with the Trayvon Martin tragedy, and how mobilized Black folks got so quickly. And then how quickly we moved on. I think it’s interesting; there’s a very reactionary culture. At Smithsfield too [when I was there], there were some things that came up around the newspaper, and then an incident with some White frat boys. People were up in arms, there were rallies, and then the next week things were back to normal. That whole conversation around strategy, and how we work in between... because you know these racist situations are going to come up because we’re still living in this racist society. And we all have experiences that affirm that. There are Black folks that I think are in denial but for the most part, folks are aware, yeah, racism is still happening. It’s happening to us, and it’s now happening to our children because we’re parents. Where I get frustrated is when we don’t take that next step toward strategy, like, okay, what are we doing to do except get mad next time they shoot somebody, or call a Black woman out of her name, or write a racist article. What are we going to do in between that?”

As mentioned previously, for some students, the answer to “what are we going to do in between that” is, and has been, to participate in community education initiatives. But even these efforts produced various questions for participants; can educational outreach make a difference, particularly in today’s “broken educational systems” as one student said;

are enough students engaged in this work; are Smithsfield's outreach programs the right mechanisms to address these issues.

One faculty participant talked about the many community outreach efforts available through Smithsfield's community programs office, but perceived that not many Black students were involved in this work. In a separate interview, a student participant said, "When we had the activities fair I remember leaving feeling so disappointed. I was like, 'where's the radical, action-oriented service organizations, besides just going to high schools and tutoring?' I didn't see anything. So I did sign up for one of the tutoring groups and I work there now."

Given the many previous comments about students being more focused on individual achievements and future career options, this student's remarks (specifically about seeking more radical activist options) are the exception at Smithsfield, not the rule. Yet, it is essential to note that in this student's words, the exception exists.

In the next section, student activities are revisited. It is within those efforts that students foster connections with Smithsfield and each other. For some, student activities become the launching pad for exceptional activist engagement.

Extracurricular Activities

The previous section highlighted the ways that student activism is framed and facilitated at Smithsfield. As indicated, for some participants, student extracurricular activities played an essential role in Black community activist engagement, and also Black student presence on campus.

There are numerous culturally specific extracurricular options for Smithsfield's students, in addition to a wide variety of activities and events geared, in theory, toward all

students. According to Smithsfield's website, there are performance groups, various student government roles, pre-professional organizations, honor societies, cultural organizations, community service opportunities, Greek-letter organizations, political clubs, hobby and enthusiast groups, academic discipline clubs, student publications, and more. Aside from the honor societies, all activities, even those more specific to certain groups such as future medical students or a dance group grounded in certain cultural traditions, are interest-based, meaning that a prospective member does not have to know for certain that they are going to medical school or does not have to be a member of the cultural group in order to participate in these respective examples. Adding in the various research and fellowship programs, along with campus-sponsored internships and athletics, there are literally hundreds of options for students to choose from. This becomes one of the critical building blocks for student engagement as a whole at Smithsfield, and also as it particularly relates to Black cultural exploration.

Regarding this, an administrator said,

"I think by virtue of the investment that Smithsfield makes into student life and the empowerment that is given to students to create their own student groups around culture and networks and interests, that Smithsfield does make it a priority for cultural identities to be explored but they leave the exploration up to students."

Students wholly embraced this ownership; participants beamed with pride regarding their groups' many achievements and self-determined presence on campus. For many students, Smithsfield's activities gave them an opportunity to continue extracurricular endeavors that they had undertaken in high school or earlier, while other students were excited about the many new possibilities available to them. The process of creating and operating these groups, and deciding which groups to participate in, was all student-driven. An alumnus acknowledged this autonomy, stating that, "these groups aren't

really because of the university, but allowed to happen through the university.” As evidenced by Smithsfield’s extensive student programming calendar during the data collection phase, and past activities researched online, and as reflected in the focus group sentiments, Black students have positioned their cultural programming as *the* guiding element of Black life on campus, far beyond any academic, administrative, or other broader institutional initiatives.

Thus, from this perspective, not only are students engaged in the developmental and operational aspects of their groups – which several student participants talked about in the focus groups, and which becomes quite involved as will be discussed in the next section – but their work through these groups essentially sets the tone for the Black community. This seemed to be the logical play in many ways; participants felt that at a place like Smithsfield, students should be given the keys and be prepared to drive the community and the institution forward. But, as will be explored in the next section, it may be prudent for Black community members to collectively discuss where and how students are going, and whether their student extracurricular activities are consistently serving their best interests and the interests of the Black campus and extended communities.

Too Much / Not Enough

All of the participants were well aware of the intense activities-based cultural norms of Smithsfield, and the ways that students seemed to pack their schedules full of events and extracurriculars the moment they arrived on campus. I asked some of the student participants for a quick list of the different activities they were presently involved in. Nearly twenty responded and most were actively engaged in five or more different groups, many in some sort of leadership role. It was typical for students to not think anything of this.

One student, after returning from a leadership conference at another school, noted that in comparison to the various other conference attendees from schools throughout the country, Smithsfield had a vast amount of cultural resources and opportunities. An alumnus made a similar point, stating that, “not every school will present the chances to engage culturally like Smithsfield.”

These and other participants also recognized the potential challenges that this could present. One faculty member said simply, “There’s a lot to do here. That’s the problem.”

A current student said the following:

“I’ve talked with friends at other schools, kind of seeing how their [Black] communities function, I realized that we have a lot of events in our community, compared to other schools. And I think that may be a function of Smithsfield itself, being so decentralized, whether it be a Greek community, or a cultural community, being so heavily involved within themselves. That may be part of it. I think the other part of it is that the Black community here is so diverse, in terms of interests, in terms of ethnic breakdown. So as a result of that, and as a result of a lot of people with A-type personalities, we’re going to have a lot of student groups forming. And with so many different student groups there’s just a lot of overlap in events and the overall Black calendar. If you were to be that heavily involved person like you were back in high school, you probably wouldn’t get any work done.

The other thing that happens is that there isn’t a prerequisite for planning an event and collaboration isn’t the norm. Everybody’s just doing their own thing and hoping people come and that doesn’t really make a community. So there’s very much an individualist perspective on everything and that doesn’t help anyone really.”

Another student leader added, “It’s 2013 and I struggle to understand why we as a community have not figured out ways to facilitate institutional memory. It seems to be such a consistent theme across groups and organizations.”

In these comments, which were echoed by other students in other conversations, the idea of individualism is placed within the context of student groups, raising questions about the true intent of student programming, students’ involvement in these groups, and possible inefficiencies on numerous levels. Returning to some of the previously mentioned

comments regarding activist or sociopolitically conscious engagement, and the difficulties gaining a “critical mass” of consistent student commitment, one could question whether the existing activities were essentially reducing the possibility of deeper activist exploration. Students’ interests undoubtedly vary, but the one constant for everyone is time. Even if students want to mentor a child or organize around the mass incarceration of Black youth or develop a Black think tank to address various economic disparities, these things take time. If students are already doing too much, and likely not as effectively as they could, how can they be expected to do more?

For students who do seek to be sociopolitically aware, the internet has come to serve as a convenient and accessible space to remain engaged. Participants from each of the groups indicated that they regularly shared insightful articles, signed online petitions for causes, and were intentional about using some of their online interactions to raise awareness and stay connected to others who shared similar ideas or who could challenge them intellectually in some beneficial way. Regarding this development, particularly as it related to campus-based activism, one student said the following:

“Today, I think the dialogue would start online. People would express how they feel about the situation online... and then, from past experiences, it has led to actual meetings and rallies and interactions with campus, like administrators. It eventually leads to action on the ground, versus, like in the past, there wasn’t the internet so people sort of immediately came together, I think, and then would take whatever actions were necessary. So I feel like people got a lot more vocal in expressing how they felt about acts of racism when they came together in the ‘60s and ‘70s. Now people sort of have these conversations in a digital space. I guess it tends to like, not dilute the dialogue but it just... I think things happened a lot more quickly in those days, and now it’s like sort of a process to get people to come together.”

A faculty member also spoke on this, saying,

“I have been approached by a number of students that want to re-awaken the political climate of ten years ago but I am unapologetic about the their inability to do so because they have at their disposal way more resources than we had in the way of assembling a community by way of social

networking. The best we had at that point was an e-mail listserve and that's fallen through, so if we've gone from just one listserve that we could disseminate everything into to Facebook groups and fan pages and blah, blah, blah, then something has happened. Maybe it's too much technology. Maybe, you know, there's no need to pay attention to a post about an event because you're getting 8 million invites from people you're going to school with. I think they're pretty disorganized."

What we see at Smithsfield in terms of Black student leadership and organizational engagement are well-meaning, highly motivated students who often put all of their energies into organizing events because this is the culture of the institution. This is not just a Black community phenomenon. As some participants mentioned, the Black community at Smithsfield took its initial cues from the broader campus community, creating parallel Black-specific groups to provide opportunities for Black students who did not feel as welcome in and/or attracted to the other campus groups. Over time, additional Black groups have emerged and the popularity of these groups has risen such that they are not only widely recognized as a part of the broader Smithsfield experience, but have also served as a model for other cultural groups (including White students) to develop their programming and activities.

In this institutional culture of organizations and activities, students are typically so busy doing *something* that they are unable to truly process what they are gaining and/or losing in their investment of time. In terms of activist engagement, some students have grown comfortable with clicking "Like" on Facebook as a statement of solidarity. Some literally have little time to do even that.

Within that reality, some students explicitly talked about the conversational barriers that are put up when everyone is so busy and/or digitally oriented for communication. One student mentioned the disappointment she had in not finding the "intellectual conversations" she had hoped to have at an elite school. Another student leader keyed in on

the toils of event planning and said that students doing this “don’t get some of the connections that you get coming to college. You know, sitting around, talking about nothing and eventually getting into a really deep conversation that helps you grow as a person.” She, and others, recognized that the leadership opportunities afforded to her through her student groups were “things I couldn’t have picked up in the classroom” and would be highly valuable as she moved on to the next phase in life. There were trade-offs, however.

Practically, as some participants mentioned, students simply could not attend all of the events that were being organized. And, the previously quoted student leader also said, “If you’re spending your whole life planning events, you’re not going to have any time to do any schoolwork.” Others pointed out that this was also true for those spending their lives attending events, as will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Performing Academically

One of the more interesting sub-themes that emerged in this study was the ways in which participants approached their academic work. In general, while students had elected to attend Smithsfield because of its academic reputation and they were driven toward lucrative professional opportunities after completing Smithsfield, by and large students spent more time engaged in extracurricular activities, as previously discussed.

One senior recalled his week working multiple campus jobs, paying bills and planning his budget for next year, attending group meetings, going to most of his classes and carving out time, usually late at night to study. On the weekends he described the following scenario:

“With that huge social calendar, and all of the friends you’ll have in all of these groups begging you to come out to every event, saying, ‘aw, man, I’m gonna be so hurt if you don’t come,’ you feel the need to go to every event. I think they call it ‘the fear of missing out.’ But that’s going to hurt

academically. When you're at an event on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night, and then you plan to do work on Sunday night but then you have a meeting, it's like, there goes your weekend. And how you balance that out... well, with balance, ultimately something's got to give. With me it was sleep, honestly. Sleeping and taking care of myself, that's what became deprioritized for me."

For this student, sacrificing sleep allowed him to maintain a strong academic standing at Smithsfield and be viewed as an academic mentor to others, despite his busy schedule. Other participants discussed their struggles with finding this balance for themselves. The thing that has succumbed for them has been their coursework.

In general, beyond the basic fact that Smithsfield is an elite institution and the coursework is challenging, there appeared to be two driving factors that inhibited Black students in the classroom. The first was preparation/exposure, particularly in the STEM courses, but stretching into liberal arts classes as well. Some Black Smithsfield students indicated, for example, that they had not previously done rigorous research papers in high school. This limited preparation affected their comfort in the classroom and left them even more susceptible to stereotype threat (as discussed in the literature review, and will be further contextualized later in this section). The second factor was interest. This was likely not unique to Black students at Smithsfield, but, put simply, students had difficulty motivating themselves to address the basics for their coursework, let alone undertake more rigorous study (i.e., reading additional material, consistently using academic resources). Thus, the reduced, last-minute time dedicated to schoolwork was often, more or less, a product of students not truly knowing how to do their work effectively and not being motivated enough to put in the time. Nonetheless, they knew that they had to do the work, so they would eventually sit down and – pushed by a quickly-approaching deadline – do something.

For many, the “something” that they would produce would be just enough to get by. As one alumna succinctly stated, “Without trying, I’m a B+. I always say that. Without doing my homework, without much effort, I’m a B+. And left to my own devices I would just coast through as a B+ and kind of mind my own business.” Once students found their comfort zone and could properly gauge the level of effort necessary to remain there, they put their academics on autopilot until exam time and typically shifted their primary energies to activities and socializing. This certainly was not the story for all of the alumni and student participants, as some did spend considerably more time on their schoolwork (but were also still quite active on campus). This was the script for the vast majority, however, following each other’s lead. Thus, activities became a social space that was more productive than simply casually hanging out (which they also did), and lent more toward their natural interests and talents they possessed outside of their intellectual gifts. Activities also became a space to commiserate with peers about academics while attempting to motivate each other to do some work.

This was their performance. Students engaged in a strategic process of squeezing academics into the rest of their busy lives and somehow making it work. For more savvy students the performance employed a variety of tactics such as well-informed course selection, resource utilization, negotiation, and more. The performance also stretched outside of the classroom. A few participants talked about leveraging faculty connections to gain access to graduate school and employment opportunities. Again, this is not something uncommon among all students at Smithsfield and places like it, but it is important to note because some may not feel that Black students engage in these sorts of negotiations. They do.

Again, the secondary academic emphasis described in this section is by no means a testament to student ability or performance, and that is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this finding. While there were some participants who had admittedly underperformed on occasion, there were others who had done extremely well. These high-achieving students have come from mixed groups – some prep schools, some public high schools, some through programs such as Gates Millennium Scholars and A Better Chance. Consistent with Maya Beasley’s research, students – and particularly the high-achieving group – were largely over-represented in the social sciences sector. Students who had the most difficulty academically had initially sought out pre-med, math, engineering, or business degrees. Many of them changed course during their career after one or more bad experiences. As one student said, “I figured I’d be a math major, you know, no big deal. To be Black, to be a woman, to be a math major... And then I took my first math course and I was like, nope, never again.”

A handful of students (some who did well and some who struggled) as well as some faculty and administrator participants spoke about the need for Smithsfield to create more supportive academic environments, particularly for students who may be first generation college students or not fit the traditional Smithsfield pipeline, and for students who were pursuing STEM courses where Black students have not traditionally performed strongly or been well-represented. While anecdotally, Smithsfield faculty and administrators indicated that across all racial and ethnic groups there was a significant drop off among those who initially expressed interest in pre-med and those who actually finished out their undergraduate studies still on that path, Black students and alumni felt there were particular challenges facing them.

One administrator pointed to stereotype threat as another critical factor in Black student underperformance, particularly for those interested in pre-med:

“[Black] students today come with the fact that they are much broader and are reaching out because they’re in better [high] schools and at the same time they know that are just as smart as the kids who don’t look like them. But, they get here, and in a subtle context they end up taking the wrong chemistry [course], if you can understand what I’m saying. The class that you take because they want to prove that I’m as great as they are. Whereas a lot of them [White students] took the dumbest class possible. They took the applied [course] when they were supposed to take the theoretical, so they made sure in their first semester – see all of the strategy and tactics in their first year here – they get all As. But they didn’t take all of those hard courses. No! They weren’t challenging the world, just to prove that I’m good. No! What they did, and what Black students today should be doing, is in the same way taking these courses that you know that you’re going to be doing fairly well in, knowing what drop-add really means, knowing all of the details of the politics of academics. You don’t do chemistry during the regular semester; it’s got to be done during the summer. All of that is what you use... how you teach students to get through this place. They have to learn the culture of the institution *and* the culture of the discipline. Each discipline has its own culture.”

A current senior echoed this sentiment, describing how she witnessed Black students “getting Cs and Ds” in pre-med courses every year, and later realizing that they should not have taken those courses during the semester or in the sequence that they did. In some cases the classes were simply not the appropriate ones to take at any point. She then said, “I told this one freshman not to take that [pre-med] class. She did anyway, and then she had to drop.”

This example feeds back into the Type A nature of Smithsfield, which runs in conflict to one of the lingering racial issues in higher education. The Black students want to compete and prove themselves in these pre-med classes and do what they believe everyone else is doing, but if they lack the previous exposure, the social capital and resource networks (e.g., having medical doctors in their immediate household and/or extended family), and the culturally specific support mechanisms to get them to and through medical school, the road

is significantly more difficult. To not engage would be to confirm the stereotype that Black students *can't* engage these rigorous courses. The challenge, in pre-med spaces as well as others, is to construct relevant messaging and infrastructures for the twenty-first century Black student so that they may engage and perform on much stronger terms.

A recent alumnus stated:

“I met plenty of other Black students who were far more, you know, wealthy than I am, but simply lacked that understanding of how to be successful in the university context. They lacked the confidence that it takes to be successful in classes that are predicated on participation. So I think it's about finding spaces where we can harness the educational capital that we've amassed as a group of people, and to be able to translate that to entering students who in many ways are coming from privileged backgrounds these days, but lack these particular pieces of privilege that are necessary to be successful at elite schools. Because there's a sense of comfort from coming from, you know, a financially secure background or coming from a successful college prep program, you feel like you've been in the spaces before, but as soon as you step on campus you're on your own.”

In this theme I discussed the various perspectives on Black student activism and engagement through on-campus activities, and how students defined and balanced their academic selves. The next theme discusses the ways that institutional forces shape the overall Black experience, and the many challenges remaining for present and future Black communities on campus.

Institutionalization

One of the most significant changes in regards to Black presence at PWIs over the last forty years is the level of institutional investment in supporting Black students. Today, as opposed to when Blacks first began to be admitted in larger numbers, schools have made greater efforts to establish cultural resource centers, hire faculty and administrators of color, and provide cultural student activities and academic experiences. This is one side of the institutionalization process – still a work in progress but an element that many

participants commented on, both as a draw to Smithsfield and a constant source of support. There is another side, however. As discussed in this section, some participants expressed concern about the institution's actions and in-actions in certain areas, as well as the institution's motivations and the many unintended (or anticipated) consequences that have resulted from the university's policies and practices.

Admissions

Admission into Smithsfield was discussed in the initial theme, but it is necessary to revisit it here in the context of strategic institutionalization. Nearly all of the participants acknowledged that Smithsfield's admissions process had become dramatically more competitive, but several participants took the issue even further, linking reduced Black student sociopolitical engagement directly to Smithfield's recruitment and admissions strategy. While the participants' views were all purely speculative, the pattern of responses raising suspicions about Smithsfield's recruitment motivations was noteworthy.

One alumni participant among the several who commented on this called the Black admissions process, as he perceived it, a "Negro algorithm." He said that it successfully filtered out any rowdy or "hood" Black students, particularly any males who may fit these descriptors.

Another male alumni participant said,

"I think now they're tightening up admissions. If you're going to be the type of student to call out the [university] president because they're not hiring enough Black faculty, then they don't want *you* here. They want the Black kid who's just going to shut up, and go to the library, and go to the basketball games, and give them money at the end. That's what they want. I'm not going to say it's an all out-and-out conspiracy, but it's more complex than people just don't care anymore. Part of it is people don't care anymore, but also it's the people who get selected go to Smithsfield don't really care about that kind of stuff. If people cared, things wouldn't be the way they are now."

A faculty member said the following:

“...the administration doesn’t have any fear that a student occupation of an administrative building would happen today like it used to. You know, something could jump off, but they don’t necessarily feel any deep compulsion. And that could be where the kind of students we recruit impacts that. Because when you bring in students who want to be part of the status quo... and now, that’s not a knock on that, I’m part of the status quo. But the thing is, can you make the status quo better?”

As previously discussed, many participants simply accepted the idea that at Smithsfield the status quo of upward social mobility for whomever in the student population could acquire it was perfectly fine and not in need of change. If they themselves did not explicitly feel that way they perceived that that was the general sentiment within the Black community, as fueled by the wider Smithsfield institutional culture. Additional resources, a new building, or landing a highly sought-after new Black faculty member would qualify as a status quo improvement, rather than the wider distribution of access and opportunities that the faculty member quoted above had implied.

Another view on the increased selectivity of admissions emphasized the more stringent academic performance requirements to gain entry to Smithsfield and to successfully earn a degree from the institution. Within this construct participants keyed in on several overlapping factors including the kinds of selective high schools and neighborhoods that Black students were coming from, the impact of their possible higher income status, the greater representation of various Black ethnic groups, and the increased focus on academics necessary to remain competitive on campus.

Regarding these possible factors one administrator offered the following:

“I think that the competitiveness breeds a certain type of mentality... The socioeconomic diversity now is clearly much bigger. And the number of kids who are on no financial aid certainly rivals the number who are on substantial aid. That's part of it. I also think there's all of the kind of cultural things that come with that, both from a class standpoint and also from an ethnic standpoint too. You also have a much greater ethnic diversity than

you would have had 20 or 30 years ago. I think that the notion that everybody who comes from private school is not quite true but I certainly think that anybody who comes to Smithsfield today has got super high SAT scores and is navigating White or high-end institutions more than those kids from years ago. So they also don't see the need for the kind of community that had existed.”

Interestingly, Black alumni, as previously mentioned, spoke of perceived changes in the Black student community, questioning the sociopolitical involvement of current students and the overall sense of solidarity on campus. For some, when they came back to visit, things did not seem familiar. For others, things grew “differently” while they were there. Many pointed to the students as a source of this difference. The students’ self-centeredness, seemingly at the expense of broader community challenges, was a primary concern.

Individualization and Professionalism

In the earlier “Campus Climate” theme I discussed student’s individual orientations and the ways that their greater access opened up new doors. These opportunities have allowed some of today’s Black college students to engage in challenging individual pursuits without bearing the full burden of being “the first” or “the only one” in some cases. Some of the Black students today may be able to more fluidly move among diverse crowds (race/ethnicity, SES, sexual orientation, etc.), and craft unique experiences that set the bar for their peers and the underclassmen. As a student participant mentioned earlier, Smithsfield is a “Type A personality” school. Students are highly driven to set themselves apart, to overachieve, to be extensively engaged, and to attain outstanding results. Smithsfield is also keenly focused on pre-professional development. While the institution offers strong liberal arts opportunities, for many students those courses only supplement their primary focus, which is to become an investment banker, a lawyer, or a doctor. And

even for some of the students who take up urban studies, for example, and appear – through this major and their interests in education – to be on the road to a teaching position or fellowship, Smithsfield has a strong record for placing graduates in corporate consulting positions which can be a huge draw as a first job out of college.

This subtheme briefly revisits the ways that the institutionalized individualism of students and their pre-professional aspirations interacts with their thoughts on sociopolitical engagement and future possibilities toward that end, both while they are in school and beyond.

The following quote from a current student sets the tone:

“There are two beliefs that I see us on the fence of in terms of community. There’s one group of people that think that everyone needs to be unified, we all have to get along, five fingers one fist, everybody together, one community, and we have this solid Black identity, and we’re all like together in unity. But then the other group is everyone else at Smithsfield who’s Black and can kind of do their own thing, and do it well, and do what they want to do, and do what they like, and be successful, and then later come back and as a unified whole, bring back what they have and the resources and how good they are to community... And so, I guess, I fall into the second line that, honestly, if we’re all individually sound and successful then in some sense we’re becoming a stronger unit with the synergy versus us trying to somewhat conjure and fix a community of people with different interests and make it feel like they have to sacrifice their interests in order to be part of the community.”

Other student and alumni participants were unapologetic in their support of the second position described by the student above. They wanted to leverage the connections at Smithsfield and the numerous growth opportunities to build a strong personal foundation as quickly as possible. In many ways, this is what Smithsfield is built to do. The questions that remain to be explored are how does the future “give back” actually unfold for the individually driven student (i.e., does it actually happen and how impactful is it measurably for others), and can there exist an operational paradigm where one is focused on being

successful individually and being sociopolitically active simultaneously. This will be explored in depth in chapter five.

A Seat at the Table

Smithsfield's coalition politics revolved around elected student leaders representing different cultural groups. While other institutions have created multicultural centers, or one space dedicated to various traditionally underrepresented populations, Smithsfield has maintained distinct cultural spaces and programs, but has at times grouped them together for specific institutional purposes. The student coalition approach is one example. Cultural coalition leaders are gathered together periodically to meet with university administrators, including the university president, to discuss various issues and concerns. This model is paralleled in other spaces at Smithsfield; for example, alumni cultural groups are grouped together for meetings and events, as are faculty representatives and programs, and others.

For the coalition leaders and boards, this bundling created some strong personal connections and meaningful broader campus engagement opportunities, but also introduced some complicated political maneuvering and uncomfortable situations at times.

As one alumna recalled,

“Something that bothered me more than the tensions between White and Black students on campus were the tensions between and among minority groups. In my experience, there's always this kind of jockeying for position. Who needs more resources? Who is more deserving? Or, on the flipside, who's more exemplary? And it was difficult to move freely among those spaces.”

Others critiqued the function of the administrative meetings and the clustering of the minority groups together. The question that evolved was whether there was power, from the student perspective, in being clustered politically in this way, or whether this took

away from what specific cultural groups could accomplish or how they were viewed by the administration and the broader campus.

A current student said, "I found the multicultural meetings uncomfortable. It was a weird competition. Not that the other cultural groups are trying to bring you down, but it just wasn't as strong of a community as I wanted it to be. And some of my ideas did get shut down, and I'm like why are you doing this?" The student added,

"I wanted to get groups to do stuff out in the community, and connect the different groups together and throw collaborative events. We had all of these cool ideas. Then when you come in, you're starting from zero. And not only that, when you're presenting to these administrators, I didn't get the passion back. It was never reciprocated. When it's a one-way street, you're just hitting a wall. So a lot of us just ended up falling back. Doing small-scale things. I wouldn't say small-scale, but they definitely weren't fully in line with the larger vision."

Some students simply had no understanding about the inner workings of politics on Smithsfield's campus and only a vague sense that Black students engaged in this coalition work. Other students and alumni questioned the role of the institution in addressing issues directly. One alumnus recalled the following story:

"I remember the Black student who got harassed by the police and we mobilized and had the march. And I feel like the way that the administration handled it at the time, it was very non-confrontational and overly politically diplomatic and it didn't feel like anything tangibly came from it. I feel like the message that was sent was 'how can we kind of quell this.' The difficult thing about that is that it happens every so often so unless you're a staff member... because there's a four-year turnover for students, so... me having a historical context and being around people who knew these types of things had happened before it illuminated that this was a bigger problem than just this one incident. And I just felt like Smithsfield's response to it was just... it wasn't responsible. I remember they tried to make some committee or something like that to talk about these types of things but I don't think any of the cops were reprimanded or anything like that. To me, it seemed real surface level band-aid type of stuff."

The type of institutional memory that this participant refers to is the subject of the next sub-theme. More specifically, the next section provides participant data to better illuminate why the sharing of stories and cross-campus collaboration was *not* happening.

Fragmentation and Intergenerational Disconnect

As mentioned earlier, Smithsfield's approach to fostering cultural diversity on campus has been to create smaller, independent enclaves of various sorts, and allow them to essentially function on their own. From the numerous student groups to academic programs and departments to cultural centers to alumni programs to residential programs and more, different cultural groups on campus have numerous ways to reach students (and others) interested in their efforts. Additionally, students can elect to participate in the vast number of non-culturally specific opportunities such as academic departments, scholars programs, clubs and activities, internships, part-time employment, volunteer opportunities, and more. As discussed earlier, there is an extraordinary amount of things that compete for students' attention at Smithsfield.

Within the Black community, study participants provided a number of observations and insights regarding the ways that various levels of fragmentation between different Black communities impacted sociopolitical solidarity and the overall Black experience. As one recent alumnus said,

"I think that it's really more fragmented. You have a lot of folks with different aspirations who come from different backgrounds. The first wave of affirmative action that my parents went through - not just out of necessity but there's a certain urgency behind Black students and students of color coming to these institutions. There was a project behind it. This was about their liberation struggle. It wasn't just about gaining access to these institutions and gaining personal success. It was about changing the entire landscape of this country, the global landscape, especially the decolonial struggle that was happening just before. So I think that for me that's really the shift I've seen from a sense of collectivity to a sense of ... a sense of

individual aspiration that's still colored by our racial backgrounds, but it's construed as 'I'm a Black student who should aspire to this, you know, these high aspirations in order to prove my value to the race and to the wider populous' rather than a discussion about how do we shift these actual structures that are in place. So that was a struggle for me. It was a struggle to deal with this individual rhetoric that often comes about. And getting people to organize collectively against that sort of ethos."

A faculty member offered the following:

"I think now, because... across generations there's more fragmentation in the sense that people... I think the income levels of the Black students has gone up. I think class issues... I think they were always here, but among the faculty, I would say... there's still a pressure of proving individually that you can do stuff that undermines some Black solidarity. That you don't get rewarded for being a communal person. As a group, you get rewarded for individuality. And I think that's what happened for students also. Black students have embraced the sense of being on my own. But I think we also have more alienated Black students on campus now than we've had before. One because they don't have a communal group to go to in crisis or keep them steady along way. So even if you go to one now and ask for help you're really at crisis level. You know somebody almost has to force you to go, or recommend, or refer, rather than you knew exactly where to go back in the day. And I think there were spaces was a part of that support structure, but are not a center in the same way [now]."

The next comments from a recent alumna brings the generational fragmentation to campus, critiquing the limited presence of elders (who would likely be from the generation of the parents of the first alum quoted above) in student's individual and organizational lives:

"I don't think there was a lot of intergenerational leadership. I think with more organizations we would just be figuring shit out by ourselves... excuse me [for cursing]. But yeah, I really think it's that lack of mentorship for, or just adult intergenerational sponsorship with everything. I was in a few Black organizations... but there was never anyone documenting the long-term history of the groups. There was never anyone to say, 'we did this already, here's what worked, here's what didn't work.' So it felt like every year we were just kind of figuring things out on our own and there really wasn't that like nurturing of leadership. It was like, 'oh, y'all are at Smithsfield so y'all are leaders.' But a lot of times the organizations... like there was a lot of foolishness going on that could have easily been prevented by someone saying, 'okay, here, read this article on Black leadership and what it could look like' or 'here's this book Du Bois wrote about...' You know what I mean? Because we really thought that we were brilliant and were

having these new ideas, but it was like 'no, Du Bois already did that.' You know? 'Kwame Nkrumah already said that. That's not original. Go sit down.'"

The limited engagement and interaction between the various cultural spaces and programs on campus was also viewed as a critical challenge with no simple solution. As one participant stated,

"I don't necessarily see Black Cultural Studies as having the same reach with their programming. So they're having it but they're not connected with the other cultural spaces and efforts, connected with the pipeline of information that will get students and bodies in the seat. There were so many entities on campus to make sure that we were one body, one community. That doesn't really happen anymore. I think that had Black Cultural Studies been better supported at the faculty level then you would have greater faculty interest..."

Another administrator said, "I think that the administrator and faculty breakdown was significant. I don't think that there were real examples for the students to see." In this sense, one could reconstruct the theoretical "Black community" at Smithsfield as a mixture of siloed institutional offices, student groups, and other pseudo-affiliated entities. The "five fingers, one fist" metaphor that a student participant mentioned in an earlier theme thus becomes an unrealistic model, given what is happening on the ground. More accurately, there are many hands worth of fingers that serve the Black Smithsfield community in some way. From the participants' remarks, it seems rare that the majority these fingers are ever even in the same room together, and this arguably negatively impacts the community.

The direct limited engagement between Black faculty and Black students is perhaps the most damaging layer of fragmentation. As a faculty member said,

"I have several students who went to Black faculty to ask for help and they were told, 'I'm too busy. I don't have time for you.' And I think that can be very... that can be daunting. I know what that feels like. I was really hurt by that when I went to an African American faculty member at a different institution and I was told those exact words, 'I don't have time for you.' You can get that from any race but when you're African American and they're African American and you think they can help you and they don't – not that they have to, because it's complicated... I don't know. I just feel like, as

someone who grew up poor, and was first-generation college and all of those things, I just feel like I have an obligation.”

As will be discussed in the next section, this sense of obligation was central to each of the faculty and administrator participants in this study, but as the faculty member above mentioned, has been “complicated” to execute. The various added realities of being a Black faculty member and a Black student at Smithsfield substantially impeded what was physically possible for them to accomplish on a daily basis.

The Burdens of Black Folk

Faculty are attracted to institutions such as Smithfield for the same reasons as students: the prestige and location of the university, the opportunity to work alongside esteemed and highly driven colleagues, the chance to access the institution’s wealth of resources, the ability to grow as a scholar and shape the lives and careers of future scholars and professionals, among other considerations. For those Black and other faculty members keenly aware of and sensitive to issues of racial disparity and difference, a commitment is often made to make themselves available to students far above and beyond what is expected of them. As one faculty member remarked,

“I had always thought that a Black professor, should, on the one hand nurture students academically, but on the other hand, connect with them in various ways outside of the classroom. It was important for us to see them in their performances, or a fraternity function or something like that, doing their thing and for them to see me see them doing that. I had examples and mentors who reminded me that we owed the generation of students who fought for us to be here as faculty.”

Other faculty and administrative participants shared similar commitments, relishing the opportunity to aid students in need. As I explored this notion more deeply it became much clearer just how challenging this work was. Participants were often added to committees or working groups, or asked to step into other roles in addition to the primary

duty as a faculty member or administrator, as part of the institution's diversity efforts.

Participants also felt compelled to advise and mentor numerous students on the undergraduate and graduate level. And obviously the faculty featured still had to perform their jobs, producing the appropriate amount of writing to advance their academic careers, balancing their teaching loads, and conducting their research. The administrators had to fulfill their many varied functions as well. In some ways, but for different reasons, the "job" components of the faculty and administrators mirrored the academic lives of students. Black faculty and administrators' lives were filled with the numerous additional things (analogous to the students' activities and organizations), some of which were assigned to them by the institution (meetings, diversity working groups, etc.) and some of which they were compelled to do (student support and mentoring).

What makes these efforts that much more extraordinary, as participants shared, is that they are conducted daily under the weight of intense institutionalized racism.

Participants were well aware that their work was scrutinized in particular ways, or that they may be called to fight a racialized struggle at any moment. Students also felt the gaze but some struggled to articulate exactly what it was. As one recent alumna remarked, "I feel like when I was at Smithsfield I had to be 'on' all the time, like when I was in class... I don't even know how to describe the 'on' position... what you're saying, what you're doing, how you appear to other people. Being around other Black students kind of gives you a release from that."

Thus, their friendship networks, their spaces to gather, and their organizations became vital points to regroup, or to "touch base" as another alumna phrased it. But after speaking with the participants more in depth I grew to understand that even within the supportive environment of their organizations there were additional burdens placed upon

them as Black students. For example, Black Greek organizations had to answer to multiple administrative coordinators, sometimes across different campuses depending on the make-up of specific chapters. Further, because of the traditional importance of Black Greek organizations to the broader Black student life at campuses like Smithsfield, these groups played an even greater role in social planning and event coordination, despite have substantially fewer chapter members and resources than most White Greek organizations.

Similar to the faculty and administrators, some Black students were called upon to be on diversity committees, to appear on panels and in photos, and to offer comments on various campus and national events. Again, this was not specific to Black students, but for the Black students, one could argue that because there were fewer of them, there was less of an opportunity to distribute these additional responsibilities across the group. Further, as with the number of student groups one could participate in or the amount of committees and additional students a faculty member could commit to mentor, there was no sort of metric regarding how many “extra things” was too many. It was up to the student to attempt to self-manage. But again, for a student who has been constantly told that they are the best, that they can do anything they put their minds to, it is often difficult to say “no.” In some cases, such as with institutional diversity efforts, students were essentially obligated to participate. Either it was mandated by their position or they felt a deep personal or group accountability; if they were not there, Black people at large would have no voice.

Finally, it is important to underscore that Black students and Black faculty and administrators’ daily lives at Smithsfield were impacted by institutional racism, that, in the post-racial moment, they often could not outwardly acknowledge, and thus were left to inwardly process. Regarding this, specifically in the student context, a faculty member said the following:

“What amazes me is their awareness of how the rest of the world will see them if they complain about a racial incident. So it’s almost like they’ve been socialized to realize that despite the discrimination it’s worse looking like a Black person who complains. The stereotype is you don’t want to be *that* Black person. And it’s more than the angry Black person, it’s the complaining Black person. And what people are doing is they are not getting help. So instead of other students who pay all this money per course, they don’t see themselves as consumers because they’re worried that it’s going to affect their future. So it’s almost like, ‘I’ll take this heat now,’ but they take a mental health cost, they take an academic cost, in some hope and pray strategy that when I want to go for the next level I won’t be seen as one of those Black people...

Even if you graduate from here and haven’t had to challenge the notions of Black inferiority, it follows you for the rest of your life... to your career, to your own children and how you teach them how to see the world differently and how to not be quiet when the world is treating them differently. You don’t get away from it.”

The Illusion of Progress

As stated previously, there is no doubt that the increased access of Black students, faculty, and administrators to Smithsfield and places like it has produced tremendous benefit for Blacks, the nation, and the world. Smithsfield’s Black students, graduates, and faculty have been able to represent human achievement on multiple levels, and produce tangible changes that have impacted communities and ideas globally. That stated, there are still monumental concerns regarding the experiences of Blacks at Smithsfield today and the institution’s role in shaping not only what happens to Blacks while they are on campus, but how global Black communities will be influenced by what does or does not take place at Smithsfield.

One recent alumnus offered the following for consideration:

“I think one of the biggest challenges facing Black students today is what it means when these sites of struggle, or like spaces that Black students fought for become institutionalized and then appropriated by the university at large. Some of the former student-created programs have become part of a larger system, out of student’s control. Others spaces are becoming part of the prevailing university structure. I wonder how those spaces will continue

to be forged. We need to think beyond simply the presence of these spaces but also about what are we doing with them and what sort of conversations are they spurring, and where do we take those conversations. Because, once the university has dominion over these spaces are we able to use them toward the same radical or progressive ends that we once did? So for me, that's really the challenge that I faced and students in the future will face."

For many, "progress" in the supposed post-racial moment is measured by how much race can be removed from the conversation, hence the subtle transition of cultural spaces, as the alumnus above alluded to, or the institutional emphasis on meritocracy, peppered with occasional rhetoric about a diversity that has no clear institutional commitment and likely, from the institution's standpoint, leads back to emphasizing sameness rather than genuinely embracing and building around difference. The idea is appealing. It would make things much easier for White folks if things could work this way. But, as the participants have consistently demonstrated in their remarks, this prevalent "post-racial progress" that is assumed at Smithsfield is simply not real.

On the ground Black alumni have reviewed students' present struggles and described the same battles ten and twenty years prior. In classrooms and committee meetings, faculty described the blatant and subversive institutional racism that they've witnessed and experienced. Students have felt it on the other side, combating a sense of "otherness," disconnect, or neglect. Structurally, some have recognized, as one faculty member noted, "there's an institutional power that prevents people of color from moving up into higher administration." Black spaces and programs have been transitioning into less politically engaged and student-driven sites, and are instead propagating institutionally-controlled agendas. Black Cultural Studies is still questioned about its rigor and function. More broadly, in the shadow of current affirmative action critiques, any and all "cultural" (read: non-White, non-hetero) entities and initiatives are up for constant public debate.

Yes, there has been progress. But what kind of progress, and who gets to define it? What could be happening that is not? And why?

A faculty member stated the following regarding the experiences of Blacks at Smithsfield today: "... people think they're at the beach when they're really at the desert. But, you know, they're bringing beach equipment... swimsuits and pails and beach balls. It just feels convincing. People today have this privilege. Not just in money, and class. But privilege in blindness."

And thus, the illusion continues.

Social Justice

In this final theme I explore focus group and interview data centered around notions of social justice. For the participants included in this study, the idea of students actively advocating for the access and equity opportunities of others was complicated. As will be discussed, the central conflict revolved around the perceived social class differences and ensuing commitment levels of Smithsfield students. Digging beneath the surface, however, some of the participants shared intriguing personal experiences that pushed the conversation further. These respondents revealed an emerging community of students and alumni who had committed significant time and energy to social justice causes, and who had much to say about where Smithsfield should head in this regard in the future.

Race and Class

"If you're affluent and African American, you may care about what happens in the wider Black community but you may have been raised not to care, just like a lot of other affluent people. I would hope that you wouldn't, because you realize that most of people in the community who are poor have the same skin color as you but sometimes people don't care. I know people who

don't care. I know White people who just close their eyes when they drive through those areas and I know Black people who do the same thing."

The above statement from a current faculty member is representative of the responses given during this study, supporting previous quotes from earlier themes. By and large, participants thought that among the roughly 700 Black Smithsfield undergraduate students at any given time during the last decade, a good percentage (well over half) were likely coming from a significant amount of money and/or a "moneyed" experience (i.e., attending a prestigious high school, even if via scholarship) and were thus somehow removed, at least partially, from "the struggle." As another administrator said,

"... there is still much to fight for and generally people are pacified. A wealthy black student who was not raised to be concerned with urban strife is not concerned about the resources available to their peers from urban areas that might not be prepared for the college experience... Injustice anywhere is only injustice everywhere if it inconveniences enough people. Many times it gets swept under the rug or even worse, accepted as 'the culture of the institution.'"

A recent alumnus added, "because we have access to the wider university, there's a sense that it's an anachronistic struggle to talk about Black politics especially on an elite campus like this."

The limited conversation about social justice and Black politics led some to believe that Black students and the broader institution held particular problematic beliefs about Blackness, specifically as it related to Black services and facilities staff on the Smithsfield campus who were daily examples of the broader Black working class community.

Another faculty member offered these thoughts:

"To be honest, some of us buy into the notion of they [Black security guards and facilities staff] are where they are because of some... belittling of their life, as opposed to seeing them as 'this is my cousin, this is me, this is where I grew up.' So there's really no boundary to be crossed in that sense. It's the boundary that I erect that's the problem. That's what you get from being at

Smithsfield. You learn how to be elitist. And the question is how do you unlearn that in some other way?"

In a number of conversations during this study the idea of "elitism" came up. In one group discussion, a current student stated that she was in fact *elite* because she had risen to the challenge of "working her ass off" to get to Smithsfield, but she would never be *elitist*, "because the reason that I'm here is to put my people first, and use this opportunity to help them." A recent alumnus echoed this point in the following revealing reflection from his interview:

"I was in one of the main campus cafés on my way to class. It was packed! And I just happened to notice that I was the only Black person and I'm like okay, you know, it is what it is. But then I looked back behind the counters and there were all Black people working. You know? And then of course the supervisor comes out and starts screaming on someone and it was like the only White dude on the staff. So the juxtaposition was crazy. I'm the only patron of the establishment who looks like all the work force. And they're not being treated fairly. And all of a sudden I get... it was like my freshman year and I was grappling with a lot of identity stuff like we all were. So it was just a lot. It ended up being the only time that I skipped a class at Smithsfield, because I got so frustrated. I put my food down, didn't checkout, didn't eat. I went back to my room and sort of like... I was really distraught. I just started thinking like there's all these Black people and it is good that they have jobs but what can be done to make sure that they are taken care of....

We can choose to engage, in that it's something you're sort of hardwired to do, reflective of the values you grew up with. It's not like, you know, the entire Black population at Smithsfield is going to stand up and recognize their solidarity with Black people who work at the school. But for me, I mean, I look across the counter and I see somebody who I went to church with. You know, my play aunty, or a cousin, you know... I don't really put up barriers like that to think that just because my home might look different... or, maybe, the job one of my parents had. It's just like Black folks are Black folks. You have to understand the racial constructs and all that good stuff, and how they operate. We're all kind of in this together. I feel like... even before Smithsfield I'd see brothers who the cards are really stacked up against them from day one. And I always felt that it was kind of luck being born in the situation that I was. So, it was never really a question of are these my people or not. That's not even a thing."

In the words of this alumnus we find a multilayered application of Du Bois's double consciousness. The alumnus, as a student, sees himself both as a customer of the café (and of the institution) and someone with familial-like links to the most visibly marginalized group (marginalized both in the specific employment context and in the broader scope of disparities in the region and nation). While in this example, he was the only one in the room who could express such a duality and was conscious of it, he was by far not the only one among the participants who had similar observations, and who sought to do something further.

Critical Mass

Earlier I discussed the notion of “critical mass” as it related to the numbers (or lack of) Black students actively engaged in campus sociopolitical efforts, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s. In revisiting the phrase in this section, I am putting a different inflection on the words. Rather than numbers of people, I instead in this section want to highlight the ways that the masses at Smithsfield – the undergraduate students – have displayed a critical consciousness regarding the social justice issues around them, similar to the examples from the previous section.

In their critical analyses, participants shed light on the numerous challenges still facing the campus and the nation. They were also expressively critical of the institutionalized complacency and neglect they experienced at Smithsfield, as well as damaging racialized perspectives that they felt guided conversations and actions on campus and beyond. For example, from a faculty participant, one of the most significant challenges to overcome included the following:

“It’s the way that we think about things that are predominantly Black that are politically problematic, spiritually problematic, and intellectually

problematic because people don't imagine that somehow we can do great things at a predominantly Black place. That's a history of academic institutions and that's also an American history that people just don't want to give up on. And what it leads them to psychologically is to not even go down that road. They don't even posit or question could we do something."

This underlying mindset, more often not stated explicitly but present in the ways that programs, interventions, and situations were oriented, guided the ways that participants viewed some of Smithsfield's community interests. For example, as one administrator noted, "a lot of Smithsfield students are trying to mentor somebody at a local school. I think that's all well and good. But it would be nice if it could be in a more engaging and richer way." This administrator went on to talk about the institutional public statements about diversity and the fact that many, but certainly not all of the community service volunteers were not Black, simply by the very make up of the institution. Fundamentally, he thought that the bigger challenge was in the way that the service was framed. In his view, it was not created to build institutions for the community, but rather for the Smithsfield institution to further its own agenda. "Students," he said, "want to interview somebody [in a neighborhood school or community], do this paper, get your grades, and then you're out. And then that person [the community member] is still there, and another student comes in."

Student participants involved in service efforts shared these frustrations. Many wanted to figure out ways to do more, and some took it upon themselves to either add personal responsibilities, propose alternative community-building models, or launch new endeavors. In their work, in addition to their own personal development and critical consciousness-raising, they saw strategic and structural possibilities for change. As one alumnus noted,

"You have a lot more students especially at a pre-professional school who are sort of looking for transactional education experiences so they show up

if their grades, if the degrees, if you get the job after. So whatever your academic discipline, whether you're a liberal arts or a business kid, taking a closer look at how to invest in the community that you're a part of. The values that you're going to carry with you in your career, you know, you're going to be the corporate executive who's going to spend their weekends in a Boys and Girl's Club if you did a meaningful community outreach project when you were in college. So I think that there's a strong case to be made for the importance of programs like that across the board in educating the volunteers, let alone the kids they are serving."

Another alumnus who was not involved in institutionalized service efforts but who had instead gathered with a small group of Black Smithsfield students and on their own initiated an ongoing weekly tutoring and mentoring program at an area high school said,

"It's interesting in how serving a population that reflects yourself can benefit you. That's very interesting. That's not the American way. It's usually let me get mine... picket fence, 2.5 kids, certain other things that indicate stature and power. To ask me about my community education work at Smithsfield all of those years ago, I never thought about how that served as a rudder to where you could go. I'm interested to see how participating in something like that could cause people to change careers or do something else, and what are they doing now, 10 years later?"

Both of these alums had spent the bulk of their professional careers after Smithsfield in community-building and educational occupations, largely framed by their personal and community experiences at Smithsfield. Each has risen to high-level positions in the education and nonprofit sectors, likely aided by the Smithsfield brand, but also certainly due to their passions for this work and their experiences while at Smithsfield.

For these two alumni, and for many of the other participants in this study, their critical engagement with the opportunities presented to them and with the various social justice concerns that they had identified prior to, during, and after their time at Smithsfield, open the doors for them to consider other Black realities. Much of this critical consciousness was developed in accord with CRT's emphasis on historical grounding and the centrality of story-telling. As one administrator noted,

“I believe that there is value in learning personal histories and learning how you fit into other spaces and learning the context of the space that you’re in. Black solidarity specifically, I would say no [that it is tangible]. And I would I say... one of the reasons I would say that is because in many cases it’s an imagined thing. It didn’t exist. It’s a myth. I would rather have students be instructed in actual events, circumstances of the events, players of the events, and using the terms to allow them to see where they fit into a space.

A recent alumna talked about the power of “celebrating and sharing individual stories that reflect a collective.” A faculty member added, “If you give people a chance to tell their stories, healing happens in a way where you don’t need a lot of special effects or a lot of money. Black women and Black men don’t get enough time to tell their stories, so there’s power if I create a space for them to do that.”

How these spaces could look, and to what end they might produce increased Black student sociopolitical engagement and solidarity were debatable. As mentioned, some participants did not see the applicability or accessibility of a rigid notion of Black solidarity. Others noted that while it was a novel concept, it did not translate well in the twenty-first century, at least as they understood it more closely aligned with the ways that it was practiced in the 1960s and 1970s. One faculty participant recommended Black feminism as a more viable model, given its “true interest in the social welfare of children and women on equal playing fields as men. And it’s different than racial solidarity in that sense, as practiced and theorized.” Others felt that it was imperative for Blacks to do “as every other successful group has done,” as one alumna articulated. She later added,

“I think people for some reason get afraid. I don’t know what the hell they think, like we’re going to collectively get together and then somehow realize the horrors of slavery and just like... [Laughs]... retroactively rebel against the country. It doesn’t even have to like... there’s this like anger and hatred that people like to associate with Black people organizing, and it really doesn’t even have to be all that. Because it really is any other group that has some sort of collective identity whether its teachers or gay folks or Jewish people... there’s always this thing that’s says, hey look, for all intents and purposes you may be whatever you may be but when it comes to this matter that we all share, we all want to have a say in how it goes. So I think there

absolutely is something to be said especially when you look at the numbers and you look at the statistics and you see the things that are ailing Black people as a collective that aren't getting better. So I think that should be a space where we say listen, until we start to see a reverse in these trends or some numbers shift then we need to have an agenda that addresses why the hell we keep running up against these things and how we're going to do something different."

The next section describes what was the consensus for that "something different" for many of the participants: education.

An Education Agenda

As mentioned throughout this paper, participants in this study identified education as a primary area of personal interest and responsibility, in their Smithsfield careers and for some, well beyond. Perhaps most interestingly, participants seemed to read beyond the achievement gap discourse in expressing their commitment to education. They were not as interested in standardized test scores and rote curricula as they were in youth and community empowerment, increasing access to life-changing opportunities, holistic developmental models, and shifting the explicit and implicit cultural deficit narratives that they felt had shaped, to a large degree, the present realities of young people.

Smithsfield, institutionally, often did not present the types of true community-based solutions that the participants in this study felt were necessary. Nevertheless, they took advantage of what was available to them, and in some cases created their own outreach interventions. Some attempted to rekindle community service components of a Black student organization while others developed their own programs or created their own individualized space to get involved with a school or site. In launching these efforts, students ran into the same challenges as those previously mentioned in the student activities conversation. Time and resources were limited, particularly for this work that was

popular within a certain community at Smithsfield but not fully embraced by the wider circle, at least not to the level of rich, continuous engagement. From these experiences, students and faculty members who also had undertaken their own community-based projects had thoughts for how they felt Smithsfield and/or its Black community could proceed in the future, regarding enhancing current opportunities at Smithsfield and creating new ones.

One faculty member said,

“I think it should come the bottom up more so than that the top down, and that’s because... stuff like student-driven community outreach programs, to me... it says if you create something and you put yourself in it, then you’re more likely to bear the fruit of it. Which is what school is supposed to do, rather than somebody coming in to tell you. If you created something and in that there’s some mental health benefits of empowerment that I think starts from the grassroots that could filter into your education in a way that a program from the top down, where nobody’s willing to say race or class, they just say diversity, its sort of a sham in a way. So, I guess the... I think the answer would still be at the level of the student. I don’t trust the institution to put itself at risk at the level that students need to question their education. They’re going to catch hell for questioning their education... which is a miseducation. But it would help their mental health to say, ‘yeah, I want to write about the elephant in the room. I don’t want to just study elephants. I want to critique the elephant.’”

A recent alumnus offered these thoughts:

“It was really the small acts, the, you know, meetings, the conversations I had with individual middle school students who I then saw go from struggling and, you know, hating our youth program to loving it and finding comfort and solace in it. For me, I think that’s how at least how I’ve changed personally in my view of what politics are because I think that’s what gives me hope that there’s a space for political engagement in these PWIs that were not crafted for any sort of social justice agenda.”

An administrator, in highlighting the urgency of the present situation, said,

“Think about it... Smithsfield is in a community where there’s poverty everywhere. The people here are starving. People not getting great healthcare. If it continues to get bad economically... my contention is that people are not going to starve if other people around them are eating.... As an institution, and as students, it’s important to look beyond some of the

surface programs. Like how can you help people get jobs? What about the schools in the area that aren't doing well. They are right around the corner."

There were other issues besides education that captured the Black community at Smithsfield's attention on the ground. They included racial profiling, immigration concerns, Black male initiatives, faculty diversity, facilities issues, and more. Interestingly, often these concerns were still placed in the context of education and community-building. For example, students talked about losing the ability to define and own spaces on campus because it would negatively impact the opportunities they had to do youth programming. Students also understood that in connecting with young people and the community, they were actively reshaping the hegemonic ideals of the institution, and broadening the possibilities for more "horizontal" justice as one administrator said.

Regarding this, and what he envisioned in the future, a recent alumnus said,

"The kind of talented tenth model is flawed. We can't simply bring the rest of our people up behind us, but rather we need to identify the particular individuals that we can link to in this broader fight to not just transform the institution and its structure under White supremacy... So I think that's really, for me, how I imagine a potential movement arising is through the alliance between distinct segments of the Black community of which Black college students and academics are just one."

A current student added:

"You may be Latino and care about Black issues, then, you know, we should value that... that voice. So I think it means being open to anyone who's willing to acknowledge and recognize Black issues and then... genuinely supporting those who want to help its growth, or challenging the issues so that the community, the Black community, can grow."

Another student said, "I really feel like if there's a critical mass of students interested in any sort of thing linked to social justice, then they truly have the power to take existing spaces and make them into a space for their ideas."

And finally, another recently alumnus said simply,

“...I do think there needs to be a strong responsibility, regardless of race but also specific to race. If not us, then who? If it's not us in these positions to create these programs and opportunities to bring people up and into these privileged environments so-to-speak... if it's not us then who?”

Summary: Crossroads

“Smithsfield has to decide if they are committed to affirmative action or if they're committed to diversity, because I feel like those are two different things. Affirmative action I feel like is supposed to be restorative for Africans who were brought here as slaves and then their descendents, you know, we all know the story. If it's supposed to be restorative then why is affirmative action today just aimed to have a number that's reflective of the [Black U.S.] population? I feel like accepting 13% of the Black people [to be representative], that's not doing the work that it needs to to restore everything that happened before we were allowed to get into predominantly white institutions. That's not enough. Because I feel like if we're going to restore all the injustices that were done, it should be way more than 13% in every institution. Because Black people... this country was built, I feel like, on Black people's backs. When are Black people going to get the justice that they deserve? If education is supposed to be the gateway to all of the access and all the opportunities that this country is supposed to have then why are we only accepting the Black people that we see today? Why aren't we accepting the numbers of Black people today, and their fathers, and their grandfathers, and their great grandfathers who didn't have access to college at all?”

“When you look at the much larger conversation, what's more important than letting more Black people into the few and the best institutions, there needs to be more spaces like Smithsfield. As opposed to just letting more Black people into the PWIs and further perpetuating the idea that the only way to receive proper education is through the hands of White people, why don't we value HBCUs more? I can't remember the last time we had a conversation about why there's such a disparity between the elite White schools and the Howards and Morehouse. There should just be more schools where I feel like I can go and feel liberated in some way or form. I can take that and move forward and advance the mission of me and my people. There are very few spaces for that. Instead of just trying to clog those spaces and try to make up for past situations we need to kind of stop trying to build success now on the backs of White people. And let's take it back to ourselves and be able to build it that way.”

Above we have two differing views from two student participants on questions that largely go unasked, and are thus unexplored on most days in American higher educational institutions. What is clear is that these students are in solidarity on one thing – there is

work to be done. Their different perspectives on how to approach the present challenges demonstrates that, when asked, today's students have extremely thoughtful ideas based not only upon their personal experiences but also the various philosophies and histories that they have been exposed to.

Today we stand at several crossroads. Blacks must negotiate a progressive and nurturing racial identity in the faces of post-racial discourse and systematic racism. Institutions like Smithsfield must continue to remain "elite" while also somehow being inclusive in an evolving national and global sociopolitical climate. Black scholars must "publish or perish," knowing that the youth – those on their campuses and those in various urban communities throughout the country – need them, and people like them, now perhaps more than ever. Black students must grapple with building a future that will seize the numerous opportunities afforded to them while creating new legacies built upon the many shoulders on which they stand.

The most significant crossroad of all is to recognize the crossroads, rather than continue uncritically on our present paths. In the final chapter I present structured analyses based upon this study's guiding questions and theoretical frameworks to discuss how Smithsfield's Black students and alumni have begun developing their own pathways, and how the institution can further its mission and profile by listening to what its Black stakeholders have to say.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study I have explored the experiences and perceptions of Black students, alumni, faculty, and administrators at one selective predominantly White institution on the east coast, looking specifically at how those experiences, guided by the culture of the institution, have shaped students' sociopolitical engagement and notions of Black solidarity. Informed by an array of literature covering shifts in the construction of Blackness, pragmatic social justice frameworks, student engagement theories, social movement literature, and critical race theory, I have presented a number of themes to help better understand this one example of how Black sociopolitical engagement is currently being shaped.

The bulk of this chapter explicitly puts students' experiences and perceptions in conversation with the theories and literature reviewed, to present a final analysis of Black student sociopolitical engagement. The chapter ends with a set of student- and community-centered recommendations, constructed through a critical race lens that will ideally push institutions to think more seriously about how they employ their diversity initiatives to address some of the most pressing national concerns of our time.

Discussion

Three primary questions were at the center of this study: *How has Black students' sense of activism evolved from the post-Civil Rights era to the present day? How do Black students engage social and political issues that have historically and contemporarily impacted them on campus? How do the practices, policies, and culture of predominantly White postsecondary institutions shape Black sociopolitical solidarity?* In the pages to follow,

answers to each question will be outlined, using the literature from chapter two and the findings in chapter four.

The Evolution of Black Activism

In this section I summarize the ways that Black student activism has been perceived by Smithsfield students, alumni, faculty, and administrators. This analysis covers the last two decades, with a particular emphasis on the more recent moment. Social movement theory serves as the primary analytical tool.

From a social movement theory perspective, the “militant” Black student activism experienced at Smithsfield has been co-opted by the institution. The Black Power movement on campus ended; the exact time frame is debatable. Some suggested a fairly quick death, in the mid-1970s, when nationalistic activities gave way to more campus-centered concerns (e.g., completing coursework, fostering an active extracurricular life on campus, attaining quality employment after graduation). For others, the co-opting was a slower process, extending into the ‘90s until the last examples of consistent Black protest faded. The view on this largely depended on the context of the participant. Most of the students and younger alumni had only a passing sense of the institution’s twentieth-century history and thus focused mostly on the present conditions. Faculty, administrators, and the literature provided a wider lens. In general, the participants across all the groups were in agreement, and were supported by the literature (institutional and broader), that the movement had ended via co-option.

As mentioned in chapter four, protests continued to occur sporadically in the 2000s, but they were often more symbolic than substantive, and not viewed as an essential tool to produce change. Black Smithsfield students, by and large, did not view themselves or their

peers as “student activists” or “Black activists,” nor did they, for the most part, associate strongly with any organized or informal activist efforts outside of the campus. There were a handful of exceptions; some participants either had or were seeking to engage in a more radical style of politics and social activism, but they recognized that this deviated from the typical Black student profile today.

Over the past two decades there have been instances of local and national/international protest, but not a salient and sustained protest culture, particularly not around Black-specific issues. Most recently on a national scope there have been anti-war demonstrations and Occupy movements, originating from the Occupy Wall Street campaign. Participants in this study did not discuss any active engagement in these or other efforts. This is not to imply that there was no interest in or even a certain degree of support for such causes, but as was mentioned in chapter four, the internet has fundamentally changed the ways that students and others can engage.

The institutional co-opting of student protest and the dismantling of student activism was certainly not driven by this move to internet communications, however. As participants mentioned throughout the previous chapter, four other primary factors played a much larger role. First were the intentional actions of institutional authorities to create controlled environments for students to express their grievances. The continued emphasis on this being the acceptable means for constructive debate on campus, combined with the relative nonexistence of any tangible campus-based or broader protest culture has suppressed such activity, except on rare occasions. Student leaders and other students often do not see protest as viable strategy. Part of this is out of fear, and part is a marginal commitment (by themselves and/or others who could potentially support them). Fundamentally, today’s campus culture would view any sort of rally or protest as “fringe.”

Instead, student leaders know that they will have scheduled administrative meetings annually and they wait until those appointed times to present their concerns. Individual students or groups may also voice grievances in the campus newspaper to create public awareness, but not necessarily to present any sort of list of demands or call students to mobilized action.

Secondly, the institution benefits, in multiple ways, from the various academic, cultural, and social spaces that have been created either by the university or by students/groups. Students are often so active moving between various sites and opportunities on campus, and the many campus-based entities are so busy executing their individual agendas, that rarely are there opportunities for meaningful collaboration. In this sense, the fragmentation across campus, coupled with the built-in turnover of students every four years, makes it extremely difficult for communities to truly organize and leverage their full range of possibilities.

The final two points are very much connected. First, participants indicated – and historical documents have supported – that students entering Smithsfield today are among the nation’s most educationally prepared. Many of them have not grown up knowing the depths of “struggle” as previous generations, but have instead benefitted from attending some of the best preparatory schools. As such, not only do they have very different backgrounds than compared to many of the students who entered predominantly White institutions in the late 1960s, but they also have much less to be upset about. Black students today are not angry because they do not have to be angry to survive. For the most part, there are few, if any, opportunities not available to them.

That said, the final factor is the extremely demanding academic experience at Smithfield. As discussed, students still tended to prioritize activities over academics. This

may or may not be a conscious decision on their part, but often could be measured by the amount of hours devoted to each. When students did address their schoolwork, they had to do so intensively in order to remain competitive. Students understand very early on that accessing a top-level job or graduate/professional school is much like the competitive process they undertook to gain entry to Smithsfield, and thus they recognize the importance of getting their acts together when it counts.

All of these student-based factors combined with the reduced emphasis on broader national racialized concerns have produced mostly peaceful results on campus. Further, the majority of the Black Smithsfield community – undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, professional staff, administrative staff, services staff, and others – can enter and leave the institution and never develop a sense of the institutional history, particularly as it relates to the Black experience. For the students, this is certainly evident. There are very few opportunities for them to hear the stories of exclusion, and the stories of excelling in the face of exclusion. Thus, while Blacks at Smithsfield have a general sense, because of the history of America, that there was a point when the campus was significantly more racially oppressive, they do not truly understand that history nor the Black activism that took place.

In the co-option and decline of the more militant and mobilized Black student activist movement at Smithsfield there were numerous trade-offs. The Black community on campus gained resources (space, academic programs) and presence (additional students and faculty) but lost its ability to politically organize and develop an autonomous agenda. As such, the institutionalized resources gained are perhaps more tenuous than they appear and are susceptible to institutional agenda shifts (budgetary concerns, changes in academic and/or facilities priorities), national conversations (affirmative action, meritocracy, and post-raciality), and the institution's natural lean toward conservatism. It is difficult to

predict whether the Black Smithsfield community can and would mobilize in response to critical institutional change. Given the limited political engagement of Black students specifically around campus-based political issues, and the structural fragmentation, it is likely that institutional change could take place and the Black community would not even be aware.

Continued Social and Political Engagement on Campus

The above section looked at the ways that today's Black community at Smithsfield conceptualized contemporary campus activism in the tradition of the former Black student movement, and how social movement theory can be applied to the evolution of campus-based efforts over the past two decades. In this section I look at the sociopolitical activities that students are presently engaged in, and discuss some of the ways that they are creating spaces for activist-like work. Student engagement theories and pragmatic Black nationalism help to frame this analysis.

Despite the co-option of the student movement at Smithsfield and the relative calm within the Black community (even as students still experienced racism and social injustice on and off campus), the majority of the participants from each group – faculty, administrator, alumni, and student – indicated that there were concerns facing the Black community at large, and on campus, that were of prime importance to them. Educational access, particularly focused on the many challenges within today's urban public schools, was among the most widely mentioned issue. Many of the participants were presently or had been engaged in work directly connected to this. It is important to note that given the diversity of Blackness at Smithsfield today, the Black students and alumni undertaking these efforts came from the full range of ethnic, economic, religious, and sexual-preference

backgrounds. Students and alumni participants who mentioned familial roots in the Caribbean or an African country were vitally concerned about under-resourced urban communities and schools in the United States, as well as positively impacting conditions back home and in other parts of the globe. It is also important to point out that many of the participants mentioned diverse networks of peers (at Smithsfield and/or in working as professional educators, researchers, and youth advocates at other sites) outside of the scope of this study who were also heavily involved in education and community-building work, demonstrating its vast reach on campus and beyond. So while the more demonstrative Black campus movement was no longer relevant, the continued marginalization of the Black communities near Smithsfield's campus and the heightened national and international awareness around educational disparities plaguing Black youth created numerous points of entry for both Smithsfield as an institution and Black students through Smithsfield's or their own personal efforts.

As discussed previously, a significant portion of the work toward this end, particularly in the way that it is framed at Smithsfield, falls under the student activities realm, and thus was not viewed as activism by many of the participants. Further, because much of the community-focused work was being facilitated directly through Smithsfield institutionally, it was not necessarily situated as social justice work. Instead it was "community service" or "community outreach." Community outreach certainly is informed by the goals of social justice, but in Smithsfield's sense, it is tempered by the needs of the institution, with the primary interests of Smithsfield and its students in mind. Thus, the institutional objectives overshadow the larger underlying elements of social change and political awareness.

Students naturally, to no fault of their own, view their participation in, at most, a four-year span. Some may jump between different student groups across their four years, taking on various roles along the way. From an institutional perspective and student engagement lens, these activities are most meaningful when they are connected directly to the campus and when students have a well-articulated sense of purpose and set of expectations in the activity (versus just being on the membership list and not engaged), along with a balanced overall schedule that includes sufficient time for academics and other campus integration efforts. It is therefore not in the best interest of the institution or the future graduates of the institution to devote a disproportionately heavy amount of time to sociopolitical causes that do not link directly back to the institution in some structured way. This is just as true in the example of finding the next Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg as it is for the next Black educational innovator or global activist. The time spent on writing computer code and business plans outside of class, or leading public school walkouts or Black history seminars at community centers, takes the Smithsfield student further away from graduation, and is thus not in the best immediate interests of the institution.

Viewed through Shelby's notion of pragmatic Black nationalism, the fundamental questions would revolve around the needs of the community and would operate with the understanding that multilayered, structured supports would be required, rather than student commitment for a semester or two. A number of participants have dedicated five, ten, and even more years to this type of work, many beginning during their first year at Smithsfield. They have largely constructed their own pathways, however, sometimes leveraging Smithsfield's opportunities along the way but typically functioning independently, as there has not been a specific pragmatic Black nationalistic program for them to follow.

Outside of K-12 educational concerns, participants mentioned other issues such as health disparities and community-based healthcare, public policy, higher education, Diasporic development, juvenile justice, and more. Again, participants were largely engaging these issues on their own, doing what they could when they could with the resources that they had available to them. Many did not see Smithsfield as an ally in these efforts. It was not that they felt Smithsfield would be opposed, but rather that as an institution, it was not particularly concerned about strategic Black community development.

Predominantly White Institutional Culture and Black Solidarity

The final research question focused on exploring the ways that the culture, policies, and practices of a predominantly White institution shaped Black student sociopolitical solidarity. As described above, the multiple policy and practice layers effectively eliminated Black protest culture and preemptively shaped students' experiences related to the institutionally-operated urban education work. This section highlights other ways that the institutional culture helps define the parameters for Black student sociopolitical solidarity.

In addition to framing the way that student disapproval is expressed on campus (through institutional meetings with administrators) and structuring many of the community engagement projects, Smithsfield has also successfully created (or has encouraged and/or allowed its students to create) a hyperactive student activities culture built upon multiple forms of student leadership and events programming. In many ways this reality is understandable. Today's Smithsfield students are among the most talented in the country and have been prepared – through a series of high school extracurricular activities, challenging courses, internships, travel experiences, and more – to compete in a

highly intense environment such as Smithsfield. “Compete” is the operative term; for students who have come to Smithsfield from the top of their high school classes, from the best schools, with the strongest recommendation letters, there is the constant question of “what’s next?” As such, students at Smithsfield will get involved in high profile activities, or pursue leadership and board positions, or create their own organizations to distinguish themselves in the student life community. Academically they will pursue multiple majors and minors, compete for prestigious fellowships, present their work at conferences, and prepare for top-ranked graduate and professional programs.

Obviously, these are not negatives. Through Black student participation in this level of personal branding and campus engagement, the entire Smithsfield community gets the opportunity to re-imagine what Black students are capable of achieving, as opposed to the traditional stereotypes of Black underachievement and/or disengagement. These students may or may not directly connect with the Black community in the interactive ways described in chapter four, but can still symbolically represent Black success, particularly in wider channels (e.g., Smithsfield alumni periodicals, other promotional brochures circulated throughout and beyond campus) where color stands out prominently.

Black solidarity on campus is primarily facilitated through the student activities culture. This is both what the institution supports and what the students gravitate toward. Within these groups students foster some degree of affinity toward the institution, with other groups, and with other students who participate and support the groups. The groups also help students develop the leadership and management skills that they may not get in the classroom, but will benefit them in their future careers. As mentioned in the literature review, the initiative taken by Black students beginning as early as the 1960s and ‘70s to create Black-specific organizations on campus provided students with opportunities that

would not have otherwise been afforded, due to the exclusion of Blacks from mainstream groups as well as the mainstream groups' possible limited relevance to Black student and community concerns. While more Black students are participating in the full range of campus organizations, and a number of multicultural groups and programs have developed in recent years, Black student groups at Smithsfield are still the backbone of the Black community, and this is largely supported by the institutional culture.

Within the core Black community, as discussed in chapter four, there are often tolls paid, both by individuals and by student groups. These tolls, similarly experienced by overburdened faculty and staff, wear down on individuals who overextend themselves, or who – through the desires of the institution – are called upon to represent people of color at any number of events, committees, working groups, etc., and subsequently are pressed to find sufficient time to conduct their work. From the institutional perspective, there may either be a lack of knowledge about these phenomena, or perhaps a lack of genuine concern. In many ways, for both the students and faculty/staff, the situation can be framed as a matter of choice. While structurally the deck is stacked (faculty, staff, and students are typically somewhat aware of the additional burdens, but likely not the full personal impact), many of them also tend to have a commitment to the community so they not only take on the institutional burdens (committees, working groups, organizations) but they do even more (mentoring, organizational work above the normal call, etc.). From the institutional perspective, the additional work is “personal choice.” From the individual’s perspective, the additional work is a matter of commitment and personal responsibility; it is choice, in a sense, but much more of a *calling*, as in feeling chosen by others (students, community members in need, underrepresented voices, etc.). Eventually something gives; the

individual is forced to reduce their active engagement, they burn out, they underperform, or some combination occurs.

The underlying messages of Smithsfield's culture are "individual choice" and "individual achievement." As one of the faculty members asserted in the previous chapter, "you don't get rewarded [here] for being a communal person." Black sociopolitical solidarity is undermined within this environment because there is little value placed upon sociopolitical awareness and/or engagement, and virtually no value in solidarity. For Black students these messages can become quite damaging. Students operate within the elitist culture and are ostensibly being invited to participate for the long-term. Thus, even the students who have elected to devote themselves to social justice work have to do so while navigating a framework that is diametrically opposed to actual social justice, particularly as it relates to any sort of communalism or community-centeredness.

Convergence and Critical Consciousness: A Wider View

The findings at Smithsfield are in sync with other historical reviews and contemporary research projects that have looked at a range of areas including the evolution of Black Studies, Black student political engagement at particular sites, contemporary Black sociopolitical practices more broadly, and institutional agendas in higher education.

Exum's *Paradoxes of Protest: Black Student Activism in a White University* offers a strikingly similar analysis of the sociopolitical engagement at NYU's University College during and following the Black student movement of the 1970s. Exum provides five interweaving elements that hindered the development and wider success of the University College students' efforts, and shaped the campus following the Black student movement. The first was *fragmentation* of the actual student movement, in its inability to achieve the

political solidarity necessary for more sustainable progress. Second were both the *successes and failures* of student activist efforts; success generated reduced commitment to further protest while failures frustrated students and curtailed their participation in the movement. *Personal interests* were the third area, with students finding that movement activities got in the way of their studies and in some cases put their academic careers and future professional aspirations in jeopardy. The final two points were also closely connected to the participants' primary identification as college students. For many of the students, there was a constant *inner conflict* in their own middle-class upbringing (and its closer fit within the White college setting) and the liberation struggle that they were engaged in at University College. In this sense, the University College student efforts were often more centralized around campus concerns and less connected with larger social justice issues such that there was a formidable disconnect between the campus movement and the broader liberation effort. Finally there was the students' *fear* that the institution would severely reprimand them, or perhaps even expel them, if they continued to participate in radical protest activities.

At Smithsfield the contemporary fragmentation, as previously discussed, was more of an institutional manifestation via the creation and maintenance of various disjointed channels for Black social, cultural, and intellectual engagement on campus. At University College, it was a product of the fractured student movement itself, through dissent and conflict. The end result in both cases produced a relatively apolitical social climate that opened the doors to more explicit institutionalization, rather than maintaining a consistent student-driven or community-centered sociopolitical presence. Also in both cases, the institutional influence created insular, campus-centric spaces – as in the case of Smithsfield,

the “Smithsfield bubble” – that prevented broader coalition-building efforts from developing naturally and/or being shaped intentionally.

Exum, citing Flacks, speaks of the necessity for off-campus alliances in student movements and the challenges of producing such partnerships based upon the “physical isolation” of students and “their privileged freedom from the responsibilities and burdens of adult life, and their speech, dress, tastes, and idealistic impatience” (Exum, 1985, p. 187; Flacks, 1971). Further, as participants described at Smithsfield, Exum also discusses the challenges of student coalition building and sociopolitical activity given the built-in four-year turnover of students and the institution’s ability to “talk protests to death,” or in other words, wait out any campus-based sociopolitical proposals or activities until students have moved on to some other project or have left the institution (1985, p. 190).

Contemporary critiques of Black Studies also provide a relevant perspective in this wider Black student sociopolitical analysis. Rooks’ *White Money / Black Power* traces the evolution of Black Studies as an institutionalized, and Ford Foundation funded, response to the Black student movement of the 1970s. In her research, Rooks uncovers patterns of Black Studies programs being ascribed with liminal status, barely able to sustain themselves structurally and only truly valued in their abilities to minimize cultural conflict on campus. Rooks writes that Black Studies is “held hostage to its past” and is thus “implicated in a cultural landscape where race, and particularly Blackness, means too much and, at the same time, remarkably little” (2007, p. 28). Rojas, in *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*, calls Black Studies’ position in the academy “ambiguous” and says that its development as a “bureaucratic response to a social movement” became “depoliticized and deradicalized” over time (2007, p. 2,4). In *The Black Revolution on Campus*, Biondi states,

“Students demanded it [Black studies]; on many campuses they helped to create it, and they rightly deserve credit for its beginnings. But then the narrative gets more complicated. On some campuses, students continued to stay vitally involved in forging the character and mission of Black studies programs. But on others, student activists passed the baton to administrators and professors, and as the overall Black liberation movement declined, the political mission of Black studies was not always embraced with the same perspective or fervor. The sense of its political potential tended to shift from a hope for broader social transformation and Black community empowerment to a narrower intellectual or academic transformation. To be sure, an intellectual transformation is no small thing, but the point is that many student activists had envisioned a more dramatic, even revolutionary, potential for Black studies. And as well, this view may have been a miscalculation. Indeed, many student activists graduated and went on to medical and law school, or organized in factories and Black communities, or journeyed overseas to help build new African nation-states, and began to see the terrain of struggle as necessarily broader than the campus” (2012, pp. 275–276).

In adopting Black Studies as a space for the institutional development of a “diversity agenda,” colleges and universities have positioned it, along with other cultural studies programs, as the primary sites to feature faculty of color rather than sites for the development of revolutionary, community-centered activity (Biondi, 2012; Painter, 2000; Rojas, 2007; Rooks, 2007; Van Deburg, 1992). While this is the case at Smithfield and other institutions, interestingly, Rooks, citing research by Huggins, shows that with Black students’ greater interests in career development, their participation in Black Studies courses has declined, beginning in the 1980s (Huggins, 1985; Rooks, 2007). In other words, in addition to the reduced political and/or community-based orientation of Black Studies programs, as constructed by the Ford Foundation’s efforts and individual institutions’ interests, today’s students also perceive reduced value in such courses largely due to the students’ increased preoccupation with pre-professional aspirations. Lingering critiques of the rigor and utility of the field of Black studies also heavily impact its scholars and the positionality of the Black studies enterprise on campuses. As Rooks writes, “what is clearly

missing is an acknowledgement of the significance of the intellectual work that takes place within African American Studies” (2007, p. 131).

In *The Reorder of Things*, Ferguson takes an even wider view, pointing to the ways that the academy, responding to student movements and calls for cultural change in the 1960s and '70s, has created an “adaptive hegemony where minority difference was concerned” (2012, p. 6). Grounded in Foucaultian analysis, Ferguson argues that the academy, working *with* rather than through the state and capital, has constructed a power/knowledge model that acknowledges minority presence as it reproduces the means and mechanisms to marginalize it. By focusing on the particulars within the minority story, and by recognizing and harnessing the productive capacities of power, Ferguson challenges us to consider whether there “are other ways to disseminate and circulate minority culture and difference that do not place them within dominant systems of value” (2012, p. 230). In echoing the stance of one of the Smithsfield faculty participants – to be *in* the academy but not *of* it – Ferguson asks, “what happens if the texts that engage minority difference are used to imagine how minoritized subjects and knowledge might inhabit institutional spaces in ways dominant institutions never intended” (2012, p. 230).

Some, like Joy James, have called for a return to a more radical and activist-based Black Studies platform as one example of an unintended space, though she recognizes that there are few institutional incentives to “retool or retrain for an Africana studies future that privileges the demands of radicals and nonelite communities” (2000, p. 156). Others, such as Harry Belafonte during a 2013 NAACP award acceptance speech, have invited an even broader-reaching return to radical sociopolitical activity. He stated,

“What is missing, I think, from the equation in our struggle today is that we must unleash radical thought... America has never been moved to perfect our desire for greater democracy without radical thinking and radical voices being at the helm of any such quest” (2013).

Mary Frances Berry offered similar remarks, pointed particularly at academics in a tribute to W.E.B. Du Bois over a decade ago:

“We are at a stage now where we need to translate the research on African Americans into useful policy... If we have any interest in being like Du Bois, instead of just writing and talking about Du Bois, we must understand that following his example means much more than being a public intellectual who writes for mainstream publications and graces an occasional meeting or dinner at the White House. It means a commitment to act for social change, to rub shoulders with activists on a regular basis, and to rejoice when attacked for being too radical” (2000, p. 109).

Cornel West, in “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” argued in the mid-80s for an “insurgent black intellectual” model that not only could prompt individual research projects and engagement capable of “effective resistance and meaningful societal transformation,” but also would develop an organized network of scholars and ideas, providing a Black-owned institutional foundation separate from the dominant power/knowledge base of the academy. West writes, “an intelligentsia without [self-directed and self-determined] institutionalized critical consciousness is blind, and critical consciousness severed from collective insurgency is empty” (1985, p. 66).

The majority of the participants in the Smithsfield study did not explicitly advocate for a more insurgent or radical operational framework or set of activist possibilities, but they did acknowledge the limited institutional infrastructures provided by the dominant power base, and they expressed concerns about the true social justice orientation and potential achievable through these institutionalized mechanisms. That said, the participants were also, by and large, fully vested members in the institutionally-managed status quo, operating inside of the Smithsfield bubble that essentially dictated their daily moves. In many ways, it is because of this institutional reality that the participants did not (and

perhaps could not) suggest a more radical space. Such possibilities and opportunities likely are not readily conceivable, particularly using Smithsfield as a centering point.

In this sense, the concerns raised by Du Bois generations ago are re-asked by Exum in his analysis of Black student activism. He writes,

“There is no guarantee that the middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs that these students will become will return to the ghetto (indeed, many black students do not come from the ghetto in the first place), or that they will do so in large enough numbers to have the desired impact, or that they will put racial consciousness above individual or class interests. Many black students do intend to return to the black community to practice their professions. However, the success they desire frequently requires substantial participation in the larger society” (1985, p. 188).

These exact sentiments were shared by one of the student participants at Smithsfield, in his questions regarding whether the ideal path for Black sociopolitical uplift would occur through intentional mobilization at Smithsfield or via the individual successes of Smithsfield’s growing Black alumni, each finding their own causes to support in some way during their lifetime. Embedded within each option is the even larger question: will the Blacks at Smithsfield – either during their time on campus or after – be connected closely enough to and concerned about the sociopolitical advancement of Black people to participate in and contribute to any sort of mobilized efforts in any way? *Is this their battle to fight?* If so, are they adequately informed and prepared? If not them, who should engage this work, and how?

Shelby asserts that we need a large, “vigorous” group of Black people to undertake the necessary social justice work, but at the same time, given the various challenges that Blacks face, we can’t expect every Black person to step up, particularly “the most vulnerable, as a result of ghetto poverty.” “Thus,” he writes, “it is imperative that more affluent blacks extend special concern to the least advantaged” (2007, p. 246). Robinson, much like Du Bois, also calls upon the talented transcendentals to use their access, influence, resources, and

expertise to make a statement and pave new pathways of possibility for others. The challenge, as it applies to Smithsfield and places like it, is in creating a viable mechanism to tangibly realize such aspirations consistently, visibly, and in ways that are accessible to each new wave of students.

Returning to the theories guiding this study, I now want to more explicitly, but briefly, discuss where and how student engagement theory, social movement theory, and pragmatic Black nationalism can possibly converge in this effort.

The substantial benefit of the model presented by Shelby is not only contained within its far-reaching objectives toward social justice, but also in its philosophical construction, as opposed to a more rigid action plan or proposal. This allows for entities seeking to apply his logic to shape inputs and projected outcomes in ways that best fit their function and specific vision. Even in the flexibility of Shelby's approach some will find elements to critique. For example, an Afrocentricist or a more traditional Black nationalist may not be able to conceptualize and/or accept Shelby's framing of a multi-racial, non-essentialized project centered around social justice as "Black nationalism." Colleges and universities may sympathize with the social justice objectives that Shelby has set forth but not view themselves as primary direct allies in such work, nor anchoring points, particularly if the effort is not university-centric (as opposed to community-centered). Students may not be able to conceptualize the relevance of pragmatic Black nationalism (or perhaps get beyond the "Black nationalism" label itself), especially if it requires them to be extended beyond the "Smithsfield bubble" and/or, in their minds, moves them away from their academic and professional pursuits.

Any and all actions are susceptible to critique, perhaps more so than ideas merely outlined on pages. While not everyone will "get" Shelby's version of Black pragmatic

nationalism nor feel the need to become engaged in such efforts, the various participants' remarks clearly demonstrate multiple layers of alignment. Participants see higher educational institutions and their students as one vital element of a critical social justice core, and envision themselves engaging this work in a racially sensitive but not racially exclusive manner, very much in line with Shelby's conceptualization. In many ways, Smithsfield's community outreach agenda has operated accordingly, but without the far-reaching vision and urgency of a social justice movement. It has been an afterthought rather than a rallying point. For many, this may continue to be the case. But for some, there are opportunities to do more.

Social movement theory and Black nationalism, or sociopolitical solidarity, are typically framed as responses to a dominant power structure or set of realities that has created a socially inequitable experience for a group of people. Much in line with Ferguson's approach, and in response to the many calls for more progressive and productive engagement, the next iteration of campus-based social movement activity as it relates to Black sociopolitical solidarity can and should be much more than a casual response to sets of fragmented circumstances. Instead, it should be a concerted effort to launch sustainable projects with social justice and community empowerment at the heart. The bureaucratization phase of the movement can occur in and outside of the university classroom, as well as in community centers, K-12 schools, homes, businesses, nonprofits and foundations, and more. In positioning the movement as a co-constructed and democratic endeavor, the objective is for it to allow the university to apply meaningful and measureable activities to its espoused value structures, thereby prioritizing a well-articulated and readily transparent commitment to not only talking about equity and access,

but nurturing it so that it helps to develop and sustain surrounding communities for multiple generations to come.

The section to follow provides concrete recommendations toward this objective. In many ways, certain elements are already in motion at Smithsfield, but it is important to again note here that while there is considerable room to improve and expand, and that ultimately such an endeavor should certainly become a more explicit component of the Smithsfield brand, it is not realistic nor expected that every Smithsfield student or faculty/staff member would be directly engaged in social justice work. It would be ideal for each student to be exposed in various ways to the opportunities and benefits, and for a core group to be strategically incorporated into community-based projects that engaged them both as Smithsfield students and as global citizens. It would be expected that within this initial core, a subset would seek to take advantage of other more intentional developmental opportunities that would allow them to become well-positioned to pursue careers in social philanthropy, education, nonprofit development, academia, and more. It also would be expected that individuals interested in the STEM fields, corporate finance, law, or other areas not immediately associated with education-based social justice would also be presented opportunities to explore various immediate and longer-term service possibilities, from youth mentoring to learning how to serve on a nonprofit board later in their careers. These opportunities can be easily woven into the co-curricular activities of the institution. In this way, those who may not have ever considered where and how they could enter such a spectrum can be presented with a set of options to explore. And those who recognize immediately or later that they have a deeper passion for this work will be able to more tangibly insert themselves into a range of pipelines that will not only fully engage them as Smithsfield students and prepare them to become the best at whatever it is they envision

for themselves, but will also help to strategically develop and empower the communities around the institution, generating a sustainable common good.

As one of the alumni participants said during his interview, “if not us, then who?” This study has identified many who are highly capable of and interested in doing the work, and would greatly benefit from a more rigorous and aligned set of opportunities that they can co-construct, and that would benefit far more individuals and communities on a significantly deeper level. Again, while Smithsfield is commonly known as a pre-professional institution, none of the 11 alumni featured in this study were employed in corporate America at the time of their interviews. Their careers in education and the nonprofit sector, along with their graduate school pursuits leading them toward liberal arts academic positions, undergirded by community-based critical consciousness, proves that the moment is ripe to foster deeper levels of educationally-aligned sociopolitical engagement for committed Smithsfield community members.

Conclusions

There are numerous competing interests that shape the realities of Black community members at Smithsfield. Higher education’s long history of racial exclusion, mirroring the national climate, has subsided, but not without substantial sociopolitical activity by previous generations of Black students, faculty, and allies. Demonstrative Black activism and structured political mobilization on campus are no more, but Black sociopolitical work centered on developing critical youth education is growing. Black student organizations have grown to become the backbone of the Black community and the Black experience, creating meaningful co-curricular opportunities that have simultaneously increased Black student engagement and raised the profile of Black students on campus.

Black students are now more involved in mainstream and multicultural Smithsfield activities and programs, but even so, the institution is still not fully in sync with the needs of the Black community at Smithsfield or the Black community surrounding Smithsfield. On campus there are still racial incidents. Off campus there exist vast disparities between life in the Smithsfield bubble and the harsher realities of the broader Black community. The institution is resourced to do more, on and off campus, but likely will not without being made more explicitly aware of what should be done and how to go about doing it. In this sense, there is a substantial opportunity for the Black Smithsfield community to seize, if they can do so in a way that is compatible with their individual academic and professional pursuits, and fosters a healthier overall life balance given their current realities and additional burdens. Are these issues important enough to enough Black Smithsfield community members to establish a critical mass, and will these efforts produce any sustainable traction?

If the Black Smithsfield community takes no action to grow stronger and/or more tangibly address concerns that impact both the campus community and other Blacks beyond Smithsfield, particularly those most in need, there will still exist a certain degree of Black solidarity on campus. This solidarity as it stands in the present moment is limited and limiting, particularly in a pragmatic Black nationalistic context. The question for the Black Smithsfield community is much as Du Bois asked sixty years ago: will they be able to use their elite access and resources for the benefit of others, or will they pursue self-interests to the detriment of all? The institution is presently not well-structured to help students address, or even frame this question. There are, however, numerous examples and opportunities for them to do so on their own, potentially reordering the shape of things to come.

Recommendations

In presenting recommendations from the data and analysis of this study, three layers must be considered. First, there is the widest-reaching layer, that of society itself. Returning to the Du Boisian notion regarding the intentional development to positively impact Black and poor communities, we have to ask whether there is identifiable value and viability in such a project, particularly from a college student perspective. We also must consider, from the community-centered view, whether this Du Boisian-influenced model of Black self-help, with Black elites actively engaged as change agents, is wanted or needed. The second layer is the institution. What are its interests, its strengths, its strategic priorities, and how does it see itself moving in the future? The final layer consists of the Black community members affiliated with the institution, namely the students and faculty/administrators, but also the growing alumni community. What are their interests and experiences, goals and desires?

With these considerations in mind, and using critical race theory's interest convergence principle as a guide, I offer the following three thoughts:

First, the Black community at Smithsfield, and perhaps at other schools as well, should spend more time developing itself, forging stronger intergenerational relationships (between students and faculty/staff, as well as alumni and other partners). The numerous results – improved retention and academic experiences, stronger programming, a greater appreciation of institutional memory, more critical sociopolitical engagement, a richer exploration of the growing diasporic influence on the ways that Blackness is being reshaped, and more – align well with institutional priorities, student desires, faculty missions, and broader community needs. The challenge is time. Strategic thought needs to be given to the time invested in student activities and other programming, along with

various faculty responsibilities and institutional commitments, such that an optimized agenda can be developed and grafted into the campus culture.

Second, there appears to be a moment for the Black Smithsfield community to assert itself specifically around youth education and community development. There seem to be ample opportunities for students, faculty, and departments to reshape present community outreach initiatives and/or propose new ones. Further, there is also room to generate new, more culturally substantive professional development opportunities and career paths for the growing core of Black Smithsfield graduates and their allies entering the education sector and related fields. The success of such a venture could likely filter out to other professional networks and link Smithsfield graduates working in various fields back to a progressive youth education and development movement. When done properly, this work will address community needs and wishes in a nurturing way, and circles directly back to the first recommendation, enhancing the development of the Black Smithsfield community. This effort must be undertaken as a true partnership with community representatives and other critical stakeholders present throughout the process. This is to ensure that it does not become Black institutional members imposing their ideas of progress on the broader community, but is instead a collaborative construction of community-centered empowerment, leveraging the assets and energy of the Black Smithsfield community and the histories, assets, and energy of the broader community. In this sense, the false division of “Black Smithsfield” and “the broader Black community” is deconstructed, and instead a diverse social justice community is created with a range of contributors and allies coordinating their efforts, each leveraging their resources and networks.

Finally, there is an opportunity to develop a Marshall Plan idea, similar to what Eugene Robinson speaks of in *Disintegration* and consistent with Tommy Shelby’s

framework, focusing specifically on the eradication of poverty in targeted areas around Smithsfield. The Obama administration launched the Promise Neighborhoods project in 2010, modeled after Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone, but the funding was redistributed in the wake of the nation's financial crisis. Institutions like Smithsfield commit significant dollars already to institutionally-directed outreach efforts but have not positioned them as a comprehensive Marshall Plan, nor have they measured their impacts from a truly community-centered perspective. The resources are likely available or well within reach to sustainably manage a more holistic and community-aligned model. Smithsfield students have consistently shown interest in these efforts, as participants indicated, and as additional document analysis has shown. Smithsfield student curriculum can be aligned around a long-term program with specific community-centered goals, but mapped into semester-long courses, thus satisfying the institution's and students' academic interests while sustainably prioritizing community needs.

The amount of positive media traction around such an effort would be phenomenal. In an era where elite institutions have to remain competitive to distinguish themselves, an initiative such as this would certainly add value. It can and should serve as a national model for replication, furthering the Smithsfield brand. On the ground, the move from "community service" to "community building / community empowerment" would produce tangible increased benefit for the neighborhoods and families, as well as the Smithsfield students of all backgrounds.

Such an effort would not be a simple undertaking, for numerous reasons. Perhaps the most significant concern, as alluded to in the previous recommendation, is whether institutions like Smithsfield would be able to truly partner in a decentralized manner alongside community members and other agents of change, as Shelby outlines, and whether

these elite university spaces can transcend their conservative proclivities in the interests of social change and democratic realization. If so then this is what Black sociopolitical solidarity and activism *could* look like in the twenty-first century. It certainly would not include *all* Black students and faculty/staff at Smithsfield, and also would not be positioned to be exclusive to *just* Black Smithsfield community members. Much in the way that Shelby outlined, the primary emphasis would be on a commitment to social justice, ending structural poverty, and forwarding an antiracism agenda.

This initiative would not be the solution to every sociopolitical concern affecting Black communities near Smithsfield, or in other areas of the country through replication, but it does create a viable space for an institution like Smithsfield to contribute to problem-solving and community-building in a way that is both compatible with the institution's strengths and resources, and is democratically forward-thinking, addressing issues of race and class in direct, responsible, and community-centered ways. This effort also would not be the single idea for furthering Black sociopolitical solidarity, scholarship, and institutional identity at Smithsfield and places like it. Other research projects, innovations, and student development initiatives must be constructed, maintained, and more widely discussed so that we can expand the ways that Black students, faculty, administrators, and alumni can benefit from community-building and rich engagement on campus. These limitations are pointed out not as excuses for inaction, but rather as guides to realistically approximate impact and to serve as a reminder that even in the face of monumental success of this project, additional projects and ideas will be necessary to further nurture and harness the full potential of a true democracy.

Closing

"Let's restate the problem of black liberation in a white, conservative, and capitalist society: to end racism, we must end inequality. Our goal cannot be simply the assimilation or integration of black elites into the white cultural and corporate mainstream. Nor can we combat inequality by going it alone, divorced from real and potential allies. The problem of the 21st century is the challenge of multicultural democracy - whether American political institutions and society can and will be restructured to incorporate the genius and energy, the labor power and social struggles of millions of people who have been denied full equality - Latinos, Asian-Americans, American Indians, Arab-Americans, African-Americans, women, working people, the unemployed, the poor, and many others." (Marable, 1997, p. 23)

Is any of this the responsibility of this institution, these students? This is debatable.

Perhaps an HBCU is better positioned philosophically to engage in Black sociopolitical solidarity and community building as described in the above recommendations. Or possibly this is not the place of higher education at all. The 52 participants' thoughts lead me to believe that there is something here worth exploring; something tangible that sets the stage for a new discourse, and new, encouraging ways of framing future possibilities for often ignored young people and communities. The realities on the ground in our nation's struggling cities and neighborhoods – much like those near Smithsfield – remind me daily that we have already run out of time to waste.

APPENDIX A. IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Pennsylvania
 Office of Regulatory Affairs
 3624 Market St., Suite 301 S
 Philadelphia, PA 19104-6006
 Ph: 215-573-2540/ Fax: 215-573-9438
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
 (Federalwide Assurance # 00004028)

08-Jan-2013

Vashaun R Harper, sharper1@upenn.edu
 3700 Walnut Street, PME 425
 Graduate School of Education
 Philadelphia, PA 19104
 Attn: Brian Peterson, peterson@upenn.edu

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR : Vashaun R Harper
 TITLE : Black Student Sociopolitical Solidarity in the Twenty-First Century
 SPONSORING AGENCY : No Sponsor Number
 PROTOCOL # : 817205
 REVIEW BOARD : IRB #8

Dear Dr. Vashaun Harper:

The above referenced protocol and was reviewed and approved by the Executive Chair (or her authorized designee) using the expedited procedure set forth in 45 CFR 46.110, categories 6 and 7, on 07-Jan-2013. This study will be due for continuing review on or before 06-Jan-2014.

Approval by the IRB does not necessarily constitute authorization to initiate the conduct of a human subject research study. Principal investigators are responsible for assuring final approval from other applicable school, department, center or institute review committee(s) or boards has been obtained. This includes, but is not limited to, the University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center Clinical Trials Scientific Review and Monitoring Committee (CTSRMC), Clinical and Translational Research Center (CTRC) review committee, CAMRIS committee, Institutional Bio-safety Committee (IBC), Environmental Health and Radiation Safety Committee (EHRS), and Standing Conflict of Interest (COI) Committee. Principal investigators are also responsible for assuring final approval has been obtained from the FDA as applicable, and a valid contract has been signed between the sponsor and the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania. If any of these committees require changes to the IRB- approved protocol and informed consent/assent document(s), the changes must be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to beginning the research study.

If this protocol involves cancer research with human subjects, biospecimens, or data, you may not begin the research until you have obtained approval or proof of exemption from the Cancer Center's Clinical Trials Review and Monitoring Committee.

The following documents were included in this review:

- HS-ERA Protocol Application (Confirmation: bbbfcddb) submitted 01/02/13
- Recruitment Letter uploaded 12/14/12
- Informed Consent Form uploaded 01/02/13
- Interview Protocols uploaded 12/14/12

When enrolling subjects at a site covered by the University of Pennsylvania's IRB, a copy of the IRB approved informed consent form with the IRB approved from/to stamp must be used unless a waiver of written documentation of consent has been granted.

If you have any questions about the information in this letter, please contact the IRB administrative staff. Contact information is available at our website: <http://www.upenn.edu/regulatoryaffairs>.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
 IRB Administrator

APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT**A Study on Black College Student Sociopolitical Solidarity in the Twenty-First Century****University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education****Principal Investigator:** Dr. Shaun Harper**Co-Principal Investigator:** Brian Peterson, Doctoral Candidate

Purpose: This study seeks to investigate the ways that today's Black college students at one selective institution engage social and political issues that have historically and contemporarily impacted Black students on campus and in the wider society.

Participation: Participation in this research study is purely voluntary. Your involvement will require an individual interview (typically lasting up to 45 minutes) or focus group session (lasting approximately 90 minutes). You have the right to end your participation in the study at any time. You are also permitted to disregard any of the interview questions for any reason. All of the interviews and focus group sessions will be audio recorded and transcribed. This data will be used to complete this research study, which includes a dissertation and other possible future publications.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made by the researchers to keep the study participants' identities anonymous. The name of the institution will be changed to a pseudonym, as will the names of each participant.

Risks and Benefits: Participation in this study may not personally benefit any of the participants, outside of the satisfaction of contributing to higher educational research. Though the study is designed to be confidential, there is the risk that participants in focus groups may discuss the conversations outside of the group. *This is strongly discouraged. Your signature below indicates that you've been made aware of this risk and agree to protect the anonymity of the study.* There are no other foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

Contact: If you have any questions about the study at any point in time, please contact Brian Peterson using the provided contact information.

Thank you.

 Your name (print)

 Your name (sign)

 Date

 Brian Peterson, Co-Principal Investigator
 University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education
 IRB # 817205

 Date

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

STUDENT INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

- Think back to when you were applying to schools. What made you ultimately decide on Smithsfield?
- How do you like it so far?
- What's been most memorable for you on campus?
- What have been challenges for you here, if any?
- Did coming to Smithsfield mean more to you because of your race, your gender, your family story, your future career goals, or some other factor? [Clarification, if necessary: In other words, in being here now do you feel like you are representing your family's ability to overcome obstacles, Black people's struggle to continue to be accepted, or are you dreams of becoming a pediatrician, for example, the thing that drives you the most?]
- How would you describe the racial climate here on campus?
- How do you personally interact and engage with various groups?
- [If not already unpacked in the above questions, ask them to describe the racial climate specifically within the Black community.]
- What links Black students on campus?
- What divides them?
- Overall, which do see more of within the Black community at Smithsfield - cohesion or division?
- What inspires you about the Black community at Smithsfield?
- What are some things that you'd like to see changed or improved within the Black community at Smithsfield?
- What do you think are the Black Smithsfield community's priorities?
- What issues are important to you, whether they be things that specifically affect the campus or touch on the broader society? [If necessary, give examples... education, racial profiling, sexual violence would be campus and broader. "More Black Cultural Studies courses" or "making sure that Smithsfield is affordable" is campus based. "Addressing world hunger" is a broader issue].
- How do you engage these issues, if at all? [If necessary, tease out -- Do you discuss them with your friends? Do any of your student groups address them? Are you in any groups or participate in any of activities that concentrate solely on this work? If you are not engaging the issues now, maybe probe -- did you work on them in HS (and if so, what changed)? Do you plan to after college?]
- Do you consider any of these efforts "activism"?
- Do you consider yourself an "activist"? Why or why not?
- Do you have any friends or peers that you would consider activists? What makes them qualify, in your opinion?
- Do you think that activist work is something that fits with being a Smithsfield student? [Does it feel like the institution supports (and/or nurtures/develops it) or is it something that you feel students have to carve out their own space to do?]
- [IF NOT ALREADY COVERED IN THEIR RESPONSES]... Let's talk a bit about causes and concerns that impact Black people. What are some of the major issues now, in your opinion?

- [AGAIN, IF NOT ALREADY COVERED]... Working on these Black community-specific concerns -- is this something that fits with being a student at Smithsfield, in your opinion?
- How much do you know about the experiences of Black college students - at Smithsfield and other institutions - in the late 1960s and early 1970s?
- Do you see any connection to their stories and your experiences now?
- [IF NOT ALREADY COVERED IN THEIR RESPONSES]... Have you experienced anything on campus that brought you together with other Black students, and if so, please describe. [Get them to explain the experience and describe it as positive as negative. Also, if specific incidents don't come up, ask them about Trayvon Martin and/or the student rally of 2010].
- [If necessary (if need to push further)]... How do Black students deal with issues now (racism, education, healthcare, etc)?]
- What is "Black solidarity" to you on campus, and what does (or should) it look like?
- [IF NOT ALREADY COVERED IN THEIR RESPONSES]... Concerning "Black progress" (ways to make things better for Black Americans in general), how do you see the Smithsfield experience ultimately playing out for you and your peers? [Do you think that by coming here, you and your peers are preparing yourselves to do great things for the broader Black community eventually, or is this something that is not necessarily a major concern?]
- Is there anything else that you want to add?

ALUMNI INTERVIEWS

- Think back... when you were choosing between the schools you applied to, what ultimately made you select Smithsfield?
- Describe your time at Smithsfield - what were the most memorable moments for you? What were your challenges?
- What did coming to Smithsfield mean to you as a Black person?
- How would you describe the racial climate at Smithsfield when you were there?
- How did you personally interact and engage with various groups on campus?
- Did you connect with any people or groups in the broader area but not affiliated with Smithsfield?
- How would you describe Smithsfield's Black community when you were here?
- [IF NOT ALREADY COVERED IN THEIR RESPONSES... (select appropriate probing questions)]
 - What, if anything, connected you to other Blacks on campus?
 - What, if anything, divided you and other Blacks on campus?
 - Overall, did you see more division or cohesion in the Black Smithsfield community?
 - How would you describe the sociopolitical solidarity, or togetherness, of Smithsfield's Black community? Did students have conversations about issues (racial, social, political) and challenges, either in organizations or on their own in peer groups? Did the conversations ever extend to or create any sort of programs, events, etc? Did you and/or other Black students experience any racism on campus? Did that experience, or even the threat of such experiences, connect you in some way?

- How would you describe Black student activism at Smithsfield? How did you define activism during your time on campus? Do you think this definition still fits today? Do you think it fit during the 1960s and 1970s? Do you see any links between those times and today? Do you think current students do - do you think they even know about this history?
- Given your descriptions above, what do you think are the main factors that drive Black student solidarity / activism today?
- Where do you see this Black student solidarity/activism going at Smithsfield and institutions like it in the future (and why)? [What should Black student solidarity look like?]
- What role, if any, did/does the institution play in shaping Black student solidarity and activism on campus?
- What would you like to see in the future for Smithsfield's Black students, both during their time at Smithfield and beyond? What do you think is needed to make this possible?
- [If not already answered, Do you think your Smithfield experience shaped you to be an agent of change, in general and/or in the Black community? Why/how or why not?]
- Is there anything else that you would like to add?

FACULTY/STAFF INTERVIEWS

- When did you arrive at Smithsfield?
- What led you to Smithsfield - what about the campus and/or community attracted you?
- What keeps you here (or kept you here as long as it did, for retired/departed participants)?
- Can you briefly describe your role/duties and your interaction with students, particularly Black students?
- When you hear the phrase "Black solidarity," what's your first thought?
- How would you describe today's Smithsfield's Black student community?
- [UNPACK THIS RESPONSE IN CONTRAST TO "BLACK SOLIDARITY" -- Ask them to describe their differences in thought, or their similarities].
- How would you describe the activism of Smithfields's Black community over its contemporary history - the last 40 years, broadly speaking?
- How would you describe the activism of Smithfield's Black community over the last 5-10 years?
- What do you think are explanations for any variations?
- What are your thoughts on Smithfield's diversity efforts?
- How do you think that these efforts and Smithfield's policies and procedures support or impede students' social and political engagement, if at all?
- What are your thoughts on the ways that Smithfield institutionally supports its Black campus community while they are on campus? [MAYBE ALSO ASK-- After they leave, do you think that Smithsfield continues to support it's Black alumni sufficiently, either individually or collectively?]
- What do you see in the future for Smithfield's Black community?

- What would you like to see? [OR... If they answered the previous question in the ideal sense, ask them if they think that this will likely be the future reality, and why or why not].
- What do you see in the future of Black sociopolitical activism in general, beyond Smithsfield? What would you like to see, and again, what accounts for the differences?
- [IF NOT ALREADY COVERED ON THEIR RESPONSE]... How do you think that we can get to this ideal sociopolitical future?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add?

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