African American Students in Counselor Education Programs: Perceptions of Their Experiences

Malik S. Henfield, Ph.D., University of Iowa
Delila Owens, Ph.D., Wayne State University
Sheila Witherspoon, Ph.D., Rutgers University - New Brunswick/Piscataway

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/sheila_witherspoon/1/
Counselor Preparation

African American Students in Counselor Education Programs: Perceptions of Their Experiences

Malik S. Henfield, Delila Owens, & Sheila Witherspoon

The authors explored 11 African American doctoral students' perceptions of their experiences in counselor education programs, and their findings are presented. Using a phenomenological methodological framework, the authors investigated the various systems of support that students use as they navigate their respective programs. Human agency was the theoretical framework for this study, and 4 themes emerged from the data: assertiveness, more experienced African American students, race-based organizations, and personal and professional care from advisors. Implications for students and counselor education programs are discussed.

There has been a call for more African American representation among counselor education faculty to better represent society's changing demographics (Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). More information is needed to better understand the underrepresentation of African American counselor educators. Although there is a growing body of research related to the experiences of African American counselor educators (Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy & Bradley, 2003), the literature is bereft of information detailing the experiences of African Americans at the beginning of their journey toward the professoriate from counselor education doctoral programs. The present study was designed to help address this void by documenting African American doctoral students' perceptions of their experiences in counselor education programs as told in their own words.

African Americans and Doctoral Education

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 served as the impetus for a new interest in the active recruitment of ethnic minorities into higher education (Skrentny, 2002). As a result of this act, as well as other measures, there has been a rise in the number of African Americans entering doctoral programs (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2009).

Malik S. Henfield, Department of Rehabilitation and Counselor Education, University of Iowa; Delila Owens, Department of Counselor Education, Wayne State University; Sheila Witherspoon, Department of School Counseling, Monmouth University. Sheila Witherspoon is now at SW, Ph.D. Consulting, LLC. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Malik S. Henfield, Department of Rehabilitation and Counselor Education, University of Iowa, N352 Lindquist Center, Iowa City, IA 52242-1529 (e-mail: malik-henfield@uiowa.edu).

© 2011 by the American Counseling Association. All rights reserved.
According to the NSF (2009), for example, the proportion of African Americans earning doctoral degrees has modestly increased from 5% to 7% between 1997 and 2007.

Despite statistics detailing African American students' presence in doctoral programs, literature related to their personal experiences is relatively scant. The small body of research devoted to the topic suggests that African Americans in doctoral programs, particularly those enrolled at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), contend with a variety of issues not encountered by their White peers. For example, researchers interested in the experiences of doctoral-level counselor education students have determined that many students are confronted with issues due to stress and wavering emotions (Hughes & Kleist, 2005) and proper fit between students and their program (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). These studies, however, fail to detail the specific experiences of African American students, who have been found to be different from other students, at all points along the educational pipeline (Duckworth-Warner, 2003; Harper & Patton, 2007; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; McClure, 2006).

Indeed, unlike White students enrolled in doctoral programs, African American students attending doctoral programs at PWIs encounter the added pressure of being a numeric minority within these predominantly White learning environments. These African American students identified feelings of intense isolation, marginalization, and oppression (Herzig, 2004; King & Chepyator-Thompson, 1996; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004; Nicholas & Tanksley, 2004; L. D. Patton, 2009; Shealey, 2009). Specifically, King and Chepyator-Thompson (1996) surveyed 106 African Americans who had received their doctoral degrees in exercise science from a PWI, and 46% of these respondents recalled their doctoral education as being a positive experience because of positive relationships established with peers and faculty, as well as a comfortable racial climate on campus. Yet, 31% described the experience as partially negative, and 18% described their experience as totally negative. The 49% who had negative experiences attributed these feelings to a negative racial climate on campus, a lack of African American peers and faculty, and discrimination. These results were echoed almost a decade later in a qualitative study of six graduates of doctoral programs at PWIs. The "most powerful" (Lewis et al., 2004, p. 234) theme reported related to feelings of isolation from other African Americans that, according to the study's participants, were so strong some described it as feeling "invisible" (p. 234) and considered dropping out of school. Despite more than 40 years of activism, social policy, and social justice, almost half of the African American students surveyed continue to report negative campus climates with regard to race, feelings of isolation, marginalization, and the lack of a substantial racial peer group during their graduate education. Tragically, even less is known about the experiences of African American doctoral students in counselor education programs.

According to Section I, Standard J, of the 2009 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)
Standards, accredited counselor education programs must demonstrate "systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community" (p. 4). Many counselor education programs, however, have stated they lack a plan to recruit and retain more African American faculty (Holcomb-McCoy & Bradley, 2003), some of whom, it stands to reason, may be particularly effective at helping to meet the goals as stipulated in the aforementioned standard. To develop ethnic minority student recruitment and retention plans, counselor education programs must have information related to these students' experiences. Although there is current research literature related to the experiences of African American students in doctoral programs, there is no documentation of African American students' experiences in counselor education doctoral programs. The absence of information on one of society's largest populations represents a failure to produce culturally relevant research, a lack of focus on social justice issues in counselor education, and inadvertently supports continual marginalization and invisibility of aspiring African American counselor educators and supervisors.

Given the decline in African Americans graduating from doctoral programs in education (NSF, 2009), it is not difficult to predict that unless something is done, the negative program experiences African American doctoral students associate with being in the racial minority will continue to persist, thus making this a significant social issue as well. Indeed, if "recruitment of young African Americans into the field [of counselor education] is critical" (Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004, p. 267), then we hope the findings of this study will serve to increase the successful recruitment and retention of African American students in counselor education programs, as well as increase numbers entering the professoriate.

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Bandura (2006), there are three modes of human agency: individual, collective, and proxy. Individual agency is enacted when persons use their knowledge, skills, and resources to act on their own behalf to achieve desired results. Personal factors such as resilience and perseverance, for example, have been found to contribute significantly to some African American students' ability to achieve high levels of academic success (Melody, Russell, & Atwater, 2005; Sanders, 1997).

Because humans do not operate in a vacuum, Bandura (2006) suggested they may opt to also use collective agency in order to reach their goals. This type of agency is required when it is necessary for individuals to collaborate with others and pool their knowledge, skills, and resources to achieve desired outcomes. Educational experts assert that collective systems, such as same-race peers (Harper & Patton, 2007; McClure, 2006), same-race spaces (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), and regular contact with family members (Herndon & Hirt, 2004), offer tremendous support as well. Guiffrida's (2005) findings
from a qualitative study provide an example of students' need for collective systems. He identified that African American undergraduates were underachieving and dropping out of school because of familial obligations that required them to leave campus and take frequent trips home (Guiffrida, 2005), indicating perhaps a lack of support from campus-based collective systems.

Bandura (2006) noted that many individuals did not have complete control over their circumstances and felt compelled to use a proxy agent. A proxy agent is an individual who has the knowledge, skills, and resources to act on someone else's behalf to help said person achieve the results he or she desires. Similar to other historically marginalized groups (e.g., women and Latinos), African Americans have used uncanny resilience and a number of advocates, such as a family member, an educator, or a peer, in order to achieve desired educational outcomes (Duckworth-Warner, 2003; Harper & Patton, 2007; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Herzig, 2004; McClure, 2006; Minor, 2003; Shealey, 2009).

Although the many obstacles African Americans encounter in their respective programs are significant, the current study was designed to examine African American students' strengths and utilization of personal and professional resources. To best accomplish this goal, we used human agency as the theoretical framework for the study. Because a plethora of research and literature has demonstrated that African Americans make use of personal, collective, and proxy resources to achieve desired results (e.g., the different modes of human agency), we found it to be a useful framework to describe the support systems African American doctoral students use in counselor education programs.

**Methodological Framework**

Using qualitative methodology in this study, we allowed students to detail, in their own words, their experiences en route to a doctoral degree in counselor education. The general purpose of the phenomenological approach is to describe one or more individuals' perceptions of a particular phenomenon (M. Q. Patton, 2002). The meanings, or "essences," ascribed to the phenomenon are thought to be shared and understood by the participants in the study. Given the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of African Americans in terms of academic achievement, in this case, the phenomenon is that of being an African American doctoral student enrolled in and progressing toward a doctoral degree in counselor education. In line with the theoretical framework, the following research questions served as a guide for the study:

*Research Question 1:* What types of issues confront African American students in counselor education programs?

*Research Question 2:* How do they address said issues?

**Research Team**

The research team (the authors) consisted of three African American counselor educators (one man and two women) experienced in qualita-
tive research who received their graduate education at PWIs. Prior to beginning the study, each member of the research team acknowledged (e.g., bracketed) the following major assumptions about the experience of being an African American student in a counselor education program: (a) African American students have unique experiences at PWIs, (b) African American students will undoubtedly encounter significant barriers to success, and (c) African Americans can conquer these barriers with support. In addition to information drawn from the education research literature, these assumptions were based on critical incidents the researchers experienced in their respective programs. The research team members met one another at an annual professional conference, in particular a meeting for graduate students. As they assumed counselor educator teaching positions, the research team began to discuss the idea of researching this study's topic.

Each member of the research team has published multiple qualitative manuscripts, and two members of the team have conducted qualitative dissertations. In addition, each member of the research team has chaired or cochaired qualitative doctoral dissertations.

**Participants**

Inclusion in the study consisted of two steps. First, participants had to self-identify as African American and as a doctoral-level student enrolled in a counselor education program at a PWI. Second, because the purpose was to explore how African American students used human agency to overcome particular barriers in their respective programs, it was important to purposefully select participants based on their unique experiences with self-perceived impediments to graduation, as well as their knowledge of various means to overcome said obstacles. In order to be eligible to participate in the study, the respondents had to be able to discuss critical incidents in which they had to exercise human agency.

Although participants attended PWIs in the Midwest, South, and Southeast regions of the United States, the majority of them were enrolled in midwestern schools. The 11 (eight women, three men) participants' ages ranged from 27 to 43 years ($M = 29$). All of the participants who accepted an invitation to participate in the study completed the study; none declined the invitation or dropped out of the study after agreeing to participate. A more detailed description of the participants, including information related to racial composition in their respective programs, is shown in Table 1. This information was included to provide a richer context for the findings.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

*Data collection procedures.* Criterion sampling procedures (M. Q. Patton, 2002) were used to recruit participants. This procedure was deemed most appropriate because of its focus on specific criteria. Participants were recruited by sending e-mails to the Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET) electronic mailing list, which targets
TABLE 1
Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>YP</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>SP</th>
<th>AAP</th>
<th>SC</th>
<th>AAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alecia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6-4.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constance</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6-4.0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0-3.5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawson</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6-4.0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamila</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6-4.0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.6-4.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6-4.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larissa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6-4.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0-3.5</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0-3.5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.6-4.0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Dashes indicate information was not reported. YP = year in program; GPA = grade point average; SP = number of students in program; AAP = number of African Americans in the program; SC = number of students in the cohort; AAC = number of African Americans in the cohort.

As such, those participants who self-identified as being an African American doctoral student in a counselor education program were sent an e-mail message containing the following four structured interview questions, which were based on information derived from a thorough review of the available literature and the experiences of the research team: (a) What is it like to be an African American student at your university? (b) What is it like to be an African American student in your program/department? (c) What is it like to be an African American student in class? and (d) Please describe your experiences as an advisee.

Students were mailed a packet containing a cover letter; an informed consent form; a biographical questionnaire; and a prepaid, stamped envelope. After they returned the signed, informed consent forms and demographic questionnaires, the first author contacted each student by e-mail to arrange a time to conduct the interviews. Because the students were located in numerous cities across the United States, collecting data via e-mail (first interview) and conducting interviews via instant messenger (second interview) were the most suitable methods of gathering information (Moore & Flowers, 2003).

Scholars have found that sending questions to students via e-mail is an effective means of collecting qualitative data (Meho, 2006). The first round of data collection consisted of e-mailing structured interview questions to students and served two purposes: (a) to determine eligibility for participation in the study and (b) to provide foundational
content for the semistructured questions used in the second interview. All of the participants reported critical incidents in which they enacted human agency; thus, all respondents were included in the study. Once the first round of interviews was completed, the research team analyzed the responses and formulated a list of semistructured questions (M. Q. Patton, 2002). The semistructured questions were designed to help participants provide more in-depth description of the critical incidents and human agency disclosed in the first round of interviews—a standard practice when using criterion sampling to identify students (M. Q. Patton, 2002). The Data Analysis section that follows more thoroughly details the coding procedures.

Participants were informed within 1 month of the initial interview that the second interview, lasting approximately one to one and one half hours, would be scheduled. The second interviews were intended to allow participants the opportunity to expand on their responses to the structured questions from the first round of interviews. The first author used various types of instant messenger (IM) platforms (e.g., America Online IM, Yahoo! Messenger, Gmail Messenger) instead of e-mail communications to collect the second round of interview data. This method was deemed most appropriate because, according to Moore and Flowers (2003), it minimizes geographical constraints and is cost-effective. In addition, it allowed for real-time interaction, which is necessary when asking semistructured interview questions. It should be noted, however, that this method of data collection is also limited in that voice tone, inflection, and nonverbal responses are omitted.

Data analysis. Upon receipt of the first round of interview data, each member of the research team independently identified words, phrases, and events that appeared to be similar and grouped them into like categories or open codes (M. Q. Patton, 2002). The research team's open codes were finalized and e-mailed to the first author, who compiled them into one document and e-mailed the complete list back to the team. The research team reviewed and considered the codes for 1 week and discussed the nature and importance of each code by phone. Initially, there were some conflicting codes because the research team had different experiences in their doctoral programs that influenced how they perceived the data. For instance, one member of the research team perceived a particular passage in the data to indicate freedom, whereas the other two members perceived the passage to indicate isolation. After considering the participants' statements, their context and meaning, and the three components of human agency, the research team resolved conflicts of this nature.

The first author conducted all of the interviews in this study. Similar to the first round of interviews, the initial coding process consisted of each researcher individually analyzing each interview transcript and developing open codes. In this instance, however, open codes developed in the first round were used as a point of reference when coding the second-round data. Each member of the research team
independently added codes that emanated from second-round data to the list of first-round open codes. At the conclusion of this portion of data analysis, team members e-mailed their open codes to the first author. These codes were collapsed into one document and were forwarded to the rest of the team members. The codes were compared and contrasted, and whenever disagreement emerged, the previously described process for consensus building was used.

Next, axial coding was used. In this process, open codes were compared and combined to create a new, more streamlined explanation of the phenomenon under study. Interview data were broken down into more manageable categories according to information derived from the first and second round of interviews. The research team sorted the open codes into the following categories, according to Miles and Huberman (1984): (a) setting/context, (b) definition of the situation, (c) perspectives, (d) ways of thinking about people and objects, (e) process, (f) activities, (g) events, and (h) strategies. By combining open codes into similar categories, the research team began to notice emerging themes from the data, which were documented in the form of personal memos (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The information extracted from memos helped the research team determine gaps in understanding of the phenomenon in question. For instance, many students mentioned different systems of support they used, but it was often unclear why they found these systems to be useful. As a way to reduce this confusion, participants were contacted a third time (i.e., member checks; M. Q. Patton, 2002) to help clarify the meaning of participants’ responses and to increase the research team’s understanding of participants’ experiences. The first author e-mailed participants a copy of their personal transcripts and codes derived by the research team, with accompanying explanations, and requested that for a period of 1 week, the participant explore and correct the materials where necessary. At the conclusion of this time frame, participants were asked to engage in a discussion of themes with the first author via IM. In most cases, the research team accurately depicted themes. There were, however, a few cases where participants’ interpretations of meaning conflicted with those of the research team. These instances were very few and were related only to relationships between themes, not the themes themselves.

**Trustworthiness**

In keeping with the requirements for a trustworthy study (M. Q. Patton, 2002), the research team used group decision-making processes and lengthy quotations to accurately capture students’ perceptions. The research team, however, did correct some of the misspellings with participant quotes to improve readability, clarity, and understanding. Multiple data sources and researchers provided triangulation for the data. In addition, the first author maintained a transparent description of the research steps taken, or audit trail, from each team member, which consisted of (a) raw data, (b) data reduction and analysis products, (c) data reconstruction and synthesis products, (d)
process notes, (e) materials relating to intentions and dispositions, and (f) instrument development information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To address potential researcher bias associated with these assumptions, the research team used an external auditor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to examine the audit trail, member-check comments, as well as interview transcripts. This person was an African American woman enrolled in a master’s of business administration program and trained in qualitative methodology. The auditor reviewed random samples of open and axial coding and the audit trail and examined the memos written during data analysis.

Results

Using human agency as a conceptual framework, we found that four themes emerged from the data: (a) assertiveness, (b) more experienced peers, (c) race-based organizations, and (d) personal and professional care from advisors. Pseudonyms selected by the research team were used to protect students’ true identities.

Individual Support: Assertiveness

Participants mentioned numerous factors that served as impediments to human agency. Nevertheless, they managed to succeed (as determined by their self-reported grades) in their programs because of various forms of support. Assertiveness emerged from the data as the most prominent theme. Assertiveness, as described here, means taking ownership of particular situations and making subsequent decisions in a manner that can be perceived as self-confident.

Participants recalled on numerous occasions the need to rely on an inner determination to get their needs met. Many discussed a desire to assert themselves because faculty members did not, in participants’ opinion, provide adequate direction. For example, according to Tara, before arriving on campus, she had a decent understanding of what was expected of her as a student because of the information she gleaned from her entrance interview, a mandatory orientation session for new students, as well as the student handbook that is available to everyone on the program website. Once she arrived on campus, though, she soon realized that she needed additional assistance from her advisor. However, she stated, “When I do go to him, it’s almost like [he makes me feel like he’s thinking], ‘do whatever you want to do... I did expect a little more structure.” Apparently, Tara wanted her advisor to issue more directives in their meetings. Because he did not, she decided to make important decisions, such as her program of study, based on her limited understanding of her program.

Tara also discussed classroom experiences that caused her to doubt her academic ability. Specifically, she felt some of her classmates did not take her contributions to class discussions very seriously. She said, “I was always getting challenged when I would speak. That made me feel like I had to explain what I said more than I noticed other people did. So I stopped talking. My participation went down.”
time, though, she grew tired of these negative emotions and began to assert herself more often: “I speak more and just don’t really care anymore what anyone else thinks because I know my opinion is just as valuable and my input is just as important.” Taylor also expressed his feelings of undue pressure in classroom situations: “There is always a lingering thought or feeling that I have to perform twice as well to prove that I too belong at this level of study. This thought is more of a motivator than a stressor.” Although his feelings of doubt appear to be more a strength than a weakness, he used them to prove he is capable of meeting the academic standards of his program, despite his recognition that greater expectations may be placed on him.

In terms of interactions with those in power in her program, Alecia found it necessary to “appropriately” confront them on issues pertaining to the lack of ethnic minority students in her program:

I can honestly say that this department does not do enough to be supportive of their minority students. I don’t even know if collectively this is something they care a whole lot about. I’m really vocal and I have let it be known to faculty, our dean, our department chair, and program coordinator that the diversity and the lack of attentiveness to this when I entered the program is in my exact words “unacceptable.”

Collective Support

Participants in this study seemed to get their needs met, most often, from more experienced students in their program, as well as race-based student organizations on campus.

More experienced African American students. Participants in the study gravitated to more experienced students in their programs for support for a variety of reasons. Specifically, participants reported that more experienced students really seemed to understand them and shared similar interests. Keisha, for example, grew close to a woman who started in her program a year before and had similar attitudes with respect to the importance of multiculturalism. In addition to similar interests, participants also found racial background to be extremely important when choosing more experienced students to rely on:

Over my first year of study, I had two African American women that were a year ahead of me in the program, one whom I knew in the master’s program we attended together, so that was very helpful, in terms of transition. I at least had someone to talk to and share experiences with Alecia.

Similarly, Jason, nearing the end of his program, “identified most with older minority doctoral students, who were from a similar background, less worried about impressing professors and more interested in completing a degree and becoming counselor educators.”

Race-based organizations. Outside of their academic programs, participants also found support from students in race-based organizations on campus. As with the reasoning behind their befriending of more experienced students of color, the participants were attracted to these organizations because race was a focal point of their lives. Constance
summed it up quite eloquently: “I believe that for a minority student, involvement with persons from similar backgrounds aid[s] in the process of getting through the everyday bureaucracies associated with being a minority at a predominantly White institution.” In particular, participants mentioned the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA) as playing a significant role in their lives. For instance, Rebecca took the initiative to revive her university’s BGSA chapter.

In addition to the BGSA, participants also mentioned Black Greek fraternities and sororities as meaningful forms of collective support. For instance, according to Jamila,

Although I did not see a lot of other African American students, I was aware that there were Black fraternities and sororities on campus, as well as other African American student organizations. So, I can have a more active experience as a minority student at my university, if I put forth the effort.

Taylor, an active member of a Black Greek fraternity, specifically stated that his fraternity members and others allow him to be himself, something he believes he cannot be in his program:

I have friends from my fraternity and friends who live in nearby cities. I am able to find camaraderie and that needed informal release; sort of “code switching,” if you will. By code switching I mean that I am able to switch between Taylor the doc student at a PWI and Taylor the guy who knows where he is from and who is in touch with his circle of friends and community as a whole.

Proxy Support: Personal and Professional Care From Advisors

In addition to individual and collective forms, proxies also served as systems of support for students. Specifically, participants mentioned religion/spirituality and a personal/professional relationship with their advisor as significant contributors to their ability to find success in their programs. Participants in this study seem to rely on their advisor for many things. In addition to providing them with traditional guidance related to academic and professional opportunities, they also valued the close personal relationships they shared with one another. Constance stated the following about her advisor:

I need someone who is supportive and honest. I really like him because he helps me to think and believe in myself at the same time. I would say that at this point I need him to motivate me and help me with my critical thinking and writing. Networking with professionals is also a need. At this stage, I need a support... someone who will provide feedback, but also someone who will just listen on those days when I need to vent.

It is interesting to note that Constance also expressed that she developed this close relationship with her advisor because once, when upset, she cried in his office and he, according to her, was accepting of her and her feelings. This made her feel as though he was sensitive to her needs beyond academics. Rebecca, similar to Constance, also expressed a very close relationship with her advisor that was formed as a result of the advisor’s interest in her total experience in the program:
I had a time when I was going through some personal problems and I cried every day for a couple of months . . . she would just say "Do you need a tissue?" every time I walked into her office . . . it was a safe place.

Like the aforementioned participants, Alecia is also appreciative of her advisor’s support because “she is soooooo concerned about me having a good experience in the program, beyond the classroom, and always being supportive of my educational needs.”

**Discussion**

The results of this study are consistent with and extend the literature related to the experiences of African American students in doctoral programs. The study is unique, however, because rather than focusing on African American doctoral students’ experiences in other areas of education and science, technology, engineering, and math fields (Herzig, 2004; Nicholas & Tanksley, 2004; L. D. Patton, 2009; Shealey, 2009), it focused on African American doctoral students in counselor education doctoral programs, a profession that is seeking to increase racial diversity within the professoriate. Also, rather than narrowly focusing on students’ needs or barriers, we intentionally focused this study on the strategies participants used to address said needs. As such, this study investigated African American students’ ability to exercise human agency when confronted with difficulties, which is rarely reported in the educational books, professional journal articles, and popular magazines. These findings have implications for the field of counselor education because they highlight how race operates at the crux of African American students’ campus experiences.

On the basis of the findings, one can discern the centrality of race in students’ experiences. Experiencing, responding to, and addressing race-based interactions represent an additional burden for African American students to overcome in pursuit of a graduate degree. In response to these race-related issues, a number of different individual, collective, and proxy forms of support were implemented. With regard to individual support, students mentioned assertiveness as the primary means to overcome some barriers on their own. This is not a surprising finding because the literature has shown personal factors, such as resilience and perseverance, contribute to African American students’ success throughout their educational careers (Melody et al., 2005; Sanders, 1997). Students mentioned they had to assert themselves in the classroom, particularly because this was the site where their intelligence was most often questioned. This is an interesting yet not surprising finding because low expectations of African Americans’ aptitude for academic success have been and continue to be challenged (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). For example, according to the findings of a qualitative research study conducted by Sue et al. (2008), students believed "white people they encountered gave the subtle impression that they perceived African Americans to be “intellectually inferior, inarticulate, or lacking common sense” (Sue et al., 2008, p. 333).
Besides individual forms of support, participants emphasized the importance of collective support. Specifically, they discussed how integral more experienced African American students and race-based organizations were to their counselor education experience. It is interesting that students did not relate relying on these peers for assistance with course work. Instead, much of the emphasis seemed to be focused on how these students met students' need for emotional support. Given the plethora of research highlighting the intense feelings of isolation African American students experience in doctoral programs at PWIs (Herzig, 2004; King & Chepyator-Thompson, 1996; Lewis et al., 2004; Nicholas & Tanksley, 2004; L. D. Patton, 2009; Shealey, 2009), we hypothesized that students found their social experience to be more difficult to master than their course work. If our hypothesis is accurate, it would make sense for them to rely on experienced African American students for support because they may have had similar feelings, yet managed to progress through the program.

Outside of their academic programs, students mentioned the BGSA and Black Greek fraternities and sororities as collective forms of support. In this case, it seemed that this form of support aided in meeting students' need to affiliate with students of similar racial backgrounds, as well providing an environment for an emotional release. This finding is supported in the literature as other researchers have noted African American students' need to affiliate with same-race peers and spaces (Harper & Patton, 2007; McClure, 2006; Solorzano et al., 2000). Although students in this study did not mention family members as a collective form of support, other researchers have identified the family as an integral system of support (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). The reasons for this omission are unclear, yet may relate to the students' desire to distance themselves from familial obligations that could serve to derail progress toward a degree (Guiffrida, 2005) or may demonstrate developmentally appropriate relationship development (e.g., intimacy vs. isolation; Erikson, 1968).

Much of the literature on students in graduate programs identifies that students need strong mentoring from faculty to be successful (Harper & Patton, 2007; Herzig, 2004; Lewis et al., 2004; Nicholas & Tanksley, 2004; Shealey, 2009). The findings of this study overwhelmingly support this notion. Students continuously mentioned how they liked, or would like to have, advisors who were interested in their well-being inside as well as outside the realm of academia. In other words, in addition to the general role of faculty, particularly advisors, students also seemed to rely on and benefit from additional emotional support from their advisors. This finding is consistent with those of Duckworth-Warner (2003), who suggested African American students in doctoral programs need trusting relationships with their advisors that can, over time, evolve into enduring friendships. This finding speaks to the significance of race to their experience and the desire to have advisors who are aware of, and unafraid to help, a student work through the challenges associated with being one of the few African American doctoral students in a counselor education program.
This study offers detailed information regarding the experiences of African American students in doctoral-level counselor education programs. However, as in all research studies, the findings have certain limitations. First, the researchers collected the perceptions of the students only. Including the perceptions of non-African American peers and counselor education faculty could have broadened the scope of phenomena under study and may be appropriate for future studies. Second, on-site observations of participants on their respective campuses could have yielded pertinent information; however, such observations were not feasible. Observations would have provided greater context and foundation to the findings. Finally, because of the decision to use e-mail and IM for data collection, the researchers could not obtain additional meanings from students' nonverbal or verbal behavior.

Implications and Conclusion

It is imperative that counselor education programs take a proactive approach to developing an environment that is warm and accepting of African American students upon matriculation and as they progress through the program. This entails counselor educators becoming more understanding of students' preferred means of communication, needs for affiliation, desire for a reduction in isolation, and experiences of institutional and interpersonal bias. In some instances, counselor educators may misunderstand African American students' assertiveness in response to perceived discrimination as disrespectful behavior. This cross-cultural communication clash may lead to misunderstanding students' intent or result in students' being disciplined. Advisors should compliment students on their ability to advocate for themselves and then help them brainstorm the pros and cons of the various types of human agency as it relates to their current environment. Such conversations may help them determine the responses they are likely to receive based on programmatic norms, which, in turn, will help them determine how to best get their needs met most effectively.

In addition to typical advisor responsibilities, such as assisting students with course planning and dispensing career-related information, counselor educators may wish to initiate conversations with African American students so that they may articulate or vent their frustrations regarding the inevitable feelings of loneliness that accompany isolation and marginalization based on race. For some advisors, this may not seem to be a part of the customary advisor–advisee relationship and may appear to be unprofessional or even unethical. However, because many African American students report differential learning experiences due to their race, professors can demonstrate socially just behaviors by initiating a frank conversation regarding their willingness to serve in a meaningful advisory capacity with their African American students. Many African American students may desire such a relationship.

The need for peer support was an important finding in this study. As such, the onus should be on counselor education programs to
design orientation programs that pair experienced students with incoming students. This would allow new students to enter the program knowing that they have the support of a same-race peer who knows how to navigate their program. If there do not happen to be any other African American students in the program, counselor educators should contact race-based organizations and arrange for incoming students to meet with representatives of the organization and introduce them to other members. Although these students are unable to provide program-specific information, they are nonetheless valuable resources because they understand what it is like to be a student at a PWI. Because students in this study did not seem to rely on their peers for information related to course work, establishing relationships with African American students outside of their program would be an effective way to provide opportunities for additional systems of affiliation and support.

In order for African American students to be well prepared to be successful in completing counselor education doctoral programs, their experiences advancing through the doctoral process must be understood within the intersection of race and higher education. This particular study provides information from their points of view that has recruitment and retention implications. By drawing attention to the salience of race and students' needs in responses to race-related issues, counselor educators may better assist African American students by implementing proactive strategies that could aid students in successful progress toward their degree and improve the cultural responsiveness and climate within counselor education programs. These efforts may also result in increased numbers of African American counselor educators. There is a strong possibility that these issues are pervasive and systemic. As such, it may be appropriate for counselor education professional organizations to begin discussing standard practices and expectations for advisors who work with diverse students, particularly those working at PWIs.

Given the paucity of research on the experiences of African American counselor education doctoral students, future research investigations could focus more in-depth and longitudinal study on the specific personal and institutional barriers and supports (e.g., prevalence of other African American students in the doctoral program) as detailed by students. Studies could also be done that investigate faculty members' perceptions of their roles as advisors to all students in general, including African Americans. This study demonstrated that African American students seem to experience a number of microaggressive incidents as well (Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2008), thus additional research could be undertaken to explore the prevalence and impact of subtle acts of racism in counselor education programs and, in particular, classrooms.

References


