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It is a different world? Providing a holistic understanding of the experiences and perceptions of non-Black students at historically Black colleges and universities.

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# Is It a Different World? Providing a Holistic Understanding of the Experiences and Perceptions of Non-Black Students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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## Abstract

This qualitative study contributes an original holistic understanding of the perceptions and experiences of non-Black students (e.g., Asian American, Latino, and White) as they matriculate into historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), persist to graduation, and reflect on their experiences as graduates at HBCUs. Findings from this study confirm, challenge, and extend existing research regarding the preenrollment experience, institutional experience, and culminating outcomes of non-Black students enrolled in HBCUs. Implications are offered for researchers, practitioners, and current and future non-Black HBCU students.

## Keywords

non-Black students, HBCUs, academic success

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Several misconceptions surround modern historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). One is the notion that they are racially exclusive in favor of Black Americans, thereby promoting segregation reminiscent of this nation's divided past (Rivers, 2009). On the contrary, HBCUs emerged as a consequence of segregation, not promoters of it (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Jewell, 2002). Although they serve a predominantly Black student population even today—a niche that many view as vital (e.g., Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Drewry & Doermann, 2001; Gasman & Tudico, 2008; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008)—growing numbers of non-Blacks such as Whites, Latino/as, and Asian Americans are selecting HBCUs for their college degrees.

According to data from the National Center of Educational Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013), Blacks make up roughly 78% of the undergraduate student population at 2- and 4-year HBCUs, with the remainder comprised of other groups such as Whites (10%), Asian Americans (1%), and Latino/as (4%). Today, non-Blacks constitute 40% or more of the student populations at three 4-year HBCUs (i.e., Lincoln University of Missouri, West Virginia State University, and Bluefield State College) (NCES, 2013), and one 2-year HBCU (St. Philip's College) has a majority Hispanic student enrollment and is recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution. This growth in diversity is not by happenstance, as many HBCUs are actively recruiting non-Black students to compensate for the decline in enrollment among Black students (Gasman, 2009; Stewart, 2013).

Given the increasing racial diversification at HBCUs, researchers have recently begun to focus on the experiences of non-Black students at HBCUs. For example, literature has emerged on Asian Americans and Latino/as (Gendrin & Chandler, 2011; Palmer & Maramba, 2015a, 2015b), and on White students (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Closson & Henry, 2008a, 2008b; Conrad, Brier, & Braxton, 1997; Hall & Closson, 2005; Nixon & Henry, 1991; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010). However, while the aforementioned studies have explored non-Black students' experiences with faculty (Palmer & Maramba, 2015a; Closson & Henry, 2008a, 2008b; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010), campus engagement (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009), and perceptions of racism (Palmer & Maramba, 2015b; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Closson & Henry, 2008a, 2008b; Hall & Closson, 2005; Nixon & Henry, 1991), no study has provided a holistic understanding of the experiences of non-Black students as they enroll into HBCUs, work toward degree completion, and assess their attendance as successful graduates.

Given this gap in the literature, the purpose of this current study is to provide a holistic understanding of the experiences of non-Black students as they matriculate into HBCUs, persist to graduation, and reflect on their experiences as graduates. To further contextualize the relevance of this article, the subsequent section will provide an overview of literature related to non-Black students

at HBCUs. Moreover, this article will discuss the methodology for this study, followed by the findings. Four research questions guided this study:

1. What factors influence non-Black students' decisions to select and enroll in an HBCU?
2. What are the experiences of non-Black students in as well as outside the classroom?
3. How, if at all, does attending an HBCU affect non-Black students' views on race?
4. How do non-Black students define the primary roles and outcomes of modern HBCUs?

## Relevant Literature

Although more research is beginning to emerge on the experience of non-Black students at HBCUs, the literature on this topic is still quite limited. This section will highlight some of the significant themes appearing in the literature on this topic. Discussing the history of HBCUs, Jewell (2002) noted that HBCUs have a longstanding tradition of embracing racial diversity. He explained:

Faithfully serving as the primary educators of [Blacks], Black colleges were also among the first educational institutions in the South if not the nation to open their doors to students regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin. From the time of their founding and well into their histories, the student bodies at many Black colleges have been diverse to at least some degree and open to all despite their existence within a segregated social order that vigorously sought to preserve a racial hierarchy. (Jewell, 2002, p. 12)

One theme present in the extant literature is the inclusive and supportive environment of HBCUs. Black students have long reported this ethos (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984), and now data underscore its applicability to many non-Black students as well (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Closson & Henry, 2008a, 2008b; Gendrin & Chandler, 2011; Hall & Closson, 2005; Palmer & Maramba, 2015a, 2015b). Interestingly, while some non-Black students are initially apprehensive about how they will be received on an HBCU campus, once enrolled, many of these students find their fears quickly allayed (Hall & Closson, 2005).

Factors contributing to the supportive HBCU environment for non-Blacks are varied. Members of the faculty and staff appear to contribute to these positive experiences (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Closson & Henry, 2008b; Palmer & Maramba, 2015a; Strayhorn, 2010). This is essential to note because these individuals tend to have frequent interaction with students inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, engagement in activities like sports or other

campus organizations provide non-Black students with vital support systems that help to engender social integration and create more satisfying outcomes (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009).

Despite reporting positive experiences, however, many non-Black students also report negative instances of perceived exclusion and hypervisibility. Although a survey of student affairs personnel at one HBCU campus found that there were no “acts of overt racism against White students” (Nixon & Henry, 1991, p. 122), self-reports from non-Black students reveal racial micro-aggressions (i.e., subtle forms of racism) at HBCUs (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Closson & Henry, 2008b; Palmer & Maramba, 2015b). For example, students have offered examples of name calling (e.g., “Tom Cruise,” “White girl”) (Closson & Henry, 2008b) and being picked out to serve as spokespersons for their race (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). Moreover, some non-Black students say that their Black professors are too Afrocentric, display bias or lack inclusivity, and are ignorant about the cultural norms of other groups (Palmer & Maramba, 2015a). This can lead non-Black students to practice self-censoring or avoidance tactics during class discussions so they do not feel awkward or ostracized based on differing opinions (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009).

Some Black students are openly suspicious of their non-Black counterparts. Research on Blacks’ views of Whites (Closson & Henry, 2008b) and Vietnamese Americans (Gendrin & Chandler, 2011) suggests that some Blacks begrudgingly stereotype these groups as being more intelligent, on a merit scholarship, or more affluent, while at the same time feeling judged as inferior by these groups. This by no means describes all Black students’ perceptions, but the finding is significant to mention because it may signal underlying tensions between some Black students and their non-Black counterparts. In the case of a group of Black and Vietnamese Americans at one HBCU, Gendrin and Chandler (2011) conclude, “the quantity and quality of [their] relationships...do not necessarily promote a mutual willingness and readiness to develop personal/intimate relationships with one another” (p. 115). With respect to attracting Whites (or other non-Blacks) to HBCUs, data (Conrad et al., 1997; Maramba, Palmer, Yull, & Ozuna, in press) suggest that academic program offerings, financial support (e.g., scholarships and low tuition), and institutional characteristics (e.g., supportive culture) are among the top factors. In summary, the overall experience for many non-Black students at HBCUs is satisfying, but they appear to experience some challenges that tend to center on racial issues.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Approach***

We used in-depth interview methods (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) to explore the holistic experiences and perceptions of non-Black recent graduates of

HBCUs in order to understand the preenrollment experience, institutional experience, and culminating outcomes of non-Black students enrolled in HBCUs. Given this, the study's epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning through human interactions (Jones et al., 2006). More specifically, a constructivist epistemology underscores the meaning making of individual participants and acknowledges that such understanding is socially constructed (Crotty, 1998).

### *HBCU Profiles*

This study involved three public HBCUs. We selected these institutions because of the professional relationship between the administrators, staff, and the research team. The student population for each school is approximately 80% to 90% Black. School A is an urban institution located in the mid-Atlantic region with a total student population of 6,700. School B, a public land-grant institution, is located in a suburban section of the mid-Atlantic region and serves a student body of 5,300. School C is a rural institution located in the Northeast and enrolls approximately 2,000 students.

### *Participant Profiles*

Participants for this study were 11 recent graduates from three HBCUs. Participants were recruited with assistance from institutional administrators and staff as well as through snowball sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2012). Six participants graduated from school A, two from school B, and three from school C. This study included nine females and two males, with an average age of 31. The sample was primarily White ( $n=8$ ) with one each identifying as Latino, Filipina American, and Filipina Chinese American. Among the White participants were a self-reported nonpracticing Jew and a first generation Eastern European Muslim immigrant. Of the 11 participants, 5 reported previous experiences at a community college and predominantly White institution (PWI). Five stated that they were continuously enrolled at their HBCU, and seven lived on campus for at least part of their HBCU experience. Five participants were nontraditional students, four were traditional, and two began as traditional students but completed their degrees as nontraditional students after taking an extended break. Table 1 provides details about the participants.

### *Researchers' Positionality*

For any qualitative study, it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones et al., 2006). A White male researcher conducted all interviews. The data analysis, however, was conducted by a White male researcher with a Black male and a

**Table 1.** Detailed Participant Profiles.

Participant	Race and ethnicity (Self-identified)	Gender/age	Education
Julia	Asian American (Filipino and Chinese)	Female, 28	Earned Bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies
Paula	Asian American (Filipino)	Female, 30	Earned Bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies (emphasis on elementary education and math)
Janet	White	Female, 27	Earned Bachelor's degree in mass communications
Alicia	White	Female, 45	Earned Bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies (emphasis in science health-care management and psychology)
Tracey	White	Female, 22	Earned Bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies
Faith	White	Female, 26	Earned Bachelor's degrees in biology and anthropology
Jill	White	Female, 26	Earned Master's degree in psychology
Linda	White	Female, 27	Earned Bachelor's degree in mass communications
Carl	White	Male, 35	Earned a Bachelor's degree in nursing
Joe	Latino	Male, 38	Earned Bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies (emphasis on business and psychology)
Cheryl	White	Female, 31	Earned Bachelor's degree in psychology

Filipina American researcher. The White male researcher was a faculty member at an HBCU, and the others were affiliated with a PWI when data were collected. Moreover, while the White and Filipina American researchers attended undergraduate and graduate school at PWIs, the Black male attended graduate school at an HBCU.

The research team members' interests are similar in that we assess campus climate across institutional types (e.g., HBCUs and other minority serving institutions), investigate factors promoting the success of students of color, and examine racial or ethnic disparities in college student outcomes. Given that a White researcher conducted the interviews, this likely motivated participants to provide further depth regarding their experiences on campus (Mizock & Harkins, 2012). During data analysis, we allowed the findings to emerge independent of our racial status and current or previous affiliations with HBCUs. Member checking also helped to make certain that the findings were accurately reflective of the participants' voices.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Our primary means of data collection was one semistructured interview with each participant, ranging from 60 to 90 min. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Prior to each interview, participants signed an informed consent form, and completed a basic demographic questionnaire with information such as age, gender, race or ethnicity, date of entry and exit from college, time spent at institutions other than their HBCU, and periods of enrollment. In some cases, follow-up interviews for clarification and new information were conducted as the research process unfolded organically. Examples of questions included the following: (a) What was your decision making process for identifying and selecting a college to attend? (b) Based on your knowledge and experience, how would you describe the modern role of HBCUs (like the one you attended) in American postsecondary education? (c) How, if at all, has attending an HBCU influenced your thoughts on race? (d) How involved were you at your HBCU? and (e) What factors influenced or hindered your campus involvement?

The team engaged in the constant comparison of data to identify recurring patterns (Charmaz, 2006; Jones et al., 2006). Specifically, all researchers reviewed the transcripts, making research notes, and reflective remarks in the margins to form initial concepts. As the data became increasingly voluminous, the researchers used ATLAS. Ti (7.0), a qualitative data management software program, to organize, manage, and code the data. We used line-by-line open coding to identify initial concepts and categories, followed by axial and selective coding. Specifically, with axial coding, data were reanalyzed to determine words or patterns that could be combined or collapsed into similar categories. Lastly, selective coding was utilized to elucidate detailed examples and accounts, which



helped us to solidify and cluster the data into the themes presented in the findings section of this article.

Member checking also was employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Specifically, the transcribed interviews were returned to all participants so that they could review transcriptions for accuracy and clarity following the interviews. As the study progressed, participants were provided an opportunity to review the interpretations of the data. The participants did not raise an issue with the way their voices or experiences were represented. In discussing the findings, excerpts from the participants' responses are presented verbatim to preserve the essence of the participants' voices. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant.

### ***Limitations***

Although the participants of this study represented various background characteristics, the number of participants from each institution was small. Despite this, descriptions of the participants' experiences are provided to help institutional officers at HBCUs decide the transferability of the findings to their institutions. Another limitation is that while this study attempts to understand the experiences of non-Black students, the majority of the participants were White. Although some of the participants were from different HBCUs and their racial identities varied, there was significant overlap among the experiences of the participants in this study. A third limitation is that 5 of the 11 participants in this study majored in the same field (i.e., interdisciplinary studies) at the same institution. This may have resulted in some of the participants having similar experiences, which may differ from other non-Black students at HBCUs. However, participants who majored in the interdisciplinary studies program earned degrees with diverse concentrations, which enabled them to come in contact with various academic departments, faculty, and students across campus.

### **Findings**

Four themes emerged from the interviews. The first theme discusses factors that encouraged participants to consider attending and enrolling into an HBCU. In the second theme, participants share reflections of their experiences within and outside the classroom of HBCUs. The participants' experiences focus specifically on their engagement in the classroom as well as in extracurricular activities on campus. In the third theme, participants share reflections on how their HBCU experiences helped to foster changes in their viewpoints on race and racism. In the final theme, participants explain how their perspective on the modern HBCU was changed as a result of persisting to degree completion at their HBCU.

### *Factors Influencing Non-Black Students' Decisions to Matriculate Into an HBCU*

These participants came from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and level of academic preparation, suggesting there is no single profile of a potential non-Black HBCU student. Factors influencing their selection and enrollment in a HBCU were largely practical, with all but one of the participants stating they had limited-to-no knowledge of the history or purpose of HBCUs. For example, Faith, a White student, stated, "I don't know if I knew what HBCU stood for. I really didn't know anything." Similarly, Paula, a Filipina American student, noted, "I thought it was just another college. And maybe, just, it was a different demographic, that's all." Consequently, most of these students chose their school for reasons other than being an HBCU.

The most frequently cited reasons for selecting their respective institutions were proximity, institutional openness, and affordability. Specifically, nine participants said that they valued the ability to remain close to family while attending school and to commute and work as needed (proximity), seven discussed the flexibility of the admissions process and general openness and comfortable environment of the HBCU (institutional openness), and six indicated that attendance was affordable and the HBCU offered academic or sports scholarships (affordability). None of the participants received a diversity or minority scholarship.

Commenting on proximity, Paula explained the HBCU "was close to home, I could commute. I didn't have to live somewhere far away from home." Faith highlighted the factors of proximity and affordability, explaining, "I was working my job and thinking about going to school . . . it was one hundred percent about cost and where I lived and I didn't care at all what school it was." Others included institutional openness as a factor in their decision to enroll. Tracey, a White student, indicated, "on my visit I just felt so comfortable at the school and um the whole color thing was not even something that I really thought about." Further, Linda, a White student, articulated, "I spoke to . . . admissions and the faculty there and . . . I just liked everyone . . . It seemed definitely much more communal [and I thought] this could work out." Similar to Tracey's and Linda's experiences related to accessibility, Alicia, a White student indicated the following:

I called three area campuses after I graduated from [community college] . . . to complete my undergraduate degree. I was impressed with [HBCU]. The person that initially answered the phone took the time to ask a few basic questions and then connected me with someone that they felt could best assist me. I spent almost an hour on the phone. [They] took the time to listen to me, share with me what they felt were [the HBCU's] strengths and even weaknesses, and gave me options. [Other area PWIs] could not come close to this.

Moreover, five participants selected a specific HBCU because it was congruent with their career goals and four participants attended an HBCU because it offered a sports program in which they could participate. For example, Joe, a Latino student, indicated that “[the HBCU] was more affordable than my other choices and the fact that it had a wrestling program made it an attractive option.” Further, Julia, a Filipina Chinese American student, stated,

It was closer to home. Because I was so young, I had to stay closer to home um...right after high school. They had a volleyball program that I really wanted to play in and they had my major.

In addition to the aforementioned choice factors, 10 participants discussed overcoming obstacles such as negative social perceptions and negative personal perceptions related to HBCUs. Joe discussed his negative personal perceptions, saying

I was initially hesitant because of the perception of being a poor quality school. I also learned that graduation rates were extremely low, which reinforced this perception. Through friends and research I came to the conclusion that the education I will get will be a direct result of my effort so I decided to attend.

Other participants received challenges from people in their social circles, largely based in racial stereotypes. For example, Janet, a White student, explained

I had a few high school teachers that said negative things about me going such as I will never find a job because I am attending an HBCU and another teacher even said to others, but not me personally, that I would get raped if I attended.

It is important to note that six participants indicated positive feedback from family members and peers about attending an HBCU. For example, Tracey stated,

My mom came with me on my visit and she felt the same way I did about the school. She thought it was very welcoming. She was really supportive of my decision and my dad's the type of person that whatever makes me happy, makes him happy.

Although many participants were not familiar with the historical and present role of HBCUs, many chose to attend an HBCU because of a number of important factors, such as proximity, affordability, and the availability of programs and activities that suited their interests. Despite the fact that some participants encountered resistance from friends, family, and teachers when they decided to

an HBCU, positive interactions they had with admissions representatives and faculty helped them to overcome some of challenges they received from family, teachers, and friends for their institutional selection.

### *The Experiences of Non-Black Students in and Outside of the Classroom*

After enrolling in their respective HBCUs, all participants reported high levels of academic or classroom engagement when asked to compare themselves to their peers, and all but two reported high extracurricular engagement compared with their peers. Each type of engagement is discussed separately below as a way of contextualizing their experiences in and outside the classroom.

*Classroom engagement.* For nearly all participants, classroom engagement manifested as being vocal in the classroom, interactive in online discussions, and involved in study groups or as informal peer tutors. Janet said that she was very committed to academic achievement, though she was not very vocal in the classroom due to shyness. Personal motivations for these participants' involvement included a desire to excel personally and academically, being the first in the family to attend college, being a role model for a child, and needing a way to financially support their families or themselves.

Complementing this high engagement, and perhaps in some cases contributing to it, was positive relationships with faculty. All participants reported positive relationships with at least some faculty members, and some praised their instructors for being critical to their success. For example, Paula explained, "You don't have to reach out for help. Your teachers will make sure if you ever need help, they will say, 'Yeah, come talk to me, and come see me.' I could always talk to my teachers when I was there." On the same accord, Alicia praised her instructors, saying that they "have given me much more than an undergraduate degree."

Importantly, these generally positive reports stand alongside instances of racialized treatment in the classroom. In fact, 10 participants indicated either overt or covert race-based negative interactions. For example, Julia and Paula felt that their Black classmates assumed that they were smarter due to the stereotypical lens of the model minority myth, which is the notion that Asian Americans are hardworking and intellectually superior compared with other minority groups. Others pointed to classroom discussions that took a more uncomfortable turn for them, their classmates, or both. Janet shared, "I would get a lot of 'no offense' when there were racial discussions." Jill drew a parallel between the experience of feeling singled out to speak for all White people in her HBCU classes, and the way that Black students at PWIs are asked for "the Black opinion on things." Tracey recounted a psychology course where the professor "was really, really strong about Black power." She did not

take offense to the topic nor did she feel attacked by the professor; however, she did report feeling “uncomfortable.” She also felt that “there clearly were [Black] students who did not like White kids.” Carl, a White student, on the other hand, shared his feelings of being excluded in a course because of his race. More specifically, he perceived that the instructor made it very clear that study sessions for the course were off limits to non-Black students.

Despite these and other examples of racialized treatment in the classroom, all but one participant reported overwhelmingly positive experiences. Carl expressed more displeasure with his classroom experiences than the other participants; however, his engagement was equally high, and he was sufficiently prepared to pass his nursing exam after graduation. Overall, in spite of sharing experiences of conflicts involving race and classroom interactions, they did not pose a daily challenge for most students nor did they become an insurmountable barrier to learning.

*Extracurricular engagement.* The extracurricular engagement patterns generally mirrored the participants’ classroom engagement. Participants reported being involved in sports, student organizations, and professional organizations. Two of the participants were elected to student government positions. One participant pledged a historically Black Fraternity. The four former athletes identified a strong link between involvement in sports and their sense of the inclusive campus climate at their respective HBCUs. Indeed, membership on an athletic team created a bond between the teammates that enabled these students to feel more committed to their school.

However, like their classroom experiences, some noteworthy racial situations marked their extracurricular experiences. For instance, Linda, who ran for student government, shared her story. She said that some students asked her, “Why are you here? This is an all-Black school.” Other classmates said, “No, you shouldn’t run. You’re White. You don’t know our struggle. We don’t want you to go to leadership.” Faith, who also ran for student government, described this situation: “When I ran for student government [it] was the first time that people were like you shouldn’t be on our student government because you’re White.” Faith shared that one of her Black classmates even told her, “You just don’t have what a strong Black woman has.” Linda and Faith were quick to point out that they won their elections, so they did not feel that these sentiments were widespread.

Three of the participants reported being referred to as “snowbunny” and other similar racial terms. The following account shows how this bothered Janet:

Throughout my years at (my school) I was always called “snowbunny” from Black guys. It was in the type of way when a guy is trying to talk to you. I was also referred by a lot of Black guys from the school as “Christina Aguilera,” “Jessica Simpson,” or “Paris.” They would pick any famous White girl with blonde hair and

call me by her name to get my attention. Same as “snowbunny.” If a White guy called out a Black girl and was like, “Hey, Halle Berry, come here,” it would be considered racist. That was something that used to irritate me a lot from the guys at school.

In sum, while many non-Black students demonstrated high classroom engagement or high extracurricular engagement, and generally experienced a supportive and inclusive campus climate, some participants experienced small and isolated incidences of racial microaggressions.

### *A Different Reality: HBCU Attendance Facilitates Changes in Non-Black Students' Views of Race*

The data suggest that HBCU attendance impacts the racial views of non-Black students in various ways. For example, in Joe's case, witnessing the curiosity of Black students to learn about their culture engendered a passion to understand his own. It made him “want to learn more about my ethnicity.” He explained,

While at my university, it became clear that there was so little I actually knew about where I came from. This led me to question my parents about the history of Puerto Rico, and seek information online. As a result, I've learned a lot about the history and ancestry of Puerto Ricans.

In contrast, Alicia was left more aggravated than inspired. Reflecting on an “African American Politics” course, Alicia “found it upsetting that the undertone of the class focused on being paid back . . . someone owing to a group.” She continued, “This is why so many White people think the way they do about Black people . . . I earned my ‘Black card’ as I received an A in the class.”

Generally, however, participants grew in their appreciation for general racial diversity. Eight stated that they felt more well-rounded and better off for having interacted with Blacks in new ways. Seven participants experienced a change in knowledge or feelings toward Blacks personally. For instance, Jill, who had little prior contact with Black people, was impacted in two ways. First, she was surprised to discover within-group diversity among Blacks, including that “there's people that are [Black] that are like me.” Second, attending an HBCU greatly diminished her fear of Black strangers. Jill remembered times (prior to attending her HBCU) seeing “a Black person on the street” and thinking, “Oh, I'm scared and I hope the light doesn't turn red.” She no longer felt that way after attending her HBCU.

Perhaps even more significantly, eight participants reported an increased understanding of racism or White privilege. Some of these individuals' broadened perspectives were more or less cerebral, citing knowledge they gained

through classes, while others internalized and integrated their newfound knowledge at a deeper emotional level. Faith, in particular, went into detail about structural racism, ongoing modern inequities, and how she felt “tremendous White guilt . . . and hatred of a lot of things White people do.” Faith seemed to internalize the consequences of racism more than the other participants. In contrast, although Linda grew in her understanding of historical and current racial inequities facing Blacks, she took a defensive posture when Black peers tried to implicate her alongside other Whites in American discrimination. She explained, “I’m not just White . . . I’m Albanian . . . and this ‘White guilt’ that people try to put on me, like oh, ‘White people should feel guilty,’ [I am] like, ‘Oh, they can honey, but not this one.’”

To summarize, attending an HBCU impacted the racial concepts of non-Black students in a variety of ways. For example, some participants became more motivated to learn about their own culture and history while others grew in their appreciation for diversity. Moreover, most participants in this study experienced some personal changes as a result of their HBCU attendance. Some participants may have experienced these changes on a more cognitive level, as they encountered new concepts of race and racism while others may have internalized and personalized those new concepts, resulting in deeper emotional changes.

### ***Non-Black Students’ Postgraduation Perceptions of the Primary Roles and Outcomes of Modern HBCUs***

As indicated previously, none of these participants were able to clearly articulate the institutional purposes of HBCUs prior to enrolling. Upon persisting to graduation, however, most were able to list several perceived institutional purposes, including (a) preserving and promoting Black culture, (b) drawing an academically diverse pool of students and offering an entrée into college for the underprepared and underresourced, (c) facilitating self-learning and open mindedness, and (d) delivering a quality education. The final purpose, delivering a quality education, is particularly noteworthy because most participants said that they were aware of stereotypes suggesting that HBCUs are substandard compared with PWIs. Despite such stereotypes, Joe shared this succinct statement: “The modern role of HBCUs is to provide a quality and affordable education that prepares students to be competitive in a globally competitive environment.” For this individual, as echoed by most of the others, HBCUs can and are doing this successfully for Blacks and non-Blacks alike.

The participants also suggested that HBCUs are generally inclusive. Eight participants experienced a sense of community and felt a sense of acceptance. Cheryl stated, “I couldn’t have asked to be treated any better.” Julia remarked, “I think HBCUs are a good option, not just for Black people, but for [other] minorities and White people. Just people who want to have a comfortable sense



of community and pride.” Moreover, all participants indicated that their HBCU was supportive. Some of this support was general, some came in the form of specific services, and some came from other sources such as membership on a sports team or interactions with faculty members. To illustrate this support, Paula contrasted her experiences at the HBCU with her prior attendance at a PWI. As an Asian American, she felt excluded from student support services at the PWI, which she perceived to be targeted toward non-Asian racial minorities such as Blacks and Latinos. However, she never felt excluded from student support services at the HBCU. In her words, “HBCUs are inclusive for non-Black students. The same services are available to non-Black students. It was just open to everybody.” She continued, “It just felt more like the services were available and the teachers were more approachable at this school.”

Leadership also emerged as an outcome of HBCUs. Six students took advantage of opportunities that helped develop leadership qualities, and seven offered instances when they behaved or grew as leaders. Some students served as ad hoc tutors, as researchers, in elected government, or on a team doing grant-funded community-based work, among other things. Linda recalled a “sense of activism” on campus that was fueled by students who were interested in more than academics. Faculty members were encouragers and opportunity creators in support of the students’ leadership development. Faith explained that they would “bend over backwards” for eager students who wanted more from their college experience.

As a caveat to these positive roles and outcomes attributed to HBCUs, it is important to note that these participants mentioned some challenges along the way. First, at least six felt that the lack of diversity at their HBCU created a degree of narrowness that dampened their experience or the experiences of students around them, including Blacks. Tracey explained that “it would be the same for all White institutions . . . you’re not going to go into a workplace and just be with the same people that are just like you.” Second, at least three participants felt the campus was too conservative. These graduates felt that there were too many paternalistic rules governing the campus (i.e., no co-ed dormitory visitation, zero tolerance policies), and there was too much integration of religion into classes and conversations. Finally, the participants listed a miscellany of issues pertaining to lack of funding, the upkeep of campus buildings, and inefficiency and disorganization. To reiterate, none of these appear to have prevented the positive outcomes from manifesting for most of these students, but these issues posed barriers that they had to negotiate in an already largely foreign (to them) racial environment.

Overall, participants grew in their intellectual or emotional appreciation of the special value HBCUs hold historically and currently for Blacks in America, as well as for students of all races or ethnicities. Additionally, several participants developed as leaders, which is a testament to the value-added nature of HBCUs. Although some participants encountered microaggressions and other



environmental challenges, they were able to successfully run for student government offices and pledge Black fraternities. Others took full advantage of resources and opportunities (e.g., working on a grant funded project), as students would on any PWI campus. That is, they were able to participate in the full life of campus culture, including leadership roles.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this current study was to provide a holistic understanding of the experiences of non-Black students as they matriculate into HBCUs, persist to graduation, and reflect on their experiences as graduates. The findings that emerged from this current study confirm, complicate, and extend existing research on non-Black students at HBCUs.

To begin, the current study complicates the question of which races or ethnicities are more likely to attend an HBCU as traditional or nontraditional students. In this study, five of the undergraduate participants were traditional age college students who attended only an HBCU, one was nontraditional who completed an associate's degree prior to enrolling in an HBCU, and four started as traditional students either at a PWI or HBCU, but completed their degrees as nontraditional students at an HBCU. This finding is interesting and contradicts research that asserts White students at HBCUs tend to be older and are more likely to be enrolled in graduate programs (Conrad et al., 1997; Strayhorn, 2010). In this study, all five traditional-age college students were White. Moreover, three of the four who began as traditional but ended as nontraditional students were the Latino, Filipina American, and Filipina Chinese American participants.

On the subject of college choice, extant literature has indicated that White students tend to select HBCUs because of academic program offerings, the availability of financial support, and the welcoming campus climate that these institutions foster (Conrad et al., 1997). Similarly, research has demonstrated that Asian Americans and Latino/as attend HBCUs because of academic programs, cost of attendance, availability of financial support, and proximity to their homes (Maramba et al., in press). For the most part, findings from this present study support findings from previous research regarding factors motivating White, Asian American, and Latino/a students to attend HBCUs. For example, while some participants attended an HBCU because of athletic programs and congruency with their career goals, many participants attended an HBCU because of the institution's proximity to home, institutional cost, the availability of financial support, and a sense of feeling welcomed at the institution.

While participants were motivated to attend an HBCU for various reasons, some faced criticism from friends and family for their choice. Many participants had to overcome challenges from family and friends, as well as deal with

stereotypical perceptions of HBCUs being substandard institutions. Negative sentiments about HBCUs are widespread today, especially in the media (e.g., Riley, 2010; Vedder, 2010), and exist among Blacks (Dancy, 2005; Palmer, Maramba, & Lee, 2010) as well as non-Blacks (Maramba et al., in press). According to a study of the college choice process for Asian Americans and Latino/as at an HBCU, similar to the participants in this current study, some participants shared that friends and family ridiculed them for their decision to attend an HBCU (Maramba et al., in press). Despite the consistency of this finding with the extant literature, the finding of this current study indicates that participants' families and friends were fearful for some of the participants to attend an HBCU because of racial stereotypes about Black students. While non-Black students (i.e., Asian Americans) at HBCUs discussed having stereotypical notions of Blacks (Palmer & Maramba, 2015b), they never broached that such stereotypes created fear among family and friends about their safety at HBCUs. Given this finding, more research is warranted on the perceptions that families and friends of non-Black students in general, and White students specifically, at HBCUs have toward their family member or friend who enrolls in an HBCU. Having this information might prove critical as HBCU officials work to more actively recruit non-Black students in general and White students in particular.

Once enrolled into their respective HBCU, most of the participants in this current study were highly engaged both within and outside their classrooms. Despite the definite sense of support and inclusion these participants felt both from the campus community generally and faculty specifically, some participants shared stories of being called names, being singled out in the classroom, and being viewed through the stereotypical lens of the model minority myth because of their race. While it is important to point out that such treatment was not pervasive, and for the most part, did not make the participants feel unwelcomed at these HBCUs (Hall & Closson, 2005), it does contradict findings from studies (e.g., Nixon & Henry, 1991; Strayhorn, 2010) that indicate non-Black students in general, and White students specifically, experience no overt acts of racism on the campuses of HBCUs.

Interestingly, while Closson and Henry (2008b) also claimed that White students at HBCUs experienced no overt acts of racism, they state that White students have reported being singled out because of their race and "dubbed with nicknames based on their Whiteness" (p. 527). Nevertheless, Closson and Henry stated that though participants expressed some acknowledgement that racist feelings might have existed toward them, they were not perturbed by those experiences and felt that the campus had been welcoming.

The findings of this current study are congruent with the findings of Closson and Henry's (2008b) study in that, although the participants experienced what we would perceive as overt issues around their race, they did not manifest into a chilly campus climate. However, findings from this current study differ from the

finding of a study on the experiences of Asian Americans and Latino/as at an HBCU (Palmer & Maramba, 2015b). Similar to the participants in this current study, participants in Palmer and Maramba's (2015b) study experienced conspicuous issues centered on their race. However, unlike participants in this current study or the participants in Closson and Henry's (2008b) study, participants in Palmer and Maramba's study discussed how these experiences, in some ways, made them feel unwelcomed.

Although one might be inclined to seek ammunition against HBCUs because some of the findings of this current study suggest that non-Black students have less than perfect experiences at HBCUs, this would be a misuse of this study's findings. Much like lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students at HBCUs, who tend to report overall satisfaction and pride in their schools despite clear instances of personal discrimination or alienation (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012), all but one of this study's participants expressed overwhelming praise for their HBCU. Looking back as HBCU graduates, several also were able to communicate a dual purpose for modern HBCUs, which included providing special ongoing support for Black education, while making space for diverse populations. All but one of the participants in this current study, who previously attended a PWI, found their HBCU to be superior academically or personally compared with their PWI. Most are now engaged in rewarding post-undergraduate pursuits, including graduate school, entrepreneurship, corporate business, education, and medical school. Matriculation at an HBCU appears to have propelled rather than hindered their life paths, which provides a weighty counterpoint to observers who would challenge the ongoing relevance of these schools.

## **Implications for Research and Practice**

### ***For Research***

Three implications from this study are especially important for research. First, scholars should seek a more complete understanding of the racial microaggressions non-Black students encounter at HBCUs. This is important because extant studies—including the current study—describe a complicated environment where some non-Black students experience race-based confrontations, which might hinder HBCUs' ability to retain non-Black students. Researchers must investigate the potential short- and long-term impacts of racial microaggressions on issues pertaining to identity (i.e., self-concept) and whether they negatively impact academic or extracurricular engagement by excluding non-Black students.

Moreover, because participants in our study reported a combination of affirming and challenging interactions with Black students and faculty in contexts that typically fall under Academic Affairs and Student Affairs divisions,

future studies must seek to understand the perspectives that key stakeholders at HBCUs have toward the enrollment of non-Black students. Results from such investigations are important for increasing HBCUs' efficacy of fostering supportive, welcoming, and affirming climate for all students.

Finally, additional research is needed on the experiences of Asian American and Latino/a HBCU students, respectively. The existing non-Black HBCU student literature largely focuses on White students. Comparatively fewer studies have examined non-White populations such as Asian Americans and Latino/as. Given their own status as minorities in the American society, Asian Americans and Latino/as may have different experiences at HBCUs compared with White students.

### *For Practice*

This study also has several implications for practice. For example, recruiters should understand that non-Blacks are willing to enroll in an HBCU. As such, concerted efforts should be made to approach non-Blacks, if indeed it is within that HBCU's vision to diversify. Recruiters, however, should be aware that these students might face added pressures to enroll elsewhere due to pressures from family and friends. Accessibility to information about HBCUs is also important. With such information, recruiters, high school counselors, and advisers can be better informed about HBCUs in order to encourage potential students that HBCUs are options for receiving a quality education.

This study also has implications for retention. Once non-Blacks are enrolled, institutional agents (e.g., practitioners, administrators, faculty, student affairs professionals) might consider the unique challenges these students face in an unfamiliar environment. The solution seems to be more complex than merely offering programming geared toward Latino/as, Asian Americans, Whites, and other non-Black populations. Although targeted programming might be a part of a comprehensive retention strategy, going too far in that direction may undermine campus inclusivity and unity by encouraging racial or ethnic groups to separate from each other as they often do in society. Focus should be on ways to have inclusive programming rather than provide more avenues to be apart.

It is important, however, to recognize that non-Black students do indeed experience the HBCU campus differently. Therefore, student affairs professionals can benefit from learning more about the increasing diverse populations enrolling at HBCUs. More challenging and perhaps more critical is exploring ways to discuss and display issues salient to Black culture while including rather than excluding non-Blacks. In the case of White students, this also means exercising sensitivity to avoid making them feel personally implicated for all of America's race-based problems, while educating them about pressing topics such as White privilege.

Finally, findings from this current study provide important insights for current and future non-Black HBCU students. For example, they can learn from the examples of these participants that level of engagement determines the quality of one's college experience, especially when met with the occasional race-based confrontation. Indeed, students who open themselves to the notion that diversity adds value to one's higher educational experience, and who are willing to grow personally, are especially well suited to enroll at an HBCU.

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