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Building Community for Black Women Student Affairs Graduate Students by Creating a Mentor Sister Circle Program

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**Building Community for Black Women Student Affairs Graduate Students
by Creating a Mentor Sister Circle Program**

Taijah M. Claybrook

Master's Project

Submitted to the College of Education

At Grand Valley State University

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To my mother, grandmothers, and little brother. You all have provided me with comfort, insight, and prayers throughout this journey. Thank you all for being my escape when I was stressed and overwhelmed. I am constantly reminded of how loved and supported I am each step of the way. To all of my wonderful mentors and peers across GVSU that validated my feelings and experiences, from faculty, staff, students, to colleagues. I thank you all. It is because of your support and guidance that the idea of this project came to be.

Taijah

Abstract

When studying the gendered and racialized experiences of Black women in higher education, research often focuses solely on faculty members as opposed to student affairs professionals. However, lack of support for Black women student affairs professionals leads to many developing racial battle fatigue. This project explores the effects of the intersection of oppressive systems on Black women student affairs professionals' journey through graduate school to the professional work setting. The implementation of a mentor sister circle program supported by higher education administration is proposed to provide this demographic with needed support during graduate school. The designed mentor program features an activity to build rapport between mentees and mentors, opportunities for professional development, and provides participants with a platform to voice their experiences to potential allies. Once completed, participants will be able to name a community of mentors and allies to assist them with discovering much needed self-care practices in the profession of student affairs.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Black women (BW) student affairs professionals (SAPs) in higher education are in jeopardy of developing many forms of fatigue while navigating the environments of predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Despite growing diversity numbers in student populations, this same diversity is not reflected in staff members at PWIs (Han and Leonard, 2017). This can lead to BW developing racial battle fatigue due to consistently enduring microaggressions in these settings (Chancellor, 2019). Racial battle fatigue can be defined as the psychological, emotional, and physiological toll of racism and its microaggressions on educators of color working in predominantly white fields (Pizzaro & Kohli, 2020; Chancellor, 2019). This toll manifests into mental, emotional, and physical stress over time (Chancellor, 2019).

Challenges

Unacknowledged racism, or subtle forms of prejudice displayed in everyday interactions, experienced by Blacks and other racial groups is the concept of microaggressions (Williams, 2020). BW find themselves constantly policing their emotions while experiencing microaggressions regularly at PWIs (Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018). Along with this, a heavy burden is placed upon BW in student affairs. The lack of BW in higher education causes a disproportionate burden on the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of BW due to being the numerical minority (Harley, 2008). They may then experience burnout, which is caused by the absence of support for BW in this field due to systemic misogynistic and racial arrogance at PWIs (Harley, 2008).

The challenges that BW SAPs face and the workload they balance often goes unnoticed. On account of a lack of research, this leaves assumptions to be made about BW SAPs based on

existing literature on BW faculty (Henry, 2010). Differing from faculty's job responsibilities of teaching and conducting research, SAPs instead support student concerns by helping students in their journey of growth and self-exploration outside of the classroom (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2021; Mullen et al. 2018). The limitation of literature on BW SAPs is another example of the unique challenges faced by BW with their experiences being routinely ignored and excluded from larger discussions (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

Importance and Rationale of Project

Employing a diverse staff is highly important in the student affairs profession (Turrentine, 2001). This is due to diverse student affairs staffs benefiting both students and other staff members (Turrentine, 2001). Students are able to vision themselves pursuing various positions in the workforce when observing role models of many backgrounds (Turrentine, 2001). Staff members are also able to benefit from rich work environments that are created by individuals with broad backgrounds and identities (Turrentine, 2001). As the U.S. population is predicted to be immensely diverse in 2050, with the Black population increasing by over 20 million, it is easy to assume that the student affairs profession should reflect these demographics (Betts et al., 2009). Yet, the staff population of higher education continues to be dominated by White professionals by 80-90% (Steele, 2018; Kayes, 2006).

Retention

While many PWIs launch efforts to diversify their staffs, this is not reflected in the mission of retaining these employees (Kayes, 2006). This may leave the few Black SAPs at PWIs to be overworked as they are expected to do the racial uplifting of underserved minorities at their institutions (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Given the name of *Black tax*, oftentimes, this

responsibility falls onto BW due to the demand of their wisdom and attention (Cohen, 1998; Griffin & Reddick, 2011). While also greatly servicing White students, BW are most typically sought out by students of color for help, guidance, and support (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). It is expected of BW to be more accessible and supportive to students despite them being the numerical minority of PWI staff (Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Han & Leonard, 2017). In turn these assumptions stress BW and causes them to stretch themselves thin, resulting in racial fatigue (Harley, 2008).

Stress that leads to burnout, poor salaries, and lack of advancement are prominent reasons why SAPs leave the field within 1-5 years (Marshall et.al., 2016). One may wonder what would happen to the retention rate of students of color if BW as a collective decided to stop pursuing the student affairs profession. In order to lighten their load and retain BW in the field of student affairs, institutions should become intentional about supporting this group through their recruitment and retention initiatives (West, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this project is to propose a support program which caters to mentoring BW student affairs graduate students.

Background of the Project

With the goal of defining the field of student personnel work in mind, the American Council on Education held a two-day long conference in 1937 forming *The Student Personnel Point of View* report (American Council on Education, 1949). The report defined higher education as a culture composed of instruction, scholarly work, and scientific research (American Council on Education, 1949). The development of students as a whole (physically, socially, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually) is the main focus of student personnel, or student affairs, work (American Council on Education, 1949). SAPs are to view students as

individuals that are constantly impacting society while also being shaped by it (American Council on Education, 1949). These professionals may hold an array of job titles and responsibilities ranging from: recruitment and marketing, disability services, financial aid, counseling and advising, large program planning, international student services, student assessment, crisis response, and more (Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2014). Working alongside faculty and administrators, SAPs are committed to working towards the goal of teaching students socially desirable processes inside and outside of the classroom (American Council on Education, 1949). However, attending to students' emotional needs and performing these job duties often leads to burnout in this field (Mullen et al., 2018).

Black Women in Student Affairs

Due to the intersection of race and sex based oppression and discrimination, known as intersectionality, BW tend to experience marginalization (Collins, 2002; West, 2015). Marginalization is the experience of having your ideas, experiences, beliefs, and contributions downplayed and dismissed during group conversations (West, 2015). Experiencing marginalization leads to BW feeling devalued (West, 2015). Underappreciation makes BW feel unseen for the work they are doing and causes self-doubt and constant negative thoughts about themselves (West, 2015). These feelings can be classified as imposter syndrome, which is the fear of feeling like a fraud despite all of your accomplishments (Bahn, 2014). While anyone can experience imposter syndrome, women in academics are at a greater risk of internalizing it due to constant messages of inadequacy (Bahn, 2014). In addition to this, BW are expected to navigate predominately White spaces while feeling unwelcome and unsupported, giving them the status of being an outsider within (West, 2015).

Isolation, along with the underrepresentation of other BW in these spaces, can lead to them feeling uncomfortable when speaking in conversations related to the experiences of their race (West, 2015). As of Fall 2016, the amount of BW in student affairs positions totals a mere 9% of the 179,164 individuals employed in U.S. postsecondary institutions (NCES, 2017 as cited in West, 2020). This compares to White women who represent 45% and White men who represent 22% of the population (NCES, 2017 as cited in West, 2020). These numbers are drastically different when compared to the massive representation of BW in higher education administration positions (West, 2020). Despite this, there is still a great underrepresentation of BW in education graduate programs although they are the most represented minority (West, 2020). The graduation rate of BW enrolled in these programs is significantly low compared to that of White women and men (NCES, 2017 as cited in West, 2020). As a means of survival, fellow BW scholars have turned to the acts of peer mentoring, building community, and creating a sense of belonging within themselves in the forms of sister circles (Hills, 2019; Minnett et al., 2019).

Personal Experience

As a Black woman and current graduate student entering the student affairs field, I have found myself experiencing this same marginalization during my first year of my graduate assistantship. When feeling isolated in a majority White cohort and facing the microaggression of being called the wrong Black woman's name on a consistent basis by associate directors, my concerns and feelings were disregarded by numerous supervisors. I was consistently told that I was either overreacting or should just accept my position in the social hierarchy of White environments. I was even given the advice of overextending myself to my cohort to ensure that my White peers were comfortable enough with my Blackness to begin including me, placing this

burden of inclusion onto me. My experience led to me feeling extremely discouraged, saddened, and doubtful on whether or not I could survive the treatment of BW in the student affairs field prolonged post graduation.

What motivated me to continue in my studies was reading the experience of bell hooks' time teaching at a PWI in the book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* as well as seeking outside mentorship from BW SAPs in other campus departments. Both sources could relate to my dilemmas, validate my feelings, and also suggest strategies on how to navigate them. This validation came as a result of me actively seeking community with other BW within my institution, which could easily be provided within sister circles. These circles act as support groups which allows BW to network and share experiences with one another (Hills, 2019). This process allows for healing and resilience to occur as BW continue on in their journeys (Hills, 2019). Implementing Black feminist literature and sister circles to support and encourage entering BW SAPs after me led to the creation of this project.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to highlight the experience of BW in student affairs higher education. The goal is to develop a model for institutions to utilize in order to retain this demographic of professionals for generations to come. This project will include a model of an ideal mentoring program specifically for graduate-level BW SAPs to support them in their graduate school experience. Each component of this model will address the needs of this group and promote an inclusive, supportive work environment for this demographic to thrive in.

Objectives of the Project

The development of this project will specifically address the challenges that BW in higher education have endured silently for many decades. It will provide BW student affairs graduate students with a network of other BW to gain mentorship and fellowship from. From this, institutions will also be able to create a plan of action to implement such programs to aid this group in naming their experiences. Naming of experiences is a form of self-care for BW, as it allows them the space and agency to defend their identity and wellbeing (Hills, 2019). The intention of this plan is to make BW graduate students feel as though they belong without placing the burden of correcting their non-inclusive work environments onto them.

Definition of Terms

Black tax: “the expectation of Black SAPs at PWIs to do the racial uplifting of underserved minorities at their institutions, leading to them being overworked” (Griffin & Reddick, 2011).

Critical mass: “critical mass exists whenever, within a given group [of individuals], there are enough members from a particular group such that they feel comfortable participating in the conversation and that [others] see them as individuals rather than as spokespersons for their race... underrepresentation may be defined as a lack of critical mass” (West, 2015).

Imposter syndrome: “the fear of feeling like a fraud despite all of your accomplishments” (Bahn, 2014).

Intersectionality: “the intersection of race and sex based oppressive systems which leads to the double marginalization of Black women” (Collins, 2002).

Isolation: "feelings of loneliness, to the persistent awareness of not fitting in, to always being on guard, and/or to the fatigue that comes from always having to be one's own support system" (Daniel, 1997 as cited in West, 2015).

Racial fatigue: “racial fatigue is the syndrome of being over extended, undervalued, and unappreciated due to being asked to serve and represent the “color factor” in yet another capacity” (Harley, 2008).

Racial battle fatigue: “the psychological, emotional, and physiological toll of racism and its microaggressions on educators of color working in predominantly white fields. This toll manifests into mental, emotional, and physical stress over time” (Pizzaro & Kohli, 2020; Chancellor, 2019).

Microaggressions: “unacknowledged racism, or subtle forms of prejudice displayed in everyday interactions, experienced by Blacks and other racial groups is the concept of microaggressions” (Williams, 2020).

Outsider within: “described by Patricia Hill Collins as the marginalized and isolated status of African American women in various professional and academic settings” (West, 2015).

Student affairs: “the development of college students as a whole (physically, socially, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually) as they are individuals that are constantly impacting the world while being shaped by it” (American Council on Education, 1949).

Student affairs professionals: “those committed to working towards the goal of teaching students socially desirable processes inside and outside of the classroom” (American Council on Education, 1949).

Scope of the Project

This project will address the feelings of isolation and lack of critical mass that BW graduate SAPs experience while working in higher education. BW graduate students studying within other departments may also benefit from participating in this model, although it is not within the scope of this project to cater to their specific needs. While BW faculty are also not the

focus of this study due to their foreign job responsibilities of teaching, writing, and publishing research, it would be beneficial for them to participate as senior mentors. Seasoned SAPs, faculty, administrators, and other graduate students all share a similarity in experience, knowledge, and career paths while navigating PWIs as BW. Sharing these experiences would greatly assist graduate students that identify as BW in navigating their journey.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Black women (BW) student affairs professionals' (SAPs) unjust treatment at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) causes many of them to endure long-term fatigue symptoms. This treatment derives from the combination of systemic racism and sexism embedded within the structures of higher education. Historically, males have occupied student affairs positions at much higher rates than others (Tull, 2014). Yet, as the field continues to grow and change, so does its workers' demographics (Tull, 2014). There has been an influx of women and other minoritized populations entering the field, with most women identifying as White, married, and middle-aged, with at least ten years of experience (Tull, 2014). An underrepresentation of BW SAPs continues to exist despite the growing number of BW undergraduate students, leaving emerging BW SAPs longing to socialize and build community with those that can relate to their gendered and racialized experiences (Turrentine & Conley, 2001).

Theoretical Discussion

For institutions to truly learn how to best support their BW employees in finding community, they must first understand their historical experiences in the workforce and academia. In a society that prioritizes the concerns of White males as the norm, women of color have found themselves to be at the bottom in every aspect (Wing, 1997). Specifically for BW, American society has failed them by not accepting them into America's mainstream economic, political, social, or educational life (Wing, 1997). Despite being stereotyped as lazy, powerless, incompetent, and invisible, this group of women holds a significant portion of the workforce

amongst people of color (Wing, 1997). Researchers continue to predict a future of the United States (U.S.) that moves from a White nation to a more diverse one where minorities will soon become the majority (Wing, 1997; Betts et al., 2009). Yet, BW are still overlooked and not acknowledged by the larger society and its systems (Wing, 1997).

Critical Race Feminist Theory

Created to distinguish women of color's voices from men of color's and White women's, Adrien Katherine Wing's Critical Race Feminism theory (CRF) will provide the theoretical framework of Chapter Two's research (Rodriguez & Boahene, 2012). CRF emerged at the end of the twentieth century to legally express the concerns of those that hold the multiple identities of being women, racial minorities, and poor in their single existence (Wing, 1997). Therefore, this theory will examine the various oppressive systems that BW endure concurrently in American society and academia (Wing, 1997). The theory's concept lies within the term *multiplicative identity*, which means that women of color are not just White women who happen to be of color or men of color who happen to be women, but rather those with identities multiplied together (Wing, 1997). This theoretical framework will provide context on the importance of BW SAPs sharing the stories of their discriminatory experiences and how institutions can utilize this information to provide intentional support for the BW of higher education, specifically within student affairs.

Intersectionality

BW's experiences of enduring race and sex discrimination simultaneously were initially erased by legal cases examining bias by only utilizing single categories (race *or* sex, but not both) (Crenshaw, 1989). CRF foremother, Kimberlè Crenshaw (1989), provided a solution by

coining the term *intersectionality*. Intersectionality brought a means to an end to this exclusion and examined the impact of both. The infamous 1991 Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings caused an increase in publications that focused solely on women of color and their unique experiences (Wing, 1997). Anita Hill appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee for the sexual harassment charges of then U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas against her (Thomas et al., 1993). The hearings aired on national television, and Hill's character was disserved by the public and mass media the weekend following (Thomas et al., 1993; Wing, 1997). Before the hearings began, twice as many Americans found Thomas to be more credible than Hill (Thomas et al., 1993). Although both parties identify as Black, Hill's Blackness combined with her gender made for further scrutiny and invalidation of her truth by public perception. As a result, a platform for BW law professors' voices was provided for the first time by the 1991 issue of the Berkeley Women's Law Journal (Wing, 1997).

Berkeley Women's Law Journal allowed BW scholars and professionals to see themselves in Hill's experience of not being believed, despite her many accomplishments (Wing, 1997). Televising this event was prominent, as it was the first time a Black woman law professor faced the national spotlight while also defying all stereotypical imaging of BW (Wing, 1997). Many women, including Wing, were deeply wounded by Hill's vilification (Wing, 1997). Following, CRF evolved as the interweaving of multiple theories of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), Critical Race Theory (CRT), and feminism (Wing, 1997). This theory allows for examining the intersection of race, gender, and class and how they relate to societal power dynamics (Wing, 1997).

Anti-Essentialism

CRF utilizes narrative and storytelling to understand women of color's lives in relation to power dynamics, allowing women of color to be placed at the center of theoretical discussions and debates rather than on the margins (Wing, 1997; Betts et al., 2009). It argues against the many assumptions of the plight of the once enslaved Black woman (Wing, 1997). These assumptions include that the U.S. race and gender discrimination law resulting from the Civil Rights movement is enough to protect BW; therefore, their plight should be kept separate from that of other groups (Wing, 1997). While it derives from the foundations of other popular theories and remains underutilized in popular feminist discourse, CRF separates itself by providing the notion of anti-essentialism to critique feminism (Wing, 1997).

Under anti-essentialism, CRF denies that one essential voice speaks for all feminists on a particular issue (Wing, 1997). In mainstream feminism, this voice typically belongs to White and middle to upper-class women (Wing, 1997). Instead, CRF shifts the narrative to highlight the voices of BW, allowing them to provide insight into the intersection of their racial and gender identities (Wing, 1997). The following research discussed intends to call attention to the voices of BW in higher education generally rendered as invisible and ignored.

Research/Evaluation

The literature selected for review examines forms of fatigue BW SAPs endure on PWI campuses, leading to racial battle fatigue. Specifically, these articles will identify factors that cause this fatigue and provide future implications for institutions. Such factors include the media's depictions of BW, microaggressions from peers during graduate school, and pressure to identity shift in professional work settings. The sources referenced are empirical studies, auto-ethnographies, essays, and counter-stories that discuss and analyze the forms of gendered sexism faced by BW in various higher education environments. To gain a broad understanding of the

career pathways of BW SAPs, the settings reviewed include graduate school classrooms, graduate assistantships, student affairs departments, and faculty positions. All sources chosen were published in educational journals or are critical pieces of Black feminist literature and discourse.

Media Representations of Black Women

Popular media representation of BW influences how others view and treat them (Corbin, et al., 2018). These images reinforce popular stereotypes that categorize BW as sassy, intense, irrational, and angry (Corbin, et al., 2018). In turn, this leaves BW on the defense as they are vulnerable to experiencing microaggressions at PWIs (Corbin, et al., 2018). The most common of these stereotypes include the Angry, Mammy, and Strong tropes (Corbin, et al., 2018). BW are continually working to disprove these media-produced stereotypes at PWIs while also maintaining their mental clarity (Corbin, et al., 2018). An examination of these depictions can explain the intersection of racism and sexism present in higher education (Corbin, et al., 2018).

Mammy Stereotype

The first depiction to be examined is the Mammy, or “Aunt Jemima,” stereotype (Yarbrough et al., 2000). This stereotype represents the display of BW being everyone’s favorite aunt or grandmother (Yarbrough et al., 2000). Derived from the idolization of BW serving the White family under American slavery, the Mammy is always ready to soothe everyone’s pain and wipe away their tears (Hills, 2019; Yarbrough et al., 2000). Mass media depicts the Mammy as strongly submissive towards her owner during slavery and later her employer following their emancipation (Yarbrough, 2000). Such a portrayal of BW allows for their oppression to be

justified in the U.S. (Collins, 1990). Controlling BW's image normalizes the racism, sexism, and poverty experienced by BW (Collins, 1990).

As the normalization of this role in higher education continues, it is common for BW to find themselves forced to enact the part of an 'Academic Mammy' (Hills, 2019). Academic Mammies are expected to know their place and carry the loads of everyone else at the expense of their well-being (Hills, 2019; Yarbrough, 2000). Included in this load is the act of overextending themselves willingly and giving up their own fulfillment and happiness in favor of their White counterparts and White culture (Hills, 2019). Academic mammy-ing results from a racist and sexist perception of BW and their womanhood (Hills, 2019). It is used to allow mistreatment and exploitation of BW while also assuming they lack competence and do not perform well as scholars (Hills, 2019).

White students tend to inherit these beliefs of incompetency by viewing BW in academic settings as having less intelligence and needing to cater to their needs solely (Hills, 2019). In turn, students of color also expect to be given undivided attention and care as the underrepresented student population (Hills, 2019). In an academic essay by Darrius D'wayne Hills (2019) on the burdens of BW scholars, Maya Whitaker shares her experience as a professor expected to be a Mammy, or other mother, to her students in comparison to other professors. White and male professors are expected to be the only ones competent in pedagogy as Whitaker is used as a prop not meant to contribute but instead reinforce the racial hierarchy of teaching (Hills, 2019). The Academic Mammy stereotype is problematic as it leads to BW receiving unequal pay salaries, no support from administrations, and racist comments and behaviors from colleagues and students while performing great academic labor (Hills, 2019).

Angry Stereotype

Performing this extensive academic labor and living in a White-dominated society not designed to support Black individuals or women causes great pain which leads to anger (Rodriguez & Boahene, 2012). Women of color in America have grown to be angry at being silenced, unchosen, and seen as inhumane (Lorde, 1984). Black feminist Audre Lorde recalls the many ways that women of color utilize rage as a means to survive the everyday racism endured in White academia. Lorde (1984) says that every woman has stored anger that can be useful against the oppressions they face personally and institutionally. Women of color have learned to cope with their anger and channel it to benefit them despite others viewing it as a negative quality (Lorde, 1984). The transformation of anger allows these women to be empowered to commit acts of service that create the future they desire (Lorde, 1984). However, BW still fall victim to silencing and emotionally policing themselves in fear of others in higher education categorizing them as angry (Corbin, et al., 2018). Mainstream media also tries to silence women's response to racism in hopes of racism remaining a normalized and expected experience of the oppressed woman (Lorde, 1984).

Despite many Black feminists' refusal to be silent about racism and reclaim the emotion of anger, BW are still at significant risk of experiencing racial battle fatigue (Corbin, et al., 2018). The risk of racial battle fatigue is due to the effects of the media's angry Black woman and strong Black woman images (Corbin, et al., 2018). Given the name Sapphire, the stereotype of the angry Black woman portrays them as being evil, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful (Yarbrough et al., 2000). In a study done by Corbin et al. (2018), counter-stories of undergraduate student Kyla Sarpong's conversation with faculty member Dr. Maya Gabriel were created from a compilation of the experiences of 13 BW at PWIs across the U.S. In one exchange between Kyla

and Dr. Gabriel, Kyla shares being upset about an incident that occurred in her diversity class (Corbin, et al., 2018).

During Kyla's diversity class, a professor showcased racist imagery used to depict Black people (Corbin, et al., 2018). In response, a fellow White classmate excused the image rather than acknowledge its racist intent. Kyla wanted to say something to the student but instead shrugged it off due to being exhausted from the current racial climate and to not seem angry. Caricatures of BW in popular culture showcase them as being irrational and filled with baseless anger, which is what Kyla was trying to avoid (Corbin, et al., 2018). The impact of this depiction is BW often assuming themselves to be unjustly angry by default due to being told they are by mass media (Corbin, et al., 2018).

Strong Stereotype

In fear of being dismissed as the mass media's depiction of the Angry Black woman, the Strong Black Woman trope was born (Corbin et al., 2018). To maintain agency and avoid being unheard, BW utilize this strong image as a defense form (Corbin et al., 2018). This mechanism derives from respectability politics upheld by middle-class women within the Black Baptist church between 1880 and 1920 (Higginbotham, 1993). The Black Baptist church served as a means for Black men and women to rally against the racism and poverty they faced (Higginbotham, 1993). Using the Bible to fight for the rights of BW within the church and larger society, BW of the Baptist church advocated for voting rights, equal employment, and educational opportunities (Higginbotham, 1993). The church expected BW to become an archetype of Black womanhood that showed great moral and superhuman strength in aggressors' faces (Corbin et al., 2018). Appearing strong allowed BW of the church to maintain their dignity and morality when faced with insults during discourse (Higginbotham, 1993). In an

autoethnography written about her first year in academia as a Black woman, Mikkaka Overstreet (2019) compares herself to D.C. African superhero Vixen's strength to document her experiences receiving racial insults.

Indistinguishable from the traits expected of BW while facing racial insults, Vixen's powers are super strength, healing quickly, and shapeshifting (Overstreet, 2019). Overstreet (2019) recalls different instances where she mimics Vixen's powers when faced with negative responses to her headwrap during faculty meetings. Headwraps are commonly used as a fabric accessory to beautify BW's natural kinky hair (Overstreet, 2019). In one experience, Overstreet recalls a staff member laughing at her headwrap and imitating a Jamaican accent to ask her for a psychic reading. In another, Overstreet's name was mistaken for another Black woman faculty member's, despite her looking drastically different in height, body shape, skin tone, and her non-use of headwraps. In both instances, Overstreet suppressed her emotions by shyly laughing off the offensive encounters, wholly mortified and unaware of how to respond (Overstreet, 2019).

As the qualities of Vixen assumed by Overstreet during these encounters, the strong image of BW has shown its way into other forms of media. Television characters such as Olivia Pope of *Scandal* and Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder* are included in this imagery (Corbin et al., 2018). These characters' core personality traits revolve around the Strong Black Woman trope (Corbin et al., 2018). These fictional women depict BW as strong women who have it all together and handle their business (Corbin et al., 2018). However, these images are harmful as they encourage BW to suppress their normal human responses to the oppression they face (Corbin et al., 2018). Feeling anger under these circumstances is normal, yet BW live in an unhealthy mental space by remaining mute to showcase strength (Corbin et al., 2018).

Graduate School Experiences

While BW have learned to emulate strength as a skill, professionals, in general, are expected to apply a wide range of skills and competencies to their career in student affairs (Muller et al., 2017). This skillset is as outlined by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (Muller et al., 2017). Professionals can attain these skills during their time in their Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA) graduate degree programs, professional development opportunities, and working in the field (Muller et al., 2017). Graduate students participating in HESA programs are likely to gain exposure to the field by obtaining a graduate assistantship. Graduate assistantships may incorporate the values of social justice in their work.

Of the attainable competencies within student affairs, the values of social justice and inclusion are commonly mentioned (Muller et al., 2017). Social justice and inclusion is a vision or goal that “works towards the equity of resources and individuals having a sense of social responsibility towards others, society, and the broader world in which we live” (Bell, 2013, pp. 21). Many HESA master programs commit to social justice and inclusion in their mission statements, requiring students to enroll in at least one diversity class (Harris & Linder, 2018; Flowers, 2003). However, BW graduate students pursuing student affairs often report their graduate school experiences as being non-inclusive.

Curriculum

Harris and Linder (2018) examined graduate school's inclusiveness, sampling 29 graduate students participating in HESA programs and representing 21 public and private institutions across the U.S. Eleven students identified as Black, with the majority of the 29 students in total being women. Researchers asked each participant about their experiences in 45-75 minute

interviews. There were four major themes found of student of color's experience within graduate school. These themes were educating White peers, invalidation of experiences and identity, racial stereotypes, and isolation (Harris & Linder, 2018).

When these themes of race and education were discussed in the classroom, they seldom went further than surface-level conversations (Harris & Linder, 2018). Overall, it was commonly found that programs lacked a depth of social justice, cultural competence, and diversity despite requiring diversity courses in the curriculum. During class, White students were allowed to state their privilege without being required to unpack it further. This upset one Hispanic participant as he was hoping that White students would be asked how their identity would inform their future work with students. Stephanie, a Black woman participant, shared similar sentiments as she was concerned with future White professionals continuing to harm students at their prospective institutions. Concurrently, there were also no expectations of the students of color to share their experiences further to develop these future educators. Many participants often mentioned that race greatly influenced their experiences within the programs. Participants were either the only, or one of the few, people of color within their cohort. Being minoritized led them to question their experiences in White environments and whether or not they were valid (Harris & Linder, 2018).

In another study conducted by Muller et al. (2018), it was found that minoritized individuals in White settings were more likely to have a higher attainment of social justice/inclusion competence than others. Those that identified as people of color, persons with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ community were included in this category. This could be because these demographics are more invested in these issues than their non-marginalized peers (Muller, 2018). By not acknowledging their racial plight, faculty and assistantship

providers contribute to the negative experiences of students of color within HESA graduate programs (Harris & Linder, 2018). Perhaps student affairs programs and the instructors should focus more of their attention on topics related to social justice and foster conversations for all students to critically engage (Muller, 2018).

Peer Interactions

When critically engaging in conversations with ten or more people, a person of color can expect to experience some form of microaggression (Williams, 2020). Microaggressions include negative or hostile attitudes, color blindness, objectification, and avoidance (Williams, 2020). Microaggressions are typically thought of as random acts committed by well-intentioned individuals that should be given the doubt's benefit (Williams, 2020). Microaggressions are aggressive, deliberate acts of dominance fueled by underlying bias (Williams, 2020). Offenders (typically individuals in the majority) may feel anxiety or hostility around a targeted group (usually marginalized peoples) based on stereotypes of fear (Williams, 2020). For this reason, challenging assumptions and learned stereotypes to reduce this anxiety and fear within an offender is an effective method for educating those who commit acts of microaggressions (Williams, 2020).

As a means to challenge their classmates' assumptions and share their racial experiences in the classroom, some participants of the Harris and Linder (2018) study took it upon themselves to make their identities visible by engaging in discussions. Students did so by becoming a native informant that advocated for themselves and their culture to educate their White peers (Harris & Linder, 2018). Naddia, a Black lesbian, shared that this role exhausted her and led to racial battle fatigue. Naddia described the classroom as a struggle that is hard for her to continue fighting in when she holds so many marginalized identities. It is common for native

informants to experience racial battle fatigue whether they were asked to educate others or not (Harris & Linder, 2018).

While trying to educate their White peers, students of color assuming the native informant role often found themselves being invalidated (Harris & Linder, 2018). This is due to White graduate students not having to experience the injustices within the educational system, therefore they deny that they exist (Harris & Linder, 2018). Master's students of color reported facing daily encounters of racism, isolation, and feelings of having to combat racial stereotypes within the classroom and their assistantships. Students that identified as both Black and a woman also recalled situations where they faced racism and sexism in both settings. Students of color also fell victim to essentialism when their experiences were clumped into one racial category despite them identifying as different races and ethnicities. Educators should strive to change this culture by examining their own internalized biases and addressing the systems of domination that impact the experiences of students of color within HESA programs (Harris & Linder, 2018). Doing so would relieve students of color of the pressure of assuming the native informant role within their classrooms and assistantships (Harris & Linder, 2018).

Professional Work Experiences

As a continuation of the systemic domination endured during graduate school classrooms and assistantships, BW may have difficulty advancing in their job positions once they enter the workforce as full-time staff. There, all women are likely to be faced with invisible systemic barriers (Dickens, et al., 2019). These barriers are often referred to as the “glass ceiling” that is to be broken through by women and marginalized people (Dickens, et al., 2019). Women run into glass ceilings when a seemingly achievable work goal, such as a promotion, is presented to them

yet becomes unattainable when a barrier suddenly occurs (Dickens, et al., 2019). BW experience a “concrete ceiling” that is more difficult to break through than glass due to the double marginalization of their race and gender (Kumar, 2016 as cited in Dickens, et al., 2019). When reacting to this concrete ceiling, the concern of any wrong actions reflecting negatively on their social group is high for BW as they are often one of the few, or token, BW in their work environments (Dickens, et al., 2019). Therefore, BW may assimilate to dominate work culture to reduce the risk of scrutiny and hypervisibility in exchange for increasing their perceived belonging (McCluney, 2019).

Identity Shifting

To assimilate and increase their perceived belonging, BW have developed coping strategies to mitigate the effects of gendered racism experienced in their lifetime (Jones, et al., 2021). Microaggressions endured during graduate school may be a prominent illustration of these experiences. Identity shifting is one example of these developed strategies, which is the alteration of how one speaks and behaves to conform to their work environment (Jones, et al., 2021). Other shifting components include the changing of appearance, mannerisms, and other cultural markers that are assumed to be associated with BW’s existence (Dickens, et al., 2019). This strategy and those alike are temporary, short-term fixes that lead to long-term effects on BW’s mental and physical health (Jones, et al., 2021). Identity shifting is detrimental for BW as they are more likely to perform well when they show up as their authentic selves (Smith, 2018). Being comfortable in their skin allows for BW to provide suggestions and recommendations to work discussions from their point of view (Smith, 2018). Shifting between their gendered-racial existence and curated professional selves can be stressful on their mental health (Dickens, et al., 2019).

Jones and others (2021) examined the relationship between these BW's mental health and identity shifting symptoms. It was found that the stress of identity shifting causes BW to report higher levels of poor mental health, anxiety, and depression due to the intersection of their race and gender. Reasons for shifting included being accepted by dominant society but most noticeably as a means to combat stereotypical images of themselves. Institutions could alleviate the pressure to identity shift by engaging in authentic leadership (Jones, et al., 2021). Authentic leadership can be defined as leaders possessing the traits of transparency, openness, trust, and guidance, which shows within their relationships with followers and associates (Gardner, et al., 2005). Employing authentic leaders allows for self-awareness and self-acceptance to become a norm in the workplace, promoting inclusion and better work performance (Gardner, et al., 2005; Cottrill, et al., 2014). To further address the state of BW's mental health, PWI's should also promote mental wellness activities in departments where BW are not the majority (Jones, et al., 2021).

Isolation in the Workplace

BW and other people of color are not a majority at PWIs due to the low retention rates of staff members of color (Steele, 2018). On these campuses, SAPs report working in departments with few people of color while experiencing promotion barriers, racial bias, and feelings of otherness (Jayakumar, et al., 2009). While experiencing overt racism is not common, professionals of color do experience microaggressions, isolation, and feelings of discomfort in specific settings on campus (Steele, 2018). These factors lead to people of color leaving institutions with a hostile racial climate (Watson, Williams, & Derby, 2005). To examine how institutions can best support these staff members, Steele (2018) conducted a study on the retention of staff of color at PWIs.

In this study, Steele (2018) found that participants reported feeling invisible to their institution despite the many roles they performed. One participant, Melody, shared that despite her three years at her institution, she still experiences being ignored by others as they enter a room. Other participants shared that they did not feel valued at their institutions. Maxine elaborated on this by stating that she stopped giving her opinion on things because she knew she would not be heard. These experiences may lead to the development of invisibility syndrome, or “the inner struggle of being ignored or undervalued because of prejudice and racism” (Franklin, 1999 as cited in Dickens & Chavez, 2018, pp. 767). When experiencing invisibility syndrome, BW slip into a state of self-isolation where they speak less as a means to avoid being visible (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Initially expecting to change their institution's climate, professionals of color instead become discouraged when they find that they have little influence to do so (Steele, 2018). Unfortunately, these sentiments are common for BW as they wonder if they were hired for their expertise or simply to help institutions meet their diversity requirement (Overstreet, 2019).

Despite BW having moments of self-doubt because of diversity requirements, some attributes of their work environments have made positive impacts on them. Referring to the previous mention of authenticity, Maxine found that her supervisor made her feel valued by allowing her to be heard while also being her authentic self (Steele, 2018). Along with supervision, mutual support from other people of color across the institution added support for these participants. Participants often joined racial/ethnic groups and organizations that allowed for common experiences and tips to be shared. These spaces are seen as a means of survival on navigating their invalidated experiences at PWIs (Steele, 2018). The most common tip shared amongst them was a warning of caution to stay under the radar as a means to protect their mental

and physical health. Steele (2018) encourages more research to further examine how community support serves as a coping mechanism for staff experiencing racial tension at their institution.

Strategies for Self-Care

The lack of community support combined with experiencing microaggressions at institutions with racially charged tension can also lead to racial battle fatigue (Husband, 2016). These campuses consist of environments that force Black SAPs to endure stress resulting from unfair treatment (Husband, 2016). BW SAPs are likely to endure an even higher amount of stress due to the conjunction of their experiences with sexism as well. These experiences make it difficult for BW SAPs to focus on their students' needs in their already demanding roles (Husband, 2016). In addition to these hostile environments, SAPs generally struggle with work-life balance as their positions often require them to work over the 40-hour workweek (Husband, 2016). Certain situations such as 24-hour on-call crisis response and student night programming attribute to the extra hours worked (Husband, 2016). These extreme work hours, along with microaggressions, leads to BW's burnout as their self-care needs remain unattained to (Husband, 2016). To encourage community support and empower one another, BW SAPs create counter spaces to cope (Husband, 2016; Quaye, 2019).

Sister Circles as Counterspaces

Counterspaces serve as environments, on or off-campus, where professionals can be their authentic selves and connect with others (Quaye, 2019). These spaces allow for professionals to care for themselves and express their experiences (Quaye, 2019). While counter spaces catering to Black SAPs in general may exist at an institution, participants with other marginalized identities found them not to be safe (Quaye, 2019). Often race was the only identity being

centered while messages of misogyny, queer-phobia, and transphobia were spewed (Quaye, 2019). In response, BW create counter spaces called sister circles that specifically center their experiences (Henry & Glenn, 2009). These spaces allow for BW SAPs to develop support systems and share stories about their daily negative experiences in their roles (Henry & Glenn, 2009).

To broadcast their stories, Quaye and others (2019) center the voices of Black SAPs and their responses to an anti-Black society. In their study, many BW name counter spaces as a form of self-care that relieves racial battle fatigue (Quaye, 2019). One participant, Imani, described these spaces as helpful to ease the feelings of isolation by reminding BW that they are not alone. Imani specifically recalls sister circles as space where she could discuss the Mike Brown shooting at the time of the occurrence. Another participant, Lo, mentions how sister circles consist of BW across campus having lunch and taking mini-retreats with each other. The women were able to connect with each other organically and learn to navigate racial battle fatigue in solidarity during sister circles and mini-retreats (Quaye, 2019).

Professional Development

Finding solidarity against racial battle fatigue in professionals outside of their workplace was also found to be of importance in Quaye's and others' study (2019). Not only was building relationships with other BW beneficial to participants, so was the opportunity to find white allies that became advocates of their treatment. Creating this spectrum of connections allowed for BW SAPs to practice self-care in response to racial battle fatigue together. Trinity and Joy noted that being in community with others outside of their own departments allowed them to ask others' questions about the challenges faced daily. The sharing of other BW's experiences affirmed their own while allowing them to vent as opposed to keeping it to themselves. A common way for BW

to build these outside connections within student affairs is to attend the African American Women's Summit (AAWS) (West, 2019). This summit is a professional development that serves as counter space for BW SAPs (West, 2019).

Created by BW to serve as counter space for BW, the AAWS is an annual day-long workshop reoccurring in March during the NASPA Annual Conference (West, 2019). AAWS brings 100-150 BW SAPs together to share the positive and negative stories about their existence at their institution (West, 2019). This group of women ranges from undergraduate and graduate students to mid and senior-level SAPs (West, 2019). AAWS fosters engagement between new professionals and seasoned professionals working in positions they aspire to obtain someday (West, 2019). The Summit utilizes small and large groups "on-the-spot mentoring" facilitated by Summit faculty to discuss personal and professional growth strategies (West, 2019). Attendees account for the AAWS' help with forming mentoring relationships, professional networks, and encouragement to explore spirituality to cope as contributions to their well-being and success at their PWI (West, 2019).

Mentorship

The formulation of the AAWS is one example of the many ways that BW SAPs intentionally create relationships to help each other (West, 2019). Connecting with possible mentors of the same racial identity is essential for the success of BW graduate students (Zachary, 2011 as cited in Minnett, et al., 2019). The lack of opportunities for mentorship for women of color is a notably mentioned barrier to BW's success in higher education (Kelly & McCann, 2014). This type of support in peer mentorship provides insight into how to survive graduate school and its systematic marginalization, which harms BW (Collins, 2000 & Lorde, 2012/1984 as cited in Minnett, et al. 2019). Missing out on this support furthers feelings of isolation within

academic settings (Kelly & McCann, 2014). Mentors provide mentees with guidance on how to navigate the territory of higher education, celebrates their success to discourage imposter syndrome, share similar stories and emotions, and help promote self-care (Overstreet, 2019)

Personal Wellness

A common self-care strategy for those who experience racial battle fatigue is taking care of their physical and mental health (Quaye et al., 2019). Being physically active allows BW SAPs to exert the negative energy they experience in the workplace and redirect it towards their workouts (Quaye et al., 2019). Cardiovascular activities such as running or walking around campus provide Black SAPs with mental health benefits as it promotes mental clarity (Quaye et al., 2019). Other mental health strategies extensively utilized include mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and deep breathing (Quaye et al., 2019). Paired with taking needed mental health days, current Black SAPs encourage entering professionals to partake in activities that promote health and engagement (Quaye et al., 2019). Finding a sound support system and counselors that can relate to their experiences with racism are also other ways to navigate racial battle fatigue (Quaye et al., 2019). Doing so alleviates how overwhelming the racism present in student affairs can be by allowing one to function at their fullest capacity (Quaye et al., 2019).

Implications

To function at their fullest capacity, BW SAPs have employed many self-care strategies to help them survive and cope with the racism and sexism endured regularly (Quaye, 2019). However, it is essential that the act of navigating these spaces does not triumph the need to change the systemic issues within student affairs (Quaye, 2019). The strategies mentioned above are mere band-aids for SAPs that do not dismantle systemic racism, sexism, and White

supremacy (Quaye, 2019). Administrators and employers within higher education can address these systems of oppression by creating policies and environments which affirm BW's experiences and support them (Jones, et al., 2021). Such settings would include creating sister circles, mentorship programs, and opportunities for professional development (Husband, 2016; Henry & Glenn, 2009). All serve to encourage BW to share how they are impacted by power, privilege, and oppression (Husband, 2016; Henry & Glenn, 2009).

The sharing of BW's experiences is essential, as it allows for healing against racialized trauma (Husband, 2016). Other ways that institutions could support BW would be by assisting with creating retreats for Black and White women (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing guidelines, institutions may consider utilizing technology to encourage this community-building in virtual spaces (Henry & Glenn, 2009). Like transgender people's online spaces of community, social media, institutional websites, and other software programs can allow BW SAPs to connect virtually (Henry & Glenn, 2009; Nicolazzo, 2017). Such initiatives would allow Black and White women to understand each other by sharing life stories and discussing personal biases and stereotypes (Patton & Harper, 2003). These discussions would promote inclusivity in student affairs in order for BW to feel heard and supported rather than feel the need to identity shift to be accepted (Jones, et al., 2021).

Literature Review Summary and Conclusion

Black women (BW) student affairs professionals (SAPs) experience many forms of discrimination based on popular media's stereotypical images. Such stereotypes include the Mammy, Angry, and Strong women tropes. These images impact how BW are treated by students, peers/colleagues, professors, and supervisors during their graduate school experience and later on in their professional work lives. Others express the impact of these images through

microaggressions aimed towards BW, which are indeed intentional, harmful, and aggressive. The media's stereotypical imagery is also internalized by BW, affecting how BW SAPs respond to these microaggressions in fear of not reaffirming them.

In turn, this leaves BW within student affairs feeling isolated, undervalued, and questioning if they are simply tokens to further institutional diversity initiatives. To increase their sense of belonging and reduce their visibility, many BW find themselves identity shifting to adhere to the dominant work culture, which greatly reaffirms White culture and White supremacy. As a means to cope with their treatment and form a community, BW SAPs create sister circles as counter spaces for self-care. In these settings, BW provide each other with mentorship and encouragement to take care of themselves mentally, physically, and spiritually. While these coping strategies are found to help mitigate the effects of racial battle fatigue, they do not change the culture of student affairs. To dismantle systems of oppression and White supremacy at large, institutions must support BW by implementing policy change, creating inclusive environments that promote BW to show up as their authentic selves, and assisting with forming sister circles. This also includes providing professional development opportunities and mentorship both physically and virtually.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

In efforts to retain Black women (BW) in the student affairs profession, predominately White institutions (PWIs) must become intentional about fostering safe spaces for this demographic to combat racial battle fatigue (Jones, et al., 2021). Not only does this include policy change to promote inclusive work environments as a means to shift the culture of the field, but also additional opportunities for professional development and mentorship to occur (Husband, 2016; Henry & Glenn, 2009). Chapter 3 will begin by proposing a mentor sister circle program for College Student Affairs Leadership (CSAL) graduate students that identify as BW. The setting for this proposal will take place at Grand Valley State University (GVSU). Such a program would call for the collaboration of GVSU's College of Education, Center for Women and Gender Equity (CWGE), and Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) departments.

Through the collaboration of multiple functional areas, the creation of this mentorship program would allow for BW CSAL graduate students to partake in opportunities of growth within a community setting. The formed community will be composed of established BW SAPs and faculty members to serve as mentors. As a means for administration to acknowledge mentors for their work, a stipend will be provided by the Provost and Executive Vice President of the Academic and Student Affairs office. Involvement will also count as significant service towards staff and faculty promotion and tenure. Concurrently, graduate students within the mentorship program, referred to as mentees, will provide fellow mentees with peer mentorship. Next, the development of hybrid in-person and virtual meetings, professional development opportunities,

and a mini-retreat is discussed. Finally, this chapter concludes by offering plans for implementation.

Project Components

This section will begin by detailing the process to initiate the mentoring program. To start, an email invitation for the commencement of the mentoring program is to be dispersed to new and existing graduate students, faculty, and staff members that identify as BW (see Appendix A). Kelly and McCann (2014) explains that the lack of mentorship opportunities hinders the success of women of color in higher education. As a means to offer this opportunity to BW within GVSU's CSAL graduate program, recipients are invited to participate as possible mentees in a separate email. The email invitation also identifies the goal of this program being to create support in the form of sister circles for BW CSAL graduate students.

Introductions

Introductions are the next step to be detailed. Upon receiving responses of acceptance, best possible meeting times would be determined to schedule hour-long monthly meetings. These meetings will reoccur during both Fall and Winter semesters each school year. West (2019) states that it is important for entering professionals to engage with seasoned professionals serving in positions they aspire to be in someday. Therefore, monthly meetings would encourage this group of BW to connect and share their experiences on campus and within the student affairs field.

The initial meeting will communicate the intention of this program to serve as counterspaces of sister circles. During these monthly occurrences, mentees are given the chance

to seek counsel about their navigation of GVSU as a PWI. Mentors then can provide advice based on their own experiences and name the self-care strategies they partake in to cope with their work settings. While following meetings may be held virtually via Zoom, the initial meeting is to be held in-person so that everyone may meet and introduce themselves. Face-to-face introductions establish familiarity between mentees and mentors so that mentees may see relatable faces while roaming campus. The nature of the following meetings are to remain open and unstructured, allowing for the flow of conversation to occur naturally based on relative topics of discussion.

Building Rapport

This section focuses on building rapport between mentees and mentors. While Overstreet (2019) explains that mentors sharing their stories and emotions with mentees provides them with guidance, it may be difficult for everyone to initially open up to one another. I Am From is a common poem activity utilized within school settings to facilitate open communication. This activity produces safe environments to interact in by focusing on one's upbringing, identity, and culture. It would be best to utilize this activity after participants have already gathered for a few meeting sessions. By then, relationships and comfortability within the group will have been previously established.

The exercise utilizes poetry for self-reflection by asking participants to complete a series of 'I Am From' statements (see Appendix B). Examples of these statements include references to one's hometown, family traditions, cultural foods, and childhood experiences. After being given the prompt, 5 minutes is given for brainstorming, followed by another 5-10 minutes for writing. Once time runs out, both mentees and mentors are asked to share their poems to the group if they

are comfortable doing so. After all willing participants have shared, time to reflect on the activity, any similarities noticed, and feelings evoked are discussed. For guidance on the history of I Am From or possible facilitator questions, participants may find the University of Minnesota's faculty guide useful (see Appendix B).

Professional Developments

In addition to monthly meetings, professional development opportunities are a major component of the mentoring program. Authentically interacting amongst each other in both on campus and off campus events serve as counterspaces for BW SAPs (Quaye, 2019). As identified as important in Quaye and others' (2019) study, interactions with other professionals outside of their department assists BW with finding solidarity in others. Providing mentees with at least two professional development opportunities each semester serves as a means for these outside interactions to occur. Likewise, mentors will also benefit from networking to broaden their community support as well. These opportunities will range from on campus events to relative off campus conferences.

On Campus Development

For on campus developments, the group should attend or participate in OMA's events hosted during their Black History Month programming. One event includes the Black Voices student panel which features the sharing of Black GVSU students' experiences on campus. Other events include the Talk Back Tuesday discussions, which partners with the CWGE to center intersectionality in relation to prominent events and topics. Annual mentee participation of both events offers further insight of their experiences at GVSU as a CSAL graduate student, specifically one that is both Black and woman. Such participation may lead to the naming and

examination of the multiple systems of oppression experienced by BW as outlined in Wing's (1997) CRF theory. Further aligning with the goals of CRF theory, sharing these stories as BW attending GVSU gives faculty, staff, and possible administrators in attendance different perspectives of campus climate than those of singular marginalized identities (Wing, 1997).

Off Campus Development

Larger professional development opportunities include mentees and mentors attending local and statewide conferences together. Graduate students' funding to attend these conferences can be requested from the Graduate Student Association (GSA). Attending a range of conferences that varies in topics related to racism, campus climate, depression, self-care strategies, and BW in higher education will equip both mentors and mentees with necessary strategies to assist them in their own work and personal journeys. Mentors may also find that their load of being the sole source of information for mentees will be lightened. Examples of these conferences include GVSU's own Multicultural Conference hosted by OMA, University of Michigan's Depression on College Campuses Conference, the African American Women's Summit (AAWS) hosted during NASPA, and others. Mentees and mentors are able to deepen their relationships with one another by engaging in community off-campus, discover new possible discussion topics for following meetings, and connect with other professionals outside of GVSU through these conferences.

Identifying Allies

Similarly to connecting with professionals from other institutions, Quayle and others' (2019) state that BW SAPs benefit from participating in opportunities to meet allies. These connections may later assist BW in combating racial battle fatigue by receiving advocacy from

allies (Quaye et al., 2019). Participants of the mentoring program may be interested in attending the CWGE and Department of Women & Gender Studies' collaborative programs for Women's History Month each March. One prominent program includes the annual Equalitea on-campus conference. The Equalitea conference gathers women and allies across the local area over tea and lunch. During this session, attendees are able to engage with others through dialogue and reflection related to rotating themes within American women's history. Meeting and interacting with allies during Equalitea may appeal to mentees.

Mini-Retreat

Following Equalitea, a mini-retreat for BW and allies across campus will replace the mentor program's final meeting of the school year. Mentees and mentors will detail their experiences as BW navigating the racial climate of GVSU's campus. Allies are invited to attend and listen in on this concluding meeting. The goal of this mini-retreat would be for mentees to engage in important dialogue which centers their stories to inform allies of how to best support them. As a means to avoid any interference or conflict, the retreat will be facilitated by a pair of senior staff/faculty members, one identifying as a mentor of the program and the other an ally. The retreat serves as a safe space for necessary conversations to occur, focusing on the nature of campus and how its climate can become more inclusive moving forward.

Project Evaluation

This project should be continuously evaluated through two methods of assessment. The first would be short surveys for mentees and mentors to anonymously complete after each professional development (see Appendix C). Time to fill out surveys will be made available after each event, which should take no longer than five minutes to complete. The surveys will ask

participants to indicate their role in the program (mentee or mentor), provide short answers on key takeaways gained, and to score whether these events positively enhanced their personal and professional development or not. Questions would be scored on a 1-5 scale where 1 is low and 5 is high. There will also be space at the end of the survey for any additional comments. Feedback will provide knowledge on whether or not the attendance of said events are beneficial to the mentor program or if the itinerary should be adjusted for years following.

The second form of assessment would be mid- and end of the year evaluations. The evaluations would ask more in depth questions relating to the entirety of the mentor program and its meetings (see Appendix D). Questions on the form include whether or not participants have formed a community of support, identified possible mentors or mentees, and received needed guidance from participation in the mentor program. Answers are to be indicated on the same 1-5 scale as the survey, with the option to provide short answers at the end. Participants will be asked to complete the evaluation by signing their name. Follow up with those indicating any additional needs may take place to offer further assistance.

All answers compiled from the surveys and evaluations will be compiled to provide quantitative and qualitative data on the effectiveness of the program and its goals. Assessment data will be reviewed by mentors. The information learned will be utilized to identify any room for program improvements as indicated in the results. It will also serve as justification for the continuum of the mentor sister circle program for the Provost and Executive Vice President.

Project Conclusion

BW make up a significant portion of higher education student affairs jobs at PWIs. Yet, they are at great risk of enduring microaggressions, underappreciation, and underrepresentation

which all leads to racial battle fatigue. Identity shifting is often utilized as a tool of survival to this constant exposure of adversity. However, this tactic does not benefit institutions or their undergraduate students that identify as BW. Adhering to White culture causes BW SAPs to behave inauthentically. This does not create space for BW to provide diverse input in important work conversations or relatability to students of the same cultural backgrounds.

For this reason, BW graduate students pursuing student affairs need mentors that they can envision themselves as. This demographic must have a community to encourage healthy self-care practices to combat the fatigue experienced on PWI campuses. Mentors offer similar life experiences, validation, and promote mental, spiritual, and physical wellness (Quaye et al., 2019). The proposed project allows for a program to incorporate all of these elements to cultivate success within GVSU's CSAL program. Following the aspects of Wing's (1997) CRF theory, the formulation of this mentor program centers BW CSAL students in important discussions. As outlined by CRF, it is critical that BW utilize storytelling to name their experiences so that others may understand them (Wing, 1997). Partaking in sister circles and professional developments alongside mentors and fellow colleagues offers these graduate students the chance to define their professionalism in a way that centers their own culture, identity, and experiences.

Plans for Implementation

The mentorship program is intended to be utilized by the College of Education's College Student Affairs Leadership program. Due to the enrollment of BW in said program being relatively low years prior, invitations to participate as mentees would be open to BW in other graduate programs as well. However, the program is designed to cater to both cohorts of the CSAL program by being offered each year. The I Am From poem handout, along with compiled

surveys and evaluations, will provide future members with adequate information on the program's design and areas for improvement. Mentees and mentors that have previously participated will also be able to serve as references for those inquiring about the program and what it entails.

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Appendix A
Participant Recruitment Email (Mentor)

Dear [insert name],

My name is Taijah Claybrook and I am a graduate student enrolled in the College of Education's College Student Affairs Leadership program. We are in the process of launching an initiative at GVSU that would benefit Black Women partaking in the CSAL graduate program. The GVSU College of Education CSAL department is hosting a year long mentor sister circle program which features sister circles as counterspaces. This program will meet monthly, with the option to participate in person or virtually.

Given your connection to Black women graduate students and/or potential interest in this project, we want to invite you to participate as a mentor within our mentor program. All mentors will engage in critical conversations with mentees about personal experiences at a PWI and the student affairs profession. All mentors will also be asked to participate in professional developments and a concluding mini-retreat session. While this service may count in the promotion process, an honorarium will also be provided.

Please feel free to send me an email at claybrot@mail.gvsu.edu if you are interested in assuming a mentor role or lending your support anyway you see fit.

Thank you for your consideration and I hope to hear from you soon,

Taijah Claybrook

claybrot@mail.gvsu.edu

Graduate Student, College Student Affairs Leadership (Higher Education)
Grand Valley State University

Appendix B

"I Am From" Poem Template

I am from.....

Adapted by Levi Romero

Inspired by "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon

I am from _____ (an everyday item in your home)
 from _____ and _____ (products or everyday items in your home)
 I am from the _____ (description of your home)
 _____ (a detail about your home – a smell, taste, or feel)
 I am from the _____ (plant, flower, natural item)
 The _____ (plant or tree near your home)
 whose long gone limbs I remember
 as if they were my own.

I'm from _____ and _____ (a family tradition and family trait)
 from _____ and _____ (family members)
 I'm from _____ and _____ (family habits)
 and from _____ (family habit)

I'm from _____ and _____ (things you were told as a child)
 and _____ (a song or saying you learned as a child)
 I'm from _____ (a family tradition)
 I'm from _____ (place of birth) and _____ (family ancestry, nationality or place)
 _____ and _____ (family foods)
 From _____ (a story about a family member)
 _____ (detail about the story or person)
 _____ (description of family momentos, pictures or treasures.)
 _____ (location of momentos – under my bed, on the wall, in my heart)
 _____ (more description if needed)

By (student name) _____ Date _____

Adapted by Levi Romero. Inspired by "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon.
 Use along with the University of Minnesota's "I Am From" Activity Guide

Adapted by Levi Romero. Inspired by "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon.
 Use along with the University of Minnesota's "I Am From" Activity Guide.

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY
ED 693/695 Data Form

NAME: Taijah Claybrook

MAJOR: (Choose only 1)

Adult & Higher Ed Educational Differentiation Library Media

Advanced Content Specialization Education Leadership Middle Level Ed

Cognitive Impairment Educational Technology Reading

CSAL Elementary Ed School Counseling TESOL

Early Childhood Ed Emotional Impairment Secondary Level Ed

Early Childhood Developmental Delay Learning Disabilities

Special Ed Admin

TITLE: Building Community for Black Women Student Affairs Graduate Students

by Creating a Mentor Sister Circle Program

PAPER TYPE: (Choose only 1)

SEM/YR COMPLETED: Winter 2021

Thesis

Project

SUPERVISOR'S SIGNATURE OF APPROVAL _____

Using key words or phrases, choose several ERIC descriptors (5 - 7 minimum) to describe the contents of your project. ERIC descriptors can be found online

at: <http://eric.ed.gov/?ti=all>

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Group Activities | 6. Racial Attitudes |
| 2. Community Support | 7. Sex Stereotypes |
| 3. Diversity | 8. |
| 4. Women Education | 9. |
| 5. Barriers | 10. |