

WHAT MAKES THEM LEAVE? RETAINING AND GRADUATING BLACK MALES AT  
LINCOLN PRAIRIE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

In the United States, Black male students graduate at a significantly lower rate than other student groups, with 38.6% of Black males graduating in six years from four-year institutions and just 21% when time is reduced to four years. This qualitative action research case study used a focus group interview with six participants to understand the factors related to Black male student retention and graduation at Lincoln Prairie University (LPU) (pseudonym), a private, predominantly White Midwestern institution. The study also sought to determine what actions LPU could take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students. Past research pointed to several factors that had both positive and negative influences on Black male student retention, including campus climate, feelings of isolation, racism and microaggressions, academic performance, the availability of financial assistance, and peer and mentor support systems. The campus climate theoretical framework was used to organize this study and connect it to existing literature. Findings suggest that when campus administrators understand their campus climate and continually improve campus operations, Black male students can persist to graduation. The findings also point to the importance of fully supporting Black male students on campus by making them feel heard, seen, and included and limiting racism and microaggressions. With the appropriate levels of academic and social support, a healthy campus climate, and a constantly improving campus, Black male students can achieve academic success, be retained from year to year, and ultimately graduate. To improve retention and graduation rates, campus administrators should focus on increasing the diversity of campus employees, supporting open and honest conversations about racial issues, and using all available resources to promote Black activities on campus.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother, Pearl V. Lake, who held me to the highest possible academic standards and was always my biggest cheerleader. The success I have achieved in life is because of her and I am thankful to her and all of my ancestors for carrying me through this process.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities across the country take pride in having high retention and graduation rates because they can be viewed as signals of credibility and financial stability (Gilliam & Kritsonis, 2006). Those rates, especially graduation rates, can be easily found on institutional websites and marketing materials in an attempt to encourage students to apply to and attend the institutions. What is sometimes harder to find are specific breakdowns of these rates by race and other variables that may not be as favorable. Two areas where most schools struggle with those rates are in retaining and graduating Black male students. Nationally, only 38.6% of Black male students graduate within six years from four-year institutions, compared to 64.1% of White male students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). When graduation time is reduced to four years, the percentage of Black male students who graduate drops to just 21% (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

At Bradley University, of the full-time, first-time male and female students who started school in the Fall of 2015 and graduated within six years, 62% of the Black students graduated, while 78% of White students, 64% of Asian students, and 60% of Hispanic/Latino graduated during the same time period (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The statistics show that Black students and other students of color overall at Bradley are not graduating at the same rates as White students on campus. The current study was conducted at Lincoln Prairie University (LPU) (pseudonym), a private, predominantly White Midwestern institution with an undergraduate population of just under 5,000 students. Sixty-seven percent of the student population is White, while Black students make up just 8% of the undergraduate population. Hispanic and Asian students represent 13% and 4% of the population, respectively.

LPU is very similar to Bradley in terms of size, racial makeup, and graduation rates for students of color, making it a viable place to conduct this research study. When looking at national and local retention and graduation statistics, one may wonder what is causing Black male students to leave school or not graduate at the same rates as other students. This chapter will review some of the factors that affect the retention and graduation rates of Black male students and provide insight into what the current study hopes to achieve.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Black male students at Lincoln Prairie University are retained and graduate at lower rates than other student groups on campus.

### **Literature Review**

Previous studies have found several factors that may contribute to low retention and graduation rates for Black male students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Some of those factors include feelings of isolation on campus (Black & Bimper, 2020), racism and microaggressions (Black & Bimper, 2020; Harper, 2015), academic performance (Glenn, 2004; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Palmer et al., 2010), and availability of financial assistance (Glenn, 2004; Palmer et al., 2010; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Despite some of the negative factors presented by past research to explain low retention and graduation rates, there have been studies that show that there are strategies like retention initiatives and summer bridge programs that can be implemented to improve both rates (Barker & Avery, 2012; Bir & Myrick, 2015; Druery & Brooms, 2019; Ottley & Ellis, 2019).

### **Feelings of Isolation on Campus**

Research has shown that Black male students who attend PWIs experience feelings of isolation on campuses where there are not many other Black students, faculty, or staff members

(Black & Bimper, 2020; Ottley & Ellis, 2019). Participants in Ottley and Ellis' (2019) qualitative case study reported feeling like outsiders at their rural, public PWI because of the small number of Black male students on campus. They also felt that they were negatively affected by the lack of Black faculty and staff members who could serve as role models for them. Similarly, a participant in Black and Bimper's (2020) qualitative case study reported that there was an overall lack of personal, academic, and social support because of the limited number of Black students, faculty, and staff members on his campus. Feelings of alienation, inferiority, and isolation were also reported by other participants during academic and social experiences on their campus (Black & Bimper, 2020).

### **Racism and Microaggressions**

In addition to feelings of isolation, racism and microaggressions are factors that have been shown to affect Black male students at PWIs. All of Black and Bimper's (2020) participants reported having negative actions directed toward them because they were Black. In both on- and off-campus experiences, they reported feeling marked as different and inferior to other students on campus. In a study by Harper (2015), several participants reported experiencing the following microaggressions because of assumptions based on their race: they were drug dealers; they were only in school because they were athletes; they were admitted to the school through affirmative action; they did not belong at the institution; or they were from low-income, high-crime neighborhoods. Harper (2015) concluded that if White students, faculty, and staff members did not make racially offensive comments or stereotype Black male students, there would not be a need for Black male students to respond to microaggressions.

### **Academic Performance**

Past research on the academic performance of Black male college students has been split, with either a focus on academic deficiency or resilience (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Harper, 2015). From a deficiency perspective, factors affecting Black male students' abilities to perform well academically include insufficient academic preparation for college, low SAT scores, and a lack of positive self-esteem (Glenn, 2004). Conversely, Black male students have shown that in the right setting, academic deficiencies can be overcome. In a study by Palmer et al. (2010), participants at an HBCU stated that the school's racial makeup and support from Black students, faculty, and staff had positive effects on the participants' academic success. If similar support systems can be created at PWIs, there can be an increase in the overall academic success of Black male students.

### **Availability of Financial Assistance**

The ability to pay for school is an important determinant in whether some students can attend college or matriculate to graduation once they have begun school. Several studies have shown the vital role financial assistance plays in educational attainment for Black male students, including studies by Wood and Harrison (2014), Palmer et al. (2010), and Glenn (2004). Wood and Harrison (2014) found that Black male students considered the availability of financial assistance when deciding which school to attend, while over 60% of Palmer et al.'s (2010) participants experienced a shortage of financial assistance that could impede their academic success. Additionally, Glenn (2004) cited unmet financial need, inflexible payment options, and full reliance on financial assistance to pay academic costs as reasons Black male students stop their academic pursuits.

### **Success of Retention Initiatives**

Research has shown that there are several types of initiatives that have been successful in boosting retention and graduation rates for Black male students at PWIs (Barker & Avery, 2012; Ottley & Ellis, 2019; Druery & Brooms, 2019). In Ottley and Ellis' (2019) case study, participants who took part in an on-campus Black male retention initiative reported feeling encouraged and determined to work harder. Holding leadership roles in retention initiatives has also been found to increase engagement and encourage persistence among Black male students as evidenced in Barker and Avery's (2012) and Druery and Brooms' (2019) studies. Participants in both studies were able to network and connect with other Black people on campus, experience culturally rich environments, and develop personally because of their affiliation with the Black male leadership initiatives. Finally, educational summer bridge programs have also been shown to increase graduation and retention rates for students who participated in them prior to beginning their collegiate careers. Black male and female students in Bir and Myrick's (2015) study showed higher rates of retention and graduation and higher grade point averages than students who did not participate in a summer bridge program reinforcing the idea that better academic preparation can equate to increased academic success for some students.

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the factors related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus being retained and graduating at lower rates than other student groups and to determine what actions Lincoln Prairie University can take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students.

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus being retained at lower rates than other student groups?

2. What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus graduating at lower rates than other student groups?
3. What actions can Lincoln Prairie University take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students?

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Attrition:** A decrease in the size of a cohort that occurs when students drop out (fail to re-enroll) or stop out (do not re-enroll continuously) (Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education, n.d.).

**Historically Black College or University:** A college or university that was originally founded to educate students of African American descent (Oxford Languages, n.d.).

**Historically White Institution:** An institution whose history includes policies and practices that denied admissions for people of color, in addition to equitable access to resources, campus spaces, and opportunities (Brooms, 2017).

**Minoritized:** A term used instead of minority to “signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions including colleges and universities” (Harper, 2013, p. 207). People are not born into minority status but are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness (Harper, 2013).

**Persistence:** A student’s ability to continue to the next term (Spear, n.d.).

**Predominantly White Institution (PWI):** An institution of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment. (Lomotey, 2010).

**Retention:** The percentage of a given cohort that enrolled at an institution the fall following their first year. Retention rates may be reported over subsequent years (Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education, n.d.).

**Traditionally White Institution:** An institution that has traditionally had a larger population of White students when compared to other student groups attending the institution (Fortier, 2013).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important because it aims to understand the factors that cause Black male students on LPU's campus to be retained and graduate at lower rates than other student groups. Identifying these factors would allow LPU to take steps to implement strategies that would lead to Black male students staying at LPU and graduating at higher rates. The implementation of new strategies could lead to increased revenue for LPU and an increasingly diverse alumni population. Beyond LPU, at Bradley for example, this study can add to the existing literature on ways to improve the retention and graduation rates of Black male students at other PWIs. Gaining an understanding of the factors that affect Black male students' ability to be retained and to graduate can help institutions everywhere better serve that student population.

### **Organization of the Research Report**

This chapter introduced readers to the study and presented the research problem, a brief literature review, research purpose and questions, definitions, and the study's significance. Chapter 2 will provide an in-depth review of the existing literature related to the graduation and retention rates of Black male students. It will also include literature about programs and initiatives that have been successful in aiding Black male students in their persistence through college. Chapters 3 and 4 will present the study's research methods and findings, and discussion,

respectively. The report will end with Chapter 5 which will present concluding thoughts on the study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

There have been numerous studies completed in the last 50 years about the academic and social experiences of Black students on the campuses of predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Harper, 2013). Other acronyms for these types of institutions used throughout this section include HWI for historically White institutions and TWI for traditionally White institutions (Brooms, 2017; Fortier, 2013). Many of those studies focused on the facts that Black students, in general, and Black male students, in particular, have negative campus experiences and face issues with being retained and graduating on time (Black & Bimper, 2020; Harper 2015; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Nationally, only 38.6% of Black male students graduate within six years from four-year institutions, compared to 64.1% of White male students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). When graduation time is reduced to four years, the percentage of Black male students who graduate drops to just 21% (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). This chapter will review the literature related to the low retention and graduation rates of Black male students at PWIs. The three main themes that have emerged from the literature are negative factors affecting retention and graduation rates, positive factors affecting retention and graduation rates, and solutions for combating the issues of low retention and graduation rates for Black male students. Each main theme has several sub-themes that will be explored in detail in the following sections.

#### **Summary of the Research Problem**

The research problem that this study will address is the issue of Black male students at Lincoln Prairie University (LPU) being retained and graduating at lower rates than other student

groups on campus. As mentioned previously, students of color at Bradley University are not graduating at the same rates as other student groups on campus. The Bradley Racial Equity Advisory Group (2020) reported that Black male students are four times as likely to leave the University before graduating than other student groups. Of those Black male students at Bradley who persisted to graduation in the four-year cohort entering in 2016, only 25.6% of them graduated (Bradley Racial Equity Advisory Group, 2020). This information signals that there are factors affecting Bradley's Black male students in terms of retention and graduation. Completing this study at LPU will hopefully identify the factors affecting both LPU's and Bradley's retention and graduation rates for Black male students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that was used to properly focus and organize the current study and connect it to the existing literature is the campus climate framework. This framework takes into account an institution's historical legacy and connects it to current institutional problems (Harper, 2013). It attempts to make "sense of contemporary problems related to race, stratification and durable patterns of racial underrepresentation in higher education" by "understanding ways in which various groups of people were excluded, the conditions under which they were eventually granted access, and myriad [of] ways in which generations of them have been numerically and experientially minoritized" (Harper, 2013, p. 188). The social media hashtag #BlackAtBradleyU shines a light on some of the experiences of Black students, faculty, and staff members on campus, signaling a need for improvement in the campus climate.

### **Literature Review**

Past studies cite numerous factors that negatively affect the retention and graduation rates of Black male students at PWIs. Some of the most consistent negative factors that have emerged

from the literature include the campus climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2008); feelings of isolation on campus (Black & Bimper, 2020; Fortier, 2013; Harper, 2013; Harper, et al., 2011; Ottley & Ellis, 2019); racism and microaggressions (Black & Bimper, 2020; Harper, 2015; Harper & Davis, 2016; Steele, 1997); academic performance (Glenn, 2004; Harper, 2015; McClure, 2006; Palmer et al., 2010); and availability of financial assistance (Cabrera, et al., 1992; Glenn, 2004; Palmer et al., 2010; Wood & Harrison, 2014). As a result of all the research done around improving retention and graduation rates for college students in general, and specifically for Black male students, many studies have identified factors that positively affect retention and graduation rates for the latter student group. Some of the factors that have emerged from the literature are having peer and mentor support systems (Black & Bimper, 2020; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2013); creating retention initiatives geared toward Black male students (Brooms, 2018; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Druery & Brooms, 2019; Ottley & Ellis, 2019); and providing meaningful campus leadership experiences for Black male students (Barker & Avery, 2012; Druery & Brooms, 2019).

The literature review concludes with what past studies present as solutions to the problem of retaining and graduating Black male students at PWIs. The low retention and graduation rates achieved by Black male students at PWIs can be attributed as much to the institution as they can be to the student (Black & Bimper, 2020). With that in mind, solutions to the problem of low retention and graduation rates for Black male students at PWIs should include actions that support the academic and social success of the student and changes or enhancements to the campus climate to fully support all aspects of the Black male student experience. Some of the solutions that emerged from the literature to improve the retention and graduation rates of Black male students at PWIs include retention initiatives geared directly toward Black male students

(Brooms, 2018; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Druery & Brooms, 2019; Ottley & Ellis, 2019); summer bridge programs (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Douglass & Attewell, 2014; Garibaldi, 2007; Harper, 2013); and changing the campus climate (Black & Bimper, 2020, Fortier, 2013; Harper & Davis, 2016; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Leadley & Ryan, 2015; Rankin & Reason, 2008; Robertson & Mason, 2008). Retention initiatives will be fully discussed in the positive factors section.

## **Negative Factors Affecting Retention and Graduation Rates**

### ***Campus Climate***

Rankin and Reason (2008) defined campus climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential” (p. 264). Unfortunately, for students of color on PWI campuses, and Black male students in particular, some campuses are viewed to have toxic or unwelcoming campus climates that have a negative effect on the students’ college experiences. Harper (2013) posited that many U.S. institutions of higher education were created without any focus on the needs and interests of Black students and cultural norms that have governed PWI campuses for decades were established by White students, faculty, alumni, and other stakeholders, making the climates of some PWI campuses unsupportive places for Black students.

In a qualitative study of campus climates on five PWI campuses, Harper and Hurtado (2007) gained valuable insight into the experiences that students and staff members of color had on their PWI campuses. What was most intriguing about the responses related to social satisfaction on campus was that the White and Asian students interviewed generally felt satisfied with their institutions and found it difficult to identify aspects of the campus environment that they would change. On the other hand, Black students at all five universities in the study

expressed the highest level of social dissatisfaction of all the participants (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Similarly, because White students were the most satisfied with social environments at their PWIs, they incorrectly assumed that students of color experienced the campus in the same way and were equally satisfied with their college experiences.

Participants of color in the same Harper and Hurtado (2007) study acknowledged that their campuses were racially segregated and that on-campus conversations about race outside of ethnic studies classes rarely occurred and were even considered to be taboo. Another finding in the study was that outside of ethnic and multicultural centers on campus, there were very few spaces on campus that participants considered to share cultural ownership with White students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Participants of color also mentioned the overall White feel of campus when it came to activities, culture, sports, and textbooks and were critical of the fact that ethnic and racial culture was isolated to just the multicultural or ethnic centers on campus. Additionally, staff members of color who were a part of the study reported being fully aware of the dissatisfaction of and disadvantages experienced by their students of color on their campuses. Despite this awareness, however, the staff members were reluctant to call attention to the issues out of fear of political backlash or being fired. Many remained silent on matters of race out of fear of being labeled a troublemaker (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The one thing that students of color and White students agreed on in Harper and Hurtado's (2007) study was that their universities' words and actions did not match when it came to diversity. The universities promoted diversity everywhere on campuses but took few steps to actually diversify the campus. Participants also mentioned that their universities did little to assist with the educational process that leads to racial understanding.

A quantitative study by Rankin and Reason (2005) explored how campus climates were experienced by students in different racial groups on 10 campuses. The results indicated that students of color experienced harassment at higher rates than Whites. In the study, harassment was defined as “any offensive, hostile, or intimidating behavior that interferes with learning” (p. 43). Seventy-five percent of respondents in the study identified other students on campus as the source of the harassment they experienced, while 20% said faculty were the source (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Additionally, students of color perceived campus climates to be more racist and less accepting of minority groups than White students, even though White students recognized racial harassment at the same rates as students of color. White students perceived the campus as “nonracist, friendly, and respectful” (p. 57), and they were more likely than students of color to think that their institutions were responding well to the racial climate and that the racial climate on campus was improving. Lastly, students of color were found to be more optimistic than Whites in believing that required courses and workshops would improve the campus climate (Reason & Rankin, 2005). Overall, the results of the study showed that students of color and White students had very different experiences and perceptions of their campus climates.

### ***Feelings of Isolation on Campus***

At PWIs, many minority group students experience isolation or discomfort while being on campus because of a lack of ownership of campus traditions, which are usually monopolized by White students (Fortier, 2013). These feelings of isolation and discomfort can affect overall student satisfaction and ultimately, student retention and graduation rates (Fortier, 2013). Additionally, the lack of Black male students on PWI campuses is a new experience that may be completely different from what Black male students are accustomed to in their home communities and school districts (Ottley & Ellis, 2019). To capture Black male students’

feelings of isolation on PWI campuses, Harper, et al. (2011) introduced the term “onlyness” which is defined as “the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group” (p. 190).

In Harper’s (2013) study, Black male student leaders reported feeling burdened to be exceptional because so few other Black male students had been chosen for prominent campus leadership roles. They also reported feeling pressure to be perfect so that future Black male student leaders would have similar opportunities. Additionally, they were expected by White peers and university administrators to serve as spokespersons for Black issues and other underrepresented populations during meetings (Harper, 2013).

In her ethnographic study at the University of Illinois (U of I), Fortier (2013) detailed the experiences of undergraduate minority student researchers in her Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI) class. Their assignment was to examine the university’s efforts to improve the racial climate on campus. Students reported several instances of minority students not fully existing in spaces across campus and planning programs that centered on race-related discussions that were only attended by students of color. One student noted that five African American students gathered in a small residence hall room for a meeting even though a large lounge area was available nearby. When questioned, the students mentioned wanting to stay in areas in which they felt comfortable and where they would not be judged or stereotyped. The same student also reported that when she held staff training for fellow students who worked in the residence halls, the White students immediately became uneasy and disengaged, while the students of color listened and participated intently (Fortier, 2013).

When it came to reactions to U of I's efforts to bring diverse students together, Fortier (2013) found that White and some Asian American students had reactions ranging from indifferent to hostile. Conversely, she found that minority students "called for programmes [*sic*] and public conversations on intolerance and discrimination" (p. 25). The differences in reactions show how racial tensions form on campus. Multiple groups of students do not care or are against actively engaging with minority students while minority students want to engage and have meaningful conversations.

In a qualitative case study conducted on the campus of a rural, public PWI, Ottley and Ellis (2019) found that Black male students felt like outsiders because of the small number of Black male students on campus and were negatively affected by the lack of Black male role models who were faculty and staff members or graduates of the university. Participants in the study also reported feeling like the "odd men on campus" (Ottley & Ellis, 2019, p. 20), making connecting to the White students difficult. In Black and Bimper's (2020) qualitative case study, a participant reported that there were not enough faculty or staff members at his historically White institution (HWI) to provide mentorship to all the Black males who needed support. That lack of support extended to social settings as well, as the participant recalled attending events and being the only Black person in attendance. Other participants in the study reported feeling alienated, isolated, and inferior in both classroom and social settings on their HWI campus (Black & Bimper, 2020).

### ***Racism and Microaggressions***

Other factors that have been shown to affect Black male students at PWIs are racism and microaggressions. Although racism cannot be exclusively blamed for Black male students not being retained or persisting to graduation, it does play a central role in the experience of Black

male students at PWIs (Black & Bimper, 2020). Despite the efforts of faculty and staff members and campus administrators, Black male students at HWIs experience racism as a result of the actions of other students and members of the surrounding communities (Black & Bimper, 2020).

Harper (2015) had several participants in his qualitative study report that they experienced microaggressions on their PWI campuses that included the assumptions that they were drug dealers, only on campus because they were athletes, admitted to school through affirmative action, or did not belong at the institution, from low-income, high-crime neighborhoods and were not capable of producing quality academic work all because they were Black males. Most of Harper's participants were high-achieving Black male students who were able to resist the stereotypes and microaggressions they faced through their experiences in campus leadership roles, engagement in student organizations, and by calling out the stereotypes and microaggressions when they occurred. Harper (2015) suggests that Black male students in his study would have to respond less frequently to microaggressions if White students and faculty believed fewer stereotypes and made fewer racially offensive comments. He also states that "consciousness raising and corrective experiences are needed for Whites who, sometimes unintentionally or unknowingly, inflict racial harm on minoritized students at PWIs" (Harper, 2015, p. 670).

Every participant in Black and Bimper's (2020) study reported having negative actions directed toward them because they were Black. They reported feeling marked as different and inferior to other students at their HWI and to the predominantly White community when they were off campus (Black & Bimper, 2020). They also reported feeling isolated and alienated as a result of racist experiences.

Another issue Black male students have to deal with while attending PWIs is stereotype threat, which Steele (1997) defined as:

the social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies. This predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype. (p. 614)

Black male students spend time and effort to avoid conforming to any of the stereotypes that exist about Black men like them being athletes, being admitted to colleges and universities because of affirmative action, and being unintelligent and aggressive. This leads to them constantly trying to prove people wrong by working overtime to avoid behavior stereotypically assigned to Black men. What results is them being psychologically stressed out or feeling immense pressure to prove their intellectual competence or their right to admission (Harper, 2013). Participants in Ottley and Ellis' (2019) study reported feeling judged and marginalized because people stereotyped them as soon as they got on their PWI campus.

Racism and microaggressions targeted toward Black male students on PWI campuses are not just limited to social spaces on campus, but also happen in the classroom. Students of color, including several Black male students, in Harper and Davis' (2016) study reported that their White instructors were often surprised when they made thoughtful comments in class. The students were also routinely accused of cheating if they did well on exams or submitted well-written papers. Harper and Davis (2016) found that students in their study reported that their instructors were insufficiently skilled to teach students from various racial groups and cultural backgrounds. Participants in the same study also reported being disappointed when instructors immediately shut down classroom conversations that created racial tension instead of furthering

the conversations and turning them into teachable moments. This usually left students of color alone to wrestle with their classmate's offensive statements or actions (Harper & Davis, 2016).

### *Academic Performance*

In terms of academic performance, past studies have either focused on the academic deficiency or resilience of Black male students on college campuses (Harper, 2015; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Black male students are the most likely student group to stop attending college before completing their degrees (McClure, 2006). Glenn (2004) cites inadequate preparation for higher education in certain high schools, lack of positive self-esteem, lower SAT scores, and a lack of alternatives to standardized admission tests as reasons why Black male students struggle academically when they get to college.

On the other hand, some studies show that Black male students can overcome academic deficiencies in the right environments. Participants in a qualitative case study by Palmer, et al. (2010) credited their HBCU's racial composition and support from peers, faculty, and role models in helping them to learn and achieve academic success, showing that when Black male students have a support system that includes other Black individuals, they are more likely to succeed academically. Though HBCUs and PWIs do not have the same racial composition, if a support system of Black students, faculty, and staff members can be formed at PWIs, Black male students may be able to succeed at similar rates as those at HBCUs. The high academic achievers who were participants in Harper's (2015) study overcame stereotypes of being uninterested in academics by engaging in student leadership organizations on campus and using their exposure to White faculty and staff members to dispel racially motivated stereotypes. With help and support, Black male students can achieve academic success during their collegiate careers.

### ***Availability of Financial Assistance***

The availability of financial assistance plays an important role in whether students with financial need can attend college or complete degrees once they start school. Wood and Harrison (2014) found that the availability of financial aid was one of the most important factors that Black male students considered when it came to selecting an institution to attend. Palmer et al. (2010) found that seven of their 11 participants faced a lack of financial aid which interfered with their success in school. Other reasons why some Black male students succumb to attrition include unmet financial need, lack of flexibility in tuition payments and scheduling, and having to fully depend on financial aid to cover educational costs because of lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Glenn, 2004).

In a quantitative study by Cabrera, et al. (1992), the results showed that financial aid had a significant total effect on students' persistence through college. Being awarded financial aid allows students to continue their academic pursuits while allowing for social engagement and integration into campus life, which are two areas that impact a student's decision to remain in school or drop out (Cabrera et al., 1992). Participants in the study were able to have more social interactions with their peers because they did not have to work jobs to pay for school. Those who already had jobs were found to put more effort into their jobs. Not having to worry or stress about financing their education allowed the students in the study the freedom to engage in social activities with their peers. It also allowed them to spend more time engaging academically and enhancing their academic performance (Cabrera et al., 1992).

### **Positive Factors Affecting Retention and Graduation Rates**

#### ***Peer and Mentor Support Systems***

One of the strategies that Black male students use to succeed in PWI environments is seeking out peers or faculty and staff members to provide them with various types of support. The literature points out that peer support systems are usually formed with same-race students, while mentors can be of the same or different race (Black & Bimper, 2020; Harper, 2013). Harper (2013) found that participants in his National Black Male Achievement Study took on the roles of institutional agents with the responsibility of educating same-race peers at PWIs, specifically related to navigating the campus racial climate. He termed this education process as peer pedagogies and defines it as:

the methods minoritized students use to teach each other about the racial realities of predominantly White colleges and universities, as well as how to respond most effectively to racism, racial stereotypes, and microaggressions they are likely to encounter in classrooms and elsewhere on campus. (p. 208)

In the study, new students of color reported being approached by older students of color within the first weeks of the new school year to help them get acclimated. Older students of color also sought out same-race peers in residence halls and would deliberately initiate conversations with same-race peers they did not know in classes early in the fall semester (Harper, 2013). The conversations usually served three purposes: to introduce themselves to one of the few other minoritized students on campus; to invite the new student to reach out if any needs arose; and to give the students a warning about potential experiences or feelings that may arise from being Black on campus (Harper, 2013). Additionally, older students used these racial socialization efforts to help to recruit new members to join Black/ethnic student organizations. Black and Bimper (2020) also found that their participants formed personal support networks with other Black male students on campus in order to successfully navigate the campus organizations and

systems that were not designed to help them. The participants benefited from Harper's (2013) peer pedagogies as they taught each other how to survive on PWI campuses. These strategies ultimately helped them persist toward graduation.

In a qualitative study done by Brooms and Davis (2017) on three HWI campuses, it was found that Black male students who participated in the study cited peer-to-peer bonding with other Black male students on campus and mentoring from Black faculty members as critical components of their college experience that helped them persist toward graduation. Bonding with their Black male peers provided them with an important social network that helped to develop and reaffirm their micro-community on campus (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Additionally, the participants said that their relationships with their African American professors were critical to their development inside and outside the classroom. Being mentored by the Black faculty members on campus helped the participants not only navigate campus life more successfully but also helped in preparing them for life after college. According to Harper (2013), because of their limited numbers on campus and frequent encounters with racism, minoritized students need mentors who can advocate for them and validate their competence and racialized experiences. When students of color have mentors and advocates who share racial and ethnic similarities, those students will be more likely to be engaged on campus and succeed academically.

### ***Retention Initiatives***

Retention initiatives geared toward Black Male students have been found to be successful at increasing retention and graduation rates on college campuses (Druery & Brooms, 2019; Ottley & Ellis, 2019). Additionally, Brooms and Davis (2017) found that male-centered, institution-based programs helped in developing a peer community on campus for Black male students. Participants in Ottley and Ellis' (2019) qualitative case study reported feeling supported

and motivated to work harder as a result of partaking in the Black male retention initiative on their campus. The initiative, called the Successful M.A.L.E. (Men Achieving through Leadership and Engagement) Initiative, focused on the development, retention, and graduation of Black male students on the campus of a Midwestern PWI. Participants and program facilitators met on a monthly basis to chat about the needs and interests of the participants. Each participant was also assigned a professional mentor and a graduate peer mentor to provide the participants with support throughout their college careers. The initiative was the second of its kind on that campus. The first one failed due to a lack of institutional support and buy-in from campus administrators, but the second one was publicly supported by the university president and various campus departments and built into the fabric of the institution (Ottley & Ellis, 2019). The researchers concluded by saying that retention initiatives are spaces where Black male students are “influenced to embrace the culture of the institution, join student organizations, partner with other peers, and develop positive, working relationships with faculty” (Ottley & Ellis, 2019, p. 29).

Black and Bimper (2020) found that participants leaned heavily on a “1<sup>st</sup> Year” program that was aimed at incoming freshmen and undergraduate students who have been historically the least likely to persist or graduate in six years. The program aimed to increase retention and graduation rates by helping students adjust to the college experience. Open to students of all races and ethnicities, participants were grouped and housed by academic interest, enrolled in at least one class together, and formally supported through programming in the residence halls. Additionally, most first-year students in the program continued participation during their sophomore year to serve as mentors to the new students in the program (Black & Bimper, 2020).

Brooms (2018) completed a qualitative study on the engagement and experiences of a Black Male Initiative (BMI) program and found that the program played a vital role in giving students access to sociocultural capital while building students up and making them feel more at home on campus. The main ways that Brooms found the BMI program to support sociocultural capital were creating a home-like environment for participants, providing access to much-needed support, including academic support and motivation, and enhancing their sense of self as well as their collective identities. Brooms (2018) asserted that BMI programs like the one in his study served a very important role in supporting the retention and persistence efforts of Black male students and addressed their holistic needs while attending college.

### ***Campus Leadership Experiences***

Studies show that when Black male students participated in retention initiatives that involved student leadership roles, they were more engaged and persistent than their uninvolved peers (Barker & Avery, 2012; Druery & Brooms, 2019). In their qualitative studies, both Barker and Avery (2012) and Druery and Brooms (2019) found that Black male retention initiatives at PWIs that allowed members to serve in leadership roles on campus helped those members to persist to graduation. Participating in leadership initiatives created specifically for Black male students allowed those students to network and form connections with other Black individuals on campus that would not have been possible without the initiatives (Barker & Avery, 2012). Black male leadership initiatives have also been found to create a culturally enriching environment that positively contributes to Black male students' overall college experience (Druery & Brooms, 2019). Participating in Black male leadership initiatives also created a support network for members and enhanced their personal development (Druery & Brooms, 2019).

### **Potential Solutions for Improving Retention and Graduation Rates**

### *Summer Bridge Programs*

Summer bridge programs can be viewed as a means to remedy inadequate academic preparation for college or as a means of maintaining academic momentum (Douglass & Attewell, 2014). The programs that address inadequate academic preparation usually review basic math, writing, and reading skills, while the ones geared toward maintaining academic momentum prepare students who may have failed entrance tests and have been recommended for remedial classes. In reference to the latter, summer bridge programs give intensive instruction and are followed by the students retaking the skills or placement tests, which, if passed, allows students to avoid spending time taking remedial courses (Douglass & Attewell, 2014).

Bir and Myrick's (2015) quantitative study found that Black male and female students who participated in an educational summer bridge program immediately prior to the start of the fall semester of their freshman year showed greater retention, higher grade point averages (GPAs), and higher graduation rates than students who did not participate in the program. The students participating in the program had significantly lower academic profiles than non-participants. When separated by gender, the findings showed that the participating Black male students had slightly higher retention rates than Black male students who did not participate in the bridge program (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Overall, the findings determined that the bridge program "made a difference to all students, male and female, whether by actually boosting performance above better-prepared peers or by leveling the playing field between the underprepared and the better-prepared students" (Bir & Myrick, 2015, p. 26).

Results from a quantitative study by Douglass and Attewell (2014) showed that bridge programs between high school and college have statistically significant positive effects on degree completion and that bridge programs seemed to work best for students who were at a higher risk

of not completing college. It is also suggested that institutions should consider increasing the number of incoming freshmen who enroll in bridge programs as a way to increase graduation rates (Douglass & Attewell, 2014). With just 8% of undergraduate students participating in summer bridge programs at the time of Douglass and Attewell's study, these programs could be a potentially untapped resource to increase the retention and graduation rates of all students. Garibaldi (2007) specifically mentioned the success that the Upward Bound and Talent Search programs had on students enrolling in college, especially students from low-income households. In the 1960s and 1970s, these and other federally funded summer and weekend pre-college programs significantly increased the number of African American students who attended college.

One of the additional benefits of bridge programs is the same-race peer support Black male students receive while participating in the programs. Participants in Harper's (2013) study reported that the Black upperclassmen who worked for the bridge programs used their influence in the programs to teach incoming male students about the racial realities on campus. The information was shared formally via panels and other organized discussions and in informal settings like lunch conversations. The upperclassmen shared stories of overt and covert racism experienced on campus, advised program participants on how to respond to potential racial situations, and gave them insight about same-race faculty and staff members who could help them deal with the racial incidents that could occur (Harper, 2013).

### ***Changes to Campus Climate***

As previously mentioned, campus climate refers to "the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential" (Ranking & Reason, 2008, p. 264). A study completed by the University of California Regents Study Group in 2013 concluded that diversity and

inclusion efforts are incomplete if they do not fully address campus climate (University of California, 2013). With that in mind, the literature points to several actions that can be taken to change and improve a campus climate that does not fully support all of its constituents (Black & Bimper, 2020; Fortier, 2013; Harper & Davis, 2016; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Leadley & Ryan, 2015; Robertson & Mason, 2008).

Robertson and Mason (2008) recommended the following ideas as ways to increase the retention rates of Black male students at PWIs: implementing summer bridge and other pre-college programs that help students adjust to campus life; recruiting African American faculty and staff members and creating social adjustment programs that address the unique needs of African Americans in PWI settings; and adding courses to the core curriculum that speak to the needs of “Black people throughout the Diaspora” (p. 84). These classes could serve to increase the self-esteem and educational achievement of Black male students, showing that they are as capable as their White counterparts.

Black and Bimper (2020) found that the student center for African Americans was the resource officially sponsored by the university that participants in their study used most frequently. Given the pseudonym “Hub”, the center was sponsored by student affairs and housed in the student center. Participants mentioned that the Hub was a safe space on campus where they could have discussions with their peers and Hub staff members about racist experiences they had on and off campus. Staff members then provided them with information on reporting racist incidents and made them aware of the formal reporting process on campus (Black & Bimper, 2020). This study shows the importance of having a space on campus where minoritized students on campus can claim as their own and feel free to discuss hard topics or negative campus experiences.

Harper and Davis (2016) identified several actions that can be taken to reduce racism in the classroom to give minoritized students better academic experiences at PWIs. The ones pertinent to this study include faculty members recognizing their own implicit biases and correcting their racial illiteracy, not being surprised when Black male students write well, meaningfully integrating diverse cultures and peoples into the curriculum, and responsibly addressing racial tensions when they arise in the classroom. People have been socialized to view individuals from other racial backgrounds as different, resulting in implicit biases of which they may not be aware (Harper & Davis, 2016). To correct implicit biases, individuals who hold them must first acknowledge the biases and then pursue racial literacy. Participants in Harper and Davis' (2016) study consistently reported examples of White professors being surprised when the participants made thoughtful comments in class, submitted well-written papers, and performed well on exams. The stereotype that all Black male students are poor academic performers is harmful and has no place in the classroom. Participants also reported being "tired of reading one-dimensional literature that excludes their cultural histories and fails to acknowledge their humanity" (Harper & Davis, 2016, p. 33). Finally, participants in the study were disappointed when professors shut down tense racial conversations in the classroom instead of using them as teachable moments that White students could learn from. Missing out on opportunities to have meaningful conversations around race will aid in racism persisting in the classroom and on campus.

Additional actions that can be taken to improve campus climate include ones presented by Leadley and Ryan (2015). In a report about diversity work done at the University of Washington Bothell/Cascadia College Library, the authors reviewed practical applications to increase equity, diversity, and social justice on campuses. Some of those items included

integrating language about diversity into major documents like strategic plans and other guiding documents and participating in workshops and lunch and learning on topics like cultural awareness, intersectionality, microaggressions, interrupting, generational poverty, and race in higher education (Leadley & Ryan, 2015). Harper and Kuykendall (2012) listed eight standards to guide institutional efforts to improve the achievement of Black male students, and ultimately, the campus climate. The standards are: being transparent with inequities and using data to guide institutional activities; engaging Black male students as meaningful collaborators in designing, implementing, and assessing campus initiatives; developing a collaboratively written strategy document that guides campus actions; prioritizing learning, academic achievement, student development and improved degree attainment rates over social programming; grounding retention and improvement initiatives in published research on college men and Black male students; gaining insights from Black male achievers on how to enhance campus efforts; having honest conversations about racism and its harmful effects on Black male student outcomes; and holding institutional agents on all levels accountable for improving Black male students' retention, academic success, engagement, and graduation rates (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012).

Fortier's (2013) conclusions, presented here in their entirety, perfectly summed up the urgent need for campus faculty, staff, and administrators to actively work on enhancing campus climates at PWIs. She stated:

I conclude that we must create a campus environment in which all students have opportunities to learn from interracial experiences. These experiences are too important to be left as an option. Faculty in all classes should require problem-solving by diverse groups of students, and students themselves should have more opportunities, and perhaps impetus, to pursue diverse extra-curricular activities. My students' findings have echoed

my longstanding belief in the urgent need of TWIs to provide more intentional environments for diversity experiences. Current programming and coursework at most TWIs allow far too many students to avoid issues of race and to remain in racially homogeneous comfort zones. As both a faculty member and former administrator, I have come to believe that White students' unconscious domination of the spaces, events, and traditions at TWIs is at the root of the discomfort that under-represented students experience. Until campus leaders recognise [*sic*] the urgent need to confront campus racial climate disparities through mandatory educational experiences that require all students to confront privilege, the problems that [my students] experienced will continue to exist. And there is no question that discomfort on campus will continue to affect both the graduation rates of under-represented students as well as their willingness to attend graduate school and pursue an academic career. (pp. 36-37)

### **Summary of the Literature**

The existing literature shows that there are several factors, both negative and positive, that affect the retention and graduation rates of Black male students at PWIs. It also shows there are actions that can be taken to improve those rates and the overall on-campus experience of Black male students at PWIs. One conclusion that can be drawn from the literature is that if campus climate issues are addressed, most of the other negative factors affecting the retention and graduation rates of Black male students at PWIs will be resolved. In whatever ways PWIs choose to address the issues they face with retaining and graduating Black male students, the efforts they embark on need to include measures that support Black male students individually and change campus systems to provide collective support for the Black male population on campus.

The following chapter presents the current study's research methodology and methods. It outlines the research problem, purpose, and questions and details the research methodology and methods and the researcher's positionality.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

#### Introduction

The research design for the current study is a qualitative case study that collected data via a focus group interview. Druery and Brooms' (2019) research design provided a good basis for the current study with their qualitative case study that explored the experiences of Black male students who participated in a Black male initiative program at a mid-sized predominantly White institution (PWI). Druery and Brooms collected data in three phases, including surveys of 25 students, one-on-one interviews with 21 students, and a focus group interview with five students. Similarly, Ottley and Ellis' (2019) qualitative case study explored perceptions of a retention initiative designed to increase the retention and academic achievement of Black male students. They conducted 12 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with students and two program administrators to engage participants in discussions around the themes driven by the research. Finally, in a qualitative study by Harper, et. al (2011), the researchers used a semi-structured interview technique during focus group interviews of 52 Black male resident assistants to explore the racialized experiences of those who became actively engaged and assumed leadership positions on campuses where racial diversity is low. On average, seven Black male students participated in each focus group which allowed the participants to have authentic conversations and opportunities for reflection while maintaining focus, order, and direction during the interview (Harper, et. al, 2011).

#### Research Problem, Purpose, and Questions

*Research Problem:* Black male students at Lincoln Prairie University (LPU), a pseudonym, are retained and graduate at lower rates than other student groups on campus.

*Research Purpose:* The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the factors related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus being retained and graduating at lower rates than other student groups and to determine what actions Lincoln Prairie University can take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students.

#### *Research Questions*

1. What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus being retained at lower rates than other student groups?
2. What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus graduating at lower rates than other student groups?
3. What actions can Lincoln Prairie University take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students?

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Qualitative Methods**

This qualitative, action research case study collected data using a focus group interview. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research is “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Additionally, in qualitative research, data collection usually takes place in the participant's setting, data analysis is built from specific to general themes, and the researcher presents his or her meaning of the data in the final report (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This research design was chosen because previous studies that researched similar topics successfully answered their research questions with this design. Additionally, as a novice researcher, a qualitative case study conducted via a focus group interview was a manageable undertaking as opposed to a more

complex qualitative design. Data were collected from participants on LPU's campus, analyzed inductively, and presented in a way that highlights the importance of the problem and situation.

### **Action Research**

According to Herr and Anderson (2015), action research is:

inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community ... It is a reflective process ... [and] is oriented to some action or cycle of actions that organizational or community members have taken, are taking, or wish to take to address a particular problematic situation. (pp. 3-4)

Specifically, the current study is participatory action research. Mertler (2020) noted that the purpose of participatory action research is to “improve the quality of the lives of the individuals who make up organizations, communities, and families. It focuses on empowering individuals and groups to improve their lives and bring about social change” (p. 19). The current study worked perfectly as an action research project because it was completed by a former higher education insider in an attempt to shine light on, and ultimately solve, a problem recently identified by the higher education organization where the study will take place.

### **Specific Research Design**

The specific research design used in this qualitative study was a case study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined case studies as a design inquiry “in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, often a problem, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (p. 14). The data were collected via a focus group interview. Mertler (2020) noted that focus groups are especially useful because people often are more comfortable talking in a small group, as opposed to individually. Additionally, “interactions among the focus group participants may be

extremely informative because of the tendency for people to feed off of others' comments" (Mertler, 2020, p. 136).

## **Summary**

Using a qualitative case study research design allowed for sufficient analysis of the problem of Black male students at LPU being retained and graduating at lower rates than other student groups on campus. This researcher was able to hear directly from a portion of the affected student population and discovered themes that are supported by past research. There is a plethora of available research on the retention of Black male students at PWIs, but since this issue was recently recognized as a problem at LPU, the findings of this study provide the administration at LPU a starting point to remedy the problem.

## **Research Methods**

### **Research Context**

#### ***Setting***

The current study was conducted at LPU, a private PWI in the Midwest, with an undergraduate population of just under 5,000 students. Sixty-seven percent of the student population is White, while Black students make up just 8% undergraduate population. Hispanic and Asian students represent 13% and 4% of the population, respectively.

#### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were six current and former Black male LPU students. The six participants self-identified as Black during the recruitment process and included two juniors, one graduate student, and three recent graduates. Of the six participants who took part in a one-hour focus group interview, four were student-athletes, two were non-athletes, and two were members of a Black fraternity on campus. One of the fraternity members was also the LPU

Student Government Association (SGA) president as a senior. The student-athletes were members of the football, swimming, and diving programs at LPU. A participant profile table that includes demographic and self-reported academic information is presented in Table 1, below.

Table 1

*Participant Profiles*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Academic Classification</b>	<b>Gender Age</b>	<b>Racial Self-Identification</b>	<b>Academic Profile</b>	<b>Academic Major</b>	<b>Campus Involvement</b>
1	May 2021 graduate	Male 23	Black	3.8 GPA	Marketing	SGA President/ Fraternity
2	May 2022 graduate	Male 22	Black	3.6 GPA	Sports Communications	Diving Team
3	Junior	Male 19	Black	4.0 GPA	Sports Communications	Football Team
4	May 2022 graduate	Male 22	Black	3.5 GPA	Accounting	Fraternity
5	Junior	Male 20	Black	3.9 GPA	Sports Management	Football Team
6	Graduate student	Male 23	Black/Mixed	3.5 GPA	Retail Merchandising	Football Team

*Note.* Participant 5 transferred from LPU in Spring 2022 after his sophomore year.

*Participant Recruitment and Selection*

The LPU Multicultural Office sent the recruitment email to seek volunteers to participate in a focus group for this study. The email instructed interested students to email the student principal investigator (SPI), Karen M. Carty, if they were interested in participating in the study. Recruitment ended once six Black male students volunteered to participate. Volunteers then received focus group information and a consent form. They returned their electronically signed consent forms to the SPI. The electronically signed consent forms then were stored on a password-protected laptop with a biometric lock and backed up on an encrypted, password-protected external hard drive. If the participants had questions about the consent form, they were instructed to reach out to the SPI or the Co-PI, Dr. Patricia Nugent. The consent form clearly stated that participation in the focus group was voluntary and that if participants felt

uncomfortable at any time, they did not have to continue to participate in the focus group. Participants were also informed that pseudonyms would be used throughout the data collection, data analysis, and reporting phases.

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected using an hour-long focus group interview that was held on Google Meet and recorded. The Google Meet recording captured audiovisual footage of the focus group interview. During the recording, the transcription service Otter was recording and simultaneously transcribing the audio. At the conclusion of the interview, the video file was downloaded and saved on a laptop with a biometric lock and that has password protection. The Otter transcription was converted to a Google document and stored on the same laptop. Additionally, both items were backed up on an encrypted, password-protected external hard drive.

### ***Strategies/Instruments***

The focus group interview used nine open-ended questions that were prepared in advance of the focus group. Two hours were allotted for the focus group to take place, which allowed for ample discussion for each question. The nine questions are listed in the Appendix.

### ***Timeline***

The data collection process began in January 2022 when the recruitment email was sent to the students by LPU's Multicultural Office. No one responded to the first email; so, the Multicultural Office sent another email at the end of March. Two participants responded to the March email. A third email was sent in April. The required number of participants signed up by the last week of April 2022. Students who agreed to participate in the study, immediately received an email with the focus group information and consent form from the SPI that the

participants returned via email prior to the focus group. During the first week of May 2022, the SPI coordinated the focus group date after getting input from the participants about their availability. On June 20, 2022, a week before the focus group took place, the SPI sent a reminder email with the focus group information and consent form. The focus group interview took place on June 27, 2022, and lasted one hour. The data analysis process began at the conclusion of the interview.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Strategies/Procedures***

Creswell and Creswell (2018) presented the following steps for analyzing qualitative data: “collecting raw data, organizing and preparing data for analysis, reading through all the data, coding the data, extracting themes and writing descriptions, interrelating themes and descriptions and interpreting the meaning of themes and descriptions” (p. 194). To ensure consistency in interpretation, data were analyzed exclusively by the SPI. The process started with the SPI watching the recording of the interview and taking notes on the commentary. Then the transcription generated by Otter was compared to the recording to ensure the words captured were accurate. Edits to the transcription were made to enhance its accuracy.

The data were then inductively coded using four first-cycle coding types: descriptive, process, in vivo, and emotion coding. Second-cycle coding involved noting patterns, clustering, and making metaphors to help generate meaning from the codes. According to Miles et al. (2020), these meaning-generation tactics aim to integrate diverse pieces of data to “see what goes with what” (p. 274). These three tactics helped to detect recurrences and topics, identified which codes fit together, and helped relate the data to terminology that used descriptive imagery to convey information and emotions.

A preliminary report of the findings was sent to the participants to get their feedback and for them to confirm that the findings accurately represented the information they provided during the focus group interview. Miles et al. (2020) noted getting feedback from participants, or member checking, is one of the most logical sources of corroboration and a good way to confirm findings.

### ***Timeline***

Data analysis began as soon as the focus group ended in June 2022. The process continued throughout the summer and fall and was completed by December 30, 2022.

### **Researcher Positionality**

This researcher is a former staff member at an institution similar to LPU, which makes her an outsider who worked in a very similar setting. According to Herr and Anderson (2015), organizational insiders or outsiders collaborating with insiders contribute to the organizational knowledge base, improved practices, and organizational transformation. One area this researcher paid close attention to during the data collection process was keeping her biases in check during the focus group to ensure that she did not use her prior knowledge of and experience with PWI campus climates to ask leading follow-up questions. Questions had to be fair and free of bias so that one-sided questions were not asked including skewed questions that were looking for specific answers or tried to prove specific things. Having been a part of a similar campus community, this researcher knew the potential problem areas and the things the participants could have struggled with. Also, as a former Black female staff member at a PWI, she experienced some of the same factors that hinder Black male students on campus. Therefore, it was imperative to keep her experiences and feelings out of the research as much as possible. The need to create a more supportive campus environment for LPU's Black male students kept the

researcher on the right track, ensuring that the research was valid and would lead to solutions to correct the problem that Black male students face in terms of low retention and graduation rates.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative case study completed at Lincoln Prairie University (LPU) in June 2022. The study used a focus group interview to understand the factors related to Black male students on LPU's campus being retained and graduating at lower rates than other student groups and to determine what actions LPU can take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students. Three research questions guided the data collection process:

1. What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus being retained at lower rates than other student groups?
2. What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus graduating at lower rates than other student groups?
3. What actions can Lincoln Prairie University take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students?

Once collected, the data were inductively analyzed, coded, themed, and validated by member checking, which Miles et al. (2020) noted as the most logical source of corroboration and a good way to confirm findings. Overall, the participants had a variety of experiences related to them being Black on LPU's campus, but none that made them consider leaving school or hindered them from graduation. Participant 5 did transfer from LPU after his sophomore year, but it was strictly related to his lack of playing time on the football team and not because of any racially related or campus climate factors.

Some participants recounted instances of feeling isolated in social and academic situations and shared examples of experiencing racism and microaggressions on campus. The student-athletes reported experiencing stereotypes in the classroom when they participated in discussions. However, most of them had positive academic experiences and were grateful for the peer and mentor support systems they had on campus. To help navigate the various issues they faced as Black men on campus, all six participants took refuge in formal and informal campus activities like organized campus events or spontaneous meetups on and off campus that included other Black LPU students and offered safe spaces for them. They also provided suggestions on the things they thought LPU could do to better serve its Black students and help them to graduate, including hiring more diverse employees on campus and encouraging open conversations around racial issues.

## **Findings**

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question focused on retention and had four sub-questions that asked about positive and negative social experiences on campus and reasons why any of the participants considered leaving LPU after the Spring 2022 semester. The complete list of research questions and sub-questions can be found in the Appendix. The three themes extracted from the data in relation to research question 1 were feelings of isolation, experiencing racism and microaggressions, and peer and mentor support systems. Participants reported feeling alone on campus in certain social and academic settings because they were usually the only Black person in the room. They also reported experiencing varying levels of racism and microaggressions while navigating life on campus. Having peer and mentor support systems helped them traverse the sometimes-unfriendly campus climate.

### ***Feelings of Isolation***

Participant 4 mentioned a time when he felt isolated when trying to mingle at a social gathering off campus.

I went out to the bars with some of my friends. We ran into some White frats, and my friends introduced me as being in a frat. They asked, “Which one are you a part of?” And then I mentioned it, and they were like, “Oh, you’re part of the Black one.” They didn’t know much about it. And then they were asking questions, but they weren’t really interested, per se. So, they were just holding a conversation with me when they really didn’t want to. I usually try to maneuver my way out of situations like this and end up not going out often.

Participant 5 started at LPU in Fall 2021 when most schools still had COVID-19 protocols in place. He mentioned that his first semester was tough because “not a lot of people were outside, making it tough to meet new people.” He continued, “You don’t really see a lot of Black males or Black females at a lot of PWIs, but in time I met more people.”

Participant 1 also experienced moments of isolation and detailed an in-class situation where he was singled out and asked to be a representative for the entire Black community.

There was one class that I was in, I was the only Black student in that class. And [the professor] made an effort to make it known that I was the only Black student in the class. The professor would routinely ask questions like, “Well, what do you think this [other Black] person thinks about this?” I thought that was so rude.

### ***Racism and Microaggressions***

Most of the participants had multiple examples of racist interactions and microaggressions that they experienced directly while on campus or heard about from peers.

Participant 2, a recent graduate from the swimming and diving program, gave examples of the stereotypes, racism, and microaggressions he experienced:

As a student-athlete, I would always get that rep that, “Oh, you’re just an athlete, you get everything handed to you. You’re lazy. He has that athlete privilege.” When, when in reality, that wasn’t really the case. I worked really hard for the things that I had, and I worked my butt off to get to where I was. But people always just kind of gave you that stereotype of being a Black athlete, and you’re just here for athletics, and you’re not smart. Sometimes, in the classroom, we’d have certain discussions, and I’d speak my mind, and people would look at me in a different way.

He also talked about the microaggressions and perceived racism within the swimming and diving program.

During meets, we’d go out and cheer on all the swimmers as they competed. But during the diving competition, we noticed that when we were using lots of black athletes, nobody was there cheering for us, and people kind of were just doing their own thing. ... There were situations where our White teammates would see us and just not even acknowledge us or say, “Hey”. It was like, dang, y’all don’t like us? What’s going on? We just felt like we weren’t being included. So that’s kind of why my first year we kind of just had our own little close-knit group [of Black divers].

Participant 5 also dealt with stereotypes of being a Black student-athlete on campus. He said:

There were a couple of instances, especially in my last class last semester, in the spring semester. When we were talking about some stuff in the classroom, people were looking at me differently. Because they wouldn’t expect, you know, a Black male athlete to know

what we're talking about. They just thought I was there just to be there. And just to, you know, pass the class and not really care about what we're learning.

He also talked about listening to his friends talk about bad racial experiences on campus.

Just listening to some of my friends and non-athlete friends talking about their situations, you know, it was just kind of hard. I was lucky enough to be able to not have those situations happen to me. But I felt their pain when they were telling me their situations.

Participant 1, the former SGA president who was also in a Black fraternity, experienced and witnessed a lot of negative encounters based on race while on campus.

I haven't had, like, I would say, direct experiences like someone calling me the n-word. But I know people who have, and I've had experiences like being a part of organizations where we didn't receive equal treatment, equal funding, or equal things because we were a part of Black organizations. And I will say I've been a part of organizations where we experienced issues racially, or we felt that because of our race, we watched other people get the same things that we've offered or pitched for, and our processes were made even more difficult because of who we are. My last year at LPU, we did a protest. It was specifically for the National Panhellenic Council and multicultural Greek organizations on campus. But some of the things that came out of it affected all students of color, mostly. So yeah, we did an actual protest. And that eventually made way for us to get access to like the Multicultural Center for longer hours and just get the things like the NPHC [statues] that are on campus now. We had to really fight for stuff, basically, representation and inclusion on campus, which is stuff that we felt should have already been there, but the fact that we just had to fight for it, in general, is just one thing.

### ***Peer and Mentor Support Systems***

Most of the participants credited formal and informal on-campus peer and mentor support systems with helping them to persist through their educational careers. Participant 5, who started school during the pandemic, did not know any Black students on campus besides his teammates and one of the team managers.

Once I was able to connect with one of the managers on the football program and got to meet his friends, is when I really started to meet a lot of people on campus and make different connections. You know, just seeing a lot more Blacks on campus, was just, you know, amazing because LPU's a PWI. ... But just seeing more and more Black people on campus just like, made me want to meet and get out more.

Similarly, Participant 2 spoke on the importance of being able to rely on his Black peers.

Social events that pertain to Black people kind of helped me find some people that I know I could kick it with and just be able to you know, vent to. My roommate was Black as well. So, he was kind of somebody that I leaned on whenever I was feeling some type of way. So that really helped me.

Participant 3 talked about the built-in support system that being on the football team provided him and the other football players in the focus group which served to shield them from some of the negative experiences other Black male students had on campus.

Being on the team, we do a lot of team bonding things like just going out to eat with each other, and just ... hanging out with each other a lot. Because that's just what it takes to build our chemistry. And that's what our coaches wanted us to do, so I feel like that, that is a reason why [we are shielded from the negative experiences].

Participant 1 had a lot to say about the various peer and mentor support systems that he used as he worked toward graduation.

I will say being a part of student organizations is probably one of the sole reasons why I stayed at LPU. That was just everything for me. It was like a place where I can unpack things and organizations like SGA. And also, just being a part of a fraternity, is like I had people, I had a community that I felt was my family away from home. So being a part of those student organizations is what really helped me throughout my time at LPU.

When asked if he had ever considered leaving LPU, he replied:

I didn't think about leaving ever. I went to a predominately White high school. So, I got the culture shock before I came to LPU, so it wasn't as bad. But that was like completely White. So, when I came to LPU, I had a nice group of people that I can hang out with and kick it with. It made me feel much better, you know, still facing some of the same issues but I felt good that I could be a part of that community that I was in.

Participant 1 also spoke about a staff member from the Multicultural Center, "Nate", who was instrumental in helping many of LPU's Black male students.

Without Nate, I don't think any of us would have stayed there. Nate was just such a strong, not only male, but also male and Black figure who supported us, like, individually, and there's hundreds of Black people that can say the same thing about Nate.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question focused on persisting to graduation and included sub-questions that asked about overall academic experiences, specific positive and negative academic encounters and potential hindrances to graduating from LPU. The three themes that arose from the data analysis were the availability of financial assistance and negative and positive academic experiences. Participants talked about how financial assistance played a role in selecting to

attend LPU. They also discussed positive and negative experiences they had in the classroom. Despite some of the negative academic experiences faced by the one current LPU student (Participant 3), he did not foresee anything hindering him from graduating on time.

### ***Financial Assistance***

When asked why they chose LPU, all six participants mentioned some form of financial assistance. LPU either offered them the “best financial package” or an “athletic scholarship”. Table 2 below includes the reasons the participants listed for attending LPU which include the two aforementioned reasons, “being close to home”, participating in college athletics”, and “small school size”.

Table 2

#### *Reasons for attending LPU*

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Best Financial Package</b>	<b>Close to Home</b>	<b>Participate in Athletics</b>	<b>Full Athletic Scholarship</b>	<b>Small School Size</b>
1	X	X			
2	X	X	X		
3		X		X	
4	X				
5		X		X	
6			X	X	X

Participants 1, 2, 4, and 6 were all able to earn their undergraduate degrees because of the financial assistance packages they had at LPU. Participant 3 is on a full athletic scholarship and can keep it for the remainder of his undergraduate career as long as he maintains satisfactory grades. While Participant 5 attended LPU, he was also on a full athletic scholarship.

### ***Positive Academic Experiences***

Participants recounted a few times they had positive experiences in the classroom as Black men. Participant 5, a former member of the LPU football team, spoke of how

understanding and helpful his LPU professors were and his former teammate, Participant 3 agreed.

I can say that the professors were very understanding, you know, they weren't just blowing us off because we're Black. They were actually taking time to sit down and help, especially as a Black male athlete at LPU. They were able to, like sit down, you know, be manageable with us. And they just wouldn't give up on us. They would push us. We were pushed. I know, my professors pushed me very well. And I know that the professors at LPU are pushing the guys there. They were just so understanding and so like, supportive of the Black athletes.

Participant 1 specifically recalled the professors who treated him well and said:

I remember the teachers who I felt like actually cared about me. ... There were certain teachers that I can name like, instantly, just because I remember how they treated me as a student. ... The ones that [cared about me] made an effort to make sure that I knew that they cared. Also, [they] didn't treat me differently. ... So, I would say that was my experience. I just, I can remember everyone who cared, because most, pretty much all of those people that I remember, weren't Black, or they weren't the same race as me. And then obviously, I had like one Black professor who was obviously related to a lot [by the other Black students].

### ***Negative Academic Experiences***

Most of the participants mentioned having negative experiences in classroom settings. As previously mentioned, Participants 2 and 5 talked about in-class experiences where they were looked at differently because they were not expected to know what they were talking about because they were Black athletes. Participant 1, who mentioned being treated well by some of

his professors, had an overwhelming feeling that the rest of his professors did not care about him as a student.

In the majority, it was like, they didn't care [about me]. ... The protests really helped us uncover a lot of different things like there's a lack of representation of all different types of races and ethnicities on campus for students. So, I felt like, most teachers probably didn't care as much about me as a student.

Participant 4 recounted his experiences of being called on in class in what he felt was an abnormal amount and forced to participate in class on days when he did not feel like participating.

It seemed like in all my classes, they'll call me an abnormal amount. Let's say if they call on everybody, like maybe once, like, every once in a while, it's like I got called on every class. It's like, my name is always in their mouth. And I was like, "Why am I getting called so often?" It forced me to participate even on days I might not want to participate. I remember one time, I moved from the front of the class, all the way to the back. And she still found some way to like, have me included in the conversation, where my actions clearly demonstrated that I didn't want to be active in class. I just showed up for the attendance points. Then once, I'm in my psych class, I happened to sit in the back again. And the teacher said, "Hey, boy in the back with the pink hoodie on", and I was just wondering why all of a sudden he called me out. It was because I wasn't really, I guess he was like, I wasn't engaged enough for him. And I looked around the class, I'm talking like, there's people literally with headphones in, computer up shopping, but you call me when I'm in the back. Neither one of my computers [was] open. I'm like, it just felt weird.

The final negative academic experience the participants collectively mentioned was bad advising experiences. They stated that the bad encounters they had with academic advisors were not necessarily related to race but seemed to be more related to the inability of the academic advisors to properly advise students. Participant 1 was the first to mention the poor academic advising experiences he had:

I had to go to the head of the department just to make sure that I would graduate on time because my advisor wasn't doing their part. And I had to switch advisors at the beginning of my college career because my advisor just wasn't doing it. So, the fact that I had to advocate for myself, and I speak from experience, a bunch of people say the same thing; to advocate more for yourself, just to make sure you even graduate on time.

Participant 4 gave a detailed account of his academic advising experience which included him having to eventually switch advisors because he was being misadvised.

My first advisor was horrible. Like, he was a great teacher, like, when I finally had him as a teacher, he was a great teacher. He knew what he's talking about. ... But in terms of him as an advisor, he was horrible. ... There'll be times when I'll send him a schedule. And then he was like, "Oh wait, I don't think you should take these classes", and he'll recommend classes to exchange them with. Then I'll have to go through them. Like, I've taken literally three of your four options, so it's kind of only one left for me. ... When I had my meetings, he didn't really educate me, and I will actually go out there and ask some questions but then he still [would not] fill me in like how he was supposed to. It took me to get a new advisor in my junior year that really sat down and was like, "Okay, this is what you need to do". ... He had me take 20 credits my fall semester and 18 my spring to even get out of there and he was like, "If you really want to get out here, you

got to do this. You're going to have to take classes outside of LPU, too. You have to go to the board to appeal [to take that many classes]". ... And he really sat down and worked with me. So, I'm like, there's a hot and cold when it comes to LPU's advising and it's kind of like the luck of the draw.

### **Research Question 3**

The final research question asked participants what they thought LPU could do to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male student population. The three main themes obtained from the data for this research question were increasing campus employee diversity, encouraging open and honest conversations around race, and making better use of campus event promotional tools to promote Black events. Some participants mentioned LPU's need to recruit and retain more diverse employees who would be able to better relate to students of color and Black students in particular. One participant talked about how beneficial it was to have an open conversation with his coaches and teammates about racial issues among the team after the murder of George Floyd. Finally, two participants mentioned ways that campus promotional tools could be used to better promote Black events.

#### ***Increasing Campus Employee Diversity***

Participants felt that the university administration could do a better job of hiring more diverse faculty and staff members to increase diversity in the classroom and across campus. Participant 1 talked more about "Nate", a staff member from the Multicultural Center, whom many students looked up to, and concluded his comments by talking about changes in campus leadership that may help things to improve at LPU.

[We need] someone that can be there to support, not only just on a social and emotional level, like in the way that Nate did, but also like on the academic level, you know, people

representation, so whether that's the mental health department at LPU or more diversity amongst professors. ... Just more representation, more inclusion, and more support in all aspects of LPU, whether that's academia, social, emotional, diversity and inclusion, mental health, or anywhere where that can be a representation of support in diversity, that will be very beneficial. ... One other thing that I think LPU should consider is that the leadership is important. People who are in charge of so many things have been there a long time. Maybe in some of them, I think maybe, they can be a little complacent. I just feel like when [the current president] came to LPU, he looked at all students and not just a particular group of students. So, like when he came there, so many different things changed for the better, specifically for the African American community and I felt like he took actual steps, he listened to us, understood us, and took actual steps. ... There are people in leadership, probably not all of them, who don't want to see Black students succeed. I think every person in education because I work in education, has to look at all students and [see] how you can benefit each student the best you can. I think if that was sort of implemented internally amongst every part of the university, things may get better and that may mean changes of different people in leadership positions at LPU.

### ***Open Conversations about Race***

Participant 2, the diving student-athlete, talked about the time when his entire team and all of his coaches had a Google Hangouts meeting to discuss the racial tension on the team and in the country that resulted from the public murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

[Things on the team] all kind of changed after COVID and 2020. We brought awareness to, you know, some of the microaggressions that happened on the team. And we had a whole discussion on Google Hangouts with the team. We just kind of expressed our

voices. And I guess, people didn't really see things from our perspective, because, you know, they were the majority, and they didn't really think about some of these things. But I will say that the team dynamic has changed a lot since I first joined and some of those microaggressions that, you know, I experienced when I first arrived at LPU no longer are happening. So, I'm glad that I was able to be a voice to the community and help out for the people who are going to be coming behind me. ... Having that open discussion with the team, and just expressing [our feelings about the microaggressions we experienced] with some of the other athletes that also are no longer there right now, but, you know, that kind of helped change the dynamic and, you know, help our other counterparts realize that we weren't feeling included.

### ***Campus Event Promotions***

Participants 5 and 6 mentioned two aspects of promoting Black campus events that can be improved. Participant 5 wanted to see the university do a better job of marketing events for Black students.

One thing [that can be improved] is just being able to promote Black activities. Like you know, if a Black event is going on, have them push it out more to the students and not just like the Black community. ... I felt like spring semester last year, the only way you would hear about any of the Black events was through other Black students and I think that it should be able to be pushed out to everybody. Not just, you know, not just the Black community. [They] just have to support, to push out that information so more people can come and just understand the Black community that's at LPU and just understand everything that's offered there.

Participant 4 also commented on how events for Black students were promoted but approached it from a different perspective.

One thing that I can talk about ... [in relation to] the Black activities not being well projected and publicized is that it usually comes down to a lack of knowledge of how to do so. People don't know that the [student newspaper] and there's an email that goes out, that will project your events out to the whole LPU student base. I know I have fell [sic] victim to it myself, by only promoting through social media like Snapchat and Instagram which is basically just our small group of Black students who followed us. But if we use our resources such as the [student newspaper] and everything, you will reach out further to the White community. ... It's a process and I feel like if we use our resources a little bit better as organizations, we might get some other success, so I really can't blame LPU completely for that situation of [events] not being well publicized.

## **Discussion**

### **Research Questions 1 and 2**

#### *Synthesis of Themes*

The sub-themes extracted from the data related to research questions 1 and 2 (feelings of isolation, racism and microaggressions, peer and mentor support systems, financial assistance, and positive and negative academic experiences) can be synthesized into the overarching theme of understanding the campus climate. Rankin and Reason (2008) defined campus climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential” (p. 264). Students have been shown to succeed in campus climates that are supportive, welcoming and can provide

safe spaces for students to grow and learn. The growth and development of students are hindered when they are a part of campus environments that are toxic, unwelcoming, and unsafe.

### *Connections to the Literature*

The experiences Participants 1, 4, and 5 had with feeling isolated as Black men on campus is what Harper et al. (2011) termed “onlyness” which is defined as “the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group” (p. 190). Feeling isolated may have negative effects on the academic performance and social comfort of students, which can cause them to leave school before graduating (Fortier, 2013). The experiences involving racism and microaggressions that Participants 1, 2, and 5 mentioned closely mirror those in Harper’s (2015) study. Harper’s participants had to deal with microaggressions that stemmed from stereotypes of Black men, including that they were only on campus because they were athletes, and they were incapable of being high academic achievers simply because they were Black males. Harper and Davis (2016) also found that their participants had White instructors who were surprised when Black male students made thoughtful or insightful comments in class, showing that there can be several sources on microaggressions for Black male students to deal with on PWI campuses.

Several studies have shown that having peer and mentor support systems for Black male students on PWI campuses help them to navigate campus life easier, persist to graduation, and achieve higher levels of academic and social success (Black & Bimper, 2020; Harper, 2013; Brooms & Davis, 2017). Participants 1, 2, and 5 made it clear that their connections to Black peers and mentors on campus made their campus experiences better and helped them to persist from semester to semester and to graduation.

When Black male students have negative academic experiences, they are less likely to do well in school. The availability of financial assistance is a major determining factor in which schools students can attend. Wood and Harrison (2014) found that one of the most important factors Black males considered when choosing a college is the availability of financial assistance. The six participants in this study reinforced Wood and Harrison's findings as each of the six cited the financial packages and scholarships offered by LPU as the main reasons for their attendance. As it relates to academic experiences, Brooms and Davis (2017) have shown that positive academic experiences can help Black male students to excel academically, while the study by Harper and Hurtado (2007) showed the opposite.

### **Research Question 3**

#### ***Synthesis of Themes***

The themes extracted from the data related to research question 3 (increasing campus employee diversity, having open and honest conversations about race, and promoting campus events) can be synthesized into the theme of comprehensive campus improvement. Several areas on LPU's campus need to be improved if Black male students are to feel comfortable and supported enough to be retained and to graduate from LPU.

#### ***Connections to the Literature***

The need for LPU to increase the diversity of its employees, including administrators, faculty, and staff was voiced clearly by Participant 1. Harper (2013) noted that minoritized students need mentors and advocates on campus who share racial and ethnic similarities with their students. Students are more likely to be engaged on campus and achieve academic success when they have access to mentors and advocates to whom they can relate. Participant 2's success with improving the racial climate on his team after having an open and honest conversation

directly reflects Harper and Kuykendall's (2012) suggestion of having honest conversations about racism's harmful effects on Black male student outcomes. Finally, if improvements are to be made to the way Black events are shared and promoted across campus, Black students, campus administrators, faculty, and staff members all need to play a part in ensuring proper promotion. Harper and Kuykendall (2012) suggested that institutional agents on all levels need to be held accountable for improving the engagement of Black male students on PWI campuses.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings of this qualitative case study, the themes that emerged during the data analysis process, and connections of the themes to existing literature. The findings point to the importance of fully supporting the Black male students on campus in the ways they need to be supported which include making them feel heard, seen, and included on campus; limiting racism and microaggressions; increasing diversity among university employees; creating an environment where honest conversations about race can take place; and forming a campus climate that inspires Black male students to excel. The following chapter will present concluding thoughts, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative action research case study used a focus group interview to understand the factors related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's (LPU) campus being retained and graduating at lower rates than other student groups and to determine what actions LPU can take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students. The study included six participants and was guided by three research questions:

1. What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus being retained at lower rates than other student groups?
2. What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus graduating at lower rates than other student groups?
3. What actions could LPU take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students?

This chapter summarizes the study's findings, answers the three research questions, lists implications for practice, and provides suggestions for future research. The chapter also reviews the study's limitations and closes with the author's final thoughts on the study.

#### **Summary of Findings and Discussion**

This study sought to identify factors related to the low retention and graduation rates of Black male students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) and offer recommendations on actions that can be taken to improve those rates. Findings from the study revealed two overarching themes: understanding campus climate and comprehensive campus improvement.

#### **Understanding Campus Climate**

Rankin and Reason (2008) defined campus climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential” (p. 264). The participants identified six themes that comprised LPU’s campus climate from a Black male student’s perspective, including feelings of isolation, racism and microaggressions, peer and mentor support systems, financial assistance, and positive and negative academic experiences. These six themes are the factors related to Black males being retained and graduating at lower rates on LPU’s campus.

Half of the participants recounted situations where they were the only Black men in the room and felt isolated in both social and academic settings. In some of these situations, they were expected to represent the entire Black community, which placed unnecessary stress on the participants. This researcher worked at a PWI similar to LPU and as a Black woman on campus, routinely felt isolated in various settings on campus.

Three of the six participants directly experienced racism and microaggressions on campus or heard about those experiences from their peers. When the participants had these experiences, they would turn to their Black peers and mentors of color to provide escapes from their realities on campus. The participants also used these peer and mentor support systems as a means to cope with the overall experience of being Black on a predominately White campus. This researcher also relied heavily on same-race peer and mentor support systems while working on a PWI campus.

The participants expressed the importance of having adequate financial assistance in their quests to earn their degrees. All six participants chose to attend LPU based on the amount of financial assistance they received, indicating that being able to afford the cost of education plays an important role in Black male students selecting a school, being retained, and eventually

graduating. Finally, both positive and negative campus academic experiences made up the overall academic experience of all of the participants.

The participant experiences reported in this study showed that despite some negative social and academic experiences, the negative ones were not enough to deter the participants from persisting toward graduation. The findings also show that when Black male students have support systems composed of people who look like them or are from similar backgrounds, they can persist to graduation. Overall, when Black male students have campus climates in which they feel heard, seen, and supported and have safe spaces for them to operate in, they will excel socially and academically and have the freedom to be themselves.

### **Comprehensive Campus Improvement**

The participants offered three main suggestions for actions LPU could take to improve retention and graduation rates, including increasing the campus diversity of employees, having open and honest conversations about racial issues, and using all available resources to promote Black activities on campus. The participants suggested that campus administration should focus on hiring more diverse employees to increase racial and ethnic diversity across campus. When Black male students have diverse administrators, faculty, and staff members, it is easy to relate to them and the Black male students will feel more comfortable on campus. This researcher supports the suggestion to increase campus employee diversity, especially after working on a PWI campus where there were only about 20 Black employees of the 500 total administrators, faculty, and staff members.

One of the participants personally experienced the benefit of having open and honest conversations about racial issues and felt that the entire campus could benefit from similar conversations. After the nationwide racial tensions of 2020 and the racial issues that continue to

persist in the United States, it is important to have meaningful conversations that can hopefully lead to actions that will improve society. This researcher led and participated in several conversations surrounding race while working at a PWI and understands firsthand the benefits of having such conversations.

The participants felt that campus leaders did not do a good enough job of promoting Black student events and felt that more effort could be put into getting White students to attend Black events. One participant also acknowledged the role Black students played in only sharing events with other Black students and mentioned that Black organizations needed to utilize all promotional tools available to the campus community to share Black events campuswide. If campus administrators pursue comprehensive improvements to all parts of their campus operations, Black students will feel more welcomed on campus.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this study revealed two recommendations for practice that administrators should consider: improving the campus climate and examining campus operations. Understanding an institution's campus climate and the areas that may need improvement can help administrators make necessary changes, which will lead to Black male students being able to comfortably and confidently navigate PWI campuses. Based on this study's findings those areas of improvement would include diversifying staff, creating and supporting campus activities and organizations specifically for Black male students, actively working with current faculty, staff, and administrators to educate them on racism and microaggressions and facilitating open and honest conversations around race for the campus community. Administrators also need to take an impartial look at all campus operations and complete an equity audit to determine if

Black male students and students of color feel like they can freely exist on campus and have what they need to persist to graduation.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future researchers who are interested in studying the retention and graduation rates of Black male students at PWIs should consider the following recommendations when completing their studies. To get a comprehensive understanding of the Black male student experience on PWI campuses, future researchers should conduct a campus-wide study that aims to include all Black male students on campus. Mixed methods studies should also be pursued that could include a review of data trends of retention and graduation rates, surveys, and focus group interviews. A statistically significant number of participants should be included in the study so that the findings or results can truly reflect the entire Black male student population on campus. Students of various academic profiles should be recruited to participate, and IRB-approved incentives should be used during the recruitment process to encourage participation. Finally, future researchers should consider recruiting first-year students as participants to understand what their on-campus experience is like and what factors affect their retention.

### **Limitations of the Research**

The current study's findings provided a lot of information on the participants' experiences as Black men on LPU's campus, but there were three limitations of the study. First, the sample size of six participants was not truly reflective of the entire Black male student population on LPU's campus. There are about 200 Black male students on LPU's campus, so the experiences of six of them cannot possibly encompass the experiences of all of them. Second, the participants were all high achievers who did not struggle academically. Their academic experiences are certainly different from those of Black male students who are not as

academically successful and who may have to leave school because of poor academic performance. Third, 66% percent of the participants were student-athletes who have a significantly different student experience than non-athletes. The team/family nature of athletics provides a built-in support system for student-athletes which can help to increase or maintain retention and reduce feelings of isolation.

### **Conclusion**

Participants in this study showed that regardless of campus climate, they were able to persist to graduation on PWI campuses. They overcame feelings of isolation, racism and microaggressions, and negative academic experiences and used support from peers and mentors, financial assistance, and positive academic experiences to stay on track to graduation. With the appropriate levels of academic and social support, a healthy campus climate, and a constantly improving campus, Black male students can achieve academic success, be retained from year to year, and ultimately graduate from PWIs. If campus administrators understand the things that make Black male students leave, the appropriate actions can be taken to make sure Black male students stay in school and graduate.

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## APPENDIX

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

**Topic: What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus being retained at lower rates than other student groups?**

1. How would you describe your social experiences on campus as a Black male student?
2. What negative social experiences have you had as a result of being a Black male student on campus?
3. What positive social experiences have you had as a result of being a Black male student on campus?
4. Are there any reasons why you may consider not returning to Lincoln Prairie next semester?

**Topic: What factors are related to Black male students on Lincoln Prairie University's campus to graduating at lower rates than other student groups?**

5. How would you describe your academic experiences on campus as a Black male student?
6. What negative academic experiences have you had as a result of being a Black male student on campus?
7. What positive academic experiences have you had as a result of being a Black male student on campus?
8. Do you foresee any reasons that may hinder you from graduating from Lincoln Prairie?

**Topic: What actions can Lincoln Prairie University take to increase the retention and graduation rates of its Black male students?**

9. In your opinion, what can Lincoln Prairie University do to enhance the academic and social experiences of Black male students on campus?