BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF A PAUL ROBESON LIVING-LEARNING

COMMUNITY

By

Ariel Leget

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_____

Dr. Saundra Tomlinson-Clarke, Chair

_____

Dr. Ebelia Hernández, Committee Member

_____

Dr. Felicia McGinty, Committee Member

New Brunswick, New Jersey

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PAUL ROBESON LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITY

ABSTRACT

Multiple studies have discussed how campus racial climate at predominantly White institutions can negatively affect the sense of belonging of students of color, as students perceive these environments to be unwelcoming and unsupportive due to factors such as racial and institutional microaggressions (González, 2002; Gusa, 2010; Harper et al., 2011; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Kuh, 1991; Mallett et al., 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Capodilupo & Holder 2008; Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Universities can utilize Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) as an intentional tool to promote belonging and provide resources for students to explore and embrace their identity, while contributing to the greater university community. LLCs promote engagement in both a classroom and residential setting, creating a closer sense of community and interconnectedness, while allowing for the exploration of sociocultural issues with peers. With the interconnectedness of an LLC in mind, this study proposed that culturally based LLCs, particularly those with a course component, promote the exploration of one's history and culture, and create a sense of belonging for students. This may help to counter negative feelings regarding existing in a space that is historically White, as the concept of one's cultural perspective mattering, takes focus. Students also have the opportunity to feel academically and socially validated in and out of the classroom. Using a phenomenological method, this study explored the experiences of students within the Paul Robeson LLC, an LLC designed to explore the history and origins of the African diaspora as well as to assist in the transition of incoming students to the Rutgers University environment.

Keywords: Living-Learning Community, Paul Robeson, Black studies, Africana studies, belonging, counterspaces

- Dr. Tieka Harris. I remember when you told me, "There's too much living to do to be sitting at Panera. This needs to be done!" You came back for me after you crossed the finish line yourself. I will be sure to act in kind to another doctoral candidate in need.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Roan Wallace and Curtis Leget, Jr., I am now officially done with school.

However, I still do work for a school...don't be confused.

To my bestie, Samantha Harris. Thank you for being a calming spirit. You reminded me that it

was okay to take a break and reassess, when I was all the way burnt out.

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accountable to this process, and to myself. You remind me every day, that the possibilities are

endless.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

High-impact practices are defined as institutionally structured educational methods inside or outside of the classroom, that are considered beneficial to college students in regard to enhancing student engagement and increasing retention. These practices include but are not limited to the following: first-year seminars and experiences, writing-intensive courses, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, internships, and learning communities (Kuh, 2008). It is suggested that students take part in at least two high-impact practices during their undergraduate career (Kuh, 2008) and the more high-impact practices they participate in, the more they stand to benefit (Finley & McNair, 2013). Benefits are partly attributed to time on task, as students who take part in high-impact practices generally spend more time preparing for class and interacting with instructors and peers, as compared to individuals who are not participating in high-impact practices (Watson, Kuh, Rhodes, Light & Chen, 2016). Effects of high-impact practices are most noticeable in first-generation, less academically prepared, and historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (Finley & McNair, 2013).

Different types of high-impact practices have different goals relevant to student success. For example, "The key goals for [the high-impact practice of] learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with 'big questions' that matter beyond the classroom" (Kuh, 2008, para. 5). Within learning communities, integrated learning is generally obtained via student enrollment in two or more linked courses as a group, while working closely with peers and the course instructor around a shared topic (Kuh, 2008). Many studies have concluded that learning community participation leads to an increase in

faculty-student interaction and peer to peer interaction, both inside and outside of the classroom (Brownell & Swaner, 2009).

Learning community benefits also include an increase in persistence (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994) and graduation (Nosaka & Novak, 2014), greater engagement in and out of the classroom, and students taking more responsibility for their learning, as opposed to being passive receivers. Engagement in and out of the classroom involves faculty to student interactions, as well as peer to peer interactions. Learning communities are also positively associated with personal and social development (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). They can help to make a large campus, with all of its moving parts, feel smaller, as students connect with peer groups. In this connection, students may find it easier to take intellectual risks and participate in class, as they are supported by their peers, which assists in the college transition (Brownell & Swaner, 2009).

Learning communities have demonstrated positive outcomes for students from various backgrounds. For example, students who are first-generation, and students of lower socioeconomic status have especially shown pronounced effects on critical thinking and the ability to persist from one year to the next (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, benefits of the learning communities model vary depending on what is offered within the learning community. Much of the research has focused on the more complex, heavily coordinated communities such as those with an interdisciplinary curriculum involving intense faculty collaboration (Stassen, 2003). There is a paucity of research, however on learning communities with a residential component, also known as living-learning communities (LLCs). Much of the existing research is comprised of single institution studies as opposed to multi-institutional studies, making it difficult to generalize outcomes (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Stassen, 2003).

Living-Learning Communities as High-Impact Practices

Living-learning communities (LLCs) generally involves grouping students who have similar interests onto the same floor or into the same building within a residential setting. Students are then placed into at least one class together that is exclusive to the community, based on a theme or topic of interest, as well as one to two other classes that includes the larger university community. This clustering of students in a residential setting, as well as within the classroom, helps to make larger institutions feel more intimate (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Additionally, students explore the topic of interest through staff programming in the residence halls. Ideally, this programming builds on topics learned in the classroom and when possible, incorporates the instructor to reinforce faculty connections. LLC structures vary by institution and are referred to by other names such as residential learning communities, learning centers, and living-learning programs. It is precisely this structural variance that makes it difficult to definitively state that all LLCs have similar outcomes; some programs have strong outcomes in particular areas, while others do not. Additionally, not all LLCs have the same objectives (Inkelas, Soldner, Leonard & Longerbeam, 2008).

At their best, LLCs create community that facilitates increased opportunities for student and faculty interaction through coordinated activities, and a supportive curricular and co-curricular environment (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). When studies have been conducted that specifically seek to examine the outcomes of LLCs, findings confirm Shapiro and Levine's (1999) claims to varying degrees. Generally, students who participate in LLCs are more likely to persist to graduation, have higher academic achievement, campus involvement, engagement with faculty, engagement with peers, and an increased sense of

institutional belonging (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stassen, 2003;

Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

As enumerated, there are several positive outcomes through the LLC experience.

Specifically, students who take part in the Paul Robeson LLC have access to resources that

consistently encourage an investigation into Black history and culture, thereby creating a space

where these students can feel that they matter. This mattering is necessary to create a sense of

belonging, which "refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation

of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued

by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty,

peers)" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

The focus of this research was the Paul Robeson LLC offered at Rutgers University. The

Paul Robeson LLC explores the African diaspora, as well as the contributions of Paul Robeson.

The LLC provides academic and social resources to students who have been historically

underrepresented in the academy as well as historically underserved by the academy. The LLC

provides students with an opportunity to engage in their own understanding of what it means to

be Black, feel validated, and thereby express a sense of belonging at the university. Creating a

sense of belonging is of great significance, as it has a tangible effect on the persistence of Black

students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Hausmann,

Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). Multiple studies

have discussed how campus racial climate at PWIs can negatively affect the sense of belonging

of students of color, as students perceive these environments to be unwelcoming and

unsupportive due to factors such as racial and institutional microaggressions (González, 2002;

Gusa, 2010; Harper et al., 2011; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Kuh, 1991; Mallett et al., 2011;

Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Capodilupo & Holder 2008; Worthington, Navarro,

Loewy, & Hart, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

Problem Statement

Students of color may perceive the racial climate of a PWI to be unwelcoming and

unsupportive, negatively affecting their sense of belonging (Gusa, 2010; Harper et al., 2011;

Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Kuh, 1991; Mallett et al., 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000;

Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). This

issue of creating a sense of belonging is of great significance, as belonging has a substantial

effect on the persistence of Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWI)s (Bonilla-

Silva & Forman, 2000; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis, Chesler,

& Forman, 2000). Although Rutgers may no longer be considered a PWI based on racial

composition (Bourke, 2016) it is considered a traditionally White institution or historically White

institution (HWI). HWIs have embedded practices of power based on Whiteness, which

exemplify a long history of exclusion of minoritized groups. Therefore, despite a less White

racial composition, traditionally marginalized students may still describe an HWI as a PWI.

The data indicates that Black students' postsecondary fall enrollment increased between

the years of 1976 and 2012 from 9.6 percent to 13.7 percent (U. S. Department of Education,

2016a). Although this increase in enrollment is encouraging, when compared to enrollment by

Whites in 2016 at 56.9%, there is still quite a considerable enrollment gap (U. S. Department of

Education, 2016a). Also, the percentage of Black students to graduate within four years, after

starting at a four-year institution was 20.6%, as compared to 30.5% for Hispanic students, 44.2%

for White students, and 48.7% for Asian students, including Pacific Islanders, within a cohort

beginning in 2009 (U. S. Department of Education, 2016b). Although Black students are

increasingly pursuing postsecondary education, the rate of graduation is low, as compared to other groups.

Blacks within the United States have historically been underserved by the academy from K-12, including access to education, as well as lack of high-quality teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This has manifested itself in the achievement gap, defined as the statistically significant difference in standardized testing scores between students grouped by race/ethnicity, or gender (U. S. Department of Education, 2018). The Education Commission of the States (2006) asserts that the gap itself continues to persist for minoritized groups over time, putting many minoritized students at a deficit in terms of preparation, should they consider pursuing postsecondary education. As if this academic preparation is not enough of a concern, Black students must also contend with the racial climate once they arrive at a PWI (Gusa, 2010; Harper et al., 2011; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Kuh, 1991; Mallett et al., 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

Despite these obstacles, students can succeed academically when other intentional supports are put into place. In a comprehensive national study, "academic preparation only accounted for 17 percent of the variation in college completion rates…. there is still a significant amount of variation in college completion that cannot be explained by academic preparation alone" (Adelman, 1999, p. 150). It is not only the social and academic background of the student that matters, but the college experience itself that influences persistence (Tinto, 1993), and we know that the college experience of students of color at predominantly White institutions is different than that of the college experience of White students at those same institutions (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Students of color experience alienation, hostility, and racism in various forms on campus (Harper et al., 2011; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Reid &

Radhakrishnan, 2003; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) which plays a role in how connected they feel to the institution, faculty, staff, and fellow students, and in whether or not they decide to stay at the institution (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Hurtado, 1992; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Statement of Purpose

The burden of student integration into the college setting is not solely the responsibility of the student, but it is a shared responsibility between the student and institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). According to the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, a comprehensive multi-institutional study of LLCs, LLCs promote engagement in both a classroom and residential setting, creating a closer sense of community and interconnectedness, while allowing for the exploration of sociocultural issues with peers (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen & Johnson, 2006). Unfortunately, this overall optimistic perspective towards LLCs is one that is based on research conducted mainly with White students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). There is a gap in the research in regard to the experience of Black students within culturally based LLCs. The Paul Robeson LLC is an intentional institutional intervention designed to assist students in transitioning to the university. The LLC places significance on cultural enrichment via the knowledge attainment of Black history and Black culture. The LLC also offers students the opportunity to engage in an inclusive curriculum and residential programs that focus on the positive and multidimensional attributes of Black history and culture. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the first-year and incoming transfer student experience of Black students at a historically White institution, within an LLC focused on Black history and culture.

With the interconnectedness of an LLC in mind, I proposed that culturally based LLCs, particularly those with a course component, promote the exploration of one's history and culture, and create a sense of belonging for students. Through the support of peers, faculty, and staff, students are empowered to learn more about themselves, and those who came before them. Culturally based LLCs have the ability to shift the focus from a Eurocentric curricular lens, to a lens in which its participants experience curriculum and pedagogy that is culturally relevant and validating (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Museus, Lam, Huang, Kem, & Tan, 2012). This may help to counter negative feelings regarding existing in a space that is predominantly White, as the concept of one's cultural perspective mattering, takes focus. Students also have the opportunity to feel academically and socially validated in and out of the classroom (Rendon, 1994).

Paul Robeson LLC Programmatic Structure

The LLC can be used as a space to promote belonging and provide resources for students to explore and embrace their identity, while contributing to the greater university community (Jehangir, 2009). This qualitative study explored the experiences of first-year and transfer students within the Paul Robeson LLC at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. As a result of this study, I expected to gain insight into how first-year and incoming transfer students of the Paul Robeson LLC experience the LLC, both academically and socially, and within the context of the larger university. Although the Paul Robeson community is currently comprised of first-year, incoming transfer, and continuing students, this study examined only the viewpoints of the first-year and incoming transfer populations, because these students enroll in the two courses aligned with the LLC.

 The living-learning community is named for Paul Robeson, described as a scholar, athlete, actor, singer, and global activist, [and] one of Rutgers University's most distinguished

alumni….The son of a runaway slave, Robeson attended Rutgers College in New Brunswick on an academic scholarship, becoming the university's third black student and its first black football player….he won 15 varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball and track….His scholarly accomplishments included being inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa Society and Rutgers' Cap and Skull Honor Society….He spoke more than 20 languages fluently, [and] was valedictorian of his graduating class in 1919. After graduation, Robeson earned a law degree from Columbia Law School but decided to use his artistic talents in theater and music to promote African and African-American history and culture. Over nearly four decades, he achieved worldwide acclaim as a vocalist and actor on stage and screen. A towering figure in the African-American struggle for human dignity and democratic rights, Robeson connected this struggle with people around the world who also were fighting for political rights, cultural recognition and economic justice. (Paul Robeson Centennial Committee, 2020, para. 2). In Fall 2015 Rutgers University-New Brunswick Residence Life moved from a special interest community model to an LLC model. This special interest model meant that students in residence who wanted to gather around a common theme, came together much like a student-run organization. They elected members, were provided a budget, and created and implemented various initiatives within the residence hall. As with many student-run organizations, commitment ebbed and flowed from year to year based on student interest, and over the years, student participation numbers dwindled. My understanding of this phenomena comes from personal experience, as I acted as an advisor to the Paul Robeson Special Interest Community in 2011, when I first arrived at Rutgers University as a residence life coordinator. The potential answer to this waning student commitment came in the form of LLCs. After a short period of dormancy, The Learning Communities Office converted the Paul Robeson Special Interest Community into the Paul Robeson LLC. This

meant that rather than being student led, the Learning Communities Office of Residence Life would be responsible for recruitment of LLC members, hiring and training of peer mentors, and identifying linked courses.

The launch of the Paul Robeson LLC involved multiple university partnerships including Africana Studies, Student Access and Educational Equity, and the Paul Robeson Cultural Center. The Africana Studies department committed a faculty member to teach a first-year, one-credit seminar course in the fall – Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen. The seminar class size is generally restricted to 22 students and consists mainly of LLC members.

> The seminar introduces students to the life and legacy of Paul Robeson, especially with respect to how he integrated "home" and "world" into his civil rights activism. The seminar has a fourfold focus: (1) to explore Paul Robeson's formative years as a student at Rutgers University and the challenges he faced as the only black student in his graduating class; (2) to examine some of his artistic achievements as an actor on the stage and screen, especially his role in promoting African-American folk songs on the concert stages of the world; (3) to study his efforts to connect anti-fascism, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism together; and (4) to examine his controversial associations with communist movements and the former Soviet Union. (Rutgers Undergraduate Academic Affairs, n.d.)

The Africana Studies department also provided seats in the three-credit lecture of Introduction to Africana Studies, for the fall term. This course enrolls a much larger portion of the general university community, with a class size in the hundreds. Due to these two courses, participants had contact with one of the instructors at least three times a week.

The Office of Student Access and Educational Equity committed an Educational Opportunity Fund director to provide one-on-one academic advising. The Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC) promoted cultural programming to the Paul Robeson LLC that integrated with the larger university community. The PRCC provides a multitude of resources and initiatives for "historically underrepresented students, with an emphasis on students of the African diaspora" (Rutgers University, n.d.). These include but are not limited to a computer lab and prayer space for student use, tutoring and internship programs, speaker series, and film exhibitions (Rutgers University, n.d.). Signature events such as the Black Student Social in September, Dream Week in January, I Am Robeson Week in April, and Rites of Passage in May, are coordinated by PRCC staff. Additionally, many of the Black student organizations are advised by the PRCC staff, and therefore utilize the PRCC as a meeting space. Residence Life committed a full-time professional staff member: a residence life coordinator, that manages multiple LLCs within the area, including Paul Robeson. Residence Life also hired two upperclassmen peer mentors for the duration of the academic year. Peer mentors are undergraduate students who live in residence with mentees and are paid to program towards the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community's pillars of scholarship, service, and culture. Their focus is cultural programming, encouraging student engagement, and connecting students with campus resources. They also conduct two one-on-one conversations per semester, that are meant to provide a designated time for the mentors to inquire about the wellbeing of students from a scholastic and personal perspective, as well as to continue to build rapport with members of the LLC. Additionally, they make themselves available for two hours a week via drop-in hours within the residence hall. These mentors are internal to the LLC and understand the needs of the students, as the mentors themselves were once members of the community. This integration of curricular and co-

curricular activities provides both academic and social support for students, and promotes student success (Tinto, 2012).

It is important to note here that the Paul Robeson LLC is not exclusive to Black students. Students from any background may apply and be admitted to the community. However, from a recruitment perspective, the community was mostly marketed towards Black students at the time of this study. Marketing included outreach to the Rutgers University School of Arts and Sciences Educational Opportunity Fund Program Office as well as to the Paul Robeson Leadership Institute. Both programs serve students who are either from low-income backgrounds, are first-generation college attendees, and/or part of historically underrepresented groups in higher education. The Learning Communities Office worked with administrative staff throughout the summer recruitment cycle, to ensure that students within these programs were made aware of the community. Additionally, Learning Communities staff worked with Rutgers University Admissions to retrieve a list of students who identify as Black. These students were sent an email invite to the Paul Robeson LLC, highlighting the benefits of the community, as self-reported by former students.

Research Questions

- How do participants describe their Paul Robeson LLC experience?

- Which specific academic and social Paul Robeson LLC experiences have been influential in members' overall development?

- In what ways has the LLC influenced students' academic and social integration at the institution?

- In what ways has the LLC created a sense of belonging for participants?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Racial and institutional microaggressions are amongst some of the major deleterious acts that create hostile environments for minoritized students (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000), specifically Black students. Racial microaggressions are "subtle non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez & Willis, 1977, p. 66) that "stem from unconscious attitudes of White superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" (Davis, 1988, p. 1576). Whether covert degradation or overt degradation, racial microaggressions negatively affect the performance of students of color, in some cases leading students to drop a class, switch majors, or leave the institution altogether (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Within the academic sphere, students of color may feel invisible, as a numerical minority. They may also feel that faculty have lower expectations of them. Isolation amongst school peers due to preconceived notions from Whites about general Black student ability may manifest in exclusion from study groups, being told that their Blackness prevents them from excelling in STEM related fields, and that they are only at the institution due to affirmative action (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso et al., 2009).

This race-centered hostility, regardless of the environment: academic space, social space, or public space (adjacent to and owned by the campus) can be particularly difficult for Black male students who must attempt to manage two types of social identities, being Black, and being male. Black male students reported that they constantly were made to feel that they did not belong on campus and were the target of hyper surveillance by campus police, as a way for

White spaces to be reclaimed from Black bodies (Smith et al., 2007). In instances when Black

males considered showing their frustration, it was necessary for them to be careful, as

stereotypes of Black males being violent are prevalent. The constant need to keep one's self in-

check in order to avoid fallout from Whites is problematic and leads to psychological and

physiologic stress, which Smith et al. (2007) terms, racial battle fatigue. This concept of racial

battle fatigue is also echoed within Solórzano et al.'s (2000) study, as participants noted that they

felt "drained" as a result of having to regularly deal with put-downs and avoid scrutiny.

      In addition to racial microaggressions, institutional microaggressions also negatively

affect the experience of students of color. Institutional microaggressions impact the adjustment,

school performance, ability to feel comfortable in the campus environment, and persistence of

students of color (Yosso et al., 2009). Institutional microaggressions include for example,

physical structures on a campus (i.e., buildings, sculptures, flyers, and banners) that are

representative of the dominant culture and marginalize non-Anglo cultures (González, 2002;

Sue, Capodilupo & Holder 2008). Institutional microaggressions also include practices and

discourses that endorse a negative racial climate for people of color, such as a lack of course

offerings that are representative of multiple cultures, limited access to non-White faculty and

administrators, and the limited presence of non-Whites at higher levels within the administration

(González, 2002; Sue, Capodilupo & Holder 2008; Yosso et al., 2009).

      The successful recruitment and retention of students of color is connected to the presence

of faculty of color (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009). Faculty of color are more likely

to produce scholarship that has to do with issues of race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as engage

in service/committee-related activities and mentorship more often than White faculty (Allen,

Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Knowles & Harleston, 1997). However,

faculty of color face many of the same campus racial climate challenges that students do,

consistently reporting lower satisfaction with their workplace than their White counterparts

(Jayakumar et al., 2009). These institutional microaggressions can equate to a "cultural

starvation," leaving students of color feeling as if they are less valued in the institutional setting

(González, 2002).

A recent study by Hotchkins and Dancy (2017) further expanded the discussion to

examine the experience of Black students at a PWI from a residential perspective. The study

found that Black students often felt like they were outsiders within the residence hall, and on

campus. Per their findings, Black students actively sought out space on campus, which was

absent of White peers, in an effort to "distance themselves from racial microaggressions" (p. 4).

Students within the study expressed that they were most interested in being connected with

individuals and groups who understood their Blackness. This demonstrates the importance of

"safe" spaces on campus, which encourage Black students to congregate, and interact with one

another. Findings also determined that students experienced environmental or institutional

microaggressions, and felt the halls were absent of staff, organizations, and domicile aesthetics

that were representative of Black culture, thereby implicitly expressing that Black students did

not belong in the residence hall. Students also felt a sense of "perpetual homelessness," as they

were consistently questioned about their Blackness and racially confronted, via White peers,

staff, and police in the residence halls regarding whether or not they actually belonged in the

space, thereby reinforcing feelings of hyper surveillance and otherness (Hotchkins & Dancy,

2017).

Studies such as Hotchkins and Dancy's (2017) demonstrate the need for designated space

where Black students can feel that they belong, and where they can confront and push back

against the normative Whiteness that surrounds them at PWIs. The Paul Robeson LLC represents

both a physical and intellectual community that pushes back against normative Whiteness by

centering a Black experience. The Paul Robeson LLC includes the linkage of two courses –

Introduction to Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen and Introduction to Africana Studies, through

which the Paul Robeson LLC students attempt to tackle two big questions: What is Paul

Robeson's legacy at Rutgers University, as well as on the global stage, and what is the

connection between the history and protest of peoples of African origin across the African

diaspora (Ramsamy & Robeson, 2018)? This content is then echoed through programmatic

activities within the residence hall. Echoing Kuh (2008) in relation to the purpose of learning

communities, I proposed that these two big questions indeed do *matter* beyond the classroom. In

learning about the legacy of Paul Robeson and the African diaspora through the context of

history, Paul Robeson LLC students are encouraged to think about various aspects of their

identity, what it means to be Black in the context of today's society, the contributions of Blacks

across history, how they are connected to the Rutgers University community, as well as how they

are connected to the larger society.

Exploring Black History and Culture Through the LLC Model

Unfortunately, prior to attending college, many Black students have not had the

opportunity to learn about Black history and culture in any great depth via formal schooling.

Generally, one to two lessons within the academic year are dedicated to Black history curriculum

at middle schools and high schools within the United States (National Museum of African

American History and Culture, 2015 as cited in King, 2017). In some instances, teachers may

choose to ignore Black history lessons altogether, or choose questionable class activities such as

mock slave auctions or slave catching games (King, 2017). This is not to say that all classrooms

engage in such problematic behavior. There is a general consensus that Black history should be taught within the U.S. history classroom, but there is not a consensus of how and what should be conveyed in said lessons (King, 2017).

For example, within the U.S. there is a penchant to use the month of February (Black History Month) as the singular opportunity to explore Black history and culture. The incidental nature of this presentation is generally one that provides only snippets of a rich and complex story. The same individuals: Sojourner Truth, Washington Carver, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X and the like, are highlighted and made to carry the mantle of all things relevant to Black culture (Gallien & Hikes, 2005). However, events that happened prior to slavery, in Africa, and the inventions of Black people that have impacted many of today's civilizations are seldom addressed. The linear progression from slavery to the Civil Rights Era to modern day is the often-told story; some states have received grades of Ds and Fs for their approach to teaching about the Civil Rights Movement (Center, 2014). The Paul Robeson LLC explores this hidden curriculum and works to actively counteract hegemony through intentional academic and co-curricular activities. "Black students are seldom exposed to scholarly work related to the Black experience and must construct their young adult racial identities from the raw and flawed racial stereotypes perpetuated in the media and popular culture" (Adams, 2005, p. 285). In exploring their Blackness, these students are encouraged to engage in their own race identity development, something which is not generally nurtured in the larger U.S. society, but is fundamental to the facilitation of accomplishing personal and academic goals (Taub & Mcewen, 1992).

Specifically, having a high salience of racial identity is necessary in order to move through the stages of various racial identity development models (Cross, 1995).

This movement is critical because the more advanced stages of these models indicate a well-established core identity which is associated with an array of positive outcomes including increased self-esteem (Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001), moral reasoning (Moreland & Leach, 2001), institutional commitment (Dovidio, Gaertner, Niemann, & Snider, 2001), intercultural competence and maturity (King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005), and academic achievement (Ortiz & Santos, 2009). (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015, p. 128-129)

As noted by Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003), "Central to the formation of a counter hegemonic community is the continual articulation and passing on of a counter narrative" (p. 91). Counter narrative curriculum is important to identity and belonging, and especially for race groups who are severely underrepresented on campus and/or targeted. These students tend to think about their race more often than groups that are not underrepresented and/or targeted on campus. Whereas White students never or seldom think about their race (52.8%), Black students think about race often/very often (59%). Additionally, "processing race-related issues with peers is related to higher racial identity salience and may serve to facilitate students' identity development" (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015, p. 144). Members of the Paul Robeson LLC serve as the ideal peer group to process race-related issues occurring within the college environment, as well as incidents that are happening outside of the college environment, that may potentially have a substantial impact on the psyche of Black students.

This work to counteract hegemony also manifests in the culturally relevant curriculum of the instructors associated with the Paul Robeson LLC. Instructors for the PR LLC are not only content experts but are invested in the process of ensuring that students are able to *communicate*

the legacy of Paul Robeson to others and understand the Black experience in America, thereby

affirming their cultural identity. In 1987, the historically Black institution of Spelman College

instituted a foundational curriculum that is both culturally relevant and culturally validating. The

curriculum requires first-year students to enroll in a course entitled, The African Diaspora and

the World. The course is centered on the African diaspora rather than Western civilization. This

counter narrative perspective is enmeshed in the culture of Spelman. Through strategic work

within both academic and student affairs, students come away from their education as "informed

citizens of the black community, the nation, and the world" (Gallien & Hikes, 2005, p. 6).

Although the Paul Robeson LLC is not on the scale of an entire college environment such as

Spelman College, portions of their model can be utilized to engage Black students in a

continuous dialogue, encouraging a sense of belonging at the university.

Black Identity Development

A negative campus climate can have an adverse effect on students of color. Adolescence

is a time in which student identity is being significantly shaped, and research suggests that this is

the case even more so for college students, as compared to the general population (Chickering &

Reisser, 1993). Defining one's identity is one of the most important aspects of adolescence, and

confidence and self-esteem are absolutely necessary for success and achievement at PWIs for

Black students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). There are a number of Black identity models such

as those developed by Cross, Helms, Myers, and Baldwin, which address how sense of self is

developed in consideration of this external environment (Constantine, Richardson, Benjamin &

Wilson, 1998). Below I consider Jackson's 2012 model, which grounds Black Identity

Development in Black heritage/culture rather than solely focusing on how racism influences the

development process. Jackson's model also considers the intersection of salient social identities

such as ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, physical ability, age, etc. This study does not

seek to identify Paul Robeson LLC participants in a particular stage of their Black identity

development. However, the explanation below serves to illustrate how the Paul Robeson LLC,

which seeks to explore the history and origins of the African diaspora and celebrate Black

history and culture, can assist students in realizing their fullest Black identity. Finding and

joining with peers who may assist with managing the stress associated with navigating the

mainstream culture is a positive coping strategy (Tatum, 1997). Again, the PR LLC is an ideal

space to find peers who may need similar support.

The five stages of Black Identity Development include: Naïve, Acceptance, Resistance,

Redefinition, and Internalization (Jackson, 2012). Adolescents in their teenage years and

twenties are most often in the stage of Acceptance, which involves the acknowledgement that

racism is entrenched in the Black experience within the United States, and that there may be

frustration in finding support to learn about and further explore Black culture. People in this

stage are making decisions about how much they are willing to fight against or take part in/

accept the expectations imposed on them by White society. They are also making decisions

about which Black cultural influences they will adopt and develop. In the Resistance stage there

is such anger brought upon by the realization of the systemic and systematic pervasiveness of

racism that they may be unable to embrace Black culture for its own sake and instead may

embrace Black culture simply because it is not White. During the Redefinition stage, individuals

are defining themselves independent of White people and White culture and choosing to interact

with other Blacks with a similar mindset. Individuals choose to fully embrace Black culture, but

not as a means of rejecting White culture. The Black cultural perspective is strongest and most

salient in this stage. In the final stage of Internalization there is a feeling of release in that there is

no longer a need to explain, defend or protect one's Black identity. Additionally, some Blacks

adopt an outlook which connects world views from multiple compatible cultural perspectives,

while simultaneously considering the intersection of social identities (Jackson, 2012).

Cultural Safe Spaces

Imagine you are a first-year student who has been away from home for several weeks or

months. You look around and find very few sights or sounds that liken to your home

environment. This experience for any incoming student can lead to homesickness and longing

for the familiar. However, these feelings may be magnified for students of color at PWIs, being

surrounded by White peers, faculty, and staff. For some students of color, their home

environment may be reflected at a PWI, but for a large portion, a PWI does not reflect their home

environment. If there is perceived incongruence between the individual and the institution, the

individual will likely experience more difficulty becoming integrated into the institution and,

therefore, will be less likely to persist (Tinto, 1993). Additionally, the discomfort, stress, and

social isolation associated with this perceived incongruence can lead to student attrition for

African American students who have not established supportive communities (Gloria, Kurpius,

Hamilton & Willson, 1999). For these students, a safe space or counterspace is an ideal resource

to aid in their academic and/or social adjustment within this new environment, (Guiffrida, 2003;

Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006a; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000)

encouraging students to become integrated into a smaller group first before becoming a part of

the larger campus community (Guiffrida, 2003).

Safe space, as defined by the *Merriam Webster On-line Dictionary* (n.d.), is "a place (as

on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening

actions, ideas, or conversations." Taking this concept a step further, counterspaces are defined

"as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 70). These counterspaces, or locations where students can find individuals that share similar cultural characteristics and experiences, may manifest in a physical venue such as a cultural center, (Patton, 2006a) or a group of students coming together in the form of an organization (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008).

One of the major themes that emerges from the literature is the sense of comfort that students receive in these spaces (Grier-Reed, 2010, Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006a). To some degree, these spaces or subcultures act as a "home away from home" (Patton, 2006a, p.7) where students of color can find a sense of community, belonging, and feel that they matter (Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006a). The counterspace is often comprised of people who have a similar background and relatable experiences. Therefore, students can be their authentic selves in these spaces, dressing, speaking, and acting as they would at home, and without a need for code switching (Guiffrida, 2003). They are able to share concerns regarding incidents happening on and off campus, with the likelihood of encountering others in the space who have dealt with similar circumstances. In these spaces, the act of discussion in and of itself, can be therapeutic. For example, the counterspace of the African American Student Network (AFAM) was described as a sanctuary for students coping with racial microaggressions, in a study conducted at a large midwestern PWI (Grier-Reed, 2010). This voluntary meetup provided students with an opportunity to engage with one another, and campus faculty and staff, around the topic of race. This was an intentional tool created by faculty to counteract the race-related stress of isolation, mistrust of the institution, stigma, and stereotype threat, amongst other sentiments. AFAM encouraged students to vent and feel heard, which was not only good for social support, but had

academic benefits as well. African American students who spoke with one another about unfair treatment, rather than keeping it to themselves, tended to have higher grade point averages than those who did not speak with one another about these concerns (Powell & Arriola, 2003).

Additionally, counterspaces serve as an opportunity to learn more about one's own culture and engage with individuals from various ethnic groups within the African diaspora (Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006a). Rather than subverting their identity and attempting to fit into mainstream organizations, Black student organizations offer the option of a safe space, where Black students can further explore their identity, while enhancing skill sets related to joining student organizations (Harper & Quaye, 2007). For Black male students within Harper and Quaye's (2007) study, these organizations were the primary vehicle for student engagement, and without this option, Black students may not have found this crucial space to express their racial identity. Finally, within these organizations is also the opportunity to act as an advocate on behalf of other Black students, as well as educate the larger campus about Black culture.

Access to these safe spaces can be a selling point on whether a student chooses to enroll in a particular institution (Patton, 2006a). An inability to find membership in the cultures available at PWIs has been linked to lower graduation rates of students of color (Kuh & Love, 2000). The physical space, equipped with engaged staff, can be viewed as a tangible demonstration of the value that the institution places on having students of color on campus, as these resources help to retain and graduate students (Patton, 2006a). Connected to Steele's (1997) research, these identity-safe spaces can also help to negate the outward perception of intellectual inferiority within academic spaces for students of color. Harper and Quaye (2007) posited that it is highly likely that Black male students in their study would first seek out Black student organizations prior to engaging in White or mainstream organizations. With this in mind,

institutions are encouraged to invest in organizations that will enhance the experience for

students of color, as this is likely the first point of entry in connecting with campus culture and

finding membership, for these students. This is why the active presence of culturally based

LLCs is so important on college campuses. These LLCs signal to incoming and continuing

students that the institution welcomes students of color and are invested in the success of these

students.

LLC Programmatic Structures and Components

The outcome of creating an environment that encourages a sense of belonging via the

LLC model is of great interest to the study at hand. There are very few examples of LLCs that

have been created with students of color in mind, and that are built to address the needs of this

population. Generally, if demographic data is collected within a research study, it has been used

to identify participant characteristics that may affect LLC outcomes (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003;

Inkelas, Daver, Vogt & Leonard, 2007; Stassen, 2003) not to tailor LLC programming structures

to a minoritized demographic. The next portion will discuss learning community programming

structures taken from the research literature, that have expressed the power of learning

communities, in regard to the retention of students of color. The Key LLC's four principles,

Norfolk State University's LLC structure, and the Multicultural Learning Voice Community

(MLVC) model are discussed below.

In 1998, Colorado State University (CSU) instituted the Living-Learning Key

Communities (Key), an LLC intervention for first-year students of underrepresented (ethnically

diverse, first-generation, low income) groups. Key was created with the understanding that these

underrepresented populations are most at risk of attrition. After reviewing seven cohorts of the

program, researchers found that students who engaged in the community were more likely to

return to CSU the following year, as well as more likely to graduate within a four to six-year

timeframe (Nosaka & Novak, 2014). The rationale behind these positive results can be outlined

in four principles grounded in theory, which underlie the vision, decision making, and growth of

the Key Communities. These principles are: designing with diversity in mind, maximizing

learning, voicing a powerful message, and giving honest feedback early and often.

In designing the community, administrators must design with diversity in mind, noting

that strategies used within the LLC need to be specific to the needs of underrepresented (low

income, first-generation, minoritized) students, rather than the general population (Thayer,

2000). To maximize learning opportunities, both curricular and co-curricular activities need to

be created intentionally, so that learning occurs both inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto,

1993). In voicing a powerful message, students were made aware of the expectations that faculty

and staff have of them in terms of their own success. The bar is purposely set high, and students

are encouraged to meet said standards. Lastly, it is recognized that first-generation college

students are generally less aware of context regarding the university environment, therefore it is

necessary to update students on their progress regularly. Mentors and professional staff were

also provided to the students, to assist in their college transition (Nosaka & Novak, 2014).

Outside of the four principles, Key was structured in a way that would be successful for

its particular population. Residential living, orientation, course clustering, staffing, an early

warning system, and creating programs that foster community, are all important features of the

program. As the Key Community is an LLC, all Key students were clustered to live together; the

residential aspect of the Key experience was consistently rated by participants as one of the most

beneficial aspects of the program. Living on campus allows for more time to be spent with peers

(Kuh, 2005). This is an important aspect of encouraging in-person social networking. All

students who were a part of the Key program received a two-day, intentionally designed

orientation prior to the start of the fall semester, orienting them to the high expectations of Key

and the university, connecting them with staff and faculty, and creating a sense of community

(Nosaka & Novak, 2014). Through its various intentional efforts, Key was able to retain all

students from one year to the next, as well as assist students in persisting to graduation (Nosaka

& Novak, 2014).

Norfolk State University (NSU) created and implemented LLCs over the course of eight

months, via a strategic collaboration between academic and student affairs (Ericksen, Walker,

Laws, Fitzgerald, & Burwell, 2015). The goal of the LLC implementation was to increase first-

year retention rates, increase graduation rates, and bridge the curricular and co-curricular

environments to enhance learning outside of the classroom. Additionally, the goal was to do this

in a manner that was inclusive of students, faculty, and staff. Initial assessment of the program

revealed that the retention rate between students who engaged in the LLC and those who did not

from one year to the next, demonstrated a seven percent difference in favor of students who

participated in LLCs. There was also a reported increase in the use of critical thinking skills

(Ericksen et al., 2015).

NSU was successful in its implementation for a number of reasons. In many cases, it built

onto existing structures and programs rather than creating from scratch. For example, one of the

new LLCs paired with the Honors College, which already had many of its students in a

residential setting and operated under a community-based learning ethos which made the idea of

LLC paired courses easily digestible. For EMPOWER, a social and economic justice LLC for

sophomores, the foundational courses were taken from the required classes of the social work

curriculum, which already had a source of funding as well as demonstrated success (Ericksen et al., 2015).

Previous research suggests that it is not enough to simply increase the number of students of color on college campuses. Institutions must consider the challenges these students will face in terms of racial climate, and plan in a fashion that will add the proper supports to allow students of color to persist through to graduation. LLCs are a programmatic intervention that assist in the academic and social transition of students to college by increasing student involvement and enhancing their connection to the institution (Inkelas et al., 2007).

It is through the creation of a safe space, where multiple voices are valued, that marginalized students are able to find their voice in the world of academia (Jehangir, 2009). These students often feel isolation when they enter the academy, as there is very little within the realm of academia that intersects with their home lives, and the lack of multicultural curricula often creates further marginalization. Mannerisms, speech, and ways of thinking, manifest differently in academic spaces and may cause students to question whether they can be their authentic selves (Jehangir, 2009).

Created in conjunction with TRiO Student Success Programs, the Multicultural Learning Voice Community (MLVC) serves first-generation, low-income students, many of whom identify as immigrants, as well as students of color. The qualitative multiple-case study examined seven cohorts (cohorts of 18-20 students) of the MLVC, totaling 128 students between fall 2001 and fall 2007. The approach was used to "capture students' perception of their learning experience in process, i.e., as they responded to weekly reflective writing prompts" (Jehangir, 2009, p. 38).

The MLVC format is a learning community, but not an LLC. However, the methods described could be implemented within an LLC format. Students of the MLVC take three classes, which focus on identity, community, and social agency, and allow students to construct knowledge through self-reflection and regular conversation with peers and faculty. Five themes emerged from weekly writings of the cohorts: finding place; finding voice, finding self; conflict as catalyst; bridge building; and transformational learning (Jehangir, 2009).

Three themes – identity, community, and agency – derived from a critical pedagogy framework, framed the course. A critical pedagogy framework questions the neutrality of education; looks at the relationship between knowledge, authority, and power; breaks down disciplines in order to create interdisciplinary knowledge; and "invites…marginalized groups into a dialogue that allows them to consider, evaluate, apply, reflect upon and make connections between theoretical positions about race, class and gender, and their own lived experiences" (Jehangir, 2009, p. 36). The critical pedagogy framework has implications for classroom practice and curricular design. In instances of dissonance, students were provided with avenues through the curriculum that encouraged self-reflection, such as reflective writing assignments. Leaving space in the curriculum for the personal interests and lived experiences of students, helped students to claim their voice within the academy (Jehangir, 2009).

While the current study focuses on race, it is important to consider multiple aspects of Black students' identity when implementing an LLC. In a quantitative survey study that examined academic achievement and intellectual engagement within LLCs at a research university, researchers found that students of color, specifically women of color, reported lower levels of academic achievement than their counterparts, presumed to be White, female peers. Also, when sexual orientation and religion were accounted for, students of color who identified

as lesbian/gay/bisexual or non-Christian reported a higher academic achievement level than students of color who identified as heterosexual or Christian (Pasque & Murphy, 2005). Therefore, the impact of an LLC on an individual has less to do with race alone and must also consider the multiple identities that each individual carries.

Summary

In 2001, Barbara Leigh Smith, in a report for the Association of American Colleges and Universities Conference on Learning Communities stated, "in my opinion, as a national movement, the rhetoric of [learning communities (LC's)] is far ahead of the reality in terms of seriously addressing the multiple issues of diversity" (p. 8). Seventeen years later, the scarcity of research literature surrounding this topic leads to the presumption that little is being done for Black students in the way of Learning Communities. What is rarely discussed in the literature for LLCs is to what extent LLCs can be created in a way that addresses the concerns of students of color in general, and Black students in particular. According to Kuh (2009), students with two or more risk factors when starting college, such as being academically underprepared or being from a low-income background, are less likely to participate in activities such as LLCs during college. Unfortunately, the labels of underprepared and low-income background are attached more often than not to students of color. In consideration of the campus climate into which many Black students enter, this is a topic that must be addressed by institutions in order to create a more inclusive environment for this population and increase persistence. Examples of successful LLCs for Black students can be found at CSU and NSU. Through a discussion on microaggressions I have illustrated the negative effects that an unsupportive campus climate can have on Black students, and how the institutional climate, ranging from the physical structures to the faculty and staff present at the institution, represent the value the institution places on

diversity. On paper, the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community is already comprised of

many of the features which are considered positive assets to an LLC. Through my research, I

explored how students are actually experiencing the community.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The present phenomenological study provided insight into the lived experiences of four first-year and two transfer students who participated in the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community at Rutgers University. Phenomenological research examines the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of those participating in that phenomenon, allowing for in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2013). In this chapter I discuss my philosophical worldview and research approach, sampling methods, participant recruitment and selection, data collection and analysis, researcher positionality, site profile, and a summary of participants.

Philosophical Worldview and Research Approach

The researcher's epistemological perspective is that of social constructivism. Social constructivism states that individuals seek to understand the world in which they exist, creating their own meanings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the researcher understands that participants have multiple realities and viewpoints and looks to represent those perspectives via rich, descriptive text (Kafle, 2011). Qualitative research design allows the researcher to understand and explore the context or setting of the participants, and the meaning participants ascribe to a social problem. This occurs through the gathering of personal information and findings are interpreted from the perspective of the researcher, thus researcher background should be taken into consideration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Within this interpretive framework, the investigator and the investigated are connected in the construction of findings, with the expectation that the investigator is a passionate participant. The research questions, data collection and analysis, and writings of this study are informed by this qualitative, interpretive research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Purposive Sampling

        Participant selection in hermeneutic phenomenological research requires that participants

have lived experience that pertains to the focus of the study, who are willing to discuss said

experience, and who are distinct enough that stories will be rich and varied (van Manen, 2016).

The sample for this study was purposive and nonrandom, as subjects were selected because they

met the predetermined criteria (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 1993), which was that they must have

been enrolled in two specific courses -- Introduction to Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen and

Introduction to Africana Studies -- and they must have identified as a first-year student or

transfer student. Participants were also asked to identify their race as another important aspect of

sampling criterion. The inquiry was open-ended, and so participants could identify themselves

as they felt appropriate. As shown in Appendix B, this question was found within the

demographic survey that participants completed after accepting the interview.

Phenomenological sample sizes may be as small as three participants and as large as 15

participants. The number of participants necessary varies on the data collected as the study

progresses (Creswell, 2014). The study included six students -- four first-year students and two

transfer students.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

        As assistant director of living-learning communities and academic initiatives, I have

access to the contact information of all LLC members. Participants were made aware of the study

via email. The email explained the purpose of the study, data collection method, and listed

researcher contact information. I also introduced myself at the fall LLC orientation in September

and attended two class sessions of Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen early in the semester, so I

had some prior exposure to the participants. The first class session involved my listening to the

lecture while the second class session involved my acting as a typist/recorder for our annual

focus group, which takes place for all LLCs. The context of both sessions were unaffiliated with

this study. However, my hope was that this two-pronged method of email and in-person contact

would make students more amenable to participating in the study; I also wished, to begin to build

rapport with potential participants. At the time of outreach there were 14 students in the LLC.

Two of the students were only enrolled in one of the courses connected to the LLC, rather than

the sample criterion of being enrolled in both courses and were therefore ineligible for the study.

I initially reached out to nine of the 12 eligible students within the LLC and seven students

agreed to the study, however one student did not show up for the interview and did not

reschedule. Two other students did not respond to the initial email within the designated

timeframe in which interviews were scheduled to occur. Outreach verbiage is included in

Appendix A. The nine students were chosen with input from peer mentors via text, inquiring

which students in the LLC were most active in the LLC. Mentors stated that all members were

generally active in the community. From this information I surmised that any of the nine

students that I selected would have some LLC related experiences to discuss via interview.

Again, the phenomenological approach calls for three to 15 participants, so six participants were

well within the accepted range (Creswell, 2014). Email outreach occurred in early December,

prior to finals. This may not have been an ideal time to seek participants as interested parties

were likely concerned about impending exams and seemed to be less flexible with their

schedules.   No incentives were provided. Participants confirmed their participation via email.

All participants were sent a text message the day of the interview, reminding them of the

appointment. Once participants arrived at the interview, we engaged in small talk while they got

settled. I then provided the consent form. Participants reviewed and signed the consent form prior to the beginning of the interview.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Participants were invited to engage in a single interview. Data was collected via individual face-to-face interviews between December 9, 2018 and December 16, 2018, audio-recorded using Rev, and transcribed verbatim. The first two interviews were transcribed by hand while the remaining transcriptions were done via YouTube transcription and then corrected by the researcher. All written records, including consent forms, were stored at my home in a document case. All electronic records were stored on a password-protected laptop.

The interview protocol consisted of questions that aligned with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) suggestion that phenomenological questions be broadly stated and ask what the participants experienced as well as the contexts or situations in which they experienced the phenomena. Phenomenological research design usually requires in depth or multiple interviews (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were scheduled for up to 90 minutes and began and ended with a script (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The actual interviews took between 42 and 66 minutes, averaging 54 minutes. Although I asked clarifying questions during the interview, there were still some items that needed further clarification after the interview. Rather than scheduling multiple interviews, I emailed students regarding statements they made during the initial interview which needed clarification. The decision to email participants versus schedule an additional interview was because a full interview was not warranted to follow up on singular questions while reviewing transcripts.

Interviews were conducted in a reserved room on the campus where the Paul Robeson LLC resides (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). I considered a space that would be free from

background noise and unnecessary distractions. The focus of the interviews was related to the research questions and inquired about what students learned about themselves and others as a result of participation in classroom and residential environments, as well as which aspects of the experience had the most impact, contributing to their overall development. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focused on student background, discussion in the residence hall, discussion in the classroom, discussion across environments, and impactful activities. The protocol is included in detail within Appendix C. Field notes were kept to a minimum during the interview so as not to distract from the interviewer listening to the interviewee (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Overarching themes and takeaways were documented in the notes section of my phone immediately after each individual interview (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). All written transcripts were labeled with the student's pseudonym for the study, and the date. Participants had the opportunity to identify a pseudonym via the demographic survey. Peer mentors were given a pseudonym, chosen by the researcher.

Study and Consent Procedures

Prior to participation in the study, prospective participants received an informed consent form which stated the purpose of the study, procedures, risks, duration, and voluntary nature. The consent process was ongoing throughout the study, with the understanding that participants could withdraw their consent at any time, without penalty. There were no known risks to participating in this study; private, identifiable information about the study participants has been kept confidential and carefully safeguarded. Possible benefits to participation in the study included an opportunity to reflect on one's own identity as a Black student, their role in society, and what they have learned in regard to Black history and culture.

Data Analysis Procedures

Hermeneutic phenomenology does not accept the approach of bracketing out, or setting aside preconceived views and perceptions, as described by Husserl. Instead, Heidegger suggested that these preconceptions cannot be divorced from the individual and are crucial to the analytical process (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology states that the researcher should address biases and implicit assumptions related to the research, acknowledging them on an ongoing basis, and making them explicit. It is suggested that researchers reflect on their interpretations via consistent journaling (Laverty, 2003). Memos, noted in NVivo, served as my form of journaling throughout the coding process. I utilized my positionality statement below to make my preconceptions more explicit to both myself and the reader, as well as reflected on these in the creation of my discussion section, as my interpretations led me to determine what was of most value in regards to implications for practice and future research.

It was not possible to follow a step by step process for the purposes of analyzing the data utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenology approach as "Hermeneutic avoids method for method's sake and does not have a step by step method or analytic requirements" (Kafle, 2011, p. 191). Instead there are guidelines recommending specific research activities: (1) commitment to a lasting concern, (2) maintaining focus on the research question in mind, (3) investigating the lived experience, (4) writing and rewriting descriptive iterations of the phenomena , (5) and consideration of parts and whole, or utilizing the hermeneutic circle (Kafle, 2011).

I first organized and prepared the data for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The digital audio files from all semi-structured qualitative interviews were transcribed by the interviewer and uploaded to NVivo, a statistical and qualitative data analysis software. By listening to the files during the transcription process, I was able to set myself back in the space

where the interviews took place, thereby beginning the analysis process (Miles & Huberman,1984). Each participant received their transcript for review, and they were asked if they chose to make any edits to their statements. Five of the six participants responded. No participants chose to make edits. I then read through each participant's transcript in its entirety. This first reading was for the purposes of reading for comprehension of the phenomena (van Manen, 2016). I also expanded on my initial field notes or memos. Memo notes included follow-up questions for participants; my perceptions of what the participants stated, including value judgments; comparison to answers a pilot group provided around similar points; and relating participants' statements to the research literature and my personal understanding of the inner workings of Rutgers' LLCs. Memoing is an opportunity to record notes about what the researcher experiences while collecting and reflecting on the research process and is an opportunity to further clarify each interview setting (Miles & Huberman,1984). I then reread transcripts and began to engage in inductive coding, using the raw data to identify codes to form into categories or themes, (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and in vivo coding, utilizing words and concepts used by participants (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) as codes. This second reading was for the purposes of finding statements that were most closely representative of the phenomena of study (van Manen, 2016). A third reading allowed for a check of consistency of coding and collapsing of codes.   Codes were created and modified throughout the coding process until all transcripts were reviewed, creating a code book. I then reviewed my codebook to identify categories which were most salient and addressed my research questions. Once I identified categories that addressed topics most discussed by participants, yet were still aligned with the overarching research questions, I chose quotes illustrative of that perspective to create rich textured description (Kafle, 2011).

Trustworthiness

Maintaining research process quality is one of the most important aspects of hermeneutic phenomenological research, in order to present findings that are representative of participants' lived experiences (Kafle, 2011). To ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness, I tested emergent findings by carefully reading the data and looking for information that ran counter to the patterns that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and presented this information in my findings. I triangulated data by conducting numerous interviews, as each participant provided a nuanced perspective on my interview questions, allowing me to identify patterns or the underlying essence experienced by participants in the Paul Robeson LLC (Patton, 2002). I chose not to share individual descriptive participant profiles within the presentation of the study, as the pool was small and might compromise participant confidentiality. Instead, I provide a summarized participant profile. Finally, another measure of analytical rigor and trustworthiness is engaging in the Hermeneutic Cycle. The Hermeneutic Cycle consists of reading, writing, and reflective interpretation (Laverty, 2003). Chapter four of the study is the result of writing and rewriting of the descriptive iterations of the phenomena, to provide strength, richness, and depth of data (van Manen, 2016; Kafle, 2011).

Positionality

Prior to conducting this study, I facilitated multiple focus groups with our LLCs as a routine job responsibility in my capacity as assistant director for LLCs. During one of the focus groups, a student made what sounded like a simple statement to some, which was that she loved living in the Paul Robeson LLC because she was able to walk around with her bonnet. A bonnet is a hair covering that many Black women wear to protect their hair from damage, particularly at night while sleeping. The bonnet may also be worn around the house in some cases, to keep the

hair in place. I identified this as a significant statement, being a Black woman myself. The student went on to state that she felt comfortable in the residential space of the Paul Robeson LLC because she would not receive questions about why she wore the bonnet or what it was, as it was a normal part of Black culture. It was in that moment that I truly began to understand the impact that cultural LLCs have for some of our students. This informs my positionality in that I inherently believe in the positive impact of LLCs. Concurrently, the LLC program must have both the necessary structures in place and buy-in from LLC members in order for a positive impact to occur.

My social identities or group memberships as a Black, Jamaican-American, educated woman of a middle-class socioeconomic status, who is responsible for living-learning communities, all play a role in how I perceived participants and how they perceived me. Due to my Black identity I assumed participants would treat me as an insider, and that I would be able to create rapport and gain insight into their experiences with relative ease, as long as I created a well-designed interview protocol. Shared attributes would include race, access to college, connection to the Paul Robeson LLC, and for some, gender.   My outward appearance as a Black woman and assumed understanding of Black culture may have provided access to information that participants might not have shared otherwise, reducing researcher affects (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I assumed that a number of my social identities could give me access, but I also understood that in general, students are continuously juggling multiple priorities such as extracurriculars and part-time jobs on top of their academics. Therefore, I did not take access to participants as a given. Previous experience with piloting questions also helped me to understand that students do not always make themselves readily available, regardless of one's insider identities.

My ethnic identity as an American born to a Jamaican mother, meant that growing up, Jamaican culture was present in my everyday life, and my close friend group throughout my adolescence consisted of children from West Indian homes. Although my American father was also present in the home, I do not have a recollection of extensive conversations around American Black history. Those conversations were mainly left to my schooling. Black history was generally taught in the month of February, during Black History Month. This is where familiar figures such as MLK, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X were discussed on repeat. Recently I began wondering about the breadth and variety of Black historical figures, recognizing that I had had a limited understanding of Black history in my youth, and did not have an awareness of blind spots until later in life. This positionality informs my work; it made me inquisitive about what Paul Robeson LLC members experienced regarding Black history and culture prior to coming to Rutgers, and then again while in the LLC.

"Backyard research" is research that occurs in one's own organization (Glesne & Peshkin, 2015). An imbalance in power between researcher and participants is one potential byproduct of this type of research, as well as compromising the researcher's ability to disclose information; this potential should be remedied with multiple strategies for validation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I do not believe that my position as assistant director for LLCs had a positive or negative effect on the way that participants responded, however I cannot prove this to be the case. There are always perceptions and implications associated with our identities. As I oversee the entire LLC program, including the hiring of peer mentors, participants may have opted to share positive experiences of the LLC rather than negative aspects. However, findings demonstrate that rather than fabricating responses, participants who did not experience particular aspects of the LLC stated that they were unable to provide examples. To build rapport and create

a sense of trust, written consent forms made participants aware that I would willingly erase anything they chose to redact from their interview. No participants chose to do so. However, one participant chose not to provide GPA in one of my follow-up inquiries, demonstrating that students understood they could participate in the study as they saw fit.

Though the topic of cultural LLCs is of great importance to me, I strove for objectivity by having an awareness of my biases and values. I believe in the power of LLCs and counterspaces, and by conducting this study I expected to shed light on the experiences of Black students within an LLC focused on studying the African diaspora, in the hopes that other institutions will consider creating these counterspaces on their campuses. Though the experience of Paul Robeson LLC members is exclusive to this specific group of students, and not generalizable, there can perhaps be transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to demonstrate a variety of experiences, I included the full range of participant examples, including those that ran counter to most participants. I also used the tool of reflexivity to think about what portions of my writings included my interpretations and knowledge of the program, versus information directly provided by participants. In order to present an authentic voice of the phenomena, I used participant quotations in chapter four in order to exemplify how participants experienced the LLC. I utilized chapter 5 for my interpretation of the LLC experience, however still utilizing participant data to inform my interpretations. In the following chapter, I present a synthesis of the data, further elaborating on central points by clustering themes, and including direct significant statements of participants, to describe the essence or common experiences of the Paul Robeson LLC participants (Moustakas, 1994). This includes a textural description of the experiences within the LLC, i.e. what they experienced, as well as a structural description of their experiences, i.e. how they experienced the LLC, and a combination of both to express the essence (Moustakas, 1994).

Site Profile

The research project was done at Rutgers University, a leading, co-ed, public research university in New Jersey. The campus is situated between New Brunswick and Piscataway, across 3,600 acres. Total enrollment is 55,000 students, of which 36,000 are undergraduates. The school is moderately competitive with an admission rate close to 58% of applicants. The institution is recognized for its ethnic diversity: 42% of students are white; 29.3%, Asian, 14.5%, Hispanic/Latino; and 7.9%, African American. 9% of the student body are international students. 43% of the students live on-campus (CollegeData, n.d.).

Summary Participant Profile

Table 1

Summary Participant Profile

Category	Participants / Profile
Participant Pseudonyms:	Alysse, Moesha, Wanda, Emir, Isaiah, Tracion
Self-Identified Race:	1 African, 1 African American/Black, 2 Black, 2 African American
Age:	4 participants were age 18, 2 participants age 20 and above
Class Status:	4 first-year students, 2 transfer students
Gender[1]:	3 males, 3 females
Origin:	4 participants from NJ (1 participant described that they were from the most dangerous part of their town), 1 out of state, 1 international
Potential Majors[2]:	biology, communications, computer science, social work, 2 undecided
Pre-College Friend Group:	91% Native Africans and 8% African-American, 1% other - African American - Black women, who identify as either Black Americans or Caribbean 100% Black - Mostly Black and Hispanic - Very diverse
Self-Reported GPA[3]	- High school GPAs: 3.0; 3.72, 4.102 - Fall 2018 Term GPA: 2.5, 3.25, 3.6, 3.83 - Spring 2019 Term and Cumulative GPAs: term 3.125 and cum 2.833; term 3.16 and cum 3.206; 2.45 term and 2.7 cum

[1] Participants were not asked to identify gender via demographic survey. This information is based on information provided on LLC application materials.
[2] Participants were not asked to identify major via demographic survey. This information is based on information provided on LLC application materials.
[3] Missing GPA information is due to one of the following: participant unresponsive, participant unsure of GPA, participant unwilling to share information

Chapter 4

Findings

The Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community consists of first-year, transfer, and continuing students. In this study, four first-year students and two transfer students participated in individual interviews in order for the researcher to ascertain a better understanding of the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community experience. In analyzing the transcripts from students' interviews, the following themes emerged: perceptions of success, belonging and connectedness, and hidden figures.

Perceptions of Success

Participants within the Paul Robeson LLC utilized one another's collective talents in an effort to succeed academically at Rutgers University. The low-stakes environment, nurtured by peer mentor staff, boosted participants' confidence and helped them to feel more prepared as they worked to transition to Rutgers University. The theme of *perceptions of success* emerged, as all six participants were able to describe how the LLC environment contributed to their academic success at Rutgers University in some manner. The LLC environment includes not only the residence hall, but related resources outside of the residence hall.

Participants stated that communal study sessions, led by LLC participants, encouraged test preparation. Participant Alysse mentioned the study group several times during the interview.

Alysse: We're all really close. Everyone, we all go out to eat together. Everyone supports each other in every way possible. We actually made a study group, every Sunday at 8:30pm, and we go down to the basement, and we basically do our homework together, help each other out. And even besides that, we go down

to the basement almost every night to work on our homework, and we have a goal

that just about everyone gets a 3.0 GPA or makes Dean's list.

Participants relayed that the LLC linked courses were often a part of conversation.

Interviewer: So, you to talk about class and Africana a lot, and PR a lot. Can you

give me any more depth in regards to that?

Wanda: Africana, we really just talk about like our notes. Cuz…it's open note

class basically, so we just talk about oh do you have this, do you have that, um oh

did I miss that, I didn't catch that kind of stuff.

Being able to assemble quickly for the purposes of studying, helped alleviate stress and promote

calm around academic anxieties.

Interviewer: Are there any topics that are being discussed now that you find

resonate within the community, and what do those conversations sound like?

Tracion: … as of like maybe yesterday or the other day, we've been talking

mainly about like our like classes, and the finals. Like the final season and how

it's kind of stressing us out. But like we're trying to like, like calm that down.

Like the stress, because it's a test. I'm like, if we feel more prepared for ourselves,

we try to prepare each other. Like as a community. By like studying together.

And like we try to like, like, make everything calm like there's no issue. And

that's what we've been talking about like probably the last week. Talking about

finals and the situation about finals.

Participants also stated that their time together also created opportunities for informal advisement

and provided a means for students to identify potential career paths.

Moesha: Like yesterday we met. We were talking about what's our major. What

we gonna do with our major when we get it? And then the people that was like

undecided, we was like trying to help them to see like what they like, what they

don't know. So yeah. If it's not about Paul Robeson or the class, it's about like

school related or it's just like being social just to get away from the school stuff

for a while.

The foundational pillars of the Paul Robeson LLC include scholarship, culture, and

service, based on the legacy of Paul Robeson. Although students did not outright name the pillars

within their responses, they demonstrated awareness of the fact that Paul Robeson excelled in

multiple areas. A true Renaissance man, he spoke multiple languages, and displayed talents as an

orator, lawyer, actor, athlete, and civil rights leader. Many participants reported the utility of

living in a space such as the LLC, which cultivated a community of learners, specifically with a

conscious mentality of not only surviving in the college environment but excelling in the college

environment.

This understanding of intention manifested in the creation of communal study sessions.

During these sessions students of the LLC gathered in the basement of the building's lounge, to

connect regarding the courses they were intentionally clustered in by the Learning Communities

Office, including the seminar and Introduction to Africana Studies. It is important to note that

the formation of study groups occurred independently of scheduled peer mentor programs and

arose out of the need to exchange and compare notes, assist one another with homework, and

facilitate test preparation. Tracion noted that students' natural inclination was to stress about

upcoming exams such as finals, however, having the support of LLC members for the purposes

of preparation, promoted a focus on maintaining calm, rather than stress. Students took the

incentive to schedule this time with one another until it became routine. This time together

propelled members forward academically, while creating another layer for existing friendships.

Outside of homework and test prep, topics ranged, and included informal advisement within the

peer group, as well. As stated by Moesha, students who were perceived to have a better

understanding of their potential choice of major, assisted those who were undecided, to begin to

think about career paths and major choice.

Admittedly, studying in a group setting does not work for everyone. Wanda reported that

studying in a group setting was not always helpful as she preferred to study alone and found that

a less social, quieter environment, was more effective. Alysse noted that as the semester

progressed, these study sessions became less social and instead began to specifically move

towards accomplishing a more academic function; the goal of the community was for everyone

to obtain a 3.0 GPA. In reflecting on past educational settings, Isaiah noted that being

surrounded by peers who he considered "Black scholars," inspired him, and had a positive effect

on his maturation. Not only that, but Isaiah considered the students of the LLC to be "smart"

which encouraged him to think about himself in this way. This speaks to the power of

surrounding oneself with like-minded individuals. Although Isaiah identified himself as a good

student, the four-year college environment proved to require a different skill set than the

community college environment. Isaiah determined early on that good study habits and

organization are necessary in order to do well at Rutgers University, and being surrounded by

individuals who had similar academic goals and held one another accountable, facilitated the

ability to focus academically. Similarly, Tracion highlighted how peers not only assisted with

study techniques, but also helped with time management.

Interviewer: Do you think you have changed after participating in the LLC? So,

you talked about confidence. Are there any other ways that you've changed after

participating and if so, what?

Tracion: So, um basically like my time management as well because like, like we

also talked about like oh you have to be on time to class like you shouldn't be

asleep like or like what are you doing on your free time? Are you like watching

Netflix or are you studying? Like doing different things like to basically help me

out because my time management before coming here was horrible. Like I'll be

late to everything. And they've also like, because like my neighbors who live

across me, they'll knock on my door make sure I'm up. Also, my roommate too

because I can't wake up on an alarm. I don't know why. But he'll help me out.

He'll be like, wake me up. But that's basically it.

Interviewer: Okay. So, time management. What do you believe has been the cause

in the change for time management?

Tracion: Um basically having like support of like my peers because like they don't

want to see me fall they want to see me successful just like I want to see them

successful so it's like when we help each other out we can't like, nothing like,

nothing bad is gonna happen. Like if we help each other out we're gonna be

successful.

Conversations with peers prompted Tracion to question whether or not he was best

utilizing time outside of the classroom in a productive manner, that facilitated the

accomplishment of his goals. Per Tracion, members of the LLC supported one another in

various ways. According to participants, in addition to the independent, member-run study

sessions, the peer mentor role played a significant part in the lives of LLC members' academic

success. Peer mentor Nina was named more often than peer mentor West. This may have been

due to how students were allocated amongst mentors. A number of participants discussed the

ways in which peer mentors helped them stay on track academically, utilizing conversations

about LLC members' academics as an entry point from which mentors could pivot to other

pertinent topics in LLC members' lives. Participant Wanda noted two academically driven

interactions with the peer mentors. These included a journal event, which encouraged students to

get themselves organized for the semester, as well as an offer by peer mentor Nina to review an

Expository Writing essay prior to submission. Wanda felt this was a kind gesture and appeared

to be heartened by the peer mentor's willingness to actively take part in her success with the

course. Tracion discussed the ways in which Nina was helpful in assisting him in creating a

class schedule that spoke to personal interests. This interaction increased his confidence and

influenced his choice of major.

> Tracion: So, um like [Nina] came to me one day and like she, we actually like,
>
> she worked on my schedule…and she was saying like what will fit me from like
>
> what she knows of me. So, she would like pick, like this class. Like this is a
>
> class you can actually like succeeded in. So, like that made me like feel more
>
> confident, or like what I should actually take in for my major kind of, because I'm
>
> undecided right now. And it's probably…. Like she had a impact on me like on
>
> what major I'm able to take.

For Moesha, conversations with the peer mentor inspired her to imagine possibilities, identify

what she enjoyed, and to think about how those possibilities could be mirrored in her daily life

and future career.

Belonging and Connectedness

Study participants noted that peer mentors, the assigned academic advisor, Paul Robeson Cultural Center staff, and the assigned instructors, helped students feel a sense of belonging to varying degrees. LLC members who noted a sense of belonging due to a particular resource provider (peer mentor, cultural center, etc.) were able to name this connection only when there was a mutual investment on the part of both the LLC member *and* resource provider. For example, some participants did not have contact with the academic advisor and therefore could not speak to how the advisor would have influenced their sense of belonging, or they attended programs facilitated by the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, which gave them access to resources and other students, but the participants did not demonstrate interest in regularly attending events or did not realize that the Paul Robeson Cultural Center was responsible for creating the events they did attend. Rutgers University's status as a historically White institution did not discourage students from feeling a sense of belonging prior to arriving at the institution and instead, the *size* of the institution seemed to be of more concern to some participants. However, participants noted their advantage as compared to their peers who were not in the LLC, stating that their ability to live and learn with other Black students in some way contributed to their sense of belonging at the institution.

Peer Mentors

Perhaps equally important as academic success, students relayed how peer mentors were instrumental in helping them feel less alone. Several students used the term "sister," or "Big Sister" when referring to peer mentor Nina, "friend" when describing the relationship they had with the peer mentors as a whole, and the term "family," when describing the type of environment they considered the LLC to be. Specifically, the peer mentors' ability to listen and

validate mentees' feelings and experiences, helped participants feel that they belonged within the

living-learning community and that they had someone to confer with as the academic year

progressed.

> Moesha: And Nina, every time I have a one-and-one with her like I leave feeling
>
> like… I just leave feeling better, not not [*sic*] about anything in particular but like
>
> just that you have someone that you could talk to you know. Like just about
>
> anything. To just sit and talk for a couple hours.

Similarly, Alysse stated,

> I see them um even past peer mentors. I could go to them about anything. Talk to
>
> them. Nina, I see her as my big sister. Because I always see her around. Um I tell
>
> her every time something, something's going on in my life….West, he's one of
>
> the sweetest people on the floor. He's so nice. His door is always open. He's
>
> always willing to help in any way, shape, or form.

Many students mentioned the ease with which they were able to converse with the mentors.

Although they knew peer mentors were required to have one-on-one conversations as a part of

their job responsibilities, those conversations did not seem strained or forced. They had a natural

flow which allowed the conversation to meander.

> Emir: The peer mentors you know, we have the one-on-ones. So, with the one-
>
> on-ones I guess they're supposed to ask specific questions and we're supposed to
>
> give them answers to the questions, but the conversations really just go wherever
>
> it takes. So, I mean like we could be, I could be talking about like a specific
>
> topic, like why are you here at Rutgers, and we start talking, and we like go into a
>
> different thing. It's like, it's more. I don't feel like I'm talking to a peer mentor

when I talk to a peer mentor. It's like we're having a conversation and you know

I just feel like I'm comfortable talking to them so. They really, they they [*sic*]

brought comfort for me. They brought comfort.

According to participants, mentors not only had the ability to provide an understanding of

Rutgers University resources, such as how to use the bus system, but also made students aware

of campus events, connecting students to one another and the campus in general. Nina also

incorporated students into her own life by making LLC members aware of organizations she was

involved in, encouraging students to support her in her own endeavors. Furthermore, Moesha

discussed the role that mentors played in connecting outliers. As is expected with transitioning

from one environment to another, a few members of the community needed more time to adjust

to the residence hall environment, and initially had difficulty connecting with other members of

the community. Per Moesha, these individuals also had diverging interests from the majority of

community members and did not seamlessly integrate into the community at first. In one-on-one

conversations, peer mentor Nina utilized time with Moesha to inquire about the nature of

Moesha's relationships with other community members. Were these outliers being included in

excursions? Were they being invited to informal conversations in the hall? Nina asked that

Moesha be more mindful of how she interacted with students who Moesha perceived to be

outliers, in an effort to be inclusive of all those living within the community.

With this concern about transitioning from one institution to another in mind, one of the

questions asked of participants was what expectations they had about belonging, prior to arriving

at Rutgers University, a historically White institution. All study participants, with the exception

of the first interviewee, Emir, received the definition of belonging during the interview when the

question pertaining to sense of belonging was asked. After this first interview, I realized that it

would be best to define the term "belonging" for participants, in order to have a shared understanding of the term. The following definition of sense of belonging was shared with participants. Sense of belonging "refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

Some participants vocalized their awareness prior to coming to Rutgers University, of its historically White status. Even so, they anticipated finding friends, regardless of race or gender, stating that finding someplace to fit in on campus would perhaps be challenging, considering institutional size, and that it would take some effort on their part. However, those who had siblings that previously attended Rutgers University, or had entrée into programs such as Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) or the Paul Robeson Leadership Institute, established friendships prior to beginning their fall semester and stated that this jumpstart allowed them to seamlessly transition to Rutgers University, from a social perspective.

Familial Environment

Once at Rutgers University, participants found a familial environment amongst members of the Paul Robeson LLC. Although the role of the peer mentors is not explicitly named in the statements below, peer mentors laid the groundwork for this LLC residential experience, and were instrumental in creating the named familial environment. One participant, Wanda, stated that she reserved the label of "family" for those within her bloodline, but nevertheless, she did feel close with members of the LLC. The following participants used the label of family to describe the environment.

Interviewer: Okay. And would you say that the LLC has assisted with your sense of belonging?

Alysse: Definitely.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how that has happened?

Alysse: They kind of made it like I had a family away from home and we're all just so close to each other, so I do feel like I do belong here. I do have somewhere where I feel appreciated. I feel loved. That I basically can, I don't have to force myself to try to be somewhere I don't want to be. I already have that here.

Tracion echoes the sentiment of family.

Interviewer: If someone dropped in from another planet and asked you to tell them about the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community experience, how would you describe it to them?

Tracion: I would tell them that it's a really great experience, like so far, because like we get together all the time like as a family like it's a family outside of your home so like we come together as a community even though we're a small group. We all get together, we talk, we have different um conversations about what's going on in our like in our communities. We relate on different topics. Um I would say they're able to like.... You're able to feel comfortable in a small, like a small space environment without having any worries about oh um like I don't know being like being downgraded by like whites maybe or like being looked down upon.

In the statements above, Alysse highlights the importance of being in a space where she feels

accepted and does not have to "force" herself to be there while Tracion lauds the fact that he will

not be "downgraded" or "looked down" upon in the LLC. This alludes to the importance of

being in a Black-centered space. This is further reinforced by the statements below.

> Interviewer: So, if someone dropped in from another planet and asked you to tell
>
> them about the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community experience, how
>
> would you describe it?
>
> Emir: Me, um I'm African American so, me being African American, it was
>
> comforting for me to be in the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community
>
> because there's other people like me in the school that isn't really a lot of people
>
> that look like me so just being surrounded by other people that look like me and
>
> we, I can relate to them in a way that some other people can't. That really um that
>
> helped me a lot. Um. Everybody's supportive. Um. Everybody's like together.
>
> Like nobody does anything without asking everybody if they want to do it. You
>
> know you have certain like, back in high school you would have certain cliques,
>
> like oh this group, that group, that group, but in the community, everybody is one
>
> clique, so we all move together. We study together, go out together, you know it's
>
> really just like one family, to me.

When comparing her experience to that of her Black peers outside of the LLC, Alysse stated the

following:

> Interviewer: It's only been four months but how do you think you're doing in
>
> terms of academic and social life here at the university?

Alysse: I actually think I'm doing great! Better than most freshmen because I

know a lot of the freshmen who don't live in the LLC, they say like they wish they

lived here because um we're automatically surrounded with people of color and

also because we just, we're so close that it's like you would think that we knew

each other before the LLC.

Key statements here are: a family away from home, feeling appreciated, feeling

comforted in an environment with people who look like them, being able to relate to those

individuals, moving as one group, and feeling supported. Participants relayed that they were

aware of the historically White status of the institution prior to attendance, and they expected to

create friendships on campus regardless of race identity. However, they found comfort in being

with a group of people who specifically "looked like them" and left them "feel[ing] appreciated."

Prior to coming to Rutgers University, Moesha was at another institution where most of the

students in her residence hall were White. She expressed that she did not feel connected to the

community. She attributed this to the fact that no one made an effort to connect with one

another, and not directly to the difference in race. Her initial concern about coming to Rutgers

revolved around that same theme of connection. However, after some time at Rutgers she felt

connected to and comfortable around members of the hall, and in large part due to the fact that

students looked like her and could relate to past events in her life.

Moesha: …my fear…. It was about like having people around you that you like

connect with and like you just feel the urge of like comfort and you don't feel like

out of place. Cuz like for my old school like I had people on my floor. Like there

was like many different race, but mostly White, and like I didn't feel comfortable

just go in my hallway and just sit there, just knock on somebody door. But it's just

here, just like even if you just want to have a conversation, you weren't sure about

something, you could just like, it was just a sense of like comfort. And then like

being able to take like the same classes where like we take the Africana Studies

class together so like whenever we have a test we study together. So, it's like, that

aspect of it is great and just like have someone that you could like connect to cuz

not a lot of university have that, just a floor with just Black kids that you could

just be comfortable and connect to.

Interviewer: Okay. Got you. So, um you said at your last institution you didn't

necessarily feel comfortable going out onto the floor.

Moesha: I mostly stayed in my room. I didn't have a connection with my floor

like I have here cuz like my floor it was mostly like. Not saying because it was

White kids but it was just like you know like it wasn't no connection really there.

Interviewer: Okay, why do you think that was?

Moesha: Um I think like nobody made a effort. Like I would only see them at

like floor meetings so it's like nobody made an effort and the connection just

wasn't there.

While study participants did recognize that social class and ethnicity varied within the

LLC, there was an assumption that people who looked like them may have experienced similar

things in life, providing a common link and natural foundation to build upon. This sense of

family and ability to relate instantly may not actually be the case for all LLC members. There is

a tendency to assume homogeneity within groups, when in fact there may be more within-group

differences than between-group differences (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Per Moesha, some of the

outliers of the community needed more time to acclimate. However, many of the participants described Blackness as an important attribute of the community, to some extent.

> Interviewer: Can you describe any other ways that uh the community has been supportive?
>
> Alysse: They've introduced me to a lot of different organizations on campus as well as like individual people, period…. When I got here I was kind of like scared that I wouldn't meet anyone that looked like me, that act like me. But they actually, they made it easier for me to go out and put myself out there, if that makes sense.
>
> Interviewer: Mhm. How did they make it easier?
>
> Alysse: Like being able to come back to my dorm every day and know that okay, I'm going to be with people that I relate to. They made it easier for me to go out and see that like other people that look like me, just go up to them. Hey, you can come by. We have a lot of people that come to the LLC all the time. And even people, even people that um don't look like me, I still feel like they encourage me to be more inclusive to just talk to random people because you never know who you might be talking to.

Isaiah highlighted the voices of students *outside* of the LLC who were managing acclimation issues.

> Interviewer: How has the PR LLC assisted you if at all in connecting with other students of color on campus?
>
> Isaiah: ...I was already like fine with communicating with other, I mean obviously to Black students.…Like I would hear other people's stories of where they live

and how they feel like they don't belong on their floor because they're the only

Black person so I guess I would tell them, oh, join the Paul Robeson LLC. Like

you'll have people who look just like you.

In Isaiah's experience, connecting with other students of color on campus did not present

as an issue for him. However, according to Isaiah, students outside of the LLC reported that they

were unable to find community in their residence hall due to the lack of Black students on the

floor.   In this way, it seems Paul Robeson LLC members may be at an advantage early on by

living in a space where they have ready access to individuals who may have similar cultural

experiences as them.

This commonality of wanting to reside in a Black-centered space seemed most apparent,

as multiple study participants described a negative incident which took place on campus. During

the incident, a group of individuals from outside of the University used what participants

described as racist, homophobic, and misogynistic language towards Rutgers University

students, as they walked through one of the plazas on campus. Some LLC members personally

experienced the incident and subsequently shared photos on the Black Rutgers University

groupchat and LLC groupchat, of individuals holding signs with perceived homophobic

language. After receiving word of the incident, LLC members came together in person to

discuss the incident, and how it affected them. They reflected on past experiences they'd

encountered in life and considered how to best react in such situations.

Interviewer: Okay. And what were like some of the major takeaways from that

conversation for you?

Alysse: Don't let these people get a rise out of you….

Interviewer: Like through acts of like violence or? When you say a rise, what do

you mean?

Alysse: Don't let them see you angry. Don't let them know that they're getting to

you. Violence definitely. Um yeah basically don't let these people make you the

character that they already have in their heads that you are. You know, they say

that we're angry, we're violent, we're ignorant. Don't let them have any reason

to truly believe that.

Alysse infers here that there is a stereotype that Black people will act out or retaliate

through violence. Rather than allowing them to "get a rise out of you," these students conferred

on how they should go about handling the situation in a manner that would contradict the

stereotypes about Black people. It is in instances such as this that having a place to discuss

pertinent issues and *be* with individuals who might be able to relate, seem most profound.

Advisement

Upon arriving at Rutgers University, students found that the Paul Robeson LLC not only

connected them to other Black students, but Black faculty and staff as well. Participants stated

that faculty and staff connected to the LLC were invested in assisting them with finding

somewhere to belong, whether that be through club/organization affiliation, at the Paul Robeson

Cultural Center, and/or within the residence hall. Members of the Paul Robeson LLC reported

that they were provided an academic advisor whose primary responsibility involved assisting

students with acquiring classes that suited their interests, as well as planning their long-term four

to six-year academic trajectory. Students participating in the EOF program stated that they were

not assigned an academic advisor through the LLC, as EOF participants received advisement

through the EOF program instead.

Study participants who received advisement remarked on the ability of the advisor to ask questions which were simple at their core but required students to be introspective and reflect on their abilities, desires, and what they hoped to accomplish at Rutgers University. The advisor asked students to confront aspects of themselves that would deepen their understanding of themselves. The task of identifying a potential future via class registration seemed overwhelming to most participants. However, the academic advisor was able to engage with participants in a way that they eventually became more comfortable with not only identifying career aspirations, but also determining ways that they could be more active via extracurriculars, at the institution. Interactions ranged from one visit, to multiple visits. Emir stated that working with the academic advisor had the greatest impact on him, in relation to resources available within the LLC. As the first interviewee, Emir was provided with a slightly different prompt than the other participants and was not provided a definition of belonging.

> Interviewer: What role have our staff and partners. So, staff are the peer mentors.
> um I'm a staff member, umm, the cultural center, you know, they're our partners,
> what role have they played in your time here within the LLC? And that also
> includes [the academic advisor].
>
> Emir: Um. I don't know. I mean for me, it's just like he just asks those questions
> that you can't answer, but you can answer it. If you get what I'm trying to say,
> you know.
>
> Interviewer: Can you give me an example?
>
> Emir: Like, what are you good at or what are you bad at? People may, well for
> me, people may think that's just like an ordinary question, but for me, when I
> think about what I'm good at, I don't I don't know all that I'm good at and the

things that I think that I'm good at, I don't think I'm good at, because they could

be better. I mean it's maybe just the way I think about things but you know those

questions, I think for me he asks broad questions and I think when you ask me a

broad question, I don't know where exactly where to tackle it from so it makes me

think about everything as a whole.

Like Emir, Alysse also described how the academic advisor shaped their conversations:

Interviewer: Okay. Um what role have our staff and partners played in your time

here in the LLC? So that's the peer mentors, that's the cultural center and the

academic advisor.

Alysse: Um I met with the [academic advisor] one time. I should go back to see

him. He was really helpful with me in the beginning because when I first got here

I was so lost. I was confused. I didn't know what I wanted to do, I didn't know

what I wanted to study, what organizations to join, and he basically, he just

calmed everything down. And he started from the beginning. Basically, said

okay, who are you? What is your family like? What kind of things did you do in

high school? And we basically started working our way up from there to see like,

what do you actually like, and maybe you should pursue that. So that's the

[academic advisor]. He's a very generous. Uh non-judgmental. So easy to talk to.

I love [the academic advisor]. I need to go see him again.

Moesha recounted a follow-up visit with the academic advisor in which he expressed

concern about her lack of confidence during their first interaction. He advised her to go home

and reflect, which resulted in a considerable difference in how she chose to engage with the

institution. Rather than assuming she would not fit in and did not belong, choosing to go home

every weekend, Moesha chose to more fully engage with her university experience, and step out

of her comfort zone, based on the conversation she had with the advisor. This allowed her to

create connections, due to this greater personal investment.

> Moesha: ...and I think my first meeting with him, like talking to him, and having
>
> him tell me that like. He just tell me to like go home and have like a self-
>
> reflection of me and I think like after that, like I took like two weeks to just look
>
> back on myself and like look back on who I really am, what I really want to do
>
> and what my life is really about. So, he definitely like helped me and boost my
>
> confidence about being at this university because I never been to such like a huge
>
> school, so it was just kind of hard to like to just fit in and like find myself and like
>
> yeah. He definitely helped me with that...he basically told me that like Rutgers
>
> University is what I make it and if whatever I want to whatever I want out of it I
>
> just have to make that step and make it what I want it to be. So, I think I
>
> definitely took that advice and I definitely came out of my comfort zone. I had to
>
> like I just came out my comfort zone and start to like not think about so much of
>
> the negative and not thinking about like oh I don't belong here and just think like
>
> oh I'm here for a reason and I have to get something out of this.

At the time of our interview, Wanda had not met with the academic advisor as she did not realize

that he was a resource specifically asked to engage with the LLC members.

Paul Robeson Cultural Center

As suggested in the literature review, cultural centers are considered a safe space where

students can come together to commune, be themselves, and learn more about their own culture

(Patton, 2006a). At the time of our interview, one semester into their time at Rutgers University,

many study participants had had minimal engagement with the Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC) and its staff.

Four of the six participants stated that they had attended the Black Student Social, a PRCC event that encourages students, faculty, and staff to commune amongst music, food, and games. Participants who attended the social reported that it was an enjoyable event. However, the concept of convenience loomed large as a factor as to why study participants chose not to frequent the PRCC more regularly. If it was not convenient, students did not make the effort to be connected to the PRCC. Two of the six participants stated that the distance from the campus on which the LLC resides, College Avenue, to the campus on which the PRCC is located, Busch, was too far a commute to wish to engage with the PRCC regularly. One participant identified schedule conflicts with PRCC events, along with the PRCC not being at the top of their mind, as a reason for their absence. Additionally, participants separated the ability to attend cultural organization meetings at the PRCC from involvement in the PRCC.

> Interviewer: And the cultural centers, the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, what role
>
> has that staff played in your time here?
>
> Emir: ...I've only been there like once, so I don't yeah, not really anything.
>
> Interviewer: What um what did you attend?
>
> Emir: It was a meeting for the [African] organization. And I just went there to see
>
> what it was about. So yeah.
>
> Interviewer: Okay. What keeps you from the Center?
>
> Emir: Um, nothing. I just don't go there unless there's anything to do there. There
>
> probably are things to do there but I'm just probably not aware of it. It's also on
>
> Busch and I'm on College Ave. I don't really like to travel.

Isaiah echoes this sentiment about only visiting the PRCC for specific events, as opposed to using it for a hangout or studying space. He also mentions this concern about the distance from the PRCC acting as a barrier.

> Interviewer: Okay, all right. So, you went to the event. Is there any other um connection you've had with the Paul Robeson Cultural Center?
>
> Isaiah: …I think like I've just been by there a couple of times from like you know normal like Rutgers University stuff. Just stop there and um, and like just you know, we just like there, and then you go, go on with your life.
>
> Interviewer: Okay. There. Like there meaning, like studying?
>
> Isaiah: Oh, no, not studying. Because I'm, I mean other people would, but like I feel like it's too far of a reach. I don't, I don't like studying places too far so I'd, I'd either stay in my room or stay in the dorm…. But I mean I would, say if I lived around there. But yeah um, I don't, other than like the events and stuff I don't really go that deep to just to go over there…. Like it would have to, have to be something happening for me to go there.

And like Emir, Wanda indicates that students may distinguish between organizational meetings that occur *at* the PRCC, and actually being *involved* in the PRCC.

> Wanda: I've only been to the Cultural Center like a couple times. Well, only once. And that was for the Black Student Social. And then, I mean I go for HARU (Haitian Association) but that's not really the Cultural Center. That's HARU, I guess. So not too much.
>
> A number of students stated that they were waiting to become involved in

extracurriculars because they wanted to ensure that academics remained their focus. There was

recognition that taking part in extracurriculars would be an excellent way to make friends outside

of the LLC, but there was also a concern that taking part in multiple activities would distract

from academic success. Instead, some of the participants were attending organizational events

and meetings and identifying those that best fit their interests, but not necessarily making a

commitment to be a member. Advisement of many Black organizations occurs via the PRCC,

and so in many ways, students were connected to the PRCC, although they may have not realized

it.

Two outliers in relation to engagement with the PRCC were Alysse and Tracion. Alysse

was able to name the staff members and discussed how being connected to the PRCC was

beneficial, describing the staff as open to conversation and readily providing support regarding

class assignments, extracurricular endeavors, and monetary assistance when necessary. Tracion

remembered that he not only attended the Black Student Social but had access to a tour of the

PRCC during the summer. He also attended a number of Brother's Circle events held at the

PRCC, in which he had the opportunity to meet other Black men and discuss current events in

the Black community. This Brother's Circle was later described as an important way in which

Tracion came to feel known on campus, and greater connected at Rutgers.

Class Instructors

All Paul Robeson LLC members participated in the one-credit seminar, Introduction to

Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen. Additionally, Paul Robeson LLC members participated in a

three-credit Introduction to Africana Studies course taught by one of the seminar instructors. As

many of us are aware, teachers not only provide information necessary to pass the test, but also

have the power to shift perspectives, inspire, build confidence, and even influence career paths.

Study participants' conclusions varied regarding instructor influence on their sense of belonging

on campus, ranging from no influence, to truly impactful. Although all participants' sense of belonging may not have been influenced by the instructors, participants did report academic influence, greater connection with Black peers, and incitement of positive feelings towards oneself as a Black student, as positive results of instructor-student interactions.

For example, Wanda expressed that she did not feel that the instructors played a role in her sense of belonging because she had not made an attempt to connect with them one on one, during office hours, or any opportunities outside of class. She took some responsibility in the matter, recognizing that the relationship between student and teacher can be dynamic, but needs engagement and investment from both parties. Emir also stated that he did not feel that the instructors played a role in his sense of belonging, but believed they played a role in his learning.

And with [Instructor 1] um yeah, he's just the type of teacher or professor that um, well for me, that really just makes you think about where you're from. We think, we think. I think for me, I think that we think that we know where we're from, but we really don't. There's so much. There's so much history that I don't even know that has affected who I am today or like where I'm from today, so really just understanding where you're from and your history.

Moesha relayed similar sentiments.

[Instructor 1] definitely played a big role because he like taught me a lot about my culture that I feel like I should have already known, but like I didn't know. And I was just like, just starting to learn stuff that I should have been known, like maybe back in high school. Like before that.

Isaiah expressed that he felt he already belonged, having made friends prior to attending Rutgers University. However, like Emir and Moesha, he acknowledged that instructors did have

an academic influence; the content discussed during the course of the semester encouraged him to consider minoring in Africana Studies. Alysse felt heartened by the instructors, through connections to Black history and culture, to have a greater appreciation for herself as a Black individual. Tracion was encouraged to explore different organizations and attend programs on campus that would specifically provide greater exposure to the Black community, such as the Brother's Circle. As a direct result of attending Brother's Circle, Tracion felt connected to this group of Black men on campus in a way that he did not before. Lastly, Moesha named instructor racial identity as an important feature of the classroom experience, enabling her to relate to her instructors and feel more comfortable in the classroom setting. At her former institution, when a topic arose regarding Black identity, Moesha was often the only person in the classroom visibly connected to Black identity. She explained that she felt put on display, and at times, under attack.

> Interviewer: What role did the instructors play in your sense of belonging?
>
> Moesha: … at my old university, when I've been at classes, and then something comes up about like about Black people, like Black history or anything and it's like a classroom that full of like White people and the instructor is not Black, it's just like you don't really know like how to say it, or like how to like talk about it without feel like you're being attacked by like, you know cuz there's people around you that can't really relate. So, I feel like, being like having a class, or like being connected to them is just like they kind of understand and like they kind of know, so like you feel a sense of more comfortable to talk about it.

Hidden Figures

Although study participants' comments ranged widely on the role of instructors as it related to sense of belonging, all participants agreed that their understanding of Black history, or lack thereof, was significantly enhanced by their LLC classroom experience with said instructors, as well as interactions with floor staff. Prior to attending Rutgers University, participants had limited knowledge of Black history. Major sources of this information included parents, school curriculum, and social media. Parents served as positive reinforcement for some participants, instilling Black pride. These participants spoke of parents who chose to actively recognize the positive contributions of Blacks, substituting and subverting negative media images.

This destabilization of rhetoric was particularly important as participants came of age in the midst of what appeared to be hyper visible media coverage of the death of Blacks across the United States. Competing narratives within the media served to confuse the public and place blame on those who could no longer advocate on their own behalf. We remember Rekia Boyd in 2012, Miriam Carey in 2013, Michael Brown in 2014, Eric Garner in 2014, Tamir Rice in 2014, Yvette Smith in 2014, Freddie Gray in 2015, Sandra Bland in 2015, Tanisha Anderson in 2015, Alton Sterling in 2016, Philando Castile in 2016, and many, many more.

Participants also spoke of utilizing Black social media prior to college for essentially four purposes: greater awareness of current issues in the Black community; finding solidarity within the Black community; gathering together online to counter negative narratives; and one may argue, for less consequential matters, such as following interests related to Black and/or African culture, e.g., staying abreast of the most recent episodes of *Love & Hip Hop* and *The Real Housewives*. Television, magazines, and journals were some other, less utilized resources.

Interviewer: What were some of the major sources of Black history and culture within the media for you?

Alysse: Within the media? I follow a lot of like Black inspired accounts. So I often, I know a lot about what goes around in the Black community. I hear a lot about the Black businesses. People are often uplifting each other on my social media account. Um. Yeah that goes from Instagram, Twitter, uh YouTube, just googling random things, all that kind of stuff.

Regrettably, all participants described a school curriculum which reflected the dilemma discussed earlier in chapter two, utilizing Black History Month as the catch-all for all things related to Black history. Additionally, references to Black history often involved conversation specifically about the Civil Rights Movement, frequently naming the customary exemplar of Martin Luther King, Jr. The following quotes capture participants' description of this phenomena:

Emir: ...but in like school, it wasn't really much [referring to discussion about Black history and culture] until it came to like Black History Month. That's when everybody wanna try to jam pack the Black history into like one month. But it's more than a one-month subject. So, yeah, I didn't really learn much. Honestly, I didn't really learn much in high school or anything about Black history at all.

Alysse confirmed my own concerns discussed earlier in chapter two, regarding the restricted conversation surrounding Black historical figures.

Interviewer: So, what were your major sources of Black history and culture prior to attending college?

Alysse: My main sources of Black history were mostly during Black History

Month in school and that was basically when my principal and all the teachers

they would have like a festival and a theater show, a performance, going on where

they go over the usual Black history figures: Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks,

Malcolm X. But when I got here, when I got to the LLC, it completely changed,

like Black History Month is every day, here.... Well what's so important about the

same things we keep hearing? You get what I mean like? We keep hearing about

maybe the same ten people but I'm not hearing about the things that happened

before those people came along, and that was confusing me at the time. Now I

know but before I was like, what am I missing here?

Only one participant, Tracion, named the local community as a major source of exposure

to Black history and culture prior to attending Rutgers University. Tracion had access to two

programs: Ignite and My Brother's Keeper. Although he did not believe these opportunities

gave him a deep understanding of Black history and culture, he did believe they provided greater

exposure than he would have had otherwise. Over the course of three years, the Ignite program

introduced him to Black history and culture via monthly field trips to various cities, followed by

informal conversation discussing the major takeaways of the educational excursions. The My

Brother's Keeper experience seemed shorter lived and involved traversing Philadelphia, noting

the various murals celebrating Blacks. One participant also named the church as another source

of Black history and culture. However, her church, as well, chose to have these discussions

specifically during Black History Month.

Legacy of Paul Robeson

From these examples, it is evident that participants' exposure to the diverse array of Black historical figures prior to taking part in the LLC were limited, with Tracion being the exception. With this in mind, it is quite understandable that the name Paul Robeson did not resonate for the study participants prior to coming to Rutgers University. Lest we forget, there was an active campaign to remove Paul Robeson's name from history.

> Robeson was singled out as a major threat to American democracy. Every attempt
>
> was made to silence and discredit him, and in 1950 the persecution reached a
>
> climax when his passport was revoked. He could no longer travel abroad to
>
> perform, and his career was stifled. Of this time, Lloyd Brown, a writer and long-
>
> time colleague of Robeson, states: 'Paul Robeson was the most persecuted, the
>
> most ostracized, the most condemned black man in America, then or ever.'
>
> (Rutgers University, n.d., para 5)

The majority of the study participants said they had never heard the name Paul Robeson prior to taking part in the LLC, which upon further reflection, caused them to question what it was that they *did* know about Black history. For example, Moesha lived in New York and had visited Harlem several times but had never heard about Paul Robeson's life in Harlem in the 1950s or saw murals of him. This is not to say that these things do not exist, but Paul Robeson did not appear to be a particularly visible presence in Harlem from her perspective. Wanda's statement below is also indicative of this realization:

> Wanda:...but like I said I didn't know anything about Paul Robeson before I came
>
> here and then finding out his story and how he was erased, I don't know.
>
> Again…. it prompted me to question what I know because I've been taught

history, and this civil rights history that I thought I knew. But never did I hear the

name Paul Robeson, so [I'm] just reevaluating things.

And although Wanda did not attribute her sense of belonging at the institution to the

instructors, she did however feel that they contributed to her deeper understanding of Black

history and culture. For example, Instructor 2 had close ties to the late Paul Robeson and was

therefore able to speak to some personal aspects of Robeson's life, making him "seem like an

actual person." She shared stories that provided intimate details that students felt could not have

been provided anywhere else.

> Wanda: A lot of times in history I'm learning about somebody and it's just oh
>
> here's their accomplishments this is when they died, this is when they lived. But
>
> she added like a personal aspect to it that um like like [*sic*] I said it humanized
>
> him made him seem like an actual man who went through his personal struggles
>
> but overcame them. Like she talked about how one time he just started crying um
>
> just because, what happened? I guess the pressure of his lifestyle got to him and
>
> he just started crying one time. And you'd never read anything about. You
>
> would never read that in the book or a history book about somebody that they
>
> started crying that the weight, I guess of the world finally got to them. You would
>
> just read that they had all this pressure, but they overcame it. But how? You don't
>
> know. So that was interesting to me. And then [Instructor 1], I feel like he just
>
> provides like more historical point of view.

In another lecture, Instructor 1 recounted a story that had a lasting impact on Wanda and

lent to her larger schema involving Black history and culture: A law intern looking to learn

about Black history and culture asked to borrow a book from the private library of his supervisor.

He was told by his supervisor that in essence, there was no contribution by Blacks to history. This story impacted Wanda because she could not comprehend how anyone could think that one culture was inferior to another and had nothing to offer. She felt encouraged to build up her own understanding of Black history. She also discussed the fact that this type of thinking is still prevalent in our society, despite the elapse of half a century since this specific event occurred. This transgression underscored the importance of not only seeking out the contributions of Blacks but sharing these contributions with others.

The seminar's culminating assignment allowed study participants to do just this. The final project involved the creation and recitation of an elevator speech, in which students summarized various aspects of Paul Robeson's life. This elevator speech was referred to by many of the participants as an opportunity to share the legacy of Paul Robeson with those outside of the Paul Robeson LLC. When asked how they planned to apply the knowledge learned in class, many referenced the elevator speech as a viable method for application. Although many study participants were initially unaware of who Paul Robeson was prior to taking part in the LLC, at the time of our interview, a little more than three months into their time at Rutgers University, participants had much to say about Paul Robeson. For Alysse, Paul Robeson served as an inspiration to be better, despite obstacles.

In the...Seminar class we often talk about some of the things Paul Robeson experienced and like you know he was born of a slave father but he basically grew to be such an inspiring person, no matter what he was faced with, and things like that. And we basically try to like, incorporate those same ideas and that same

behavior into our own lives and we just like let out all of the negative energy

within each other so we could like build each other up to be better.

Other participants described Paul Robeson as a quasi-North Star of the pre-civil rights

era, comparing him to influential civil rights leaders who unfairly received greater recognition.

For Emir, conversations about Paul Robeson prompted him to be a part of the solution,

remedying what he believed to be misinformation about Black history.

Emir: I think like people um don't really know much about um African history

but African American history, but they talk as if they do. There's different

stereotypes that people like to um say that like for example. Ummm they say like

uh, they say like oh the only people that did something for the African American

people were uh Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, all this people, like there's

nobody else that's prominent besides them. But they don't know about Paul

Robeson. Not their fault but uh Paul Robeson was really like I guess one of those

people who could have inspired a Malcolm X or a Martin Luther, so yeah it's just

giving off the little information that I know to other people that I know that are

like interested in those topics or think they know like they know it all, but there's

something, this little piece that you don't know.

Additionally, Paul Robeson emerged as a significant, unifying factor amongst members,

and appeared to be integrated into students' daily lives. A participant described a comical

experience amongst members. Students were studying together and heard a noise. They looked

around at one another only to claim that the noise must have belonged to the ghost of Paul

Robeson! In another anecdote, Wanda spoke of an instance when in the normal course of a study

session, someone changed the background music, and the following occurred:

> Wanda: Like if we're just hanging out listening to music or something someone just to change up the mood they would play "Ol Man River" and and [*sic*] like no one would notice for a while just cuz you're just like oh this is the music, sounds good, and like wait hold up, that's Paul Robeson!

Tracion further explained the significance of the song in explaining the agency of Paul Robeson:

> Interviewer: Describe a classroom conversation either the Intro to Paul Robeson, so the [seminar] or Introduction to Africana Studies that made an impression on you.
>
> Tracion: So, one class we talked about like um cuz she brought in like a videotape of Paul Robeson singing "Ol Man River." ... I remember that because he changed up the lyrics to something like he he [*sic*] said um "I'll keep trying" to "till I'm dying." I don't know the specific lyrics but like that made like an impact on me because you can see his struggle from like one point to another because of what he went through in his like time period.

The statement related to Paul Robeson's activism, as he continued to be the voice of the downtrodden, despite all of the turmoil he went through himself. Alysse further explained that circumstances were not easy for Paul Robeson, but he persevered and did not cower when he was challenged. He confronted and spoke out against inequities in society, despite the potential backlash.

> Interviewer: If you could describe a classroom conversation, either Intro to Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen, or Introduction to Africana Studies, that made an impression on you.

Alysse: Um. One conversation we had with [Instructor 2] uh a few classes ago we

were talking about, there were, there was one instance where Paul Robeson, he

just kept being accused of being a communist. He wasn't accepting or denying

the accusation but during this um investigation ...one of the uh judges said there

were no biases against you, you had no issue getting to where you were and Paul

Robeson, he basically refuted that. Like just because I had the um the privilege to

do what I did, doesn't mean it was easy to get there. And that kind of took a toll

on me that some people really think that everyone has equal opportunity even

though they don't. Basically, yeah….it just shocked me that he had to explain

why it um it wasn't necessarily a privilege. It basically uh. I just felt like yeah, he

did, he played a lot of sports. He got, he was the third African American to get

into the school, so he obviously was special... but in the time, it's like, he had to

work ten times harder than everybody in the entire school to be even recognized

as a special person. So that kind of, it just shocked me yeah. That's how I feel

about it. It just shocked me.

Finally, additional awakenings of students in relation to Black history included disbelief

at the number of Black leaders silenced for articulating their cause. The following is Isaiah's

reaction to a movie watched for class. He speaks of South African anti-apartheid icon Steve

Biko, who, like Paul Robeson, also advocated for Black citizens' rights. Isaiah's realization that

police would assassinate Biko "just to shut him up" appeared to be a sobering confirmation. He

attributes this new awareness to the LLC environment.

Isaiah: So yeah that made an impression on me because they say like wow. They

really tried to stop black people. Yeah, I already knew this, but you know seeing

more, more, and more stuff about it like how they try to shut you up, like what

they did with Paul Robeson for example. Like blacklisted uh it just made me. It

just made me more aware.

Interviewer: Can you say more about that?

Isaiah: ...we did have a conversation about Steve Biko and like that we were

surprised at how they, they beat him and killed him when he and people were

getting the wrong idea about uh his, his Black, his movement because they, they,

White people wanted. White people in Africa thought that he wanted like Black

superiority when he just wanted to be equal.

Interviewer: Okay. Why did that make an impression on you?

Isaiah: Yeah because it's, because you just, it's like there, there's more. I think of

like how many, how many other Black people have they done like that?

Interviewer: Done like what?

Isaiah: Like shut up. So, Martin Luther King, killed. Uh Steve Biko killed.

Nelson Mandela imprisoned. And Paul Robeson blacklisted. So, it made an

impression on me because like, it's like wow. But I didn't think of it that deeply

before but the class and everything just makes me think more about what's going

on because that's my environment right now.

As stated above, Isaiah had the opportunity to make these revelations because he was in

an environment that revisited history in a way he had never considered before. In response to the

question, how do you apply the knowledge you learned? Moesha astutely asked if there was

more that she could do to find out about the other Paul Robeson's of past. Who are those

individuals that do not have a floor named after them that perhaps should? What are institutions

doing to celebrate its hidden figures, not only Black, but all of those who are not being celebrated for their contributions?

As the semester progressed, students' exposure to the ideals of Paul Robeson increased. In consideration of what Robeson symbolized both on the world stage and within the lives of students, I wondered if that symbolism went beyond acquired knowledge and extended to activism in the lives of the participants. Emir spoke of Paul Robeson's willingness to secure equity for people of all nations.

> Emir: Um, it was just really learning how Paul Robeson um didn't only um seek change for the African Americans, but it was really for um, everybody. A lot of people only want to do things for their people but he, Paul Robeson really made it more of a unifying thing. He spoke over 25 different languages and traveled the world just to see change in every, in every uh culture. Just uh, just uh, I mean not just his own, but for everyone. I think he, one of his biggest things was like, um if everybody is you know um, everybody everybody [*sic*] needs to be equal in the sense of how … things are going. So, like it can't be good for America and then bad in a different country. So, he wanted everybody to be good.... I mean he wanted everybody to have justice or like wanting everybody to um feel like where they were is a place they can be and not um feel like this unequal governing happen.

Future personal exploration for Emir included taking time to do research on topics of interest, outside of class. He stated he specifically wanted to investigate what progressive policy changes had occurred within African governments over time and to identify some of the policies of today. If tangible change was not occurring, he wondered what measures could be taken to

ensure that better policy was implemented in different African countries. He also wished to study abroad in Ghana and to identify a plan or initiative, if possible, to assist the people of Ghana. Juxtaposed with international activism, was local activism. In response to a question about community activism, Emir said he did not know how to go about it and had not really thought about it. Like Paul Robeson, three of the participants reported that they wished to take advantage of study abroad opportunities in order to gain a greater awareness of other cultures, and international happenings.

Emir is not the only participant whose curiosity was stoked by the LLC offerings. Isaiah reflected that moving forward he noticed that he was now taking time to research topics that piqued his interest, rather than "remaining clueless."

Interviewer: How do you apply that development that's occurring?

Isaiah: Um. I guess I see things more clearly. Like and I'm more interested on the inside because I want to know if there are any other figures like Paul Robeson that that we don't know about so I'm more interested and I'm more inclined to go look, look things up than I was from the beginning.

Interviewer: Can you give an example of that?

Isaiah: So if I'm interested I'd say if I see, if I like see a figure of like, or I don't know, or I come across like a Black figure on the internet, I'm more inclined to like learn more about that person from the past. I'll I'll [*sic*] actually go into deep work where before, before coming here I would just be like oh that's cool and then skim through it like oh, you know not look at it deeply. But now if I see another, a Black figure, I'll actually try to like learn about it.

Interviewer: And what do you attribute that change to?

Isaiah: Um I guess being around. Um being around people. Like, like Black

people. More Black people who were more interested in like schola [*sic*]….

Studying. Scholars. Which you, you could call it that and being around people

who want to learn. Like, so Africana majors, and it just inspired me. I can learn

this stuff too rather than being clueless about it.

Wanda also stated that she would like to further her education by reading more books

related to Black culture outside of the United States. The experience with the LLC prompted her

to learn more about her Haitian and Puerto Rican heritage. She began attending HARU meetings

and wished to get more involved within that community.

Summary

Findings demonstrate that a focus on academics was a key feature of the Paul Robeson

Living-Learning Community. Conversations within the community often centered around LLC

linked courses and being within close proximity of classmates spurred communal study sessions

for the purposes of test preparation and the exchange of notes. Shared academic goals within the

community promoted peer accountability; peer mentors assisted in this accountability as well,

via routine inquiry. Topics with peer mentors and fellow mentees included academics, career

aspirations, class scheduling, and the introduction and consideration of various clubs and

organizations, amongst other topics. Participants emphasized feeling comfortable and supported

in the community, with five out of six using the term "family" in reference to LLC members.

Participants also noted the importance of living in a community that centered students'

Blackness, as they felt this made it easier to relate to one another. Students reported that this

sense of relatedness enabled them to share everyday happenings, as well as process race-based

concerns.

Participants stated that they felt faculty and staff connected to the LLC were invested in assisting them with finding somewhere to belong, whether that be through club/organization affiliation, at the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, and/or within the residence hall. However, some participants did not readily demonstrate their willingness to attend programming at the Paul Robeson Cultural Center due to distance and/or scheduling conflicts or were not aware that the organizations they engaged with were in fact connected to the Paul Robeson Cultural Center. Although study participants' comments ranged widely on the role of instructors as it related to sense of belonging, all participants agreed that their understanding of Black history, or lack thereof, was significantly enhanced by their LLC classroom experience with said instructors. Specifically, the course introduced new information or enhanced their knowledge about the legacy of Paul Robeson and other hidden figures in Black history and put students on the path to begin to interrogate what they thought they knew about Black history. And finally, all participants who met with the academic advisor reported positive engagement, mainly benefiting from the interaction(s) through guided self-reflection.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter reviews the research questions, LLC structural components, interpretation of the findings, and study limitations. Implications for practice and recommendations for further research are also presented. The purpose of this study was to explore students' lived experiences in a living-learning community designed to engender curiosity about the history of the African diaspora and draw parallels to day-to-day life, as well as to assist in the transition of incoming students to the Rutgers University environment. The following research questions guided this phenomenological research study:

- How do participants describe their Paul Robeson LLC experience?

- Which specific academic and social Paul Robeson LLC experiences have been influential in members' overall development?

- In what ways has the LLC influenced academic and social integration at the institution?

- In what ways has the LLC created a sense of belonging for participants?

The Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community is comprised of several components, involving multiple partners working together to enhance the curricular and co-curricular experiences of students. Those components are as follows: 1) LLC members live in residence on a floor with other students who desire to learn about the legacy of Paul Robeson and Black history and culture. The floor itself is not exclusive to LLC members; it is interspersed with students who are not members of the LLC, and so LLC members have access to students who are experiencing the "typical" college involvement. 2) LLC members are assigned two peer mentors who have previously lived in the community. These individuals are responsible for creating programs that connect with the theme of the community: celebrating the legacy of Paul Robeson

and embracing Black culture and history. Peer mentors focus on the pillars of scholarship,

service, and culture as they engage with LLC members. Peer mentors also regularly engage LLC

members on topics related to their transition to the institution. 3) The classroom experience

involves a one-credit small seminar, Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen, and a three-credit large

lecture, Introduction to Africana Studies, where LLC students are clustered with students from

throughout the university. 4) LLC members share an academic advisor who assists them with

understanding how their interests best align with possible majors, as well as applicable classes.

5) Finally, staff from the Paul Robeson Cultural Center engage LLC members via programmatic

activities connected to the PRCC.

Living-Learning Communities as Counterspaces

This study supports findings regarding the positive impact of counterspaces (Solorzano,

Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008). It reinforces the

current body of literature regarding some of living-learning communities' greatest attributes,

while giving voice to and providing space for the perspectives of Black students engaging within

the living-learning community environment. Rutgers University has a residential environment of

over 16,000 students (Rutgers University Student Affairs, 2020). Although participants stated

that prior to attending Rutgers, they believed that they would find a place to belong, participants

reported that the living-learning community *facilitated* their ability to connect with their peers

inside and outside of the LLC. Students felt supported and comforted by their peers and peer

mentors within the LLC, with many participants reporting a sense of family. This is in line with

the literature surrounding living-learning communities which states that living -learning

communities have the ability to make a large institution feel smaller for students entering the

university environment, as well as to increase engagement with peers (Brownell & Swaner,

2009). The living-learning community environment is situated in a way in which students are in close proximity to one another. However, students still have the option to choose to not be communicative and to emotionally distance themselves from the community. This was not the case for study participants. Six of the six participants found their interactions within the residential environment to be positive. However, Moesha's class schedule and Emir's extracurricular commitments meant that these participants felt they were less present in the community, by their own account. When they did gather with the group, they reported positive interactions, as demonstrated by their transcripts.

Racial Uplift

Within the Paul Robeson LLC students encouraged one another to be better and do better. Generally, students who participate in LLCs are more likely to persist to graduation, have higher academic achievement, campus involvement, engagement with faculty, and an increased sense of institutional belonging (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). What is distinctive for this study is that the conversation is specific to *Black* LLC members; this social identity informs how these students exist in the university environment. From acquiring time management skills to attaining a 3.0 GPA and above, participants expressed that they were being held accountable for their actions by their peers and academic advisor.

> Research indicates that they [Blacks and Latinos] are well aware how the[y] are
> viewed by the mainstream. Indeed, some research suggests a tendency for targets
> to be *hyperaware* of people's negative expectations about their group,
> considerably overestimating the extent to which they are viewed as less
> intelligent, more likely to commit crime, live off welfare, and so on (Sigelman &

Tuch, 1997). Given this climate of stereotype awareness, there are ample grounds

for black and Latino students to feel a burden of suspicion, to feel at risk of

confirming stereotypes through their behavior, and to wonder if they belong in

environments where academic ability is prized. Such feelings, our research

suggests, can play a significant role in undermining the achievement of students

who belong to groups stereotyped. (Aronson, 2002, p. 282)

Study participants expressed a mutual expectation that they are present for one another,

providing almost a reassurance that the successful management of college life was possible, as

long as they continued to uplift one another. In some ways these attributes are emblematic of

what Paul Robeson symbolized for many people inside and outside of the United States, in

regards to racial uplift. In the vein of racial uplift, being surrounded by Black scholars allowed

students such as Tracion to aspire to want more for himself and to live outside of the pre-

assigned, limited definition of what it means to be Black. Rather than giving into stereotype

threat and disidentifying as scholars, students in the Paul Robeson LLC chose not to internalize

conventional images and instead chose to engage in the community, almost as a protective

response in opposition to stereotypes (Harper, 2015). Participants reported that the most positive

aspect of the LLC, which all participants engaged in, involved the interplay between the students

and the peer mentors within the residential environment. Peer mentors were able to provide

guidance to students due to their institutional knowledge, assisting members with their transition

to the institution. This guidance manifested in the form of sharing resources, creating programs

that honed skills sets such as organization, and connecting members of the community -- both

those at the margins and those with the in-group -- with one another via formal and informal

means. Peer mentors also facilitated a sense of family and helped to create a supportive

environment for students. Study participants mainly focused on these aspects of friendship,

support, and creating a familial environment when referring to the residential environment and

role of the peer mentor. However, peer mentors also served to illuminate areas of weakness

within members' knowledge of Black history and caused some to reevaluate what they thought

they knew about the topic.

Black-Centered Programming

Per documentation related to LLC programming, LLC members had access to a variety of

Black inspired programming via their peer mentors (Rutgers Student Affairs, n.d.). Events

included Black trivia, e.g. African American History, music/tv shows, quotes by legendary Black

leaders, as well as viral memes; critique of movies and television shows; discussions about Paul

Robeson; as well as brainstorming opportunities for collaboration with the Paul Robeson

Cultural Center. Instructors outside of the designated classes were invited to attend some of the

programming, thereby increasing the faculty network for students. During these programmatic

conversations LLC members were able to discuss the everyday concerns of Blacks, allowing

them an opportunity to vent in what they perceived to be a comfortable and supportive

environment. This highlights the importance of recruiting staff that not only have institutional

knowledge, but staff who are aware of, and when possible, have intimate first-hand knowledge

of the lived experiences of the students they mentor.

An example of peer mentor programming included *Tuesday Talks: This is America*,

where mentees watched an episode entitled "Who's Afraid of the Big Black Man " on the

television show *Blackish*. The episode depicted many issues that Black people in America

endure, including "discrimination, stereotyping, police brutality, profiling, and navigating

through the disadvantages that accompany the system of White supremacy" (Rutgers Student

Affairs, n.d.). Students then had an open discussion on the topics and related the show to their own lives, including experiences that were uncomfortable and life threatening, due to their identity. Thus, the event title, "This is America." According to study participant Moesha, the question on the floor was, who is most likely to get shot? LLC members in the room immediately looked to a student who "fit the description." The student identified as male and wore black pants, and a black hoodie, with the hood draped on his head. The gravity of that moment impacted Moesha. She realized that her peers were managing issues such as personal safety, related to their Black identity, just as she was. She was "not in it alone." Rather than feeling a "sense of perpetual homelessness," (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017) she felt comforted by the realization that these concerns were not hers alone to bear. There was a mutual understanding by the students that these issues are pervasive, but that they could find comfort in one another while managing these issues. Rather than reinforcing feelings of hyper surveillance and otherness as discussed in Hotchkins and Dancy (2017) the residential environment within the Paul Robeson LLC engendered support. Throughout the interviews there was a general sense that LLC members were aware of their privilege to have access to a space such as the LLC, where they were connected to other Black students in a way that their non-LLC peers did not have immediate access to. Although LLC participants are growing up in an era where Black and brown bodies are harmed regularly, and that harm is made hyper visible through access to social media, these students came to Rutgers University, a historically White institution, with the belief and hope that they would find somewhere to belong. One participant discussed feelings of discrimination by school peers on the Rutgers University bus system, while others mentioned how non-LLC members felt uncomfortable in their place of residence due to their inability to find other Black students, but no participants mentioned any outright racist incidents on campus.

It is important to note that the interview protocol did not include any questions about incidents of racism on campus. However, racism functions as a pervasive force in American society and even without any specific incidents discussed by participants, it lingers as an imminent threat. In line with the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), there is an acknowledgement that racism exists, intersects other identities used for subordination (gender, class, sexuality, etc.), is pervasive and permanent in U.S. society, and is perpetuated via legal and institutional means; it examines the ways in which people of color experience, respond to, and resist racism, and encourages resistance through expression of personal narratives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT when applied to education, focuses "on how the social construct of race shapes university structures, practices, and discourses from the perspectives of those injured by and fighting against institutional racism" (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 663).

Although the Paul Robeson LLC is not a space designated by residence life as limited to Black students, study participants identified as Black and perceived the LLC as a space where they could find shelter at a historically White institution while exploring and celebrating Black history and culture. Prior to joining the LLC, this exploration is something that five of the six participants did not readily have the opportunity to partake in outside of the confines of Black History Month. Participants used the words family, supportive, and comfort to describe the LLC. If the LLC itself (in class and within the double room) were to be inhabited by non-Black students, would that change the familial sense of support and comfort felt by Black students? This question is beyond the scope of this research. However, the *surrounding environment* on the floor included students that do not necessarily identify as Black, as reported by participants, and LLC members still reported a sense of family, support and comfort. This presents an opportunity for informal learning to happen amongst residents of diverse backgrounds, despite

there being a focus on Black history and culture within the LLC. The key here is whether or not there is a willingness for exchange.

Cultural Center Intent Versus Impact

There are those who believe that counterspaces that are culturally affiliated and specifically Black-centered, should not exist, believing that they serve to promote segregation (Patton, 2006a). Arguments include that Blacks have reached parity with Whites and therefore are no longer in need of these spaces; these spaces reinforce messaging that all Black students are in need of greater resources to achieve college success; and these spaces allow Black students to remain in their comfort zone, discouraging intercultural connections (Patton, 2006a). A recent example of this is the controversy surrounding the Multicultural Student Center on the University of Virginia's campus. A Black student addressed White people in the new multicultural center, reminding them of the societal privilege they held, and how their presence could potentially make people of color in the center uncomfortable. She also stated that there were a number of other spaces on campus that were available to White students. This public service announcement was met with both criticism and support. After the incident occurred, the University of Virginia clarified that the space was meant for all members of the university community (Burke, 2020). It seems the intention behind the creation of the space was indeed meant for all students as a place of intercultural exchange, as determined by students who were involved in the creation of the center. However, perhaps allowing *space for all* means more of the same for students of color who may be looking for a respite from the feelings of otherness that they are faced with in American society. This effect was illustrated by students in Patton's (2006b) study, who felt that merging centers, thereby creating a multicultural center, would invalidate the individual experiences of Black students.

It appears that the *residential experience* of the LLC was positive as evidenced by participants reporting feeling connected to one another, stating physical availability and a willingness to engage in conversation as well as to gather for the purposes of studying, as significant experiences of the community. However, the majority of the study participants either minimally engaged with the Paul Robeson Cultural Center or were not aware that their engagement with particular programs and organizations were sponsored by the Paul Robeson Cultural Center. Four of the six LLC members attended Center opening events within their first weeks on campus and three of the six continued to attend student organization meetings at the Center in their first semester. These events and meetings provided access to resources as well as Black faculty, staff, and students on campus. And although the presence of Black cultural centers was hard won by students during the Black Student Movement of the 1960s (Patton, 2006b), the LLC participants appeared to be uninformed about these struggles.

Students seemed unaware of the privilege related to the ability to participate in Black affiliated programming and meetings in a space created specifically for the African diaspora. Five of the six students named an organization of interest which was invariably linked to advisement by Paul Robeson Cultural Center staff but did not seem to understand or be aware of the gravity of the historical context juxtaposed against current day privileges. However unaware, students' ability to participate in furthering their knowledge of the African diaspora through cultural organizations, is very much tied to the efforts of staff at the PRCC. In full transparency, interview protocol did not ask students to state their understanding of the Learning Communities Office's rationale to partner with particular resources such as the PRCC. But in drawing a parallel between participants' progressive understanding of Black history through LLC linked courses, and how the class content gave them greater historical insight, a greater understanding

of how partner resources emerged historically, and the Learning Communities Office's rationale

for partnership, might provide a greater appreciation for these resources and encourage students

to engage with them more consistently. Concerns such as this are relevant when thinking about

the future viability of resources, as university budgets become increasingly strained.

Students in Patton's (2006b) study described the Black cultural center as a home away

from home. However, students in the current study cited the LLC as their home away from

home. Perhaps it was difficult for study participants to attach this meaning to the Paul Robeson

Cultural Center as they had already internalized the LLC for this purpose. Distance was also

named as a barrier, preventing some students from visiting the Center more consistently. A

question for future research might be how students involved in culturally based LLCs engage

with cultural centers as compared to students who do not participate in a culturally based LLC.

Culturally Validating Interactions

Black studies was conceived in opposition to the Eurocentric university because there

was a need to provide a viewpoint that took into consideration the offerings of Black people,

countering the dominant perspective. Instructors of the courses affiliated with the LLC acted not

only as content experts but demonstrated investment in the process of ensuring that students were

able to *communicate* the legacy of Paul Robeson to others and understand the Black experience

in America, thereby affirming their cultural identity. These interactions combined with

residential programmatic efforts enhanced students' understanding of the African diaspora and

its many contributions. Students became better "informed citizens of the black community, the

nation, and the world" (Gallien & Hikes, 2005, p. 6) by gaining access to hidden figures that

played a significant role on the world's stage; they became curious about the why and how

regarding individuals' removal from the common conversation about important Black figures.

And finally, students began to assess their responsibility in passing on the legacy of Paul

Robeson to others.

In concert with culturally validating curriculum, study participants received advisement.

Study participants remarked on the ability of the advisor to ask questions which were simple at

their core but required students to be introspective and reflect on their abilities, desires, and what

they hoped to accomplish at Rutgers University. They stated that the academic advisor was able

to engage with participants in a way that they eventually became more comfortable with not only

identifying career aspirations, but also determining ways that they could be more active via

extracurriculars, at the institution. One participant recognized the importance of having an

academic advisor who identified as Black and could reinforce that she belonged at the institution,

reminding her that it was up to her to believe that messaging and act on it. The importance of

role models such as this cannot be underscored enough.

Study Limitations

LLC members for the Paul Robeson LLC self-select into the community, thereby having

some predisposition towards an interest in the topic area. The study was conducted with six

participants who had access to all portions of the LLC program (registered for both courses). 14

students lived in the LLC at the time of the study, and 12 enrolled in both courses. Although the

number of participants included in the study is within the realm of a phenomenological design, a

greater number of participants may have provided a greater variety of responses to perhaps

illustrate a fuller student experience (Creswell, 2014). The researcher knows that saturation has

occurred when discussion with participants, or gathering of new data, no longer provides new

insights. (Creswell, 2014). Another limitation involved the timing of the study. Students were

asked to participate in the study during the fall semester, prior to their impending finals, which

perhaps made some students less inclined to be flexible with their schedule. One of the students who was considered to have diverging interests received two invitations to participate in the study but was unable to commit during the established timeframe. Students lived in the community for less than three months at the time of the study, meaning that they likely had not had an opportunity to partake in all aspects of the institution, as they were still transitioning. My inclination to interview students in the fall semester rather than later in the spring semester had to do with wanting students to remember the information pertaining to the classroom and programmatic experiences, which occurred in the fall. My concern was that the further students were from the fall semester, the less they would remember about the experience. However, this also means that they had less contact with certain aspects of the LLC partnerships, such as the Paul Robeson Cultural Center and in one student's case, advising. Additionally, phenomenological design relies on participants being able to articulate their experience, in order to identify the essence, as "interpretation can only make explicit what is already understood" (Laverty, 2003, p.32). Some students had simply not given any considerable thought to the various LLC components, and were unable to speak with great depth about some experiences. Perhaps providing questions to participants in advance of the interview would have allowed participants to reflect on the experience and come prepared to address the topics.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, universities can utilize Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) as an intentional tool to promote belonging and provide resources for students to explore and embrace their identity, while contributing to the greater university community. LLCs promote engagement in both a classroom and residential setting, creating a closer sense of community and interconnectedness, while allowing for the exploration of sociocultural issues with peers. With

the interconnectedness of an LLC in mind, this study sought to examine the extent to which culturally based LLCs, particularly those with a course component, promote the exploration of one's history and culture, and create a sense of belonging for students. This may help to counter negative feelings regarding existing in a space that is historically White, as the concept of one's cultural perspective mattering, takes focus. Students also have the opportunity to feel academically and socially validated in and out of the classroom.

This study supports the argument for institutions to invest in culturally affiliated LLCs. As this is the student's living environment, it will likely be the first point of entry in connecting with campus culture and finding membership with students who share a similar background and relatable experiences. Connected to Steele's (1997) research, identity-safe spaces can help to negate the outward perception of intellectual inferiority within academic spaces for students of color. Upon arriving on campus, a safe space or counterspace is an ideal resource to aid in students' academic and/or social adjustment within this new environment, (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006a; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Additionally, finding and joining with peers who may assist with managing the stress associated with navigating the mainstream culture is a positive coping strategy for support (Tatum, 1997), encouraging students to become integrated into a smaller group first before becoming a part of the larger campus community (Guiffrida, 2003). LLCs signal to incoming and continuing students that the institution welcomes students of color and are invested in the success of these students. This study further expands the research literature on living-learning communities because it exclusively discusses the experience of Black students within living-learning communities and frames the LLC as a counterspace at a historically White institution.

And there is interest in these counterspaces; the interview protocol did not specifically inquire about this phenomenon, but two study participants recalled conversations they had with non-LLC members regarding their wish to have access to the community for the purposes of being in a Black-centered living environment. The discomfort, stress, and social isolation associated with perceived incongruence between the individual and the institution can lead to student attrition for African American students who have not established supportive communities (Gloria, Kurpius, Hamilton & Willson, 1999). This study supports the argument that counterspaces allow students to be their authentic selves, without a need for code switching (Guiffrida, 2003), thereby lessening this perceived incongruence. Additional evidence is that five of the six students who took part in the study returned to the LLC after their first year in the community, which suggests they had a positive experience in their first year.

Administrators must consider the needs of the specific student demographic, beyond class year, when creating the structure for a cultural LLC. They must contemplate the types of partnerships that will be needed to create a full experience for students. For example, minoritized students attending PWIs may have the perception that university services, such as academic advising, will not reflect their cultural values, and thus choose not to seek assistance (Collins & Sims, 2006). Depending on the goal of the specific institution, they may choose to tackle this problem by partnering with departments who 1) are willing to loan advisors and 2) willing to loan advisors who "humanize the practice of academic advising" (Museus & Ravello, 2010). All three study participants who engaged with the assigned LLC advisor noted the advisor's ability to ask probing questions which made the participants reflect on their path forward. Rather than just mapping courses onto the academic plan, the advisor came to know the student first. This advising was built into the LLC structure, and was highly encouraged by staff.

Students who engaged in advisement within the LLC deemed it very helpful, encouraging them

to be introspective about who they were and what they hoped to accomplish at Rutgers, and after

Rutgers. Residence Life is often tapped to assist with various efforts within the university, as

students are a captive audience of sorts. LLCs can act as a conduit for academic departments,

coming to literally meet students where they are, if departments have the ability to do so.

Admittedly, this may not be feasible or sustainable for all institutions due to limited resource

distribution, but the partnership of LLCs with advising is a practical area for consideration,

especially for vulnerable populations with higher attrition rates.

The Committee on Enslaved and Disenfranchised Populations in Rutgers History began

the Scarlet and Black Project in 2015 with the charge of "seeking out the untold story of

disadvantaged populations in the university's history" (Committee on Enslaved and

Disenfranchised Populations, 2020, para. 2). "Scarlet and Black Volume II: Constructing Race

and Gender at Rutgers, 1865-1945," evolved from this work, and discusses the legacy of Paul

Robeson, amongst other first Black alumni at Rutgers. As institutions across the nation begin to

or continue to consider how they might tell the untold story of individuals who helped create the

history of the institution, and in some cases, acknowledge former transgressions, LLCs are an

ideal opportunity to inform students and university community members at-large, about those

who have been erased or forgotten, and to celebrate their contributions.

One of the assignments of the Paul Robeson LLC consisted of perfecting an elevator

speech about Paul Robeson, so that on cue, students could inform anyone about who he was and

his impact on a broad range of groups. The intention was for students to share the legacy of Paul

Robeson with those inside and outside of the university. The creation of an LLC is an

opportunity to honor and memorialize these marginalized individuals, so that their legacy lives

on. When done sincerely, it also serves as institutional acknowledgment of past problematic

behavior and communicates a willingness to be forthright to students and staff. Of course,

naming an LLC after someone is not a final solution. This step would hopefully be one action

within a greater plan to integrate the namesake into other aspects of university life.

Future Research Recommendations

Study participants stated that peer mentors were a part of their familial network within

the living-learning community. Through one-on-one conversations and programming, peer

mentors provided academic and social direction for community members. An additional peer

mentor responsibility was to enhance students' understanding of who Paul Robeson was, as well

as to expose students to topics related to Black history and culture, utilizing the pillars of

scholarship, philanthropy, and culture. One avenue for further study could be research into

cultural LLC peer mentors' understanding of their responsibility as cultural educators or guides

from an institutional culture and racial identity standpoint, whether they feel they are trained

appropriately for this task, and how they go about executing this task (Loh, Leget, Thompson,

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Appendices

APPENDIX A. OUTREACH EMAIL

Hello [INSERT NAME],
As you may be aware, I am responsible for a number of the LLCs on campus. I am also a doctoral student within the Graduate School of Education and I am conducting a study on the Paul Robeson LLC. I was wondering if and when you would have time to schedule an interview about your interactions with the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community. The interview will between 45 and 90 minutes (depending on what you have to say). If you could complete the Doodle below by [INSERT DAY AND DATE], I will take a look at the dates and times you've chosen, and I will send you an email back with the confirmed date and time that we will meet on campus. The interview will likely take place in the [LOCATION WITH MAP LINK] Thanks so much for your consideration! [INSERT DOODLE LINK]

Ariel Leget
Doctoral Student
Graduate School of Education

CONFIRMATION EMAIL AFTER DOODLE

Thank you for choosing to participate in my study! This email is to confirm our appointment for [INSERT DAY, DATE, TIME AND LOCATION]l. I know that classes will end soon and finals will begin so I am hoping that we will be able to stick to this meeting time and avoid rescheduling. However, if an emergency arises and you need to reschedule, please reach me at [INSERT PHONE NUMBER].

Prior to your arrival for our conversation, please answer a few demographic questions using the following form: [INSERT GOOGLE FORM LINK].

Ariel Leget
Doctoral Student
Graduate School of Education

REMINDER EMAIL AFTER DOODLE

Just a reminder that we are meeting tonight at [INSERT TIME] in [LOCATION WITH MAP LINK] for our interview today. See you then!

Ariel Leget
Doctoral Student
Graduate School of Education

APPENDIX B. ONLINE DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Paul Robeson LLC Conversation - Demographic Survey

Please complete the survey below at least the day prior to our interview. If you have any

questions or concerns regarding these questions, feel free to email me at [insert email]. Thank

you!

- Your Name [open ended]

- Please select a pseudonym/nickname you would like to use. I will use this pseudonym to
  label all of my data moving forward, and I will no longer use your legal name. This is for
  confidentiality purposes. [open ended]

- Best phone number to reach you at? [open ended]

- Age [open ended]

- Which do you identify as? Incoming first-year student or Incoming transfer student
  [multiple choice]

- What race do you identify as? You may be as descriptive as you would like. [open
  ended]

- Where did you grow up? State and city? [open ended]

- How would you describe the ethnic makeup of your high school? [open ended]

- How would you describe the ethnic makeup of your friends prior to coming to the
  institution? [open ended]

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

A Phenomenological Study of the Paul Robeson Living-Learning Community Experience

Procedures Before the Interview

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Review the Participant Consent Form
3. Obtain consent via form
4. Ask participant to confirm pseudonym
5. Explain the logistics of the interview
6. Turn on the recorder

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. My name is Ariel Leget, as you know. I'm conducting research that involves how you have experienced the Paul Robeson LLC from an academic and social perspective, this includes both the classroom and residence hall environments. I anticipate the interview taking about 90 minutes. I have an interview protocol that I will follow to help us stay on track and I will be audio recording our conversation today. Is that okay? Thank you.

HIGHSCHOOL EXPERIENCES

- What were your major sources of Black history and culture prior to attending college?

  What was your experience with Black history and culture prior to coming to the PR

  LLC? At home? In your local community? Within the media?

DISCUSSION IN THE RESIDENCE HALL

Now moving to your time within the residence hall...

- If someone dropped in from another planet and asked you to tell them about the Paul

  Robeson LLC experience, how would you describe it?

- What are some topics that regularly come up in conversation amongst PR LLC residents

  on the floor? [Tell me about some things you talk about].

- What prompts those conversations? What are the circumstances that led up to those

  conversations?

●   Are there any topics that are being discussed now that you find resonate within the community? What do those conversations sound like?

I'd like you now to connect the LLC experience to your life...

- How have any of your experiences or conversations in the PRLLC affected the way you think about yourself?

- Have any of your experiences or conversations in the PR LLC affected the way you understand Black history and culture?

- How do you apply this development that is occurring?

- How do you apply the knowledge you have learned?

- Are there aspects of your identity that you don't share in the general classroom environment that you are able to share in the PR LLC residential environment/of your floor? Please explain.

DISCUSSION IN THE CLASSROOM

- Describe a classroom conversation, either Introduction to Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen or Introduction to Africana Studies, that made an impression on you.

- What role have the instructors of the Introduction to Paul Robeson as a Global Citizen [insert instructor names] and Introduction to Africana Studies [insert instructor name] played in your learning. Your sense of belonging at the institution?

DISCUSSION IN BOTH ENVIRONMENTS

●   Can you think of any ways that what you've learned in the classroom has shown up in your life outside of the classroom?

IMPACTFUL ACTIVITIES

- What role have our staff and partners played in your time here within the LLC? So, Peer Mentors, Cultural Center, Academic Advisors. What role have they played in terms of your sense of belonging at the institution?

- Do you think you have changed after participating in the LLC? If so, in what ways?

- What do you believe may have been the cause?

- How has the PR LLC assisted you, if at all, in the exploration of your identity as a learner?

- How has the PR LLC assisted you, if at all, in connecting with other students of color on campus?

- How has the LLC impacted you, if at all, around the topics of equity and social justice? in relation to civic engagement or community activism?

- How do you think the LLC has impacted you overall?

- Although it has only been four months, how do you think you're doing in terms of academic and social life here at the university?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Would you like to share anything else with me?

Thank you so much for taking the time to allow me to speak with you about your experiences with the PR LLC.

Procedures After the Interview

1. Turn off recorder
2. Thank the participant for sharing their experiences
3. Review next steps: reviewing transcripts, coding, finding emergent themes, summarizing data and conferring with interviewee for verification