

ABSTRACT

Mariza K. James, **FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS** (Under the direction of Dr. Crystal Chambers). Department of Educational Leadership, December 2021.

African American males have reported a lack of sense of belonging when attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). A lack of sense of belonging directly impacts African American males' retention and graduation rates. A convergent mixed methods design was utilized to determine the factors that influence African American males' sense of belonging at a PWI in North Carolina. Hagerty and Patusky's Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI) was used to determine African American males' overall sense of belonging. Interviews were administered to gain further insight on the factors that influence sense of belonging. Results indicated that African American males' sense of belonging is impacted by feeling out of place, which is a negative impact. Positive impacts on African American males' sense of belonging are having a good freshman seminar instructor and being engaged on campus. Opportunities for a more inclusive campus community include: reducing stereotyping and microaggressions, having positive experiences with faculty and staff, and having more student engagement opportunities for African American males to connect with the campus community.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN
MALES AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Karlynn, and those who have helped me along this journey. Karlynn, I know there were times when you wanted my undivided attention and I was unable to give it to you. Thankfully, you did not put up too much of a fuss and allowed me to complete my class assignments and dissertation. Going forward, I pray you will forever have all of my attention and work will not be in the way. I love you baby girl. Akio, thank you for always being by my side and supporting me along the way. You were a listening ear when I would vent from being stressed and a comforter when I was overwhelmed and in tears. Thank you for continuously encouraging me to keep pushing forward, this is one of the many reasons why I love you. Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents and Naeemah. I appreciate the sacrifices you have made to assist me. Thank you for always being there to lend a helping hand with Karlynn. Whether I was in class or just needed some time alone to complete assignments, you all were always supportive, thank you!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

African American males who feel a lack of sense of belonging in college are more likely to withdraw or completely stop attending college (Strayhorn, 2008). Within the present context of East Carolina University (ECU), a predominantly White institution (PWI) in eastern North Carolina, African American males are less likely to remain in college compared to their female counterparts. The problem of practice to be addressed in this study focused on factors that influence sense of belonging among African American males at ECU. As such, this study aided in determining how courses taken by African American males complete and the campus initiatives they engage in impacted their sense of belonging at the institution. This chapter provides an overview of the problem and analytical method for its redress.

Context

East Carolina Teaching College (ECTC) was established in 1907. The school was specifically established for White students and was one of the last schools to desegregate. Other schools in the University of North Carolina (UNC) system desegregated in the 1950s (“Desegregation”, n.d.). In 1962, ECTC admitted its first African American undergraduate student, Laura Marie Leary (“Music and desegregation”, n.d.). In 1967, ECTC transitioned to ECU. Currently, ECU is a large four-year, primarily-residential institution with approximately 30,000 students (“The Carnegie classification of institutions”, 2017). Part of ECU’s mission is to “prepare students with the knowledge, skills and values to succeed in a global, multicultural society” (“University Mission”, 2019). Since desegregation, ECU has grown and diversified its student body, but increases in diversity do not make for inclusion or foster a sense of belonging (Sherbin & Rashid, 2017; Stewart, 2017).

Background of the Problem

In April 2018, results generated from an external review of the ECU Department of Intercultural Affairs, Division of Student Affairs indicated a need for more initiatives at ECU to increase the feeling of social belonging of African American males at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Specifically, data from the external review indicated African American students needed a safe space to gather and that more male initiatives needed to be in place for African American men.

The Ledonia Wright Cultural Center (LWCC) at ECU uses student development theory and cultural center best practices to monitor student engagement at its programs and services and evaluate the impact it has on student retention and persistence. The LWCC focuses on cultural education, student success, identity development, leadership, social justice, and community engagement. As part of this mission and response to the external review, the LWCC offers a weekly program entitled, What's the Tea?, that is primarily attended by African American males. The purpose of the program is to give students the opportunity to engage in civil discourse about a given topic.

Outside of the LWCC, ECU offers other programs that contribute to student success and development. For example, COAD 1000 is a Student Development and Learning in Higher Education course offered at ECU; other universities have similar offerings called college transition courses, freshman seminars, or first-year seminars. they are usually discussion-based courses with a small group of first year students. The COAD 1000 courses are not required but strongly encouraged, as they help students transition to higher education personally and academically. The course is designed to help foster a sense of belonging, promote student engagement, help articulate the institution's expectations, help develop critical thinking skills,

and help students continue to identify/clarify their purpose. The specific impact of the programming at the LWCC and COAD 1000 individually and collectively on African American males is unknown.

As a result of the external review findings and lingering questions of academic and paracurricular programming to support African American males, a study was conducted to purposefully track and gather feedback from African American male students on how engaging in courses and initiatives on campus affect their sense of belonging and student engagement at ECU.

Problem Statement

Nationwide, African American males tend to lack a sense of belonging at PWIs. This dearth tends to impact African American male persistence and graduation rates (Strayhorn, 2008). African American males need a strong support system at PWIs to help foster a sense of belonging (Sinanan, 2012). African American males “involved in African American male initiatives or who engage in peer mentoring programs have a strong sense of belonging and reference support from other African American males as critical to their connectedness to the campus” (Strayhorn et al., 2015, p. 129).

At ECU, while overall African American student retention/graduation rates are strong (Harper & Simmons, 2019), African American males are still significantly less likely than female counterparts to be retained and attain their degree. Males have a 30.4% four-year graduation rate compared to females who have 49.1% four-year graduation rate (ECU: Four-year graduation rate by race/ethnicity and gender, 2019). Given the external reviewer report, attending African American male sense of belonging at ECU could address the within race-gender gap in student retention and graduation rates.

Purpose of the Study

This convergent mixed methods study addressed the lack of sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI. In a convergent mixed methods study, the researcher collects quantitative and qualitative data and analyzes it separately, and then compares the findings to determine if they confirm or disconfirm each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A convergent mixed methods design was used to best understand the research problem. In this study, I collected data African American male COAD 1000 enrollment, participation in LWCC events, and sense of belonging. In the interviews I explored how engaging in programs offered on campus for African American males affected their sense of belonging. The reason for mixing both quantitative and qualitative data was to garner a holistic understanding of how completing a first-year seminar and engaging in weekly programs on campus affected African American males' sense of belonging at the institution in comparison to those who do not.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

1. Do African American males feel a lack of sense of belonging when they first arrive at East Carolina University?
2. How does completing a first-year seminar affect African American males' overall sense of belonging at East Carolina University?
3. How does attending weekly programs offered on campus affect African American males' student engagement at East Carolina University?
4. What is the impact of completing a first-year seminar course and attending weekly programs at East Carolina University?

Results generated from these questions were used to design programming with the LWCC to increase sense of belonging among African American males. Results were also shared with the faculty administering the COAD academic program to enable them to improve their practices with respect to African American males.

Theoretical Framework

Baumeister and Leary's (1995) Need to Belong Theory was used to guide this study. The Need to Belong Theory was developed to help explain the human need to form and maintain meaningful relationships to become comfortable in an environment. This theory relates to this study on the factors that impact African American males' sense of belonging at PWIs because it examines the basic human need to belong in an environment. This theoretical framework was brought to the context of higher education by Strayhorn (2008) and is used throughout the extant literature to explain student experiences throughout college (Hausmann et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017; Walton & Cohen, 2007). It is also specifically used to explore belonging among African American males (Coker, 2019; Strayhorn, 2008). A more detailed explanation is available in Chapter 2.

Overview of Research Method

Research Design

I used purposive sampling strategies for this study. Institutional data was retrieved on African American males who had completed a COAD 1000 course at ECU. Data on participants who attended weekly initiatives at the LWCC were also gathered. After cross-referencing the lists, students were contacted and asked to participate in the study. An in-depth overview of this process is in Chapter 3.

Instrumentation

Using a convergent mixed methods approach, I used the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI) to get a better understanding of the overall belonging of African American males at a PWI. The SOBI was developed by Bonnie Hagerty and Kathleen Patusky and is a 27-item self-report survey with two separately scored scales, SOBI-P (psychological state) and SOBI-A (antecedents) (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). A detailed in-depth analysis of the problem was addressed via interviews. Students were assessed at the beginning and end of the study to determine their sense of belonging over time.

Data Collection

In addition to the SOBI, student enrollment in COAD data, as well as their engagement in cultural programming, were tracked in order to attain an understanding of the influence of these interventions as proffered at ECU on African American male sense of belonging. COAD data was pulled from institutional research. Each student in the study was given an alias and tracked by it. Students not engaged in the LWCC or COAD were enticed to participate by inducement.

I also interviewed students to understand how engaging in programs offered on campus for African American males helped to increase their sense of belonging. One-on-one interviews were conducted using a structured interview protocol, so all participants were asked the same questions. This feedback, along with data on changes in student sense of belonging over time, was used to enhance programming at the LWCC and inform COAD practice.

Data Analysis

I analyzed overall student SOBI by importing the responses from Qualtrics into SPSS. Composite scores for SOBI-A and SOBI-P were calculated to determine participants overall sense of belonging. I then analyzed student data by group: students participating in both LWCC

events and COAD, COAD only, LWCC only, and non-participants (see Figure 1). Due to adaptations in study design attributable to the coronavirus pandemic, I was not able to reach students who did not enroll in COAD and did not participate in LWCC events.

Interview data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Miles et al., 2014). Member checks were used to verify the credibility of interview findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative data analysis was used to triangulate qualitative findings.

Definition of Key Terms

Internalized oppression: “When socially stigmatized groups (e.g., Black males) accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities, and societal place, which results in self-devaluation and the invalidation of others within the group” (Harper, 2007, p. 338).

Micro-aggressions: “Subtle and often unconscious racist acts that cumulatively add stress to the experience of people of color” (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 511).

Sense of belonging: An individual’s perception on whether they feel included in a community (Johnson et al., 2007; Silver Wolf et al., 2017).

Stereotype threat: “Stereotype threat surmises that African American students, when cognizant of the fact that a standardized test, task, or their mere presence, can in some way be perceived to measure their intelligence/value, will experience anxiety regarding their ability to perform in academic settings” (Robertson & Chaney, 2015, p. 20).

Assumptions

Many African American males find it hard to fit in and have a sense of belonging at PWIs. According to the literature, many factors influence African American males’ sense of belonging. In conducting this study, I assumed that by retrieving data from the Registrar’s Office to obtain the population of African American males at the institution who have completed one

	COAD	\emptyset <u>COAD</u>
LWCC Initiatives	XX	X
\emptyset LWCC Initiatives	X	O

Figure 1. Data analysis matrix by group.

semester at the institution, it yielded a good sample. In regard to the SOBI, I assumed that respondents answered all questions truthfully. Likewise, I assumed that during the interview process, all interviewees provided honest responses. Responses to both the survey and interviews remained confidential and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without ramifications.

Scope and Delimitations

This study was conducted at ECU in Greenville, North Carolina. The main problem to be addressed was the lack of sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI. The specific focus was chosen because the results of an external review report of Intercultural Affairs in Spring 2018 indicated that African American males needed more targeted initiatives on campus. The study only included the African American males who have completed at least one semester at the institution. Completion of one semester allowed recruitment of participants who have taken a COAD 1000 course and also students who had actively been involved in on-campus initiatives. This study could be implemented at another institution to determine African American males' sense of belonging; however, the specific course content and campus initiatives could be different.

Limitations

The proposed study examining factors that impact sense of belonging among African American males may be limited in three ways. First, the sample of the African American males was small and only representative of a select group of African American males at ECU. Second, the responses during the interviews could have been influenced by the structure of the interview. Lastly, participant responses could have been biased based upon personal experiences at the

institution that are not representative of the entire African American population of male students at ECU.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to advance the practices at ECU to help determine factors that help to create a sense of belonging among African American males at the institution. African American students have reported that they want a place to feel like home on campus. Students have expressed interest in more interaction with faculty and other organizations on campus. These interactions may help improve their sense of belonging at the institution. Conducting this study also indicated the level of importance of enrolling in a first-year seminar and being involved on campus in regard to sense of belonging. This study informs student affairs practitioners the information needed to tailor programs to be more inclusive of African American males. More inclusive programming could help to reduce negative stereotypes and microaggressions and make African American males feel as if they are not invisible during their college experience.

Summary

In Chapter 1 I provide overview information on the importance of conducting a study on the factors that influence African American males' sense of belonging at a PWI. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth review of current literature about African American males' sense of belonging. Chapter 3 includes an overview of research methods. Chapter 4 is a report of the results from the data collection. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of results, recommendations for research and practice, and a detailed plan to adjust LWCC programming to support the sense of belonging of African American males.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this study I sought to explore how engaging in courses and initiatives on campus helps to increase the sense of belonging among African American males at PWIs. African American males often experience a lack of a sense of belonging when attending PWIs, which can lead to them eventually departing college (Strayhorn, 2008). Based on data collected from the external review section of the Department of Intercultural Affairs at ECU Program Review in April 2018, it was clear that there is a need for more male initiatives at ECU to increase the feeling of social belonging of African American males at PWIs. Data from the external review indicated African American students needed a safe space to gather and that more male initiatives need to be in place for African American men. This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework used to guide this study and an in-depth review of topics regarding African American male sense of belonging. The topics addressed in this chapter include: sense of belonging, lived experiences of African American males on campus, fostering African American male success on campus, disillusionment, student engagement, support on campus, and student success.

Theoretical Framework

Baumeister and Leary's Need to Belong Theory was used to guide this study. The theory "evolved from a simple insight about desiring togetherness into a large complex of interrelated ideas" (Lange et al., 2012, p. 136). The Need to Belong Theory was used to study the idea that individuals have a desire to build and maintain lasting meaningful relationships to have a sense of belongingness. The theory indicates that individuals must have frequent pleasant interactions with others within a given context to have a sense of belonging. A lack of these interactions can yield negative effects on an individual's health, adjustment, and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Baumeister and Leary's Need to Belong Theory enhanced the design of this study by allowing me to get an in-depth analysis of the factors that impact African American males' sense of belonging at a PWI. This theory was selected to use as a guide because it focuses directly on belongingness and an individual's needs in order to feel as if they belong. Applying this theory to this study helped build upon the existing theory.

Literature Review

Thirty-nine percent (39%) of African American students obtain a bachelor's degree within six years compared to their White counterparts at 62% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES,]2021). However, when comparing within-race completion differences by gender, African American women outnumber African American men in college enrollment and retention by a little more than two to one (NCES, 2021). Only 34% of African American males graduate within the six-year time period (Anumba, 2015). The gender gap among African American males and African American females in regard to matriculation through college is alarming compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Gafford Muhammad, 2009; Palmer et al., 2011). African American males are particularly underrepresented at PWIs (Brooks et al., 2012). Moreover, the majority of them who start college never graduate (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Jones & Williams, 2006; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Thomas et al., 2007).

Although African American women experience racial discrimination and inequities while attending PWIs, they adjust better than African American men to deal with these issues and are better able to persist and finish college. While African American women have their struggles, it is opined that PWI environments allow African American women to be more assertive and show their expressions in regard to racial discrimination and inequities more than African American males. By contrast, African American males seem to find themselves suppressing their

assertiveness and expressions in order to conform, and thereby navigating campus more successfully (Chavous et al., 2004). However, this form of suppression is contrary to a psychologically healthier and academically productive sense of belonging (Strayhorn et al., 2015).

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is an individual's perception on whether they feel included in a community (Johnson et al., 2007; Silver Wolf et al., 2017). In fact, if students lack a sense of belonging, they are more likely to transfer, stop, or drop out from higher education (Ribera et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2008). For African American males at PWIs, student success is strongly connected to their sense of belonging. Therefore, it is important that they feel valued and supported (Hoffman et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2007). However, overall, African American students are more likely to report having a lower sense of belonging compared to their White counterparts (Johnson et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017; Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2008), which can yield negative outcomes (Hausman et al., 2007). With respect to African American males, this specifically includes dropping out of higher education (Strayhorn, 2010).

Often, the notion of feeling the lack of a sense of belonging is due to the experiences with their peers, faculty, or staff. It is reported that African American males sometimes feel “socially isolated, unsupported, and unwelcome by their peers and faculty members” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 502). Researchers conclude that campus leaders should ensure they remain aware of African American students' sense of belonging while improving the climate in structured and informal spaces (Ribera et al., 2017; Sinanan, 2016). Additionally, positive peer and faculty interactions can eliminate the feeling of a lack of a sense of belonging (Brooms, 2018; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Particularly with respect to African American males, those who socialized with

individuals with different backgrounds and beliefs were more likely to report having a greater sense of belonging at a PWI (Strayhorn, 2008), which is corroborated throughout the literature (Johnson et al., 2007; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Ribera et al., 2017). These positive interactions allow African American students to feel more supported socially and academically (Johnson et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017).

Lived Experiences of African American Males on Campus

This section provides an overview of some lived experiences African Americans have while attending PWIs. Topics addressed in this section are: pre-college academic experiences, external racism, internalized oppression, external pressures, and the impact of racism on campus. Information provided in these sub-sections will aid in helping to understand the factors that impact sense of belonging in regard to African American male experiences at PWIs.

Pre-College Academic Experiences

Graduation and retention rates among African American males in elementary and secondary education has continuously been a national issue (Mitchell & Stewart, 2012). African American males often have a negative K-12 education experience (Anumba, 2015; Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Having a lack of positive reinforcement from teachers through K-12 can lead to failure syndrome. “Failure syndrome suggests that when African American students, particularly males, are viewed in stereotypical ways (i.e., African American males are stupid, academically incapable, and thugs) in educational settings, there is a possibility they will internalize those negative caricatures and underperform academically” (Robertson & Chaney, 2017, p. 262), which can carry over to college (Robertson & Chaney, 2017).

In the K-12 sector, African American males experience educational opportunity gaps that impact their ability to achieve. African American males are consistently provided with less

of everything they need to prepare for college (Anumba, 2015). African American males also experience educational inequities and have reduced access to enriching educational programs in the K-12 school system (Anumba, 2015). African American males also experience lower expectations, are placed on non-collegebound tracks in high school, face high suspension and expulsion rates, and have unwarranted special education referrals (Anumba, 2015). Based on a qualitative study by Anumba, underprivileged students expressed that early exposure to college increased their likelihood of attending college. Early exposure can be accomplished through college visits, interaction with guest speakers and other students from colleges, and participating in college preparatory courses (Anumba, 2015). Early exposure to college has a positive impact on African American males aspirations to attend college (Brooms & Davis, 2017a).

External Racism: Stereotypes and Microaggressions

In addition to the normal challenges all college students face, minority students face certain challenges that interfere with their acclimation to college and development of a sense of belonging (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Eighty percent (80%) of African American students attend PWIs (Robertson & Chaney, 2015) rendering African American undergraduate males among the most stereotyped in higher education (Harper, 2015). They are sometimes stereotypically described using negative terms such as dangerous and lazy, which unfairly reinforces negative stereotypes that can make it hard for them to establish a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008). Researchers suggest that constant portrayal of African American men as at-risk, unintelligent, and incapable of belonging at an institution contributes to their educational underachievement (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Lucas, 2018; Robertson & Chaney, 2015; 2017). These stereotypes become salient both in and outside of the

classroom (Brooks et al., 2012; Dahlvig, 2010; Guiffrida, 2005; Robertson & Chaney, 2015; Thomas et al., 2007).

According to Walton and Cohen (2007), being part of a socially stigmatized group causes one to be more sensitive to issues of social belonging. African American males have special needs when entering a PWI. The main needs are a non-threatening environment and deconstruction of negative stereotypes (Robertson & Chaney, 2015). PWIs often ignore the proven needs of African American males (Kim & Hargrove, 2013), which impacts them negatively. If administrators at PWIs pay closer attention to the needs of the African American students, it will help them develop meaningful programs to enhance their college experience and provide proper resources to retain them (Brooms, 2018; Lucas, 2018; Sinanan, 2016).

Upon arrival to a PWI, African American males try to combat negative stereotypes, which gives rise to stereotype threat (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Chavous et al., 2004; Robertson & Chaney, 2015).

Stereotype threat surmises that African American students, when cognizant of the fact that a standardized test, task, or their mere presence, can in some way be perceived to measure their intelligence/value, will experience anxiety regarding their ability to perform in academic settings. (Robertson & Chaney, 2015, p. 20)

When African Americans are constantly questioned about their presence on campus, they have to battle internal and external pressures related to their academic ability, which can hinder their intellectual ability, as well as cause them to feel a lack of sense of belonging (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018). Moreover, during stereotype threat situations, African American males experience many emotions; some feel the need to internalize their feelings to ignore the situation (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018). African American students respond to stereotype threat in different ways.

Researchers have found that anxiety is the most common response. It is reported that students have also lowered their self-expectations for academic achievement as a response to stereotype threat (Harper, 2015; Mitchell & Stewart, 2012).

Furthermore, White faculty at PWIs are often perceived as unapproachable by African American students. This is a result of African American students hearing stereotypical comments made by faculty and faculty being insensitive to African American culture and making generalizations about African Americans (Guiffrida, 2005). Research indicates that African American students also find it bothersome for faculty to ask them to speak for their entire race on issues during class discussions. African American students are bothered by faculty stereotyping them as being less capable compared to their White counterparts (Guiffrida, 2005).

Social identities and their intersectionality of forms of oppression such as classism and racism also contribute to African American males not feeling a sense of belonging at PWIs (Means & Pyne, 2017). Research indicates that African American males who experienced racism at PWIs encountered academic and social challenges, which made them feel that they do not belong (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Strayhorn et al., 2015). The mere presence of African American males at PWIs creates an environment wherein negative stereotypes are speculated (Robertson & Chaney, 2015). African American males are often viewed as having a lack of intellectual ability (Brooms & Davis, 2017a; Harper, 2007; Robertson & Chaney, 2017), constantly needing remediation, and being more interested in athletic accomplishments than academics. These negative stereotypes are often reinforced by the media (Brooms & Davis, 2017a; Dahlvig, 2010; Thomas et al., 2007). As a result, these misconceptions are often carried over into the academic environment (Brooms & Davis, 2017a; Harper, 2015; Lucas, 2018).

African American students at PWIs have reported enduring microaggressions, which is a less overt form of racism (Barker & Avery, 2012; Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Lucas, 2018). Microaggressions are “subtle and often unconscious racist acts that cumulatively add stress to the experience of people of color” (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Robertson & Chaney, 2017).

For African American males, microaggressions often take the form of harassment by police on and off campus. African American males are often swept under the guise of fitting a nondescript profile (e.g., 6-foot-tall wearing a hoodie) by police who claim they “fit the description” (Jackson & Hui, 2017). Having to deal with negative stereotypes, microaggressions, and being under constant surveillance from police officers on campus hinders African American males from feeling a sense of belonging (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Robertson & Chaney, 2017; Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Strayhorn et al., 2015) and reduces their likelihood to remain at the institution (Costen et al., 2013). Overall, microaggressions towards African American males at PWIs impact their academic achievement (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

It just so happens to be the case that activities viewed as more positive stereotypical behavior of African American men can also be the very methods they use to cope. Participating in athletics helps African American males build self-esteem and facilitates social adjustment for them to successfully complete college. Likewise, fraternal membership positively impacts African American males socially and academically. Contrary to the belief that athletics and African American Greek organizations are the reasons African American males attend college, participation in these extracurricular activities serves as an avenue to negate stereotype threat by helping them build self-esteem (Robertson & Chaney, 2015). Extracurricular activities provide a buffer for African American males from the negative experiences of microaggressions and

stereotypes (Jackson & Hui, 2017). In addition to PWIs developing initiatives to increase African American males' sense of belonging, they should also continuously seek ways in which the campus climate and institutional culture can become more welcoming for African American males (Brooms et al., 2015).

Campus administrators, faculty, and staff often fail to acknowledge challenges African Americans face on campus, which can decrease retention. Continuously striving to identify the challenges African American students face can help improve retention (Brooks et al., 2012; Lucas, 2018).

Internalized Oppression

Internalized oppression is “when socially stigmatized groups (e.g., African American males) accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities, and societal place, which results in self-devaluation and the invalidation of others within the group” (Harper, 2007, p. 338). Internalized oppression affects African American males because it causes them to devalue education based on the negative messages society delivers. For instance, when same-race peers refer to high achieving African American males as “acting White,” it can lead to them consciously or unconsciously reducing the effort they put into their education, which can lead to them leaving an institution. Mentorship can be used to address this issue (Harper, 2007).

External Pressures

African American male success in higher education is heavily impacted by their financial situation (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Unlike their White counterparts, many African American male students are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Coming from a low socioeconomic background often reduces African American male exposure to educational environments, such as a PWI, which makes it harder for them to adjust socially and academically (Robertson &

Chaney, 2017). Often times, faculty and peers expect that all students have academic knowledge and experiences that may not have been available to them due to their socioeconomic background and the neighborhoods in which they attended school (Means & Pyne, 2017). The residentially-segregated neighborhoods individuals from low socioeconomic statuses reside in are more likely to have poor schools, which causes African American males to be unprepared for college, and it affects their academic achievement (Robertson & Chaney, 2017).

African American males are also more likely to work more hours than their White counterparts to have financial security, which allows little time for them to focus on their academics (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Research indicates that low-income and working-class students struggle to gain a sense of belonging in a higher education setting compared to middle and upper-class students (Means & Pyne, 2017). Working-class students often have other obligations, such as raising a family, which hinder them from engaging in academic and social activities on campus that would increase their sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017). Institutions need to strive to ensure that students from marginalized communities and working-class students are aware of the financial assistance available to them (Anumba, 2015).

Impact of Racism on Campus

African American students often enter PWIs with the expectation that they will be treated like the other students (Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Robertson & Chaney, 2015) and to excel with little to no support due to the college primarily supporting the needs of the White students (Brooks et al., 2012; Jones & Williams, 2006). Unfortunately, racism has continued to be an issue that affects the success of African American students at PWIs (Brooms & Davis, 2017b; Robertson & Chaney, 2015). For example, African American students at PWIs, have reported being discriminated against and followed in campus stores (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

Likewise, research indicates that African American students are constantly confronted with racial stereotypes and insulting comments from White faculty and staff (Guiffrida, 2005; Harper, 2015; Thomas et al., 2007). As a result of racism, PWIs can be hostile environments for African American students (Brooms et al., 2015). Hostile environments at PWIs cause African American students to feel alienated, which can result in stress, anxiety and poor academic performance (Chavous et al., 2004; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Means & Pyne, 2017; Robertson & Chaney, 2015; Thomas et al., 2007).

Fostering African American Male Success on Campus

African American males are more likely to leave PWIs due to the lack of a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008). Having an overall positive and inclusive college experience can positively impact African American male success on campus. To the extent that there are positive stereotypes, positive African American male engagement is often reduced to participation in extracurricular activities, such as athletics and African American Greek letter organizations. These stereotypes are often seen as the principle reason why African American males attend college (Robertson & Chaney, 2015). This section gives an overview of peer interventions, student organizations, mentoring and coping strategies.

Peer Intervention

The lack of African American male engagement in college is a common trend in higher education (Barker & Avery, 2012). Student engagement among African American males is essential because this group is at risk of not matriculating through college (Brooks et al., 2012; Brooms & Davis, 2017a). Research indicates that African American males need a strong support system at PWIs to help foster a sense of belonging (Sinanan, 2012). African American males also report feeling as if they are invisible (Iverson & Jagers, 2015) or seen as Educational

Opportunity Program students at PWIs (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2015; Sinanan, 2012; Thomas et al., 2007), which influences their student engagement on campus (Sinanan, 2012). As a result of feeling invisible and needing a strong support system, African American students seek support from other African American students as a way to deal with the discomforts of racial alienation at PWIs (Jackson & Hui, 2017; Sinanan, 2012).

Furthermore, research indicates that when African American males at PWIs face challenges, they learn to adapt by providing social support to each other (Watkins et al., 2007). Several scholars recommend developing peer support and same-race initiatives to support the academic and social needs of African American students and to increase their student engagement on campus (Barker & Avery, 2012). African American males “involved in African American male initiatives or who engage in peer mentoring programs have a strong sense of belonging and reference support from other African American males as critical to their connectedness to the campus” (Strayhorn et al., 2015, p. 129).

A study by Mitchell and Stewart (2012) on the African American Male Mentoring Program (AAMMP) at Penn State Greater Allegheny proved that peer mentoring interventions can positively improve the high school to college matriculation and retention of African American males, especially at PWIs. African American students who engage in extracurricular activities with same-race peers are less likely to drop out of college (Costen et al., 2013; Walton & Cohen, 2007). According to a study by Moore and Associates in 2003, African American male participants reported that their self-efficacy, along with same-race peer support, had a major impact on their success in college (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). African American male initiatives provide a supportive milieu and promote student success (Anumba, 2015; Boyd & Mitchell 2018; Brooms, 2018).

Student Organizations

When African American males serve as leaders in student organizations, they are able to make lasting connections with campus administrators, which provide access to resources and opportunities (Oaks et al., 2013). Serving as leaders in student organizations also allows African American males to refute negative stereotypes faculty and staff may have about them (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Once connections are made, underrepresented students usually stick together for support due to the negative experiences they have on campus (Sinanan, 2012). Involvement in leadership activities also helps African American males increase their sense of belonging at the institution (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Additionally, involvement in student organizations and departments on campus that encourage African American students to explore their racial identity can have a positive impact on African American males (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms et al., 2015). Organizations joined by African American males at PWIs strongly influence how they persist based on the leadership role (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). Culturally-based campus activities also help African American males with social adjustment and retention (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Many African American Student Centers at PWIs provide students with coping skills to progress at the institution (Jones & Williams, 2006). Involvement with student organizations and departments on campus allows students to have a safe space where they can express their feelings and seek support and guidance from other students that look like them. These spaces also allow students to form lasting connections with faculty and staff (Barker & Avery, 2012; Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Costen et al., 2013; Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Jackson & Hui, 2017; Means & Pyne, 2017). Administrators, faculty, staff, and campus departments help offset some of the burdens African American male students deal with as a result of being stereotyped (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018).

Mentoring

African American students at PWIs report having less interaction with faculty and being less integrated into campus life compared to their White counterparts (Brooms et al., 2015; Guiffrida, 2005). Underrepresented students report wanting to have better relationships with faculty but are fearful that being African American may negatively affect building that relationship (Sinanan, 2012). Moreover, many African American students find it difficult to connect with White faculty at PWIs because they do not view them as realistic role models (Guiffrida, 2005).

As a result of African American students having less interaction with faculty and finding White faculty unapproachable, PWIs should aim to connect faculty with students via a mentoring initiative (Sinanan, 2016). Researchers suggest that establishing relationships with African American faculty will help African American males adjust to college (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Frequent and meaningful interaction with faculty outside of the classroom also contributes to African American male retention (Costen et al., 2013; Lucas, 2018; Strayhorn et al., 2015).

PWIs generally have a small African American faculty body (NCES, 2020). Engaging with African American faculty increases African American males' retention and graduation rates; therefore, PWIs should aim to hire more African American faculty. African American faculty can serve as mentors and help decrease racial tensions on campus (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Therefore, the dearth of African American faculty at most PWIs impinges on African American male student retention.

By contrast mentoring increases college retention among African American students (Brooms & Davis, 2017b; Dahlvig, 2010). African American males need a strong support system

to help foster a sense of belonging and positive interaction with faculty will help tremendously (Sinanan, 2016). Mentoring relationships can help students overcome the challenges they face at PWIs (Brooms et al., 2015; Sinanan, 2016). That mentoring can be cross-cultural and effective (Grant-Thompson & Atkinson, 1997; Hagler, 2018). To foster support on an academic level, faculty and same-race peers should use mentoring as a means to help African American males overcome barriers that can prevent them from dropping out (Brooks et al., 2012; Brooms, 2018; Lucas, 2018).

Coping Strategies

Many PWIs provide little to no support for African American students (Jones & Williams, 2006; Thomas et al., 2007). African American students at PWIs sometimes engage in protests and serve as activists as a way to find comfort and feel accepted at the institution (Jones & Reddick, 2017). African American student organizations (Jones & Reddick, 2017) and extracurricular activities serve as safe havens for African American males at PWIs (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Particularly, involvement in athletics and African American Greek letter organizations help facilitate a sense of belonging, which yields better retention (Anumba, 2015; Robertson & Chaney, 2015). These organizations also serve as a place where they can learn effective response techniques from their same-race peers to deal with issues that affect African American students (Harper, 2015). The existence of African American student organizations and gatherings are often viewed by the White community as self-segregating from the other students and activities on campus (Jones & Williams, 2006). When students of color surround themselves with people who look like them, it should not be seen as self-segregating but as a means of support (Jackson & Hui, 2017).

In some instances when African American males join predominately White organizations, they are provided with identity development opportunities (Barker & Avery, 2012). According to researchers, African American males in predominantly White organizations develop skills that help them “deal with White people,” which can help when navigating a PWI (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Jackson & Hui, 2017). Student involvement in campus organizations helps ease the transition for students of color into a PWI (Jackson & Hui, 2017).

Disillusionment

College marketing material often illustrates supportive communities and fails to make students from marginalized communities aware that they may have challenges adapting to college (Means & Pyne, 2017). A student’s perception of the stressors and challenges associated with an institution affects their level of success (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). African American students who report having a higher satisfaction with the racial climate on campus are more inclined to succeed academically (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Brooks et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2007). African American students at PWIs can experience low academic performance, which results in them having lower aspirations to finish their college career (Brooks et al., 2012; Lucas, 2018).

Support on Campus

Research indicates that African American males need a strong support system at PWIs to help foster a sense of belonging (Sinanan, 2012; 2016). Researchers suggest that positive relationships with faculty, staff, and students will increase African American males’ sense of belonging and promote retention and student success (Anumba, 2015; Brooms & Davis, 2017b; Flowers, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005; Means & Pyne, 2017; Ribera et al., 2017; Robertson & Chaney, 2015; Sinanan, 2016; Strayhorn et al., 2015). Particularly faculty who provide academic support

and/or mentoring and encourage class participation contribute to African American males' sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Therefore, PWIs that make connecting students with faculty and staff for mentorship a top priority are more likely to foster a sense of belonging (Sinanan, 2016).

Although African American students benefit more from engaging with successful African American faculty in higher education (Guiffrida, 2005), they may not always have access to faculty of color at PWIs (Dahlvig, 2010). Research suggests that stepping outside of one's comfort zone can have a positive impact in regard to mentorship. Cross-race mentoring allows for both parties to learn from each other. Likewise, intentional cross-race mentorship interactions can help foster a greater sense of belonging for African American students at PWIs (Dahlvig, 2010).

Student Success

In regard to retention, institutions that continuously strive to maintain a welcoming environment, socially and academically, can increase African American male retention (Brooks et al., 2012; Jones & Williams, 2006). Positive faculty and student relationships impact retention (Guiffrida, 2005). Research indicates that a student's ability to find a sense of belonging on campus is positively associated with retention (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Museus et al., 2017). For African American males to succeed, they must have a good degree of social and academic integration into college life at the institution (Haywood & Sewell, 2016), which is Tinto's model of Student Departure (Tinto, 1988).

According to a study by Brooms et al. (2015) on an African American Men Achieve Program, students who participated in the program reported that it was empowering and helped to improve their academic and social engagement at the institution. Students who participated in

the program also reported that they were more knowledgeable of the resources and different opportunities available on campus, and they felt that they were more connected to their peers (Brooms et al., 2015). Three major themes from the study indicated that African American students who participated were motivated to participate in the program because of the possible interaction and connections with the campus community, opportunities for leadership and a strong support system, and mentoring and professional development opportunities (Brooms et al., 2015). Administrators, faculty, and staff who develop initiatives to engage students academically and socially can help improve retention and their overall college experience (Brooms et al., 2015). This institutional intervention is built on Tinto's model of Student Departure (Tinto, 1988).

Summary and Conclusions

Overall, research indicates that African American males need a strong support system at PWIs to help foster a sense of belonging (Sinanan, 2012). African American males “involved in African American male initiatives or who engage in peer mentoring programs have a strong sense of belonging and reference support from other African American males as critical to their connectedness to the campus” (Strayhorn et al., 2015). African American males deal with a lot of issues that can cause them to feel a lack of sense of belonging at a PWI, such as being stereotyped, dealing with internalized oppression, and having a lack of student engagement and support on campus. To address these issues, administrators, faculty, and staff need to make a joint effort to make this population of students feel as if they belong. To assist, purposefully tracking and gathering feedback from African American male students on how engaging in courses and initiatives on campus helps to increase their sense of belonging and student engagement at ECU should be conducted.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

This convergent mixed methods study addressed factors that impact the lack of sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI. A convergent mixed methods design was used to best understand the research problem. In this study, data collected on African American males enrolled in a first-year seminar titled COAD 1000 was used to determine what effect completing first-year seminar has on the sense of belonging for African American males at East Carolina University. Interviews were used to explore how engaging in programs offered on campus for African American males helps to increase their sense of belonging. The reason for mixing both quantitative and qualitative data was to get a better understanding of how completing a first-year seminar and engaging in weekly programs on campus affects African American males' sense of belonging at the institution in comparison to those who do not.

The research questions for this study were:

1. Do African American males feel a lack of sense of belonging when they first arrive at East Carolina University?
2. How does completing a first-year seminar affect African American males' overall sense of belonging at East Carolina University?
3. How does attending weekly programs offered on campus affect African American males' student engagement at East Carolina University?
4. What is the impact of completing a first-year seminar and attending weekly programs at East Carolina University?

The research design, data processing and analysis, methodological assumptions and limitations, and my role as the researcher will be described in-depth in this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The problem of practice in this study focused on factors that impact sense of belonging among African American males at PWIs. A convergent mixed methods design was used. The mixed methods design connected to the research questions in this study by gathering quantitative data on African American males who completed COAD 1000, engaged in on-campus initiatives, and who felt a lack of sense of belonging when they arrived at the institution. In regard to qualitative data, the research questions connected by determining how completing a COAD 1000 course and being involved in campus initiatives impacts African American males' sense of belonging. Quantitative and qualitative data were used to get a better understanding of factors that influence African American males' sense of belonging.

Quantitative data was gathered on the number of African American males who completed a COAD 1000 course and attended weekly initiatives offered at the institution; African American males who only took a COAD 1000 course; African American males who only participated in weekly initiatives; and African American males who did not participate in either activity. Qualitative data was gathered on how taking a COAD 1000 course and/or being involved in campus initiatives impacts African American males' sense of belonging. Both the quantitative and qualitative data helped to determine the importance of African American males' involvement on campus to increase their sense of belonging at the institution.

Population

The target population for this study was African American males who have completed at least one semester at the institution. African American males who participated in the study must have met at least one of the following criteria: have completed a COAD 1000 course and engaged in weekly initiatives on campus; have completed a COAD 1000 course and did not

engage in weekly initiatives on campus; have not completed a COAD 1000 course and engaged in weekly initiatives on campus; or have not completed a COAD 1000 course and did not engage in weekly initiatives on campus. Using these criteria allowed me to gather data to get a better understanding of the impact of completing a COAD 1000 course and/or engaging on campus on sense of belonging.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling strategies were used in this study. I used clustering and then obtained participants from the cluster who were accessible and available to participate in the study. Data on African American males who have completed a COAD 1000 course at the institution were obtained from the Registrar's Office. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to all African American males at the institution to gather participants.

The study was conducted during a semester; therefore, an initial sample size of 10% of the African American male population who have completed a COAD 1000 course would be used for quantitative data collection. An initial sample size of 10 was desired to be used for qualitative data collection. The sample size could have been reduced if I determined saturation had been achieved. Saturation is when the researcher determines that gathering new data is no longer providing useful or new insight into the problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, the sample size was reduced to 10, based on voluntary participation.

Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

Appropriate actions were taken to ensure an ethical study. Prior to conducting the study, the proposal was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) (see Appendix A). Potential participants were informed of the purpose of the study during the initial contact email. An

informed consent form was completed by all participants. Participants were informed that they were not obligated to participate and were not pressured into signing the form.

During the data collection process, I ensured that there were no issues accessing the site. Participants were reminded of the purpose of the study. Details on how the collected data would be used was explained in detail. All participants were given aliases for confidentiality. I treated all participants the same. During interviews, I followed the interview protocol and avoided asking questions that may have persuaded the interviewee to answer in a specific way. If a participant withdrew from the study, another interested participant would have been added and the previous procedures would be followed.

Data collected was confidential, and only I had access. Data was stored on cloud storage with two-factor authentication required to access. When analyzing the data, I reported findings from all perspectives. In regard to findings, I reported the findings accurately and used unbiased language.

The study was conducted in my work environment. Conversations about the study or interview responses did not take place if I encountered a participant within my work environment and an interview was not conducted. Incentives in the form of Amazon gift cards were used to recruit participants; however, the incentives were funded by myself and not my department at the institution.

Instrumentation

Hagerty and Patusky's (1995) SOBI was used to collect sense of belonging quantitative data in this study. The SOBI is a 27-item self-report survey with two separately scored scales, SOBI-P (psychological state) and SOBI-A (antecedents) (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). "Sense of belonging was viewed as a psychological construct that tapped the experience of fit and valued

involvement in relationships and had antecedents necessary in order to occur. This conceptualization guided the development of the SOBI-P and SOBI-A” (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995, p. 12).

Procedures

To begin this study, I requested data from the Registrar’s Office. A list of African American males enrolled at the institution who had completed at least one semester was requested. I also requested data on African American males who had completed a COAD 1000 course. An email requesting participation in the study was sent to all African American males who have completed at least one semester at the institution. The email included the purpose of the study and estimated time commitment and incentives for completing the study. Potential participants were also informed that they were not obligated to participate in the study. Potential participants were blind copied for confidentiality.

Once respondents agreed to participate, I sent a link to complete the SOBI via email. On the survey, participants were asked to disclose if they attended weekly programs on campus. Five respondents who completed the survey and attended weekly programs were asked to be interviewed to gather more insight into the factors that impact their sense of belonging. Five African American males who have not taken COAD 1000 or participated in on-campus initiatives were also be asked to be interviewed.

The interviews took place virtually via Microsoft Teams. I followed an interview protocol to give all interviewees the same platform to provide responses. The interviews were recorded to ensure all responses were included.

After gathering and analyzing the data, I compared the impact of completing a COAD 1000 course and being involved on campus to opting to only complete COAD 1000 or weekly

initiatives, or not engaging at all on campus. The data provided helped to get a better understanding of how these factors affect sense of belonging.

Data Processing and Analysis

Qualtrics and Audext was used for data management and organization. Qualitative data was analyzed first. Recorded interviews were transcribed by Audext software. I reviewed the transcription for accuracy. I also coded and identified major themes in the data. In regard to quantitative data, I reviewed each response to the SOBI was for completeness. After all results were received, I exported the data from Qualtrics to Excel, and uploaded it to SPSS for statistical analysis. African American males' overall sense of belonging at the institution was analyzed from this data. After analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data, I used side-by-side comparison to get a better understanding of the impact of completing a first-year seminar and being engaged on campus in regard to sense of belonging.

Methodological Assumptions and Limitations

A convergent mixed methods approach likely yielded a better understanding of the factors that influenced sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI. However, there were possible threats to validity. In this study, the SOBI was issued to gather quantitative data and interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. The quantitative and qualitative sample sizes differed. Nevertheless, I intended to use quantitative data and qualitative data to get a better understanding of the research problem.

The use of a convergent mixed approach may be limited in three ways. First, quantitative data was only received from a select group of African American males and was not representative of all African American males' experiences at the institution. Second, participants' responses during interviews could possibly have been influenced by my presence

and/or information provided could have been indirect in regard to the research topic. Lastly, the unequal quantitative and qualitative sample sizes yielded more quantitative data than qualitative data.

Role of the Researcher

I currently serve as an Assistant Director within the Department of Intercultural Affairs at ECU. I collected, analyzed and reported data from this study. Currently, I do not work with the African American male population separate from the African American population as a whole. I have direct access to the African American male population.

Recently, I was informed via results from a program review that African American male students need more initiatives in place to help increase their sense of belonging at the institution. Based on the information obtained from the program review and through working with students directly, I acknowledged that more initiatives needed to be in place to increase the sense of belonging among African American males. However, personal biases remained omitted during the course of the study to ensure accurate data collection and reporting. To ensure accurate data collection and reporting, I adhered to the interview protocol during all interviews. Additionally, all data retrieved during the study was reported the way it was received to increase validity.

Summary

I used a convergent mixed methods approach to understand the factors that impact African American males' sense of belonging at PWIs. Quantitative data was gathered using the SOBI. Qualitative data was gathered from interviewees to determine the impact of taking a first-year seminar and being engaged in campus initiatives in regard to sense of belonging. The results of this mixed methods study are shared in depth in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter provides an overview of the data collection, analysis, and results of this convergent mixed methods study to determine the factors that impact sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI. The research questions that were addressed in this study were:

1. Do African American males feel a lack of sense of belonging when they first arrive at East Carolina University?
2. How does completing a first-year seminar course affect African American males' overall sense of belonging at East Carolina University?
3. How does attending weekly programs offered on campus affect African American males' student engagement at East Carolina University?
4. What is the impact of completing a course first-year seminar and attending weekly programs at East Carolina University?

This chapter will also include a description of the participants for the quantitative and qualitative data collection and a detailed summary of the results and key findings. However, it is important to begin with a note on how the Coronavirus pandemic impacted this study.

Coronavirus Pandemic

The Coronavirus pandemic, often referred to as COVID-19, began to impact the United States and ECU in March 2020. COVID-19 impacted normal operations at ECU from the spring 2020 semester through spring 2021, which directly affected the data collection for this study. As a result of COVID-19, I had to adjust the originally proposed study and data collection process.

North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper issued Executive Order 121, a mandatory stay-at-home order, that went into effect on March 30, 2020 through April 29, 2020 (Executive order, 2020). As a result of the executive order, ECU shut down normal operations. Students on campus

were asked to move off campus, and all classes were administered online. This limited my ability to recruit students at in person events or casually in areas such as the student center. This limitation particularly impinged on my ability to connect with students who were not enrolled in COAD 1000 and who also did not participate in LWCC activities.

Students were permitted to return to campus in fall 2020, with restrictions. Over the course of 2020 and into 2021, Governor Cooper gradually lifted restrictions. However, this was after my quantitative data collection period.

Data Collection

As a result of the pandemic and the restrictions, I revised the proposed study and data collection methods. Data collection for the entire study started in January 2020 and concluded in January 2021. Quantitative data collection occurred between January and August 2020. Qualitative data collection occurred between November 2020 and January 2021. Originally, the study was supposed to take place over the course of one semester; however, after making adjustments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data was collected over the course of three semesters. I had to amend the IRB for the study to collect data virtually. Additionally, interview participants were supposed to be recruited from a list of students who regularly engaged in weekly programs at the LWCC. Since COVID-19 impacted on-campus programming and students were moved off campus in Spring 2020, I had to recruit participants from the survey responses.

After requesting and receiving a list of all African American male undergraduate students who had completed at least one semester from the Registrar, an email was sent to the students requesting participation in the study in February 2020 (see Appendix B). A direct link was included in the email, which directed students to the SOBI that was uploaded in Qualtrics. Due to

the low response rate, two follow-up emails were sent requesting additional participants. Each follow-up email was the same and was sent in April and August 2020. Fifty-five undergraduate African American males responded to the SOBI. In the initial proposal for the study, quantitative data was supposed to be collected over the course of one semester and have an initial sample size of 10% of the African American male population. It also indicated that the SOBI would be administered at the beginning and end of the semester using descriptive statistics, as well as a paired samples *t*-test to measure changes overtime. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, quantitative data was collected over a longer time period and did not yield a 10% sample size. When the survey closed, I exported the data from Qualtrics into Microsoft Excel so it could be organized for SPSS. The data was then recoded in Excel to numeric values. After the data was organized, it was exported to SPSS for analysis.

I solicited participants to interview from those who completed the survey. Nine students agreed to an interview via Microsoft Teams. One interview was completed in November 2020, and the remaining eight were completed in January 2021 within one week. The interviews were completed to gain greater insight on the overall sense of belonging of African American males at ECU.

Participant Demographics

Participant demographics for the qualitative and quantitative data are discussed in the following sections. Details of the participants' classification, COAD class completion or non-completion, and student engagement or lack thereof are provided.

Participants in Quantitative Data Collection Phase

All participants for the quantitative data collection were current ECU students at the time of data collection who identified as African American males. A total of 55 African American

males participated in the study out of a possible 1,457. Survey responses were low as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and students being burnt out overall due to changes associated with the pandemic.

Figure 2 provides an overview of African American males and COAD 1000 participation. Of the 55 participants, 15 (29%) reported taking COAD 1000. Figure 3 provides an overview of the African American males' student engagement, as measured by engaging in weekly programs offered. Of the 55 participants, 15 (27%) reported being engaged in weekly activities. Figure 4 provides an overview of the classification of the African American male participants. Of the 55 participants, 13 (24%) were sophomores, 17 (31%) were juniors, and 25 (45%) were seniors.

Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI)

The SOBI was designed to measure the phenomenon of sense of belonging. The SOBI consists of two components, SOBI-P (psychological) and SOBI-A (antecedents). SOBI-P measures an individual's perceived level of sense of belonging using two attributes, valued involvement and fit. SOBI-A measures the intensity of the antecedents of sense of belonging: energy for involvement, potential and desire for meaningful involvement, and potential for shared or complementary characteristics. Composite scores for SOBI-A and SOBI-P (see Table 1 and Table 2) determine an individual's sense of belonging (Hagerty, 2015).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the SOBI was collected via Qualtrics, and the responses were imported and analyzed using SPSS. I calculated the composite scores for SOBI-A and SOBI-P to determine participants' overall sense of belonging. There were 55 participants. The mean for SOBI-P and SOBI-A was also calculated to determine the average level of sense of belonging

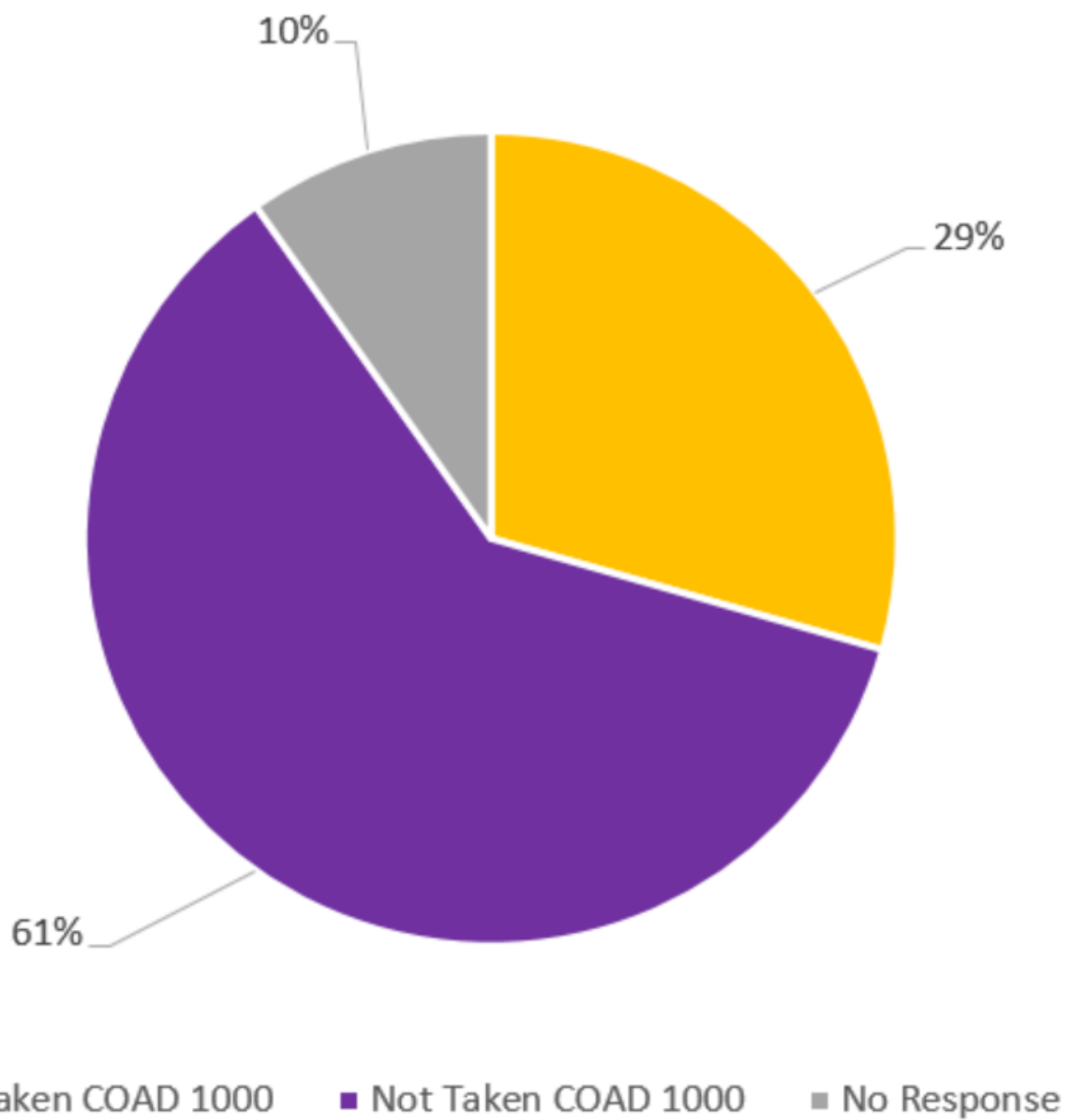


Figure 2. African American males' COAD 1000 participation.

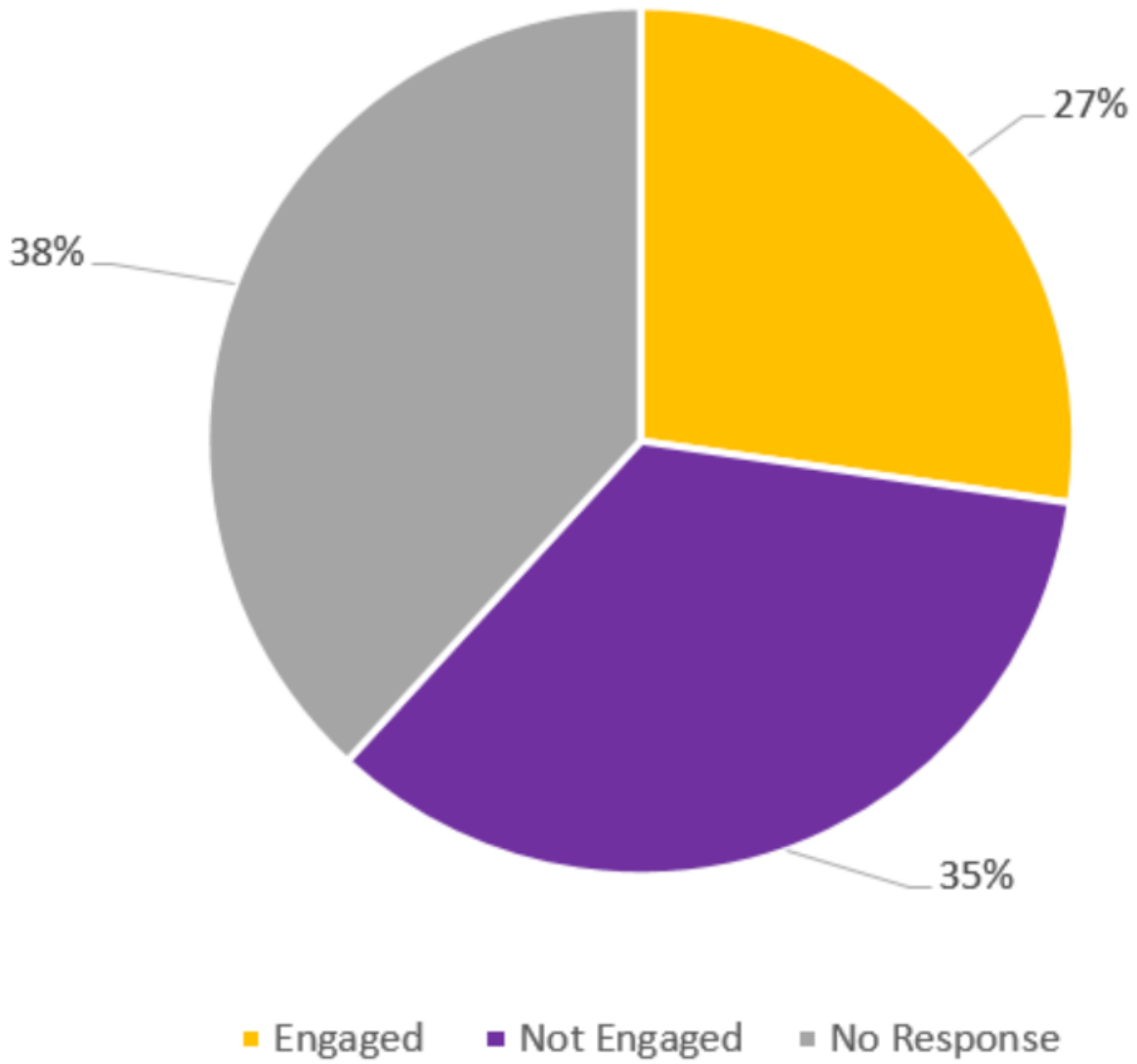


Figure 3. African American males' student engagement.

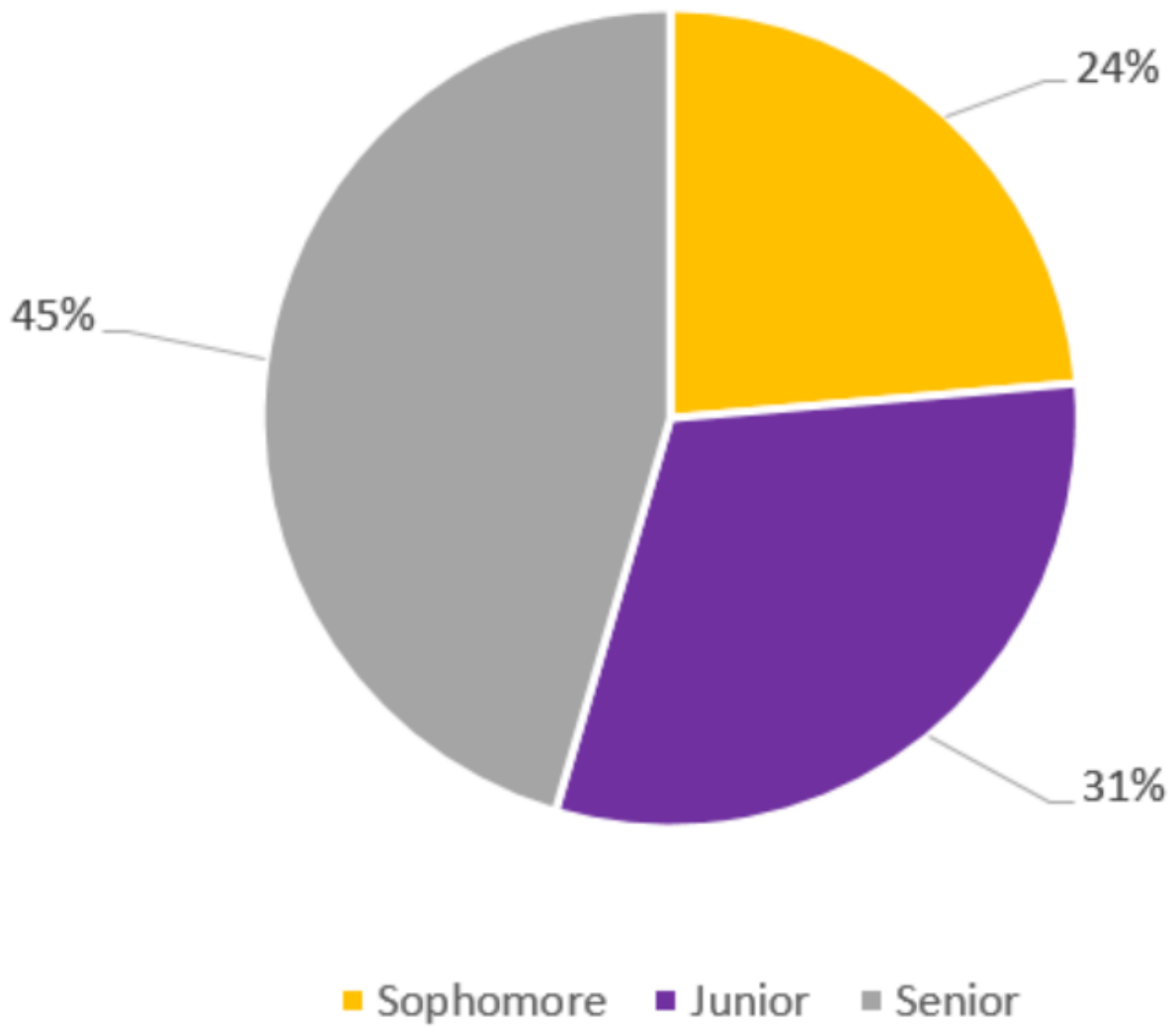


Figure 4. African American males classification.

Table 1

SOBI-Antecedent (SOBI-A) Attribute Survey Items

Energy for Involvement	Meaningful Involvement	Potential for Shared or Complementary Characteristics
6. I want to be part of things going on around me.	1. It is important to me that I am valued or accepted by others.	4. I have qualities that can be important to others.
11. Fitting in with people around me matters a great deal.	2. In the past, I have felt valued and important to others.	5. I am working on fitting in better with those around me.
13. Relationships take too much energy for me.	3. It is important to me that I fit somewhere in this world.	9. I can make myself fit in anywhere
14. I just don't feel like getting involved with people.	7. It is important to me that my thoughts and opinions are valued. 8. Generally, other people recognize my strengths and good points.	
	10. All of my life I have wanted to feel like I really belonged somewhere.	
	12. I feel badly if others do not value or accept me.	

Note. Hagerty (2015). Sense of belonging instrument (SOBI) development and use. Unpublished manuscript.

Table 2

SOBI-Psychological (SOBI-P) Attribute Survey Items

Fit	Valued Involvement
1. I often wonder if there is any place on earth where I really fit in.	4. I generally feel that people accept me.
2. I am just not sure if I fit in with my friends.	6. I would like to make a difference to people or things around me, but I don't feel that what I have to offer is valued.
3. I would describe myself as a misfit in most social situations.	9. I could disappear for days and it wouldn't matter to my family.
5. I feel like a piece of a jig-saw puzzle that doesn't fit into the puzzle.	11. I feel like I observe life rather than participate in it.
7. I feel like an outsider in most situations.	12. If I died tomorrow, very few people would come to my funeral.
8. I am troubled by feeling like I have no place in this world.	16. I could not see or call my friends for days and it wouldn't matter to them.
10. In general, I don't feel a part of the mainstream of society.	18. I am not valued by or important to my friends.
13. I feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.	
14. I don't feel that there is any place where I really fit in this world.	
15. I am uncomfortable that my background and experiences are so different from those who are usually around me.	
17. I feel left out of things.	

Note. Hagerty, B. M. (2015). Sense of belonging instrument (SOBI) development and use. Unpublished manuscript.

among participants. Participants were only required to answer survey questions they felt comfortable answering.

Quantitative Results

SOBI-A (Antecedents) – Total Score

SOBI-A focuses on the precursors of sense of belonging, which is what caused a level of sense of belonging (SOBI-P) to emerge (Hagerty, 2015). The scoring range was developed by multiplying the highest point on the scale, which is 4, by the total number of questions, 14. The possible range of scores for SOBI-A is between 14 (lowest) and 56 (highest). The average score was 29. Twenty-nine respondents (53%) scored at or above the average score (see Figure 5). To gain further insight on the participants' antecedents, I analyzed the data related to energy for involvement, potential and desire for meaningful involvement, and potential for shared or complementary characteristics.

Energy for Involvement

The energy for involvement antecedent is used to indicate how determined an individual is to try to be a part of their environment. The score for this antecedent was calculated using four of the SOBI-A items (see Table 1). The mean score for this antecedent was nine. Thirty participants (55%) scored at or above the average score. The data indicates that over half of the participants are engaged with others in their environment.

Potential and Desire for Meaningful Involvement

The potential and desire for meaningful involvement antecedent is used to determine how the participant is engaged in their environment. The score for this antecedent was calculated using seven of the SOBI-A items (see Table 1). The mean score for this antecedent was 15.

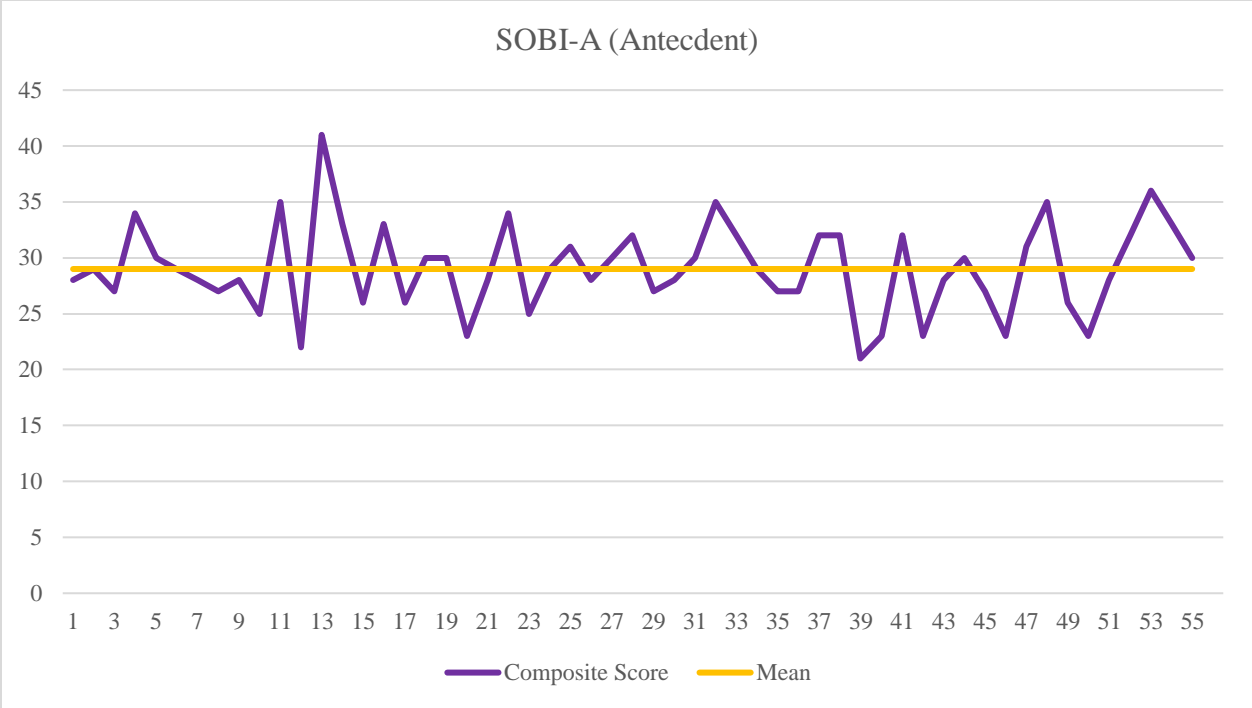


Figure 5. Sense of Belonging Instrument-Antecedent (SOBI-A) Composite Scores.

Twenty-eight participants (51%) scored at or above the average score. The data indicates that about half of the participants have the desire to be or feel valued within their environment.

Potential for Shared or Complementary Characteristics

The potential for shared or complementary characteristics antecedent is used to determine the degree a participant feels they can contribute to those around them. The score for this antecedent was calculated using three of the SOBI-A items (see Table 1). The mean score for this antecedent was six. Thirty participants (56%) scored at or above the average score. The data indicates that over half of the participants feel that they can contribute to those around them.

SOBI-P (Psychological) – Total Score

As mentioned previously, the SOBI-P measures two defining attributes of one's sense of belonging, valued involvement and fit. The total indicates the level of sense of belonging one feels in their life. The scoring range was developed by multiplying the highest point in the scale, which is four by the total number of questions, 18. The possible range of total scores for SOBI-P is between 18 (lowest) and 72 (highest). The average score was 40. Thirty-one participants (56%) scored at or above the average score (see Figure 6). To gain further insight on the participants' sense of belonging, I analyzed the data related to fit and valued involvement.

Fit

Fit is an attribute of the SOBI-P that measures a participant's level of fit. Fit is defined as “the perception of unique individual characteristics being articulated with or complementing the environment or system” (Hagerty, 2015, p. 3). The score for this attribute was calculated using 11 of the SOBI-P items (see Table 2). The mean score for this attribute was 25. Twenty-nine participants (53%) scored at or above the average score. Five participants showed an extreme

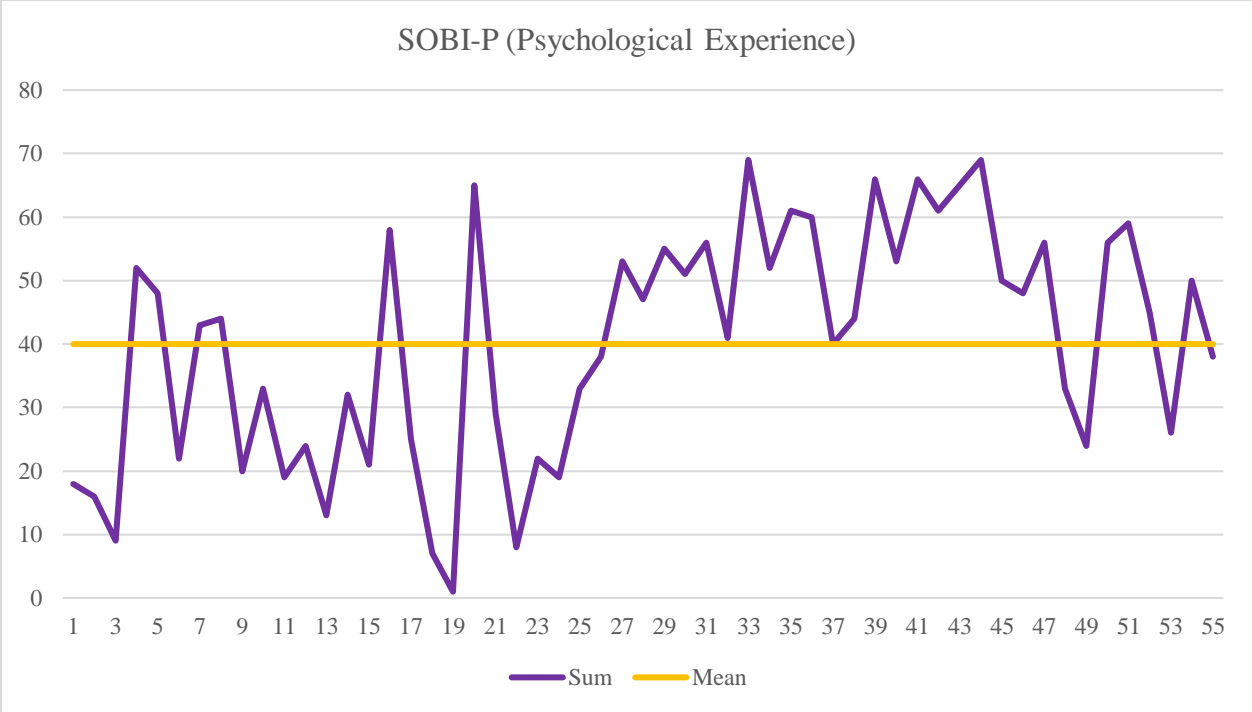


Figure 6. Sense of Belonging Instrument-Psychological (SOBI-P) Composite Scores.

lack of fit. Although the data for those five participants indicated an extreme lack of fit, it may also indicate that the participant was not comfortable answering the questions related to fit.

Valued Involvement

Valued involvement is an attribute of the SOBI-P that measures a participant's "experience of feeling needed, valued and accepted" (Hagerty, 2015). The score for this attribute was calculated using seven of the SOBI-P items (see Table 2). The mean score for this attribute was 16. Thirty-three participants (60%) scored at or above the average score. The data indicates that most of the participants feel that they are needed, valued and accepted in their everyday environments.

Qualitative Data Collection

There were nine participants who participated in the interviews out of a possible 55. Eight of the nine participants were engaged on campus. Six of the nine participants have completed a COAD 1000 course. To protect the identity of the participants, who participated in the interviews, they were referred to as Joe, Liam, Sean, Mark, Jared, Tyreik, Gavin, Will, and Lance, which are pseudonyms. Interviews were used to gain further insight on each participant's sense of belonging at ECU.

Students who responded to the survey were contacted to request participation in an interview (see Appendix D). Due to the known low response rate among the participants and having to amend the IRB to administer interviews virtually via Microsoft Teams as a result of COVID-19, I included an incentive for participation. I had offered the first 10 participants to complete an interview to be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card; however, I only ended up having nine participants for the interview. The gift card was paid for using my own personal funds. The first interview was administered on November 19, 2020, and the interviews

concluded on January 29, 2021. All nine interviews were administered virtually via Microsoft Teams, an online platform. The original plan was to have a sample size of 10 interviews; however, there were a total of nine interviews.

Due to interviews being completed virtually, participants were not able to sign consent forms and return them. I used the participant's email response agreeing to participate in an interview as informed consent. I had the email responses saved for each participant. At the beginning of each interview, I graciously thanked each participant for agreeing to participate. A brief overview of the study was shared with each participant, and they were informed that they did not have to answer any questions they were uncomfortable answering. Each participant was also informed that they could stop and withdraw from the interview at any time. Participants were also informed that the interview would be recorded and they were asked to turn their camera off. I informed each participant when the recording started.

An interview guide was used to conduct the interviews and collect data from the nine participants. The interview guide included 10 predetermined questions (see Appendix E). Probing questions were asked as needed at various times to get better insight on the participant responses. All interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams and later transcribed using Audext. I reviewed each transcript for accuracy. Each interview was approximately 15-20 minutes. I acknowledged saturation after the last few interviews were completed.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed using the constant comparative method and was collected via Microsoft Teams. A total of nine African American males were interviewed. The interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams and transcribed via Audext. Edits were made to the original transcripts to ensure an accurate verbatim transcription. After transcribing the interviews, I

reviewed and color-coded the transcripts. I used a chart to categorize the information to help analyze for major themes. The themes were then reviewed to determine which ones directly correlated with the research questions that guide this study. The three major themes discovered were: feeling out of place; having a good first-year seminar instructor; and student engagement. In sum, whereas the first theme, feeling out of place was negatively associated with student sense of belonging, the latter two themes were positively associated with sense of belonging. The detailed responses from the interviews helped me get a better understanding of the factors that impact sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI.

Qualitative Results

This section includes results from the data collected in regard to the four research study questions. A convergent mixed methods approach was used to obtain a better understanding of how completing a first-year seminar and engaging in weekly programs on campus help increase African American males' sense of belonging at the institution in comparison to those who do not. After analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data, I used side-by-side comparison to get a better understanding of the impact of completing a first-year seminar and being engaged on campus in regard to sense of belonging. The following sections provide an overview of the data analysis in regard to each research question.

Research Question 1

Research question 1 addressed if African American males felt as if they belonged when they first arrived on campus at East Carolina University. Qualitative and quantitative data was used to address this question.

Research question 1: *Do African American males feel a lack of sense of belonging when they first arrive at East Carolina University?*

Data from the SOBI was used to determine African American males' overall sense of belonging. Based on the data from the SOBI-A and SOBI-P survey responses, approximately half of the respondents reported having a positive sense of belonging. African American males' sense of belonging at ECU depends on how each of them interact within their environment.

The major theme that was found related to research question 1 is "feeling out of place". According to the interviews, five of the nine participants felt a lack of sense of belonging when they first arrived at ECU. Mark stated:

I did feel a lack of sense of belonging. It was actually so bad that I really thought about transferring to a different university because I felt like maybe if I would have went to HBCU, I would feel more belonging and I would be making more friends. I was just pretty much stuck in my room for the first few days, and it really got me down. So I think that is what really contributed to me feeling a sense of not belonging. I also feel the intimidation of being a minority and being surrounded by other people who are not of the same race, really affects your mental state.

Will shared he felt a lack of sense of belonging because "the type of people I am accustomed to being around were not around me". Likewise, Lance stated:

I did, but I think it is more so because it was the first time I was out of my comfort zone. I think that is what probably contributed to my lack of sense of belonging the most. I did not really know many people here and it was a big new environment that I was not used to, so definitely I did.

Jared and Gavin both indicated having a lack of sense of belonging when they first arrived at ECU because they needed to find their way. Jared stated, "I felt I had to find my own

footing in this different environment.” Gavin stated, “I did not immediately feel like I belonged, I had to learn the ropes.”

Research Question 2

Research question 2 seeks to determine the impact a first-year seminar has on African American males’ sense of belonging. Qualitative data was used to address this question.

Research question 2: *How does completing a first-year seminar help increase African American males’ overall sense of belonging at East Carolina University?*

Three of the nine interview participants did not take a first-year seminar. Four of the six participants who did take a first-year seminar indicated that it had a positive impact on their sense of belonging. Participants indicated that they felt they had a good instructor for the course, based on having their instructors encourage them to engage in campus activities; being able to go to their instructors for guidance outside of the course; being able to connect with them; and being engaged through tailoring the course to the interests of the students. Data indicated that a good first-year seminar instructor was defined as one who: serves as a resource for students, provides guidance outside of the classroom and makes the students feel welcome on campus. The major theme was that having a good first-year seminar instructor had a positive impact on African American males’ sense of belonging.

Mark shared how he felt COAD 1000 had a positive impact on sense of belonging. He stated:

I think it did help with my sense of belonging because we really bonded as a class. They introduced us to a lot of groups. I think that is the key thing that helped me figure out that I belong is just joining a group and sticking my head out there and finding people who I could relate with and finding some people with some similar interests. That is a great

thing about COAD because it introduces you to many things and it makes you step outside your comfort zone so you can put yourself out there.

Additionally, Jared stated, “Yes I do. It is a steppingstone because usually COAD is one of the classes taken as a freshmen and freshman year, you are basically getting adjusted to the college lifestyle”. Interview responses indicated that completing a first-year seminar has a positive impact on African American males’ sense of belonging.

Research Question 3

Research question 3 addressed student engagement among African American males and if it impacted their sense of belonging.

Research question 3: *How does attending weekly programs offered on campus affect African American males’ student engagement at East Carolina University?*

Six of the nine interview participants reported being engaged on campus. The major theme was that student engagement on campus has a positive impact on sense of belonging. Will shared that being engaged on campus helps increase sense of belonging because it helps one “identify with something.” Additionally, Mark stated:

I definitely do believe student engagement increases sense of belonging because, like I said, the main thing about college, the main thing that really makes you like your college or not, is if you have people who you hang around and who you like and bring the best out of you. When I first came here, I didn't know anybody. This school is four hours away from my hometown. It was me and one other person that came to ECU, so I literally knew nobody and being a minority surrounded by everybody else, is intimidating. But then I took COAD and then I joined a few clubs and I stuck my neck out. I then met a lot of friends, and it made me feel like I belong.

Sean shared that being engaged on campus allowed him to meet other people. Sean stated:

I feel that with student engagement I met older people who were once in my shoes. I also met other people who want to get involved and make an impact. It also teaches you how to coordinate yourself in a lot of different settings. You get accustomed to a lot of staff and other people. You meet so many people through engagement.

Lance stated:

I would definitely say it does. The first part of my freshman year, I was not really engaged. I was not really doing much of anything and then my friend told me to come to this Talented Empowered Aspired Men (TEAM) meeting. I actually went to it and it was a predominantly African American, all male organization and actually felt comfortable in there. That was really one of the first times I have felt comfortable since I stepped on campus. It helped me expand overall because it helped me step out of my comfort zone a lot and definitely made me feel more comfortable on campus because I felt like I had a place on campus to express myself as I am and be accepted for that.

Tyreik stated:

I definitely think student engagement is very important. Ever since I first got engaged with the TEAM, I definitely tried to encourage other people to get engaged. When you engage, it gives us African American students the opportunity to see what there is more to ECU. There is not too many organizations that accept African American and White but with the team, it is definitely open to different ethnicities and cultures.

The interviews indicated that being engaged on campus had a positive impact on African American males' sense of belonging.

Research Question 4

Research question 4 addresses how completing a first-year seminar and being engaged on campus impacts African American males' sense of belonging. Qualitative data was utilized to address this question. Five of the nine participants reported that they completed a COAD 1000 course and were engaged on campus.

Research question 4: *What is the impact of completing a first-year seminar and attending weekly programs at East Carolina University?*

Joe stated:

Yes, it did. I had two African American friends in my COAD class and just being with them I learned about different stuff I didn't know and different organizations on campus. I think I learned about TEAM by just being in a COAD class and hearing one of my classmates speak on it and I got involved. Once I got involved with team, I was more involved on campus and a lot of these different programs.

Mark stated:

It definitely did. It introduced me to a lot of the stuff that campus offer. It introduced me to a lot of clubs and what they had to offer. It introduced me some more people that were at ECU and lots of people from different backgrounds. It introduces you to all the different sides of ECU and it helps you really find the people who you really click with.

Additionally, Jared stated, "Yes, it helped me coming out of my shell because I was more reserved."

Tyreik stated:

Definitely. Being involved on campus helped me increase my sense of belonging. Being involved with the TEAM, I got to meet to meet African Americans, Whites, Asians, and

others from different ethnicities and races. I got to see their point of view. We had important conversations about race how they feel about it. It is very important to be to in organizations that have these conversations because eventually you never know who you are going work for or with. COAD 1000 and TEAM helps bring you closer to people.

Lance stated, “It did. COAD told me to make sure you join a club. They were always encouraging us to be active on campus. Even though I did not really want to, the constant pushing made me.” Overall, completing a first-year seminar, like ECU’s COAD 1000 course, and being engaged on campus had a positive impact on African American males’ sense of belonging (see Figure 7).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the data collection, analysis, and results of the convergent mixed methods study used to determine the factors that impact sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI. Data collection was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, quantitative data was collected from African American males using the SOBI. The SOBI consisted of two parts, SOBI-A (antecedents) and SOBI-P (psychological). Upon completion of the SOBI, qualitative data was collected via interviews from nine African American males to get a more in-depth understanding of the factors that impact their sense of belonging.

The quantitative data indicated that approximately half of the African American males who participated reported having an overall sense of belonging at ECU. After completing a side-by-side comparison of the quantitative and qualitative data, it was evident that African American males' sense of belonging is impacted based on how they interact within their environments. Many of the interviews indicated that there was an initial lack of sense of belonging until the

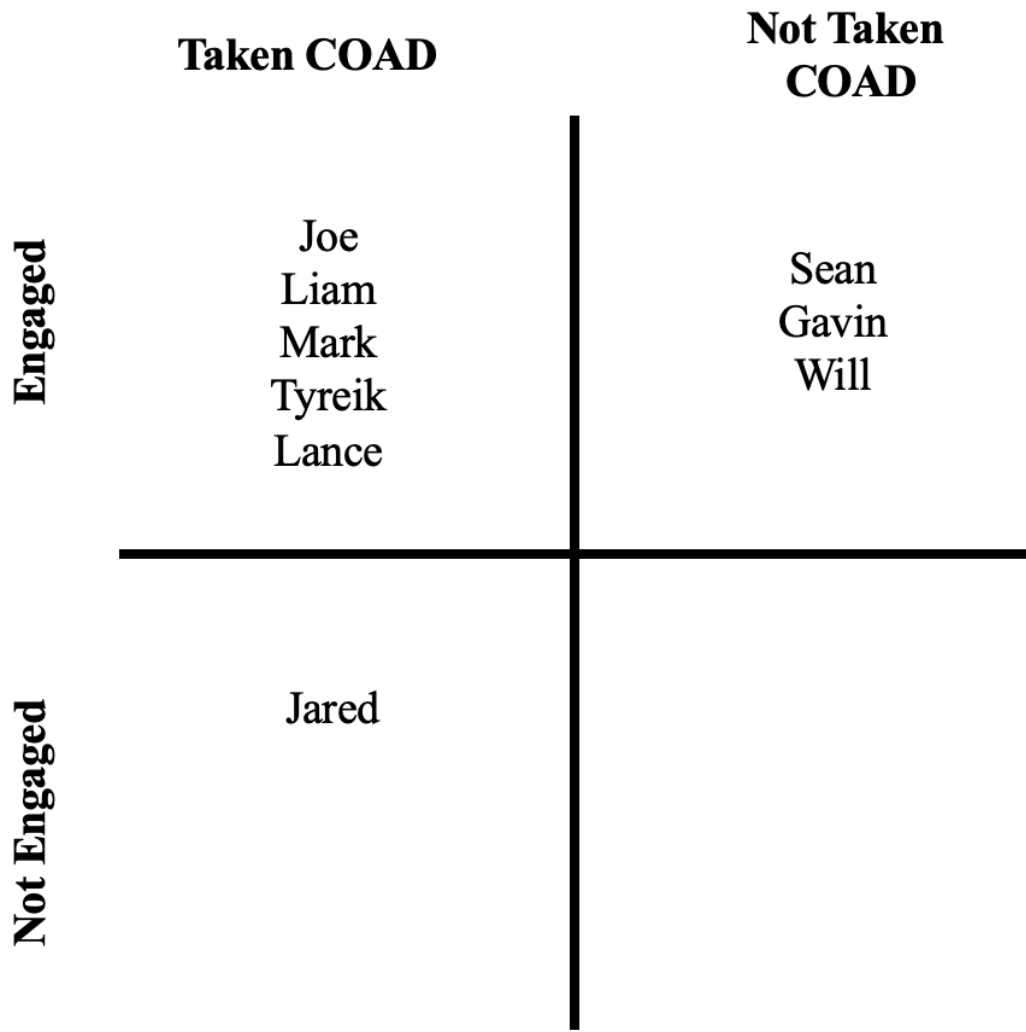


Figure 7. Participant engagement analysis matrix.

participant began to find ways to engage on campus. The African American males who were engaged on campus and completed a first-year seminar reported feeling more of a sense of belonging.

Chapter 5 will provide a summary of the convergent mixed methods study, including interpretation of results, limitations of the study, implications of the findings, and suggested recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

African American males generally have a lack of sense of belonging at PWIs. The lack of sense of belonging among African American males tends to directly impact their persistence and graduation rates (Strayhorn, 2008). At ECU, African American student retention and graduation rates are strong (Harper & Simmons, 2019); however, African American males are less likely than their female counterparts to be retained and attain their degree.

The purpose of this convergent mixed methods study was to address the lack of sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI. The research questions addressed in this study are: The research questions for this study were:

1. Do African American males feel a lack of sense of belonging when they first arrive at East Carolina University?
2. How does completing a first-year seminar affect African American males' overall sense of belonging at East Carolina University?
3. How does attending weekly programs offered on campus affect African American males' student engagement at East Carolina University?
4. What is the impact of completing a first-year seminar and attending weekly programs at East Carolina University?

Data was collected from African American males to determine what effect completing a first-year seminar and being engaged on campus had on sense of belonging for African American males at ECU.

Summary of the Findings

The SOBI, including SOBI-P (psychological) and SOBI-A (antecedents), was used to measure the overall sense of belonging among African American males at ECU. There were 55

survey participants. Additionally, interviews were conducted with nine African American males to gather more insight on their sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI)

The SOBI-A (antecedents) total score focused on the precursors of sense of belonging. The results of the SOBI-A total score indicated that 53% of the participants had an overall desire to be involved. Data related to energy for involvement, potential and desire for meaningful involvement, and potential for shared or complementary characteristics indicated that participants scored at or above the average score for each. Moreover, the SOBI-P (psychological) indicated the level of sense of belonging one feels in their life. The results of the SOBI-P total score indicated that 56% of the participants reported feeling that they belong. Fit and valued involvement was also measured. The data from the fit and valued involvement attributes directly correlate with the participants' overall sense of belonging. The results from the data indicate that over half of the participants, 53%, believed that they fit within their current environment. Regarding valued involvement, 60% of the participants reported feeling valued and accepted.

Interviews

After the SOBI surveys were completed, interviews were conducted to gain further insight about African American males' sense of belonging. There were three major themes: feeling out of place; having a good first-year seminar instructor; and student engagement. The first theme of feeling out of place was negatively associated with sense of belonging; however, having a good first-year seminar instructor and student engagement were positively associated with sense of belonging.

Interpretation of Findings

Sense of belonging is one's interpretation on whether they feel included in an environment (Johnson et al., 2007; Silver Wolf et al., 2017). The SOBI was used to determine African American males' sense of belonging at a PWI. As previously mentioned, the SOBI is made up of two constructs, SOBI-A and SOBI-P. SOBI-A measures energy for involvement, potential and desire for meaningful involvement, and potential for shared or complementary characteristics. SOBI-P measures fit and valued involvement.

SOBI-A (Antecedents)

The energy for involvement attribute measures how determined an individual is to be a part of their environment. Data indicated that over half of the participants were engaged with others within their environment. This finding supported the research that suggests involvement in student organizations and departments on campus that encourage African American students to explore their racial identity can have a positive impact on African American males (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms et al., 2015).

Potential and desire for meaningful involvement is used to determine how an individual is engaged in their environment. Potential and desire for meaningful involvement data indicated that approximately half of the participants have the desire to be or feel valued within their environment. This finding supported the literature that suggests that African American students often enter PWIs with the expectation that they will be treated like the other students (Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Robertson & Chaney, 2015). Moreover, researchers suggest that positive relationships with faculty, staff, and students will increase African American males' sense of belonging (Anumba, 2015; Brooms & Davis, 2017b; Flowers, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005; Means &

Pyne, 2017; Ribera et al., 2017; Robertson & Chaney, 2015; Sinanan, 2016; Strayhorn et al., 2015).

The potential for shared or complementary characteristics measures the amount an individual feels they can contribute to those around them. The data related to potential for shared or complementary characteristics indicated that over half of the participants felt that they could contribute to those around them. I anticipated that more participants would have reported that they felt that they could contribute to others around them.

SOBI-P (Psychological)

The fit attribute measures an individual's level of fit. Fit is defined as "the perception of unique individual characteristics being articulated with or complementing the environment or system" (Hagerty, 2015, p. 3). Data related to fit indicated that over half of the participants reported that they felt as if they fit at ECU. This data refuted literature that suggests that the mere presence of African American males at PWIs creates an environment wherein negative stereotypes are speculated (Robertson & Chaney, 2015).

The valued involvement attribute measures an individual's "experience of feeling needed, valued and accepted" (Hagerty, 2015). African American males' student success at PWIs is strongly connected to their sense of belonging; therefore, it is important that they feel valued and supported (Hoffman et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2017). Data related to valued involvement indicated that most participants felt that they were needed, valued and accepted in their everyday environments, which supported the literature. This data also refuted literature that suggests that African American students are more likely to report having a lower sense of belonging compared to their White counterparts (Johnson et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017; Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2008).

Theme 1: Feeling Out of Place

Three major themes emerged from the interviews: feeling out of place; having a good first-year seminar instructor; and student engagement. The feeling out of place theme was negatively associated with African American males' sense of belonging. Data collected from the survey responses to the SOBI indicated that over half of the African American males reported having an overall sense of belonging at ECU; however, when I conducted interviews with some of the respondents, it was revealed that feeling out of place is common among African American males at ECU. The notion of feeling out of place also directly correlated with the literature that suggests that African American males sometimes feel "socially isolated, unsupported, and unwelcome by their peers and faculty members" (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 502).

Theme 2: Having a Good First-Year Seminar Instructor

Having a good first-year seminar instructor was another major theme that emerged from the interviews. According to Sinanan (2012), African American males need a strong support system at PWIs to help foster a sense of belonging. Positive peer and faculty interactions can eliminate the feeling of a lack of a sense of belonging (Zumbrunn et al., 2014). These positive interactions allow African American students to feel more supported socially and academically (Johnson et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017). Also, faculty who provide academic support and/or mentoring and encourage class participation contribute to African American males' sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Having a good first-year seminar instructor was positively associated with sense of belonging and confirmed current literature.

Theme 3: Student Engagement

Lastly, student engagement was a major theme that emerged from the interviews. Means and Payne (2017) stated that involvement in leadership activities helped African American males

increase their sense of belonging. Interview responses from African American males at ECU confirmed current literature. The responses from African American males at ECU contradicted literature that suggests that a lack of male engagement in college is a common trend in higher education (Barker & Avery, 2012).

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations to the study. The first limitation was a small sample size. The sample size of 55 participants only represented a very small group of African American males at ECU. A sample of 55 out of 1,458 possible participants does not represent a large group of African American males at ECU. Although a small sample size was anticipated in the proposal, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on participation. Many students were burned out and did not have the desire to participate.

Second, interview responses may have been influenced by being conducted virtually as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall student sense of belonging may have been depressed due to safety protocols and student departure from campus. In addition, students who opted to participate in the study may have been more comfortable than others in a one-on-one virtual setting than a face-to-face setting. Being able to offer the option of a face-to-face or virtual interview could have possibly yielded higher participation.

Lastly, participant responses to the SOBI and interviews may have been biased based on each participant's personal experiences at the institution, which is not representative of the entire African American population of male students at ECU. African American students who had more positive experiences may have been more inclined to participate than those with negative experiences and vice versa. Likewise, students who chose to answer the email survey may have already been more active and engaged on campus anyway, and more willing to participate in the

study. Also, some students may have felt that they did not have enough rapport with me to be completely open and share more details.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

The results of this study could help develop positive change at PWIs. Although approximately half of the African American male participants reported having a sense of belonging, the findings also revealed that there are changes that could be made to help increase sense of belonging. To experience a greater sense of belonging at a PWI, African American males need to feel that they belong in their environment, have positive experiences with faculty, and be engaged on campus.

The findings of this study revealed that African American males need to feel that they belong within a given environment to have a greater sense of belonging. To create a more welcoming environment, the campus community will need to change their current behaviors. Behaviors that need to be changed include stereotyping and microaggressions, as being judged based on race and also having to deal with microaggressions from the campus community decreases African American males' sense of belonging. The campus community needs to continue to find ways to be more inclusive to all students, with the goal of making everyone feel as if they are an essential part of the community.

Likewise, the results of this study imply that African American males need to have positive experiences with faculty to help foster a sense of belonging. The African American male participants in this study reported that having good first-year seminar instructors helped to foster a sense of belonging at ECU. Faculty members play a key role in student retention. Once students develop a positive relationship with faculty, it helps to pave the way for a more successful matriculation through college. Rather than focusing solely on individual instructors,

though, encouraging sustainable change within the physical environment and culture of the campus can help encourage positive experiences with all first-year seminar instructors.

Lastly, findings in this study implied that student engagement is essential to African American males having a sense of belonging at a PWI. The African American males in this study reported that being engaged on campus helped them to “identify with something.” Student engagement allows African American males to connect with others with similar interests and learn about others with different identities. Student engagement also helps pull African American males out of their comfort zones and pushes them to engage with others, which is a skill that they will need post-college.

Recommendations

The ultimate recommendation for this study is to conduct it on a larger scale. As mentioned previously, there were only 55 participants in the study, which only represents a small portion of African American males at ECU. Having more African American males participate in the study could possibly yield results that are more representative of the African American male population at ECU. Also, conducting the study over a longer period may also yield better results. Researchers would have ample time to continue to gather data for more clarification and insight if needed.

Moreover, to measure sense of belonging change over time, a pre and post SOBI evaluation should take place. By completing a pre and post SOBI evaluation, researchers would be able to gather more insight on students participating in both campus events and first-year seminars, first-year seminars only, campus events only, and neither first-year seminars nor campus events. The researchers would be able to track changes over time to better analyze how being involved helps to increase sense of belonging. Additionally, tracking student engagement

will allow future researchers to determine the types of programs African American males are more inclined to attend, which will help administrators tailor programming to be more inclusive for African American males.

Interviews with African American male students at ECU help inform suggestions for improving experiences with first-year seminars and campus events, which increases their sense of belonging. Having Health 1000 courses and COAD 1000 courses overlap to be specific to African American males could help improve course engagement. If funding is an obstacle for finding well-suited instructors for first-year seminars, graduate students could teach the courses, which could also help encourage connections between the two types of students. Matching students with faculty who will serve as mentors can help to increase bonding. Requiring attendance for programs and events on campus can ensure that students are engaging on campus; ECU previously offered a passport program where various events, such as musical performances, sporting events, etc. were required. Encouraging students to not just join organizations, but take on executive board positions within those organizations can help to foster a sense of purpose and belonging.

Lastly, specifically at ECU, I intend to implement a program for African American males to address their sense of belonging over the next 1-1.5 years. Eventually, this program will be directly incorporated into classes, but it will begin with a weekly initiative and a couple larger scale events per semester to holistically engage students. Collaboration between different academic departments will be key, including the development of a one-page memo on student engagement and belonging in general, to be distributed during the first week of each semester. The overall goal of this program will be to encourage students to look beyond the campus, look

at graduate school, and look at long-term, lifetime success, by increasing their sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine factors that impact sense of belonging among African American males at a PWI. Overall, the African American males who participated indicated that they ultimately have a sense of belonging at ECU. Participants also reported that feeling that they are a part of and accepted within their environment helps to increase their sense of belonging. Likewise, having a good first-year seminar instructor and being engaged on campus positively impacted African American males' sense of belonging.

Making the campus community more welcoming and avoiding stereotyping and microaggressions will ultimately have a positive impact on sense of belonging among African American males. African American males have the desire to be treated like their White counterparts when attending a PWI, and changing negative behaviors towards African American males will help increase their sense of belonging. Moreover, positive experiences with faculty will also increase African American males' sense of belonging. Although it is not uncommon to have a small representation of African American faculty at a PWI, African American students want to at least have a connection to the faculty that is on campus. Also, having more student engagement opportunities will allow African American males to connect with the campus community to increase their sense of belonging.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284**
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Mariza James](#)
CC: [Crystal Chambers](#)
Date: 11/8/2019
Re: [UMCIRB 19-002483](#)
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 11/8/2019. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 2B.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Mariza James Proposal 6 25 2019.docx(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
MJames-Consent-Letter.docx(0.04)	Consent Forms
MJames-Interview Protocol.docx(0.02)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
SOBI-P and SOBI-A.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires

For research studies where a waiver of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(2)(ii) has been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.



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Notification of Amendment Approval

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Mariza James](#)
CC: [Crystal Chambers](#)
Date: 10/28/2020
Re: [Ame1_UMCIRB_19-002483](#)
[UMCIRB_19-002483](#)
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Your Amendment has been reviewed and approved using expedited review on 10/28/2020. It was the determination of the UMCIRB Chairperson (or designee) that this revision does not impact the overall risk/benefit ratio of the study and is appropriate for the population and procedures proposed.

Please note that any further changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

If applicable, approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Document	Description
There are no items to display	

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT REQUEST EMAIL (SURVEY)

African American Males Sense of Belonging at ECU Study

← ↶ ↷ →

James, Mariza Kar'Vonnia <JAMESMAR@ECU.EDU>

Thursday, January 23, 2020 at 8:32 AM

Dear Participant,

I am a Graduate Student at East Carolina University in the College of Education. I am asking you to take part in my research study entitled, "Factors that Influence Sense of Belonging Among African American Males at Predominantly White Institutions".

The purpose of this research is to address the lack of sense of belonging among African American males at a predominantly White institution. By doing this research, I hope to learn if African American males feel a lack of sense of belonging when they first arrive at ECU, how completing a COAD 1000 course helps increase sense of belonging, how does attending weekly programs on campus increase student engagement and what is the impact of completing both a COAD 1000 course and attending weekly programs on campus. Your participation is completely voluntary.

You are being invited to take part in this research because you identify as an African American male and you have completed at least one semester at East Carolina University. The amount of time it will take you to complete this survey is less than 20 minutes. If you also participate in a face to face interview, it will take approximately one hour and it will be audio recorded.

If you agree to take part in this survey and/or interview, you will be asked questions that relate to your sense of belonging.

This research is overseen by the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at ECU. Therefore, some of the UMCIRB members or the UMCIRB staff may need to review your research data. Your identity will be evident to those individuals who see this information. However, I will take precautions to ensure that anyone not authorized to see your identity will not be given that information.

Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future studies.

If you have questions about your rights when taking part in this research, call the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, call the Director of Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

You do not have to take part in this research, and you can stop at any time. If you decide you are willing to take part in this study, please use the link provided to access the survey. Upon completion of the survey, you will be contacted to request participation in a face to face interview.

https://ecu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9Br4ucCPyTdB3ZX

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Sincerely, Mariza K. James, Principal Investigator

APPENDIX C: SOBI INSTRUMENT

SENSE OF BELONGING INSTRUMENT

Psychological Experience

SOBI-P

Instructions: Here are some statements with which you may or may not agree. Using the key listed below, circle the number that most closely reflects your feelings about each statement.

KEY:

1 = Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = Disagree 4 = Strongly Disagree

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I often wonder if there is anyplace on earth where I really fit in.	1	2	3	4
2. I am just not sure if I fit in with my friends.	1	2	3	4
3. I would describe myself as a misfit in most social situations.	1	2	3	4
4. I generally feel that people accept me.	1	2	3	4
5. I feel like a piece of a jig-saw puzzle that doesn't fit into the puzzle.	1	2	3	4
6. I would like to make a difference to people or things around me, but I don't feel that what I have to offer is valued.	1	2	3	4
7. I feel like an outsider in most situations.	1	2	3	4
8. I am troubled by feeling like I have no place in this world.	1	2	3	4
9. I could disappear for days and it wouldn't matter to my family.	1	2	3	4
10. In general, I don't feel a part of the mainstream of society.	1	2	3	4
11. I feel like I observe life rather than participate in it.	1	2	3	4
12. If I died tomorrow, very few people would come to my funeral.	1	2	3	4
13. I feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.	1	2	3	4
14. I don't feel that there is anyplace where I really fit in this world.	1	2	3	4

15. I am uncomfortable that my background and experiences are so different from those who are usually around me.	1	2	3	4
16. I could not see or call my friends for days and it wouldn't matter to them.	1	2	3	4
17. I feel left out of things.	1	2	3	4
18. I am not valued by or important to my friends.	1	2	3	4

SENSE OF BELONGING INSTRUMENT

Antecedents SOBI-A

Instructions: Here are some statements with which you may or may not agree. Using the key listed below, circle the number that most closely reflects your feelings about each statement.

KEY:

1 = Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = Disagree 4 = Strongly Disagree

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. It is important to me that I am valued or accepted by others.	1	2	3	4
2. In the past, I have felt valued and important to others.	1	2	3	4
3. It is important to me that I fit somewhere in this world.	1	2	3	4
4. I have qualities that can be important to others.	1	2	3	4
5. I am working on fitting in better with those around me.	1	2	3	4
6. I want to be a part of things going on around me.	1	2	3	4
7. It is important to me that my thoughts and opinions are valued.	1	2	3	4
8. Generally, other people recognize my strengths and good points.	1	2	3	4
9. I can make myself fit in anywhere.	1	2	3	4
10. All of my life, I have wanted to feel like I really belonged somewhere.	1	2	3	4
11. Fitting in with people around me matters a great deal.	1	2	3	4
12. I feel badly if others do not value or accept me.	1	2	3	4
13. Relationships take too much energy for me.	1	2	3	4
14. I just don't feel like getting involved with people.	1	2	3	4

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT REQUEST EMAIL (INTERVIEW)

Subject: INTERVIEW REQUEST: African American Males Sense of Belonging at ECU Study

Date: Thursday, January 28, 2021 at 2:22:41 PM Eastern Standard Time

From: James, Mariza Kar'Vonnia

To: James, Mariza Kar'Vonnia

Dear Participant,

Thank you for completing the survey for my research study entitled, "Factors that Influence Sense of Belonging Among African American Males at Predominantly White Institutions".

I am inviting you participate in a interview for further data collection. All interviews will be virtual. I am planning to conduct interviews *January 25th – January 29th*. The interviews will not take up a lot of your time. The first 10 participants who complete an interview will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card.

If you agree to take part in a interview, you will be asked questions that relate to your sense of belonging.

This research is overseen by the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at ECU. Therefore, some of the UMCIRB members or the UMCIRB staff may need to review your research data. Your identity will be evident to those individuals who see this information. However, I will take precautions to ensure that anyone not authorized to see your identity will not be given that information.

Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future studies.

If you have questions about your rights when taking part in this research, call the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, call the Director of Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

You do not have to take part in this research, and you can stop at any time. If you are willing to participate in an interview, please respond to this email to set up an interview time.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Sincerely, Mariza K. James, Principal Investigator

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Did you feel a lack of sense of belonging when you first arrived at East Carolina University? If so, why?
2. What do you think are some of main reasons African American males have a lack of sense of belonging at PWIs?
3. Do you feel that completing a COAD 1000 course increases your sense of belonging? How?
4. How do you think stereotyping on campus effects African American males?
5. Do you feel that pre-college experiences effect African American males' college experiences? How?
6. Do you feel that student engagement increases African American males' sense of belonging? How?
7. How do you think a support group for African American males would increase their sense of belonging?
8. Did completing a COAD 1000 course and being involved on campus help increase your sense of belonging? If so, how?
9. What do you think administrators could do to help increase African American males' sense of belonging?
10. What do you think African American males need to succeed and have a sense of belonging when entering a PWI? Why?

