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THE PERCEPTION OF MATTERING FROM BLACK MALE ALUMNI OF  
HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

Gretchen Cotton Rodney

Date Submitted: March 22, 2022

Date Approved: May 17, 2022

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE PERCEPTION OF MATTERING FROM BLACK MALE ALUMNI OF HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS**

Gretchen Cotton Rodney

This qualitative narrative study explored the lived experience of high achieving Black men who recently graduated from very highly selective historically White institutions (HWI). The research was guided by Nancy Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering and Shaun Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework. Building on the work of Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), Schlossberg's research shows that non-tradition students attending community college are more willing to persist to graduation when they feel they matter to the institution (Schlossberg, 1989). The dimensions of mattering are attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation. Harper's anti-deficit framework counters the popular discourse in the literature around Black male students' deficits, by focusing on three success pipelines, which are pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college persistence. The current study situated the theory of marginality and mattering within the anti-deficit college achievement pipeline.

Publicly accessible information posted to social media was used to identify successful alumni of the highest rated public and private universities in the United States to determine how, if at all, the academic and social supports available at these institutions



influenced these high achievers' sense of mattering and willingness to persist. All participants self-identified as Black males who graduated from one of the target universities within the last three years and demonstrated ongoing achievement through academic awards, leadership roles in co-curricular activities, admission to graduate programs, and entrance into their career of choice after graduation. The current study utilized a modified three-dimensional narrative inquiry approach to analyze the digital story of the participants' experience as undergraduates through the artifacts they shared about every day and major life events through text, static images, and video by way of their social media accounts that allow public access. This research provides insight into what is possible for Black male scholars when they are provided with access to relationships and structures they perceived as instrumental to their success in higher education.

## **DEDICATION**

You are the wind beneath my wings.

You are the breath in my lungs.

I am a reflection of your beauty.

I am a product of your strength.

We are here, you and I. Always.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Betty Jean Adams Cotton and Gregory Cotton  
You believed in me before I knew how to believe in myself.  
You taught me about excellence, commitment, consistency, and relentless love.

Albera Daniels Cotton  
You taught me that I am absolutely precious.

Betty Ann Cotton Liase Sentell and Hazel Marie Leigh Adams  
You fed my soul and made me feel so seen.

Tracey Frances Anita Cotton Serrell  
The biggest heart. Joy on two legs. A ready laugh.  
My fabulous little sissy. My forever friend.

Shirrell Gwen Norwood Watson  
The best big sister a little cousin could ever have.

Noelyn Georgette Rodney & Noel George Rodney, Jr.  
You fill me with so much joy. I absolutely love being your mama.  
You make me want to be the best version of myself.

Noel George Rodney, Sr.  
My husband. My person. My favorite place.  
The smile that makes my heart sing.  
You challenge me to step into my greatness.

Dr. Ceceilia Parnther and Dr. Stephanie Tatum  
My Dream Team. You kept me on track and got me over the finish line.

To my ancestors  
Those unnamed  
Those unknown  
Thank you.

Jehovah Nissi  
Thank you.

...Ashe

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Education has not always been a right for Blacks in this country. The 1740 *Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes* codified an entire group of people's illiteracies, thus ensuring generations of educational, economic, social, and political advantage of all people identifying as White, including those who did not maintain control over enslaved people directly. This historical denial of full literacy to all people in our country continues to plague us. Nearly 70 years since the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* reversed the 1896 "separate but equal" stance decided by *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a disproportionate number of Blacks are still under-educated, as evidenced by the percentage shouldering the inequalities of poverty. A bachelor's degree is the gatekeeper to social mobility. According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), the third quarter of 2019 saw a 25-year-old high school graduate earning an average weekly income of \$749. His counterpart with a bachelor's degree earned \$1,281. This 42% gap in wages translates into everything from living in better neighborhoods to better healthcare.

Of the 2.9 million students who completed high school in 2017, two-thirds enrolled in a post-secondary institution immediately following graduation (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defined immediate college enrollment as "high school completers who enroll in a two or four-year institution by the October immediately following high school completion." NCES reported that the rate of immediate enrollment has been statistically stagnant since 2000 (NCES, 2017).

While overall immediate enrollment has remained constant, the gap between graduation rates for White and Black college students has widened. In 2019, the graduation rate of men between 25 to 29 years old who attained a bachelor's degree or higher within six years of starting a course of study at a four-year college or university was 40% for White men and 24% for Black men (NCES, 2017). Although Black students' overall graduation rate continued to lag behind White students, Black men also consistently trail Black women in degree attainment who had a reported graduation rate of 28% (NCES, 2017).

Beyond enrollment and persistence, where a student attends college has a significant impact on social mobility. Colleges and universities use several indicators of applicants' potential for academic success, including, but not limited to, prior academic performance. In 2018, there were 2828 bachelor's degree-granting institutions in the United States. Of these, there are a few very highly selective programs in which the most able minds compete for admission. The U. S. News and World Report (2021) is known for its ranking system of colleges and universities. Factors that they consider include, but are not limited to, retention rates, selectivity, and faculty resources. For example, the top 1% of these renowned institutions admit fewer than a quarter of applicants into their freshman class, conferring seats to those deemed most capable of successfully completing the undergraduate program. For Black scholars, these coveted seats can translate into greater social and economic access, especially in their early career (Dale & Krueger, 2011).

While much is made of the lack of access, representation, and success of Black male students, less is known about the experiences of high achieving Black men who

meet the exacting standards of these very highly selective institutions and their persistence towards graduation while navigating systems historically designed for exclusion. There is a need to understand their college experiences and the essential supports for their retention.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Colleges and universities across the country are entrusted with educating some of our country's most gifted minds, including those in the Black community. The purpose of this narrative study is to explore the perceptions of high achieving Black male scholars on how, if at all, the academic or social supports available at very highly selective historically White institutions (HWI) influenced their sense of mattering and willingness to persist despite the odds they face.

Our nation's oldest, most prestigious, and competitive colleges and universities were established to educate the sons of the controlling class in a deliberate effort to preserve and perpetuate the social, economic, and political hierarchy (Thelin, 2004; Palmieri, 1987; Solomon, 1985; Dancy, 2014; Dancy et al., 2018). The 24 participants in Dancy's (2014) phenomenological study of Black men attending both HWI and HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) reported they were constantly made to feel undeserving and unwelcomed by both faculty and White peers.

When a student is admitted to their college choice, the goal is completion. While retention is the focus of colleges, the student's concern is persistence (Tinto, 2010). Student persistence refers to remaining engaged in the process of obtaining a degree. Tinto (2012) stated that colleges are responsible for supporting students to complete their selected program of study successfully.

Students can ascertain when they are held to different standards than their peers (Tinto, 2010). The literature delineates the negative impact of microaggressions on non-majority students. Microaggressions are the accumulation of multiple implicit and explicit bias acts (Solorzano et al., 2000; Pierce, 1974). These microaggressions may impact the perception of mattering by Black men.

The idea of mattering is the feeling a student has that members of the faculty, their peers, and the administrative staff genuinely accept, respect, and value them (Strayhorn, 2019). These feelings are never more important than in the initial semester when students often feel isolated from their former life but are not yet fully a part of their new one. It is the development of connectedness to the institution and the feeling that they matter to others in their new environment that can reinforce institutional commitment of Black male students (Strayhorn, 2019). The current study used narrative inquiry to challenge the deficit framework of Black males as struggling students, and it extends the research spotlighting the levels of excellence present among these scholars, which often goes undervalued. The research in this study focused on excellence in Black male scholars which diverges from what Harper (2009) termed a “caricature of Black men” (p. 195) that perpetuates the deficit stereotype that they are not scholars, are disinterested in progress, and have no hope (Harper, 2009; Turner et al., 2010). It is important to hear from the Black men who have succeeded through institutional support and mattering.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Research on student retention explores factors including isolation, instructional bias, and ideological conflict between the student and the institution (Hurtado, 1994;

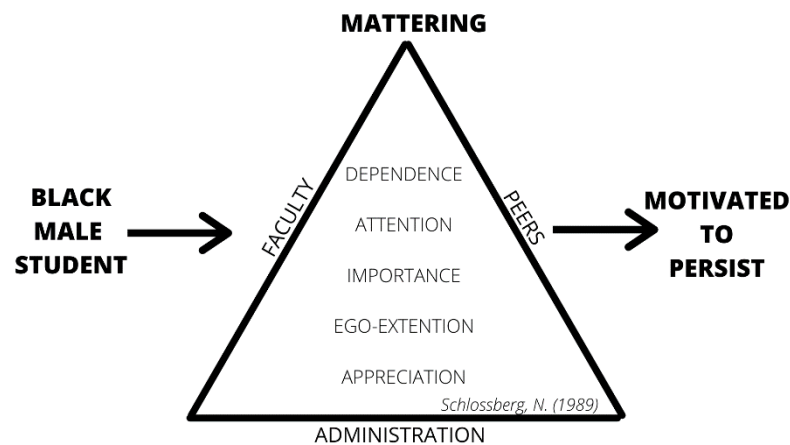
Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2012).

Tinto (2012) noted that to continue at an institution, students must “find meaning in the involvements that occur within that community” (p. 67). For Black male students, community may look different, especially given their lower enrollment levels and persistence in the academy (NCES, 2017).

In their 1981 study, Rosenberg and McCullough introduced mattering as a social science construct in their study. After surveying over 6,000 high school students, Rosenberg and colleagues defined mattering as something that was motivational, and they stated it is “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension.” The dimensions of mattering noted in the study are attention, importance, dependence, and ego-extension (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

### ***Figure 1***

#### **Theoretical Framework**



Schlossberg et al. (1989) sought to determine how the work of Rosenberg et al., applied to adult learners attending community college. An ecological approach was used to research why individuals who fail in one environment thrive in another. Schlossberg (1989) determined the responsibility for student success does not reside solely with the student or the institution but is a bilateral relationship. The resulting theory of marginality and mattering extended Rosenberg's work by adding the fifth dimension of appreciation to the mattering framework. Schlossberg explained that adult learners who felt they mattered to their college were more likely to continue their education. Learning from the experiences of Black men who have successfully negotiated the academic and social landscape of our most highly selective HWIs will grant us insight into how institutions can cultivate a sense of mattering, thereby increasing retention.

### **Conceptual Framework**

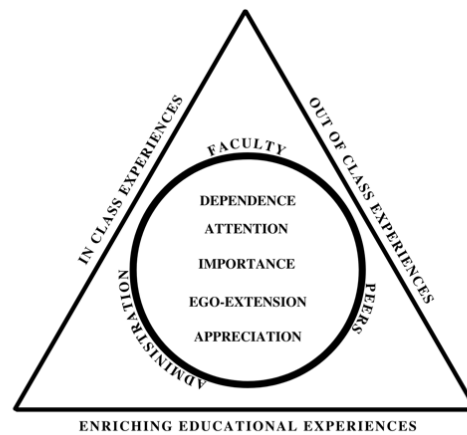
When considering Black male scholars' perception of mattering, it is important to focus on the indicators of the structures that underpin their success. Shaun Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework is based on the National Black Male College Achievement Study (NBMCA) which looked at the experiences of 241 men of color who succeeded in studying in the area of science, technology, engineering, and science (STEM) in different types of colleges nationwide. The study's guiding questions focused on the behaviors, programs, and experiences that helped these men get to college, achieve in college, and succeed after graduation. The resulting anti-deficit framework asserts that success of Black men in college is achieved by providing classroom interactions, out-of-class experiences, and enriching opportunities (Harper, 2012).



For the purpose of this study, Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering is viewed through the lens of Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework.

## Figure 2

### *Conceptual Framework*



## Significance/Importance of the Study

Social and economic mobility is a necessary element of the American dream (Hill & Torres, 2010). A college degree is one way to access that dream, so understandably, acceptance to college is a goal of many high school seniors. Being accepted to join the freshman class of one of the very highly selective higher education institutions in this country may seem to be a gilded invitation to a golden future. However, the economic mobility of Hill et al.'s American dream could be in jeopardy for those who do not complete their postsecondary degree. "In the period from 1970 and 2013 as a whole, those with a bachelor's degree earned about \$64,500 per year ... while those with a high school diploma earned only \$41,000 per year" (Abel & Deitz, 2014, p. 2-3).

Research on college completion is replete with studies that attempt to explain the low college graduation rates of Black men by focusing on their perceived social, academic, or emotional deficits. Nancy Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering postulates that students' willingness to persist to graduation is directly related to how much they perceive they matter to their college or university. This study sought to uncover how the Black men admitted to very highly selective HWIs, who were the best and brightest minds of their cohort, perceived their level of mattering, and what influence their perception of mattering had on their choice to persist through graduation. The present study provided a deeper insight into these graduates' lived experiences during their time attending a very highly selective HWI, specifically in how they perceived their level of mattering to the institution, providing clarity on how to effectively retain students who are not members of the dominate class. University policymakers, administrators, faculty members, and student affairs officers should consider these stories while institutions in the U.S. attempt to reconcile increased access with the historical marginalization of Black men on college campuses. Historically White institutions must grant Black scholars full social, academic, and emotional access to an equitable education, thereby improving retention and graduation rates.

The current study provides policy makers, administrators, and faculty members in higher education with insights into the structures and supports high achieving Black males indicate are significant to their success in very highly selective historically White institutions (HWI). This research will allow stakeholders to cultivate a culture of mattering for high achieving Black male collegians, thereby providing them with an environment that is purposefully augmented to promote their success.

## **Connection with Social Justice or Vincentian Mission in Education**

According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), there is a 67% wage gap between those with a bachelor's degree and those without one. Those without a bachelor's degree limit their options and have less rewarding or lucrative career choices (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002). The fact that Black men have the lowest graduation rate of any subgroup, race, or gender keeps them in the unenviable position of being at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy in our society where a man's value is equated to his earning potential (Hill & Jones, 1992). This means that high achieving Black male student success is stereotyped as a rarity or anomaly, which further marginalizes the population.

Colleges and universities have a responsibility to the students they admit including Black men. Understanding how this group describes the characteristics of a fertile learning environment where they feel supported and nurtured and that they matter, increases the probability of their persistence to graduation, improves their social mobility, and normalizes the experiences of high achieving Black male students (Schlossberg et al., 1989; Cuyjet, 1997).

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the experiences of mattering in college for high achieving Black male alumni of very highly selective historically White institutions?
2. How did the perceptions of mattering influence students' willingness to persist?

## **Design and Methods**

A qualitative approach using the narrative inquiry design allowed the researcher to gain insight into the influence of mattering on high achieving Black male scholars' willingness to persist by providing the opportunity to learn from their lived experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This process was enriched by the fact that individual experiences helped the researcher explore the "institutional narratives" in which they were embedded (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Individual social media accounts of these highly successful men were analyzed for static images, text, and video content they chose to share to tell the story of their time as undergraduates which reflected how they saw themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Exploring stories over time led to the development of a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Participants were alumni of the top 1% of the country's colleges and universities which strengthened a counternarrative to the deficit position taken by studies addressing college retention and Black men (Cuyjet, 2009; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2019).

## **Definition of Terms**

*Appreciation.* Having the admiration and approval of others (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Attention.* Commanding the interest of notice of another person (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 164).

*Black.* For this study, Black is used to represent those who identify as such, including those born in a country in Africa and all persons descending from the African diaspora including those born in the United States, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada.

*Dependence.* The sense of being needed, necessary, or indispensable to the success of others.

*Ego-Extension.* The feeling that one's success or failure is seen as that of a larger group. (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

*Very Highly Selective College or University.* Programs are defined as being one of the top 100 colleges and universities according to U. S. News and World Report (2021).

*High Achieving.* For this study, the definition of high achieving is defined as graduating with a grade point average of at least a 3.0 on a 4.0 scale.

*Historically White College or University.* Colleges and universities expressly established for the education of men of European descent or who identify as White according to the American "settler colonial color-caste systems" (Dancy et al., 2018). Smith et al. (2016) use the term, "historically White college or university," to bring attention to the fact that these institutions have a "racialized infrastructure" that perpetuates negative racial ideologies for Black students, staff, and faculty members (Smith et al., 2016).

*Importance.* They believe that other people care about what one thinks or does or show concern for what happens to them. (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 64).

*Involuntary Minorities.* Those members of the non-dominant group who are part of a society because of conquest, colonization, or enslavement. These individuals did not willingly migrate. (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

*Mattering.* The feeling that people have that other people depend on and are interested and concerned about what happens to them or experience them as an ego-extension of themselves (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 165).

*White.* The term will be used to represent those who identify as such based on cultural affiliation and physical characteristics.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Introduction**

As introduced in Chapter one, historically White institutions (HWI) in the United States have increased the recruitment of students from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Despite these gains, over 65% of the Black men who embark upon the journey of obtaining a bachelor's degree, fail to persist to completion. This is evidence that access to institutions of higher education does not automatically correlate into an equitable outcome. Many researchers explain this phenomenon by asserting that Black men come to the college experience academically underprepared, underfunded, and without the social capital to navigate the institutions' norms and traditions (Cuyjet, 2009; Fries-Britt, 1998; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Watkins et al., 2007).

Current literature on Black male achievement in higher education is based on disproportionalities in success rates, commonly addressed as deficit characteristics (Harper, 2012). Some of the deficits referenced include social isolation, instructional bias, a lack of access to student support, financial constraints, and ideological conflicts between the student and the institution (Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2012). The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the perceptions of high achieving Black male scholars about how, if at all, the academic or social supports available at a very highly selective HWI influenced their sense of mattering and willingness to persist. Understanding the institutional actions that positively impact high achieving Black males' sense of mattering improves overall campus cohesion and increases retention (Tucker et al.,

2010). Chapter 2 provides an in-depth exploration of the theoretical framework and the related literature guiding the study.

Vincent Tinto's work has been instrumental to the discourse around persistence and retention. While retention is the focus of colleges, the students' concern is persistence (Tinto, 2010). Student persistence refers to remaining engaged in the process of obtaining a degree. Tinto (2012) stated that colleges are responsible for supporting students to complete their selected program of study. This resists the idea that the student is wholly responsible for academic outcomes. He posited that colleges and universities must implement systems intentionally that foster a sense of mattering in minority students, both academically and socially, to maintain their initial commitment to the college or university and increase their persistence to degree completion (Tinto, 2010). However, White normative structures and the continued focus on student retention from a deficit framework perpetuates Black male scholars' perception of being less than full-fledged members of the institutions (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2012). Some of the ways this can be addressed include working to make sure the faculty and staff reflect the diversity represented in the student body. Curriculum and instructional practices must be culturally inclusive, programs are implemented to support Black male student success, and spaces are provided to allow students to enrich their cultural identity (McClain & Perry, 2017). This will increase students' sense of mattering and willingness to persist, thereby improving the retention rate of Black men. This study was intentional in its design focus on both high achieving Black males and their pathways to success, defined by graduation. Well cited studies (Harper, 2011, 2012, 2015; Wood, 2014, 2015)



describe the value of asset-based frameworks to understand the experiences of Black men in higher education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Schlossberg et al. theory of marginality and mattering challenges the deficit-based theories that undergird much of the literature on the performance of Black men's post-secondary performance. Students' sense of mattering is a measure used to predict their willingness to persist at their initial college or university to degree attainment. Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) study uncovered four features of mattering: (1) students feeling that they are depended upon; (2) others are genuinely interested in them; (3) others are concerned about what happens to them; (4) and students see their success or failure as an extension of themselves. Nancy Schlossberg (1989) expanded the dimensions of mattering to include students' perception of being appreciated by their professors, peers, and administrators in the theory of marginality and mattering. Students with a high sense of mattering feel that they are cared for and depended on, and they feel that they are important to the forward progress of the institutional goals. They are more engaged both academically and socially, which significantly influences their willingness to persist (Tinto, 1993).

In contrast to mattering, marginality occurs when students feel unseen, insignificant, or outside the campus culture (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). Gosset et al. (1998) found that Black students feel marginalized on college campuses at a higher degree than White students. Lack of same race representation among faculty or administrative staff, instructional bias, implicit bias in academic and social settings, and social isolation are a few ways marginality is perpetuated (McClain & Perry, 2017;

Gossett et al., 1998). This absence of mattering is associated with students' decisions not to persist (Tinto, 2012).

Mattering explores the interdependence students discern between the institution and themselves, which supports their willingness to persist to degree attainment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) introduced the idea that the four dimensions of mattering: attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence. Attention, the most basic form of mattering, gives a person the feeling of being seen by others. In addition to being seen by others, importance is when one's ideas, actions, and concerns are a priority to other members of the community. Ego-extension, the third dimension, means that a person's success or failure is felt by peers, faculty, and the administrative staff. The last dimension is dependence. In the context of mattering, the students are not only dependent on peers, faculty, or administration, but also they feel that those members of the institution also depend on them and would be diminished without their input (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Schlossberg et al. (1989) sought to determine how the work of Rosenberg et al., applied to adult learners attending community college. Schlossberg's survey of nontraditional college students indicated that the responsibility for student success does not reside solely with the student or the institution, but it is a bilateral relationship. The resulting theory of marginality and mattering extended Rosenberg's work by adding the fifth dimension of appreciation to the mattering framework. Appreciation is defined as students' feeling of being valued or held in high regard. These dimensions coalesce to motivate students to persist in college. Schlossberg explained that adult learners who felt they mattered to their college were more likely to continue their education. Colleges and

universities have the goal of retaining the students they admit. Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering recognizes that the university is responsible for creating an environment that supports all its students. Using this theoretical framework will illuminate how Black male students perceive their value to their peers and college agents, which leads to their willingness to persist.

Connected to the institution's responsibility for student success, Shaun Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework challenges the idea that it is the students' lack of preparation that impedes their willingness to persist. This framework rejects the position that Black male collegians are working from a position of predetermined defeat. There are three "pipeline points" within the framework including pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success (Harper, 2012). College achievement is the domain that accounts for the time the men in Harper's (2012) study were actively matriculating through a chosen institution. This includes students' time in-class and out-of-class and activities designed to enhance their educational experience (Harper, 2012).

Additionally, in a qualitative study, Goings (2016b) analyzed the interview transcripts of four high achieving nontraditional Black men attending HBCUs through the lens of the anti-deficit achievement framework. Goings' research revealed these men could maximize their academic potential in an environment that nurtured them intellectually and culturally. Purposeful focus on the strengths of Black male students and the initiatives that support their success in very highly selective colleges and universities is rooted in an anti-deficit model (Strayhorn, 2019).

Previous literature supports considering the role of mattering through an anti-deficit lens concerning Black male students' success. For example, Palmer and Maramba (2012) used Schlossberg as the framework for their qualitative study of conditions pertinent to the retention and persistence of Black male scholars. The interviews with four Black student affairs practitioners working in a HBCU revealed that Black men persisted when they perceived they mattered to the institution. Mattering was shown by faculty members and administrative staff through demonstrating authentic interest for the students' success inside and outside of class including mentorship. Black men's perception of mattering benefited from engagement across both settings. Students perceived positive in-class engagement through faculty valuing their points of view and contributions to the class. Out-of-class engagement required faculty and administrative staff to have a more comprehensive relationship with the students by knowing their interests, concerns, and goals. Participants also noted that relevant campus interventions were important to fostering a sense of mattering in Black male students, but these efforts were predicated on establishing a campus culture of caring (Palmer & Maramba, 2012). Because these practitioners work at a HBCU, which is racially affirming for Black students, it is not possible for these results to determine the influence race could have on Black male scholars' sense of mattering at a HWI.

Huerta and Fishman (2014) interviewed 10 undergraduate Latino men who affirmed that positive peer relationships and mentoring from faculty members, academic advisors, and peers shaped their perception of mattering and positively influenced their commitment to their institution of choice. Tovar (2009) surveyed over 3000 undergraduates in the development of the College Mattering Inventory. This instrument

was designed to validate Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering. Tovar found that importance, attention, support, dependence, ego extension, and marginality were all significant in the perception of mattering.

In addition, Tucker et al. (2010) used Schlossberg's theory to investigate high achieving Black male students' perception of mattering at an urban high school. Tucker et al. interviewed nine boys to investigate how mattering influenced their academic performance. This transcendental phenomenological study showed that although there were community factors negatively impacting high achieving Black male students, these young men were encouraged to maintain their academic focus due to their perception of mattering to key adults in the school and their families. This sense of mattering buffered them against the pressure to live up to the stereotype of Black boys doing poorly in school (Tucker et al., 2010). All the student participants reported the importance of the teachers and support staff establishing clear, high expectations. Having the perception of mattering to others supported these young men's development of self-efficacy. For example, those who reported not having high academic expectations set for them at home were able to lean on the expectations they set for themselves (Tucker et al., 2010). The application of Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering has been used to measure mattering in academically successful high school students and Black male students in the HBCU environment. This theoretical framework revealed the institutional policies, practices, and norms of HWIs that foster Black students' sense of mattering, thereby increasing their willingness to persist. This improved degree of persistence directly impacts the retention rates of these scholars. This research will add to the body of literature using Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering by focusing on Black

male students who were highly successful in very highly selective historically White environments.

### **Review of Related Literature**

This review of related literature will explore the institutional conditions that support high achieving Black male scholars' perception of mattering. Specifically, the research describes challenges for Black men on campus particularly related to social isolation, instructional bias, ideological conflicts between the student and the institution, as well as the student support practices that help mitigate these concerns.

Research on students attending historically Black colleges and universities indicates that having a race affirming experience inside and outside of the classroom matters for student success (Palmer & Marumba, 2012). Less research exists on the experiences of Black men at different institutional types. This review of related literature will explore the challenges Black men face at highly selective historically White colleges and universities that reduce their willingness to persist and their perception of the practices that support their retention.

### **Challenges to Persistence and Retention**

#### ***Systemic Oppression***

All students face a period of adjustment in their collegiate experience. This process can be exasperated for Black men by overt and subtle forms of racism perpetrated by members of the dominate culture including faculty members, administrative staff, and peers. While overt forms of racism garners substantial attention, the most covert forms called microaggressions often go unaddressed. When developing the aversive racism framework, Dovidio et al. (2002) conducted an extensive review of the literature to

examine the effects of racism on the interactions between Black and White people. Aversive racism is a microaggression that creates an emotional response, “such as anxiety, which lead(s) to avoidance and social awkwardness rather than to open antagonism” (p. 91). It is described as subtle and is often unconscious. The perpetrators see themselves as unbiased and will behave in a way that disadvantages a member of a non-dominate group when the action is ascribed to a cause other than overt prejudice. Aversive racism adversely influences the perception Blacks have of Whites, which breeds distrust (Dovidio et al., 2002). White members of the college community often think of themselves as unbiased, and they find it difficult to recognize when their comments or behaviors perpetuate racial stereotypes, reduce Black male students’ feeling of fitting into the campus culture, and create a general lack of trust for the institution (Watkins et al., 2007).

These stereotypes held by White peers and professors are buttressed by images popularized in the media (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). This creates an environment that fosters social and psychological stress which serve as impediments to Black male students’ success (Boyd, 2017). In Harper’s 2015 study of high achieving Black male collegians, participants revealed that their White peers would assume they were athletes, from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, or were able to secure recreational marijuana (Harper, 2015). These stereotypes impact students inside and outside the classroom.

### ***Instructional Bias***

Many historically White institutions promote the norms and values that reflect the

dominant culture (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012). In Guiffrida's 2005 qualitative study, 19 high achieving undergraduates at a HWI shared their perception of student-faculty relationships. Their interviews uncovered that high achieving Black students perceived Black faculty members as being more student-centered, while White faculty members directed microaggressions toward them during class (Guiffrida, 2005). Sue et al. (2007) defined microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional" (p. 273). The study went on to delineate three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. A microassault is an explicit attempt to victimize a member of the non-dominate group. This can include overt acts like avoiding people or excluding them from activities. A microinsult is a subtler rude comment that a member of the dominate group may categorize as race neutral, but it carries derogatory undertones which are clear to the targeted person, and microinvalidations attempt to diminish a person's opinions, experiences, or feelings. An example includes telling members of the non-dominate group that they are overreacting to one of the forms of microaggression (Sue 2007). Another example of this is a professor proffering high praise on Black students for behaviors that are seen as expected from their White peers like being articulate. Participants in Guiffrida's study also noted times when the evaluation of their performance was rooted in a stereotypical frame. An example in the study was when an instructor told one dance major she could use her hips well during rehearsal. The student perceived that this feedback lacked the depth of that shared with her White classmates and served to reinforce racial biases (Guiffrida, 2005).



Black students can find themselves preoccupied with concerns about inadvertently confirming to White professors' and peers' negative stereotypes. Steele and Aronson's (1995) study found that "Black college students' performance on standardized tests was adversely affected by intrinsic anxiety associated with the fear of conforming to low expectations of intellectual capacity" (p. 808). Bair and Steele's (2010) two-part quantitative study examined the effects of stereotype threats on 78 Black Canadian undergraduates to determine how race-based interactions in multiracial groups affected the participants' executive function by assessing their self-regulatory depletion. The first part of the experiment asked participants to complete a survey containing the Racial Centrality subscale of Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The participants were then asked to be part of a second study, stated to be unrelated to the first. Seventy-two individuals chose to continue as part of the second experiment. The findings showed that Black participants experienced a reduction in their ability to self-regulate, even with the White person did not make a comment that the researchers deemed as racist. In a three-part quantitative study on the effects of stereotype threats on cognitive performance, Schmader and Johns (2003) enlisted 73 undergraduate students: 33 identified as Latino (20 female and 13 male) and 40 identified as White (27 female 13 male). One White participant's data was lost leaving the researchers with a total of 71 participants. The outcomes of all three studies supported the initial hypothesis that internalized stereotype threats decrease working memory. Latino and White women who were members of group exposed to stereotype threat conditions experienced reduced working memory, recalling significantly

fewer words than all other participants including Whites who were also in this experimental group (Schmader et al., 2003).

In addition to meeting the rigor of a very highly selective college or university, Black men find themselves navigating the mental and emotional minefield of microaggressions in the classroom, which requires that they expend precious time and energy working to counteract the impact of these microaggressions (Solorzano et al., 2000). This type of racial stereotyping can damage students' willingness to participate fully in class activities, thereby causing them to perform below their true ability (Museus, 2008).

The classroom is the epicenter of a college student's life, making the interactions high achieving Black male scholars have with faculty a strong influence on their perception of mattering to the institution (Tinto, 2012). This supports the importance of inclusive class environments (Quaye & Harper, 2020). One way to achieve greater instructional inclusivity is by diversifying the faculty to reflect the backgrounds of the students whom they serve. Same race members of the faculty and administrative staff can act as mentors and role models to Black male students (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004).

Together with same race faculty and administrative staff, a culturally relevant curriculum is also important to cultivate instructional inclusivity. Currently, college students across the country have the option of taking non-Eurocentric classes like Black history; however, Quaye et al. (2020) argued that this should be taught as part of United States history. U.S. History is a requirement for all undergraduates, and not relegated to the designation of an elective. A curriculum that uniformly reflects the dominant culture signals that the contributions of members of the non-dominate culture are not as valuable,

or they are nonexistent. Curriculum which reflects and validates non-dominate cultures will enrich the lives of all students, while improving the engagement and retention of Black men (Quaye et al., 2015).

Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) conducted a series of 10 focus groups comprised of 34 Black undergraduates attending one of three elite, historically White institutions. Using critical race theory to guide their work, they were able to learn that the study participants (18 females and 16 males) felt unseen in the classroom when professors ignored them or presented racially biased curricula. They also reported that professors had lower expectations of them than they did for White students. These types of microaggressions left the study participants frustrated, isolated, and in doubt of themselves, which could lead to them performing below their full capacity (Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue, 2004).

Educational exclusion and the resulting inequities have been part of the fabric of higher education since the inception of our nation. Black men continue to be underserved in higher education.

### ***Representation***

The literature shows us the importance of culturally and ethnically inclusive faculty at historically White institutions. These academic professionals will not only be able to enrich the learning of all students, but also they can provide high achieving Black scholars with mentors and a representation of what is possible (Smith, 1989). Colleges and universities have not worked assertively to diversify their faculties (Trower & Chait, 2002) because the percentage of Black full-time faculty members remains stagnant. According to IPEDS/NCES (2018), only 6% of all full-time faculty members identified

as Black. Smith et al. (2012) conducted a descriptive analysis of full-time faculty at colleges and universities which revealed the diversity improvement occurred at a slower than expected pace between 1993 and 2006. Using a multi-lens perspective to analyze and disaggregate IPEDS/NCES data by race/ethnicity and citizenship, Smith et al. (2012) found that the percentage of Black full-time faculty members teaching at public research universities went from 3% in 1993 to 4% in 2009, and it was stagnant at 4% in private, not-for-profit research universities. Nineteen high achieving undergraduates in Guiffrida's 2005 quantitative study perceived that Black faculty members were willing to go "above and beyond" (p. 708) to ensure the success of Black students by listening to them in order to provide academic and non-academic advice, hold them to high academic standards, and provide them with resources to navigate historically White institutions (Guiffrida, 2005). The presence of Black faculty and staff facilitates an increased sense of mattering in high achieving Black students, which supports their willingness to persist.

### **Promising Practices**

#### ***Student Supports***

Given the persistently low retention rate of Black men in college, it is important for college and university administrations to identify strategies that will improve their educational outcomes (Strayhorn, 2010). Sledge (2012) defined social support as feedback that validates students. This type of support can include the students' family and friends, student organizations, or members of affinity groups. The absence of these supports possibly can stand in the way of Black students achieving their goals (Petty, 2014). Having a social support system plays an important role in persistence, especially for Black students. Jackson (2012) conducted an observational study on Black male

students at a historically White institution who sought solace in each other through a social support program. In this two-year ethnographic study, the author noted that in addition to social support, the students defined brotherhood for themselves, and they ultimately developed a community that provided academic support, practical support, accountability, and a familial bond as a means of survival. Palmer and Maramba (2012) interviewed student affairs administrators at a HBCU who emphasized the importance of faculty and administrators supporting Black male students through mentorship, and they discussed the importance of showing an interest in their lives in-class and out-of-class.

Summer bridge programs offer support for students transitioning into college who are academically underprepared. In addition to supporting the development of study skills for some students, the experience could offer high achieving scholars the opportunity to gain the social capital necessary to navigate college while developing bonds within their peer group and with upper classmen (Strayhorn, 2019; Palmer & Maramba, 2012).

Targeted programmatic interventions that provide mentoring, facilitate access to resources, and encourage the cultivation of ethnic identity are other ways to foster Black male students' sense of mattering and improve retention (Palmer et al., 2012).

### ***Mentors and Advocates***

Black men attending historically White institutions often find themselves in an environment where their White peers and faculty members diminish their personhood. Microaggressions in the classroom contribute to what may become a negative environment (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Adverse statements and behaviors erect barriers to the full integration of these scholars into the academic and social landscape (Brooms et al., 2017). To counteract these interactions' negative impact, it is important for Black

faculty and college administrators to serve as mentors (Strayhorn, 2016). These mentors can serve as guides through the college experience and can increase students' overall satisfaction leading to increased levels of retention (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Broom & Davis, 2017). There are campuses that have instituted strategies to match Black male students with mentors, offering an increased level of support (Clark & Brooms, 2018; Palmer et al, 2014).

### ***Affinity Groups***

Relationships are critical to a students' measurement of their level of mattering. Black men on college campuses express feeling marginalized by their White peers (Brooms & Davis, 2017). They need to feel they are valuable and important to and appreciated by both faculty and peers (Carey, 2019). Paputsakis (2010) noted a difference in the way male and female students interpreted mattering. Males perceived significantly lower levels of interpersonal mattering. High achieving Black male scholars at very highly selective HWIs are not only isolated from their White peers, but they may find barriers between themselves and other Black men on campus who do not share their academic acumen. This adds more emphasis on the importance of positive interactions between Black male students and their same race peers and their relationships with college agents. Positive interactions with peers and faculty were found to be a major contributing factor to Black male students' willingness to persist toward degree completion (Kent, 2004; Brooms & Davis, 2017). Programs like the Student Black Brotherhood and the Black Male Initiative are designed to provide Black men with a supportive peer group on historically White campuses which allows them a space in

which they can feel a oneness with others (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2013; Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2016).

Another type of affinity group that supports Black men on college campus are historically Black fraternities, also referred to in the literature as Black Greek letter organizations (BGLO). In a qualitative study Shaun Harper interviewed 131 African American undergraduate members of BGLOs attending HWIs. Each participant reported attending classes where there were few, if any, same race peers. The findings revealed that membership in a BGLO had a positive effect on student performance (Harper, 2007). Patton, Bridges, and Flowers (2011) conducted a quantitative study of archival data found in the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to assess the level of engagement members of BGLOs experienced when attending historically Black colleges or universities (HBCU) compared to those members who attend HWI. The sample of 9,539 students, revealed that although students attending HBCUs had a higher level of engagement, all members engagement was higher than non-members (Patton et al., 2011). Currently the fraternal BGLOs are Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Inc. Each of these organizations are part of the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC).

### **High Achieving Black Males**

Black male scholars' rate of academic achievement, as measured by college completion, has long been the subject of research. In 1994, the National Center for Educational Statistics published *The Educational Progress of Black Students*. It stated that Black men graduated with a bachelor's degree at half the rate of their White peers. In

the 2011 cohort, the 6-year graduation rate gap between Black and White students remained stagnant at 34% and 61% respectively. Scholarly literature discussing this phenomenon is often written from a deficit perspective. It has been theorized that Black men eschew pursuing academic excellence for fear that they will be accused of “acting White.” They may face social or academic isolation. Some people assume they are academically underprepared, and they are subjected to racist stereotypes at historically White colleges and universities (Cuyjet, 2006; Fries-Britt, 1998; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2009; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Watkins et al., 2007). The inordinate amount of discourse on Black men who do not find success in college could negate the inroads that high achieving Black men continue to make.

The designation of a high achiever can be defined by the students’ grade point average, meaningful engagement in student organizations, and participation in supplemental educational opportunities (Harper, 2015). Historically Black Colleges and Universities are places where high achieving Black men flourish. Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) conducted one-on-one interviews and focus groups with 34 high achieving juniors and seniors attending HBCUs and HWIs. While the men attending HWI faced challenges based on the lack of a race-affirming critical mass, those attending HBCUs were readily able to solidify meaningful connections with faculty and peers, which positively influenced their connection to the campus.

To answer the question of the progress Black male scholars have made since the Chief Justice Warren wrote the majority opinion in the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, Harper (2008) sought to gain insight into the long-term



effects of the decision of high achieving Black men attending HWIs. Using both the social capital and social reproduction theories as the framework for the review of 32 interviews from a larger phenomenological study, he uncovered that the scholars increased their social capital through active participation in student leadership. These student leadership positions offered them access to upper college administrators and key faculty members. The relationships they were able to foster with these gatekeepers allowed them membership on high-level decision-making teams, helped them gain early notification of scholarships and internships and positioned them for an advantaged life after their time as undergraduates.

Life for these high achievers is not all cocktail parties and study abroad programs. Having a brilliant mind or holding an impressive position on campus does not shield these men from the pain of racism. Many Black men studying at HWIs describe being met with negative stereotypes inside and outside the classroom (Steele, 2000). In fact, Fries-Britt (2017) stated:

In 20 years of interviewing high achieving Black students, especially those born in the United States, I have never had a participant report no encounters with stereotypes, biases and/or racism. Put differently, every Black male born in the United States that I have interviewed has encountered one of these social ills prior to, and/or during college. (p.13)

White students surmise that these high achievers were admitted to elite HWIs because of affirmative action and not because of their academic capacity (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Professors offer cursory responses to their questions in class (Fries-Britt, 2017), and it is assumed that they are attending the HWIs because of their athletic prowess

(Harper, 2015). High achieving Black male scholars are left in the position of having to navigate around microaggressions and disprove these erroneous misassumptions (Harper, 2015).

Achiever isolation is also a challenge faced by high achieving Black male scholars. These men often find themselves as the lone Black person acting as the voice of all Black people (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). They often are devoid of close bonds with Black or White peers (Fries-Britt, 1998; Johnson & McGowan, 2017). Harper termed this phenomenon as “onlyness” in his 2012 National Black Male College Achievement Study. It is not uncommon for high achieving Black men to find themselves to be the only person of their racial group in the classroom at some of the largest colleges and universities (Harper, 2016). These men assume the responsibility of serving as the expert for all things relevant to the Black experience (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt, 2002; Harper, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Black male scholars have greater access to postsecondary education than ever before; however, access alone does not create equity. Although recruitment efforts have had some effectiveness in increasing the number of Black students admitted to highly selective historically White colleges and universities, once on the campus, these men are often one of only a handful of same-race students, leaving them to experience what Fries-Britt (1998) calls “Black achiever isolation,” which carries academic and social ramifications. HWIs have the responsibility to establish and nurture student organizations that provide a safe place for Black men to further develop a community within the institution that specifically supports their continued academic growth, provides them with

information regarding resources and opportunities, and enriches their ethnic identity (Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2016).

Conversely, the intensity devoted to recruiting students of color, including Black men, does not apply to an effective increase in the number of Black faculty and administrative staff members to whom these scholars can look for mentorship (Strayhorn, 2016). Without this representation and related support, Black men are at an increased risk of dropping out of their college of choice due to a lack of connection to the institution and a diminished sense of mattering. Having key allies to provide advice about how to navigate the explicit and implicit norms of the HWIs strengthens scholars' perception of their importance to the institution and demonstrates that the school appreciates their contributions, thereby bolstering their willingness to persist (Kent, 2004; Brooms & Davis, 2017).

The research has shown that when students perceive they matter to their chosen institution, they have a greater willingness to persist to graduation. Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering has been supported in studies focused on nontraditional students, those attending community colleges, and those attending historically White colleges and universities. Although there is a growing body of work exploring the lived experiences of high achieving Black male scholars attending HWIs, none of the studies have used mattering as the framework. This study seeks to extend our understanding of successful Black male scholars who graduated from highly selective HWIs by exploring their perceptions of the ways in which the academic and social supports made available to them by the institution influenced their sense of mattering and willingness to persist.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Introduction**

Chapter one provided an overview of the current status of retention for high achieving Black males, but there has been limited research on what allowed them to be retained and persistent in college. Mattering provides this promising lens. As illustrated in Chapter two, there have been a variety of studies that support that context. Chapter three will provide an overview of the methods, procedures, and ethical considerations that guide this study.

Qualitative research is appropriate when there is a need for an in-depth understanding of a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social media platforms have become a place where individuals can share their ideas and experiences and interact with one another (Jenkins et al., 2006; Cormode & Krishnamurty, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Participants were able to share their stories in their own words, and they shared artifacts that included photographs and videos, which enriched their digital storytelling. In this way, qualitative research bears witness to the participants' truth without respect to presuppositions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Many of the stories of the men who successfully navigated the most highly selective historically White colleges and universities in the country include instructional biases, underrepresentation, and systematic oppression. However, their stories provide invaluable insight into effective supports for top academic performers.

### **Methods and Procedures**

A narrative inquiry method was used to explore the experiences of high achieving Black male graduates of very highly selective historically White institutes (HWI) through

the information they chose to share about their lives on social media. Connelly & Clandinin (1990) said, “Humans are storytelling organisms who lead storied lives” (p. 2). The stories, the text of our lived experience, serve as models from which others can learn (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). By using the stories of these high achieving Black men that were shared through static images, text, and video, this study was able to disrupt the deficit framework and current narratives that concentrate on the obstacles to achievement by describing, in depth, the pathways and tools students used to achieve success. Creswell et al. (2018) stated that narrative research is “best for capturing the detailed stories of life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (p.71). The view of these men’s lived experiences that was shared on social media added to understanding how mattering allowed them to prevail.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the perceptions of high achieving Black males who are alumni of historically White colleges and universities to uncover what interpersonal and institutional supports influenced their sense of mattering and thereby, their willingness to persist. Narrative research is guided by overarching open-ended central questions that are designed to allow for the maximum exploration of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This same design was used to explore the digital artifacts.

### **Research Questions**

To frame the narrative inquiry, this study was guided by the following research questions designed to allow the researcher the latitude to interpret the artifacts in the form of static images, text, and video shared to gain insight into the extent, quality, and breadth

of mattering; the researcher also studied the experiences of the participants while matriculating through very highly selective historically White institutions (HWI).

1. What are the experiences of mattering in college for high achieving Black male alumni of highly selective HWIs?
2. How did the perceptions of mattering influence student's willingness to persist to graduation?

### **Setting**

This study utilized data individuals voluntarily posted in the public domain by way of social media, specifically Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube. No data was collected from closed groups, private accounts, or sites requiring membership or approval for access.

### **Participants**

The participant group was comprised of high achieving Black male alumni. This population was defined purposefully as completers of undergraduate degree programs offered by the most highly selective historically White institutions of higher education in the United States as ranked by the U. S. News and World Report (2021). Focusing on the experiences of high achieving Black men who graduated from a very highly selective HWI provided a much-needed perspective on the value of mattering.

In addition to being a graduate of one of the country's most selective institutions, the data collected was from men who self-identified as Black and male. Harper (2015) defined high achieving by grade point average, leadership positions in student organizations, personal interactions with faculty and staff, and honors, awards, and merit-scholarships that they received. For this study, high achieving was initially defined by

admission to the very highly selective HWIs to maximize the opportunity to uncover which, if any, of the attributes delineated in Harper's definition supported mattering. The participants' accomplishments during their time as undergraduates included holding leadership positions in co-curricular organizations, graduating with distinction, being admitted to graduate programs, and successfully transitioning into their career of choice, which aligned with Harper's definition. Limiting participants to men who graduated since spring 2018 increased the probability of capturing an accurate and complete digital repository of the events they shared during their time as undergraduates. The initial participant group was 21 men. At the time of this writing, two men modified the settings of their social media account from public to private, and one indicated that he identified as Jamaican and not Black American (African American), leaving the total number of participants at 18.

The participants' characteristics were chosen because of their demonstrated success. They earned their way into very highly selective HWIs, and they successfully navigated through them. Shaun Harper's (2012) National Black Male College Achievement Study described eight factors instrumental to the achievement of the participants across three time periods he called pipelines: college readiness, college achievement, and post-college success. The factors contributing to college achievement include out-of-class activities, experiences in class, and engaging enrichment opportunities (Harper, 2012). Likewise, the unsolicited information high achieving men Black male alumni shared about their unique experiences while attending very highly selective institutions challenged the deficit model applied to Black male scholars by

refocusing the narrative away from barriers to achievement and toward those things that matter to success.

## **Recruitment**

Criterion sampling was used to allow the selection of individuals who had experience with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After approval of the St. John's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher actively engaged in recruiting qualified participants for this qualitative study through social media for four weeks by posting a flyer (Appendix F) on the social media page of the alumni association of each institution's pool of potential participants, sharing the research topic, and outlining the criteria for participation. After that time, no participants were identified. A second round of recruitment expanded appeal directly to moderators of the institution's alumni organization social media accounts, as well as posts of the recruitment flyer made by individuals who graduated from the target institutions but did not fit the other criteria for inclusion (self-identifying as Black, male, or graduating within the past three years). These individuals reposted weekly for four to six weeks. A third round of recruitment included direct appeals to the graduate chapters of fraternal organizations in the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC), and personal network affiliations not exclusively male centered, but potentially providing access to the target population. These affiliations included sorority organizations in the NPHC, the National Association of 100 Black Women, Jack and Jill of America, Inc. and The Links, Inc.

Over the next six weeks, three men completed the demographic survey. One received his master's degree from Columbia University; however, his undergraduate work was done at an institution outside the scope of the current study. The second and



third men who completed the survey did not respond to the initial email to review the consent to participate and schedule an interview. The researcher did reach out to these two men once a week over the course of three additional weeks without response.

It was important to the current research to learn about Schlossberg's (1989) dimensions of mattering, dependence, attention, importance, ego-extension, and appreciation; through the stories of the lived experiences high achieving Black male alumni of very highly selective historically White institutions (HWI) shared. This perspective aligned with Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework by allowing Black men indicate how, and to what degree, they perceived they mattered while undergraduates. In collaboration with the committee chair, the recruitment efforts shifted to identifying indicators of mattering through the digital information that men who met the study criteria outlined earlier in this chapter posted on their public social media accounts. This allowed the researcher to seek out their individual stories and gain authentic insight into those things the authors of the posts deemed important to share about their lived experiences.

The researcher conducted a search for high achieving Black male alumni of the five highest rated private and the five highest rated public universities according to U. S. News and World Report (2021). The search focused on social media networks including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Initial searches were conducted utilizing the hashtags #blackivyleague and #blackexcellence. The feed was examined to find individuals who posted using the hashtag who presented as Black and male. If the individual's page was publicly accessible, the researcher verified that the posts aligned with the requirements for inclusion in the study, namely that they identified as Black,

male, and posted indicators of high achievement. The researcher experienced more success through LinkedIn. Each of the universities included in this study have LinkedIn accounts with an alumni section. This search parameter allowed the researcher to filter all LinkedIn user accounts that self-identified as alumni of the university by examining key terms and looking for specific dates. Using the term “Black” and setting the dates from 2018–2021, created a list of individual profiles meeting the criteria. Those profiles with the option “Connect” available were examined to verify that the person presented as Black and male. Once that was determined, the “Education” section was used to ensure the individual graduated within the specified time frame. Reviewing the “Posts” section allowed access to posts that the author chose to share with other users of the platform. Once all relevant data shared on that platform was collected, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube were queried for additional posts.

The researcher also employed snowball sampling to increase the number of qualified participants by utilizing the participants’ networks (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individuals tagged in group photos or present in the comment section of posts or the original author of a reposted item were identified. Their demographic information was then examined to verify their eligibility for participation if they self-identified as Black or male or if they demonstrated the indicators of high achievers such as graduating from one of the top 1% of historically White institutions.

According to NCES (2018), there were 2,828 bachelor’s degree conferring institutions operating in the United States. Of these, 750 were public and 1,590 were private not-for-profit. Those schools at the top of the U. S. News and World Report’s (2017) annual ranking of colleges and universities are some of the most prestigious in the

country. Gaining insight into how, or if, the most competitive and best resourced members of the academy create systems and relationships that allow space for all its students to perceive they matter advances the research and supports institutions' quest to improve retention. To ensure that the undergraduate experience was of the highest caliber available, this study focused on the ten highest ranked national universities according to the U.S. News and World Report 2021 study. However, that list consisted solely of private not-for-profit institutions. The aim of this study was to diversify institutional types to include public and private institutions located in urban and suburban areas. To that end, the researcher included participants who attended the 5 highest ranked national private universities as well as the 5 highest ranked public universities. Engle (2007) pointed out that students' ability to persist in college can be impacted by their ability to finance their continued attendance. The high cost of some of the highest ranked schools may be a barrier to some high achieving Black scholars. For example, the annual tuition and fees at Columbia University are reported to have an annual cost of \$64,280, Meanwhile in-state costs to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are \$9,021 (U.S. News and World Report, 2017). Including both the highest ranked private and public colleges and universities allowed this study to gain the perspective of a broader cross-section of high achieving Black scholars. Those universities included in the study in rank order were Princeton University, Harvard University, Columbia University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale University, the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of California, Berkeley, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the University of Virginia, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (U.S. News and World Report, 2017). This protocol was utilized for all 10 universities.

The researcher's online recruitment efforts yielded alumni from six of the 10 targeted universities (Appendix E).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Once eligibility was verified, a direct message was sent to the graduates with a copy of the notification of inclusion in the study to allow the individual to choose to decline the usage of the data found in the public domain. The fact that inclusion in the study was voluntary and there was no known risk for being part of the study was clearly stated in the notification (Appendix B). Participants were given the opportunity to meet with the researcher by way of video conferencing to address, refine, clarify, or redact any portion of information shared on any of their public social media platforms. It was also stated that participants were free to withdraw their information from the data set and be excluded from the study at any time without consequence.

Each social media account for every participant was manually reviewed by the researcher. The initial review verified that the demographic information shared on each account aligned with the participation criteria for this study. Posts traditionally appear in reverse chronological order, and the most recent posts appear at the top of the feed. Date stamps on the posts were used to establish the timeline of events shared, and the researcher ensured that all data collected was limited to the time the participants were matriculating through their undergraduate programs. Individual data folders were created to house screen captures of static images and text posted to their pages.

All participant data was stored under pseudonyms for confidentiality. At no time were their identities revealed to anyone other than the dissertation chair. During the digital artifact analysis, the researcher maintained a journal while reviewing the data to

capture nuanced interpretations of the artifacts provided from their lived experience. In addition, video footage was downloaded and saved when available. Videos that could not be directly downloaded were transcribed, and a detailed description of the imagery was recorded by the researcher. All captured posts including still images and texts, as well as recordings were stored using Microsoft One Drive cloud storage software which is St. John's University's official platform. All data retrieved was uploaded into Dedoose for the coding process. The digital artifacts from the participants supported a thick, rich telling of their story. To further ensure the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used to identify specific posts or quotes in Chapter four. Table 1 (on the next page) provides a list of participants and relevant information about their academic and social background.

**Table 1***Pseudonyms*

Pseudonym	Univ	Major	Grad	Co-Curricular	Honors	Post Grad
Gregory	H	Government Pre Med	2019		Cum Laude	U Michigan Medical Yale Law <i>deferred</i>
Dean	UVA	Biology Music	2020	Phi Beta Sigma	Achievement Award	Northeastern Bouv� College of Pharmacy
Malik	H	Applied Mathematics	2020	Black Men’s Forum		Software Engineer
George	UCB	Business Administration	2021	HUBBA <i>President</i>	Confidence w/o Attitude Award	Analyst
Paul	Y	Political Science Government	2020	Track Black Men’s Union Chi Alpha	Graduation Speaker (Ivy Ode)	Securitized Products
Robert	UVA	Systems Engineering Economics	2021	NSBE		Investment Banking
Neville	Y	History	2021	Student Government <i>President</i>	Maryland General Assembly Citation NY Times, CNN	Gen Z Blogger
Kyle	H	Applied Mathematics	2021	Track <i>Captain</i> Black Harvard Consulting <i>Founder</i>		Consultant
Daniel	Y	Statistics Data Science	2021	Step Team		Equities Data Analyst
Christopher	M	Movement Science	2021	Kappa Alpha Psi		Medical Scribe
Anthony	UVA	Systems Engineer	2021	Alpha Kappa Psi Virginia Venture Fund	Dean’s List	Investment Banking
Kyrie	M	Philosophy	2021	Omega Psi Phi <i>Social Media Coordinator</i> NAACP		Photographer Financial Rep
Leon	UNC	International Finance	2021	Alpha Phi Alpha <i>President</i>	Dean’s List Holmberg Carolina Scholarship	Harvard Law
Alex	H	Economics Computer Science	2021	Kappa Alpha Psi Onuocha Fellowship <i>Founder</i>	Honors	Associate Product Mgmt.
Millard	H	Economics	2019	Track		Yale Law
Phillip	H	Economics	2018	Alpha Phi Alpha	Cum Laude	Harvard Business
John	H	Neurobiology	2019		Cum Laude Jackie Robinson Foundation Award	Assoc. Director WH Mgmt. Yale Law <i>deferred</i> Stanford -MBA <i>deferred</i>
Adam	H	Sociology Psychology	2020	Blk Capital Management	Graduation Speech	Consultant

### ***Digital Artifact Analysis***

Narrative inquiry data is not only transcribed interviews and researcher notes. Saldaña & Omasta (2016) listed documents, drawings, photographs, video, internet sites, emails, and literature as examples of data (p. 4) These items were available to the researcher through narrative inquiry. These artifacts are what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) called a memory box that can prompt more vivid recall and help construct a richer narrative. The unsolicited nature of social media posts provides its users space to share the artifacts of their lived experience. An interview is a reflective process. Analyzing the information shared on these platforms allows researchers access to authentic representations of experiences as they occurred. Participants shared images, text, and videos that were important to them at that time. The researcher included all information shared about the digital artifact through direct captions, comments, or responses to comments in the field journal. All artifacts were organized by type, and they were aligned to a narrative plot and associated codes (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Digital Artifact Protocol*

Considerations	Theoretical Framework	Related Literature	Research Question
Why did the individual select to attend the very highly selective institution college?	X		RQ1 RQ2
Indications of a time when the individual felt like he mattered.	X	Student Support Systemic Oppression	RQ1 RQ2
Description of in-class events.	X	High Achieving Representation Instructional Bias	RQ1 RQ2
What made this event important?	X	Systemic Oppression Representation Instructional Bias	RQ1 RQ2
What made him proud?	X	Mentorship Affinity Groups	RQ1 RQ2
Description of out-of-class events.	X	Student Support High Achieving Affinity Groups	RQ1 RQ2
Interpersonal Connections	X	Mentorship Affinity Groups	RQ1 RQ2

**Trustworthiness of the Design**

Trustworthiness is the level of confidence in the data and its interpretation for a qualitative study (Connelly, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) established the criteria for trustworthiness to include internal validation and external validation. Validation is how accurately the researcher captures the lived experience of the participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Validity refers to the interpretation of the data and not the raw data itself (Creswell et al., 2000). Internal validation of a study fosters confidence in the findings.



Dependability is the stability of the data gathered throughout the time and condition of the study, and confirmability is the degree to which the findings can be repeated (Connelly, 2016).

Triangulation, member checking, and peer feedback are ways that qualitative researchers ensure both the trustworthiness and reliability of a study. Triangulation allowed the exploration of areas where the data overlap or diverges across the participants' stories, observations, and artifacts during their systematic processing (Creswell et al., 2000). This was accomplished in the present study through cross-referencing all social media platforms of each participant for consistency. Member checking promoted collaboration between the researcher and participants by sharing the transcription of the data gathered and interpretation garnered confirmation of the information's credibility (Connelly, 2016). This was encouraged through communication sent to each of the participants. At the time of this writing, no participant chose to communicate directly with the researcher. Triangulation is used to remove inconsistencies in the research, and member checking helps control researcher bias.

In Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) work, elements of narrative inquiry are likened to a dramatic production. Participants are characters; the setting is referred to as the scene, and the narrative is advanced by plot or time. This study illuminated the characters (participants) response to, and within, the scene (setting) to provide the research with rich and thick descriptions to assign events to the beginning, midpoint, or end of the plot (time) under consideration. The specific focus was their time in college. This research design allowed the emerging themes to assist the reader in experiencing a robust immersion into the stories of these high achieving Black men.

The researcher obtained feedback from the dissertation chair to confirm and clarify the assignment of codes and emerging themes when analyzing the data through the lens of the theoretical framework and review of the relevant literature. The researcher also maintained a journal to document any salient information shared by the participants.

### **Research Ethics**

After approval of the St. John's University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher began recruitment. Because the researcher shares a cultural identity with the potential participants, the researcher was granted access to areas where there were higher populations of high achieving Black male scholars. Participants were sent an electronic notification that the information they posted to their public social media accounts would be included in this study. This allowed for voluntary participation including the option to leave the study at any time without penalty.

A pseudonym was selected for each participant to ensure confidentiality. The identities of the participants were known only by the researcher and her dissertation research advisor. Centering this research in a nondeficit perspective allowed the researcher to focus on stories of success and accomplishment opposed to the stereotypical narrative of marginality.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

Qualitative research is appropriate when there is a need for an in-depth understanding of a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants in this study told their stories through the images, text, and videos they chose to share with the public to chronicle their time in college, which allowed this qualitative research to bear witness to their truth without respect to presuppositions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative analysis as being three-dimensional. They outlined that the researcher has to focus on the interaction, continuity, and situation in which a phenomenon occurs (Clandinin et al., 2000). This intense analysis of notes taken during the initial review of the participants' static images and text with the transcription of videos allowed the researcher to "understand and make meaning of experience" (p. 80).

After gathering artifacts through social media, the researcher reviewed the static images, texts, video recordings and their transcription to begin coding. The researcher also reviewed all journal notes to drive the assignment of plot elements. Initial coding was based on the theory of marginality and mattering, the anti-deficit framework, and review of the literature. This cycle of coding positioned the plot by using the data gathered in the participant's individual stories chronologically. The plot allowed the researcher to gain clear insight into the people, structures, and events that helped these graduates feel they mattered at the beginning, midpoint, and end of their time as undergraduates. Although social media does archive posts chronologically, the way individuals choose to post, thereby telling their story, is not always linear. The concept of plot, with a perspective subject to continuity, allowed data simultaneously to reflect autobiographical information that was focused on the past, situated in the present, and making observations that were future-oriented (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To continue the coding process, all data was uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software.

Using multiple iterations of pattern coding allowed the data collected to be closely scrutinized for similarities, patterns, and differences, thereby refining the initial coding

into headings and subheadings (Saldaña, 2016). This system facilitates the organization of establishing codes into categories or themes (Saldaña, 2016). While earlier coding provided individual plotlines of the participants' lived experiences, the patterns revealed through pattern coding were completed to saturation and allowed the unfolding of a universal story. The resulting themes were used as a guide for the individual stories and the summary of the collective experience. The researcher was able to show how these emergent patterns, themes, and concepts aligned with the research questions (Saldaña, 2016).

### **Researcher Role**

The researcher's role in qualitative research was critical because (s)he was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. The researcher was responsible for the collection, coding, and analyzing of the data from interviews, observations, and any participant artifacts to showcase the emerging concepts and patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2017)

The researcher is a Black woman who attended an HWI for both undergraduate and graduate studies; however, she did not attend a school represented by the participants in the study. Although the researcher does work in the field of education, her current focus is at the PK-12 level. As an "indigenous-insider," she had the opportunity to "endorse the unique values and perspectives" of these exceptional scholars. (Banks, 1988, p. 8). Sharing a cultural experience could have created insider bias, leading to a skewing of the data for a more desirable outcome (Chavez-Reyes, 2008). To mitigate any prejudicial behavior, the researcher shared her dataset with her dissertation chair. The data gathered for individual participants was made available for their review.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the research method used to answer the research questions. A discussion of the procedure, study participants, data collection, and data analysis outlining how the study was conducted and how the participants were selected was discussed. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions of high achieving Black males who are alumni of very highly selective historically White institutions to uncover how the institution influenced their sense of mattering and willingness to persist. The data collected came from the individuals' public social media accounts and was reviewed using a digital artifact protocol, and it projected codes constructed by the researcher. The coded dataset along with journal notes were combined to achieve data saturation.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how high achieving Black male graduates from very highly selective historically White institutions (HWIs) perceived that they mattered to their college or university. Chapter one described the concerns regarding retention for high achieving Black males, and it explained that mattering provides a framework to understand the structures and supports that allowed them to persist in learning environments where they were often the “other.” In Chapter two, the aspects of mattering were explored to further understand these students’ perceived value to the institution. Chapter three described the methods and procedures used to conduct this study including a narrative inquiry describing the alumni perspective of their mattering through information shared on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. The research questions that guided analysis of the data were

1. What are the experiences of mattering in college for high achieving Black male alumni of very highly selective historically White colleges and universities?
2. How did the perceptions of mattering influence students’ willingness to persist to graduation?

The present study utilized criterion sampling to search for Black men who met the research criteria was initiated on LinkedIn. LinkedIn’s format encourages users to include information in respect to their educational background and professional experience. Using the university’s alumni section led the researcher to profiles of individuals who

presented as meeting the criteria for inclusion in this study. When a LinkedIn profile was verified to match the inclusion criteria, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube were searched for any additional posts made by the individual to maximize the completeness of the information gathered. This strategy was repeated for each HWI included in the study. Snowball sampling was conducted by further scrutinizing the posts of identified participants for individuals tagged in photographs are in the comments who met the criteria for inclusion. This allowed the researcher to increase the number of participants in the present study.

Through three coding cycles of the data three themes surfaced including finding their place, finding their people, and finding their purpose. The theme of finding their place was comprised of three subthemes including school pride, school traditions and access to opportunity. Within the theme of finding their people, the subthemes were advocates, fraternities and affinity groups, and peer relationships. Leadership, service, and activism were the subthemes that emerged within the theme of finding their purpose. A summary of themes and subthemes are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Themes and Subthemes*

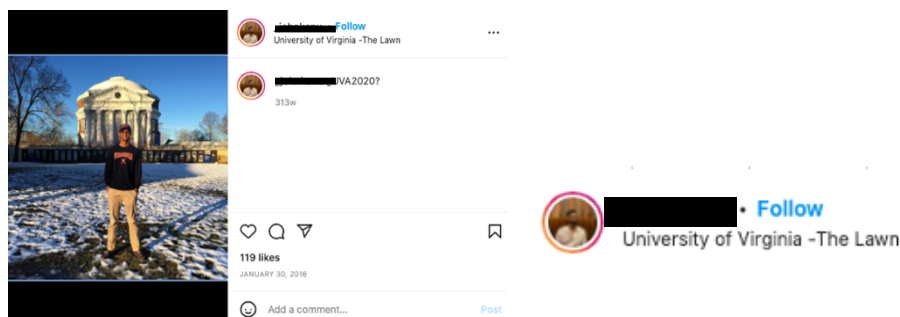
Theme	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3
Finding Their Place	School Pride	School Traditions	Access to Opportunity
Finding Their People	Advocates	Fraternities and Affinity Groups	Peer Relationships
Finding Their Purpose	Leadership	Service	Activism

### Theme 1: Finding their Place

Admission into one of the country's top-rated universities is cause for celebration in the lives of many high school completers and their families. Black young men are no exception. Attending a very highly selective college or university can increase a Black alumni's access to more prestigious starting careers as defined by social and economic access (Dale & Krueger 2011). Dean demonstrated his pride in starting at the University of Virginia by posting a photograph of himself standing on the lawn in front of the campus rotunda in his school sweatshirt and cap during his freshman year. The rotunda is an iconic hub of campus activity. The image let his followers know that he had arrived. His smile indicated that he was happy to be there (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Dean Standing on "The Lawn" at the University of Virginia*



*Note.* Photograph posted to Instagram (<https://instagram.com>), coded school pride. January 30, 2016. In the public domain.

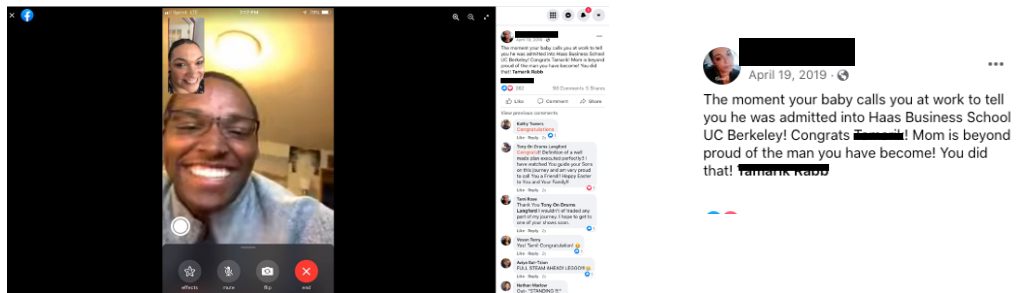
The students' pride and excitement of being selected to join the freshman class of a very highly selective HWI was exhibited on social media by posting acceptance letters



and photographs in the school's paraphernalia and writing captions that signaled the joy associated with being numbered among the selected few who were accepted to the schools. The pride of being accepted was shared by the family, friends, and community members as noted by their congratulatory comments. This network of individuals that Sledge (2012) referred to as the students' social support plays an important role in students' reaching their goal of graduation (Petty, 2014). In Figure 4, George reposted his mother's Facebook post that spoke about how she felt about him attending the University of California at Berkeley. Alongside a screen capture of a video call between herself and George that showed him smiling, she wrote, "The moment your baby calls you at work to tell you he was admitted into Haas Business School UC Berkeley! Congrats (George)! Mom is beyond proud of the man you have become! You did that!" (George, 2019). The original post shows how important this moment was to George's mother, and the fact that he reposted it demonstrated the value he placed on his pride in his accomplishment.

**Figure 4**

*Mother Announcing Students' Acceptance to the University of California at Berkeley*



*Note.* Screen capture reposted to student's Facebook page (<https://facebook.com>), coded as school pride. April 20, 2019. In the public domain.

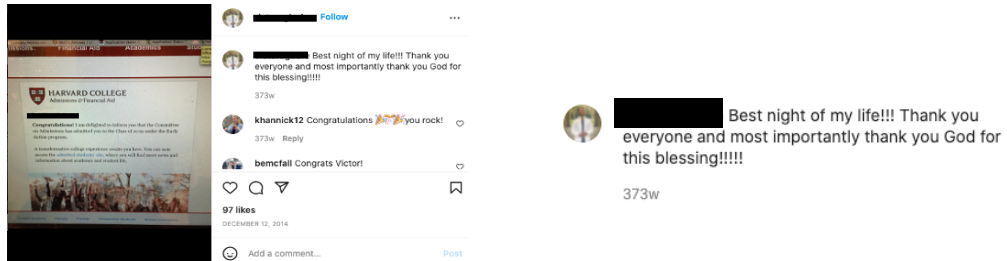
### ***School Pride***

The mystique surrounding our nation's top colleges and universities can be felt well before students step on campus. Adam, a graduate of Harvard University, shared his commencement address on Instagram. In his speech, he described the fact that Harvard's reputation as an aspirational university extends beyond the university experience and is widely spread as part of our common understanding. He stated that before they were students, they understood the magnitude of the opportunity through "a story that we heard, from TV punchlines, to political institutions" (Adam, 2020, 1:06). He went on to say that the school's importance was not limited to the select few who attended, but it "reverberated across the canyons of culture ... it permeated the boundaries of class, creed, country and continent" (Adam, 2020, 1:12). The gravity of being accepted into one of these institutions was echoed by other men in the study.

Posts archived on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram are evidence of the level of pride these men had in being granted membership into one their very highly selective HWIs of choice. The images and captions they shared, and the comments from family and friends served as artifacts of their journey from the time of their initial acceptance through graduation. In Figure 5, Gregory, a graduate of Harvard University, posted his award letter that set the tone for his future as a member of the "admitted class of 2019" by stating, "A transformative college experience awaits you." Gregory captioning the post "Best night of my life!!!" (Gregory, 2014).

**Figure 5**

*Notification of Acceptance to Harvard University*

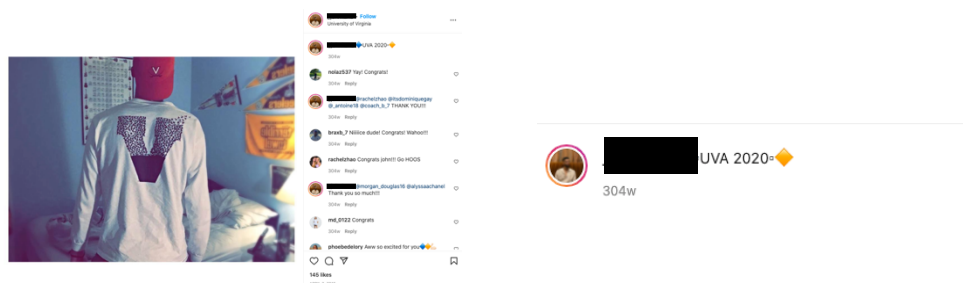


*Note.* Screen capture posted to Instagram (<https://instagram.com>), coded school pride. December 12, 2014. In the public domain.

Another way students showed their pride in being associated with their HWI was by wearing school colors, insignias, and other paraphernalia. Dean announced that he was selected to attend the University of Virginia by posting an image of himself in what appeared to be his boyhood bedroom wearing a UVA ballcap and sweater. Although his face was not depicted in the photograph (the ballcap is turned backward), the caption, “UVA 2020” let everyone who saw the post know his intentions for the upcoming fall (Dean, 2016).

**Figure 6**

*Dean’s Announcement of Acceptance to University of Virginia*

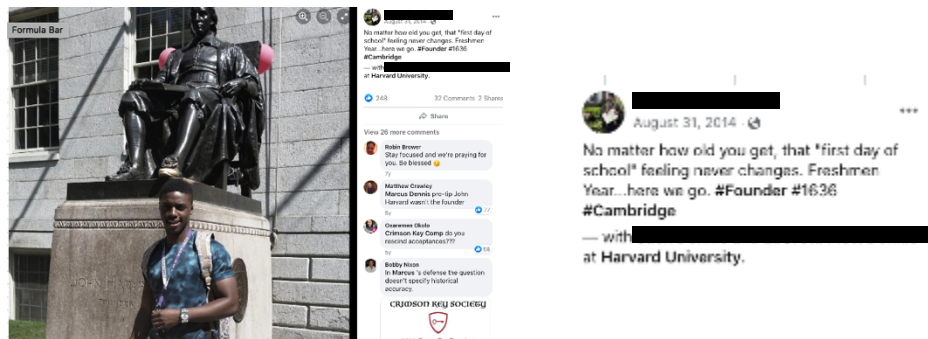


*Note:* Photograph posted on Instagram (<https://instagram.com>), coded school pride. April 3, 2016. In the public domain.

The post Phillip made on Facebook in Figure 7 included a photograph of himself on the first day of class as a Harvard man. The photograph captured him standing by the statue of the university's founder wearing a backpack. Taking the time to chronicle the start of his college journey indicates a level of pride in the accomplishment of starting. Standing next to the statue of John Harvard highlights the pride specifically associated with being part of the Harvard student body (Phillip, 2014).

**Figure 7**

*Phillip on His First Day of Class*



*Note:* Photograph posted on Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded school pride. August 31, 2014. In the public domain.

The men demonstrated an understanding of matriculating through a very highly selective HWI. Malik shared a photograph of himself in a Harvard University sweater sitting in front of one of the buildings on the campus with the caption, “First semester is finitooooo” (Malik, 2016). The solitary young Black man set against the red brick of a

century old dormitory for first-year students creates a feeling of quiet satisfaction in Figure 8.

### Figure 8

*Malik After Completion of First Semester In Front of Matthews Hall*



*Note.* Photograph posted on Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded school pride. December 20, 2016. In the public domain.

Paul made a post on Facebook that proclaimed his graduation from Yale University was the “culmination of years of hard work, prayer, love and support from friends and family” to accomplish the “hardest thing [he had] ever done. (Paul, 2020)” acknowledges the pride that comes with finding success in a place that challenged him. In addition to the practical advantages of attending these schools, students often look forward to enjoying the traditions associated with these institutions.

### ***School Traditions***

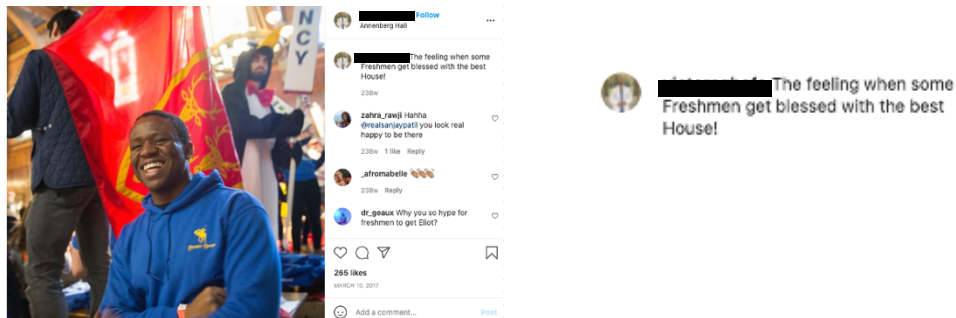
Traditions build a sense of community by allowing participants to share common experiences. Harvard builds community and legacy within its student body by providing incoming freshmen with a list the names of alumni who lived in their particular dorm room. Adam recounted this experience by stating, “Later, I walked into my dorm room, and on my desk, I found a list of alumni that held the keys to that room before me. The

first name I read was Henry David Thoreau- the prophetic essayist and abolitionist. It was a glimpse into the greatness of what the surreal world was capable of (Adam, 2020, 0:36).

Another one of Harvard's traditions is assigning students to one of twelve houses at the end of freshman year. Gregory was assigned to Dunster House. In March 2017, he posted a photograph of himself smiling broadly in the foreground with another student holding the flag for Dunster House aloft. In the far background, viewers can glimpse someone dressed in a costume holding a sign for a different house. The caption, "The feeling when some freshmen get blessed with the best house," supports the idea that participation in the tradition was a positive experience (Gregory, 2017).

## Figure 9

*Gregory After Learning He Had Been Assigned to Dunster House*



*Note.* Photograph posted on Instagram (<https://instagram.com>), coded school traditions. March 10, 2017. In the public domain.

Graduation ceremonies are also steeped in tradition. In addition to the posts of families and friends gathered to commemorate in-person or virtual ceremonies, all pictures depicted smiling graduates adorned in their regalia displaying an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. According to Yale University's website, the tradition of

planting an ivy for a graduating class was established in 1852. The ivy is said to represent the growth of the students of that class and the bonds they create. Paul is a Division 1 track record holder who was part of Yale's 2020 class. He was given the honor of performing the "Ivy Ode," a speech that is part of Yale's Class Week to celebrate its graduates. The speech can be found on the university's YouTube channel, which allowed Paul's words to find an audience much larger than his audience on his personal social media account. He currently has 3,000 friends on Facebook and three subscribers on YouTube, but through Yale's social network, his speech was made available to the university's 272,000 YouTube subscribers. This is one example of how the reach of the institution can be leveraged to extend exposure and opportunity (Yale, 2020).

### *Access to Opportunity*

One of the benefits to attending a very highly selective college or university is the long history of alumni who have risen to positions of power in every industry. For example, in addition to the pride of sharing an alma mater with notable alumnus like Henry David Thoreau referenced by Adam (2020) earlier in this chapter, students attending one of the schools included in this study share a common experience with 10 of the 22 men who have served as President of the United States since 1901, who also attended. This legacy of postgraduate success is one way the reputation of the school grows, and it enhances the social capital of those students affiliated with it. One-way students leverage the social capital extended to them through their membership in the student body includes the opportunity for internships. An internship is a valuable tool an undergraduate can use to overcome the "lack of experience" objection many recent

graduates face. Every man in this study documented internships with Fortune 500 companies, U. S. Congresspersons, and international philanthropists.

Although association with these schools provides opportunities and possibilities, success is not guaranteed. Paul's LinkedIn post announcing his summer internship with the financial giant, Morgan Stanley, stated that although he felt blessed, "The application process taught me to be creative, resourceful, and willing to fight for myself. More than anything, I have learned to take risks and be willing to make opportunities where there are none." Right below the posting was a picture of Paul smiling in a blue business suit with his Morgan Stanley credentials (Paul, 2018).

Other men found summer internships at Hines Investment Management, Citibank, and Goldman Sachs. Gregory was selected to participate in a delegation of undergraduate students from across the country to convene in Washington, DC. He later served as a congressional intern for Senator Elizabeth Warren. John, who interned for the late Congressman John Lewis, went on to serve in a White House appointment after graduation. Kyle thanked Harvard and stated he was "forever indebted" to the school community that, "picked me up when I was down, flew me across the globe, and make unforgettable memories." Sharing these experiences on social media is evidence of the students' perceived feelings of mattering (Gregory, 2017; John, 2020; Kyle, 2021).

## **Theme 2: Finding Their People**

Experiences outside the classroom are as important as those within it for high achieving Black male college students. Only 8% of all students attending these very highly selective HWIs identify as Black or African American. For example, in a YouTube video in which Robert, a 2021 graduate of the University of Virginia, was



featured, he noted that there could be “more representation of Black and brown people” at the university (Robert, 2020, 5:43).

Representation was also notable for other graduating scholars. Christopher, who graduated from the University of Michigan in 2021, posted an image of himself on Instagram wearing a Michigan alumni sweatshirt with the university in the background, captioned, “Achievement in every field of human endeavor is a reality for me. 4 years later and I’m graduating as the only black man in my major” (Christopher, 2021). With this post, Christopher let’s his social media following know how solitary being a Black man was for him within his major with very few, if any, same race peers in class. However, he found a community to overcome being the only Black person to graduate in movement science. This community provided a support system included extended family, community members, and campus-based advocates, and affinity groups. Christopher participated in one such affinity group, a historically Black fraternity.

### ***Advocates***

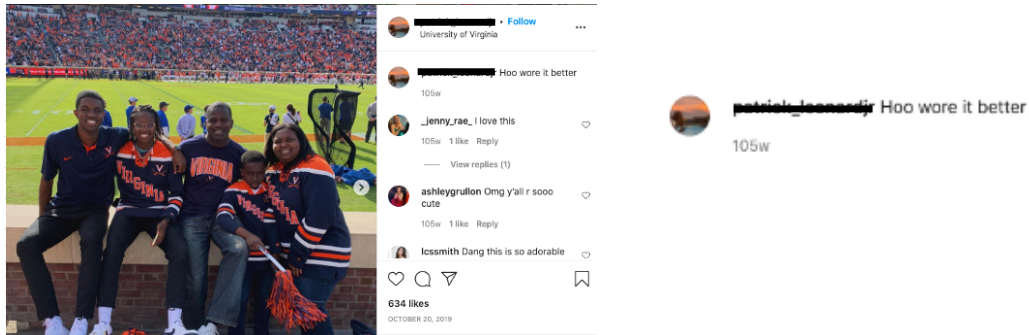
Social supports helped students receive validation and create community. This support team includes family, friends, faculty members, peers, and teammates. The graduates in this study benefited from having someone who advocated for them, opening doors to future opportunities. One example from the data was John, who interned with the late U.S. Representative John Lewis, had an article published in an online newspaper describing the lessons he learned from the civil rights leader, including how to engage social, economic, and political capital to affect change. John went on to work as a White House staffer after graduation.

Every man in this study noted the support of family being instrumental to his success. These men shared the value they placed on having the support and approval of family members. Paul (2020) credited his family and friends for being paramount in his completion of college, which he described as being an extreme challenge. Each graduate placed great importance on the network of friends they depended on outside of class. John announced his decision for both law school and business school by thanking his family, friends, and mentors. He ended the post with “I hope to keep making you proud” (John, 2021). Paul (2020) thanked his hometown community for its support and hoped to pay its belief in him forward. Gregory (2019) posted that his alma mater was imperfect, but he felt that his family and friends were the people to whom he turned when things were difficult.

Social media feeds depicted family members standing with their student proudly wearing the school’s emblem, participating in parent weekends, and attending sporting events. In Figure 10, Robert posted an image of himself with his family at a University of Virginia football game. Each member of his family was adorned in paraphernalia which showed their enthusiasm and pride as fans of the team.

**Figure 10**

*Robert and Family at University of Virginia Scott Stadium*

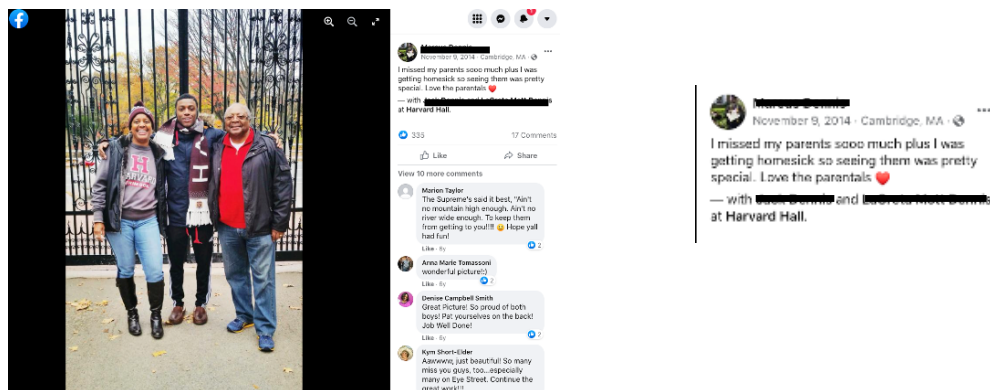


*Note.* Photograph posted to Instagram (<https://instagram.com>), coded advocates. October 20, 2019. In the public domain.

Phillip posted an image standing with his parents smiling in front of a set of ornate gates. Both parents wore something that identified them with Phillip's chosen institution, Harvard University, which showed their pride in being affiliated with the university through their student (Figure 11).

**Figure 11**

*Phillip with Parents Outside Harvard Hall*



*Note.* Photograph posted to Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded advocates. November 9, 2014. In the public domain.

Kyle thanked his grandmother in an Instagram post announcing his 2021 graduation from Harvard. He thanked her for, “forcing me to read and study instead of playing video games while growing up” (Kyle, 2021). During his junior year he posted a greeting to his mother in which he acknowledged the importance of her support. His public declaration was viewed at least 100 times as indicated by the number of likes and comments it received. The photograph he chose for the post depicted them standing together with him smiling broadly in a crimson baseball cap turned backward and a matching bow tie, and his mother was in a Harvard sweatshirt (Figure 12).

**Figure 12**

*Kyle with Mother at event for Kyle’s Former High School*



*Note:* Photograph to commemorate Mother’s Day posted to Facebook (<https://facebook.com>) May 12, 2019. Reposted to commemorate mother’s birthday on Facebook, coded advocate. November 15, 2019. In the public domain.

Adam punctuated the commencement speech he shared with the graduates of his class with the advice his mother shared with him upon entering the university four years previously. The advice was for him to believe, be fearless, and inspire others. The impact

of his mother's words resonated with him throughout his time as an undergraduate. The fact that he reposted the speech on his personal social media feed illustrated that her words mattered (Adam, 2020).

Kyrie dedicated his degree in philosophy to his late father by posting his high school graduation picture with the caption, "Dedicated to My Predecessor (04-01-1957 – 04-13-2013)" (Kyrie, 2021). This post showed that Kyrie's father was still part of his social support network, which contributed to his perception of mattering.

In addition to family, Paul credited his entire hometown for his ability to finance his education by establishing a fund to pay for incidentals not covered by his scholarship (Paul, 2020). In a May 2020 Facebook post, Neville noted that when first entering Yale University, upperclassman Rayan was integral in helping him adjust to life on campus. In wishing Rayan a happy birthday, Neville wrote, "I don't think I would have had such an amazing and impactful Yale experience without ur guidance" (Neville, 2020). The pride of family and friends provided students with support and advocacy that fortified their persistence to graduation.

Students expressed their gratitude for the support of faculty advocates in posts announcing their graduation. One participant also posted himself standing outside Widener Memorial Library holding a bound copy of his senior thesis. The caption in part thanked his "amazing advisor for the inspiration and help" needed to achieve this milestone (Gregory, 2019).

### ***Affinity Groups and Fraternities***

Affinity groups provided the men in this study the opportunity to form bonds with members of the dominate culture through experiences that align with their shared

interests. George found personal value in his work with his university's Black Business Association. He included posts at various events hosted by the organization with captions including, "I love this team of amazing ppl!", and "It's been very fulfilling to be on the leadership team" (George, 2019). In a post celebrating the organizations first diversity fair he captioned a picture of himself standing alongside other officers of the organization, "In just a few months of serving on the Board, I have seen our impacts within the campus community" (George, 2019). Daniel found community within the Yale step team. (Daniel, 2020).

Stepping is rooted in the cultures of the African diaspora and is often practiced by historically Black Greek letter organizations in celebration of athleticism, musicality, and precision. These Black Greek letter organizations, formally part of the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC), were founded to support Black scholars (Wesley, 1981). These organizations continue to play an important role in affirming peer relationships among Black men in historically White institutions (Harper, 2006). Christopher, referenced earlier as the only Black graduate in his major, was an active member of one of these fraternities. His frequent posts of himself with other members of the organization who he referred to as brothers demonstrated the prominence the fraternity held in his life. In one post, Christopher reflected on a party for another fraternity member for which 20 men traveled to attend. He stated, "If this isn't brotherhood idk what is. I love my fraternity" (Christopher, 2020). This demonstration of showing up for someone depicted in this post exemplified the five dimensions of mattering.

Being part of a brotherhood provided a safe space for the members to be vulnerable. Christopher (2021) was able to dive into his love of drawing with his own art

show. His posts of the event featured his work and him presenting it to an audience. He captioned the post, “This was my first time showing another side of myself to the world. Whew, I’ve come a long way” (Christopher, 2021). The post included one of his fraternity’s symbols, the diamond.

The concept that the men in these historically Black fraternities were part of a brotherhood was facilitated by the idea that the relationships forged during the membership intake process, and after membership was granted, were unbreakable. Christopher posted a picture of himself with five other men in identical attire, standing in one row chest to back, all looking toward the sky. He captioned it with “I was truly my happiest self last night and I can only thank these guys for helping me push through to KappaLand. I couldn’t ask for better LBs see that they held me accountable 24/7” (Christopher, 2019). Dean posted, “Happy Founders’ Day to the greatest fraternity in the world.” This was accompanied by a photograph of him with his back to the camera, overlooking the campus wearing a jacket with the fraternity’s name and emblem prominently on the back (Dean, 2019). He also shared his pride in the success of other members of his fraternity who he referred to as brothers, indicating that the bonds formed would last a lifetime (Dean, 2020).

The four oldest historically Black fraternities were represented by the 18 men included in this study. The importance of membership in these organizations for these men was evidenced by each graduating member posting images of himself in their regalia, which clearly identifies them as part of their university. Leon, a graduate of the University of North Carolina, centered himself as part of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. in his graduation photograph posted to Instagram by wearing the organizations stole

around his neck while holding the university stole on his arm. Posed looking to the viewers' right, Leon emphasized the significance the organization held for him (Figure 13).

**Figure 13**

*Graduate in Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Fraternity Stole*



*Note:* Photograph of Leon posted on Instagram (<https://instagram.com>), coded affinity groups and fraternities. May 10, 2021. In the public domain.

Alex was photographed on Harvard's campus wearing his mortarboard and both his Harvard stole and that of his fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. The stoles are positioned, one on each shoulder indicating the importance of both organizations to the moment being commemorated. Alex is also holding a red and white cane, which is a traditional artifact associated with his fraternity. It should also be noted that Alex chose to wear the kente cloth Harvard stole, aligning himself with the experience of decedents of the African Diaspora (Figure 14).



## Figure 14

*Graduate in Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Fraternity Stole*

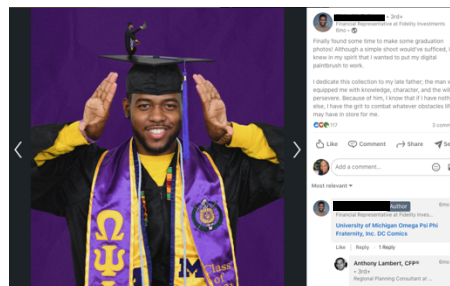


*Note:* Photograph of Alex posted on LinkedIn (<https://linkedin.com>), coded affinity groups and fraternities. May 2021. In the public domain.

In Figure 15 Kyrie is wearing his full regalia with the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. stole placed on top of the one for the University of Michigan. The stoles are positioned so that the one for the university can be seen inside and beneath the one for the fraternity. This appears to indicate the positionality of the organizations for this graduate, with university experience subordinate to that of the fraternity.

## Figure 15

*Graduate in Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. Fraternity Stole*



*Note:* Photograph of Kyrie posted on LinkedIn (<https://linkedin.com>), coded affinity groups and fraternities. July 2021. In the public domain.

Similar positionality can be seen in Dean's post (Figure 16). His Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. stole ins nearer the camera and on top of the one he wore for is alma mater, the University of Virginia. Blue reflective lens of his sunglasses obscure part of his face, which focuses the viewers' attention on his smile and stoles.

**Figure 16**

*Graduate in Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. Fraternity Stole*



*Note:* Photograph of Dean posted on Instagram (<https://instagram.com>), coded affinity groups and fraternities. May 23, 2021. In the public domain.

Posting is a deliberate action, requiring one to select the image they will use, thereby attaching significance to it. The men who posted these graduation images showed that they were as proud of their membership in a historically Black Greek letter organization they were with being affiliation with one of the highest rated universities in our country. The brotherhoods represented are peer relationship that provided these high achieving Black male scholars with community in an environment where they were not part of the dominate culture. They purposefully shared their pride in being part of this community with family, friends, and followers on social media.

### ***Peer Relationships***

Bonding with peers was an important component of college life. These young men lived, learned, and loved together in a semi-closed community. We saw the significance of peer relationships to high achieving Black men in very selective HWIs through Christopher's experience joining 20 other members of his fraternity to celebrate with one of their brothers.

The importance of peers is also demonstrated through bonds over time. John and Gregory's timelines both contain photographs of a shared consistent core friend group, which while they were undergraduates. This type of bonded friend group allowed students to provide one another with the opportunity to garner attention, feel important to, and be appreciated by a peer, which are dimensions of mattering. An example of a series of photographs depicting a core group of friends was shared through the social media accounts of two group members. Figure 17 shows the friends in casual attire in front of a building on the university campus decorated for the winter holidays, surrounded by reindeer lawn ornaments with a large evergreen tree behind them. Three of the five men in the picture are wearing holiday sweaters, and one is in a red and white Santa hat. The timestamp on the posting and wintry setting, along with the five smiling faces, gives the semester fall semester has come to a happy conclusion (Gregory, 2018).

## Figure 17

### *Friend Group on Campus During The Winter Holidays*



*Note:* Photograph posted by Gregory to Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded peer relationships. December 10, 2018. In the public domain.

Figure 18 posted by John shows four of the five men in Figure 17, along with three additional peers, playfully posing and smiling into the camera at an event for the residence hall, Dunster House and a second post of the same seven men outside in blazers, smiling into the camera (John, 2019).

## Figure 18

### *Friend Group Spring Semester 2019*

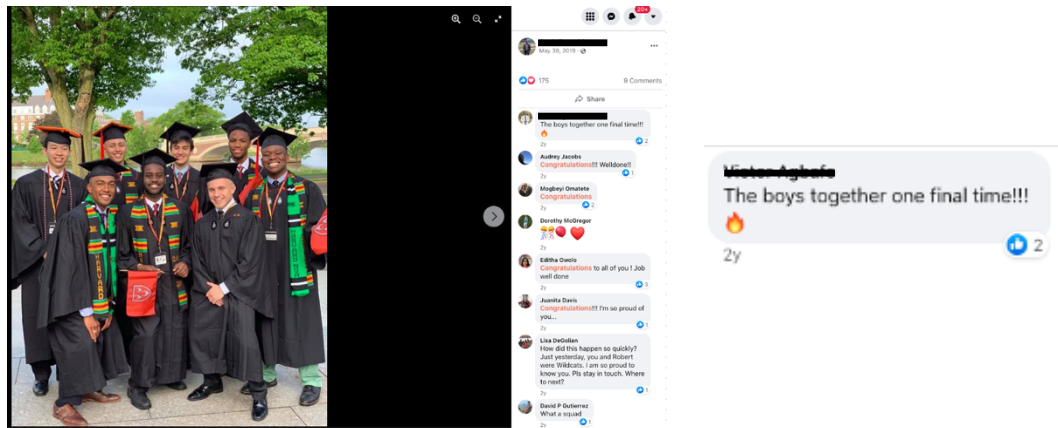


*Note:* Both photographs were posted by John to Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded peer relationships. Photograph on the left posted May 5, 2019. Photograph on the right posted May 22, 2019. Both in the public domain.

Both John and Gregory with the seven men, plus an additional graduate gleefully posing in their regalia. Three of the core group of friends are wearing honors cords, Harvard stoles, holding flags and a sign announcing they all are residents of Dunster Hall. Gregory commented, “The boys together one final time” on the post made by John (John, 2019). The finality of that one sentence communicates the importance this group hold for the friends.

**Figure 19**

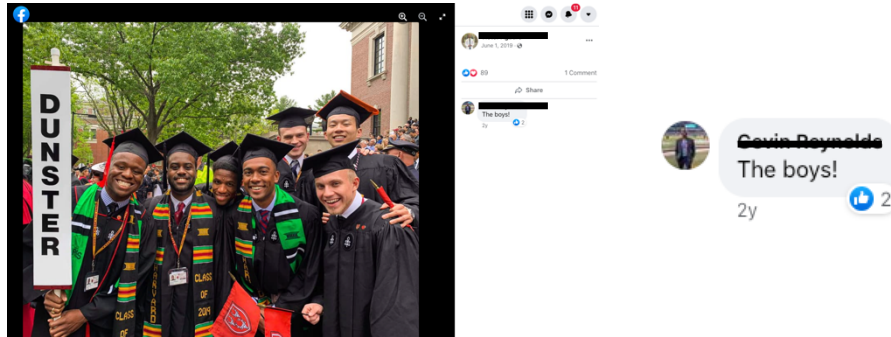
*Friend Group at Commencement*



*Note:* Photograph posted by John to Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded peer relationships. May 30, 2019. Reposted by Gregory to Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded peer relationships. June 1, 2019. In the public domain.

**Figure 20**

*Friend Group at Commencement*



*Note:* Photograph posted by Gregory to Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded peer relationships. June 1, 2019. In the public domain.

The story told through the digital artifacts shared by the men included in the current study tells of the significance of individuals who support the student as they navigate a very highly selective HWI, that validate the students' interests affinity groups, friend groups that provide important connections during the college years, and historically Black fraternities that provide a safe place for Black male scholars to be transparent within a brotherhood designed to extend beyond their time as undergraduates. The work the participants do through their affinity groups and fraternities often led them to discover ways to use their growing social capital to serve more than their personal success.

### **Theme 3: Finding Their Purpose**

“My parents’ advice for me at Yale was to keep my head down, get good grades, and find a job to support myself and my family.” This quote was part of an Instagram post Neville made to outline his detour from a traditional career path into his purpose as a full-time blogger focused on social action. The sentiment of pursuing purpose was

expressed in various ways by the men included in this study. They each found ways to use the social capital afforded to them as part of a very highly selective institution to support individuals and organizations whose mission aligned with their own. In instances where there was a void in the community, these men stepped in to fill it by establishing ways to deliver resources and opportunities to others. Adam's commencement speech to his fellow graduates admonished them to "pursue progress over status", understanding that greatness is not in the institution, but in each of them (Adam, 2020). This statement punctuates the idea that Adam recognized his mattering extended beyond his affiliation with a very highly selective university, and he used the influence afforded him by obtaining that education "for another person" (Adam, 2020). He went on to admonish his fellow graduates to be "sensitive to injustice", "empathetic to struggle", and "embolden to make change". To do anything less than to fully use the social capital afforded them by virtue of being graduates of the highly selective would "forfeit" what importance of their accomplishment (Adam, 2020). The graduates in the current study demonstrated their willingness to activate their social capital to further causes and help communities through leadership, service, and activism.

### ***Leadership***

Many of the graduates in this study found that serving in a leadership role for a co-curricular organization provided them the opportunity to be a part of influencing systemic change within their school. Men graduating from Harvard and Yale in 2020 or 2021 attended school during the time when the students elected their first Black man to the office of student body president. Working in student government allowed these men to lend their voices to the concerns of members of the student body who may have been

outside of the dominant culture on campus. For example, in 2019, Neville used his platform as a leader in student government to organize a protest against racial profiling by campus police. This gained him national recognition in part because he was Yale University's first Black student body president, and he was able to share his message during an appearance on CNN (Figure 21). John focused his energy on increasing the representation of students of traditionally marginalized communities in student government. In a 2018 Facebook post, John is pictured standing between two fellow Harvard students holding a whiteboard with a handwritten message that simply stated, "Transform Minority Representation." All three individuals smiled broadly while looking directly into the camera.

**Figure 21**

*Neville's CNN Appearance as Yale University's First Black Student Body President*



*Note:* Photograph of CNN segment that aired June 2019. Posted on Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), coded as leadership. September 20, 2020. In the public domain.

Leadership was also apparent in in other co-curricular organizations. George helped lead the HAAS Undergraduate Black Business Association (HUBBA) while serving as their president. Kyle was named co-captain of Harvard's track and field team, and Leon served as president of his fraternity chapter.



Alex, along with two other Black undergraduate men, founded an equity hedge fund with the goal of improving financial literacy for Black students across the country. The post of the three men proudly standing behind their promotional material at an industry event showed that this was more than a school project. At the time of this writing, the organization they founded is still in operation. Adam reminded his fellow graduates that leaders have a responsibility to serve the people. He stated, “If we did not become leaders of sacrifice, we would become leaders of selfishness” (Adam, 2020, 3:32).

### ***Service***

Service to others is one way the idea of purpose was realized for these graduates. Social media was used to lend the prestige of their very highly selective HWIs to community service organizations by strategically identifying themselves as part of their organization when making posts on their extensive social media networks. Paul appealed to his 3,100 friends on Facebook to support a mentorship program focused on providing Black boys living in central Florida with mentorship and exposure to examples of success inside and outside school. He included pictures of himself in a gym wearing his Yale University shirt and standing behind seven mentees who were dressed casually in t-shirts, jeans, and shorts. This picture was placed alongside another picture of the boys in navy blazers, white shirts, and red neckties. They were standing against a sunny window with palm trees in the background (Paul, 2020). Neville showed his support for the Girls and Boys Club of America with a post of himself sitting on the floor in a gymnasium in a Yale sweatshirt surrounded by over 50 smiling children. The caption he included with the post stated, “This place did so much for me and it’s an honor to come back after 6 years”

(Neville, 2019). This commitment to service led some of the participants to move toward activism.

### ***Activism***

Activism can be defined as taking a deliberate action to effect change. Alex's experience as a student at Yale University helped him to see the importance of mentorship. Activism inspired him to establish a four-year fellowship to provide incoming freshmen, who identify as Black, with a monetary scholarship, and it matches them with a mentor to guide them through the nuanced world of very highly selective HWIs. There are currently six fellows in the program. Daniel collaborated with other student leaders on his campus to suspend letter grades while students studied remotely during the pandemic by making social media posts targeting the student body and school administration. Their efforts were ultimately successful.

Posting on LinkedIn, Anthony stated, "...I realize that I sit in a position of privilege. Throughout my last three years, I've realized that those that look like me are often left out of the conversation, regardless of the quality of contributions that we bring to the table." In response to this realization, he led a venture capital fund focused on the economic development of marginalized communities by investing in "minority-owned" business for the Virginia Venture Fund (Anthony, 2020).

Another form of activism came in the form of reposting information designed by other creators as a way of extending the reach of the message. Dean directed his Facebook repost of a Black Lives Matter (BLM) article that was originally published by the university's art department to the president of the institution. His caption read in part, "President Ryan needs to...come out and condemn the knee that the institution has put on

the lives of many for far too long...” (Dean, 2020). Gregory, who is currently attending medical school, showed an early commitment to public health by co-authoring an article published in *Newsweek*’s online magazine that was focused on the importance of creating trust for the medical profession by diversifying the clinical trial process.

The themes that emerged after three rounds of coding 1,642 data were finding their place, finding their people, and finding their purpose. These themes worked in concert to create the conditions by which Black men at very highly selective HWI perceived they mattered. The first theme, finding their place, showed that the men connected pride to being accepted to their school of choice. The posts showing acceptance letters, newly admitted men in apparel emblazoned with the school’s logo, and the accompanying projected graduation dates demonstrated that these men not only looked forward to being part of the organization, but also felt confident in their ability to complete the program within the traditional four years. They entered college fully prepared to maximize the experience and had the familial support to anchor them as they embarked upon the rigors ahead.

The pride of being affiliated with the institution was shared by their family and members of their community. Posts originating with family member congratulating the scholars and comments to posts made to the students’ declaration of their intended school further demonstrated the importance placed upon admittance. The demonstration of familial pride in the men being members of the student body continued while the students attended the school as evidenced by posts made with family members donning school-related paraphernalia at sporting events, celebrating their student at different occasions,

and participating in some of the university's traditions with family members during visits to the campus.

School traditions are a way to create a sense of connection between its incoming class and the institution. Each alumnus shared evidence of his participation in school traditions and campus events. Posts were made with students proudly wearing the school colors or featuring logoed items in photographs taken on and off campus. This is one way these men intentionally announced they were part of the fabric of the student body, and they aligned themselves with their school's brand. One graduate noted that he was the only Black person to receive a degree in his major. These declarations proudly signaled to all who viewed the participants' posts on social media that they were not annexed to the institution, but they were enmeshed in it as part of the school community.

The men in this study found community in an environment where they were not part of the dominant culture. Through the second theme, finding their people, we see evidence that they were able to form a strong social support system which has been found to be a critical determination of satisfaction for Black men attending HWIs (Caldwell, 2000; Brown, 2006). Positive relationships with successful models affirmed their perception of mattering. The dataset indicated that the men received support from faculty members through the gratitude they expressed at milestones like completing their senior thesis or graduation. In addition, the participants made social media posts replete with images of themselves meeting, interacting with, and working for notable individuals in the fields of business, finance, and government who possibly also served as models. In online graduation announcements, the participants credited their success in college, in large part, to the support of their advocates, including family members, friends, and

faculty, thereby validating that mattering to these groups was instrumental in their achievement.

The third theme, finding their purpose, proved to be an important way the participants in this study assigned value and experienced mattering while in college. These men extend their leadership skills beyond their respective fraternities to student-led, co-curricular organizations of sports, dance, business, and student government. They used their affiliation with highly selective HWIs to amplify the concerns of their constituents, including student grading, campaigning for equitable representation of individuals from marginalized communities in student government, and elevating financial literacy in the Black community.

The purposeful use of the expanded social capital acquired through being a student at one of the country's highest rated colleges allowed these men to contribute to causes and communities that were important to them. Participants utilized the attention, importance, and ego-extension garnered through affiliation with their HWI to catapult their work to a broader audience. In some instances, social media posts were viewed over 100,000 times, and the coverage of their endeavors extended beyond social media to traditional media outlets including print and cable news outlets. Some of these graduates were featured on CNN and the New York Times, and they were interviewed by regional magazines. They had their accomplishments memorialized by state law makers. The impact of their contributions of time, resources, and influence continued to serve these groups after the men graduated.

## **Conclusion**

The conceptual framework of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) within an anti-deficit framework (Harper, 2012) was used to support the findings from posts made on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram along with videos posted to YouTube that showed the lived experience of 19 high achieving Black men as undergraduates. After multiple rounds of coding of the 1,642 data points, three themes for the experiences of mattering became evident. The themes had three subthemes: finding their place (pride in place, school traditions, access to opportunity), finding their people (advocates, fraternities and affinity groups, peer relationships), and finding their purpose (leadership, service, activism). Through these themes and subthemes, the research questions were answered. Chapter 5 will interpret the results, describe the relationship these results have to prior research, delineate the limitations of the study, and share the implications for future research and practice.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Introduction**

The present qualitative study was conducted as a narrative inquiry designed to explore the perception of how Black men experienced mattering while attending a highly selective historically White institution (HWI) as an undergraduate student. This study examined the way 18 recent graduates of six institutions used their social media posts on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube to express how and the degree to which, they mattered while attending their HWI. Two research questions were posed in Chapter one to provide better insight into the perception of mattering held by the graduates in the present study. The first research question focused on the experiences that created a sense of mattering for these graduates. Specifically, what were the life events that made them feel depended on, paid attention to, important, appreciated, and that they were an integral part of the success of peers and the university as a whole (Schlossberg, 1989). The second question investigated how the perception of mattering influenced these graduates' willingness to persist to graduation.

Research on mattering and the anti-deficit framework as well as the relevant literature were reviewed in Chapter two. Chapter three provided the methodology used to analyze the text, static images, and video content collected from social media. The results of this analysis were presented in Chapter four. The dataset of 1,642 events were coded through three cycles which resulted in three themes. The first theme showed how intrinsic and institutional factors fostered a sense of pride in being recognized as a member of the organization. The second theme focused on the groups and individuals who provided a community that accepted and supported these men. The last theme explored how working

toward creating a legacy that surpassed the immediate challenge added substance to the HWI experience.

### **Implications of Findings**

The research questions posed in the present study examined the extent to which high achieving Black men attending very highly selective HWIs felt they mattered and how mattering contributed to their progress through the undergraduate program to graduation. The data analysis discussed in Chapter four revealed three themes, finding their place, finding their people, and finding their purpose. Together these three themes show that the findings in the present study aligned with the conceptual framework as well as the current literature on mattering and the anti-deficit framework.

The anti-deficit framework was the lens through which the present study observed the social media post made by 18 high achieving Black men while attending one of six very highly selective HWIs. This frame guided how the study was conducted in so much that the researcher was able to bear witness to the lived experiences these men felt compelled to share with the public by way of social media. Social media is a space that allows an individual to select the information they share about themselves. It could be said that individuals post in a way to cast themselves in the most favorable light, therefore exclusively researching mattering through this medium can skew the dataset (Chen, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Social media allowed the participants in the study being discussed to craft the story of their lived experience through controlling the narrative. Harper's anti-deficit framework stressed the importance of listening to the voices of high achieving Black scholars as a means of reducing the opportunity to view the accomplishments of this group through a deficit lens (Harper, 2012). Using the social



media posts of these graduates allowed the researcher to exhume a dataset rich with life events these men deemed to share, allowing them to tell the story of their lives experience while in college in their own voice (Harper, 2012).

Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering was viewed through the lens of Harper's (2012) anti-deficit framework to ascertain the graduates' perception of their level of mattering while they were undergraduates at very highly selective HWIs, and how that perception influenced their decision to continue through graduation.

### ***Discussion of Research Question 1***

The first question guiding the current research sought to determine which, if any, experiences high achieving Black male alumni of very highly selective HWIs perceived as contributing to their mattering. The findings indicated that the social media posts made by the graduates included in the current study showed evidence of mattering, namely dependence, attention, importance, ego-extension, and appreciation (Schlossberg, 1989). These five dimensions are interdependent; therefore, data can have significant influence in more than one of these factors.

The dimension of dependence, the idea that other people depend on us and we can depend on them, was demonstrated through all three themes. In theme one, finding their place, and theme two, finding their people, graduates shared that family members were deeply invested in their student's success at their HWI of choice as evidenced by the enthusiasm showed by George's mother in the post made for his acceptance to the University of California at Berkeley (George, 2019). Parents and siblings immerse themselves into the traditions of the school by attending campus events wearing paraphernalia as seen in photographs posted by Robert, Kyle, and Phillips (Kyle, 2019;

Robert, 2019; Phillip, 2014). This shows that the pride displayed by the families of the graduates showed they were invested in the graduate attending and successfully graduating from a very highly selective HWI. This further communicated to the graduate the expectation of success. Phillip shared that his parents coming to the campus supported his transition to college and Kyle stated his mother was instrumental in his ability to be successful (Kyle, 2019; Phillip, 2014). This demonstrates that there was mutual dependence between the student and the people in their support system.

In the third theme, finding their purpose, the dimension of dependence is most evident. The findings showed that both Paul and Kyle were leaders on the track team of their respective university. As such, the other members of the team depended on their guidance, encouragement, and performance. George served as president of the HAAS Undergraduate Black Business Association (HUBBA) which other students from marginalized communities could depend on to provide networking opportunities with Fortune 500 companies. George also shared that he was able to depend on his executive board in a post expressing he could not have executed a successful event without their contributions (George, 2019).

Leading organizations also provided the graduates in this study with a sense of importance to the individuals within, and outside, the university. Alex was one of three undergraduates to establish an investment firm with a mission to increase financial literacy in the Black community. Additionally, graduates experienced importance through their association with leaders in various industries, as evidenced by their internships in congressional offices and Fortune 500 companies. In addition, importance can be found in the university's willingness to invest in the student, as Kyle expressed pride and

humility when thanking his alma mater for providing him with enriching experiences showing that Kyle is as important to the organization as the organization is to him (Kyle, 2021).

Closely associated with importance is attention. One source of attention present in this dataset was observed through peer relationships. These relationships provided the graduates in this study with the opportunity to both give and receive authentic attention as evidenced by images cross-posted to the social media accounts of multiple members of a peer groups. Attention was also found through continued membership in affinity groups. In addition to George's affiliation with HUBBA, graduates included in the present study participated in organizations and activities that supported their specific interest or cultural identity. One such affinity group is the historically Black fraternity. As described in chapter four, these organizations provided members with a sense of brotherhood that expanded the individual's definition of themselves. The posts made after membership into these organizations showed the men were proud of their affiliation through the consistent presence of paraphernalia and other identifiers specific to the fraternity in the still images, videos, and captions. These men share ways in which they pay attention to the other members of their fraternity, as well as how those members support them.

Membership in the fraternity not only provided the graduates in the current study with attention from others, but became they saw themselves as an extension of the organization. Ego-extension was seen in those who were members of fraternities referring to other members as brother. This reinforced the position of the organization as a family structure. Once admitted members' posts openly and consistently identified them as an extension of the organization. Each man expression of allegiance to their fraternity spoke

to their degree to which they were integrated into the fabric of the organization and thereby strengthening their connection to the university.

Ego-extension was also present in the graduates who participated in the graduation exercise for their HWI. Commencement commemorates the successful completion of four years of study. This culminating activity in the life of an undergraduate is filled with tradition and being chosen to speak at these occasions is considered an honor. Two of the graduates in this study, Adam and Paul, were selected to represent the voice of their graduating class during the commencement ceremonies. Another way the data showed that the graduates were an extension of the university was through how individuals outside of the HWI regarded their inclusion therein. Neville used his social media platforms to inform and educate his followers about issues impacting Black Americans identifying as members of Generation Z, however because he was also the first Black person to serve as student body president for one of the very highly selective HWIs in this study, his work garnered national attention from news outlets including CNN and the New York Times. The fact that Neville was seen as an extension of the university elevated his message to a broader audience benefiting them both.

Being appreciated by those around you for who you are, while being appreciative of others, is the fifth dimension of mattering. Appreciation was present in the dataset as demonstrated by graduation tributes posted thanking families, friends, and other community members for their unyielding support while the author of the post was an undergraduate. Neville also shared his appreciation of the Boys and Girls club for the role they played in his life before college, stating he planned to be a lifetime member of the

organization. He showed his appreciation of this non-profit mentorship organization by including a photograph of himself in a shirt with the name of his very highly selective HWI across the front in large block letters, while the current mentees in the program gathered around him. This example of the purposeful use of expanded social capital also allowed Paul to advocate for a cause that was important to him by appealing to his social media network to support a youth mentorship program he believed in. Paul indicated that he benefited from the support of others while he was a student and was committed to paying that forward (Paul, 2020). In this way, Neville and Paul made their appreciation for the support they received actionable by extending their standing with an HWI to promote rally their online community to support others. The smiles on the faces of the children receiving the assistance spoke to their appreciation of these graduates.

### ***Discussion of Research Question 2***

The second research question explored the ways in which the graduates included in this study expressed that their perception of mattering influenced their willingness to persist to graduation. In the face of the overwhelming amount of research literature focused on those things that impede the success of Black men in undergraduate programs, how mattering undergirds the continued success of these high achieving scholars serves to expand our understanding around the structures they found supported their matriculation to graduation.

The data indicates the interpersonal relationships between the Black male alumni and peers outside of the classroom was a cornerstone of their college life. One of the significant findings was the importance of interpersonal relationships to mattering to, and continuing in, the very highly selective HWI. Consistency within friend groups across

academic years was one way the significance of these relationships was established on social media. Posts showed these men with members of their peer group at school functions and while they traveled to community service efforts and partnered with organizations. These relationships supported the students' sense of dependence, importance, attention, and appreciation, which are dimensions of mattering.

In addition to these friendships, membership in affinity groups was another way participants in this study experienced campus life and expanded their social network to include individuals with varying cultural backgrounds who shared their interests. Participating on athletic teams, joining organizations germane to their academic major, and explorations into the arts, provided ways to form authentic connections and social supports that influence mattering and the willingness to continue toward the goal of graduation.

Organizations associated with the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) were prominent with the study participants. Four of the oldest historically Black fraternities were represented among these men included in this study. The men showed pride in membership in these organizations through posts that chronicled their process from being granted membership into the brotherhood to their own efforts to recruit like-minded men. Participants held leadership positions in their local chapters and were active in community service efforts spearheaded by their fraternity. As their time as undergraduates came to an end, they took an opportunity silently to affirm their allegiance to the brotherhood they formed by posting graduation photographs wearing their fraternal insignia. The data showed that historically Black fraternities provided a safe space that allowed these graduates to experience interdependence, provided them

with attention, elevated their importance in the eyes of their peers and the university, provided them with authentic opportunities to share of themselves and receive the appreciation of others, and develop the sense of being an extension of the fraternity, and thereby life at the university.

The experiences of mattering garnered through interpersonal relationships on campus allowed these men to develop an expanded view of their position as Black men who were students of a very highly selective HWI, and turned their attention toward discovering how they could use their expanded social capital to benefit causes they found important. Having a purpose beyond grade point averages and personal elevation proved to be critical in how the graduates assigned value and experienced mattering while in college. The men in this current study extend their leadership skills beyond their respective fraternities to student-led, co-curricular organizations of sports, dance, business, and student government. They used their affiliation with highly selective HWIs to amplify the concerns of their constituents, including student grading, campaigning for equitable representation of individuals from marginalized communities in student government, and elevating financial literacy in the Black community.

The purposeful use of the expanded social capital acquired through being a student at one of the country's highest rated colleges allowed these men to contribute to causes and communities that were important to them. Participants utilized the attention, importance, and ego-extension garnered through affiliation with their HWI to catapult their work to a broader audience and had their accomplishments memorialized by state law makers. The impact of these high achieving Black male scholars contribution of time, resources, and influence continued to serve interest groups after the men graduated.

Choosing to post to social media was a deliberate act on the part of the 18 men included in this study. It allowed the world a glimpse into what mattered in the lives they created for themselves while attending college. The data gleaned from the digital representation of the experiences of the 18 men included in this study signified that they perceived they mattered in the ways they shared information about specific events. The pride in being a part of a place they aspired to attend, finding individuals who validated and encouraged them, and assigning value to causes beyond themselves anchored the men's perception that they mattered and supported their willingness to continue to graduation.

### **Relationship to Prior Research**

The findings in the present study aligned with the current literature on the characteristics of high achieving Black male scholars and the promising practices that support the success of these scholars attending HWIs. The findings also showed some evidence of challenges to persistence and retention as defined by the current literature cited in chapter two. The 18 Black male alumni of six of the highest rated universities in the country demonstrated the perception that they mattered through an anti-deficit lens while they were undergraduates.

### ***Student Support***

The first major finding in this study extended to the present body of work around the ways students were supported was the importance of social supports that validated graduates in the present study (Strayhorn, 2010; Sledge 2012). This support can come from family members, faculty and staff at the university, or their peers (Petty, 2014). The graduates included in this study were able to find communities outside the classroom that



validated their personal interests and allowed them the opportunity to develop friendships and leadership skills as well as explore interests and talents not directly related to their major. Christopher, a movement science major, pursued his interest in visual arts, noting that he was allowed to show a different part of himself to his peers (Christopher, 2021). Daniel, a statistic major, found community through a campus step team.

The findings go on to show the value these graduates placed on the support and approval of family which aligns with previous literature (Petty, 2014; Sledge, 2012). Paul shared that his family and friends were instrumental in his success in college. Gregory posted that he felt that his family and friends helped him through the challenges associated with college.

The crucial nature of positive peer relationships was evident in the present study. John and Gregory were part of a larger friend group that appeared on each man's social media feed over the time they were undergraduates. The closeness shared within the group could be inferred by the smiling men physically touching one another including putting arms around each other's' shoulders and leaning in to get everyone in frame. This supports Strayhorn's (2008) suggestion that students who have strong positive personal relationships with experience higher satisfaction while in college. That satisfaction can lead to the willingness to continue to graduation.

### ***Affinity Groups***

The importance of strong peer relationships was supported by the evidence presented in the data in this study. These interactions correlated with male students' perceptions of themselves as mattering by making them feel valued (Paputsakis, 2010; Carey, 2019). Affinity groups helped the men in this study form alliances with other

students who shared their interest or cultural background. This continued to be revealed through the data because of the participants' membership in affinity groups, including Milliard and Kyle who found community as part of an athletics team, George found personal value in his work with his university's Black Business Association. Being an extension of the institution is one component of mattering that supports the success of Black men at HWIs (Rhee, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008). This type of camaraderie provided participants with a necessary link to the university, and it also demonstrated mattering by being important to their universities as an extension of their respective schools.

The findings show that graduates in the current study take great pride in holding membership in one of the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) fraternal organizations. These organizations played a significant role in the lives of the graduates who represented four of the five historically Black fraternities. The significance of membership also showed up in his Instagram feed. He is featured displaying reference to the fraternity in the form of paraphernalia, hand signals, the organizations official colors, or a reference in the caption in all but two of his posts. Greek letter organizations provided connections that enriched the lives of the members (Floyd, 2009; Harper & Harris, 2006). Through these organizations, the graduates were able to band together in a brotherhood of support. The fact that they continued through graduation at very highly selective HWIs further supports the prior literature regarding the benefits of these organizations (Harper, 2007; Patton, Flowers, & Bridges, 2011).

### ***Mentors and Advocates***

The additional promising practice of advocacy was revealed in the findings of this current study. Prior research has shown that Black students attending historically White

institutions benefit from “frequent and meaningfully supportive relationships with faculty and staff” which can lead to greater student satisfaction (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Davis, 1999; Strayhorn, 2016). Same race faculty and university staff mentors have been shown to counteract barriers to full integration into the academic and social life on campus (Brooms et.al., 2017). Although it was not possible to know the race of faculty members, the men in the present study also credited faculty members with supporting their journey. Additionally, Gregory and Paul made posts that acknowledged the support of professors in the completion of their senior thesis, while Paul thanked his hometown for believing in his potential enough to provide their ongoing support. While mentors support a person’s current endeavor, an advocate opens doors to future opportunities. John’s opportunity as a congressional intern later led to a position as a White House staffer after graduation.

Another finding of the present study was the significance the graduates attributed to using their position as members of a very highly selective HWI to advocate for other members of the Black community. This aligns with Palmer and Marumba’s (2012) nothing that race affirming experiences contribute to the success of Black students. Neville and Paul used there expanded social capital to support the efforts of mentorship programs, George connected minority students with recruiters from Fortune 500 companies, Alex co-founded a venture capital to promote financial literacy in the Black community, and Anthony headed a venture capital fund dedicated to supporting underserved communities.

### ***High Achieving Black Males***

The academic ability of the graduates in the present study was validated by their admission to one of the highest rated public or private universities as determined by the

U. S. News and World Report 2021 study. The standard of being a high achieving Black male scholar as described by Harper (2015) consists of maintaining a strong grade point average, leadership in student organizations, and participation in opportunities that supplement and enrich their collegiate experience. The current findings align with this description as evidenced by the number of presidencies and other leadership positions held by the graduates in this study, along with the accolades and honors accumulated while matriculating through their undergraduate programs. High achievement within the current graduates can also be observed through their admissions to graduate programs offered by very highly selective HWIs, initial job offers at Fortune 500 companies, and governmental appointments.

### ***Challenges to Persistence and Retention***

The challenges to persistence and retention delineated in chapter two of the present study are systemic oppression, instructional bias, and underrepresentation of individuals identifying as Black serving as faculty members or college administrators. Because this study is centered on an anti-deficit model, these characteristics were limited in the dataset. The literature tells us that Black scholars attending HWIs can find themselves subject to overt and covert forms of bias or negative stereotypes that can adversely affect their experience both inside and outside the classroom (Boyd, 2017; Harper, 2015; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). This can reduce Black male students' feeling of being part of the culture of the institution, inhibiting their sense of attachment (Watkins, Gree, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007). While no student specifically outlined an incident of bias or stereotyping on campus, the findings do show that there were challenges on campuses. Dean admonished the president of his HWI to stand with other

departments in opposition of institutional oppression and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (Dean, 2020). Gregory included that alma mater “is not a perfect place by any means” in one of his posts announcing his graduation (Gregory, 2019).

Being a high achieving Black man attending a very highly selective HWI created the opportunity for Christopher to be the only Black student to graduate in his major. The findings extend the research noting the underrepresentation of same race peers for high achieving Black scholars attending HWI (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Fries-Britt, 1998; Johnson & McGowan, 2017).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the present study was able to satisfy the purpose stated in chapter one, the design had to be modified. Due to the ongoing challenges surrounding the global pandemic, the researcher was not able to secure interview participants. Qualitative research is not generalizable in nature; however, moving from interviews to a digital narrative did allow for an unadulterated look at the persona these high achieving Black men chose to share to the public. Because the data resided in the public domain, there was no opportunity for interference from the researcher that could influence the intention of the communication.

A second limitation was that the digital posts were the only source of information used in this study. The information was crosschecked across all the individuals’ social media platforms to ensure consistency within the dataset. Although the researcher gave participants the opportunity to address their digital artifacts, there were no interviews or focus groups conducted to allow for the men to refine the researcher’s interpretation of the posts shared.

People may choose to present themselves in a way that may not offer a complete picture of their lives when posting to social media. There were more posts that were positive than negative in the dataset. However, in the study of mattering, it is more important to look at the things these men deemed worthy to share and celebrate.

Finally, during the study, some men had life transitions that caused them to modify the privacy settings on specific posts or their accounts in general. To maintain the highest level of ethical conduct on the part of the researcher, during this study, any data that was not publicly available and intended to be shared at the time of this writing was removed from the dataset.

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

The results based on the data in the current study showed that the 18 Black participants perceived mattering through their pride and the benefits of being affiliated with the university, the relationships they were able to bring with them and those developed during college, and contributions they made to the broader community. These graduates demonstrated that they were socially conscious and politically active. They were proponents of economic empowerment, and future-oriented while in their undergraduate programs. University policy makers, administrators, and faculty members can enrich the lived experience of all members of the campus community by harnessing the energy and enthusiasm for advocacy and purpose that these men exercised.

During their time as undergraduates, participants saw needs on campus and in the surrounding community and devised ways to meet them. For the university to move from awareness of concerns to action in these areas, it is important that Black students have a systematic mechanism for multiple voices from the Black student community to share

their authentic experience with university administrators who have the authority to actualize solutions designed in collaboration with students.

It is important that the things that are important to Black men on college campuses are also seen as important to the institution. These men created foundations and fellowships to support marginalized student groups. They also created partnerships with Fortune 500 companies to help connect students with opportunities. Additionally, these men worked with mentoring programs that exposed young people to the possibility model represented by their success. Student affairs officers can look to see how the university can partner with the students to support their efforts to fill a need experienced by members of the student body.

There were few data points that spoke directly of the value placed on mentors, which indicates there is an opportunity to institute, or strengthen, that program. Students identified as members of minoritized communities should be assigned a mentor from the faculty or staff to support their successful transition into and through the university. It is important that these mentors be trained, and schools should develop a feedback loop to reflect on the success of practices to maximize effectiveness. To augment the number of mentors available, teaching assistants and teaching fellows also could be considered if they are properly trained. Because this adds value to the overall programming and increases the responsibility of the mentor, these individuals should be compensated by the university. Peer mentorship is an equally important way to strengthen Black male collegians' connection to the university and thereby, their sense of mattering.

Although the universities represented in the current study did have co-curricular organizations, the data does not make clear how the men came to know about them.

Student affairs officers should review the strategies used to disseminate this information to ensure all students, including Black male students, know the variety of opportunities available to them in which they can become involved. Subsequently, it will be important that the leadership representing these organizations reflect the diversity in the student community. This will require that schools nurture a campus culture that celebrates and embraces diverse communities. University leadership can operationalize this value by increasing the diversity of faculty and staff through purposeful hiring practices.

One type of co-curricular organization, the historically Black fraternity, proved successful in recruiting and nurturing the graduates in this study. Membership provided them with peer mentors, leadership opportunities, deep peer relationships, and a strong sense of community. University policy makers and administrators can use the demonstrated success of these organizations as a model for increasing Black students' capacity to identify as fully invested members of the institution.

The stories of the lived experience of the graduates included in the present study as told through the artifacts they publicly shared on social media emphasizes the importance of sharing the possibility model they represent. College administrators can look for authentic opportunities to feature the pride these scholars shared in their many accomplishments in admissions and recruitment material as one way to move the academy toward normalizing the expectation of academic achievement for Black males in college. These possibility models are also valuable for guidance counselors in the PK-12 space by providing tangible evidence of Black male student success in very highly selective HWIs as a way of increasing application rates of their high school counterparts.



## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on the experiences of high achieving Black men at very highly selective historically White institutions. However, the findings provide rich opportunities for future research to build the academy's understanding of the environmental, programmatic, and interpersonal structures that support success in Black male undergraduates at any institution. The dataset was limited to the digital artifacts provided through the public social media accounts of the men included in this study. One recommendation is to include interviews with the men to gather a deeper interpretation of the images, videos, and text of their social media postings.

Secondly, the original study was designed as a narrative inquiry utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol to gain a deeper understanding about how high achieving Black men at very highly selective historically White institutions perceive mattering. Executing the original design of this study will extend our capacity to support these scholars.

Qualitative studies by nature are not generalizable. Another recommendation is to conduct a quantitative study of mattering from an anti-deficit perspective by using a survey instrument that allows the researcher to measure the extent to which participants perceive the subthemes related to finding their place, finding their people, and finding their purpose. This will allow the researcher to learn to what extent these dimensions influenced the alumni's sense of mattering.

This study focused on the in-school pipeline of Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework (2012). A longitudinal study of this group of men or an expanded study to include additional men of a similar demographic and educational experience that

investigates how they continued to capitalize on their experience at a very highly selective HWIs will enrich the understanding of the long-term impact of mattering on success.

During the process of identifying graduates to include in the current study, the researcher found evidence of high achieving Black female alumni of very highly selective HWIs. While high achieving Black males were the focus of this study, research on how female students experience mattering in while attending an HWI can provide us with a more robust understanding of how to best support all students, especially those who do not identify as part of the dominate culture.

The goal of this research was to understand how high achieving Black men who were recent graduates of very highly selective HWIs perceived mattering and its impact on their willingness to persist through graduation. Research that includes a focus group comprised of these graduates, university policymakers, administrators, and senior faculty can examine the degree of alignment between student and institutional perceptions.

### **Conclusion**

This study was designed to explore the lived experience of high achieving Black men who attended highly selective historically White institutions as undergraduates to gain deeper insight into the structures and relationships that supported their success. There is a plethora of research focused on understanding why Black male students do not find success in college at the rates of their White peers. There is also research on why Black men attend HWIs in lower numbers (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010). This study focused on the possibility model provided by the success of these men. Utilizing Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and Harper's (2012) anti-deficit framework, the

construction of this study focused on those things these men courageously chose to share as they documented their evolution from acceptance to college through graduation.

In the age of live streaming and instant uploads, the information on social media gives the viewer a unique insight into the moment being shared. Static images, videos, and text were analyzed and coded in this narrative as a means by which the digital stories told by these men could lend themselves to a universal story of Black males' academic success through gathering the authentic experiences of Black men on college campuses in real time. The men in this study were proud to be accepted into a university they knew was one of the leading educational institutions in the country. They each came into the collegiate experience with rich social capital in the form of familial and community support. Once there, these men did not attempt to change themselves to fit into a model of what others may have expected a student at that institution to be. Instead, they found ways to connect with people who validated and supported who they already were and the men they aspired to become.

While pride in the place they chose to continue their education and the interpersonal support they received from people on and off campus were important to the success of these men, finding purpose became more prominent on their social media as they matriculated. The findings in this study showed that it is this sense of purpose that helped fuel these men to continue what some called the hardest thing they had ever done, which was graduating from one of the leading universities while often being the only Black person, male or female, in the space.

The success these Black men experienced while attending a very highly selective historically White institution serves as an example of what is possible when they are

granted access to opportunity. They challenged the university community by claiming space for themselves, as themselves, and using the expanded social capital garnered by way of membership in these institutions to serve underrepresented communities.

# APPENDIX A

## IRB Approval

2/25/22, 10:08 PM

Mail - Gretchen J. Cotton - Outlook

IRB-FY2021-461 - Initial: Initial Submission - Expedited - St. John's

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

Tue 5/18/2021 4:04 PM

To: Gretchen J. Cotton <gretchen.rodney16@my.stjohns.edu>; parnthecc@stjohns.edu <parnthecc@stjohns.edu>

\* External Email \*



**ST. JOHN'S**  
UNIVERSITY

Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

May 18, 2021 4:04:50 PM EDT

Pl: Gretchen Rodney  
CO-Pl: Cecelia Parnther  
Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2021-461** *Exploring Black Excellence: A Study of the Impact of Mattering on African American Male Alumni of Highly Selective Historically White Colleges and Universities*

Dear Gretchen Rodney:

The St. John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *Exploring Black Excellence: A Study of the Impact of Mattering on African American Male Alumni of Highly Selective Historically White Colleges and Universities*. The approval is effective from May 18, 2021 through May 17, 2022.

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.  
IRB Coordinator

CAUTION - External email. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

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## APPENDIX B

### Notification of Inclusion



Hi there \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Gretchen Cotton Rodney, and I am a doctoral candidate at St. John's University. My research is focused on the ways in which very highly selective colleges make space for African American male students, in a way that communicates how much they matter to the school.

You were selected to be included in this study, because the photographs, captions, video, and comments shared in your posts on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube told your story of success at one of our nation's top-tier institutions, \_\_\_\_\_ University.

Even though the information I gathered was in the public domain, every effort will be made to protect your individual identity, meaning that only my dissertation chair and I will be aware of your identity in connection with the data collected. You will be assigned a pseudonym for quotes or any direct reference to you, and your name will be redacted in the reproduction of posts.

If you are uncomfortable with anything you posted being included, in whole or in part, please feel free to let me know. You can contact me at g[REDACTED]@my.stjohns.edu and I will make the necessary adjustments to the data set.

If you have any African American men in your network who are fellow alumni and graduated since 2018, that would also be willing to meet with me, please send along my contact information or feel free to leave their name and I'd be happy to contact them directly.

If you have any questions about the purpose of this research, please contact me at g[REDACTED]@mystjohns.edu or Dr. Ceceilia Parnter, Assistant Professor Department of Administration and Instructional Leadership at p[REDACTED]@stjohns.edu.

My truest hope is that the path you have blazed illuminates the way for a young African American man who, through your example, knows he too can excel in these spaces.

Sincerely,

Gretchen Cotton Rodney  
St. John's University  
Principal Researcher

## APPENDIX C

Related Literature Matrix

Reference	Participant Characteristics	Purpose of Study Research Questions	Data	Findings
Bair, A. N. & Steele, J. R. (2010). Examining the consequences of exposure to racism for the executive functioning of Black students. <i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i> , 46 (2010), 127-132. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.08.016">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.08.016</a>	Black undergraduates (N=72)	Investigate the impact of exposure to racism on the cognitive functioning of Black undergraduates and whether this would be moderated by the extent to which race was a central aspect of our participants identities.	Survey Responses Interviews	Participants experienced self-control depletion following interracial encounters, regardless of whether the views expressed were racist. However racial centrality moderated the depletion effect when racism was involved.
Brooms, D. R. & Davis, A. R. (2017). Staying focused on the goal: Peer bonding and faculty mentors supporting black males' persistence in college. <i>Journal of Black Studies</i> , 48(3), 305-326.	Black male undergraduates from three historically White institutions (N=59)	How black male students construct meaning from their collegiate experiences and their efforts for educational success?	Interviews	Peer to peer bonding with other black males & mentoring from black faculty members had a positive impact on persistence. Social networks and micro-communities enhance and support black males' persistence in college
Clark, J. S. & Brooms, D. R. (2018). "We get to learn more about ourselves": Black men's engagement, bonding, and self-authorship on campus. <i>The Journal of Negro Education</i> , 87(4), 391-403.	Black undergraduates participating in Black Male Scholars (BMS) initiative (N=23)	How does participating in BMS enhance Black male students' self-authoring and persistence at a historically White institution?	Interviews Data was collected as part of a larger study.	BMS helped move men from feelings of isolation and alienation to a heightened self-awareness that enhanced their self-authorship.
Davis, G. M., Hanzsek-Brill, M. B., Petzold, M. C., & Robinson, D. H. (2019). Students' sense of belonging: The development of a predictive retention model. <i>Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning</i> , 19(1), 117-127.	Incoming college freshmen who were domestic students. (N= 837)	Measure students' sense of belonging during their freshman year in a attempt to predict rates of retention.	Survey Responses	While social belonging and academic performance are not correlated, they are significant predictors of retention.
Fries-Britt, S. (1998). Moving beyond black achiever isolation: Experiences of gifted black collegians. <i>The Journal of Higher Education</i> 69(5), 556-576.	High achieving Black college seniors participating in comprehensive intervention program (Meyerhoff)	Examine the racial experiences of high achieving Black students enrolled in a merit-based scholarship program for students with STEM majors.	Interviews	High achieving Black students experience isolation from other Black students as well as Whites. Membership in Meyerhoff allowed them to be in the company of like-minded individuals.

	(N=12)			Black Achiever Isolation
Fries-Britt, S. & Turner, B. (2002). Uneven stories: Successful black collegians at a Black and White campus. <i>The Review of Higher Education</i> 25(3), 315-330.	High achieving Black undergraduates in their junior and senior with 19 attending historically Black colleges years. (N=34)	Identify experiences that both challenged and supported academic success.	Interviews	Themes that emerged were: Establishing Support and Involvement HBCUs reportedly felt like home, had actives geared toward Black students, and allowed students to make meaningful connections with peers and faculty members. On the other hand, HWI lacked the critical mass of peers and faculty, campus activities were geared toward the dominant culture, and Black students' energy was diverted to provide racial context for Whites.
Fries-Britt, S. (2017). It takes more than academic preparation: A nuanced look at Black male success in STEM. <i>Journal of African American Males in Education</i> 8(1), 6-22	High achieving Black male undergraduates perusing STEM majors at both HBCUs & HWIs	Examine the experiences of high achieving Black men studying in the STEM field to focus on how self-confidence, meaningful relationships, and navigating stereotypes impacted their success.	Interviews  Data was collected as part of a larger study.	The academic confidence the men had was based on previous achievements but were at risk of erosion from defending their position at the HWI. They were able to cultivate relationships within their major but had difficulty socializing with less academic Black peers.
Goings, R. B. (2016 b). (Re)defining the narrative: high-achieving nontraditional black male undergraduates at a historically black college and university. <i>Adult Education Quarterly: A Journal of Research and Theory</i> (66)3, 223-253.	High achieving Black undergraduates 25 years old and older (nontraditional) (N=4)	Investigate the campus experience of Black males at HBCU both academically and socially, as well as the supports that played pivotal roles in their success.	Interviews	Participants were (1) self-motivated. They believed their determination was explanation for their academic success, (2) peers provided encouragement, (3) family support, (4) HBCU was an inclusive environment that embraced their identities as Black scholars and nontraditional students
Gossett, B. J., Cuyjet, M. J., Cockriel, I. (1998). African American's perception of marginality in the campus culture. <i>College Student Journal</i> , 32(1).	1180 students across four predominately White institutions (N=1180) African American (324)	African American students' perception of marginality as compared to non-African American undergraduate students at 4 large, public, predominately White	Survey Responses	Most African American students in this study felt marginalized to a higher degree than their non-African American peers at the four campuses surveyed, in the areas of administrative advising, classroom faculty and



	& non-African American (805)	institutions in the Midwest.		peers, and student services.
Guiffrida, D. (2005). Othermothering as a framework for understanding African American students' definitions of student-centered faculty. <i>The Journal of Higher Education</i> , 76(6), 701-723	High achieving African American undergraduates GPA Avg 3.2 (N=19)	Uncover patterns in students' perceptions of relationships between AA students and faculty in order to open new paths for future thought and research	Interviews  Individual and Focus Groups	Participants felt African American faculty was more student-centered. Student-centered faculty were described as going above and beyond their professional responsibilities to advocate for students. They also maintained high expectations of African American students .
Harper, S. R. (2015). Black male college achievers and resistant responses to racist stereotypes at predominantly white colleges and universities. <i>Harvard Educational Review</i> 85(4), 646-674.	High achieving African American undergraduates attending HWI  GPA 3.0 or higher  campus leadership position  (N=143)	To learn more about who is succeeding in postsecondary context where they are routinely stereotyped.	Interviews 1:1 and follow-up  Data is from a larger study National Black Male College Achievement Study	African American undergraduate men were frequently confronted with stereotypes, but resisted them through their campus leadership roles, engagement in student organizations, use of three-step strategic redirection.
Harper, S. R., & Nichols, A. H. (2008). Are they not all the same? Racial heterogeneity among Black male undergraduates. <i>Journal of College Student Development</i> , 49(3), 247-269.	Black male undergraduates (N=39)	Explore within-group differences among Black male undergraduates at three private institutions	Interviews	In direct contradiction to Black men being a monolith, research found six distinct subgroups among the study participants.
Hurtado, S. & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. <i>Sociology in Education</i> , 70(4), 324-345.	Latino undergraduates in the 1990 cohort. (N=287)	The role of Latino students' transition into college on their sense of belonging.	Survey responses	Discussions about coursework outside of class, and associations with religious and peer groups had a positive effect on belonging.

Huerta, A. H., & Fishman, S. M. (2014). Marginality and mattering: Urban Latino male undergraduates in higher education. <i>Journal of the First-Year experience and Students in Transition</i> , 26(1), 85-100.	Undergraduate Latino males ages 17-23 attending community college, 4-yr state college, comprehensive university, and research university (N=10)	How does the theory of marginality and mattering help explain the social and academic experiences of Latino male undergraduates in order to better lead to college completion?	Interviews	4 Themes Emerged (1) Motivation to Attend (2) College Environment (3) Mentorship (4) Mattering & Marginality
Jackson, B. A. (2012). Bonds of brotherhood: Emotional and social support among college Black men. <i>The annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i> , 642(1), 61-71.	African American undergraduates who participate in Uplift and Progress (UP) at a regional college.	How the Black men on a HWI campus invoked the notion of brotherhood in their everyday interactions as well as in the research interviews.	Observations	The concept of brotherhood allows men to express love, concern, and closeness. They developed an in-group code of conduct.
Johnson, J. M. & McGowen, B. L. (2017). Untold stories: The gendered experiences of high achieving African American male alumni of historically black colleges and universities. <i>Journal of African American Males in Education</i> , 8(1), 23-44.	High Achieving African American male alumni of HBCUs (N=19)	Insight into the unique role of HBCUs in promoting college access and degree attainment of high achieving African American males through the intersectionality of gender and race.	Interviews  Data is part of a larger National HBCU Alumni Study	(1) High achieving African American men recognized the negative stereotypes that characterize them as low performing and uninterested in education. (2) They were supported by African American male mentors (3) Engage in academic behaviors including a. going to class, b. establishing a study routine, c. study peers. (4) social involvement was as important as academics (5) high academic expectations from faculty
Lareau, A. & Harvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. <i>Sociology of Education</i> , 72(1), 37-53.	Parents and Guardians of African American and White children at one elementary school (N=24)	Based on Bourdieus theory of social capital, this study focuses on the activation of social and cultural capital.	Case Study	Black parents concerned about discriminations against Black children in school

Lundberg, C. A. & Schreiner, L. A. (2004). Quality and frequency of faculty-student interaction as predictors of learning: An analysis by student race/ethnicity. <i>Journal of College Student Development</i> , 45(5), 549-565.	Undergraduates who completed the College Students Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) between 1998 and 2001 from seven different racial and/or ethnic groups (n=4,501)	How does involvement with faculty predict learning, and how that learning varies among the different racial/ethnic groups in the sample group.	Survey Responses	Relationships with faculty were stronger predictors of learning than student background characteristic for all groups, but strongest for students of color.
Palmer, R. T. & Maramba, D. C. (2012). Creating conditions of mattering to enhance persistence for black men at an historically black university. <i>Spectrum: A journal on Black men</i> , (1)1, 95-119.	African American student affairs practitioners working at a HBCU  46 years of collective experience (N=4)	Provide insight into ways to help increase the Black male completion rate at HBCUs.	Interviews	2 Themes: (1) Authentic Caring (2) Engagement Matters out of class and in class.
Rosenberg, M., & McCullough, B. C. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance and mental health among adolescents. <i>Research in Community &amp; Mental Health</i> , 2, 163-182	High school juniors and seniors from various parts of the United States (N=6,568)	Impact of adolescents' perception of mattering to parents influence on behavior and self-esteem.	Survey Responses	Adolescents' perception of parental mattering was related to their overall self-esteem. Males who perceived low levels of parental mattering were more likely to display delinquent behaviors.
Schiefererecke, R. W. & Card, K. A. (2013). Helping males succeed in college: Male's experiences of mattering and marginalization. <i>College Student Affairs Journal</i> , 31(2), 87-99.	Black male undergraduates (n=21)	Investigate the male students' perceptions of mattering and marginalization during their college experiences at a research university in the Great Plains where the majority of students enrolled were women.	Interviews	Six themes emerged including praise, investing in me, sense of community, the unseen, insignificant and outsider.
Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. <i>New Directions for Student Services</i> , (48).	Determine how mattering impacts adult learners transitioning to college	Non-traditional adult students in community college	Survey Responses	Mattering is a motivator to continue toward degree completion
Schmader, T. & Johns, M. (2003). Converging evidence that stereotype threat reduces working memory capacity, <i>Journal of Personality and Social</i>	African American female and male undergraduates (N=59)	Hypothesis that stereotypes threats interferes with test performance because it reduces working memory capacity.	Survey Responses	Negative stereotypes reduce women's (experiment #1) and Latinos (experiment #2) working memory capacity.

*Psychology 85 (4), 440-452.*

Smith, J. W., Smith, W. J., & Markham, S. E. (2000). Diversity issues in mentoring academic faculty, <i>Journal of Career Development, 26</i> (4).	College faculty who were in mentoring relationships (n=226)	To explore the nature and impact of diversified mentoring relationships.	Survey Responses  Subset of a larger data set.	Significantly more women are mentored than men. No significant difference in the amount of psychological support mentors provide.
Solorzano, D., Ceja, M. Yosso, T. (2000), Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students, <i>The Journal of Negro Education 69</i> (1/2), 60-73.	African American female and male undergraduates attending three research 1 universities (N=34)	Examination of racial microaggressions and how they influence the collegiate racial climate.	Interviews  Focus Groups	Aversive racism negatively effects Black students' perception of Whites.
Strayhorn, T. (2010). When race and gender collide: Social and cultural capital's influence on the academic achievement of African American and Latino males. <i>Review of Higher Education, 33</i> (3), 307-332.	This study utilized the data from the African American (9%) and Hispanic (13%) respondents.	To measure the influence of background traits, academic preparation for college, and sociocultural capital on academic achievement in college, as measured by college grade point average.	Survey Responses  Data part of a larger study National Education Longitudinal Study  8 <sup>th</sup> Graders (N=24,588)	Sociocultural capital can mediate the negative effects of low SES. Same race affinity groups, pre-college outreach programs, and conversations with parents concerning college all supported positive outcomes for Black and Hispanic students.
Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students (2nd ed.). Routledge.	Rising Black and Latinx college freshman participating in a summer bridge program (n=55)	Examine the impact of the summer bridge program on first-year students' sense of belonging.	Mixed Method	Belonging is important in order for students to persist at their college of choice. This is especially true for marginalized groups. This is especially important when transitioning into a new setting.
Tovar, E. (2009). Development and validation of the college mattering inventory with diverse urban college students. <i>Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development 42</i> (3), 154-178.	Undergraduates 62%female 38%male (N=3,139)	Validate the College Mattering Inventory (CMI). Survey instrument developed based on the work of Schlossberg but targeting college students	Survey Responses	CMI reflects various aspects of perceived mattering by college students: importance, attention, support, dependence, ego extension, and marginality. The researchers contend that mattering and sense of belonging are two distinct but related constructs.

Tucker, C., Dixon, A., & Griddine, K. (2010). Academically successful African American male urban high school students' experiences of mattering to others at school. <i>Professional School Counseling, 14</i> (2), 135-145.	African American male high school juniors  GPA 2.0 or higher  No disciplinary record  (N=9)	How the concept of mattering to others at school is experienced by academically successful African American male high school students, and how mattering to others at school affects their desire to excel in their studies and academic expectations.	Interviews  Individual and Focus Group	Students perceive higher levels of mattering when they experience extensive support at school, have clear and high expectations from key adults (family & school), personal drive  Key factors participants identified as important to their academic success.
Watkins, D. C., Green, B. L., & Goodson, P. (2007). Using focus groups to explore the stressful life events of black college men. <i>Journal of College Student Development, 48</i> (1), 105-118.	African American male undergraduates attending HBCUs and HWIs during the 2005-2006 academic year. HBCU (n=24), HWI (n=22)	RQ1. What are the stressful life events of Black college men? RQ2. How do these stressful events contribute to their mental health and health behaviors?	Focus Groups	While Black men attending PWIs and HBCUs experience similar stressors, those attending PWIs report that their stressors are related to school.

## APPENDIX D

### Projected Codes

Code	Definition
Appreciation	Efforts make a significant positive impact on someone.
Dependence	Others rely on an individual's efforts or input.
Ego-Extension	One's actions, accomplishments, or challenges are shared by the larger community.
Attention	Being noticed.
Importance	Those in the community are concerned about an individual's ideas, goals, or opinions.
Mentorship	A person who helps the student learn the cultural norms of an institution, and how to navigate the opportunities and pitfalls to maximize the value of the college experience.
Social Support	A group or organization that provides the student with a sense of community, teaches institutional norms, and/or provides information about university resources.
Marginalization	Members of the dominant group exclude, diminish, or act on negative assumptions in regard to a non-dominant group.
Representation	The underrepresentation of members of a non-dominant group in the student body, faculty, or administrative staff.

## APPENDIX E

### Highly Selective Colleges and Universities

Rank	Institution	Location	Type	Enrolled
1	Princeton University	Princeton, NJ	Private	5,422
2	Harvard University	Cambridge, MA	Private	6,755
3	Columbia University	New York, NY	Private	6,245
4	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	Cambridge, MA	Private	4,530
4	Yale University	New Haven, CT	Private	6,092
20	University of California - Los Angeles	Los Angeles, CA	Public	31,543
22	University of California – Berkeley	Berkeley, CA	Public	31,780
24	University of Michigan – Ann Arbor	Ann Arbor, MI	Public	31,266
26	University of Virginia	Charlottesville, VA	Public	17,011
28	University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill	Chapel Hill, NC	Public	19,355

*Note.* 2021 U. S. News and World Report Best National University Rankings. This list consists of the top 5 ranked private and top 5 ranked public colleges and universities.

## APPENDIX F

### School Specific Recruitment Flyer

**EXPLORING  
BLACK  
EXCELLENCE**  
A STUDY OF MATTERING AT  
HISTORICALLY WHITE COLLEGES

AN INVITATION FOR PARTICIPANTS  
**COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**  
ALUMNI

WHO IDENTIFY AS  
AFRICAN AMERICAN  
MALE  
GRADUATED IN THE LAST 3 YEARS  
G.P.A. OF 3.0 OF HIGHER

  
**GRETCHEN COTTON RODNEY**  
RESEARCHER  
 **ST. JOHN'S**  
UNIVERSITY  
G [REDACTED] @MYSTJOHNS.EDU

If this describes you, I would love to hear if,  
and how, you perceived mattering while  
attending your alma mater during a 45-60  
minute virtual interview.

**CLICK  
HERE**



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