A MULTI-SITE, EMBEDDED CASE STUDY OF BLACK STUDENT UNIONS:
BRIDGING AND BUFFERING BLACK STUDENT EXPERIENCES

by

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DISSERTATION
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DEDICATION

This doctoral dissertation is dedicated to my late paternal grandmother and to my children. Julian and Chloe, Mom is finishEdD!
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I have always wanted to obtain a doctorate degree. In the face of adversity, I have always vowed to achieve my dreams. My motto has always been, “Reach for the moon. If you fail, you will be amongst stars.” The following people have been an immense support in my summit to the mountaintop. I would like to personally acknowledge them for their graciousness and support.

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Abstract

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This multi-site, embedded case study drew on qualitative data to uncover how Black Student Unions (BSUs) within a large California university system bridged or buffered Black student experiences. The central purpose of this case study was to gain an understanding of the Black students’ experiences within the BSU, framing the overarching research question: How do the university BSUs bridge and/or buffer Black student experiences? The BSUs included in the present study were from state universities from two distinct regions in California: a southern San Joaquin Valley university and a Southern California university campus. This case study informs the reader of the BSU participants’ experiences within the bounded cases. The methods consisted of collecting data such as Instagram social media posts, interviews with staff advisors, and ten student participants—five from both campuses. Participants shared their experiences as the investigator sought to understand the context and the experiences of BSU students on the university campuses. The results of this study fill in research gaps as well as help university administrators, faculty, and staff with the development of best practices for Black students.

Keywords: Black student experience, Black Student Union, bridge, buffer
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

California State University (CSU; 2021) strives to achieve student success by providing various avenues for students combined with a stellar education that enables students to be prepared for the workforce. The California State University system has approximately 127,000 annual graduates; the system yields the most California state undergraduates (California State University, 2021). California State University graduates strengthen the economy by working in technology, business, education, sciences, healthcare, and public administration. Most of the CSU graduates remain in California, and they assist in strengthening the workforce (California State University, 2021).

California State University is a massive educational system that has a major impact on a plethora of students’ lives. CSU’s enrollment totaled 481,929 students in the fall of 2019 (California State University, 2021). These students are derived from various backgrounds, and they are spread amongst 25 schools. The CSU system also employs approximately 53,000 faculty and staff (California State University, 2021). Faculty comprises 51.4% of the employee population.

Equally important, California State University is very diverse—one of the most diverse university systems in the country (California State University, 2021). Over half of the employees are women; more than 38% of employees and 60% of the students are people of color (California State University, 2021). Additionally, one-third of undergraduates are first-generation college students (California State University, 2021).

In 2018, the California State University system was comprised of 481,210 students. Of this sum of students, 19,301 were Black students (California State University, 2021). This equates to 4% of the student population (California State University, 2021). By 2020, 19,645 of
the student enrollment were Black—still 4% of the student population (California State University, 2021). Of the total population, 42.5% were men, while 57.5% were female (California State University, 2021).

Overall, Black male students in the large university system graduate at different rates than their counterparts (California State University, 2021). Additionally, Black male students experience greater academic hardship than Black females. For instance, in 2018, the overall postsecondary six-year graduation rate for females was 65%, yet for males it was 59% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Most Black students do not complete their undergraduate schooling within six years at the same rate as their different-race peers (Harper & Davis, 2012). Additionally, the high school dropout rate was higher for Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Black student completion rates are not increasing at the same rate as other groups due to various reasons, such as a lack of support throughout their educational careers (Muhammad, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Additionally, Black student joy and identity are not reflected in educational settings. As Marks and Sandles (2021) state, “These glaring omissions are compounded by the seemingly ubiquitous White gaze that often permeates educational quarters, both K-12 and higher education sectors” (p. 2).

This study conducted research at two California-based universities. University 1 is in the southern San Joaquin Valley. It is an area that experiences Mediterranean-like weather (Greene, 2021). The area only receives about 5 to 18 in of rain annually; it is in a constant state of water deficiency (Greene, 2021). Living conditions in the southern San Joaquin Valley are riddled with high poverty rates, food insecurity, and limited access to health care (Greene, 2021).

University 1’s data reveals that Black students’ academic achievement is faltering. Consider the following data: In fall 2017, California University 1’s total enrollment was 9,863.
The total number of undergraduate Black students totaled 465 (7%); there were 13 (3%) Black students in the credential program, and 39 (6%) in the graduate program (Harper, 2020). In fall 2018, the total number of students was 10,493. The total number of undergraduate Black students totaled 489 (5%); there were 17 (3%) Black students in the credential program and 36 (5%) in the graduate program (Harper, 2020).

In 2013, there were 35 Black males in the undergraduate programs; in 2014, there were 33 Black males; and in 2015, there were 42 Black males (Harper, 2020). The one-year retention rate dropped from 71.4% to 60.6% from 2013 to 2014. In 2015, the retention rate was 64.3% (Harper, 2020). Overall, the change from baseline was -10% (Harper, 2020). The four-year graduation rate reflected an 8% change from baseline, while the six-year graduation rate was unchanged (Harper, 2020). This data is in contrast to Black females whose cohort size was 50 in 2013, 57 in 2014, and 61 in 2015 (Harper, 2020). The one-year retention rate was 66% in 2013, 73.7% in 2014, and 68.9% in 2015 (Harper, 2020). The change in baseline was 17%. The four-year graduation rate showed a 12% change from baseline (Harper, 2020). The six-year graduation rate demonstrated a slight decrease (Harper, 2020). According to Harper (2020), Black students’ graduation rates are decreasing. To combat the oppression and injurious colorblind educational settings (Marks & Sandles, 2021), this study examined Black Student Union (BSU) participant experiences.

**Black Student Unions and the Large University System**

The purpose of BSUs is to promote academic excellence and a positive sense of self for Black students (Cox et al., 2018). In fact, BSUs have positive effects on academic engagement as well as student satisfaction. Moreover, BSUs promote activities of common interest to Black students (California State University, San Bernadino [CSUSB], 2021). Black Student Unions are
defined as an organization that advocated for Black students’ needs within a college or university. The purpose of a BSU is to ensure that equitable practices occur within the university setting. The Unions also strive to create cultural benefits for their members. Additionally, BSUs serve as an umbrella organization for which other organizations are affiliated (CSUSB, 2021). For example, BSUs provide a forum for other Black student groups’ voices to be heard (CSUSB, 2021). BSUs have certain tenets for which they stand (CSUSB, 2021). For example, BSUs serve to uplift their respective communities in order to create equitable practices and awareness amongst others (CSUSB, 2021).

Across the California State University system, there are many social activities (California State University, 2021). For example, there are 22 social fraternities and 22 social sororities. In addition, there are also 312 registered organizations (California State University, 2021). Student organizations include Afrikan Student Union, Global Aztec Alliance, Student African American Brotherhood, The Pride Center, Muslim Student, Euro, and French clubs (California State University, 2021).

BSUs are a byproduct of the Black Campus Movement (Rogers, 2008). From 1966 to 1975, BSUs strived to reform American higher education (Rogers, 2008). The first BSU originated at San Francisco State University (previously known as San Francisco State College) and is revered as the “vanguard organization of the Black Campus Movement” (Rogers, 2008, p. 1). The purpose of the Black Campus Movement was to combat racial discrimination (Robinson, 2012). The Black Campus Movement impacted multiple campuses in the United States (Rogers, 2008). For example, the University of Washington and Washington State University both created a BSU based on San Francisco State’s BSU (Robinson, 2012). In addition, Cornell University students established the Afro-American Society to create programs that uplift the Black diaspora
Moreover, these universities fought for racial equality as well as the creation of a Black Studies department at their respective universities (Robinson, 2012). Overall, BSUs gained notoriety as they demonstrated the ability to “lead effective and productive campaigns, challenging the image of Black Power as only destructive” (Robinson, 2012, p. 63). Additionally, BSUs provided a platform for Black students to have a voice, to demonstrate their tenacity, and to persevere to ensure progression for Black students at their respective universities (Robinson, 2012).

**Significance of Study**

To understand the higher education Black graduation rates and the staggering numbers of Black college students, one must examine from where Black students derive. In the kindergarten through the 12th grade school system, the racial disparity and opportunity gap for Black students develop at an early age (van den Bergh et al., 2010). Teachers’ expectations impact student achievement (van den Bergh et al., 2010). Black students are more prone than White students to be impacted by teachers’ expectations (van den Bergh et al., 2010). Moreover, Dumais (2002) pointed out that cultural capital consists of “linguistic and cultural competence” (p.44). For instance, “The differences in cultural capital are reinforced by a school system that prefers these [upper class] styles, leaving most members of the lower classes with little hope of achieving social mobility” (Dumais, 2002, p. 45). Even though educators state that the achievement gap must be addressed, educational organizations still reinforce upper-class behaviors and values—thus, the production of the status quo, the “how,” is still not addressed (Dumais, 2002).

The U.S. Department of Education states that in 2017, Black students had a 6.5% dropout rate as opposed to White students who had a 4.3% dropout rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In addition, Black (and Hispanic) youth had higher dropout rates than the youth
of two or more races, White, Pacific Islander, and Asian youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The dropout rate for males was higher than for females. The Black male dropout rate in 2017 was 8% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The Black female dropout rate in 2017 was 4.9% (National Center for Education Statistics 2019). This is in stark contrast to White males (4.9%) and White females (3.65%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Yosso (2005) states that schools operate from the belief that people of color do not possess the social and cultural capital that is required for social mobility. Schools believe that Black students are disadvantaged, and the schools must teach them the dominant cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, the school system rewards students of the dominant culture (Dumais, 2002). The educational system, therefore, creates feelings of hopelessness for socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Bordieu, 1984; Dumais, 2002). On the contrary, scholars such as Muhammad (2020) believe that the educational system has not been designed to allow Black students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Additionally, students must see themselves in the learning; this is key to identity development (Bracken & Wood, 2019; Muhammad, 2020).

As Howard (2016) points out, most Black males in the fourth, eighth, and 12th grades have not reached grade-level standards in reading, math, history, and/or science. In California, Black males are five more times likely to go to prison than to enroll in California state universities (Howard, 2016). With these and other outcomes, it is apparent that the educational system is failing to serve Black students in an effective manner. It is assisting in widening the opportunity gap (Howard, 2016). Leaders must work to find ways to celebrate Black students so their genius is cultivated and celebrated in the school system (Muhammad, 2020).
At the collegiate level, inconsistencies also exist. All colleges and universities are not created equal, and they do not become more equal as the school matures (Clotfelter, 2017). It is the school’s responsibility to ensure all students succeed, regardless of their racial or socioeconomic backgrounds (Boyd, 2000; Myers, 2015). Colleges with low levels of degree attainment pose a problem for their communities and society as a whole (Museus, 2008).

Black students are allowed to address many of their concerns through participation in student organizations such as BSUs (Patton, 2016). The BSU is a Black student organization that works to positively influence Black students’ cultural identity (Museus, 2008). Additionally, BSUs provide students the opportunity to discuss their experiences in a supportive environment. The purpose of this multi-site case study was to analyze BSUs relative to Black students’ experiences. To conduct the aforementioned task, the researcher explored the question How do the university BSUs bridge and/or buffer Black student experiences?

**Theoretical Framework**

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory proffers the notion that life is different for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) groups, especially Black students. Critical race theory holds the idea that everyday occurrences that happen to BIPOC individuals can create an environment of annoyance due to the microaggressions that they may encounter (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Microaggressions can be defined as an indirect statement or action against a marginalized group. The dominant culture creates a systemic barrier of oppression for persons who are BIPOC (Patton, 2016). Additionally, critical race theory is an answer to the problematic colorblindness ideology that the United States has adopted (Caldwell & Crenshaw, 1996).
Critical race theory states that being a person of color carries a negative connotation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), “Whiteness is also normative; it sets the standard in dozens of situations” (p. 86). Furthermore, they state that the color White is seen as good, while Black is viewed as bad (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Moreover, most teachers possess the dominant culture’s perspective on education; there is a clash in a shared vision among teachers and many persons who are BIPOC (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Practices that sustain students who are BIPOC are lacking in higher education (Patton, 2016). Patton (2016) found that the establishment of higher education institutions and knowledge production are deeply rooted in racism, and the practices of said institutions are in alignment with imperialism and capitalism. By the utilization of critical race theory, the lens established that racism has been embedded in higher education’s practices, and the structures have continued to marginalize BIPOC students (Museus, 2008). People’s sense of knowing has been subjective, and it has shaped how society has treated them. Additionally, this study took an interpretive framework approach to show how individuals hold different views, and how research reveals said views (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Bridging and Buffering

This study utilized the bridging and buffering conceptual framework to explore the notion of the large university system and the BSU: What are the Black students’ experiences? How do the schools’ BSUs bridge or buffer Black students (Honig & Hatch, 2004)? Bridging is defined as negotiating the external needs to craft coherence. Buffering is defined as limiting external demands but not eliminating them. Figure 1 is a visual depiction of the bridging and buffering concept (Honig & Hatch, 2004). The “central office” has its wants and needs; the school makes a
decision and either bridges or buffers it. If the wants and needs align with the school’s schoolwide goals, it will, more than likely, craft coherence and create a bridge (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Moreover, Honig and Hatch (2004) state, “Our conceptualization of coherence as a craft suggests the importance of ongoing investments in the institutional capacity of schools and district central offices to engage in practices that may help schools manage multiple external policy demands productively” (p. 27). The “central office” should try to promote practices that align with the school’s vision (see Figure 1).

In the higher education setting, the BSU can either bridge or buffer BSU student experiences. The BSU can serve to negotiate the external forces to ensure coherency with the BSU club functionality. Additionally, the BSU can ensure the BSU’s goals are in alignment with the external forces. On the other hand, the BSU can serve to buffer outside forces by limiting their response to the outside demands. The BSU might buffer outside forces due to misalignment with its goals.

The concept of bridging and buffering is in alignment with studying BSU members’ experiences; it permitted the researcher to understand how BSUs impacted Black students within the large university system. The researcher was afforded the opportunity to analyze data regarding BSU student experiences. Bridging and buffering also permitted the researcher to craft coherence surrounding the large university system’s policies. The researcher was able to analyze the university’s vision, mission, and system goals, and how the goals impacted the BSUs functionality. Moreover, the researcher analyzed how the policies impacted Black students within the BSU. By the utilization of the bridging and buffering framework, the university system’s goals and decision-making process were also analyzed.
Figure 1

*Crafting Coherence: Bridging and Buffering Outside Forces (Honig & Hatch, 2004).*

*Note.* Figure 1 is a visual depiction of how schools can bridge or buffer outside forces (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Black student graduation rates are faltering (Harper, 2020). In order to ensure the Graduation Initiative 2025 is attained, students, particularly Black students, need supportive programs (Harper, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this multi-site, embedded case study was to better understand BSU student experiences within a large university system. Additionally, this qualitative case study explored BSUs and Black students’ experiences while attending college at a California University. The Black students were afforded the unique opportunity to share their experiences in a way which they deemed relevant and necessary. To understand how to cultivate
Black student success and to retain and recruit more Black students, the following research question was addressed: How do Black Student Unions bridge or buffer the Black student undergraduate experiences within a large university system?

Another purpose of the study was to understand what universities might need to support BSU student members. Based on the student experiences that the interviews revealed, information was provided that could support BSUs within the large university system. In addition, the research findings yielded information that could contribute to the continued success of the BSU within the large university system.

**Research Design**

For this study, a multi-site, embedded case study approach (Yin, 2018) was used to examine two BSUs within a large university system. In addition, the researcher gathered data from two California regions: southern San Joaquin Valley and Southern California. The participants included 10 BSU members (five per school site), three staff club advisors, and artifacts (e.g., the BSUs Instagram account) from each university campus.

The multi-site case study consisted of inductive and deductive data analysis. The coding was inductive since the researcher examined the themes that emerged from the data to answer the research question. The data were deductive because the researcher applied the framework of bridging and buffering, and it included a priori coding (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

A modified approach of Seidman’s’s (1998) qualitative interviewing procedures was used. The interview questions were in alignment with the research question. Semi-structured interviews were no more than 90 minutes via Zoom. Interviews were recorded using Zoom’s software. Next, the interviews were transcribed using Zoom software and Microsoft Word. Additionally, the data were coded using Dedoose for Windows qualitative data analysis software.
version 9.0.46. The researcher coded the data, outlined the data, and created themes and subthemes (Saldaña, 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

The researcher had to be understanding of underlying assumptions. Therefore, the researcher bracketed these notions and was mindful of them throughout the study (see Appendix D). The researcher bracketed any preconceived notions by using Milner’s (2007) framework; additionally, the researcher bracketed after each interview and after examining related artifacts. This process was followed for University 1 and University 2 data collection.

Assumptions

The purpose of this study was to examine Black Student Unions within the large university system and Black student undergraduate experiences. It was assumed that participants would truthfully answer questions and that their responses would be based on their actual experiences. Participants were selected from two universities within the large university system in California. The participants included BSU staff advisors and BSU members. Additionally, it was assumed that participants would honestly meet the criteria set for the study. Lastly, it was surmised that participants would be able to effectively and efficiently navigate the technology needed to conduct the interview.

Limitations

Participants for the study were chosen by utilizing a purposive and snowball sampling method. This method was enacted by coordinating with the two universities that have a BSU on campus. It should not be anticipated that the results from this study would be the same for other large university systems. In addition, the interviews for this study were conducted via Zoom due to COVID-19. The interview process varied from a face-to-face interview because the researcher
did not have the opportunity to meet participants in person. Even though the interviews were conducted via Zoom, the researcher was able to interview participants from the various regions with ease, as Zoom allows for greater flexibility.

**Delimitations**

The purpose of this study was to study BSUs from two university campuses to examine the undergraduate Black student experience. This study did not include students from all of the universities within the large university system. Moreover, the study did not include private universities or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). In addition, this study did not include all the BSU student participants from Universities 1 and 2. The study only focused on Black student experiences within the BSUs; it did not focus on Black students across campuses of Universities 1 and 2.

**Operational Definitions of Terms**

Black: a racialized group of persons whose ancestry derives from Africa

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC): a racialized group of persons whose ancestry derives from that of non-White groups

Black Student Union: a group that advocates for Black students’ needs at a college or university campus to create a unified sense of belonging to create equitable practices within an organization

bridging: the act of producing working relationships with organizations to gain some sort of benefit (Honig & Hatch, 2004)

buffering: the act of not producing working relationships with/within organizations to continue with the status quo (Honig & Hatch, 2004)
case study: a study that has detail surrounding a certain event, person, or group (Yin, 2018)
critical race theory: a framework that examines how institutional structures intersect with race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012)
stereotype threat: a situation where persons feel as if they are being placed at risk of following the stereotypes for their group (Steele, 1997)

Summary

Graduating from a university poses more challenges for Black students than their White counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Opportunity gaps develop for Black students in grade school; these gaps are influenced by systemic barriers (van den Bergh et al., 2010; Howard, 2016; Patton, 2016). The research question for this multi-site, embedded case study was How do Black Student Unions bridge or buffer Black student experiences within a large university setting? Ten BSU undergraduate members and three BSU staff advisors were interviewed to uncover their experiences. Archival data such as social media posts were also analyzed.

The goal of this study was to explore how BSUs bridge or buffer Black student experiences. The study began with background information such as statistical information on Black student achievement. The next section in Chapter 1 discussed BSUs and the large university system. The significance of the study was outlined; this led to the theoretical framework of the study. The purpose of the study and the research question was reviewed, followed by the research design. The assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were outlined. The remainder of this study includes an extensive review of the literature. Following the
literature review is the study’s methodology. Chapter 4 explicates the findings. The study ends with a discussion with recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The research question for this multi-site, embedded case study is How do Black Student Unions bridge and/or buffer black student undergraduate experiences within a large university system? To explore the aforementioned case study, one must understand the historical and sociological context from which the necessity of a support group, such as the Black Student Union, derived. Therefore, one must analyze the literature and research on the history of Black students’ academic portfolio and how this level of opportunity impacts Black students.

In this literature review, the researcher outlines the theory behind the academic performance of Black students. The cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance is explored (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In addition, social learning theory is reviewed with a focus on how it impacts organizational programs (Bandura, 1990). The tenets of critical race theory are also reviewed with particular attention to how it impacts the educational sector (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Zamudio et al., 2011). The tenet of racial inequities in the United States is examined and applied to the impact on Black student achievement and the existing relationship between said inequities, Black Student Unions (BSUs), and bridging and buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

Cultural-Ecological Theory of Minority School Performance

Black students have experienced an unequal distribution of opportunities throughout history (Ford et al., 2008; Ogbu & Davis, 2003). This unequal distribution of resources is known as the opportunity gap; the opportunity gap begins in elementary school and continues through high school (Ford et al., 2008; Ogbu & Davis, 2003). By the time students graduate high school, Black students will be, on average, two years behind their White counterparts (Ogbu & Davis, 2003). Furthermore, the opportunity gap has affected Black students in kindergarten through
12th grade settings and higher education as an academic disconnect for Black students continues (Ford et al., 2008; Ogbu & Davis, 2003).

The opportunity gap can be defined as the ways in which race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, English proficiency, and communal wealth contribute to lower academic achievement for certain groups of people. Those who are BIPOC have a greater opportunity gap than their White counterparts (Howard & Navarro, 2016). Moreover, there has been a shift in the amount of BIPOC persons in the United States (Howard & Navarro, 2016). By the year 2060, students of color will account for 57% of the population (Howard & Navarro, 2016). Despite the racial shift that is occurring, the opportunity gap—the unequal distribution of educational access between White students and non-White students—continues to grow (Howard & Navarro, 2016).

Ogbu (1998) explains BIPOC student performance in school in terms of a cultural-ecological theory. This theory looks at the extensive societal and school factors in addition to the dynamics that exist within Black communities (Ogbu, 1998). In addition, Ogbu’s (1998) theory has two main parts. The first part is about how non-Whites are treated in education concerning educational policies, pedagogy, and returns for their investment or school credentials. This is what Ogbu (1998) calls the system. The second part is about the way non-Whites view and relate to schooling regarding a consequence of how they are treated. The way BIPOC individuals respond to how they are treated in schools has a direct relationship with how the Black person became a minority. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) state that Black people are a group of caste-like minorities. This means that Black people did not come to America on their own accord; they were forced to do so.

White students academically outperform Black students in school (Brooms, 2018; Eunyoung & Hargrove, 2013; Ford & Moore, 2013; Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, 2008;
Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu & Davis, 2003). Ogbu and Davis (2003) state that Black people experience an incongruity with the school curriculum (culture), language (standard English), and social-emotional learning. Racism is a large factor of the inequities that those who are BIPOC experience (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

To further understand how the system impacts Black students in school, one must examine how Black people are treated by White people (Ogbu, 1998). Some barriers impact Black people such as employment and wages; social and residential segregation; and defamation of the Black culture and language (Ogbu, 1998). The aforementioned are “collective problems faced by minorities” (Ogbu, 1998, p. 177). To explain Black people’s perceptions of and responses to education, the theory explores the impact of how White people treat Black individuals (Ogbu, 1998).

Another reason why Black students do not perform as well in school is that they experience “inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177). This problem arose, state Fordham and Ogbu (1986), because White Americans did not want to acknowledge that Black Americans were able to achieve academically; subsequently, Black Americans began to doubt their intellectual abilities; they then began to view school as a “White person’s prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating White people in academic striving, i.e., from ‘acting White’” (p. 177). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) further state that due to the “ambivalence, affective dissonance, and social pressures, many Black students who are academically able to do not put forth the necessary effort and perseverance in their schoolwork and, consequently, do poorly in school” (p. 177).
Within the Black community, there is a schism in school performance based on class (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Cope (2009) conducted a study where he discovered that pursuing higher education is also seen as “acting White” by working-class Black people. In addition, pursuing higher education is viewed as risking one’s Black identity. Black identity is at risk when a Black individual takes on behaviors that are viewed as acting White.

**Cultural-Ecological Influences**

Some BIPOC subgroups do well academically, while some do not. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) state there are academic achievement variances within the same groups. In 1986, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) placed BIPOC into three categories: *autonomous minorities* (numerical minority), *immigrant minority* (arrived in America voluntarily), and *subordinate/caste-like minority* (came to America involuntarily). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) state that Black people are considered a *subordinate minority*, and the large opportunity gap is due to adaptation to cultural norms within the ecological framework.

Part of the ecological structure for Black people is a job ceiling and substandard schooling. Environmental factors impact student performance and cause mistrust between Black people and schools (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steele, 1997). Therefore, the unmotivated behavior that some Black students exhibit stems from the ecological system as they are “required by and appropriate for the niche Black Americans have traditionally occupied in the American corporate economy and racial stratification system” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 179).

**Black Achievement Motivation**

Contrary to Ogbu’s (1998) cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance, there is little evidence that Black people were resistant to a formal education directly following slavery (Cross, 2003). Cross (2003) states that the southern United States made it difficult for
Black achievement and motivation to occur. In addition, Cross (2003) states that Black southerners revered education, and they passed this love of learning from one generation to the next; this trend of academic achievement did not start to wane until after the Great Depression.

Formerly enslaved people did not trust the White southerners, so they took control of their education (Cross, 2003). White teachers were astonished at how Black people valued education; White teachers only expected to find this characteristic in other White students (Cross, 2003; Spencer et al., 2003). In addition, White teachers from the north, the White educational officials, and the Federal Freedman’s Bureau did not have to take time to motivate the Black students (Cross, 2003; Spencer et al., 2003). The fact that Black people possessed a collective attitude of achievement signifies that evidence of motivation was present (Cross, 2003; Spencer et al., 2003).

Some scholars disagree with the notion that Black students are simply succumbing to their environment (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002; Ferguson, 2001; Kao et al., 1996; Spencer et al., 2003; Tyson et al., 2005). For instance, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) do not consider that there are some second-generation students whose coping strategies resemble that of a subordinate minority (cited in Spencer et al., 2003). Spencer et al. (2003) state that the cultural-ecological theory purports that Black people have a sense of cultural inferiority; this is a flawed view of thinking. For instance, it does not consider intra-cultural differences, and it is also a deficit thinking—focused on negative factors. The positive factors—resilience, grit—are overlooked. Lastly, the cultural-ecological model overlooks the process of human development (Spencer et al., 2003).

A study was conducted where Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (2002) found that Black students possessed a more positive outlook on their academic careers. In addition, Black students
are popular among their peers. Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (2002) concluded that the habits of Black students may be a reason for an opportunity gap.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is defined as how one views oneself in relation to culture and the surrounding world (Ogbu & Davis, 2003). How Black people view themselves affects how they perform in academic settings (Ogbu & Davis, 2003). For example, “Blacks in Shaker Heights were aware of their collective identity or a sense of who they are as Black Americans and that this identity was different and perhaps to their perceived White collective identity” (Ogbu & Davis, 2003, p. 258). Black people in the Shaker Heights, Ohio, area are higher achieving than many other Black neighborhoods; therefore, Ogbu and Davis (2003) are postulating that the Shaker Heights Black community must have a differing identity—one that is more attuned to White identity.

Stereotype threat is the notion that for school achievement to occur, a student must identify himself as part of the mainstream group (Steele, 1997). This identification translates into long-term achievement motivation (Steele, 1997). Conversely, negative life experiences, that is, limited role models, can create more difficulty to relate to academic purviews. According to Steele (1997), stereotype threat is a situational threat that can affect the members of the said group for whom the stereotype exists (see Figure 2). When an individual is worried about the stereotype, academic success can decline because the individual is preoccupied with becoming said stereotype.

Barber (2017) conducted a study where she discovered that stereotype threat is not solely limited to persons who are BIPOC. Stereotype threat is also known to harm men, nonnative speakers, and blind students (Barber, 2017; Kapitanoff & Pandey, 2017). Stereotype threat can
also impact the elderly, regardless of their race, in a negative manner as they experience
cognitive degeneration as they age (Barber, 2017). Instructor stereotype impacts women in the
university setting (Kapitnof & Pandey, 2017). Women experience math anxiety—even if the
professor is a woman (Kapitanoff & Pandey, 2017). Additionally, girls experience math anxiety
as early as age five (Tomasetto et al., 2011). Parents, particularly mothers, play a crucial role in
combatting math stereotype threat (Tomasetto et al., 2011). Figure 2 demonstrates the social and
psychological factors that impact Black students’ academic success (Ford et al., 2008). These
factors include the notion of acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), stereotype threat (Steele,
1997), attitude (Mickelson, 1990), and resistance among involuntary minority groups (Ogbu,
1987).
Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is the intersection of race and societal factors such as law and education, and how it impacts the lives of BIPOC individuals. Critical race theorists believe that race plays a crucial role in society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theorists believe that race affects daily life for students of color (Sablan, 2019). Under critical race theory, the belief is that “racial inequality permeates every aspect of social life, from minute, intimate relationships, to the neighborhoods we live in, and the schools we go to, all the way to the
macro-economic system” (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 3). Zamudio et al. (2011) state that race impacts every area of our lives—from academic achievement to the neighborhoods in which people live. For example, many believe the idea that race no longer matters is part of an ideology to keep the White culture superior to its BIPOC counterparts (Zamudio et al., 2011). Americans learn to look, inadvertently, towards European literature as superior to other types. People have learned to believe that someone’s race informs others about his/her behavior—without even taking into account the preconceived ideas or notions. These types of beliefs are also interwoven throughout our educational system (Bell, 1992; Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Zamudio et al., 2011).

**Interest Convergence**

Bell (1992) is one of the major contributors to critical race theory. Bell (1992) plays a pivotal role in the key components of CRT, explicating the racial divide that exists between Whites and Blacks and the known causes. Bell (1992) states that few White people can identify with Black people. This view is in alignment with Delgado and Stefancic (2012) who also argued that racism serves the needs of the dominant group and that it is difficult to acknowledge because it serves to progress the dominant needs. Additionally, Bell (1992) believes that Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was developed due to the self-interest of elite White people. This notion furthers Delgado and Stefancic’s (2012) notion that the United States could not afford to appear divided if it wanted to continue to be a superpower. This situation is known as interest convergence; America had a vested interest in Black issues as the needs of Black and White communities converged.

Many White folks struggle to identify with Black folks (Bell, 1992). This is the “essential prerequisite for feeling empathy with, rather than aversion from, Blacks’ self-inflicting
suffering” (Bell, 1992, p. 4). Moreover, Bell (1992) states that White people are in fear that they will lose the perceived power that they possess over minorities. White people want to continue to be the standard of all that is seen to be correct (Bell, 1992).

Public education in the United States was created when only White men possessed full rights (Labaree, 2010); therefore, the school structure was not designed for Black students to succeed (Fowler, 2013; Labaree, 2010). Black students do not all receive the same type of educational experience as their White counterparts due to their race; CRT also states that the structure of the United States—schools included—was designed to maintain White power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). For example, the majority of teachers are White females; oftentimes the White teachers have a difficult time connecting with Black students (Ladson-Billings, 2011). The organization of public schools “mobilizes bias in favor of professional educators and against other stakeholders” (Fowler, 2013, p. 32). The White majority holds the power because even though they may be declining in terms of a racial group stronghold, they dominate at the voting polls (Myers, 2015). Their voices are heard and addressed, and their needs are met accordingly.

Another way bias exists in the structure of United States public schools is how schools conduct business (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Events held during working hours are very problematic for many families who work. Additionally, the physical structure and organization of a school are usually uninviting (Fowler, 2013). Consider the notion that there may be little to no parking and the parents must park blocks away. The office may be small, crowded, and very busy; the campus may not be conducive to visitors as there may be a closed campus policy. School personnel is under the impression that the school is inviting, but in actuality, the school holds the power (Fowler, 2013). Critical race theory critics would state that schools have bigger
problems such as the financial and practical considerations of reconstructing a school; critical race theorists would state that the aesthetics of a school are a representation of how the persons in power view the students, parents, and community as a whole.

Critical race theory states that the school system and the learning process, in general, are a hardship for students who are BIPOC, especially Black students. For instance, the entire judicial system, educational system, and everyday way of life are designed for White persons; therefore, Black students are still the other—the outsider, the exception, not the norm or the standard. In contrast, White is seen as the norm and the standard in which others must utilize (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Critical race theory also says that the color White is seen as pure and good, and Black is seen as evil and bad (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Moreover, since most educators possess the views of the dominant culture yet many students do not, there is a clash in a shared vision. This clash in a shared vision and tension creates social mistrust (Steele, 1997); Black people do not trust the dominant group since the People of Color do not believe the majority understand their needs. Moreover, the dominant group may not seek to understand the needs of the Black community unless there is a convergence of interests.

**Critical Race Theory and the Impact on Education**

Individuals who are BIPOC are faced with multiple tasks when they are at school. Not only do they have to learn the material, but they must also decipher the unfamiliar “codes” that surround the material (Fowler, 2013, p. 33). For these students to overcome the racial bias, teachers should teach children the White middle-class codes and also to “treasure their own cultural heritage” (Fowler, 2013, p. 33). Critical race theorists disagree with this notion. Critical race theorists state that due to the structural inequality that exists, knowledge construction needs
to incorporate “Critical Race Pedagogy” so as to perpetuate a different “cultural reproduction” that encompasses the stories and the voices of BIPOC individuals. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggested that the social inequity in schools was due to three issues: “(a) race is a factor in U.S. inequities, (b) U.S. social stratification is based on property rights, (c) race and property intersectionality is how people can understand social inequities” (p. 48).

**Race Is a Factor in U.S. Inequities**

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) state that race is a major factor for the racial inequities in the United States. Gender and socioeconomic status are not the only reasons for educational completion variation. In fact, middle-class Black students do not graduate at the same rate as their White equivalents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Race is important, and it has an impact on how well students perform as well as their class placement.

Patton (2016) applies Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) critical race tenets to higher education. Patton (2016) states that she applies the tenets to move past White supremacy in curriculum, access, and policy. Patton (2016) says that “the establishment of U.S. higher education is deeply rooted in racism/White supremacy, the vestiges of which remain palatable” (p. 317).

It is said that higher education is rewarded to those who work diligently (Patton, 2016). However, Patton (2016) says that colleges—such as the Ivy Leagues—have a history in slavery; the charter members were slave owners. People were mistreated, and yet higher education institutions have ties to the maltreatment. In addition, multiple delegates at the Constitutional Convention had enslaved individuals. (En)slaved labor was used to profit the universities; however, there is no plan for retribution.

**Bridging and Buffering**
Bridging and buffering is a theoretical lens through which to understand the actions that an educational sector elects to make (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Honig and Hatch (2004) state that there are external factors that influence situational outcomes. Moreover, the external forces are instrumental in determining what reforms an organization will undergo. Schools and administrators must work together to create a coherent plan that develops community partnerships with external forces (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Scribner, 2013).

Educational coherence is a type of policy goal because of the impact that coherence has on educational goals such as academic achievement (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Policy incoherence impacts what occurs at the central office as well as the school sites. In addition, organizations can utilize external demands to advance their agenda (Oliver, 1991). Situations that increase interaction between the school and the community are known as bridging, while situations that limit it are known as buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Oliver, 1991). When an organization acts upon an external demand, it should do so to create a more cohesive environment with goals that are aligned with the vision (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Oliver, 1991; Shieh, 2020).

Organizations bridge to factors by collaborating with the external environment (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Oliver, 1991; Shieh, 2020). This can be done by blurring the outside lines and using the external power to advance an internal priority (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Oliver, 1991; Shieh, 2020). Bridging can also be done by working to shape the terms of compliance with the outside force (Oliver, 1991).

Buffering is the act of limiting the organization’s engagement with the outside entity (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Schools utilize buffering strategically to “incubate particular ideas and ignore negative feedback from their environments that can derail their decision-making” (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 23). Sometimes outside forces attempt to influence schools to engage in
activities—such as outside monies—to develop and sustain partnerships that are connected to externally funded school reform initiatives (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Scribner, 2013). The school can decline the money and state they do not want it to influence its core values and beliefs. A school may also ignore critiques from the outside forces; however, they may change something on the surface but nothing more (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Scribner, 2013; Shieh, 2020).

Organizations must recognize the impact that policy has (Shieh, 2020). The development of strong partnerships with the community is imperative to bring more resources to the school (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Scribner, 2013). Honig and Hatch (2004) state, “Some schools thrive when multiple demands converge on them in part because multiple demands can mean additional resources for educational improvement” (p. 26). If K-12 and higher educational settings create strong community partnerships, they can create an influx of revenue.

The politics of bridging and buffering must be taken into account on all levels of the educational organization, from central administration to the administrator to the teacher/professor (Shieh, 2020). Shieh (2020) states that policy is created in many different spaces; it is even in school culture. When teachers bridge or buffer certain policies, they impact how that policy is viewed in their classroom, by their students, and by the local community. Teachers play an important role in the bridging/buffering policy, and they must be prepared for the problems that can occur (Scribner, 2013). Figure 3 demonstrates the relationship between schools and central offices.

Scribner (2013) believes that educational leaders should support policy that supports the disenfranchised and marginalized. The development of strong partnerships is needed to foster an environment that continuously improves for the betterment of the entire school community (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Scribner, 2013; Shieh, 2020). Policy demands, however, might stand in
the way of policy support (Kohansal, 2015). Honig and Hatch state (2004) that “buffering is not the blind dismissal of external demands but strategically deciding to engage in limited ways” (p. 23). Buffering can help an organization ensure it maintains certain policies while it disregards negativity in the environment (Kohansal, 2015).

A study by Hallinger and Murphy (1986) was conducted to discover the similarities and differences between high and low socioeconomic schools (SES). One of the findings was that leaders of low SES schools buffered outside forces, while principals of high SES schools bridged outside forces. High SES school principals even held frequent parent meetings to ensure their voices were heard.

Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the concept of bridging and buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004). The visual depicts how outside forces, such as the central office, attempt to impact a school’s operation. The school can either bridge or buffer the forces. The school’s decision will be based on how the outside force impacts the schoolwide goals and systems that are in place.

**Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory (also known as social cognitive theory) states that human behavior can be explained in a three-way reciprocal model (Bandura, 2012). Bandura (2012) states that personal factors, environmental influences, and behavior continually interact. People learn not only through their own experiences but also by watching how others act and how people respond to those actions. Individuals react differently depending upon from whom the behavior derives. This three-way model Bandura (2012) has coined triadic reciprocal causation. A person’s self-efficacy is developed through the way in which others respond to him/her.

Bandura and Walters (1963) discuss stage theories of personality development. They state, “Although there is relatively little consensus among these theories concerning the number
and characteristics of crucial stages, they all assume that social behavior can be categorized in terms of a relatively pre-fixed sequence of stages which are more or less discontinuous” (Bandura & Walters, 1963, p. 24). Students who are from varying cultural backgrounds but who have similar biological characteristics may show “inter-individual variability in social behavior patterns” (Bandura & Walters, 1963, p. 24).

The frustration-drive hypothesis is the notion that when an individual is introduced to stimuli, the response varies depending on outside variables (Bandura & Walters, 1963). The motivation is compromised based on an outside stimulus.

Self-Efficacy

To understand self-efficacy, one must understand social learning theory (Bandura, 2012). Multiple factors determine a person’s self-efficacy. There is the environment where the imposed, selected, or constructed environmental factors impact a person. People are producers of their environment, not just a by-product. There are also the personal decisions that a person makes to a certain extent. Bandura (2012) states that a person cannot control every aspect of their lives; they use proxy agency. People influence others to act on their behalf to produce the best outcomes for them. If the group works together and spreads the tasks amongst the group members, the outcomes tend to be more positive for the entire group (see Figure 3). Figure 3 is a graphic depiction of how Bandura’s (2012) social cognitive theory has a triadic reciprocal relationship. The environment, the personal determinants, and a person’s behavior all impact a person’s self-efficacy.
Self-Efficacy in Relation to Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura (2012) states that people’s beliefs in their capabilities impact their self-efficacy. Bandura (2012) proposes that four areas are impacted. The first one is mastery experiences. This is the notion that if people experience quick and easy success, they become accustomed to it occurring as such. Resilience occurs when people overcome trials and tribulations. Resiliency must be managed so people can learn from their mistakes. The second way that people develop self-efficacy is by self-modeling. When individuals view other individuals who are similar to themselves become successful, they are encouraged. The third way is social persuasion. When people believe they have what it takes to be successful, the belief comes to fruition. Social persuaders arrange situations that bring people success. The fourth way to achieve efficacy is the
idea of relying on physical and emotional states. Less depression, stress, anxiety, and more of a positive emotional state lead to a more positive self-efficacy.

People must manage their state of being to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1990). It is important to note this is not the same as self-esteem, the judgment of self-worth. Self-efficacy is the judgment of self-capability.

Figure 4 shows the process people undergo based on their cognitive adaptation of the situation. Bandura (2012) believes those with low self-efficacy believe that a situation is arduous and the outcome will be negative. Those with high self-efficacy believe the contrary. A higher level of perceived self-efficacy creates better results with particular attention to motivation and performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1990). Changes in self-efficacy will impact individuals’ motivation and behaviors (Bandura, 1990). People need to become resilient to create positive self-efficacy. Bandura (1990) states that self-efficacy “is achieved by equipping people with knowledge, subskills, and the strong self-belief of efficacy needed to use one’s skills effectively” (p. 402). Figure 4 is a representation of how self-efficacy is impacted by outside forces such as sociostructural, physical, social, and self-evaluative. Self-efficacy’s goals are aligned with a person’s reaction to the outside forces. This, in turn, structures behavior.

Figure 4

*Structural Paths of Influence* (Bandura, 2012)
Note. Figure 4 is a depiction of the process people undergo based on their cognitive adaptation of the situation.

**Self-Efficacy Within the Educational Setting**

van Dinther et al. (2011) conducted a study in which they determined that programs within the higher education setting can impact students’ self-efficacy. Additionally, van Dinther et al. discovered that social programs based on the self-efficacy tenets yield more effective results for students. The study revealed that 91% of the social cognitive theory intervention research studies led to effective results. Based on this study, educational organizations must create and cultivate programs that are based on the triadic reciprocal model (see Figure 3).

**The Black Campus Movement**

The first BSU originated at San Francisco State University in 1966 (Epstein & Stringer, 2020). At the time of inception, San Francisco State University was called San Francisco State College. During this time, the Black student numbers were staggering because many of the Black
students were being sent to the community colleges (Epstein & Stringer, 2020). Only four percent of the San Francisco State population was Black at the time (Epstein & Stringer, 2020). In addition, the administration and faculty were all White (Epstein & Stringer, 2020). Initially, there were no bylaws, but the organization continued to grow and spread to other California state colleges and universities (Epstein & Stringer, 2020).

San Francisco State’s BSU wanted to protest to gain power so they could assist other Black people (Epstein & Stringer, 2020). More specifically, the BSU held protests to create an Ethnic Studies Department. If the Ethnic Studies Department could not be created, the Union said they would “close down the school” (Epstein & Stringer, 2020, p. 21). The students and staff went on strike (Epstein & Stringer, 2020).

The BSU members organized and developed the first Black and Ethnic Studies Department in 1965 at San Francisco State University (Epstein & Stringer, 2020; Robinson, 2012). Initially, the department was not recognized, but it continued to grow and develop. By 1967, there were eleven Black Studies courses, and the other departments at the university included information about Black people (Epstein & Stringer, 2020).

From 1968 to 1969, the Black Campus Movement intensified. One can attribute this to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. (Rogers, 2008). In addition, there were between 200 to 600 police officers at San Francisco State University. Seven hundred protestors in total were arrested and hundreds of students were beaten (Epstein & Stringer, 2020; Robinson, 2012). The students, however, persevered and stood strong as they fought for equality (Robinson, 2012).

The Black Campus Movement’s purpose was to combat racially charged biases that existed in higher education (Robinson, 2012). The Black Campus Movement had a large impact on campuses around the nation (Rogers, 2008). Rogers (2008) states, “The more than 300
departments, programs, institutes, and centers for Black Studies, the dozens of Black Student Centers… at America’s colleges and universities are a direct result of the struggle of these BSUs” (p. 176). Universities such as Lincoln, Howard, Florida A&M, Brandeis, Stanford, and Swarthmore were active in the Black Campus Movement. They all fought for racial equality for Black students by staging events such as protests and rallies (Rogers, 2008). BSUs are the only organization formed during the Black Power Movement that are still a thriving organization today (Rogers, 2008).

San Francisco State’s BSU had a profound impact on BSUs (Rogers, 2008). It was the inspiration for more than one thousand BSUs across the United States (Rogers, 2008). Additionally, San Francisco State’s BSU founded the Black Studies Department (Rogers, 2008). Moreover, universities such as the University of Washington and Washington State University created proposals for Black Studies Departments (Robinson, 2012; Rogers, 2008). Additionally, universities such as Cornell established the Afro-American Society to create programming that uplifted the Black diaspora (Rogers, 2008).

Not all organizations within the Black Power Movement were in support of each other (Bundy, 2017). For example, Boston’s Black student movement proved to be more aggressive than its predecessors (Bundy, 2017). Boston’s youth were more radical in their want for student government power and culturally relevant education (Bundy, 2017). There was tension between the Black Educators’ Alliance of Massachusetts and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). These groups urged the Bostonian youth to be cautious in their rhetoric (Bundy, 2017). The Black freedom movement was a time in Black activism that was striving to create a heightened sense of awareness (Bundy, 2017).
In the fall of 1968 in Boston, a Black Student Federation (BSF) was formed city-wide. The goal of this organization was to help Black youth to combat racism (Bundy, 2017). After 1969, enrollment was decreased to only high school students (Bundy, 2017). The formation of this group demonstrated the rising power of Black Nationalism (Bundy, 2017). The BSF assisted in Boston’s development of a BSU (Bundy, 2017). Overall, a culturally relevant education was the BSU’s goal (Bundy, 2017).

**Black Student Unions**

Black students who attend predominantly White colleges and universities often join student groups, such as BSU, to combat the negativity that they experience (Jackson & Hui, 2017). Black students face comments, jokes, and microaggressions from White students. Smith et al. (2011) state that Black students undergo racial battle fatigue. This is the process by which they undergo racism—so much so that it drains them physically and mentally. Therefore, Black students seek counter spaces to create a sense of belonging on campus (Jackson & Hui, 2017). The BSU serves as a supportive space where Black students could connect with like-minded individuals (Robinson, 2012). It is described as a gathering space that was inspired after the Black Power Movement which fought for racial pride and equal treatment for Black people (Robinson, 2012).

The need for BSUs derives from a need for Black students to be able to navigate racist, predominately White institutions (PWI) (Hotchkins, 2017). Membership in an organization such as a BSU allows Black students to give back to the community, to thrive in an environment that may not foster it, and to socialize through activism (Hotchkins, 2017; Jackson & Hui, 2017). Black students are known to use transgenerational knowledge to navigate mostly White spaces (Hotchkins, 2017). Identity development can be influenced by participation in a space such as a
BSU (Hotchkins, 2017; Jackson & Hui, 2017). When students experience a sense of belonging in college, their persistence to degree completion is positively impacted (Museus, 2008).

Black Student Unions focus on Black student issues, such as the creation of an Ethnic Studies department and racial climate scenarios (Robinson, 2012). Student-led protests were a natural occurrence during the 1960s (Robinson, 2012). Students were protesting the racial injustices that plagued the country as they were in search of a better quality of life on predominantly White college campuses (Hotchkins, 2017; Robinson, 2012). Black Student Unions were a place where Black students’ voices were able to be heard as a single unit.

Summary

Based on the research and historical information that is presented in this literature review, the research question, How do Black Student Unions bridge or buffer Black student experiences within a large university system?, is necessary due to the inequities that exist for Black students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steele, 1997; Spencer et al., 2003); the racial inequities that exist in the United States (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); and the need for a strong sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1990). The bridging and buffering literature focuses on kindergarten to 12th grade school settings as a school organization (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Scribner, 2013; Shieh, 2020; van Dinther et al., 2011); therefore, a study that focuses not only on higher education but also on a higher educational program—and the way the program bridges/buffers BSU members—is needed.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODLOGY

The United States’ schools need to work to improve upon the opportunity gap that exists (Howard, 2016). Students perform better when they feel valued (Allen, 1992). Therefore, schools need to explore how Black Student Unions (BSU) bridge or buffer the Black undergraduate student college experience to strengthen their culturally responsive pedagogy, to combat microaggressions, and to engage Black students to find ways to become active campus community members.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) state the critical race theory (CRT) framework enables Black students to be celebrated in the school setting by sharing counterstories and by utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy. Critical race theory has been a transformative conceptual, methodological, and theoretical construct that has assisted researchers in problematizing race in education (Howard, 2016). To further explore BSU members across the CSU campuses, the CRT framework guided how the data would be shared and compiled.

The purpose of this multi-site, embedded case study was to analyze BSUs concerning Black students’ experiences. The following research question frames the present study: How do BSUs bridge and/or buffer Black student undergraduate experiences? The researcher examined BSU members’ experiences by examining various data from multiple sources. Data were obtained through BSU member interviews and BSU staff advisor interviews. In addition, archival data, such as social media sites, was examined. The following aspects of the methodological approach are articulated in Chapter 3: the research design, the conceptual framework, the methods, the sampling selection, the participants, the data collection strategy, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the role and background of the researcher.
Research Design

The researcher selected a qualitative research design because it allowed the researcher to understand student experiences at a level that statistical analyses would not necessarily afford. In addition, a case study allows the researcher to ask “how” and “why” questions; it does not require control over behavioral events; and it focuses on contemporary events (Yin, 2018). How and why questions focus on researching a case over time (Yin, 2018). This multi-site, embedded case study examined multiple sources of data that emerge from the BSUs from two universities within a large university system.

This multi-site, embedded case study had several embedded units of analysis: Black students who are leaders or members of the BSU, staff member advisors, and websites such as social media. The multi-site, embedded case study approach was used because it provided the opportunity to conduct a comparative study (Yin, 2018). More specifically, the researcher examined how BSUs bridge or buffer (Honig & Hatch, 2004) Black student experiences within the larger university context. Specific state university BSUs were studied—one in the southern San Joaquin Valley of California and one in Southern California—to gain an understanding of the bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the researcher studied the units of analysis from the last eight academic school years to maintain a consistent temporal boundary.

Methods

The present study was qualitative. More specifically, it was a multi-site, embedded case study because it identified embedded units of analysis within each bounded case: two BSUs at two distinct campuses within a large state university system. Black students who were members of the BSU were the parameter, and they were bounded by enrollment in the large university system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The additional embedded units of analysis included BSU staff
member advisors, and websites including social media. The researcher studied BSUs within the large university system, and the researcher explored how the BSUs bridge or buffer the Black student experience.

Multi-site, embedded case study designs are known to provide more robust data than a single-case study (Yin, 2018). Careful attention will be placed to ensure that a replication design is followed for each case (Yin, 2018). If all the individual case studies yield the predicted results, it would provide compelling evidence of the “initial set of propositions” (Yin, 2018, p. 92). Multiple-case designs should follow replication logic; the researcher chooses each case meticulously (Yin, 2018). The research procedures followed a similar protocol for each case, having similar or contrasting results that were “predicted explicitly at the outset of the investigation” (Yin, 2018, p. 97). In addition, each individual case could have been holistic or could have been embedded. Figure 5 demonstrates the research design that was used in this multi-site, embedded case study (Yin, 2018).
Figure 5

*Multi-Site, Embedded Case Study (Yin, 2018)*

*Note.* Figure 5 is a depiction of the research design that was employed—a multi-site, embedded case study as defined by Yin (2018).

**Sampling Selection**

The researcher conducted interviews with a total of ten BSU individuals. The participants were students who identified as Black from two campuses: one in the southern San Joaquin Valley of California and one in Southern California. For alignment and consistency, there were approximately five students interviewed per campus. The researcher chose ten participants because it was a multi-site, embedded case study, and other data were also utilized.

The following criteria were used to determine the study’s student participants:
1. The participants consisted of ten Black Student Union undergraduate individuals between the ages of 18–45.

2. The participants were undergraduate students who identified as Black.

3. Participants were indigenous Black students (non-immigrants).

4. Participants were active members of their campus Black Student Unions.

5. The participants were born and raised in the United States.

6. Participants were in good academic standing as defined by their corresponding schools.

**Faculty/Staff Advisor Participants**

To have multiple perspectives of the BSUs and how they bridge/buffer student experiences, BSU staff advisors were also included in the study. The advisors were employees of the large California university system, and they were involved in the daily interactions and planning of the organization. Staff BSU advisors took part in one-on-one interviews and fit the following sampling criteria:

1. Participants were employed within the large California university system as either faculty or staff full-time (100% full-time employees).

2. Participants had direct work with the Black Student Union at their respective campuses.

3. Their age, gender, and race varied.

**Participant Sampling**

To recruit participants for the multi-site, embedded case study, purposive and snowball sampling were used (Yin, 2018). Purposive sampling is the recruitment of targeted participants. BSU participants were targeted specifically. Snowball sampling was used after the utilization of
purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling is defined as the identification of “cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 158). The researcher asked participants if they had suggestions for possible participants who matched the sampling criteria.

**Universities**

**University 1**

University 1 is located in the southern San Joaquin Valley. As of 2021, the southern San Joaquin Valley’s total population was 917,673 (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The population was about 48.8% female and about 51.2% male (United States Census Bureau, 2021). White persons comprised 82.3% of the population; Black persons were 6.3%; and Latino persons were 54.6% (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Owner-occupied housing equated to 58.9% of the population (United States Census Bureau, 2021). In 2021, California University 1 undergraduate student data yielded the following: 9,149 total undergraduate student enrollment; the student population was 63% Latino; 14% White; 7% Asian; 6% unknown ethnicity; and 4% Black.

**University 2**

University 2 is in San Diego County. As of 2021, San Diego’s entire population was 3,286,069 (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Females were about 50.1% of the population while males were about 49.9% (United States Census Bureau, 2021). White persons comprised 75.4% of the population; Black persons were 5.5%; and Latino persons were 34.1% (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Owner-occupied housing equated to 53.9% of the population (United States Census Bureau, 2021). In 2021, California University 2 undergraduate student
data yielded the following: 13,865 total undergraduate student enrollment; the student population was 50% Latino; 25% White; 6% Asian; 5% two or more races; and 3% Black.

Even though the universities hailed from various regions, both universities had active BSUs. In addition, the two universities were a part of the same larger university system; therefore, the mission and the vision of the larger university system were the same. However, since the study was a multi-site, embedded case study, the researcher sought to understand the social phenomena that was unique to each individual site; the multi-site, embedded case study shed light into the reality that surrounded the contrasting locations. In addition, the researcher sought to generalize from the theoretical perspective of bridging and buffering to the bounded cases. This process is known as analytic generalization (Yin, 2018).

Data Sources and Collection Strategy

For this multi-site, embedded case study, there were various types of data that were collected. The researcher analyzed social media posts made by the Black Student Union. Social media platforms such as Instagram were analyzed from the last eight academic school years. The researcher took screenshots of the social media posts to create a repository of data. Semi-structured interviews with ten BSU undergraduate participants were conducted. Moreover, BSU staff advisors were interviewed.

Social and Traditional Media

Due to a lack of consistent social and traditional media between the two BSUs, the researcher only analyzed the clubs’ Instagram pages. By analyzing Instagram only, the researcher maintained reliability with the data. However, the incorporation of social media created a wider pool of information from each club. By collecting social media, it created a broader archive of data.
Interviews

Interviews were conducted via Zoom teleconferencing software. This occurred due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, one-half of the participants were more than 150 miles away from the researcher, and this was a uniform way to collect the information.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of seven to eight interview questions, and the duration was no more than 90 minutes. Semi-structured interviews provided participants the chance to “resemble guided conversations rather than structured queries” (Yin, 2018, p. 118). Students and full-time BSU staff advisors were interviewed. The interviews were open-ended and assumed a conversational manner (Yin, 2018). In addition, the questions were carefully worded so that the researcher appeared “genuinely uninformed about the topic” to “allow the interviewee to provide a fresh commentary about it” (Yin, 2018, pp. 162-163).

The semi-structured interview encompassed Seidman’s’s (1998) three-interview series by taking a modified interview approach to phenomenological interviewing. The goal of the interview was to make meaning of the participants’ experiences (Seidman, 1998). The interview questions included the participants’ experiences in the BSU; it included the “concrete details of the participants’ present experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 12). The interviews also included a reflection on the meaning of the participants’ experiences in the respective BSU (Seidman, 1998). The interview questions were constructed to answer the research question. The Black Student Union participant interview questions were as follows:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How did you come to be a student at [insert name of university]?
3. Why did you join the Black Student Union? What activities do you participate in, through the BSU?
a. Probing stems: Tell me more about… What was that like?

b. Possible probe: What is a typical BSU meeting like?

4. What does it mean to be a member of the BSU at [insert name of university]?

5. How does the University support the work you do as a BSU?

6. How might the University better support the work you do as a BSU?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The interview questions for the faculty/staff advisor were the following:

1. Tell me about your role as a faculty/staff advisor.

2. How did you come to be a faculty/staff advisor at [insert name of university]?

3. Why did you become the faculty/staff advisor for the Black Student Union?

4. In what activities does the BSU participate?
   
   a. Probing stems: Tell me more about… What was that like?

   b. Possible probe: What is a typical BSU meeting like?

5. What does it mean to be a member of the BSU at [insert name of university]?

6. How does the University support the BSU work that is completed?

7. How might the University better support the work the BSU does?

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

To have continuity between the student participants and the faculty/staff advisor participants, the questions were closely aligned. This alignment allowed the data to be replicated across campuses and BSUs.

Careful thought and consideration were given to these questions and the order in which they are placed by utilizing a modified approach to Seidman’s (1998) three-interview series. The first set of questions were used to build rapport with the participant and elicited a focused life
history. The questions focused on the participants’ lives, with a focus on how and why they chose the school they attend and why they chose to become a member of the BSU. The interviewer asked participants to focus their information with particular attention to their history and experience with the topic (Seidman, 1998). The next stage of questioning (questions 2-4) was used to explore the participants’ details of their experiences at the university and within the Black Student Union. The third set of questions (questions 5-8) were used to provide time for reflection on the meaning and to build metacognition around the experience.

The interviewer remained a good listener by listening to the words the interviewee stated and followed up by asking probing questions, seeking to clarify what is meant (Yin, 2018). The interviewer understood the underlying meanings of the words participants spoke (Yin, 2018). The interview questions were semi-structured, and the interview was balanced with adaptability and rigor (Yin, 2018). At the end of each interview, the researcher thanked each participant. In addition, the researcher reaffirmed to each participant that the interview would remain anonymous, and that safeguards were in place to help ensure data would remain secure. Participants were also informed that no identifiable information would be included in the findings of a dissertation.

Participants were contacted before the interviews to ensure they had the necessary technological equipment. Additionally, informed consent documents were provided electronically prior to the commencement of the interview. The Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Zoom transcription service. The Zoom recording transcript was copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document. The researcher ensured that the document was accurate by conducting a spell-check and grammar-check, by listening to the recording. After the interview, the transcript was proofread, and the actual names of participants and the institutions
were replaced with pseudonyms. Next, the interviews were uploaded to Dedoose qualitative data analysis software.

Archival Records

Archival records were collected and used in the data collection process. As defined by Yin (2018), archival records can include service records, organizational records, maps and charts, and survey data produced by others. Careful attention was placed to analyze the conditions under which the documents were produced to ensure their accuracy (Yin, 2018). Additionally, the purpose for which the documents were produced was considered to ensure proper interpretation (Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis

This study used both inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis. The deductive analysis of data focused on the bridging and buffering framework (Honig & Hatch, 2004) and will look for evidence accordingly. Since the themes were built from the “bottom-up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information,” the process of data analysis worked “back and forth between the themes and the database” until the researcher developed a complete list of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 186). The researcher used a priori codes based on the bridging and buffering framework (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Bridging is defined as the act of producing working relationships with organizations to gain some sort of benefit (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Buffering is defined as the act of not producing working relationships with/within organizations in order to continue with the status quo (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

The data analysis process also used an inductive approach by the analysis of data using codes and the themes that emerge from the data. The inductive data analysis process followed
Tesch’s (1990) eight steps in the coding process. In addition, the researcher used Saldaña’s (2016) suggestions on how to code the data. As part of the coding process, the first round entailed the researcher to sift through the text and assign a code/word/short phrase to the text. The code/word/short phrase allowed the researcher to abstract meaning from the text (Tesch, 1990). The researcher then conducted a second round of data analysis by returning to the data and categorizing and thematizing the data into groups accordingly. This second round was a higher level of abstraction.

The second round of coding was what Saldaña (2016) calls focused coding. Focused coding allowed the researcher to code the data based on its theme. This type of coding allowed the researcher to discover the most salient categories/themes in the data as described by Saldaña. The researcher was able to compare the participant codes during the second round with other participants “to assess comparability and transferability” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 243). The researcher was able to conduct a cross-case analysis. By analyzing various types of data, and by selecting two distinct cases, triangulation occurred both within and between cases (Yin, 2018). The researcher reviewed the codes and looked for patterns. A pattern can be viewed as a similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, or causation (Saldaña, 2016). Connections were drawn between each participant to draw some conclusions concerning the research question. In addition, the researcher was aware of how the researcher’s experiences help to interpret the phenomenon (see Appendix D). Researcher positionality was bracketed throughout the research process.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure that the findings of this study were valid and reliable, the researcher exercised extreme caution in the way in which the data were collected (see Table 1). Yin (2018) articulates
strategies for researchers to use in order to tend to issues of validity and reliability. For example, more than one source of evidence was collected; multiple sources helped ensure construct validity (Yin, 2018). This occurred during the data collection stage. Moreover, the researcher ensured internal validity by categorizing and thematizing the data. Additionally, external validity was tended to by conducting an explanatory case study that asks “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2018). In addition, the researcher ensured reliability by collecting multiple sources of information and by using a chain of evidence during the data collection phase (Yin, 2018). Table 1 lists the four tests that are conducted to establish a case study’s validity.

**Table 1**

*Case Study Design Tactics for Four Design Tests (adapted from Yin, 2018)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tests</th>
<th>Case Study Tactic</th>
<th>Phase of Case Study Research in Which Tactic Is Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construct validity</td>
<td>Use multiple sources of evidence</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>Categorizing and thematizing the data</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External validity</td>
<td>Conducting an explanatory case study that asks “how” and “why” questions</td>
<td>Research design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Collecting multiple sources of information and by using a chain of evidence</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This table lists the four tests that are utilized to judge the quality of a case study’s research design (as recommended by Yin, 2018).

**Trustworthiness**

The researcher conducted the multi-site case study research ethically by bracketing any preconceived notions that exist (see Appendix D). Milner (2007) states that researchers should be
reflective of their biases to have a deeper understanding of researcher positionality. By conducting ethical research, the researcher ensured that preconceived understandings do not sway the findings to or away from the research question (Yin, 2018). To test for contrary findings, the researcher reported findings to two colleagues. If the results support contrary findings, the chances of bias would be reduced (Yin, 2018).

**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher needed to consider any risks that this study could pose to participants. There were no physical risks that could occur to the participants; however, there could be social risks. To prevent social shaming, the researcher worked to ensure all the data remained confidential. For example, participant anonymity was maintained by assigning each participant an identification number and pseudonym. The identification number and pseudonym were used to ensure confidentiality. This goal would be achieved by writing the identification number on all identifiable documents, and by ensuring the document with participant names was securely stored. Moreover, the researcher kept all data on her password-protected laptop computer, which was kept in a secure office. The researcher also encrypted all the electronic files/documents with a password for a second layer of protection. Before any data collection, the researcher presented the proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). No data were collected until the IRB had approved all study protocols. All pertinent paper documents were kept in a locked filing cabinet. In addition, the Zoom account was password protected. Immediately following each interview, the interview was saved to the researcher’s password-protected Zoom cloud space. Informed consent forms were disseminated before the interview by way of Qualtrics; they were signed electronically via Qualtrics. Qualtrics is a cloud-based secure program. The informed consent
forms will be kept secured for at least three years. The transcript of the interview as well as the audio recordings will be deleted no more than five years following the study’s completion.

**The Role and Background of the Researcher**

The researcher’s primary role in this study was to collect data to understand the educational experiences of Black students within two campuses of a large university system. The researcher’s background is that she is a North American native, and she is from the East Coast. She is from a culturally diverse neighborhood that contained mostly Black, White, and Puerto Rican persons. In addition, the researcher’s race is bi-racial: she is Black and White. She also has children who are mostly Black; therefore, she comes from a place of caring and concern for Black students in their pursuit of academic greatness.

Although the researcher does not have any experiences with BSUs or other organizations for marginalized students, she did attend an Historically Black College and University (HBCU). In addition, the researcher has many life experiences which are comprised of racial injustices, overcoming obstacles, perseverance, and persistence; she had to ensure that she bracketed any preconceived notions that came to mind. For instance, the participants might have said something that had happened to the researcher, and she might have wanted to comment on it during the interview. She made sure she remained neutral throughout the process to steer clear of any personal bias. The participants’ counterstories (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020) were heard, and they were incorporated into the data collection process.

**Summary**

In summary, this qualitative, multi-site, embedded case study’s purpose was to understand how Black Student Unions bridge or buffer Black undergraduate student experiences
at two campuses within a large university system. The bounded cases for this multi-site, embedded study were two university campuses: one from the southern San Joaquin Valley in California and one from Southern California. The units of analysis were BSU members and the BSU staff advisors. Triangulation was achieved through the analysis of interviews, examining college websites, conferences, symposia, and archival data such as social media accounts of the BSUs. Data were analyzed in two rounds to thematize (Tesch, 1990). Analytic generalizations were sought utilizing the concepts of bridging and buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004).
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this multi-site, embedded case study was to utilize qualitative data to discover how Black Student Unions (BSU) within a large California university system bridge or buffer Black student experiences. The central purpose of this qualitative study was to garner an understanding of Black student experiences within the BSU. The overarching research question was, How do BSUs bridge and/or buffer Black student experiences? The BSUs included in this study were located at state universities belonging to a large, public university system from two distinct regions in California: a southern San Joaquin Valley university campus and a Southern California university campus. Student participants met the following inclusion criteria: BSU active student member between the ages of 18-45; self-identify as Black; be an indigenous Black student (non-immigrant); born and raised in the United States; be in good academic standing as defined by their corresponding school. Faculty/staff advisor participants were all 100% full-time employees of their respective universities. Additionally, they worked directly with their university BSUs. Tables 2 and 3 list the participants’ demographics.

Table 2

Participant Demographics: University One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reginald</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Norah</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rachelle</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. This table lists participant demographics for University 1. Each participant is listed by pseudonym, university, and role that they hold within the BSU.

Table 3

Participant Demographics: University Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amani</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nia</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This table lists participant demographics for University 2. Each participant is listed by pseudonym, university, and role that they hold within the BSU.

The themes that emerged from the data collection process were empowerment, identity, and connectedness/isolation. In addition to these three emergent themes, the data also revealed information surrounding the deductive analysis that utilized Honig and Hatch’s (2004) bridging and buffering theory. In the following section, a comparative analysis of the two participating university BSUs will be presented. This presentation will explicate how the finding of the major themes highlights the participants’ experiences within their respective BSUs. Lastly, the analysis will address the research question of the study.

Findings

Data for this study was analyzed; the findings highlight the notion that Black achievement motivation theory, critical race theory, and social learning theory are influential in the ways in which Black students are empowered on the campuses that were included in this
study. In addition, Black student identity development is critical to Black students’ academic and social development (Muhammad, 2020). Moreover, Black identity development is deeply rooted in the community (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). In the following section, an analysis of University 1 is presented along with the major themes and the corresponding subthemes.

**University 1**

University 1 is located in California’s southern San Joaquin Valley. As of 2019, the southern San Joaquin Valley’s entire population was 762,148 (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The population was about 50.1% female and 49.9% male (United States Census Bureau, 2021). White persons comprised 66.1% of the population, Black persons were 8.3%, and Latino persons were 42% (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Owner-occupied housing equated to 56.6% of the population (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

In 2021, University 1 undergraduate student data yielded the following: 9,149 total undergraduate student enrollment; the student population was 63% Latino; 14% White; 7% Asian; 6% unknown ethnicity; and 4% Black. The student population was 65% female and 35% male. Continuing students comprised 69% of the study body, while 23% were new, 2% were returning, and 5% were labeled transitory. The student class level was classified as 22% freshmen; 14% sophomore; 29% junior; and 35% senior (California State University, 2022). The emergent theme of empowerment was the first theme that will be explicated.

**Theme 1: Empowerment**

One of the three themes that emerged from the data was that of empowerment, specifically empowerment of the individual and of the BSU. In fact, when participants were questioned about why they were members of a BSU, their responses centered around empowering the BSU as a functioning entity. Students and advisors alike wanted greatness for
the club as they wanted to work for a common good of the BSU. The subthemes of advocacy, BSU student recruitment, and retention emerged from the data.

**Advocacy.** BSU members felt empowered to advocate for Black students’ interests. Participants in the study wanted to provide avenues for other students to express themselves in a positive manner. As a participant from University 1 named Marcus said, “We were given the opportunity to have a seat at the table they’re hearing the same message, because it’s important and they’re hearing the same message, because we’re organized” (University 1, Marcus, February 4, 2022). Marcus was stating that he is a member of the BSU because he is an advocate for not only himself but also for other Black students. Marcus wanted to ensure that Black students are taken seriously and that their needs are met by way of being an advocate.

Norah, another participant from University 1, stated that she is an advocate for Black students in various ways. For example, Norah wanted the Black BSU to reach out to another Black student organization to advocate for Black students. In fact, she stated the following:

> The Black Student Union should, you know, work with the African Student Association… I wanted to see some structure in place and I’ve reached out and tried my best to reach out to as many other staff to collaborate with them, and you know.

(University 1, Norah, February 13, 2022)

Norah would like the BSU to be organized and ready to advocate for themselves. There are many ways to do this: One way is by being an advocate for Black clubs and organizations. If the BSU members advocated for themselves, the BSU organization would be empowered as their goals and initiatives would be shared with the campus community.

A third participant from University 1 named Reginald stated that the BSU needed to advocate for themselves, even in the face of adversity. Reginald stated, “Fight, yell, and scream
as much as you want to bring an issue to light as much as you want. Wrong is wrong, you know and so, but there is backlash” (University 1, Reginald, January 31, 2022). BSU members should be advocates for themselves to ensure that they receive equal treatment; equality breeds empowerment. Critical race theory states that the establishment of U.S. higher education has roots in White supremacy; therefore, empowerment is critical for advancement (Patton, 2016).

All the participants were active in the BSU because they wanted to be advocates for the Black community. In fact, Marcus said that being an advocate for the community is vital because it “actually has a positive impact for the students” (University 1, Marcus, February 4, 2022). Even though it was not always an easy endeavor, he was proud to be a part of the organization. Moreover, Marcus stated that he would continue to be a BSU member to advocate for other students to ensure positive change. He stated that advocacy was necessary to take a stand on what was not just.

BSU Student Recruitment. Another recurring subtheme was BSU student recruitment. University 1 BSU members stated that club numbers fluctuated and that participation was not steady. Additionally, COVID-19 impacted recruitment and retainment efforts. In fact, University 1 participant Rachelle said, “Because I know it’s a slim number of African American students are Black students, they are, you don’t see those students coming out to events” (University 1, Rachelle, February 23, 2022). Rachelle stated that even before COVID-19, it was difficult to recruit Black students to participate in events. In order to improve recruitment, Rachelle stated, “To do this, they could come our way and we can do recruitment and we can be seen, and when people see us all out there, young, old black strong you know, no matter what” (University 1, Rachelle, February 23, 2022).
Norah stated that recruitment was not always a difficult undertaking. In fact, BSU club numbers and Black student numbers overall used to be high, especially when student classes were all face-to-face. For instance, she stated the following:

Everything was focused in and the recruitment of Black students was high, I mean just look like a different campus in terms of Black students and you have an office to go into with other black faculty it’s mostly staff.

Norah stated that Black students used to be a focal point of the university, and, in her opinion, there was more involvement by Black students overall. (University 1, Norah, February 13, 2022)

Black student recruitment was a focal point for the university, and recruitment efforts were a priority. Norah stated that Black student clubs flourished when there were more Black students. Norah additionally stated that during that time the BSU was much more empowered, and Black students could see themselves reflected in the university staff. Norah stated that the reflection of self also led to a higher level of Black student empowerment.

Retention. A very strong recurring subtheme was retention of BSU members. One of the ideas to ensure student retention was to continue to collaborate with the university students. The participants of this study from University 1 wanted to share their stories and experiences with others. Moreover, participants of the study stated that they wanted to hold events like open microphone nights and study group sessions. They wanted to ensure that BSU members were feeling supported by the club. For instance, Reginald stated, “Program minded in terms of getting the community together and having programs that uplift that community” (University 1, Reginald, January 31, 2022). Reginald was stating that the university must create programming that uplifts the entire university community and its environs in order to retain a diverse study body.
Another way to support BSU student retention is monetarily. Marcus stated the large university system has a lot of money; the students should be more supported. For example, Marcus stated, “You know, they give you like $100 scholarships, there’s so many resources out there, right now, that need to be that they’re sitting on it, you know” (University 1, Marcus, February 4, 2022). In other words, the university has the money; it should be able to share the money by way of BSU club involvement and scholarship. If the university shared the money with student groups more readily, stated Marcus, the BSU would feel more empowered because of higher BSU student retention. Students would feel valued; this value, Marcus stated, would “promote buy-in for student clubs” (University 1, Marcus, February 4, 2022). The BSU would thrive more; this, in turn, would lead to greater retention for the Black student population. Figure 6 is a visual depiction of the emergent theme of empowerment. Below “empowerment” the figure lists the subthemes. These subthemes are advocacy, BSU student recruitment, and retention. Additionally, Figure 6 contains examples of participants’ statements that reflect the findings.
Emerging Theme from University 1: Empowerment

The data from University 1 revealed the emerging theme of empowerment. The subthemes that also emerged were advocacy, BSU student recruitment, and retention. The data from University 1 yielded the notion that BSU members were club members because they felt empowered by the organization. Additionally, they felt as if it were their duty to advocate for other Black students because they deserved the same opportunities as other students on campus. Moreover, BSU members were empowered because they were working toward a common goal.
of recruitment and retention of club members. They felt as if it were essential to have strong participation from other Black students so the organization would endure, grow, and flourish.

**Theme 2: Identity**

The second major theme that emerged from the data was identity. University 1 BSU members stated that their participation in the BSU was a positive component of their life. When they were with other BSU members, they felt free of judgment. Additionally, they felt relaxed because they were around other Black students. They felt as if they could be themselves without being judged. In fact, Marie said, “Feel or say how they feel without judgment because that’s really what it is people who do want to be vulnerable people do want to express their feelings, but they’re constantly thinking like oh this person is going to judge me because they don’t understand” (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022). When Marie was surrounded by other BSU members, she was able to show her vulnerable self, knowing she would still be supported and validated for who she was.

Marcus stated that the university needed to cultivate student identity. He said, “The campus itself you got to know what they want to hear, what they want, and you gotta try to meet them halfway, if not all the way, because the only reason that the institution exists is because of students” (University 1, Marcus, February 4, 2022). Marcus stated that students should be able to identify with the campus values; however, the university should alter its path to meet students where they were. Moreover, the university must realize that students are their clientele; therefore, the university should cater to their clientele. The university’s identity should mirror that of the students. All students should see themselves reflected in the campus.

**Ignored.** A subtheme that emerged was that of the sentiment of being ignored. Participants stated they felt as if they were being ignored by university students. In fact, Marie
said, “But that doesn’t necessarily mean that’s how we’re acting… you didn’t even ask us, come ask me, come talk to me. We were on the same campus we’re in the same classes together, you sit right next to me” (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022). In other words, Marie was stating that her classmates could ask her if they had a question about something. They did not need to go to someone else when the issue directly involved her. Hence, she had the feeling of being ignored. Marie felt ignored by her classmate because he was speaking about her as if she was not present. Marie felt as if her White peer was ignoring her because she was the other (Muhammad, 2020). The student felt as if could be the spokesperson on the issue. She felt ignored because of her Blackness. According to Muhammad (2020), “Identity matters. Identity was one of the first things to be stripped from enslaved Africans, thus it became key for people of color to know themselves” (p. 64). Marie continued by stating the following:

You know I’m constantly being labeled and a lot of the time people look at me and they don’t even know I’m Black or White. People assume I’m Hispanic or Middle Eastern because of my skin tone and I have colored eyes. And then that too, and I was actually. Talking about that as well, like that goes along with identity how people perceive you is a big part and your identity, because again we’re not free to show who we are, because people don’t want to accept that, because they already have that prejudgment in their mind; they’re clouded by prejudgment. They’re clouded by, you know, pre-hatred that they don’t even know why a lot of the time people, subjectively act like that or subconsciously or prejudice or say certain things or do certain things to others that they don’t even realize that they’re doing. (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022)

Marie felt that her classmates’ perception of her identity was flawed. She also believed that her classmates were prejudiced because of the ways in which they prejudged people based on their
perceived identity. Marie therefore was impacted by the ways in which her classmates treated her. She felt ignored and misjudged by her peers. She joined the BSU as a way to cultivate her identity in a positive manner.

Another participant from University 1, Cheryl, stated that the university provides support but only for the time being. She stated the following:

I believe that there are individuals who are trying to get that support system together and make sure that it’s solid. And not just for the moment, because you can do something great, like oh, walk the stage, and you’ll get that support at the moment. (University 1, Cheryl, February 8, 2022).

Cheryl said that the university was working to ensure that students were successful to make it to something great—such as graduate. However, Cheryl stated there were students who were trying to ensure a solid support system all year and not solely through difficult times. Marcus held similar sentiments as Marie and Cheryl. He said the following:

It’s like you are enlisted in a very secret world that only certain people are aware of. Most don’t understand are highly represented and that you’re everywhere. First of all, they wonder why do Black folks get a BSU. Secondly, they like what if there was White privilege. You’re stapled into this fabric, where it’s like it’s one is being uplifted while the other one is being shattered or pushed into the margins. (University 1, Marcus, February 4, 2022)

Marcus’s sentiment expressed that of frustration; he was frustrated that BSU members have to “prove” to White students why they had a BSU. Marcus stated that was why a BSU was necessary: Black students should not be pushed into the margins. Black students should feel as if they belonged at the university. They should not feel as if they were ignored.
Mentorship. Participants from California University 1 stated that they were a part of the BSU because they wanted to help other Black students flourish. For example, Jacob said the following:

Being able to provide me the platform and being able to provide me access to the amazing advisors and mentors that we have on campus and just the ability to network, the avenues for me to learn this system and how to integrate into it as well. (University 1, Jacob, February 19, 2022)

Jacob stated that the BSU was a platform for him to learn how to network with various departments and personnel on the campus such as the advisors and mentors. In addition, Jacob stated that BSU participation was a wonderful networking opportunity for him to grow. He mentioned that another BSU member, in conjunction with the BSU advisors, was providing him with mentorship. He was elated at how the BSU was helping him to grow and to help others by mentoring them.

Norah stated that Black students and faculty should be mentored by the BSU on issues that pertain to the Black community and students at the university. Consider her commentary:

And they also be into educating other Black faculty staff and administration on the needs of Black students, and how to serve them better, and how to get them more involved; that’s what the Black Student Union is supposed to stand for, in my opinion. (University 1, Norah, February 13, 2022)

Reginald contributed to the notion of mentorship by stating the following:

You know, and so we’re trying to inspire the students to be able to do those types of things. To help them along the way, while they’re here where there’s a support network
Reginald was stating that students had a network of support that would be there for them to assist them on their educational journey. Reginald stated that the BSU advisors were striving to ensure that BSU members were successful in all facets: events, meetings, recruitment, and networking. Figure 7 is a visual depiction of the emerging theme of identity with the subthemes of feeling ignored and mentorship. The subthemes of ignored and mentorship are nested within identity due to the ways in which the sentiments impact one’s identity.

**Figure 7**

*Emerging Theme from University 1: Identity*

*Note.* Emerging Theme: Identity. Participant excerpts have been included to highlight their experiences.
The data from University 1 revealed the emerging theme of identity. The subthemes that also emerged were ignored and mentorship. BSU members stated that being a part of the BSU was an essential component of their lives. They felt as if club membership was vital to their identity as a University 1 student. In addition, they also shared sentiments of feeling ignored. They stated that to combat those feelings, they were members of the BSU. They also wanted to ensure that other Black students did not feel ignored. To ensure the growth of other students’ identity and to ensure positive self-efficacy, BSU members mentored other Black students within the campus community.

**Theme 3: Connectedness/Isolation**

Connectedness versus feelings of isolation are sentiments which regularly occur during the transition to university life (Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, Strayhorn (2019) states that belonging with peers is critical to the success of students when they embark upon university life. Conversely, isolation can impact a student’s achievement and sense of belonging in a negative manner (Strayhorn, 2019). The subthemes of lack of awareness, lack of resources, and lack of support will be discussed.

**Lack of Awareness.** Oftentimes students are unaware of all the resources that are in place for students (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022). Furthermore, Cheryl stated, “Even if a student is in the BSU, you can get involved in ASI. There are a lot of things that are going on. Then, that would help make a connection” (University 1, Cheryl, February 8, 2022). Cheryl believed that if students were to become active members of the BSU and the Associated Students, Inc (ASI), they would become more aware of all the resources that existed. This, in turn, would help strengthen the BSU. Correspondingly, Reginald stated the following:
Students don’t pay attention to the type of programming that does happen on campus that is designed to help them and support them, because of the subject matter, for example, our Kegley Institute. They have brought up a good number of speakers and on topics that are relevant to the Black community. How many of those students took advantage of that? (University 1, Reginald, January 31, 2022)

If students were more aware of all the events that occur at the university, they could be better informed and more involved (University 1, Cheryl, February 8, 2022). Consequently, more involvement would lead to stronger feelings of connectedness (University 1, Cheryl, February 8, 2022).

**Lack of Resources.** Black Student Union members also stated that a lack of resources existed. Marie said, “We need more opportunities to show who we are, tell our stories. More representation, definitely. We were talking about that in our last meeting” (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022). Black Student Union members said they needed more resources at their disposal. If they had more resources, they would be able to generate more revenue and grow their club. Similarly, Cheryl stated the following:

Right, if you put something out there and say that hey you can get this or you can get that, they’ll show up. I think if the school, I know, like ASI does so much like they have put things together. And sometimes, if you kind of like follow that lead, you don’t have to do everything like them, but they’re very successful. So it’s just like when you want to be successful, you don’t go hang around unsuccessful people; you hang around those or you tend to cling to those individuals that are successful, and I think that, in order to be a little more successful, and get the support we need, we have to speak up and be involved. (University 1, Cheryl, February 8, 2022)
Another participant named Reginald stated that the university could intentionally present programming that is geared towards Black students. He said more programming would allow more Black students to participate and be involved across the campus.

**Lack of Support.** The BSU members stated that they feel a lack of consistent support for their club. They said they would appreciate the support on a year-round basis, and not solely in February during Black History Month. Accordingly, Cheryl stated, “Not just in February or not just during Martin Luther King’s birthday, or something like that. I think it should be every day, all year round” (University 1, Cheryl, February 8, 2022). Moreover, Marcus stated that the BSU is trying to cultivate and grow; however, they face frequent adversity. For example, they have held events they were sparsely attended. For example, “We’re gonna have a couple events, we were trying to have a few events, we did get the study hall room. And kind of an open mic night—the mic was open” (University 1, Marcus, February 4, 2022). Marcus continued by stating that some of the faculty/staff act as a “doorstopper” and a “gatekeeper.” Figure 8 is a visual depiction of the emerging theme of connectedness/isolation.
Figure 8

Emerging Theme from University 1: Connectedness/Isolation

Note. Emerging Theme: Connectedness/Isolation. Participant excerpts have been included to highlight their experiences.

The data from University 1 revealed the theme of connectedness/isolation. A sense of belonging and acceptance was very important for BSU members. In addition, BSU members stated that there is a lack of awareness of the activities and programming that occurs on the campus. Black students would benefit greatly from more involvement within the campus community of University 1. Moreover, BSU members stated they needed more resources allocated to them so Black students could have an opportunity to connect with the various stakeholders at University
1. If students had more resources and more support from the stakeholder, they would have a greater sense of connectedness with their campus collective.

**University 2**

University 2 is in San Diego County. As of 2021, San Diego’s entire population was 3,286,069 (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The population was about 50.1% female and 49.9% male (United States Census Bureau, 2021). White persons comprised 75.4% of the population, Black persons were 5.5%, and Latino persons were 34.1% (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Owner-occupied housing equated to 53.9% of the population (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

In 2021, University 2 undergraduate student data yielded the following (California State University, 2022): 13,865 total undergraduate student enrollment; the student population was 50% Latino; 25% White; 6% Asian; 5% two or more races; and 3% Black. The student population was 61% female and 39% male. Continuing students comprised 69% of the student body, while 30% were new, 1% were returning, and 0% were labeled transitory. The student class level was classified as 24% freshmen; 15% sophomore; 28% junior; and 34% senior (California State University, 2022). Similarly to University 1, the emergent themes of empowerment, identity, and connectedness/isolation will be explored.

**Theme 1: Empowerment**

One of the three themes that emerged from the data was that of empowerment. The participants from University 2 showed a deep enthusiasm for being a BSU participant. They felt empowered, and they felt as if they were helping Black students at their university to be their greatest selves. Black Student Union members wanted to make their presence known to help the university to progress in their thinking and operation (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022).
Moreover, Nia stated the BSU helped her to “bridge that gap of being inclusive and helping others” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). The subthemes of advocacy, BSU student recruitment, and retention will be discussed.

**Advocacy.** University 2 has a very active Instagram social media page. In fact, members post about six times per month on average. There were multiple posts that focused on advocacy for BSU members and Black students within University 2’s community. One of the posts was from a BSU member who stated her goal was to “boost morale of the Black community on campus.” Another post stated, “Black Lives Matter; deconstruct colorism.” Nia added that although she was a member of her high school BSU, they didn’t dive into the topics that far, and she wanted to delve into topics in a “collegiate way.” The BSU provides that level of advocacy for participants.

A participant named Julian substantiated the posts by stating that it was important for the BSU to have a presence as a community. He mentioned that they hold frequent events (at least one to two a month). Furthermore, Nia stated that she attended all the BSU events because they were important to her. The events cultivated a love of advocacy in Nia; she stated that she enjoyed helping other Black students. Additionally, she felt empowered to learn about Black individuals so much so that she was going to minor in Black/Ethnic Studies.

**BSU Student Recruitment.** University 2 worked diligently to recruit students. They consistently held events and meetings that were open to the university community. Additionally, they advertised on a consistent basis on their Instagram page. The posts also contained information on the current Board members. It was a “get to know your BSU Board” post. The posts contained pictures of the Board members as well as a quote. Chloe stated the following:
Our social media is public to anyone who wants to see it, so if you’re a student and you follow our page, or you’re looking at our page, you’re welcome to come to our meetings we open the space for anybody we don’t want to exclude people who aren’t Black; we just want to also make them aware of the fact that we are talking about Black issues.

(University 2, Chloe, March 11, 2022)

Another example of how University 2 was recruiting individuals was their level of commitment to be inclusive to their school community. Post–COVID-19, the club limited the restrictions to be a member. For example, Julian said, “Overall, I think it being a little bit more loose is bringing some more people, and you know, bringing them into the conversation around the table” (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). Additionally, April stated that the BSU is getting back into a regular routine post–COVID-19. She said the following:

I feel like this year has been like very much of a getting back into the swing of things here, so the fact that we’re able to kind of boost the morale and kind of been able to come back has been amazing and I just hope that we continue that on like I know we’re today, we had a meeting about BSU elections for next year, so based off of the attendance and off of people’s interest, I have high hopes for the continuation of BSU. (University 2, April, March 15, 2022)

The BSU members were eager to get back to how the club operated before the closures. Although their recruitment efforts had to change due to COVID-19, they were ready and very willing to hold events that would entice students to attend.

Retention. Participants from University 2 stated that they were having a more difficult time maintaining the club’s events. This was due to the COVID-19 regulations. Even though the students were “mostly back” to campus, they were still experiencing a difficult time allowing
community members to help sponsor events (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022). For example, University 2 has held a hair show annually. Usually, they have had the local barbers, beauticians, and beauty supply stores assist with booths and events. This year presented more of a challenge. One participant said the following:

To have anybody outside of campus even come to our events and whether they’re not vaccinated, it’s like finding the time to go get tested as well, so it’s understandable and stuff like that, especially food regulations as well that can impact, but we want to have events. I think this is regulations of COVID right now but there so tight where it’s like affecting our outreach or our ability to expand as an organization just because of all the regulations, whether it’s so difficult. (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022)

Amani said that retaining a working relationship with the students and the community had been difficult. Julian corroborated the sentiment by stating the club has been more fluid with membership and dues as he stated, “they’re still kind of working through that piece, but mostly right now it’s just about attendance coming to the meetings” (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). Figure 9 is a graphic organizer that displays the emerging theme of empowerment.
Emerging Theme from University 2: Empowerment

The data from University 2 yielded the theme of empowerment. BSU members stated that being a member of the BSU empowered them to advocate, recruit, and retain student members. In addition, they worked persistently to ensure their club numbers were consistent. For instance, they worked hard to maintain an active, relevant social media page. Moreover, they held BSU events approximately every other week to connect with other Black students on campus. They were strong advocates for Black students at University 2, and they felt empowered in doing so.
**Theme 2: Identity**

University 2’s BSU holds events that explore the Black diaspora. With that exploration comes the unpacking of controversial events such as “Traveling While Black.” This was an in-person roundtable event which explored some of the hardships of traveling safely. The BSU had an Instagram post advertising the event. Nia explained the event in the following manner:

The panel aspect usually is there, but we had a panel of students, as well as faculty who were different races and just women, like, talking about the inspirations and also traveling while Black. We hit a lot of different topics. (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022)

The event was well attended, and the students learned about historical events such as *The Negro Motorist Green Book* and sundown towns. Nia said presentations that focused on Black safety were critical at this stage of identity development (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022).

The BSU members encouraged students to become involved in the club. Since the university has a Black Student Center, the BSU is housed within this center. Additionally, members shared how the club and the Center have helped to mold their identity as a University 2 student. For example, Kathy said the following:

I’ll go ahead, like maybe again just kind of like how we do encourage literally everybody to be around the Center or be involved and participate or try to take action within the Black Student Union. Yeah, not just because we’re naturally open to everybody, but we want to be able to share what we know and how we feel with everyone. Just because a lot of people don’t understand the Black community and what goes on within the Black Student Union to, you know, that can service them as well, when they interact with other people. (University 2, Kathy, March 16, 2022)
Kathy strives to help develop other students’ growth and success by way of the feeling of acceptance and fellowship.

**Ignored.** Even though the BSU members had a strong sense of connection with each other and their Blackness, they felt as if they (and the BSU at large) could have been better supported. Namely, the support could have been by way of year-long celebrations—not limited to celebratory events solely during the month of February. A University 2 participant spoke to the feeling of being ignored by stating the following:

> Having Black people in those positions [professors] to better support and strengthen the Black population would definitely aid us. And furthermore, I feel like just being in support of issues that affect the Black community in general, like my freshman year I remember it was, from what I can recall, it was an issue with having the Black flag up during Black History Month. Like they didn’t want us to have it up for the whole month or something like that, this year, they allowed us to have it up a whole month but…

(University 2, April, March 15, 2022)

Additionally, Chloe added to the notion of being ignored when she said, “Putting more out there for us during other months as well, not just during Black History Month like not having a newsletter spotlight during Black History Month, but like having a newsletter spotlight in October I don’t know” (University 2, Chloe, March 11, 2022). The BSU felt as if the university could do more to celebrate their Blackness; the support would have to come from the leadership. Chloe stated that Black students felt as if the university did not celebrate the Black students year-round; therefore, she had a feeling of being ignored.

**Leadership.** University 2 had a strong sense of leadership. The BSU held weekly structured meetings during what was called “U hour.” This was a unity hour where all students
were available for club meetings because hardly any classes were scheduled during that time. Therefore, they held their meetings during that time. Additionally, the BSU Board members held a separate meeting on a weekly/bi-weekly basis. This type of structure allowed the club to run in a more streamlined manner. To further this notion, a participant said the following:

Yes, so Board meetings are on Wednesdays, and those ones are typically at nighttime when we can all meet; we have busy schedules. But basically, during that time is when we actually plan what events we want to do what fundraisers we want to do. And if, like what meeting topics; so like at the beginning of the semester, we kind of just spit out a bunch of meeting topics and place them on the different Tuesdays that were throughout the semester, so we basically have a meeting plan for every single Tuesday of the semester, it’s more of the fact that, as we get closer, we actually start discussing that topic more. (University 2, Chloe, March 11, 2022)

The members were passionate to see other students succeed. Nia said, “I am in the BSU because I want to help the voices of the people unheard” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). University 2 BSU members were natural leaders who surprised each other with their leadership (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). Notably, a BSU member spoke to the club about voodoo and folklore; the members did not know he was knowledgeable in this area, and they were pleasantly surprised (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022; University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). The BSU provided a platform for students to be leaders and to teach each other. This leadership made the club stronger and more unified (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022).

**Mentorship.** The BSU members strived to be effective leaders; they also wanted to ensure that other Black students felt welcomed. A participant said the following:
Because we do have a good amount in the Black Student Center, so I just want to make sure, like all the students are heard and knowing that like they belong here mixed students are Black too you know, so that’s mainly why I am in the BSU to be that kind of role model. (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022)

Amani worked to ensure that bi-racial students felt supported because they “are Black too you know” (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022). She was a BSU Board member as well as an employee of the Black Student Center because she wanted to help other Black and bi-racial students to feel supported. Black student success and mentorship was a tenet that Amani felt was vital to Black student success at University 2. She was proud to be a mentor for other Black/bi-racial students because she wanted the aforementioned students to be successful.

Similarly, Julian said that he ensured that the BSU was in adherence to the university’s policies. He wanted to ensure they were successful and that the events functioned seamlessly. He then reflected on the time when he was a BSU President, and then he discussed the protocol for University 2. Julian stated the following:

They may consult with me just to get some other expertise or other ideas around areas, which you know are places in which they can get certain information and do some research around events, then planning event management, I have to sign off on just about everything that they do. (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022)

Julian was stating that although he had to affirm all of the decisions that the BSU made, he allowed the students to have a voice and to be student leaders. He stated this was the way that the club would sustain and flourish. Julian then added that the BSU was making a difference in student identity. He said the following:
You know I mean, I think, for I think we’re just in a very interesting, and I use the word interesting in a good way, but we are in a really interesting time for Black students in any institution, let alone I would kind of jump out and say non HBCU institutions. And I recognize, you know, even with the Center, you know, there’s been a spotlight on us in a good way. And I think there are institutions that are really making, having critical conversations and making some, some decisions around, you know, we’ve not done right by our Black community, um how we need to. And so, we need to figure out how do we best serve the students and so my whole thing would be to work with other Black student organizations, we have on campus or groups. (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022)

Julian was mentoring Black students and the university at large by guiding those “critical conversations;” these questions were yielding helpful results for Black students (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). Nia stated that she was an active member in the BSU because she was “helping the voices of people unheard” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). What Nia was stating is that she was acting as the giving those without the (perceived) power a chance to speak through her active leadership (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). Figure 10 is a graphic organizer which displays the theme of identity.
Note. Emerging Theme: Identity. Participant excerpts have been included to highlight their experiences.

The data from University 2 revealed the emerging theme of identity. Identity development and growth was an unspoken truth for BSU members of University 2. The participants stated that although they oftentimes felt ignored by the campus community at-large, they were providing mentorship for other Black students on campus. Additionally, the participants were leaders, since they navigated the most appropriate way to structure their weekly meetings, club events, and community events. Overall, University 2 BSU membership structured a positive identity development.

**Theme 3: Connectedness/Isolation**
University 2’s BSU had a feeling of connectedness because they had a physical space in the Black Student Center. However, the space could become alienating because it could develop into a catch all for “all things Black” (Julian). The BSU endeavored to break that mold by being active and by holding events that brought awareness to the university.

**Physical Space.** University 2 had a physical space where members could congregate and fellowship. A communal area to converse and to discuss critical issues provides the space for students to cultivate their intellect. Muhammad (2020) states that cultivating intellect is critical for Black students due to years of oppression. The BSU students are elated to have a physical space for fellowship. In fact, Nia said, “We are fortunate enough to, like, have a space for this to happen. You know, not only for our organization, but for the Center as well” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022).

Nia continued by stating the space, however, could become alienating and congested. She said, “Move to a different space like in a classroom because if everyone is in the Center [like we want], we want people to move about to other spots within the Center” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022).

Julian enhanced the topic of the Black Student Center by providing the context for which it came to exist. He said the following:

One of the narratives I got when I got here was that the BSU was very much front and center in the fight for the Black Student Center in 2016–2017… and then it opened in February of 2017. Once the, uh, community acquired a center, it seemed like the presence in the greater community got sucked into the 4th floor of the Black Student Center, and that was it. So, you went to having active Black students on the ASI board to no Black
students going to meetings. I have been adamant in telling students to permeate the campus with their voice and presence. (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022)

Julian had told students that to prevent a feeling of alienation and isolation, they still needed to permeate other spaces—such as ASI meetings. He also stated that Black students only comprised 3.5% of the student population, out of about 17,000 students (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022; Kathy, March 16, 2022).

**Support.** Participants from University 2 stated that the university was overall supportive of what the BSU aimed to do. For example, the university reposted the BSUs events on their social media. Additionally, the President of the university ate lunch with BSU members. The President learned the needs of the students at the luncheon. Moreover, the University provided support by posting BSU information on the university’s main page (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022).

University 2 showed support by having a plethora of resources for students. There were many different supports in place to ensure that students, undergraduate and graduate, were supported. For example,

In terms of support, I feel like we have so many resources on campus. Whether it’s for Black students or students in general, they’re willing to go out there and like look for them and that's what I learned from working in the Center. (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022)

Amani stated that there were many supports in place for all students across the campus; however, they had to be aware of how to receive the help. Support was the reason that Nia joined the BSU; she stated that it “pulled her in” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). Moreover, Nia said that she was a member to be supportive for other students: “We are here for you… we are here to help
them [Black students] with other resources, being a friend, feel safe, feel heard, be reflected” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). The BSU members were very supportive of other Black students as they wanted them to succeed and be successful at University 2 (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022).

**Trust.** The BSU members of University 2 stated that they wanted to provide students with a level of comfortability. They wanted students to be able to openly share with each other to cultivate an environment of collaboration and celebration. Kathy said the following:

> The Black Student Union and Center are kind of founded upon, like, not being judged, and I think the fact they they’re based off of not being judged and we know that, like we immediately walk in there, and, you know, we’re a lot of us are pretty open, because we know that we’re not going to judged, so yeah. It’s been easy to like open up about myself and let people get to know me and things so. (University 2, Kathy, March 16, 2022)

Kathy’s willingness to share the aforementioned sentiments demonstrated how club members felt a great sense of trust from the support of each other and from the BSU as a club. Additionally, the events that the club sponsored such as a roller-skating night, a movie night, an annual Black hair show, and lunch with the President were further evidence of the support. BSU students trusted each other because they felt comfortable and supported. They did not feel any type of stereotype threat when they were with each other (Steele, 1997). They enjoyed each other’s company as their culture was celebrated. Julian added to the topic of trust by stating that, “It is as much as I would say that the Community or the institution has been more open in many ways, not always but in many ways, and now the students are realizing that using that to their advantage” (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). Julian stated that the students recognize that the university was making a concerted effort to be supporting of Black students. Students in turn
trusted the university and were reaping the benefits. Figure 11 is a visual description of the emergent theme of connectedness/isolation.

**Figure 11**

*Emerging Theme from University 2: Connectedness/Isolation*

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Note. Emerging Theme: Connectedness/Isolation. Participant excerpts have been included to highlight their experiences.

The emerging theme of connectedness/isolation was revealed from the data of University 2. The way in which BSU members ensured campus connectivity was by supporting each other as well as other Black students on campus. Moreover, they trusted each other and their campus community. For instance, University 2 worked persistently to provide a physical space for
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students. In February 2017, the Black Student Center opened its doors to all Black students on the campus of University 2. Overall, the BSU members reported a sense of connection to each other and their campus.

**California University 1 & 2 Cross-Case Analysis**

Upon completion of an in-depth analysis of the BSUs of University 1 and 2, the researcher discovered there was a crossover in the findings. The crossover in the findings equated to numerous similarities between the themes of empowerment, identity, and connectedness/isolation. The BSU participants all had similarities as to why they were members of their respective BSUs. As highlighted by the themes under each major finding, all the participants stated they enjoyed being BSU members. They reveled in the advocacy and activism that the BSU provided. In addition, they liked being a part of something where others looked like them and had similar experiences. Moreover, they found it comforting being a part of a club that uplifted the Black voice, especially in an environment where the Black voice has been extremely limited. In addition, the crossover between the two different universities revealed that engagement in a club that seeks continued mentorship and connection was imperative to quell feelings of isolation.

Conversely, study findings revealed that there were very little differences related to the emergent themes of empowerment and identity. For instance, BSU members from both universities shared feelings of advocacy, recruitment, and retention of members. In addition, both clubs experienced a feeling of being ignored. Moreover, both clubs had a trait of mentorship—from the advisors to the members mentoring other Black students. This notion was evidenced by the statements such as, “We are here for you” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). Another comment that was said by Kathy was, “It feels pretty good to walk into the space and not be
judged. It is easy to open up” (University 2, Kathy, March 16, 2022). However, University 1 lacked the leadership subtheme that emerged from the data of University 2. Both BSUs had members who were leaders; however, University 2 had more numerical members who were active members. For example, University 2 had an event where a member conducted a roundtable about voodoo. It was an unexpected presentation as the club did not know the member had said knowledge on the topic (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). Additionally, University 2 held weekly meetings that were topical and/or informational (University 2, Amani, March 10, 2022; University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). They also held many events which allowed the members to fellowship. Kathy said, “We’ve had a couple of mixers and I’ve attended all of those when they have movie nights I attended those” (University 2, Kathy, March 16, 2022). Even though University 1 held weekly meetings for members, they were not topical in nature; instead, they followed Robert’s Rules of Order and were organizational in nature (University 1, Jacob, February 19, 2022). In addition, University 1 had many new members who were learning the duties of being a BSU member such as Jacob and Marie.

Another difference that was identified through the data analysis process was the feeling of connectedness/isolation. University 2 participants’ data revealed that they had strong feelings of support and trust. Their feelings of connectedness were strengthened because the members have had a physical space where members gather to have fellowship—even when they do not have a meeting. For example, Nia said, “Right we’re fortunate enough to like have a space for this to happen you’re not only our organization, but just like Center as well” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). On the other hand, University 1 participants stated they did not have a space for members to congregate. Correspondingly, Marie said, “…An outlet where people can go where they feel safe enough to let their guard down and be vulnerable and not suppress their
feelings for a second so truly” (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022). In addition, the data revealed that this lack of resources created a sense of isolation. Reginald said, “To establish a black resource center for students similar to how they have with intentionality with other cultural special groups, we have a veteran center on campus…” (University 1, Reginald, January 31, 2022). Overall, both university BSUs expressed feelings of connectedness when they were with other Black students; however, the pathway to accessing the goal varied. Figures 12 and 13 are illustrations of the major themes of University 1 and 2 respectively.

**Figure 12**

*Major Themes University 1*

Note. Major Emergent Themes from University 1.
The major themes for University 1 were empowerment, identity, and connectedness/isolation. The subthemes that emerged from the theme of empowerment were advocacy, BSU student recruitment, and retention. The theme of identity yielded the subthemes of identity, ignored, and mentorship. Lastly, the subtheme of connectedness/isolation yielded the subthemes of lack of awareness, lack of resources, and lack of support.

**Figure 13**

*Major Themes University 2*

*Figure 13. Major Emergent Themes from University 2.*
The major themes for University 2 were empowerment, identity, and connectedness/isolation. The subthemes that emerged from the theme of empowerment were advocacy, BSU student recruitment, and retention. The theme of identity yielded the subthemes of ignored, leadership, and mentorship. Lastly, the subtheme of connectedness/isolation yielded the subthemes of physical space, support, and trust.

A Priori Coding in Accordance with Bridging and Buffering Framework

Bridging and buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004) is a theoretical lens through which to understand actions that occur within an educational sector. Honig and Hatch (2004) believe there are external factors that impact situational outcomes. External forces are monumental in deciding which reforms an organization will endure. Schools and administration must collaborate to develop a plan that cultivates community partnerships with external forces (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Scribner, 2013). The following section explains the connections between the bridging and buffering framework in relation to the participant responses. Figure 14 is a chart that explores the relationship between the university BSUs and the research question. The research question is how do BSUs bridge or buffer Black student undergraduate experiences within a large university system?
Figure 14

Bridging Buffering Framework (Honig & Hatch, 2004)

Note. Figure 14 delineates how participant data were consistent with the bridging buffering framework (Honig & Hatch, 2004).
Bridging and Buffering: University 1. Participants from University 1 shared experiences of how the BSU bridges and buffers student experiences. For example, participants shared the following:

And so, if I recall correctly, on the Black Advisory Council, there are students from the Black Student Union… the President serves on that Council… there are resources there, but it’s about making sure the students know about the resources to be able to take full advantage of those resources and, hopefully, we will continue to get more. (University 1, Reginald, January 31, 2022)

Reginald was stating that the BSU works in collaboration with the President’s African American Advisory; this collaborative group works for the betterment of the University. Another example of how University 1 bridges forces is the following:

So I may, I propose to the Black Faculty and Staff Association for them to take some accountability over being Black faculty and staff, and having some leadership role in the Black student organizations. (University 1, Norah, February 13, 2022)

Norah was saying that the collaborative efforts between the BSU and the Black Faculty and Staff Association have created a stronger BSU and Black student organizations. Norah continued her thoughts by stating the following:

External forces have placed pressure on the BSU. Consider the following comment:

So it needs to be a top down type of thing as well, they need to take responsibility for what they know is already true you already see that in this. Because you know we got Blacks and we know who they’re marginalized, what are we going to do to preserve this group. (University 1, Norah, February 13, 2022)
University 1 has a dwindling Black student population; participants are stating that the university needs to do something to ensure their success, both academically and socioemotionally.

**Bridging and Buffering: University 2.** Participants from University 2 explained how their university bridges and buffers Black student experiences. For example, BSU members were able to have lunch with the university’s President. This experience was invaluable for the students. A participant stated the following:

> The students had lunch with the President…before it would have been maybe three dominant voices and everybody else would have just let them talk. But I think, you know, students are starting to find where they can advocate where they can speak up and where they can share their perspectives, and we as a university, can open that door, I think students will run through it. (University 1, Julian, March 14, 2022)

Students were feeling more confident to share with their university’s leadership. Julian stated that if students continue to be provided the opportunity to share their voices, they will take full advantage of said opportunity.

Even though the data revealed that University 2 BSU participants experienced more bridging scenarios, there were a few instances of buffering. For example, April said that the university could do better by taking students concerns more seriously, “and don’t put things on the back burner” (University 2, April, March 15, 2022). April was stating that the university should not put important issues on hold; the university should tend to them immediately. Table 3 delineates the relationship between the emerging themes, the theoretical frameworks, and the participants’ statements.
Table 4
Emerging Theme Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Sample Participants’ Excerpts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empowerment</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridging and Buffering (Honig &amp; Hatch, 2004)</td>
<td>“So it needs to be a top down type of thing as well, they need to take responsibility for what they know is already true; you already see that in this.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2012)</td>
<td>“When students raise concerns, take them seriously, and don’t put things on the back burner.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Black Achievement Motivation (Cross, 2003)</td>
<td>“Our social media page is open to anyone who wants to see it, so if you’re a student and you follow our page… you’re welcome to come to our meetings.”</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 2012)</td>
<td>“We were given the opportunity to have a seat at the table they’re hearing the same message, because it’s important and they’re hearing the same message, because we’re organized.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social &amp; Psychological Factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affective Black Student Achievement (Ford et al., 2008)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridging and Buffering (Honig &amp; Hatch, 2004)</td>
<td>“The students had lunch with the President… before it would have been maybe three dominant voices… students from the BSU are starting to advocate…”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural-Ecological Theory of Minority School Performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Ogbu, 1998)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stereotype Threat (Steele, 1997)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 2012)</td>
<td>“You know I’m constantly being labeled and a lot of the time people look at me and they don’t even know I’m Black or White.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical Race Theory (Delgado &amp; Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings &amp; Tate, 1995)</td>
<td>“One is being uplifted while the other one is being shattered or pushed into the margins.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connectedness / Isolation</strong></td>
<td>Bridging and Buffering (Honig &amp; Hatch, 2004)</td>
<td>“On the Black Advisory Council, there are students from the Black Student Union… the President serves on that”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 2012)</td>
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</table>
Social & Psychological Factors  
Affective Black Student Achievement (Ford et al., 2008)  
Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 2012)  
Stereotype Threat (Steele, 1997)  
Social & Psychological Factors  
Affective Black Student Achievement (Ford et al., 2008)

Council… there are resources there, but it’s about making sure the students know…”

“The Black Student Union and Center are kind of founded upon, like, not being judged…”

| Note. Table 3 outlines the relationship that exists between the study’s themes, the theoretical frameworks, and the participants’ statements.

Summary

Overall, the results from all the interviews and social media posts revealed the importance of BSU membership for the BSU members at their respective universities. There were a total of 13 participants who participated in no more than 90-minute interviews. Moreover, the researcher sought to understand how BSUs bridge or buffer Black student experiences within a large university system. All of the participants had life experiences that were unique; they also had various backgrounds and varying degrees of understanding of what it meant to be a BSU member. The data revealed that even when there were distinctive occurrences for each research participant, the overall experience was similar. As the three inductive themes identified in this section underscore, participants experience a sense of empowerment by participating in their respective BSUs. In addition, participants’ identity development flourished through their participation. Moreover, participants were able to establish a sense of connectedness and combat feelings of isolation through participation in the BSU.

This research study also used deductive coding using a priori codes from the bridging and buffering framework (Honig & Hatch, 2004) to understand the way in which external factors impact situational outcomes. The following chapter will explore these findings in context and...
provide connections to practice and policy. In addition, the limitations of the study as well as implications and suggestions for future research will be discussed.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Black student success is very important to educational settings and institutions (Muhammad, 2020). This quest is due to an unequal distribution of opportunities in the American educational setting (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Black student success hinges on actionable steps that educational sectors take in order to bolster achievement. In the final chapter of this study, a rich discussion will be presented regarding to understand Black Student Union (BSU) student experiences within a large university system.

This chapter provides an overview of the multi-site, embedded case study, including a short discussion of the methodology and appropriate factors that influence the collection of data. Thematic analysis of the major emergent themes provides important context and connections to policy and practice. In addition, the chapter ends with a discussion about the study’s importance in relation to past research including action items for consideration, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand Black Student Union (BSU) student experiences within a large university system. To understand the students’ experiences, the following research question was studied: How do Black Student Unions bridge or buffer Black student undergraduate experiences within a large university system?

A multi-site, embedded case study approach was utilized to capture the thirteen participants’ experiences at two campuses within a large university system. The bounded cases for this multi-site, embedded case study were two universities: one from the southern San Joaquin Valley in California, and one from Southern California. The units of analysis were BSU members and the BSU faculty/staff advisors. Moreover, media such as the BSUs Instagram...
pages were also analyzed. Due to a lack of consistency with the BSU club pages and documents, other data were not analyzed. However, triangulation was employed by analyzing the collected data. Additionally, analytic generalization was sought using the bridging and buffering framework (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

The researcher paid very close attention to ensure coherence within this written study. Chapter 1 was an introduction to the study that focused on the vital components of the study such as the purpose, the significance of the study, and the research questions. Chapter 2 was a rich delineation of past and recent literature on Black student achievement, motivation, and pertinent theories. The literature review informed the researcher and the study as to what has already been done in relation to this study. With the introduction of the research question in Chapter 1 as well as the background information that was presented in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 was the explication of the methodology of the study. In addition, Chapter 3 ensured the purpose of the study, BSU Black student undergraduate experiences, remained at the nucleus of the study. Moreover, the researcher then took the data that was collected from Chapter 3 and analyzed it through an inductive and deductive data analysis process. The data also went through two rounds of coding to identify the major themes of empowerment, identity, and connectedness/isolation. The presentation of the data occurred in Chapter 4. Lastly, Chapter 5 presented the discussion in relation to each major finding and ensured alignment in relation to each major finding, the purpose of the study, the research question, methodology, and the results of the study.

The data collection and analysis process consisted of the utilization of interviews and the analysis of BSU Instagram pages. Seidman’s (1998) modified three-interview approach was used to conduct semi-structured interviews. These interviews were no more than 90 minutes, and they were conducted on Zoom. First, the participants were asked to describe themselves/how they
became active BSU members/advisors (see Appendices A and B for complete interview protocol). The questions were designed to build rapport and to provide the researcher with background information about each participant. In addition, even though the first set of questions were not directly related to the research question, they did provide information as to the participants’ experiences. The next set of questions focused on why they became active in their respective BSUs. The purpose of these questions was to understand the why. The last set of questions focused on if the university did/did not support the work they conducted as a BSU.

The interviews were recorded via the Zoom platform. Moreover, Zoom transcribed the interview; this transcription was saved to the researcher’s password-protected computer. This computer was kept in the researcher’s secure office. Once interviews were completed, the Zoom transcript was converted to a Word document and then uploaded to Dedoose. Inductive and deductive coding were used. Inductive coding was cyclical in nature, allowing the researcher to return frequently to the data. This process allowed emergent themes to surface. In addition, deductive coding used a priori codes that were based on Honig and Hatch’s (2004) bridging and buffering framework. These codes were divided by category and by university. See Figure 14 for a delineation of the bridging and buffering framework in relation to the findings.

The researcher reviewed the codes and looked for patterns. A pattern is a similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, or causation (Saldaña, 2016). Data were coded in two rounds to thematize (Tesch, 1990). Once the themes surfaced, the researcher was then able to report the findings. The themes that emerged from the data will be analyzed further.

**Situating the Emergent Themes in the Existing Literature**

The themes that were presented in Chapter 4 expand on the research of other researchers who have studied how school entities bridge and/or buffer outside forces. The following
discussion examines each theme at length. Additionally, it provides a deep discussion of the findings and applies said findings.

**Emergent Theme 1: Empowerment**

The first major finding of this study, empowerment, was a common theme that validated previous research that minoritized groups like to have a sense of empowerment (Jennings, 2000). This sense of empowerment can come from the notion of advocating for others, recruiting and uplifting others, and ensuring the success of others. In this study, participants from the two universities felt welcomed as BSU members. They felt a sense of purpose as they participated in the club activities. For instance, Reginald said University 1 needed to be “program minded in terms of getting the community together and having programs that uplift that community” (University 1, Reginald, January 31, 2022). In comparison, University 2 participant named Julian said, “As much as I would say that the community or the institution has been more open in many ways, not always, but in many ways, and now the students are realizing that and using that to their advantage” (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). Participants were stating that the community needed to be involved in the BSU’s programming. If the BSU advocated for the community, they would have a stronger sense of empowerment within the university and the environs. In addition, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explicate, race is a factor in U.S. schools. Since White supremacy is deeply rooted in U.S. institutions of learning, in order to combat oppression, empowerment is vital.

As previous research substantiated, BSUs were a byproduct of the Black Campus Movement (Rogers, 2008). Moreover, from 1966 to 1975, BSUs endeavored to reform American higher education (Rogers, 2008). To do so, BSU members had to be activists. Activism can also be described as advocacy. Previous research also addressed that “the goal of Black activism is
political incorporation into current social and economic arrangements… Black activism seeks to rearrange social and economic systems to enhance the position of the poor and the working class” (Jennings, 2000, p. 15). Black activism is working towards a common goal. In this research study, all participants stated that they were a part of the BSU because they wanted to help others to make a lasting change for other Black students at the university. As Marcus said, “The organization [BSU] gives us strength” (University 1, Marcus, February 4, 2022) Another participant added to this notion of advocacy when she said the following:

You know, like it had nothing to do with us wanting to be better than anybody… a faculty member spoke at the meeting on that day for that panel discussion and she said it perfectly when she said we’re not asking for anything we’re not willing to earn mm hmm we just want the same equal opportunity to be able to do that. (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022)

Black students who attend predominantly White colleges and universities often join student groups to combat the negativity that they might experience (Jackson & Hui, 2017). For instance, Smith et al. (2011) state that Black students might encounter racial battle fatigue. This is the process by which students experience racism; they undergo a sense of fatigue (Smith et al. 2011). To combat racial battle fatigue, Black students seek positive, encouraging Black spaces (Jackson & Hui, 2017; Tatum, 2003). Moreover, critical race theorists state that race permeates every aspect of daily life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Microaggressions are ever-present; Black students must find ways to combat such negativity and oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Participants from University 1 and 2 both experienced negativity at their respective universities. To combat the negativity and ill will, they empowered themselves and others by joining their BSUs.
Theme 1 examined the feeling of empowerment that BSU members experience through participation in their BSU. Due to the negative experiences that a Black student experiences at a non-HBCU, empowering groups such as BSUs are a necessity for Black students. If universities want to bolster their BSU student recruitment and retention efforts, they should work in conjunction with Black student groups.

**Emergent Theme 2: Identity**

The second major finding of this study, identity, connects to previous research on cultural identity theory (Ogbu & Davis, 2003). Cultural identity is defined as how an individual views him/herself in relation to culture and the surrounding world (Ogbu & Davis, 2003). Moreover, “identity matters” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 64). Blacks who see education as relevant to their desired outcome navigate inequities more swiftly than other Blacks (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). Conversely, academic identity is continuously formed by a student’s positionality in a classroom. For example, the curriculum, the teacher, and the classroom interactions impact a student’s identity (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Muhammad, 2020). Therefore, a student’s identity is constantly evolving based upon the conditions and the student’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 2012). If a Black student has a positive identity of self and is surrounded by positive role models, he/she will be encouraged to succeed (see Figure 4). The BSU members’ identities were impacted by what occurred outside of the club, thereby making the BSU even more vital to their positive identity development. Resiliency leads to success (Bandura, 2012). BSU members have positively impacted their sociocultural factors by ensuring there are no impediments to goal attainment.

Once a Black student reaches the university setting, the student has undoubtedly undergone many changes to one’s identity. Moreover, for a Black student to persist through the
university setting, Patton (2006) postulates that social networks that are built on campus are a contributing factor. For example, Marie said the following:

The BSU allows you to feel or say how they feel without judgment because that’s really what it is, people who do want to be vulnerable, people do want to express their feelings, but they’re constantly thinking like oh this person is going to judge me because they don’t understand. (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022)

Marie felt comfortable being with other BSU members because the other members do not judge her. She was able to be herself in a supportive environment that understands her experiences at the university. Additionally, the BSU members had a positive impact on her identity development. Identity matters: students need to have a connection to something (Patton, 2006).

Previous research states that stereotype threat can be a barrier to academic success and can negatively impact identity development (Steele, 1997). This is a situational threat (Steele, 1997) that can affect the members of the said group for whom the stereotype exists. Participants from both university BSUs stated that they experienced instances where they felt as if stereotypes that others hold negatively impacted their experiences. For example, Marie said, “I get this all the time and I’ve actually experienced it here, where I was put in an uncomfortable situation where I felt like, oh, you know he’s trying to make me feel like I’m the angry black woman” (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022). Marie continued the story by saying,

And I hate that, I hate that so much, like, I’m not angry, I’m not bitter, I’m not being aggressive or abrasive, I’m not being, you know, ghetto or rude or whatever, because I choose to speak my mind and I’m choosing not to allow you to disrespect me. (University 1, Marie, March 7, 2022)
Marie felt stereotyped based on her race and gender. Although the stereotype’s impact on Marie and her academics was unknown, Marie did share that she was not going to allow her classmate to “disrespect” her. In other words, Marie stood up for herself by speaking out informing her classmate that his comments were unacceptable.

The finding and the addition to literature yields the following: Even though students’ identities have formed throughout their educational careers, the BSU has positively impacted their identity formation. This has occurred by the formation of a positive, cultivating club environment. Additionally, membership in the BSU has provided all the participants an avenue to navigate non-Black spaces (Hotchkins, 2017; Ford et al., 2008). Even though the way in which the BSUs operate within the large university system varies significantly, the positive identity formation outcome is the same.

**Emergent Theme 3: Connectedness/Isolation**

The third major finding of this study confirms the importance that a sense of connectedness holds for Black students at a Predominately White Institution or a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Since Black students at Universities 2 and 1 are only 3–4% percent of the population respectively, the BSU provides a sense of connectedness and buffers feelings of isolation. The participants in this study held a collective attitude of achievement. This said achievement cultivated an environment of motivation. The BSU members were all motivated to ensure the club’s success. Additionally, the BSU members did not succumb to Ogbu’s (1998) cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance. Although all of the BSU members were caste-like minorities (Ogbru, 1998), they were all striving to perform exceedingly well. For instance, they were all dedicated to helping other Black students to succeed. Cheryl stated that she wanted to see “familiar faces” (University 1, Cheryl, February 8, 2022). In addition, Nia said
she wanted to “help people’s voices be heard…” We are here for you” (University 2, Nia, March 17, 2022). The BSU members had a passion for helping others as evidenced in the perseverance of both clubs. Even though the clubs had to meet on Zoom for years due to COVID-19, they continued to fellowship and meet. This level of dedication and motivation can be attributed to black achievement motivation (Cross, 2003; Spencer et al., 2003).

Throughout the interviews, participants shared their experiences of how they cultivated connectedness, albeit inadvertently, to combat feelings of isolation. The major contribution to literature is the way in which Black students must create their own path to success. Since the BSUs are clubs that function on their own, they have the freedom to create the type of programming that they deem appropriate. Therefore, the BSUs are a highly powerful organization that can create major change on their respective campuses. In fact, Reginald said, “The BSU President is one of the most powerful positions on campus. The President and the ASI President are very powerful and can make changes for the students at the university” (University 1, Reginald, January 31, 2022). Additionally, he stated that the BSU President should have regular meetings with the university President. His exact words were, “Well, I will say the BSU President should have a regular meeting with the President of the university, even if it’s simply a 10–15-minute check in. They should have a regular standing meeting” (University 1, Reginald, January 31, 2022). Reginald said that ongoing communication between the BSU and the university administration would ensure the club’s ongoing support and success. It would allow the Black students’ voices to be heard on an ongoing, consistent basis. If this occurred, other Black students on campus would be aware of this communication pipeline and might start to share more sentiments with the BSU President. The word would spread to other Black students, and the BSU membership might grow. Growth in the BSU would create a stronger, more unified
organization. Additionally, Julian said that the President of University 2 has had a positive impact on their BSU in relation to a sense of connectedness. In fact, he said, “And like I said yeah the President was there, many of our senior leadership was in attendance, you know…” (University 2, Julian, March 14, 2022). Julian’s comment was in relation to the support that the university’s President and administration demonstrated. When the BSU is acknowledged and supported by the university, it empowers the BSU members’ feeling of connectedness. Figure 15 is a visual depiction of the themes that emerged based on participant’s responses and the social media posts. The size of the words are also an indication of the code frequency and the themes that were drawn from the codes.

**Figure 15**

*Code Cloud*

![Code Cloud](image)

*Note.* Figure 15 is a frequency word cloud of codes from the research study.

**Connection to Framework: Bridging and Buffering**

Deductive coding analysis generated useful information in relation to how BSUs bridge or buffer Black student experiences within a large university system. In addition, the framework
of bridging and buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004) provides a way to make sense of the role that BSUs play in participants’ lives as well as the role it plays for University 1 and 2. Moreover, the bridging and buffering framework in relation to the data that the researcher collected provides insight into the BSU students’ experiences. This insight has the capability to inform policy and practice. Bridging and buffering in relation to University 1 and 2 will be discussed in the following section.

**University 1: Bridging**

The BSU has the capability to bring Black students together and to positively impact their identity development. As Jacob stated, the BSU brought a sense of identity because he was able to identify with other club members (University 1, Jacob, February 19, 2022). In addition, it allowed him to be creative and to think critically about issues. Rachelle added that BSU membership allowed her to network and encounter experiences that she might otherwise not experience (University 1, Rachelle, February 23, 2022). In addition, BSU membership provided a sense of belonging (University 1, Marie, March 7 2022). Participants reported that they felt a sense of accomplishment through BSU participation.

**University 1: Buffering.** One of the most prominent themes that the data revealed is the feeling of isolation that developed when the participants experienced a lack of resources and a lack of a physical space. Previous research has highlighted that BSUs can provide support for Black students (Patton, 2006). However, even though participants stated that they have amazing mentors at the university who support them (University 1, Jacob, February 19, 2022), they also said they feel a disconnect because they do not have a physical space (University 1, Jacob, February 19, 2022; Marcus, February 4, 2022; Norah, February 13, 2022; Reginald, January 13, 2022). Additionally, participants stated that the lack of a Black Cultural Center has caused a
disconnect between the university and the community. Since recruitment and retention of Black students is a growing concern for the university, participants stated they would like to have a “selling point” for potential students. A Black Cultural Center would provide a space where students could go and see a “friendly face” (University 1, Cheryl, February 8, 2022). Additionally, this space would allow Black students to feel that the university sees them beyond February. Moreover, Black Cultural Centers could provide Black students at Predominately White Institutions and Hispanic-Serving Institutions the social interaction with students who have had similar experiences (Patton, 2006). Lastly, a Black Cultural Center would create a positive environment that has a positive impact on students’ self-efficacy (Bandura, 2012). It could act as a literary society (Muhammad, 2020), and it could “elevate minds and social conditions” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 25). Figure 16 is a word cloud that delineates the frequent codes and themes that emerged from the data from University 1.
Figure 16

Word Cloud University 1

Note. Figure 16 is a word cloud of the codes from University 1

Figure 16 describes the frequent codes that emerged from University 1. The size of the text reflects the frequency of each code. Empowerment was the most frequent code while privilege was the least frequent code.

University 2: Bridging

The BSU has the capability to positively impact students, especially when they are in the minority in terms of the number of students. For instance, Black students comprised 3% of the student population at University 2. The participants stated that if it was not for the BSU, they would feel alienated and isolated. The BSU provided numerous social activities such as roller-skating night, movie night, Black hair shows, “Traveling While Black” roundtable discussion,
and various other events. These events bridge the BSU with University 2’s community as well as the surrounding environs.

**University 2: Buffering**

Black students seek out safe spaces on campuses; this is a critical factor to their success (Patton, 2006). However, a safe space can also be in the form of a mentor or a friend. Additionally, even though Black Cultural Centers provide Black students with the space to fellowship and to facilitate identity development, Black Cultural Centers can also limit the BSUs growth. As participants from University 2 mentioned, the Black Cultural Center has the potential to limit Black students’ development and growth amongst the vast campus and its offerings. Black events can, ultimately, be segregated to the fourth floor of the Student Center (Julian). This type of segregation can be damaging to Black students’ growth. To combat this butterfly effect, Black students are encouraged to participate in other activities such as Associated Students, Incorporated and various other clubs. Figure 17 is a word cloud that explains the frequent themes and codes from University 2.
Figure 17

Note. Figure 17 is a word cloud from the codes from University 2.

Figure 17 describes the frequent codes that emerged from University 2. The size of the text echoes the frequency of each code. Connectedness was the most frequent code while “acting White” and disconnectedness was the least frequent code.

**Inductive Analysis and Deductive Analysis Connections**

The researcher discovered that there was a connection with the inductive themes and the deductive themes. The themes of empowerment, identity, and connectedness had some of the same codes as the deductive a priori codes of bridging and buffering. For example, the notion of bridging is similar to the notion of positive identity development and connectedness because the BSU as an entity provides a safe place for students to fellowship and connect with like-minded individuals. Additionally, the BSU provides empowerment for students as they are able to create
programming that is relevant to their community. This bridges the BSU closer to their community. Contrastly, the notion of buffering is related to the theme of isolation as BSU members felt isolated when they were not included in programming save the month of February. They felt as if the university community lacked awareness of what was important to them—therefore buffering them from the community.

**Significance of the Study in the Context of Past Research**

Black student success is of the most paramount importance to educational institutions (Muhammad, 2020). In fact, K-12 as well as higher educational settings are constantly searching for strategies to increase Black student success. Black students have experienced an unequal distribution of opportunities throughout history (Ford et al., 2008; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ogbu & David, 2003). This unequal distribution of resources has festered and, by the time Black students graduate high school, they are at a disadvantage academically to their White peers (Ogbu & Davis, 2003).

Schools can shift the opportunity gap to include more Black voices into the mainstream narrative. There needs to be an equal distribution of educational access for Black students (Howard & Navarro, 2016). A shift in access and resources will result to more equitable educational practices for Black students. It is not enough to say that all students matter. There needs to be room for educational practitioners to be allowed to say that Black students matter (Howard, 2016).

Black students need to be supported throughout their college careers. There needs to be sustainable changes that occur to bolster Black students’ success. Black initiatives have proven to excel Black students, particularly Black males (Brooms, 2016). Furthermore, when college students feel like they belong, they are more successful, and they have better odds at college
completion (Strayhorn, 2019). It is imperative that Black students are supported by the university. Black students are already in the minority; a sense of belonging and identity development are key to their success, retention, and degree completion.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The current study enhances the body of literature by building on the previous work of researchers. Analysis of the themes generated a grander understanding of the BSU undergraduate student experience within a large university system. Moreover, the utilization of the bridging and buffering framework (Honig & Hatch, 2004) created a richer understanding of the ways in which undergraduate students experience BSU club membership. Additionally, Black students’ experiences are very complex, yet they all contained similar themes of a sense of belonging and connectedness to the larger university. As universities continue to focus on recruitment, graduation, and retention of the students, there needs to be a greater focus on Black student success across the large university system. Each individual university is provided the latitude to operate in the way in which it sees appropriate for its campus. However, this approach yields fragmented results. For example, some universities have a Black Cultural Center while others do not. Some universities have a Director of the Black Cultural Center while others do not. If practices such as how to ensure all students graduate in a timely manner exist, there should be practices that bolster Black students. These suggestions are the following.

**Create a Black Cultural Center**

Tatum (1997) states that Black students constantly think about themselves in terms of race. Additionally, being Black shapes and forms Black students’ identity in a distinct way. Black people are aware of their differences from the mainstream (Tatum, 1997). Hence, the creation of a safe Black space becomes a valuable navigational tool in an environment where
Blacks are in the minority (Tatum, 1997). Therefore, all campuses within the university system should have a Black Cultural Center. A Black Cultural Center is a safe counterspace where Black students can congregate and fellowship with each other. Counterspaces are safe spaces that are considered to be outside the scope of mainstream society and are occupied by individuals who are not considered the mainstream group (Ong et al., 2017). The incorporation of a Black Cultural Center could be something as simple as a space for the Black students in another building, or it could be as grandiose as the individual university deems as necessary. Additionally, the universities could hire former BSU students as a way to further bolster Black student success.

Create a “Union of the Union”

There should be ongoing communication with the BSUs within the large university system. There could even be an annual conference where the BSUs fellowship to promote leadership development, identity development, and empowerment. Fellowship and communication amongst Black student groups within a large, Predominately White and Hispanic-Serving Institution is of the upmost importance for sustainability. As McClelland (2001) states, BSUs are important because they “maintain, sustain, buttress, and bolster African American students today” (p. 45). BSUs provide a supportive environment that allow Black students to attain the ultimate goal: degree completion.

Ongoing Communication

Ford and Moore (2013) postulate that social factors such as racial bias and prejudice contribute to Black male student completion. They state, “When families, community members, and/or peers adhere to an anti-achievement ethic, gifted and highly able African American males face significant and greater challenges to doing well in school settings” (Ford & Moore, 2013, p.
In order to ensure student completion and higher graduation rates for all, each university within the system should ensure effective communication with their respective BSU student Presidents. Each individual university could have the latitude to decide the best way to execute this endeavor. In addition, each BSU President should ensure the meetings are effective and the topics mirror the needs of the BSU members. Although Black people are not a monolith, ongoing, open communication creates new possibilities and a stronger support system to ensure Black students feel supported.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This multi-site, embedded case study provided an in-depth analysis of BSUs bridge or buffer Black student undergraduate experiences within a large university system. Thematic analyses produce three main themes that are affiliated with the Black undergraduate student experience as well as connections to the bridging and buffering framework (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Since this is a qualitative study, the results cannot be generalized beyond the participants and other data from this study. As the researcher reflects on this multi-site, embedded case study as well as the themes, recommendations for future research are explicated.

Future research should attempt to expand the breadth of student experiences by including other types of universities. This study focused on BSUs within the same large university system. Future research could expand the research by including an analysis of other types of universities such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), 2-year universities, and private universities. In addition, future research could incorporate other types of undergraduate students such as an in-depth look at how transfer students’ participation in a BSU impacts student retention and recruitment.
Another idea for future research is to widen the scope of the Black student experience by way of analyzing various university clubs and organizations. For example, this study solely focused on participation in the BSU by indigenous Black students who self-identify as Black. Future research could also take into consideration of clubs, such as the African Student Association (ASA), and how students experience membership. There could also be a study on the intersectionality between ASA, BSU, Afro-Latinx clubs, and the student experience.

Future research could also expand its number of participants. Due to time constraints and limited accessibility, this study only included two BSUs from a large university system. Future research could include several campuses from the same university system. In addition, it could include various types of interviews such as focus group interviews. Lastly, the future study could also interview recent graduates to understand the intersectionality of BSU membership and graduation.

Lastly, this study is one of the few studies that utilizes the bridging and buffering framework in relation to university BSUs. There is a need for further research into the experiences of other university BSUs utilizing this framework. By expanding the amount of BSUs that participate in the study, greater results will be yielded that can be transferable across more universities. In addition, future studies could utilize various methodological approaches such as a phenomenological approach.

**Concluding Statement**

The purpose of this multi-site, embedded case study was to explore the research question: How do BSUs bridge or buffer Black student undergraduate experiences within a large university system? Participants were recruited from BSUs within a large university system in the winter of 2021 and the spring of 2022. Interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, and
the interviews used a modified approach of Seidman’s (1998) three-interview procedure. Inductive coding produced three themes: empowerment, identity, and connectedness/isolation. In addition, deductive coding using a priori codes from bridging and buffering (Honig & Hatch, 2004) explicated a variety of ways that BSU members experience bridging and buffering through their participation in the BSU.

This study adds to the body of literature on Black student experiences at a large university setting and it advances the understanding of how to best serve BSU Black undergraduate students within a large university setting. The results from this study yielded that the leaders within a large university setting must be mindful of how different each campus operates; however, there are best practices for all Black students/Black student organizations that should be utilized. It is the hope of this researcher that the large university system will set certain structures in place that will span the entire university system.
APPENDIX A: FACULTY/STAFF ADVISOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your role as a faculty/staff advisor.

2. How did you come to be a faculty/staff advisor at [insert name of university]?

3. Why did you become the faculty/staff advisor for the Black Student Union?

4. In what activities does the BSU participate?
   a. Probing stems: Tell me more about… What was that like?
   b. Possible probe: What is a typical BSU meeting like?

5. What does it mean to be a member of the BSU at [insert name of university]?

6. How does the University support the BSU work that is completed?

7. How might the University better support the work the BSU does?

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?
APPENDIX B: BSU STUDENT PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How did you come to be a student at [insert name of university]?
3. Why did you join the Black Student Union? What activities do you participate in, through the BSU?
   a. Probing stems: Tell me more about… What was that like?
   b. Possible probe: What is a typical BSU meeting like?
4. What does it mean to be a member of the BSU at [insert name of university]?
5. How does the University support the work you do as a BSU?
6. How might the University better support the work you do as a BSU?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?
Dear Black Student Union Student/Faculty/Staff Advisor:

My name is Patricia Lane, and I am a student at California State University, Bakersfield. I am currently seeking a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership with a focus on higher education. The reason you are receiving this interest form is because I am conducting research to understand Black students’ experiences within the Black Student Unions within a large university system. I am seeking your support as a participant for my study. The requirements to participate in this study are you must be a Black Student Union undergraduate active student member between the ages of 18-45; self-identify as Black; be an indigenous Black student (non-immigrant); born and raised in the United States; be in good academic standing as defined by your corresponding school.

The requirements for Faculty/Staff Advisor participation are the following: You must be employed within the large university system as either faculty or staff full-time (100% full time employees) and you must directly work with the Black Student Union at their respective campuses.

I believe you meet this criterion and would like to contact you to give you more information on how you can help me.

Please complete the form below and return through email. I will then contact you with more specific information including signing a consent form and setting up a (no more than) 90-minute semi-structured interview with me.

Your cooperation will be greatly appreciated during this important significant step of my educational career.

Sincerely,

Patricia Lane
plane3@csub.edu

Please complete and return this portion through email to me at your earliest convenience.

Please confirm: ______ I meet the above criteria to participate in this study.

Please mark one:

______ Yes, I am interested in learning more about this study. Please contact me.

______ No, I am not interested in learning more about this study. Please do not contact me.

Name: _____________________________ Phone Number: ( )_________________

Signature: _____________________________ Email: _______________________________
APPENDIX D: REFLECTION ON RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

As a researcher, I need to consider what Milner (2007) frames as the dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. Milner delineates a framework for researchers to understand themselves in relation to a study’s participants. Milner states that researchers should take time to reflect on several questions about themselves in relation to the participants with whom they conduct research. Milner also states that his framework is a guide for researchers to guide them through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. In this section, I will discuss my race, culture, and socioeconomic status in relation to how it informs my research and my views on education.

I grew up in a home with a White mother and a Black father. I am the youngest of four siblings. My brother is the oldest; he is White as he has an Italian father. I also have two sisters who are both biracial. We never viewed color as a barrier from academic excellence because my parents are both college graduates. Therefore, attending college was mandatory. If my father could obtain a degree in the 1960s, I could definitely complete the task. Moreover, my mother was voted most likely to succeed; her siblings all graduated from college. Some might attribute this to intellect and drive; some might attribute it to their color. Overall, my racial identity and socioeconomic status influenced how I viewed an individual’s outcome.

I grew up in a family where academic excellence was expected and attained with little to no effort. I thought everyone scored in the ninety-ninth percentile on standardized tests; my siblings and I always did. My sisters and I were often viewed as the exception to being Black. We were not viewed like “the others.” We had “good hair,” got “good grades,” and were well behaved. This schism was omnipresent, and it influenced my kinship with individuals in the neighborhood. We lived in the city of Wilmington; the neighborhood was predominantly Black.
It was difficult to make friends with neighbors because they either did not associate with us, or they attended private school (as did many of the White children).

I slowly grew into my own, and I learned my place in the world. I found my niche of friends—many times it was the misfits. The children who did not care to be popular, who did not care what others thought, and who were individuals. I was friends with Black and White children; it did not matter to me. I honestly did not, and do not, view people because of their color.

As previously stated, I do not judge people because of their color. One might call this colorblindness; I view it as seeing color but seeing past color. I was taught to truly view people for whom they are. I come from a home where everyone was accepted. My mother worked as a social worker, and she used to bring children home in the middle of the night. My father is a retired high school Spanish teacher who worked at one of the elite high schools in Wilmington. I believe that my role as the oppressor stems from socioeconomic status. I grew up never wanting for anything. I always got to attend all the school dances, go on all of the school trips, and purchase whatever I wanted. I did not grow up rich by any stretch of the word, but we had a comfortable lifestyle overall.

My parents came from working class families, and they both graduated college. Therefore, I have always viewed a college degree as an attainable goal for everyone. School was always easy for me, and college was the natural progression. As I reflect on Milner’s (2007) work, I am aware of my lack of understanding for individuals who struggle in their lives and who may not appear to take advantage of their opportunities.

As a researcher, I must reflect on the fact that I come from a place of socioeconomic privilege. I will be mindful that although I do not judge others because of their race or culture, I
must be understanding of other people’s economic or personal hardships and how it impacts them. School is not easy for many, and I will reflect on my experiences in relation to others. I have been provided with many opportunities to work with others different from myself, and it has allowed me to understand the struggles and life difficulties that others may face.

As a researcher, I must also understand myself in relation to others. I must balance my own opinions in relation to the participants. Our opinions on topics might diverge, and I will negotiate this situation by ensuring my interests do not overshadow the participants’ interests. I will reflect on the notion that what might be my truth and what I view as right may not align with the participants, and that is ok! Everyone has varying life experiences; this is what makes us all unique.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patricia Lane was born and raised in Wilmington, DE. She studied English and earned a bachelor’s degree from Howard University in Washington, DC. She also earned a master’s degree in Secondary English Education from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, PA. Upon graduation, she moved to California and lived in various regions. She served as a secondary English teacher for eight years. She then decided to return to school to earn a Clear Administrative Credential. After nearly two decades in the K-12 sector as a teacher, a support staff member, and an administrator, she decided to pursue a career in higher education within the California State University system. She currently serves as a lecturer in the Teacher Education Department at CSU Bakersfield.

When Patricia completes her dissertation, she plans to continue to work in the Teacher Education Department at CSU Bakersfield, where she teaches in the classroom and works with teacher candidates. She will also use her research to develop the teacher candidate pedagogical practices. Patricia will continue to use her platform to bolster culturally sustaining teaching practices.