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## Racial Identity Development of African American Students in Relation to Black Studies Courses

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Racial Identity Development of African American Students in Relation to Black Studies  
Courses

Ja'Kia Marie Fuller

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to provide understanding of the reason why African American students choose to enroll or do not enroll in Black Studies courses; and, (2) explore the relationship between racial identity development and Black Studies programs. Using a phenomenological approach, African American undergraduate students who have: (a) participated in a student organization that focuses on the advancement of Black people/African Americans, an organization that was founded with the purpose of creating an organization for Black Americans, or an organization that focuses on racial equality; or (b) be a Black Studies minor were interviewed. Findings suggest that students who choose Black Studies courses are a result of their desire to learn more about and reclaim their history. Those who did not take a Black Studies courses did not enroll because they were not interested in the topic or prioritized their required classes. Students who were Black Studies minors were more likely to feel a connection with the African diaspora while those who had not taken a Black Studies course were more likely to claim themselves as Black verses African American. Black Studies minors reported a better sense of self and reported a more positive development of their racial identity compared to many of the students who did not take a Black studies course.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

In spite of the growth of Black studies programs in colleges and universities across the United States, few African Americans enroll in courses or graduate from them (“African Americans Show Solid Gains at All Academic Degree Levels,” 2009), particularly at Northern Superior State University. Black studies programs are reported to have many benefits for African American students. Adams (2005) contends that Black studies programs have a history of assisting students with identity development. Furthermore, Black studies programs assist students in developing self-esteem that, in turn, influences their level of self-efficacy (Adams, 2005). As a result of these benefits, Black students are more likely to graduate from college. Adams (2005) adds another dimension suggesting that these programs help students survive in a racialized society like that of the United States by providing them with knowledge to know themselves and know other cultures and civilizations. If African American students want to learn about the histories of African peoples and develop more integrative paradigms of education, Black studies programs ought to be given serious consideration. Nevertheless, many African American students never enroll in Black studies undergraduate courses despite the positive contributions these programs provide.

### **Importance of the Problem and Rationale for the Study**

African Americans deal with systemic racism on a daily basis in the United States, and unfortunately, this form of discrimination is prevalent in institutions of higher education. African Americans who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are more likely to perceive the campus climate more negatively compared to their White

counterparts (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Black studies programs, along with other ethnic studies programs, contradict PWIs because they do not have allegiance to the values of the larger racist society and its corporate structure (Ray, 1976). Ewart Guinier, the first chairman of Harvard University's Department of Afro-American Studies, stated that:

It is in Black Studies that our Black youth, especially those on white campuses, have been learning the great lesson needed to survive in a hostile environment: how to combine the training of the mind with struggles for justice, equality, and above all else for some measure of control over one's own destiny. (as cited in Norment, 2007, p. 268)

This critical engagement with the educational mandates of the dominant culture of the United States can provide a space for students to not only feel safe, but also to develop a healthy ethnic or racial identity.

Young (1984) contends that Black studies programs were the first to deal with Afro-Americans and their experiences from their African heritage to contemporary society through systemic investigations of African peoples throughout the diaspora. This systematic study of Afro-Americans expanded to the African diaspora at many institutions. Subsequently, Black studies programs have brought multiple perspectives to academic disciplines, particularly in the humanities. Young (1984) explains that it was not until the Black Power Movement or Black Conscious Movement of the 1960s that “Afro-Americans began to be accorded their rightful place in the annals of the history and development of American society” (p. 368).

Still, African Americans' histories began beyond their arrival in America and those histories warrant attention. Robinson and Biran (2006) explain that the lack of

emphasis on African contributions to subject areas is one of many obstacles African Americans face that hinders them from excelling academically. Black studies programs bring the emphasis of Africans and descendants of the African diaspora to the forefront. Further, Black studies courses challenge the current political, social, and educational structures. The lack of a comprehensive educational system has oppressed those of marginalized groups whose backgrounds and lived experiences are not proportionate with their White counterparts (Hare, 1970).

Black studies programs provide a more holistic educational framework. One way Black studies programs do this is with an Afrocentric method. This Afrocentricity, as defined by Molefi Asante, is a philosophical model that emphasizes the centrality of the African person within a cultural and historical context (as cited in Davidson, 2010), is evident in Black studies programs. Asante continues by explaining that Afrocentricity “holds a dominant paradigmatic place because it seeks to add substance to the idea of a black perspective on facts, events, texts, personalities, historical records, and behavioral situations” (as cited in Davidson, 2010, p. 35) in African American studies.

An Afrocentric focus not only brings a more comprehensive truth and perspective to world events and history, but it can help African American students further develop their socio-cultural identity. Often African Americans with an awareness of their African heritage strive toward African affirmation, empowerment, and preservation and possess self-determination (Kambon, 1992). Black studies programs bring an awareness of the history of African descendants, and this acknowledgement can assist in the development of positive identity development in African American students (Adams, 2005).

### **Background of the Problem**

Black studies programs are a result of student demands across college campuses that began in the 1960s, and these demands were supported by African American community leaders (Bailey, 1973; Gordon, 1981; Okafor, 2014). African American students advocated for Black cultures, civilizations, and literatures to be added to university curricula in the late 1960s (Hare, 1972), and subsequently in later years. Perry Hall (as cited in Davidson, 2010) explains that until Black issues were part of college curricula, Blacks were invisible within curricula. He also states that in order to achieve the integration of Black issues in the curricula, activists used a number of methods, including an outward pressure to obtain the integration of Black studies in curricula and an inward struggle to identify and develop the components of Black studies. As part of their affirmation, Black students created associations to defend their rights and further Black cultures.

Although Black studies became part of college curricula in the late 1960s, first at San Francisco State College then across the United States, many scholars degraded them, and they were subject to much scrutiny that continues today (“Dispelling the Myth,” 2009). Despite the continued scrutiny, graduates of Black studies programs are represented across a number of professional fields including law, medicine, education, politics, and others (“Dispelling the Myth,” 2009).

Ethnic studies programs have consistently proven the ways in which such programs support positive racial identity development with students. Anglin and Wade (2007) found in their study that an internalized racial identity was associated with a better adjustment to college for students. Black studies courses can assist students in building these positive identities.

Finally, Black studies programs often lack financial support (Phillips, 2010). Faculty members are often spread between multiple disciplines and do not have the time or opportunity to devote to one discipline because Black studies programs do not have the funding or support to pay for multiple full-time faculty members or grant tenure to those faculty members (Phillips, 2010).

Given these outcomes, further research is needed to better understand why students do not enroll in Black studies programs in light of the positive outcomes associated with the programs. Ignoring this problem could lead to a decreased number of Black studies programs nationwide. One way to address these issues is to document outcomes associated with Black studies programs using empirical research.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to provide understanding of the reason why African American students choose to enroll or do not enroll in Black studies courses; and, (2) explore the relationship between racial identity development and Black studies programs. The perceptions of students who enroll and do not enroll in Black studies courses will be compared. This study will assist Black studies programs in understanding the way students rationalize choosing courses, particularly at Northern Superior State University. It is my hope that with this data, Black studies programs will have more support when recruiting students to their programs and tailoring academic programs on their campuses. This study also helps institutions of higher education better understand the importance of Black studies programs and the need to support those programs. Therefore, this study not only assists Black studies programs' recruitment initiatives, but

it also provides institutions of higher education with a framework allowing them to better understand students' from diverse backgrounds.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guide this study are: (1) What reasons do African American students put forth to justify their choice or non-choice of Black studies courses? (2) In what ways do African American students who enroll in Black studies courses compare to those African American students who have not in relation to racial identity development?

### **Design, Data Collection and Analysis**

A phenomenological qualitative approach was used for the purpose of understanding the ways the participants interpret their experiences (Merriam, 2009) related to Black studies and student organization involvement. Understanding how the participants interpret their identity transformation was fundamental to this study. This qualitative study will help give context to the low enrollment numbers for Northern Superior State University's Black Studies program, help with recruitment efforts of Black studies programs generally, and add context to other ethnic studies programs in relation to racial identity development.

### **Population**

The general population for this study was African American undergraduate students who have: (a) participated in a student organization that focuses on the advancement of Black people, an organization that was founded with the purpose of creating an organization for Black Americans, or an organization that focuses on racial equality; or (b) be a Black studies minor.

## **Participant Sampling Procedures and Criteria**

The method of sampling for this study was criterion-based, or purposive sampling. Patton (2002) discusses that a criterion-based sampling procedure involves studying cases that meet a predetermined criterion that is of some significance. There were three criteria established, and participants needed to meet two of the three criteria to be eligible for participation. First, this study looked specifically at the identity of African American students, so, being an African American was fundamental. Second, students needed to be a Black studies minor or have some history of participation in a student organization related to Black students. This study compared the participation of academic coursework to student organization involvement, so students needed to meet one of these requirements to provide sufficient information for the study. Two major criteria were used to select the participants in this study: 1) identify as African American and 2) be enrolled in a senior-level class or have had involvement in an African American or racial student association. The senior academic standing was determined by the number of credit hours attained. Students needed a minimum of 85 credit hours required for graduation. As a result, there was no age requirement. The participants who enrolled in Black studies courses needed to be enrolled in the program as an academic minor to meet the criteria.

Participants who had not taken a Black studies course must have, at some point in their collegiate career, participated in a student organization that focuses on the advancement of Black people or an organization that was founded with the purpose of creating an organization for Black Americans even if membership was open to all individuals. Examples of such organizations include, but are not limited to: Black

Student Union, Black Greek-lettered organizations, etc. Alumni or graduate students were also allowed to participate in the study.

### **Data Collection Procedures and Analysis**

The data were collected through an interview protocol, which was semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews are more flexible allowing the interviewer to ask more open-ended questions and in an order that works best for each interview (Merriam, 2009). This type of interviewing process was deemed viable due to the ability to ask follow-up questions with participants. Since participants were asked to describe their personal experiences, the ability to ask for clarification was needed. The interview protocol had two sections. The first section asked students about their perceptions of Black studies programs, and the second section focused on the contributions of Black studies in their identity formation, using Cross' Nigrescence Theory (1971, 1991) as a framework to determine what stage students are at in regards to their identity formation as an African American. Cross' Nigrescence Model relates to the ways in which African Americans "become Black" or recognize their race in the context of the United States. Cross' model explores internal ideals and external factors that conceptualize what "stage" African Americans are in according to his model, and his model is validated and thorough. Due to its validity and thorough conceptualization, this model was deemed appropriate as a framework for this study. Semi-structured interview questions were generated from a comprehensive review of the literature. Interviews were conducted after permission was granted by the Institutional Review Board. All interviews took place in a private setting.

### **Research Site**

The study was conducted at Northern Superior State University (NSSU), a Midwestern, liberal arts, PWI. While this study was not designed specifically for NSSU, limited resources resulted in the participants being from the same institution. NSSU offers 122 degree options: 86 undergraduate and 36 graduate programs at five campuses. NSSU also has a Black studies program as an option as an academic minor. Thirty-one (31) students were registered for this minor during the 2015-2016 academic year.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. All participants were informed of their rights as a participant, confidentiality clauses, and a request to audio record the interview. Each participant was interviewed once during the 2015-2016 academic year. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and confidentiality, and all audio recordings were destroyed after being transcribed. While facilitating interviews, it was important to ensure participants felt comfortable to express their honest feelings and describe their experiences without feeling judged or pressured. I asked for clarification when needed.

### **Data Analysis**

This study was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study. Phenomenological studies in education strive to “explore and describe the world from the students’ perspective” (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, as cited in Tight Huisman, 2013, p. 243). The lived experiences of the participants and their own interpretation of the experiences are fundamental to phenomenological studies. To begin analyzing, I identified areas of the data that are responsive to one of the two main research questions

(Merriam, 2009). This was accomplished by completing line-by-line coding. Next recurring codes were put into categories and themes were drawn.

**Analysis during data collection.** During data collection, there was a reflexive process utilized in order to spark insight and develop meaning. Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) state that a reflexive process is iterative and consists of “visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understanding” (p. 77). Reflecting multiple times on the collected data assisted me, as the researcher, in taking time to process the ideas and themes that emerged from the interviews.

**Analysis after data collection.** After all data was collected, all audio recordings were transcribed. Next, transcriptions were examined for codes and concepts. From there, common themes were defined, and the research assessment was formulated accordingly.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### ***Afrocentricity***

A “frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person” (Asante, 1991, p. 171).

#### ***Black Studies***

Studies concerned with the experience of people of African origin residing in any part of the world (Ford, 1973; i.e., Africana studies, Africology, African/African-American Studies, and any other program with a focus on the African diaspora).

#### ***Ethnic Identity***

“The part of an individual’s self-concept that derives from his or her knowledge of his or

her membership in a social group and the significance attached to the membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255).

### ***Predominantly White Institution***

“Institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment” (Brown & Dancy, 2010, p. 524).

### **Study Delimitations**

This study is designed to explore the ways undergraduate, African American students perceive the contributions Black studies and student organization involvement have on their identity formation and world views. Although the study was open to any individual who identified as African American, was a senior or Alumnus/a, and met the academic minor or student organization involvement criteria, no alumni participated. First generation citizens were allowed to participate in the study as long as they were born in the United States. This is an imperative factor in the delimitations because Cross’ model focuses on African Americans who did not have close connections with other countries. In order to effectively use this model as a theoretical framework, the participants need to reflect the model’s intention.

While this phenomenological study uses Cross’ (1971, 1991) Nigrescence theory as a theoretical framework, participants are describing their personal growth from their perspective; and the framework was used as an analytic frame.

### **Study Limitations**

The primary limitations of this study is that I only recruited students from Northern Superior State University. Despite the present limitation, this study still serves at the first qualitative study of African American students at this institution in relation to

Black studies courses and racial/ethnic identity development. This study was not intended for generalization to other universities but rather for understanding and there may be some similarities and implications for PWIs. Another limitation is that intersecting identities (i.e., race, class, gender) are not examined. Finally, as the primary and only researcher, I present myself as a limitation to the study for two reasons: First, I am passionate about the experiences of students of color at PWIs. My recent research has focused on students of color and students who come from marginalized groups. As a person of color, I am connected to my research. As a result, I was forced to remind myself of my biases and tried to minimize them. Second, I had a personal relationship with the majority of the participants, which again, could have led to bias. Nevertheless, I believe students felt more comfortable with me due to our relationship which provided rich data.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

The next chapters will include the literature review, research design, results, and the conclusion of the study. The literature review introduces an overview of the theoretical framework, examination of other racial identity theories, history of Black studies programs, and outcomes of Black studies programs in higher education. The research design explains the methodological approach, methods of participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter four will discuss the findings of the study, which will be followed by the conclusion of the study and suggestions for further research in the fifth chapter.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This study seeks to provide an understanding of the reason why African American students choose to enroll or not enroll in Black studies courses and to explore the relationship between racial identity development and Black studies programs. This chapter deals with the theoretical framework for this study and a thematic synthesis of previous literature. Literature exploring other racial identity models is examined along with the history and outcomes of Black studies programs. To conclude, I discuss the limitations of existing studies and themes in higher education that provide justification of the need for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Using psychologist Dr. William E. Cross' (1971, 1991) Nigrescence model as a theoretical framework, this study seeks to understand a relationship with Black studies programs and racial identity development among African American students at predominantly White institutions. Cross' Nigrescence theory was developed, in part, to add substance to African American identity theories that had been reduced to notions of self-hatred (Cross, 1994). After the initial theory was published in 1971, Cross revised the theory in 1991 making two main distinctions. There was a distinction between personal and group identity and the influence they have on self-esteem and there were additions to the number of stages and identities that are found within those stages (Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002). The Nigrescence model is used as a framework for understanding this study. Concepts from this model will be used, but the findings of the study will not be categorized to fit the stages of this model.

### **Stage One: Pre-encounter**

This stage of Cross' (1991) theory is recognized by low-race salience attitudes, social-stigma attitudes, and anti-Black attitudes. While individuals at this stage may recognize their race and may not deny being African American, they do not think race plays a significant role in their everyday social lives. Little emphasis is given to "Blackness." Value is placed in other areas such as social status, religion, etc. The individuals at this stage that work toward race neutrality may give a self-referent by saying "they are human beings who happen to be Black" (Cross, 1991, p. 191).

While individuals at this stage may have a low-salience orientation, they can also see race as a stigma or problematic. Race is not a priority or important factor, but racial ideologies may still be held. These individuals may participate in activities or with organizations that promote the advancement of African Americans, but the purpose will be to destroy the negative social stigma associated with Blackness and not supporting Black culture or exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of Black history.

An anti-Black attitude pattern is a result of African Americans perceiving Black as a negative reference group. African Americans with anti-Black attitude patterns have a similar view of African Americans as White racists do. This attitude is dominated by racists stereotypes about Blacks and/or positive stereotypes about Whites and White American culture (Cross, 1991, p. 191). African Americans with this viewpoint are also more likely to feel alienated from other African Americans and do not seek a support system or potential support system from other African Americans or the African American community at-large.

### **Stage Two: Encounter**

The second stage, Encounter, is twofold. It involves experiencing an encounter and then personalizing that experience. The encounter is usually the result of an event, that causes dissonance and leads individuals to search for a deeper understanding of their identity. These encounters can range from a single event to a series of events or episodes that “chip away at a person’s ongoing world view” (Cross, 1991, p. 200), and the encounter is in relation to race.

Since part of this stage is personalizing the encounter, individuals at this stage work through the emotional effects caused by the encounter that can range from guilt, to anger, to anxiety. One major point to recognize is that the encounter does not need to be negative. Tragic events as well as learning about the positive historical events that may lead an individual to reconsider their views of Black history and culture can be considered an encounter. At this stage, individuals are beginning to become more Afrocentric (Cross, 1991).

### **Stage Three: Immersion-Emersion**

The third stage of Nigrescence is psychological and is the point where individuals begin to destroy their current reference frame while simultaneously discovering and creating a new one (Cross, 1991). In this stage, individuals may respond to reminders of their old sense of self with derogatory remarks, emotions, and images. All values associated with the old sense of self is denied.

While attempting to grasp the core of what they want their new self to be, new converts are also more likely to attack aspects of what was a part of their “old self” when those behaviors are seen in others. All that is considered White may also equate to oppressive, evil, inhuman, and inferior while, on the other hand, that which is considered

Black is seen as superior. Individuals at this stage also need clear markers and positive reinforcement that they are becoming the “right kind” of Black person (Cross, 1991).

**Immersion.** The first phase of the Immersion-Emersion stage is when individuals *immerse* themselves into *Blackness* (Cross, 1991). Things of value or relevance are related to Africa or are Black. Individuals at this stage join organizations and participate in activities that focus on African/African American/Black issues, an emphasis may be placed on external expressions such as hairstyles and wardrobe, and names may be changed to be more Afrocentric or less “American.”

**Emersion.** The second phase of this stage involves a transition from romanticizing Blackness to seeing their immersion state as a transitional period with more developmental progress ahead. Individuals at this phase are more likely to limit or discontinue their involvement in organizations that may help members feel more “immersed in Blackness” (Cross, 1991, p. 207) and more to organizations that have a deeper commitment to action and the needs and affairs of the African American community.

#### **Stage Four: Internalization**

The new identity of an individual is internalized only after working through the different transitional phases. This new identity gives “high salience to Blackness” (p. Cross, 1991, p. 210). The internalization stage is when individuals are comfortable with their racial identity and are unafraid of expressing themselves in a way that expresses their culture.

#### **Stage Five: Internalization – Commitment**

At this stage, individuals move beyond simply having a sense of security about their race and become activists for their racial group (Cross, 1991).

### **Nigrescence Model Shortcomings and Other Theoretical Considerations**

Identity development theories in relation to race in the United States are not a new phenomenon. Research on racial identity development of African Americans, using Cross' (1971) model as a framework, has increased (Cokley, 2002). Nonetheless, scholarship needs to be put forth that examines and expands upon the work that has been contributed to understanding how African Americans develop their racial identity. The conceptualization of the Black identity development process is broken into two approaches: mainstream approaches and underground approaches (Constantine, Richardson, Benjamin, & Wilson, 1998). While mainstream approaches (e.g., see Cross, 1971; Jackson, 1975; Helms, 1984) offer some type of conceptualization that speaks to how African Americans develop a healthy racial identity, they tend to create the ideals around Black people being oppressed and marginalized instead of Black people and Black culture being central (Constantine, Richardson, Benjamin, & Wilson, 1998). Kambon and Bowen-Reid (2010) criticize Cross' original work, along with other transitional models, as being a representation of "authorship that superimpose the European worldview as the conceptual framework, even though they focus on explaining AA personality or some important aspects of it" (p. 90). It is argued that the behavioral patterns suggested in the model are defined within a Eurocentric American reality and may be void of African cultural influences. This type of modeling is seen as Pseudo-Africentric according to Kambon and Bowen-Reid (2010). These models are also often

seen as transitional which can be problematic considering the fact that the worldviews and lived experiences of individuals may not be transitional.

Many underground approaches (e.g., see Baldwin, 1984; Kambon, 1992) were created to have focus on Black people, the African person, as central to the models. They also tend to place more focus on self-consciousness instead of how one survives in an oppressive society. For example, Kambon (1992) offers a framework that is considered to be one that emphasizes key constructs that assist in understating African American behavior: Cultural Misorientation (CM) and African Self-Consciousness (ASC).

According to the model, African Self-Extension Orientation (ASEO) is the foundation of Black personality that is unconscious in nature and both biogenetic and based on experiences, and CM is a scheme where Africans are culturally *misidentified* as a result of the oppressive nature of White supremacy. There are four basic characteristics of the African self-consciousness that include: 1) recognizing one's African identity and cultural heritage and seeing value in gaining knowledge, 2) placing African survival as one's first priority, 3) having respect for and perpetuating all things African, and 4) recognizing the nature of racial oppression and actively opposing it (Constantine, Richardson, Benjamin, & Wilson, 1998).

Brookins (1994) surveyed African American college students attending a predominately White institution and enrolled in Black studies courses. Participants were administered the Racial Identity Attitude Scale, a scale based off of Cross' Nigrescence model, and the African Self-consciousness Scale, a scale based off of Kambon's model. Brookins' study suggests that African American self-consciousness and Afrocentric values represent different spheres in terms of African American identity. Both models,

and similar models respectively, work to better understand African Americans, and their different, fundamental approaches assist future researchers in understanding the complexity of identity development.

The intentionality of being removed from a Eurocentric framework can be seen as a way to further validate the use of more African-centered models when working to understand the psychosocial and social behaviors of African Americans. Although Cross' original model is criticized as being Pseudo-Africentric, the revised versions of the model are recognized as moving away from a strict Pseudo-Africentric approach to more of a "Transitional Africentric" emphasis (Kambon & Bowen-Reid, 2010, p. 94).

Cross' model is used as a theoretical framework for this study because the study was held at a predominately White institution and because the focus is not on the consciousness levels of the participants. The research site is an important factor to note because the student participants are forced to confront a dominate culture and possible racism.

### **Synthesis of Research**

To understand the significance of this study, it is important to understand the history of Black studies as an academic discipline. Understanding how student activism resulted in many Black studies courses and programs supports my claim for the need to understand the significance of these programs for students today. In this section, the history of Black studies programs is examined along with the positive impact these programs have in institutions of higher education.

### **Black Campus Movement**

Black power and civil rights activists in the 1960s sought to raise the consciousness of Black and White Americans alike in regards to the oppression African Americans were facing in the country (Rogers, 2012). These activists included college students, and, as a result, activism reached college campuses. Fueled by the ideals of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., college students across the country united and demanded change at their institutions. Rogers (2012) states that Maulana Karenga, the creator of Kwanzaa, and Stokely Carmichael played a part in supporting student organizers. Beyond his writings, Karenga spoke at college campuses and urged students to develop self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense, while Carmichael challenged college students at Morgan State University and through many campuses across the country to adopt grassroots altruism in the 1960s (Rogers, 2012).

While Black student activism was already prominent on many college campuses, a new type of activism began after the formation of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense by co-founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Many Black student organizations such as the Black Student Union (BSU) and Afro-American Organization (AAO) modeled their organizations after the party or showed their support of the party through various forms (Rogers, 2012). The Black Panther Party created a ten-point platform and program of demands that demonstrated the commitment the Party had to the improvement and advancement of the Black community. One of the ten-points, the fifth point, spoke of the demand for education exposing the nature of the United States and told the true history of African descendants in the United States of America (Bloom & Martin, 2012). These demands from the Black Panther Party are a part of what encouraged students to demand courses that went beyond the simplistic discussion of

slavery and went in depth about the extensive history of Africans in the United States of America.

### **Creating Black Studies**

Black studies programs have been a catalyst of change on many college campuses. Oftentimes, Black studies programs were a result of student movements. Beginning in the later 1960s, many African American students and other supporters staged marches, sit-ins, and demonstrations to encourage their university administrators to create academic units dedicated to African American culture and history (Joseph, 2003). Tired of the Eurocentric curriculum that was being taught, Black students used their power to demand a curriculum in the American academy that was truly wholesome and representative of Black culture and its contributions to humanity (Asante as cited in Gordon & Gordon, 2006)). Dr. Nathan Hare was appointed as coordinator of Black Studies at San Francisco State College in February of 1968. In his role, he completed the proposal of a Black studies department with special admissions for Black students and an offering of a bachelor of arts in Black studies (Karenga, 1993). Despite the work that had been thrust toward this new development, the department had still not become a reality by November. On November 6, 1968, The Black Student Union at San Francisco State College held a strike demanding a number of changes including financial aid changes, special admissions, and a Black Studies Department (Karenga, 1993). The Black Studies department became a reality by the end of 1968 (Karenga, 1993).

### **Black Studies Today**

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign released a survey in 2013 to provide a perspective on the current state of Black studies. This study showed that 76%

of institutions have some form of Black studies programming that can range from one course to an academic major. Despite existing at a large percentage of institutions, Black studies units, in many cases, only reach program or center status (Manzana, as cited in Asante & Karenga, 2006). As a result, many programs only offer single courses or the possibility to be an academic minor verses a major. This also means that there are limited graduate programs available nationwide. In Northern Superior's case, Black Studies is only offered as an academic minor.

In 2000, less than one percent of all degrees awarded to Black students were in any field of ethnic studies ("Black Studies is an Unpopular Major," 2002). Despite the positive contributions Black studies has provided to students, and African American students in particular, the enrollment continues to remain low. The low number of enrolled students is partially due to the fact that students often do not see value in a Black studies program, as they do not see what careers are available in the field ("Black Studies is an Unpopular Major," 2002). Further, those in academia criticize these programs by questioning the rigor of the programs ("Black Studies is an Unpopular Major," 2002). This has led to numerous scholarly debates about the future of Black studies programs ranging from titles of programs to the content of subject matter.

### **Outcomes of Black Studies**

Adams (2005) found in their study of Black students at a large, predominately White institution that Black students who were enrolled in Black studies courses felt less pressure to focus on issues such as stereotype threat and meeting expectations rooted in White cultural norms. It is difficult for Black students to conceptualize their abilities when it challenges those of the societal stereotypes that are held against them (Robinson

& Biran, 2006). As a result, this challenge of colloquial White supremacy and Eurocentric values that Black studies programs make provides a safe space for students of color and validates their race and ethnicity.

The influences ethnic studies curricula have played in student achievement has been documented by a number of researchers, specifically in relation to the students who identify with the subject matter. Carter (2008) conducted a yearlong qualitative investigation with nine high-achieving African American high school students at a predominately White high school. This study suggests that students with strong racial identities assisted them in developing an achievement ideology that not only supported them in their academic achievements, but assisted them in navigating racially challenging environments. Rickford (2001) found that African American students became more engaged with the literature assigned to them that was written by African Americans and that student motivation increased when they were more familiar with the theme of the narratives. In this qualitative study with 25 low-achieving African American middle school students, participants described enjoying the literature, partially, because they could better relate to the characters and themes of the narratives and they could understand the vernacular tone. When these students were assessed for comprehension, they tended to perform worse with the lower level comprehension questions and better with the higher comprehension questions. Lewis, Sullivan, and Bybee (2006) found that eighth grade students, in their experimental study of a one-semester African American emancipatory curriculum, found more worth in their own heritage as a result of the course compared to only discussing African and African American heritage during Black

History Month and other singular recognized events (e.g., brief discussion about the Atlantic Slave Trade or slavery).

Educators in the discipline of ethnic studies are aware of the lack of diversity in school curricula, the negative experiences students of color are forced to deal with in society and school, and the lack of support and effort provided by schools to assist students in developing a healthy racial identity (Sleeter, 2011). Despite the lack of contribution and support from schools, ethnic studies programs attempt to equip students with the tools needed to navigate spaces that may be racially hostile (Sleeter, 2011) while supporting positive racial identity development.

### **Being Black at a Predominantly White Institution**

Many researchers have focused on the experiences of African American students at PWIs. An overwhelming number of studies express the need for equitable administrative changes at PWIs and a need for work beyond cultural competence into anti-racism.

Ariza and Berkey (2009) conducted a qualitative, longitudinal study to examine the racial identity development of African American students at a predominantly White, liberal arts institution (PWI). Participants of the study primarily discussed the struggles of stereotype threat they faced and their desires to maintain their authentic selves. Individuals also discussed the struggles with intersecting of race and gender identities. In the study of mentoring African American students at a Christian PWI, Dahlvig (2010) found that many of the participants described feelings of isolation at their institution. In their classes, each participant described having faculty members making comments about race that resulted in a perceived difference in the interactions with their White

counterparts or being pointed out in class. Soló, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) studied the experiences of African American college students in relation to campus climate and racial microaggressions. Using focus groups at three universities, they used the qualitative data to conclude that the participants did have experiences with racial microaggressions, and that, in return, had a negative influence on campus climate.

### **Student Involvement**

While African American students at PWIs may deal with negative racial climates, they are able to find support within student organizations. Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) suggest that student organizations are the primary means for involvement among African American students. Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) found that students indicated have a better sense of belonging if they were more involved on campus and had more involvement with their peers.

### **Retention of African American Students**

African American students are less likely to complete college compared to their White counterparts (Anglin & Wade, 2007). A student's identity and sense of belonging in a program can affect whether or not they choose to stay or leave (Danielak, Gupta, & Elby, 2014). If students feel a better sense of belonging, they are more likely to stay on campus and in their program. Conflicting culturally based expectations that occur in academic environments, negative stereotypes, a lack of African American role models in the curriculum, and a lack of emphasis on the positive contributions that African American have made are among some of factors that need to be changed to support African American academic excellence (Robinson & Biran, 2006).

Roberts and Styron Jr. (2010) found, in their study of students' perceptions of

services, experiences, and interactions in a particular academic program located in the southern region of the United States, that students were more likely to return to their home institution in their second year of college if they did not change their majors, had higher perceptions of social connectedness, and higher satisfaction with faculty approachability. Students who have positive interactions with their faculty members tend to have better experiences.

Allen (1992) compared the outcomes of African American students who attended Historically Black Public Colleges and Universities and PWIs. Allen concluded that while a student's individual characteristics play a large role in academic success and persistence, the quality of students' lives at a particular institution along with university policy, race relations on campus, and other campus factors also play a role in academic achievement. The African American students who attended a PWI were more likely to express concern with their campus environment compared to those at HBCUs.

Mallinckrodt (1988) found that retention influences differed for African American and White students. African American students were more influenced by campus support compared to White students who have more familial influence on their decision to remain at an institution.

Tuitt (2012) explained that Black students tend to have more positive perspectives of their Black faculty members. Students learning more about their identity and interacting with faculty members who share similar ethnic backgrounds will only help improve student retention and success. In a study on racial identity and development, Pope (2000) found that students with a more secure sense of Black identity were more likely to develop mature relationships with and establish a sense of purpose in college

compared to their counterparts with lower levels of their sense of Black identity.

### **Conclusion**

The review of the literature shows that Black American students are raised in a Eurocentric country where they learn to view themselves as inferior compared to their White counterparts. This negative connotation can result in internalized hatred and lower self-esteem. Participating in Black studies programs can help students build self-value and worthwhile building meaningful relationships with faculty members.

Students need to feel connected with their campus and also have a sense of conceptual self-understanding. Students need to see value in themselves and their work. Black studies programs can help students build their self-esteem by teaching them the history of their forefathers that is oftentimes not taught in American K-12 schools or institutions of higher education. Student participation in Black studies can improve student retention and achievement.

## **Chapter Three: Research Design**

### **Introduction**

This study seeks to provide an understanding of the reason why African American students choose to enroll or not enroll in Black studies courses and to explore the relationship between racial identity development and Black studies programs. This study utilizes phenomenological methods, or methods to conceptualize the conscious experiences of the world of the participants (Wertz, 2011), to explore the relationship between racial identity development and Black studies programs. This qualitative study also provides an understanding of the reason why African American students choose to enroll or not enroll in Black studies courses. In this chapter, a description of the participants is outlined along with the instrumentation utilized and justification of the instrumentation. Next, methods of data collection and analysis procedures are explained followed by a chapter summary.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were African American undergraduate students at Northern Superior State University (NSSU). I chose NSSU because it was located in a convenient location and has a Black studies program. Determining the selection criteria is an essential aspect to choosing which population to study (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, for this study, I used purposive, criterion-base sampling to recruit participants. Purposive sampling selects participants based on the researcher's judgment to select a specific population (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001). I also utilized a criterion-based model because a criterion approach requires the researcher to list the needed attributes that are essential to

the study and locate those matching the list (LeCompte & Preissle as cited in Merriam, 2009). I used the following criteria for the study:

- an individual of the African diaspora who identifies as Black/African American
- a student at Northern Superior State University
- an undergraduate student of senior academic standing as determined by credit hours attained
- Black studies minor, and/or a member of a student organization that works to build community among Black people/African Americans in some capacity

To recruit participants that met these particular criteria, I worked with the institutional analysis department at Northern Superior State University. The institutional analysis department conducts research about the university's resources, processes, and outcomes. With the assistance of the Director of the institutional analysis department, I drafted an email that was sent to all students who had enough credit hours to be in senior standing and self-identified as Black/African American (see Appendix B). This email was sent in November 2015. Interviews were conducted in November and December of 2015. Ten participants were recruited using this method.

### **Research Site**

The study was conducted at Northern Superior State University (NSSU), a Midwestern predominately White institution (PWI), or institution of higher education where White students account for 50% or more of the student body (Brown & Dancy, 2010). This institution was selected because it has a Black studies program and is a PWI. While this study was not designed specifically for NSSU, limited resources resulted in

the participants being from the same institution. I was unable to travel to other institutions to conduct interviews, so I only interviewed participants at NSSU.

NSSU is a liberal arts, public, master’s comprehensive, institution offering 122 degree options (i.e., 86 undergraduates and 36 graduate) at five campuses. NSSU also has a Black studies program. The Black studies program allows students to minor in the academic subject, and courses from the Black studies program are offered in some general education requirement categories that all students are required to take. The Black studies program is designed to provide a knowledge of the various historical trajectories of the global African diaspora. The program accomplishes this by offering a variety of courses for students to choose from, offering study abroad opportunities, and by being civically and socially engaged. The NSSU Black Studies program was also a demand made by student protesters in 1990.

NSSU had a total enrollment of 25,325 students for the Fall 2015 academic semester. Of these 25,325 total students, 21,972 were undergraduate students and 1,142 identified as Black or African American. Of the 21,972 undergraduate students, 22 had Black studies as an academic minor for the Fall semester. There were a total of 31 students who declared Black studies as an academic minor for the 2015-2016 academic year. Of those 31 students, 71% identified as Black or African American.

Table 1

*Northern Superior State University Enrollment 2015-2016*

Fall 2015 Enrollment	Undergraduate				Graduate				Grand Total	
	Degree-seeking		Non-Degree		Degree-seeking		Non-Degree		#	%
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Total	2188	100.0	8	100.0	314	100.0	20	100.0	2532	100.0
	9	%	3	%	6	%	7	%	5	%

First time in college	4117	18.8%	38	45.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4155	16.4%
New transfer students	1784	8.2%	24	28.9%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1808	7.1%
Sex										
-Female	12826	58.6%	49	59.0%	2133	67.8%	120	58.0%	15128	59.7%
-Male	9062	41.4%	34	41.0%	1010	32.1%	87	42.0%	10193	40.2%
Ethnic background										
-African American or Black	1140	5.2%	2	2.4%	164	5.2%	11	5.3%	1317	5.2%
-American Indian or Alaskan Native	84	0.4%	0	0.0%	13	0.4%	1	0.5%	98	0.4%
-Asian	448	2.0%	1	1.2%	55	1.7%	7	3.4%	511	2.0%
-Hispanic or Latino	1050	4.8%	5	6.0%	94	3.0%	12	5.8%	1161	4.6%
-Native American or Other Pacific Islander	9	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	0.1%	0	0.0%	11	0.0%
-White	18075	82.6%	71	85.5%	2591	82.4%	165	79.7%	20902	82.5%
-Two or more races	734	3.4%	4	4.8%	64	2.0%	4	1.9%	806	3.2%
-Non-residential international	282	1.3%	0	0.0%	152	4.8%	0	0.0%	434	1.7%
-Not reported	67	0.3%	0	0.0%	11	0.3%	7	3.4%	85	0.3%
- Total unduplicated minority	3575	16.3%	12	14.5%	514	16.3%	35	16.9%	4136	16.3%

Table 2

*Racial Demographics of Black Studies Minors 2015-2016*

Race	Number	Percentage
African American or Black	22	71%
White	4	13%
Two or more races	5	16%
Total	31	100%

Table 3

*Racial Demographics of Students Enrolled in Black Studies Courses 2015-2016*

Race	Number	Percentage
African American or Black	248	46%
Asian	5	1%
Hispanic or Latino	14	3%
White	228	42%
Not reported	1	0%
Two or more races	40	7% %
Non-resident international	7	1%
Total	543	100%

Along with the low number of African American/Black students, NSSU has a small number of African American/Black faculty members. Of the 880 regular faculty members for the 2015-2016 academic year, thirty-five identified as African American/Black. Of those 35, eight instructed at least one Black studies course. There was one faculty member who identified as White that taught one Black studies course during the 2015-2016 academic year. NSSU is located in a state that has approximately 80% of residents that identify as White and 14% that identify as Black or African American according to the United States Census.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative interview protocol was the primary data collection approach used for this study with one-on-one, in person interviews. Since the main focus of this study focuses on how participants interpreted their experiences with identity development, their

stories needed to be heard. The interview protocol had two sections. The first section asked students about their decisions to take Black studies courses, and the second section asked about the identity development of the participants during their time in college (see Appendix C). The semi-structured questions for the interview were based on a review of the literature discussed in chapter two. Cross' (1971, 1991) Nigrescence model was used as an analytical frame when forming the interview questions. Participants were asked to describe their interpretation of their racial identity development during their time in college. The only demographic questions included racial identity classification preferences and if participants identified with any particular gender.

### **Setting**

As mentioned, the study was conducted at NSSU in the Midwestern United States. Potential participants were contacted and interviewed after permission was granted by the Institutional Review Board. All interviews took place in the fall Semester of 2015. The location of the interviews varied during the weeks, but each location was convenient, private, and comfortable for the participant. Examples of locations include unused classrooms, study rooms, and campus administrative offices.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured one-on-one, person-to-person, interviews. All participants were informed of their rights, confidentiality clauses, and assurance of anonymity. All interviews were audio recorded. Prior to each interview, I requested authorization to audio record the conversation. Each participant was interviewed once during the fall semester of the 2015-2016 academic year. For confidentiality reasons all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

All audio recordings were deleted after being transcribed. All transcripts were locked in a cabinet in a secure location. The interviews lasted from 23 minutes to 56 minutes.

During the interviews, I continuously reminded myself of my personal position in order to not express my opinion or show bias. While facilitating interviews, it was important to ensure participants felt comfortable to express their feelings and describe their experiences without feeling judged. I asked for clarification when needed, and I did not interrupt participants when they told their stories, even if the conversation lasted longer than expected. There was also a reflexive process for me as the interviewer in order to spark insight and develop meaning (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). According to Srivastava and Hopwood (2009), “Reflexive iteration is at the heart of visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understanding” (p. 77). Reflections were written down and reviewed during the coding process. Reflecting on the collected data helped me, as the researcher, take time to process the ideas and themes that emerged from the interviews. This reflective process assisted me in assuring that my interpretations of the data were unbiased.

### **Data Analysis**

This study is phenomenological because the concentration is on the consciousness of the participants as it relates to their experience with Black Studies courses. In phenomenological research, the reflections of the participants are the primary interpretations which give the outsiders a better understanding of their experiences (Bevan, 2014). In analyzing the data, I worked to “compare one unit of information with the next in looking for recurring regularities in the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 177). This

was accomplished with an analytical coding process that groups together smaller codes I found into larger themes (Richards, 2005 as cited in Merriam, 2009).

After all data were collected, all audio recordings were transcribed. Next, transcriptions were examined for codes based upon common ideas and phrases. These codes served as the basis for examining emerging themes. Final transcripts were read line-by-line, and initial interpretations were noted. Next, the initial interpretations were grouped together to create concepts. I then used the list of concepts as a frame, or outline, when re-reading the transcripts. The concepts that appeared most often among narratives were made into themes.

To ensure validity and transparency, direct quotes from participants were included in the study.

### **Summary**

In summary, the intent of this study was to understand how African American students interpret their racial identity development by utilizing a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were able to provide narratives of their understanding of their racial identity development. Participants were African American undergraduate students of senior standing. All interviews took place at Northern Superior State University.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

In this chapter, I present the findings of this study. I describe the context in which the study was conducted along with background information about the participants. Next the findings of the study are discussed by exploring the four themes that emerged along with their sub-themes.

### **Context**

Northern Superior State University (NSSU) is a liberal arts, Midwestern Predominately White Institution (PWI). Just over five percent (5.2%) of undergraduate students at NSSU identify as African American/Black. Of the 21,972 undergraduate students enrolled, 22 declared Black studies as their academic minor for the Fall semester and 31 students for the entire academic year. Of the 31 Black studies minors, 71% identified as African American/Black.

A total of ten students responded to the invitation to participate in this study. Of the ten participants, five were Black studies minors and five had never taken a Black studies course but had some type of involvement in a student organization that promoted the success of African Americans or racial awareness and equality. Two of the participants identified as male, and the remaining eight identified as female. Each student was in senior standing according to the requirements set by their institution and identified as African American or Black. Demographic information of the participants can be found within Table 4.

### **Findings**

As stated previously, the purpose of this study is to provide an understanding of the reason why African American students choose to enroll or not enroll in Black studies

courses and to explore the relationship between racial identity development and Black studies programs.

All participants were asked to answer preliminary questions regarding their involvement on campus. Participants were also asked to describe their racial identity. Detailed questions about identification classifications were reserved for the interview protocol.

Table 4

*Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Sex	Involvement	Identification
Taylor	Female	Delta Sigma Theta National Sorority, Inc.	African American
Raven	Female	Black Student Union; Black Girls Rock	African American
Linda	Female	Black Student Union, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Women of Color Mentoring	Black
Emilio	Male	Black Studies Minor	African American/Black
Megan	Female	Black Studies Minor	African American
Karen	Female	Black Student Union; African Students Rise	African American/Black
Brandy	Female	Black Studies Minor; Black Girls Rock	African American
Tami	Female	Challenging Racism; Women of Color Mentoring	Black

Dered	Male	Black Studies Minor; Black Student Union; Men of Color Support Organization	African American
Marley	Female	Black Studies Minor; Black Girls Rock; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Multicultural Cohort Program	American of African Decent

Participants were also asked to describe their sex identification. The need for sex identification was not because this study intends to understand race, sex, and their intersecting realities but rather to ensure respectability in describing the participants when writing the narratives.

The finding presented from this study have four themes that emerged from the participant narratives (see Table 5). The theme *choosing Black studies* was accompanied with the sub-themes (1) *focused on graduation requirements*, (2) *uninformed about program*, and (3) *learning about/reclaiming one's history*. The second theme was *identity classification*. The third theme was *sense of racial identity development* which was followed by the sub-themes (1) *encounter*, (2) *race salience*, (3) and *transformation*. The final theme was *impact of Black studies* which was followed by the sub-theme *Black faculty support*.

Table 5

*Emerging Themes and Sub Themes*

Theme	Sub-Theme
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Choosing Black Studies	Focused on graduation requirements
	Uninformed about program
	Learning about/Reclaiming one's history
Identity Classification	
Sense of Racial Identity Development	Encounter
	Race salience
	Transformation
Impact of Black Studies	Black faculty support

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### **Choosing Black Studies**

Part of the purpose of this study was understanding the rationale for which undergraduate students choose to register for a Black studies course. Participants described the challenges that presented themselves when choosing to not take Black studies courses. They also described the reasons behind choosing to take those courses and choose it as an academic minor. Three sub-themes emerged: (1) Focused on graduation requirements; (2) Uninformed about program; and, (3) Learning about/reclaiming one's history.

**Focused on graduation requirements.** The majority of participants described not choosing to take a Black studies course because they did not directly align with the requirements for their major. Tami described wanting to “double dip,” or take one course that gives credit to two or more required subject areas. She states:

I didn't exactly look into [Black studies]. I was all about trying to graduate...The only class I took without doing the whole double dipping thing was race ethnicity. That's because [a specific professor] was teaching that class, and I really wanted her as a professor. That was about as close as it got.

Tami discusses her interest in race and ethnicity, but her priority to graduate in a specific timeframe prevented her from taking more electives despite a present interest in the subject matter. She took one course related to race and ethnicity that was not in the Black Studies department simply because she wanted to take a specific professor.

This was a similar case for Taylor. Taylor described wanting to take a Black studies course but the Black studies electives were not a priority. She stated:

I really did want to take one, but I never did only because...when I tried to take them they were full; and I was just the type of student that was trying to make sure my other classes were taken care of. And you know, the way people talk about them, I wish I would have, but, yeah, that's the only reason I didn't.

Taylor found that the courses were of interest to her, but the class sections were always full when she attempted to enroll in a course. She also explained that while taking a Black studies course was an interest, it was not a priority. She was focused on completing her required courses for her major and graduating in a specific timeframe.

In the case of both Taylor and Tami, they had an interest in race, or Black studies specifically, but they prioritized their major requirements and graduation timeline. In the case of four of the five participants who did not take a Black studies course, graduating within a certain timeframe was their main priority. While Black studies courses at NSSU are available to meet general education requirements, participants chose the general

education courses that not only met their general education requirements but also their core requirements for their major. As a result, they did not take any Black studies courses because it was not a part of their academic programs.

**Uninformed about program.** A lack of knowledge about the Black studies program at NSSU was also a reason participants did not take a course in the program. Raven describes her experiences with learning about the Black studies program:

I didn't think [Northern Superior] had any [Black studies courses] until it was like a little too late. I had already set up all my classes and things like that. It was never really promoted.

Raven may have been more likely to take a Black studies course had she been informed about the program earlier in her academic career. She had a slight interest in the subject due to familial influences. Had she known about the NSSU Black Studies program during her freshman or sophomore year, the probability of taking a course would have been greater. Raven, similar to Tami and Taylor, was focused on graduating when she found out about the Black studies program at NSSU. When she did learn of it, she was not willing to reschedule her courses because she was determined to meet the requirements of her academic program in a certain timeframe. Her interest in the Black studies courses did not supersede her desire to complete her required courses first.

**Learning about/reclaiming one's history.** For those students who were Black studies minors, they described their choice to take the course as a way to learn more about the history of their ancestors. Brandy described:

I took a Black studies course because I was interested in knowing the history of African Americans. I also think that I took that course to get the perspective

differently. I think a lot of classes teach it from the master narrative, so hearing it from a Black professor in a more predominantly Black class, they expose that master narrative.

Brandy's sentiments were echoed by Marley and Emilio who stated:

I saw investigation into my culture as not only as...having a self-fulfilling purpose to it too. But I also saw it as like an intellectual legitimate endeavor.

(Emilio)

Well, I took Black studies courses because I felt like I lacked history. When I say I lacked history, I mean me personally. I didn't know where I fit in in the context of the US, I didn't really know that much. The majority of what I learned was just like, "Oh yeah, slaves, freedom, civil rights." But it's so much in between that.

And I felt like my parents [were] always pushing us to try to know more about Africa, our African roots, just kind of the history of it all...It was my way of reclaiming my history. (Marley)

Brandy, Emilio, and Marley described their interest in exploring the history of African Americans and the African diaspora that went beyond what they learned in high school or other educational outlets. They described their grade school experiences with Black studies being slim and limited to only specific people, brief glimpses of African American history, and limited in time spent on the subject. They wanted their histories to be central within the classroom. They did not want their histories to be a simple topic but more so the driving thought in exploring all subjects. Like the other students who were Black studies minors, they wanted Black studies and not just a short history of African American contributions to the United States.

## **Identity Classification**

When asked how they identified their racial status, participants classified themselves in a number of ways. Some participants preferred being classified as Black, others as African American, and one participant considered herself an American of African descent. The ways in which student participants classify their racial identity directly aligns with Cross' (1971, 1991) model because it speaks to how salient race is to the participants.

Raven classified herself as African American but described the desire to be seen as a human being with no racial identifications. She experienced a situation with a White classmate where she was approached in a class simply because of her race, and this incident made her feel uncomfortable:

Like this one time [in] my history class we were talking about early American history, and this girl, we had just covered like a week of talking about slavery and the slave trade and things like that... This girl walks up to me and was like "I am so sorry for what my people did to your people" and I'm like... in my head I'm like okay I'm trying to literally make myself a human being like I'm not trying to identify like a particular Black person, I'm literally trying to be just another regular person and here I am being faced with this.

Raven experienced a situation where her race made her feel targeted and singled out. She wanted to simply be a human being without being racially categorized. She went on to describe how she was the same as the student who approached her in the sense that they paid the same amount of tuition, had the same number of classes, and had the same

amount of course work. Despite these similarities, Raven was still seen as different and “othered” as she would describe it.

Tami described her reason behind her preference of being classified as Black verses African American:

I choose to identify as Black because my family has been here over many generations. I have no ties in Africa anymore. I would really want to be considered American, but it doesn't work that way here. I would either be Black American or Black. I feel like the people who came here by choice who had to fill out that hard ass test, they worked their asses off to get here whether it was finances, filling out that stupid test, or anything else people have to do to be a citizen here. I think they deserve their freaking title. I think that should be for them, not for me.

Tami chooses to disconnect herself from the continent of Africa while Marley described her connection to the African diaspora:

I see myself as an American of African descent, which is very different from how I saw myself in my freshman year. [It] means something to me now, even how I word it is important to me now. I mean, you can call me African-American, Black, but it never takes away the history of who I am. Like Shakespeare says, "If you call a rose by any other word, it would still smell as sweet." So, the same with me. Whatever it comes down to is just, I think, at the end of it, it's something that cannot be taken away from you type of thing...But, now I feel like I understand kind of who I am more.

Marley has a sense of connectedness to the African diaspora, or, what some would call, a Pan-African ideology. Her knowledge of the history of African peoples has increased her desire to stay connected with the diaspora and to make her connectedness with the diaspora salient. Her education and lived experiences influenced not only the way she sees herself, but also her global point of view.

### **Sense of Racial Identity Development**

When asked to describe their personal sense of identify development, some participants described the moments they realized they wanted to know more about the Black experience, or their encounter according to Cross' (1971, 1991) Nigrescence model.

**Encounter.** Taylor explained that recent events that have gained national attention were the beginning of her desire to learn more about racial relations in the United States:

I think like Trayvon Martin honestly started it for me. It's...kind of messed up to hear myself say it and actually think about it now. Why didn't I have that mindset before all of that happened? Why wasn't I like man I gotta know what's going on before all of that stuff started happening but I honestly can't tell you. But now I feel like all of that stuff with the police and actually seeing that racism is still very alive is just like this isn't ok and that's what keeps me wanting to get down to the bottom of this and that.

Taylor also described a high school classmate who was murdered the day after their commencement ceremony. This incident touched her, but the murder of Trayvon Martin

had a larger influence on her and her desire to make her race more salient. This encounter sparked a new interest in Taylor.

While Taylor's *encounter* was a tragic event that received national attention, Tiffany realized that there was more to race in the United States after speaking with other students who had similar experiences as her in her organizations. She explained:

Seeing...talking to other students. Like realizing that I wasn't necessarily the only one who felt like I was on the outskirts...So, I made friends through that. Through like, you know, being in those organizations...My freshman year I came to school only going...coming from [an] all White [community]. So, I identify as an African American, but I didn't really have those connections to my ethnicity prior to coming to college. So, it was a culture shock. So, I definitely feel more accepting of myself. I feel more proud. I feel like...that's when I got into natural hair, that's when I had more Black friends, that's when I had more friends of any race really. So, it definitely changed me in wanting to learn more about my culture, my heritage.

When asked to describe how her perception of her race changed, Marley specifically discussed her encounter in one of her Black studies courses:

It was "African diaspora" [class]...it was one of kind of... I guess my turning point, because oftentimes African-Americans, and other people like to refer to themselves as Black, but they see themselves as African, but a lot of Africans don't recognize them to be that. And taking [this] class was kind of the first time that I've ever felt a part of the diaspora, even though I am a part of the diaspora, I

really felt a part of the African diaspora. And so, I guess, I don't know if that was a turning point.

Marley's turning point, or *encounter*, occurred in a Black Studies class. It was in this class that she felt more a part of the African diaspora and began to make her race and ethnicity more salient. Similar to other NSSU Black Studies minors, her coursework is credited to her realization of the importance of the history of African Americans and African peoples.

**Race salience.** Participants described how salient race was in their current lives. The salience levels of Black studies minors were similar to some students who had not taken Black studies courses.

Tami described her race as being very salient to her:

I feel like I am more than a stereotype since I am extremely loud. Yes, since I am extremely loud, I feel like that should not be the only thing people realize about me, that I'm a loud Black woman. My feelings should be validated. I have a right to be angry when I want to be angry because I'm freaking human.

Megan echoes this thought and stated:

Yes, I take tremendous pride in [being African American] because I don't see anything wrong with it. I mean, and I think that the only way that you're going to be ok with that is if you take courses or like the ones provided in the African American studies minor to learn about your history outside of that one little paragraph that they tell you or the stereotypes that they put out there. I mean I'm different, there are so many things about me that are different and not saying that they are better or less or not better than any other race, but there are certain things

that make me me and I feel like I wouldn't be me if I weren't Black I wouldn't be the same person. There are certain things about being Black that make me who I am, and I wouldn't be me if I was a Latino or if I was White or if I was Asian. I feel like being Black is a great thing.

Raven, on the other hand, had a different perspective on the salience of her race. She stated:

I see myself as just a person with darker skin that's [working hard] to get this degree. OK. I feel like I'm doing exactly what everybody else is doing whether they're Black, White, Asian, whatever... You're still paying the same amount of money as everybody else, you're working just as hard just to go ahead, but I do feel like I have to work a little bit harder. Not in the sense that like my homework has to be like spot on, but it's more so in my persona that I have to work a little but harder because [of stereotypes]. I feel like I have to work hard to fight against that... I feel like I have to work a little bit harder as an African American, and I feel like that sort of, not defines me, but I feel like it just adds another sort of layer to me because I always have to be conscious of how I'm conducting myself. But I feel like I'm a spokesperson as a Black person. I feel like I'm a spokesperson to people that want to better their lives, which is most, if not all, individuals. I feel like I have to be, at all times, a sort of representation of what we want to be perceived as. Not necessarily the ideal... but I feel like I have to be like a spokesperson or a role model.

These participants, both Black studies minors and not, describe having race as mid to high salience. Some describe more confidence in themselves and having their race as

highly salient in their everyday lives. One participant described her race being salient, but not in a positive way. Her race is more salient because she recognizes that she lives in a racialized environment that can result in negative stereotypes being aimed towards her as a result of her race.

**Transformation.** Participants described how they perceive their racial identity transformation compared to their freshman year. Since all of the participants were traditional students and seniors, they were all discussing their transformation over the last 4-5 years while in college. Megan expressed how she has a lower tolerance level compared to her senior year:

My patience is like zero. I have found that I've taken more pride in being African American. Not that I ever not, but subconsciously, things that I did or thought that I had to do. Ok, you're going on a job interview and you straighten your hair. You can't go to a job interview with your natural hair, speaking a certain way, or conducting yourself in a certain manner. Pushing aside those things or ways we speak culturally as African Americans when you're in front of other people or other races. I don't do it anymore because I had to come to those conclusions through my [Black] studies classes that it doesn't make me any less intelligent or that's not something that I have to do. That's just something conditioned in our minds that we have to do to be accepted, and that's not it. You know that's not what should be done based on whether someone accepts me. It's ok to wear my natural hair or to speak in Ebonics or African American vernacular English or whatever they want to call it. It's ok to express my thoughts in a way that I know

from growing up where I grew up. It's ok just to be African American. I don't have to put some of those cultural things aside to fit in.

Megan is no longer tolerant of racial discrimination or stereotypes. She feels more confident in expressing her culture. Brandy described how she had a limited and singular ideal of what the definition of being Black was. She has since changed that ideology from her freshman year:

My freshman year I limited what Blackness should look like. Basically saying if you were Black but you were more into the white community or into the white culture, I didn't identify you as Black to me. As I got older and I realized you are just as Black as me, even if I'm in touch with Black culture or not, we're still two Black people dealing with a lot of oppression still, dealing with injustices that are set up to be against us. That's the changes for me. I also realized that one gender, mostly male, cannot speak for the whole culture of Black people or the whole African American community...I take more pride into being Black. I am way happier understanding the [racial] institutions... It's just an institution that is just set up for me to fail, and my peers then to fail. It made me see, where can I start putting change at, where can I be to fix those things, or at least help African American students be better and do better.

Taylor also expressed a difference in how informed she is about events occurring in the Black community. She attributes much of this change to media and current events:

I do see myself different and it has a lot to do with what's been going on in society...I was a lot more ignorant to the things that were going on when I was a freshman and stuff like that. I wasn't as interested in what was going on, but now

I'm always checking CNN...because I want to be informed and I want to know what's going on in the world...it's mostly in the Black community because of all the things that have been going on...It's just something about that [Trayvon Martin murder] event that it's just like you know I need to be more informed so now I go and I seek information on what's going on in the African American world and you know it's not that I don't want to know about everything else, but this is what's important to me and this is what hits home for me.

Some participants saw little transformation in their racial identity. Linda expressed how she did recognize growth and development compared to her freshman year, but she did attribute that growth to her racial identity:

I don't really see it in a Black aspect of that it's just a big difference of who I am as a person, but I feel like now I recognize some of the things with race and being at a predominately [White] institution that I didn't recognize my freshman year or sophomore year. Before I was just here...now it's like I'm Black and I'm here...

Emilio also discussed a heightened sense of consciousness when dealing with conversations about race:

My freshman year, I didn't really think about those thoughts. I didn't really think of Blackness as this huge thing. legitimate before, it made me have those feelings all the more, more deep feelings and my experience with race and conversations about race were that much more intentional than they probably would have been, and they're a lot more powerful in what I experience.

All of the participants recognized some level of growth, but the area in which that growth was attributed to and the reasons why varied. While Linda did not attribute any growth

to her racial identity, she does see a difference in her everyday life and recognizes the nuance of race relations in a different way compared to her freshman year. Taylor has become more interested in investing into the Black community as a result of media outlets and high media news coverage that happened within the last three years. Although they did not take a Black studies course, they did have some type of transformation. Their transformation speaks to the validation of lived experiences.

The participants who were Black studies minors described a different type of racial identity transformation. Megan and Brandy both describe how they have grown from having a shallow view of what it meant to be Black and what was appropriate conduct of African Americans to realizing that there is no mold for Blackness. Megan and Brandy, along with Emilio, have become more intentional with not only considering what race is and appropriateness is, but they have become less tolerant with shallow worldviews and confined ideologies of what it means to be Black and Black in America.

### **Impact of Black Studies**

Participants who were Black studies minors were asked to describe how their courses have impacted them. The question was open ended in an effort to ensure participants described what they felt was important to them. Support ranged from Social support to academic support. Megan began by saying:

I feel like it's taught me to make sure I always have facts and backup what I say. Because you know you can argue with someone all day up and down, but having those facts to back up what you say and make your points valid when you're trying to get your point across to someone who really could care less about what you have to say. That's been a really big thing.

Megan described feeling more confident in her ability to answer questions from a scholarly point-of-view. Emilio also discussed feeling a sense of legitimacy as a result of his studies. He also discussed a better sense of belonging as a result of his studies:

I felt...that I belonged here as a result of that. I saw myself as more intelligent too and I associated that with Blackness. So it was like, Blackness and studying Black history and African American history, is not only something that helps me see my people and myself as something that's vast and robust. But, I also saw the...Diving into it at an academic level as something as legitimate as studying any other subject. So, it made me feel empowered and I could articulate things about Blackness, and Black culture, and Black experience better to my friends who were either Black, or who were not Black. So, I saw Blackness as something more full...I guess [Black] studies helped me see that I really see Blackness as something that's central to who I am.

Emilio's sentiments of a better sense of self are mirrored by Brandy. She stated:

It's changed a lot. I didn't understand my identity, of course I knew I was Black, of course I knew I was African American, but I didn't really understand what it meant to be Black or what does Blackness look like. I'm not saying that Blackness has one way it should look, but what does history say about my Blackness? How should I go about that in society? It just taught me a lot about organization and how Blacks came together. It expanded my knowledge and it made me feel like I had a worth, and that I was worth it, and that my Blackness should not be excused. You should still pay attention to other things besides my Blackness,

because I'm Black does not mean I am any less than anybody. That's why I did that.

Dered also expressed a sense of confidence and self-efficacy:

I would say it's more internal. Freshman year I was the hot head kid from Chicago...Once I became the minor it's like I just completely calmed down and I was like, "I don't need to show anybody the type of person that I am to get their respect." It's just carry myself in a type of manner that's like, "You don't have to like me, but you will respect me." Especially in a predominantly white college. They look at us like, "Oh my God, why are you here? No one wants you here. "You might not want me here, but I am here, and I'm here because this is the type of person that I am... I feel more confident in myself. I wouldn't say it's just the [Black studies] minor that got me into that, but it was that me having more respect for myself, that made my confidence just shoot all the way up. It's like you can say what you want to say, but it's not going to affect me in any type of way because I know the truth.

Each participant described a better sense of self both socially and academically. They were better able to understand and deal with racial discrimination and microaggressions and expressed feeling more confident academically. They described being more confident with who they were, and, as a result, spent less time trying to fit stereotypes and placed more focus on reaching their goals. Their Black studies courses not only taught them history, but assisted them in being more self-confident whether this was directly the intentions of the program or indirectly.

**Black faculty support.** Faculty members serve a vital role in institutions of higher education. The impact faculty members have on the lives of students can be positive or negative. Some participants described a feeling of hostility in their courses with their faculty members or fellow students. They described microaggressions from both faculty and students in core classes and personal interactions. Participants also described how their Black professors in the Black studies program provided a unique type of support inside and outside of the classroom.

Dered described his experiences with his Black studies professors compared to his professors in his major by stating:

And to compare [my Black studies professors] to my [communication] professors...my Com professors care too, but my [Black studies] professors act like they're my momma and daddy. They're like, "If you need help, call me. Here's my personal line, email me whenever, if you have any problems or questions let me know. We're gonna work this out." I was like, "ok." ... Like another support group.

Dered explained that he had relationships with his Black faculty members that felt more familial. He felt that his Black professors took a personal investment in his life. Brandy expressed similar sentiments:

I'm not saying that White professors don't care, or that they haven't helped me because some have, but the Black [professors] took more of a personal interest within me. They are the main reason why I am still at [NSSU]. They push me, they see the potential. I really enjoy creating, outside of the classroom, relationships with them. Being able to just go sit in their office and just talk... we

just go to [Dr. Evans] and just talk about life, not even about school, just talk about what is going on on campus with campus activism, or what's going on in the world, having them uplift me and helping me not give up, they push me... They really changed my life.

The impact of NSSU's Black Studies programs ranged from students having a stronger desire to be knowledgeable in their academic disciplines to feeling more comfortable with who they are and having higher self-esteem. Black studies gave participants more than a deeper academic understanding of global history, American history, race relations in the United States, and other topics. Black studies gave them more confidence in their abilities to communicate effectively and to stand strong to defend themselves in the racial society that is the United States of America. Black studies also helped participants develop relationships that went deeper than they ever imagined. The faculty of the NSSU Black Studies program supported students in more meaningful ways than that of their counterparts in other departments.

### **Summary**

When choosing to take or not take a Black studies course, the reasons for the participants were similar. Most of the students who did not take a Black studies course did not enroll due to their focus on graduating within a certain timeframe. One participant did express her lack of interest in the subject, but every other participant expressed some type of interest in the discipline. Students may have been more inclined to complete a Black studies course had they 1) been informed of the program earlier in their academic career and/or 2) been able to easily transfer the credits to fit their program.

Being at a PWI was difficult for many students because of experiences with overt and covert racial microaggressions from both faculty members and other students. Being around other students who were Black through student organization involvement and in Black studies courses was refreshing for participants because they felt as though they were with people who understood them and they did not feel the need to have to validate their existence. Participants described feeling more comfortable when with other Black NSSU community members compared to White community members. They expressed a feeling of being able to be their authentic selves in a space without judgment.

Participants who had never taken a Black studies course were more likely to consider themselves Black versus African American. The reasoning behind the identification classification varied. For example, one participant expressed her preference of being called Black because she felt that African American had a negative stigma while one participant preferred being called Black because she felt removed from the African diaspora. This is the complete opposite of one of the participants who was a Black studies minor. She expressed her connectedness to the African diaspora and claims her African ancestry.

The students who were Black studies minors were more likely to express a perceived difference in their racial awareness and sense of self. Those who had never taken a Black studies course were less likely to express a change in their racial awareness and identity development.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the study along with a discussion surrounding the findings. I then suggest implications for future policy, practice, and research surrounding the theme of Black studies programs and student support.

### **Summary of the Study**

This study sought to provide an understanding of the reasons African American students choose to enroll or not enroll in Black studies courses and to explore any relationship between racial identity development and Black studies programs. Cross' (1971,1991) Nigrescence model, or the process of becoming Black, was used as a theoretical framework. Nigrescence was used as an overarching concept when developing the emerging themes for the study, but the study was not limited to the linear nature of the model.

The interest in this study was a result of limited qualitative research in this specific area, limited research on Black studies at NSSU, and a personal investment in Black studies and student affairs. A large portion of the current research that focuses on how student affairs practitioners can support African American students is solely focuses on the purpose of retention and matriculation from a student organizational involvement and campus programming perspective. More focus needs to be placed on the overlapping support academic affairs and student affairs bring to institutions of higher education toward student support and academic success.

The research design consisted of a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews that prompted participants to describe their experiences with Black studies courses and their student organizational involvement that focused on the African

American community or positive change in race relations in the United States. The two research questions that guided the study were:

- 1) What reasons do Black students put forth to justify their choice or non-choice of Black studies courses?
- 2) In what ways do African American students who enroll in Black studies courses compare to those Black students who have not in relation to racial identity development?

The participants for this study were African American undergraduate students at Northern Superior State University. Participants also needed to fit the following criteria for the study:

- an individual of the African diaspora who identifies as Black/African American
- a student at Northern Superior State University
- an undergraduate student of senior academic standing as determined by credit hours attained
- Black studies minor, and/or a member of a student organization that works to build community among Black people/African Americans in some capacity.

Findings support the notion that Black studies programs assist students in not only building an academic background in the African diaspora, but also in building self-efficacy and self-esteem.

### **Conclusion of Study**

The qualitative data provided by participants suggests that those African American students who do take Black studies have higher levels of racial identity as interpreted through Cross' Nigrescence model. Each participant expressed difficulties,

socially and psychologically, with being Black at a PWI, and being involved with other Black community members provided support for student engagement and sense of belonging on campus. While each participant described support from Black NSSU community members, those who were Black studies minors expressed that learning about the extensive history and current events surrounding the African diaspora provided an internal support that was not found in any other campus resources.

### **Discussion**

African American students are more likely to have a difficult time adjusting to college campuses when they are the minority (Ariza & Berkey, 2009; Dahlving, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Students oftentimes find support within student organizations, courses, and mentors. The participants in this study found support in their student organizations and with other Black campus community members, but those students who enrolled in Black studies courses found a type of support that was unique to their college experience.

Most of the participants in this study had very similar experiences with dealing with racial microaggressions and racism from the dominate culture on their campus. In Ariza and Berkey's (2009) study, participants discussed the struggles of stereotype threat they faced and their desire to maintain their authentic selves. Dahlving (2010) found that Black student participants described feelings of isolation at their institution as a result of peer and faculty interactions. How a student feels on campus is directly related to their decision to continue pursuing their education at that particular institution. Danielak, Gupta, and Elby (2014) found that a student's identity and sense of belonging in a program can affect the student's decision to continue their education at that institution.

All of the participants in this study found some type of coping mechanism. Most of these coping mechanisms included being involved in the Black community on campus. While student organizational involvement supported students in retention and finding a sense of community, racial identity development that was supported by student organizations was different than that of students who took Black studies courses. Those participants of the Black studies program at NSSU were at higher levels of racial identity development when analyzed using Cross' (1971, 1991) Nigrescence model compared to the participants who never took a Black studies course but were involved in Black or racially aware student organizations.

Adams (2005) found in their study of Black students at a PWI who were enrolled in Black studies courses felt less pressure to focus on issues such as stereotype threat and meeting expectations rooted in White cultural norms. Having a stronger sense of racial identity that is not confirmative to the likes of a Eurocentric world is a type of development that is unique yet important. Cross (1971, 1991) suggests that environmental factors (e.g., experiences, familial influences, etc.) can influence how African Americans view themselves and the world around them. Formal education can also play a role in racial identity development.

The participants who never enrolled in a Black studies course were more likely to be in the Pre-encounter stage of Cross' (1971, 1991) model. In this stage, race salience is lower, and the feelings towards race may be more neutral. Individuals at this stage may also be involved in organizations that support Black communities; but their purpose may not be to support Black culture, and they may still have a lack of interest in gaining and understanding the history of African Americans or the African diaspora. None of the

participants in this study who were Black studies minors showed indicators of being in the Pre-encounter stage. This is important to note when discussing the importance of Black studies programs and ethnic studies programs in general. The positive impact of Black studies at NSSU is supported by the study due to the fact that all of the students that were products of this program expressed higher levels of racial identity development.

Some participants described an *encounter* which is usually the result of an event, that causes individuals to search for a deeper understanding of their identity. Taylor specifically expressed her experience with recent events at the time. She attributed her desire to learn more about the history of African Americans and learn more about the racial constructs of the United States after feeling a connection with the murder of a teenager and after a campus event where the Black studies professor was the keynote speaker. These two encounters deepened her desire to learn more. The type of encounter an individual experiences varies, but the participants in this study credit partial or all of their encounter to an educational experience. The influence of educational experiences are expressed by the participants in this study.

Participants who were Black studies minors reported being in the Immersion-Emersion stage and the Internalization stage of Cross' (1971, 1991) model. They reported higher levels of race salience and less tolerance with White American ideologies on how Black people should conduct themselves. They reported feeling more comfortable with their Blackness as a result of their studies and a sense of liberation from trying to fit into Eurocentric frameworks. The influence Black studies courses have on student racial identity development is different from that of other courses because African peoples are central to the subject matter. As a result, students are immersed into African

history, politics, and culture. This immersion can be part of the influence of the higher levels of racial identity development for the students involved in these programs. The purpose of a comprehensive Black studies program, similar to the NSSU program, is to move beyond the general, brief discussions of African Americans and truly grasp an understanding of the impacts of African peoples across the globe. These programs also explore culture in an empowering way which, often times, is a new experience for students. African American students are in a space where their cultural backgrounds are respected and not questioned which, sadly, is often times the social norm on college campuses (Ray, 1976) and in the United States.

Campbell and Campbell (1997) found that positive relationships with faculty mentors played a positive role in student academic success and retention. Students who were Black studies minors were the only participants who expressed better than average faculty experiences. Mentorship with faculty members was not part interview protocol, but participants still discussed how important their Black studies faculty members were and how important their relationships with Black faculty members were in relation to retention and feeling accepted on campus.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Although Black studies programs provide documented academic and psychosocial support for students, many institutions of higher education do not offer Black studies programs, and if they do, enrollment is likely to be low for declared majors and/or minors. The recommendations for proactive of this study relate to administration of institutions of higher education and student affairs practitioners.

First, institutions of higher education need to place more of an emphasis on ethnic studies programs, and Black studies in particular. Black studies programs lack of financial resources and faculty members are likely to be housed in multiple departments (Phillips, 2010). Financial support for Black studies programs will allow departments to not only support their students in a larger variety of ways (i.e. community service learning, study abroad opportunities, etc.), but will allow departments to hire full time faculty specifically in Black studies. Ethnic studies programs should be as included as other disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology, etc. Creating an inclusive academic culture will assist in institutional efforts to transcend all negative connotations that may haunt ethnic studies.

Second, student affairs practitioners (i.e., academic advisors, counselors, etc.) should work to support these programs when assisting students with scheduling their courses and when promoting campus events. Reviewing what many participants expressed, a lack of knowledge about the courses available to them is one reason many students did not enroll in any Black studies courses. If these courses were promoted campus wide as much as the other courses in more traditional disciplines, there could be a different outcome that results in higher enrollment levels and, as a result, students having more positive experiences on their campus.

Third, White faculty members should be intentional with supporting students of color outside of the classroom. The participants in this study did not express any negative interactions with their White faculty members, but they did describe the intentional outreach received by their Black faculty members. They recounted how important that type of support meant to them and who it influenced their academic

endeavors in a positive way. While Black faculty members may be able to make initial connections with students due to a connection from similar lived experiences, this does not mean that White faculty members are not able to reach out to students of color. Being intentional with building meaningful relationships with students, and students of color in general, will not only assist in the building of academic determination, but can also assist students in retaining at the institution.

Finally, Black student affairs practitioners, students, and faculty members should collaborate to support Black students on campus. Student organizations have a faculty or staff advisor at NSSU. While students involved in organizations found support from being with other individuals who understood their lived experiences, those students who were in Black studies courses felt the same sense of support with the added benefit of building a stronger sense of racial identity. This shows that while the two areas offer some type of support for students, the academic coursework adds an extra value that cannot be duplicated elsewhere. The value of formal education must be recognized and encouraged. The co-curricular activities brought students a sense of belonging and a place where they felt comfortable. The co-curricular activities provided a safe space for students to be themselves and not fear the need to code switch or worry about stereotype threat. Academic programs provide a different type of empowerment and support. Combining curriculum and co-curriculum can add a new type of support for students that combines the social and educational support the institutions offer.

### **Recommendations for Research**

This study focused on college African American, undergraduate students. Further research should be conducted understand how ethnic studies programs support students at

the collegiate level. When discussing racial identity development, there is not one model that totally encompasses the phenomena of identity development. Future research should include multiple models to gather a better understanding of the phenomenon of identity, racial identity, and racial identity development. Further, future research should examine how multiple identities (i.e. race, gender, etc.) intersect and develop in relation to ethnic studies curriculum.

Also, one theme that emerged from the study was experiences at a PWI. This theme did not align with the research questions posed by this study, but each participant described their negative experiences at their institution which was a PWI. Researches have documented the differences in perceptions for African American college students at HBCUs and PWIs. These studies focus heavily on academic outcomes and support services. Comparing Black studies at PWIs to HBCUs in relation of racial identity development can provide substantial data to support the importance of ethnic studies programs and the influence an institution has on such programs.

### **Conclusion**

This study gathered qualitative data from students at one Midwestern PWI, as a result, more research needs to be conducted on the impact of Black studies in relation to racial identity at other PWIs and HBCUs. For example, longitudinal studies capturing the identity development and academic achievements of students over an extended period of time are warranted. This type of study might validate the need for more ethnic studies programs and provide data for lead administrators to advocate for such programs due to the variety of positive contributions such programs make.

Black students and students of color face issues on college campuses every day that may not be recognized by their peers or administration. Students or marginalized groups find social support in a variety of ways that include organization involvement, but academic involvement can also play a vital role in the ways in which students find support matriculate at their institution. Black studies programs provide a type of support for students that is unparalleled to other programs on college campuses.

Appendix A

HRRC Approval

This research protocol has been approved by the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University. File No. 16-501-H

## Appendix B

Greetings,

My name is Jakia Fuller and I am a graduate student completing a research project about the identity development of African American students in relation to their involvement with Black Studies programs and student organizations that have a history of supporting African Americans (Black Student Union, Black Greek Lettered Organizations, etc.).

I am currently searching for volunteers to participate in this study. To meet the requirements for this study you must identify as an African American and be a senior or alumnus. You must also fall into one of the following two categories: **(1)** be an African/African American Studies minor or **(2)** have never taken an African/African American Studies course and had some involvement in a student organization with a history of supporting African Americans (Black Student Union, Black Greek Lettered Organizations, etc.). If you are an African/African American Studies minor and had involvement in one of these organizations, you still qualify to participate in the study.

Your participation would consist of completing an interview that will last about 45-60 minutes.

If you are interested and willing to participate in the study, please email me with your interest. I would like to forward you the informed consent document, explaining your involvement and the study in further detail. I would also like to speak with you about scheduling a time when we could meet for an interview.

You may contact me at [fullerj1@gvsu.edu](mailto:fullerj1@gvsu.edu) or (269) 425-1769 if you need any additional information. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warmest Regards,

Jakia Fuller  
Graduate Student, College Student Affairs Leadership  
College of Education  
Grand Valley State University

## Appendix C

Have you ever taken a Black Studies course? Why or why not?

What factors motivated you to enroll in an African/African-American Studies course?

Have your Black Studies courses influenced the way you see yourself as an African American or the world?

Are you involved in any student organization(s)? Please list them.

If so, why did you choose to join that/these organization(s)?

If not, why did you choose not to join any organization(s)?

Did your race/ethnicity play a role in your choice of joining an organization?

How has your involvement in a student organization changed your perception of being an African American over time?

How important is your organization to you?

How do you think you have developed/changed your racial identity since your freshman year? Please give an example.

Do you see yourself different as an African American compared to your freshman year? Please give an example.

How do you see yourself as an African American today?

What influenced your current understanding of your identity as an African American?

How important is race in building relationships with people?

Is there anything else you would like to address about being African American?

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