

## Exploring Sense of Belonging among Black International Students at an HBCU

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### ABSTRACT

*This study elucidates the experiences of HBCU (historically Black colleges and universities) students who are racially Black, but differ in nativity and nationality from their Black American peers. The purpose is to examine Black HBCU international students' sense of belonging on campus. This study engages qualitative individual interviews with ten Black international HBCU students and utilizes the constant comparative analytic process. Findings revealed Black international HBCU students' perceptions of race and nativity shape their university experiences as they sought to maintain national identity while adjusting to the HBCU environment and engaging in cross-cultural interactions with Black Americans. Recommendations include embracing a heterogeneous perspective when developing services, programs, and research studies related to the experiences of Black students.*

**Keywords:** International Students, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Sense of Belonging, Qualitative

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Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are defined by their principal mission of educating African Americans and these institutions have been recognized for their success in fostering African American student satisfaction, achievement and retention at higher rates than predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Palmer, 2010; Perna, 2001). However, since their origination, HBCUs have also provided access to diverse populations outside of the African American community. Extant literature illustrates the experiences of these populations, particularly focusing on White students, faculty, and staff at

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HBCUs (Conrad, Brier, & Braxton, 1997; Jackson & Daniels, 2005; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009).

I use the terms Black international student and foreign-born Black student interchangeably. Additionally, I use the terms African American student, native-born Black student, and Black American student interchangeably. Another student demographic who attend HBCUs are those who racially identify as Black, but are not native-born Americans. The national origin of these students is typically – although not always – from Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, or the Caribbean (Kent, 2007). Despite shared race, Black international students often have differences in culture, ethnicity, and language from native-born Black Americans (Kent, 2007). Though much literature on HBCUs and Black HBCU students is situated within a historical context that stems from slavery in the United States and later, the Civil Rights movement; this is not the heritage of all Black students who attend HBCUs, particularly those of whom are foreign-born. Still, studies on Black college students often combines native- and foreign-born Black students as a single demographic or does not include foreign-born Black student data at all (George Mwangi, 2014; Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007). Consequently, the experiences of Black international students as they transition and adjust to the college environment are not extensively acknowledged in research.

### **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine Black international students' sense of belonging at an HBCU and the factors impacting their sense of belonging. Understanding this issue is significant to these students' ultimate academic success as numerous scholars link academic and social sense of belonging to overall student satisfaction and retention (Tinto, 1993; Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). In addition, this study's findings elucidate intragroup dynamics and cross-cultural interactions within the HBCU environment. Throughout history, HBCUs have shown consistent interest in Africa and the Caribbean through hiring of faculty and enrollment of students from these regions as well as through participation in study abroad/exchange programs (Awokoya & Mann, 2011). Over the past 25 years, 21% of all foreign-born Black students received PhDs from HBCUs (Baskerville, Berger, & Smith, 2008). However, in their study on HBCU students Awokoya and Mann (2011) found, "particularly within the context of HBCUs, the within-group diversity as it relates to ethnicity, class, language, and national and geographic origin are often minimized in conversations about the Black student population," (p. 24). Although there has been a strong and consistent foreign-born Black presence at HBCUs, there is a dearth of empirical research regarding their- educational experiences at these institutions. This

study elucidates the experiences of HBCU students who are racially Black, but differ in nativity and nationality from their Black American peers. The research questions for this study are:

- How do Black international HBCU students describe their sense of belonging on campus?
- What factors impact Black international HBCU students' perceptions of sense of belonging?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

This paper is framed using the concept of sense of belonging. I first define and review research on this concept within the postsecondary context. Next, I present literature that examines sense of belonging among Students of Color and international students.

### **College Students' Sense of Belonging**

Higher education scholars have developed a large body of research examining how students experience sense of belonging and the factors impacting sense of belonging, leading to a number of definitions of the term (Strayhorn, 2012). However, for the purpose of this study, I use the definition as advanced by Hurtado and Carter (1997), which suggests sense of belonging is an individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to the college community that reflects upon the individual's mood, emotions, and attitude. This definition considers both cognitive and affective factors impacting students' experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Research on sense of belonging in higher education is often emphasized within the areas of retention and persistence. For example, in his seminal theory on student departure, Vincent Tinto (1993) concluded that students' level of integration into a university's academic and social systems, perceived shared values with the institution, and commitment to the institution reflects a sense of belonging and "fit" within the campus environment. Students are at greater risk of attrition if they perceive a lack of fit "with the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life" (Tinto, 1993, p. 50) or if they are "unable to establish...personal bonds that are the basis for membership in the communities of the institution" (p. 56). Conversely, higher levels of sense of belonging or fit increase the likelihood of student satisfaction and persistence at the institution.

Several studies since Tinto's early work conclude that students' sense of belonging is highly influenced by perceived rapport from peers and faculty (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008; Thomas, 2014). Meaningful interpersonal relationships, systems of support and resources, and feelings of being accepted and valued, have all been cited as instrumental to sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn,

2012). Extant research provides a wealth of evidence that an increased sense of belonging in college is associated with positive psychological, academic, and persistence outcomes (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012).

### **Students of Color and Sense of Belonging**

While Tinto's focus on student integration is often cited in contemporary research on collegiate sense of belonging, it is also criticized for placing too much onus on students, rather than on institutions, for developing sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Strayhorn, 2008). This is particularly relevant for Students of Color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), whose successful adjustment to college life is often predicated on how welcome they feel by their institution (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

Scholars have engaged in research focusing specifically on sense of belonging for Students of Color, the results of which suggest that hostile campus racial climates are associated with lesser sense of belonging and interactions with peers, as well as lower rates of persistence and degree attainment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007). Interactions with peers from different racial/ethnic groups also impact perceptions of racial climate and subsequently affect students' sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 1999). Positive cross-racial/ethnic interactions often result in greater openness to diversity as well as gains in critical thinking and academic engagement for both White students and Students of Color (Milem, 2003; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001). Research illustrates that Students of Color often engage across racial difference in developing peer groups (Antonio, 2001). In their study on interracial interaction in college, Hurtado, Dey, and Treviño (1994) found that Students of Color were more likely than White students to interact across race and the interracial interaction for Black students was most often related to social activities. Additionally, Maramba and Velasquez (2012) found that increased learning about one's racial/ethnic group had a considerable positive impact on Students' of Color sense of belonging and interpersonal relationships with other racial/ethnic groups.

African American students who attend HBCUs versus PWIs demonstrate different outcomes socially and academically, which connects to sense of belonging (Davis, 1991; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Institutional culture related to community building, peer engagement, and faculty interaction are all factors found to positively impact the experiences of African American students at HBCUs (Davis, 1991; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). African

American HBCU students also have higher GPAs and report greater campus engagement and satisfaction in their educational experiences, particularly when compared to their peers at PWIs (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). In contrast, research demonstrates that African American students at PWIs often feel isolated, experience a hostile racial climate, and are less academically integrated on their campuses (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Research suggests HBCUs provide students with an opportunity to engage in African American culture. In their study examining the experiences of Black students at HBCUs and PWIs, Fries-Britt & Turner (2002) found students “had gained a good sense of Black culture, experienced a degree of cohesiveness with it, and appreciated how effective the community could be when it works together.” (p. 320). Thus, HBCUs can provide an environment where African Americans can experience a shared identity with peers and confidence in this identity. Yet, researchers also recognize that not every student attending HBCUs are African American (Closson & Henry, 2008), but scholarship has not extensively examined the experiences of Black HBCU students who are not American and may not identify with Black American culture.

### **International Students and Sense of Belonging**

Research on international students often focuses on psychosocial factors (psychological well-being, homesickness, loss of identity) and sociocultural factors (cultural norms, intercultural contact, communication) related to the adjustment process (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Belongingness has only recently been extended to studies on international student adjustment. For example, Glass and Westmont-Campbell’s (2014) quantitative study found that sense of belonging increased cross-cultural interaction between international and host country students, and enhanced international students’ academic performance. Additionally, the researchers found that discriminatory experiences had a negative impact on belongingness among these students, while participation in co-curricular activities had a positive effect (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014). However, the students sampled were from PWIs and only seven percent of the sample identified racially as Black.

Several scholars conclude that to effectively engage with the campus community, it is important that international students interact regularly with native peers and professors (Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch & Cong, 2015; Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011; Ying & Han, 2006). Conversely, Ward and her colleagues (2001) suggest that it is important for international students to have a peer network of other international students, which can provide mutual support and understanding as well as alleviate homesickness (Ward et al., 2001). Overall, it appears

that international students adjust more positively if they have social networks comprised of relationships with other international students (unicultural or multicultural networks) as well as with native students, staff, and faculty (bicultural networks) (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Lin & Yi, 1997). When international students are not able to achieve a sense of belonging in their campus environment, outcomes can include anxiety, hostility, lowered self-esteem, social withdrawal, and depression (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Scholars have examined sense of belonging among international students and among Students of Color, highlighting within both populations that factors such as cross-cultural interactions, engagement with faculty, self-identity, and peer groups contribute to sense of belonging. Still, there are few studies that explore the experiences of Black international students at HBCUs, where these students share racial sameness but have differences across ethnicity, nationality, and nativity from their African American peers. The current study addresses this literature gap.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

I utilize a multi-participant descriptive case study approach, which is appropriate given my interest in how Black international students attending an HBCU perceive their sense of belonging and how contextual conditions impact their sense of belonging (Merriam, 2009). This study relies upon students' in-depth descriptions of their lived experiences (Merriam, 2009).

### **Research Site and Sample**

Data were collected from students enrolled at Heritage University (pseudonym), a mid-sized, HBCU in the mid-Atlantic region, in which approximately five percent of the student population is comprised of international students, the majority originating from the Caribbean and Africa. Ten students participated in this study. Each of the participants racially identified as Black and was classified as an international student. Participants originated from Nigeria, Kenya, Jamaica, Haiti, Senegal, Trinidad, Ghana, and Eritrea (see Table 1 for student characteristics).

### **Data Collection**

Participants were recruited who met three criteria: 1) an undergraduate or graduate student at Heritage University; 2) an international student; and 3) racially identifies as Black. I used open sampling, allowing any individual who met these criteria to participate. Open sampling is recommended for early stages of qualitative research to gain a diverse sample (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), reflecting the nature of this emerging study. Several strategies were employed to recruit participants. A

recruitment email was sent to the international students office in addition to presidents of campus organizations likely to engage Black foreign-born students (e.g. Caribbean student organization, African student organization). Participants were also asked to recommend others eligible for this study as means of snowball sampling (Small, 2009).

**Table 1: Student Characteristics**

Pseudonym	Gender	Country of Origin	Year in School
Stacy	Female	Jamaica	Junior
Jennifer	Female	Jamaica	Sophomore
Peter	Male	Trinidad	Sophomore
Monica	Female	Nigeria	Junior
Jake	Male	Nigeria	Sophomore
Kelly	Female	Kenya	3 <sup>rd</sup> year transfer
Jessica	Female	Haiti	Senior
Rose	Female	Ghana	Graduate student
Sam	Male	Senegal	Graduate student
Jason	Male	Eritrea	Graduate student

This study employed 1:1 semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes. Because the research questions emphasize how students described their sense of belonging and the factors that impacted their sense of belonging, the interview protocol included questions focused on students' perceived sense of belonging, collegiate experiences and transition to college; interactions with faculty and classmates inside and outside of the classroom environment; and students' perceptions of their race/ethnicity, culture, and nativity/nationality as well as whether race/ethnicity, culture, and nativity/nationality impacted their college transition. The semi-structured nature of the interview protocol allowed me flexibility to omit some questions, add additional questions, and change the ordering of questions as needed during the interview in order to better grasp how participants made meaning of their experiences (Yin, 2003). All participants were asked permission to record the interviews for later transcription and all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

Data analysis occurred in three stages throughout this project, using Merriam's (2009) constant comparative method of case study analysis. I uploaded interview transcripts to NVIVO 10, a software program that I used to code and manage all of my data. I first engaged in multiple reads and comparative examinations of the data (Creswell, 2008). Through this process I initially developed a set of inductive codes primarily relating to

how students described their transition to college, perceptions of their collegiate experiences, and impact of their social identities on their college experience. While a deductive approach was used to identify sensitizing concepts from the conceptual framework and sense of belonging literature prior to data collection, an inductive approach was also adopted allowing me to remain open to new and emerging themes throughout the course of the analysis (Merriam, 2009). Thus, some codes were developed from the literature and others were developed in-vivo from comments made by participants.

I next engaged in member checking to increase the trustworthiness of my initial coding scheme (Krefting, 1999). Member checking involves testing the interpretations of the data that I developed with the research participants (Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I conducted formal member checking with the students as a follow up to their interview. During the coding process, I provided students with their individual coded transcripts as well as my initial coding scheme to gain their feedback. The participants were asked to read through the documents and comment upon my codes and preliminary findings. I used their reactions and suggestions to refine my coding system before moving into further analysis.

Both during my initial coding process and after initial codes were developed, I engaged in comparing and connecting emerging codes and categories (Merriam, 2009). I used NVIVO 10 to group together data by code in order to reassemble the data and view patterns and themes within and across the narratives. Through this process and comparing across the different narratives, I refined my coding system, reduced my number of original codes, and connected the remaining to larger categories. Lastly, I began to pull together themes and develop a storyline (Merriam, 2009). During this process, the three primary themes that emerged across the data were 1) students' perceptions of Black Americans prior to matriculation; 2) students' perceptions of themselves and their perceived campus "fit;" and 3) campus climate and interactions with HBCU peers.

In addition to member checking, I used reflexivity to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of my data. Reflexivity served a variety of purposes in my research. It aligns with my epistemological position and methodological approach (social constructivism), which requires the researcher's "self" to be present in the study (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, reflexivity provides another form of credibility and trustworthiness to research data because it allows researchers to be conscious of how their background can influence how they collect and interpret data (Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I primarily engaged in reflexivity through memo writing, in which I would include my own personal reflections. I processed reflexivity by reflecting on my researcher identity, considering the researcher/ participant relationship, and reflecting on my social

positioning (Krefting, 1999). When I study the experiences of Black immigrants, my own ethnicity/nativity often becomes more salient as I have one parent who is a Black immigrant. Additionally, as an undergraduate student I spent time attending college in another country. In some ways, I shared similarities to the students regarding my race, heritage, and college experiences. It is possible that my identities and experiences helped me to more quickly build rapport with students in recruiting and conducting interviews. Yet, it was also important to approach this study knowing that participants would have experiences that would differ from my own. Keeping this at the forefront was the fact that I am also an outsider researcher to these students as an American-born individual who did not attend an HBCU. While this outsider identity provided a level of distance from my participants that helped keep their narratives at the center, it was also a challenge because I do not have personal experience with the HBCU context and had to learn that context through the process of this research study. Both my insider/ outsider identities shaped my research design and interpretations; thus, I sought assistance through member checking to reflect on these factors and remain aware of how they might influence my work.

## **FINDINGS**

Findings illustrate how Black international students in this study described their sense of belonging at their HBCU and the factors impacting their sense of belonging. Three primary themes emerged across students' narratives. One theme reflects how students' perceptions of Black Americans prior to matriculation impacted their initial transition and sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, students' perceptions of themselves and their perceived "fit" with the campus appeared to impact how they described their sense of belonging. Thirdly, students described their campus engagement and interactions.

### **Pre-College Perceptions Impacting Sense of Belonging**

Students were socialized into perceptions about Black Americans before ever coming to the United States. This exposure came from the media as well as from family and friends in their home countries, some who had been to the United States. Unfortunately, much of this socialization fostered negative perceptions. Therefore, students' beliefs about Black Americans prior to enrolling in college appeared to make them cautious in their initial transition to campus. For example, most students described negative pre-enrollment perceptions of Black Americans with some examples being "close-minded," and "having a defeatist mentality." Monica stated that much of what she knew of Black Americans was what she saw on television, which was a portrayal of this group as "having high rates of

incarceration and government assistance and lacking ambition.” Most participants described negative portrayals of Black Americans in the media. These images portrayed Black Americans one-dimensionally and left some participants feeling a need to differentiate themselves from these stereotypes once in the United States. Peter explained that prior to attending college, family members told him to “Make sure people know I am from Trinidad because Black men are often mistreated in the U.S.” For Peter as well others in the study, the pre-college perceptions they had about Blacks in the United States left them feeling cautious about this population as well as feeling a need to distinguish themselves from Black Americans as a protective measure due to the U.S. racial climate.

While students primarily discussed negative preconceptions about Black Americans, this was also complicated by what some participants described as a “hip hop” culture in which Black Americans through music and clothing were perceived more positively as “cool” and “resistant to the mainstream.” However, this perception was also situated within a one-dimensional context. Only three students specifically stated positive pre-enrollment perceptions of Black Americans such as being “creative,” “self-expressive” and “having courage to try to change their community/environment for the better.” Some students noted that prior to coming to the United States, they were aware of the race-related struggles that Black Americans faced and named particular issues such as police brutality, discrimination in the workplace, and “unusually high incarceration rates that can’t just be a coincidence.” However, only Jessica described feeling a sense of solidarity over these issues with Black Americans, primarily due to the negative treatment and stereotypes she experienced because of being Haitian. Other participants expressed that prior to coming to the United States, while they could feel a level of empathy towards the experiences of Black Americans, they did not feel personally connected to U.S. racial issues.

### **Sense of Belonging, Sense of Self, and Campus “Fit”**

Students described their perceptions of self-identity, particularly regarding their race, ethnicity, and nationality as impacting their perceived level of fit at their university. While students shared racial-sameness with their Black American peers, each expressed feeling more connected to their ethnic identity/nationality than to their Black racial identity. For example, Stacy explained “I am Jamaican first and Black second...even though everyone here [at her HBCU] looks like me, the second I open my mouth people realize I am not from here [the U.S.] and that sets me apart.” As an international student, Stacy’s nationality is more salient in her university environment and her Jamaican accent identifies her as different from her native-born peers. Similarly, Monica expressed perceptions of her own

Black identity in relation to what others may perceive, “I look the same, but I’m also different.” When asked to expound upon this statement Monica further explained that most people assume she is African American until they learn her name or hear her accent. Still, both Stacy and Monica described some comfort in “blending in” with their fellow Black American peers on their HBCU campus, which differed from their experience off campus where they were a racial minority in the United States. Yet, these students as well as other participants verbalized that blending in racially on their campus did not automatically create a feeling of belonging at their institution because internally these students still felt they stood out or were different due to their nationality and nativity status.

As a transfer student, Kelly had a different experience of fit related to her social identities, stating that because almost everyone at her HBCU is Black, she is less aware of her race than she was when she attended a predominantly White institution (PWI) before transferring to an HBCU. At the PWI, she felt that because there were so few Black students, she was seen as “the Black girl” among her peers, but now at an HBCU almost everyone is Black and so her peers see her as “the Kenyan/African girl.” While both perceptions are forms of labeling, Kelly felt the HBCU environment acknowledged her cultural heritage in a way that she appreciated, rather than identifying her predominantly through a racial label she found less salient.

While students were the racial majority at their HBCU, some struggled with the notion of being a racial minority in the United States because they came from predominantly Black countries. Students’ perceptions of race were based on their home-country context, and those who had not examined issues of race in the U.S. expressed confusion or dissonance regarding the dominance of race in U.S. society. Rose expressed that African Americans “talk about race constantly” and that she did not see race as such a major definer of her identity before coming to the United States. Instead students discussed other social identities that were more salient to them based on the systems of their home country. These included religion, gender, class, and ethnic group/tribe. Most students came from predominantly Black countries or countries where Black people were not considered a minority in number. Different perceptions of race and racial issues in the United States occasionally created tension with or distance from Black American peers when racially charged incidents arose in the U.S. media. For example, Jason explained,

When that whole thing happened in Ferguson [shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, by a White police officer] I felt like most of my [Black American] classmates thought the police

officer was wrong. But I wasn't so sure and that made things tough between me and my [Black American] roommate for a while.

Jason's experience was not unlike those of other participants who expressed a desire to better understand forms of systemic oppression that exist in the U.S., but felt they lacked a way to ask questions or express doubt with their Black American peers and faculty without causing offense.

However, some students believed that being at an HBCU provided an opportunity to share their culture, beliefs, and perspectives with their native-born peers as well as learn more about Black American culture, beliefs and perspectives. Sam expressed this in stating that showing respect for and learning about African Americans and their history makes African Americans more inclined to do the same regarding his culture. Other participants made similar statements such as "I'm here to learn, not just from my professors, but also from the other students," and "I think if I'm open, they'll [students] be open too."

### **Sense of Belonging and Student Engagement**

Participants described the general campus climate as positive. Peter emphasized, "Yes, for me being accepted is automatic because I have established myself as a student first and my cultural identity is simply a part of who I am and does not determine what I can contribute to this community." However, he also expressed that due to the large number of African Americans at his institution and because many activities and events revolve around this population at an HBCU, not getting involved in these activities would result in "...missing out on a lot socially." Most participants emphasized that their time as HBCU students was primarily focused on obtaining a good education and a good job in the future and less about getting involved on campus. Jessica explained, "I have to work extra hard because English is not my first language, it's my third language so schoolwork takes me a long time. I can't screw up because of partying a lot or joining too many groups." Rose also expressed that focusing on her academic work meant sacrificing a social life, "I left my husband and child back home [Ghana] to get my degree, so although I'd like to get more involved at school, I have to be focused on my academics." None of the participants held formal leadership positions on their campus, although some participated in student organizations and/or attended school events outside of the classroom. The support services office for international students provided trips into the local community and social events geared towards international students.

Students also described engaging in ethnic/cultural practices and having predominantly foreign-born friends. Some discussed the importance of connecting with a cultural or religious organization in the local community that was not campus-affiliated. Monica explained, “As an African student, I feel like I have more in common with Africans and can just be myself around them...they understand what I am going through and who I am without me having to explain.” Some students voiced that they could more easily relate to peers who were from their own culture or who were also dealing with culture shock/transition to the United States.

Participants expressed that similar to the messages they received from the media about Black Americans, some of their Black American peers stereotyped international students based on stereotypes they had been exposed to as well. Jennifer explained, “I feel like some of my American classmates think that we [Jamaicans] are really stuck up, which is just not true.” Kelly also emphasized that some of her African American friends were surprised by how metropolitan some parts of Africa are, stating, “TV in America only shows the poverty side [in Africa] and my [American] classmates have said they don’t learn much about Africa in school before coming to college.” The narratives from Jennifer and Kelly highlight that while the international students within this study had stereotypes about Black Americans, their Black American peers also had stereotypes about them. Peer engagement had the capacity to help mitigate these stereotypes, but as aforementioned many of the international students in this study described having social groups primarily comprised of other international students.

While participants perceived stereotypes between themselves and their African American peers, each explained that overall they felt respected by African American students and faculty at their university and that being foreign-born did not have a negative impact on their college experience. Findings also suggest that for most participants, their pre-college perceptions of Black Americans shifted over time and with engagement at their HBCU. Specifically, eight of the participants expressed their perceptions of Black Americans have changed in a positive way since attending an HBCU. Stacy stated “Attending an HBCU has helped me to see that Black Americans have a strong community and here [Heritage University] treat each other like family.” Similarly Sam explained, “Being at [Heritage University] I realize now that my previous thoughts about African Americans were mostly just stereotypes. The [African American] students at my school work hard and want the same thing I do, to be successful.”

Overall, stereotypes students were exposed to about Black Americans often led to initial distancing from these peers and feelings of uneasiness on their HBCU campus as emphasized by Jake, “I had heard all of these stories about Black people in America and when I first got here

[Heritage University] I didn't want to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing...it was hard." Jake's preconceived notions about Black Americans before coming to college later impacted his behavior and sense of belonging once he arrived, which made his initial college transition more challenging. However, the data suggest that over time, in addition to an evolving and more positive perception of Black Americans came a greater sense of belonging among students in the study. As aforementioned, Stacy began to see her campus as a community and family. Similarly Jason expressed, "Now that I'm in my second year, I feel more comfortable here and a lot of that is because of my international and American friends." For the participants, sense of belonging was tied to moving beyond stereotypical perceptions and messages about Black Americans that they were socialized around before coming to the United States.

## **DISCUSSION**

Findings demonstrate international Black students at HBCUs can experience challenges and improvements to their sense of belonging relative to their own perceptions and self-identity as well as their campus environment and interactions. Over time these students often felt greater sense of belonging as a result of positive campus experiences, but still appeared to see themselves on the periphery of mainstream campus culture. Because literature suggests, "belonging needs take on increased significance in environments or situations that individuals experiences as different, unfamiliar, or foreign," (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 10), understanding these students' experiences and perceptions may be critical to their ultimate success in college.

Stereotypes and racial identity were discussed as an initial barrier to belongingness on campus. The students interviewed each had negative preconceptions about Black Americans before enrolling at their university, which for many led to initial distancing and a lack of making deep connections with their African American peers. While research shows that positive socializing and connecting across difference can increase sense of belonging (Glass et al., 2015; Milem, 2003), for participants this may have been hindered by early stereotypes. Separation was reinforced when participants did not relate to Black Americans' perception of race as a central part of their identity and experience. When Students of Color behave in ways that are not considered congruent with their race or distance themselves from their racial community, sense of belonging can be negatively impacted (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). For participants, their nativity and nationality were most salient in how they defined their identity, which is a theme found in much of the literature regarding Black immigrants (Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014; George Mwangi & Fries-

Britt, 2015; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Overall, although the participants “looked like everyone else” at their university due to racial sameness, they saw themselves as different.

A second reason for an initial lack of sense of belonging was a lack of campus engagement. Students reasoned that they were involved less in social activities due to feeling a responsibility to themselves and their families to be academically successful and obtain a U.S. college education as international students. However, literature highlights that campus involvement can actually enhance academic outcomes (Strayhorn, 2012). Participants’ heavy academic focus may reduce their ability and/or desire to participate in other areas of college life and feel part of their college culture. Students may appear “invisible” to many at their university because although they are racially the same as most of the student population, they lack social engagement with parts of their campus environment. Unfortunately, this invisibility may lead to the needs and voices of these students going unheard by the broader campus community.

Participants often sought out friends who were also foreign-born and did not frequently develop close relationships with African Americans. The students stated that they felt more comfortable in groups with foreign-born peers; yet, this lack of cross-cultural communication and interaction can reinforce tension and stereotypes (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Jackson, 2010). In addition, unlike African Americans who may choose an HBCU because they want to be among others of the same race, only two of the research participants gave this as a reason for attending their institutions. One of these students, Kelly, purposefully sought out African American peer groups and found that through informally engaging with these individuals, they were also able to learn about each other. Kelly also believed that her student experience and personal growth was enhanced by these interactions. Kelly’s experience highlights that engaging with native-born Black peers may help foreign-born Black HBCU students become more engaged with their university and alleviate stereotypes. This is also reinforced in the literature, which suggests that Students of Color and international students can experience greater sense of belonging when engaging across difference (Glass et al., 2015; Milem, 2003; Whitt et al., 2001).

Although most of the participants did not have close relationships with Black American students, each believed it was important to learn about Black American culture while in the United States. Being at an HBCU appears to have increased participants’ interest in this and over time alleviated some of the negative assumptions they had about African Americans prior to enrollment. Still, while being in a majority-Black environment provides them with exposure to Black American culture and thus the opportunity to learn about it; none of the participants spoke of

formal measures that their university took to intentionally engage them in cross-cultural interactions or dialogue with African Americans. It appeared that much of the onus to engage cross culturally fell upon the students, rather than through interventions at the campus level. Harper and Nichols (2008) suggest, "Many educators and administrators erroneously assume the mere presence of diverse student populations will compel them to interact with and learn from each other's differences" (p. 212). If foreign-born Black students primarily engage with other foreign-born students and are not engaged in meaningful interactions with African Americans, these two sub-populations may not optimize opportunities to learn from one another.

The ability to engage across difference is not completely predicated by students. Campus climate plays a predominant role in whether students can engage across difference in a positive manner (Hurtado et al., 1999). As aforementioned, despite suggesting a positive campus climate, most participants expressed they did not feel part of the African American community and culture on their campus and thus remained outsiders as HBCU students. This is despite their racial sameness with Black American students at their institution, whom their university is committed to serving. Awokoya and Mann (2011) suggest that HBCUs may gloss over the intra-group differences and dynamics on their campuses. However, higher education researchers have begun to highlight the heterogeneity within the Black college student demographic (George Mwangi, 2014; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Stewart, 2009) and the interview data reflects the importance of this agenda. The students in this study want to learn more about Black American culture; yet, some do not want to risk removing themselves from the comfort zones they have created with other foreign-born students. This is an issue that HBCU administrators and faculty can address in order to create a campus climate that provides opportunities for Black international students to become more engaged at their institution and pursue opportunities for cross-cultural interaction with Black American students.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Higher education practice and research often emphasize the college recruitment of international students and it is only in recent years that U.S. higher education is turning to a focus on the retention and success of these students (Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014; Lee, 2010). Yet, even within this research, much of it centers on predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and international students of Asian descent (George Mwangi, Peralta, Fries-Britt & Daoud, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Olivas & Li, 2006). By focusing on sense of belonging, this study considers how international students experience higher education beyond enrollment and pushes scholarship

forward on these experiences by centering on diverse institutional types and students (HBCUs and Black students from Africa and the Caribbean). Through this study, I share the narratives of Black international students, a demographic still little acknowledged in higher education research. It is important for higher education institutions to recognize and accommodate this growing population of students who are an integral part of campus communities. Without this understanding, colleges and universities may not be providing these students with the tools and resources needed for them to be successful in their educational endeavors and personal growth. This is especially important for HBCUs, an institutional type cited as working to increase its global profile and foster stronger internationalization strategies (Pitre Davis, 2013).

It is important that practitioners embrace a heterogeneous perspective when developing services and programs for Black students (George Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015). Awokoya and Mann (2011) suggest HBCUS do not emphasize intragroup differences among their Black population. Yet, while many Black students attend HBCUs to build relationships with other same-race individuals or to explore their racial identity (Perna, 2001), there are also HBCU students, such as the foreign-born Black students in this study, who do not fully relate to the African American community at their institution or feel part of a shared Black experience (at least initially). Thus, these universities should continue to be intentional in working to understand and identify the needs and perceptions of this sub-population in order for students to attain college success and satisfaction. In addition to national origin, it is also important that practitioners acknowledge the diversity of religion, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics of their Black students in order to build community, instead of assume community, among this student population at HBCUS or at other institutional types.

It is important for higher education practitioners to be intentional in providing opportunities for foreign-born Black students and native-born Black students to interact with and learn from one other. The students in this study stated they were interested in sharing their culture and learning about African American culture. Yet, without formal processes for this, it appears international students might remain in peer groups with other foreign-born students in order to maintain their comfort zone or due to stereotypes Black native- and foreign-born students have about one another. Without this interaction, these stereotypes and tensions will likely continue to exist. Strategies that universities can utilize to increase cross-cultural communication include 1) pairing Black international students with an African American student “cross-cultural partner;” 2) developing formal events where both groups can have dialogue about student issues, intragroup dynamics, and/or the African Diaspora; 3) reframing curriculum on Black

studies and history to also reflect/integrate a global or diasporic perspective; and 4) encouraging and supporting collaborations between Black diaspora student organizations (e.g. Black Student Union, Caribbean Student Association, and African Student Association) on events that can create greater dialogue and learning from each other. Creating greater within-group peer engagement at HBCUs and other higher education institutions for Black students may assist in intentionally alleviating some of the initial tension and social distancing described by participants in this study.

I suggest future researchers use a heterogeneous lens when studying the experiences of Black students in higher education and engage in research related to Black student intragroup dynamics. Researchers should continue to complicate the historically perpetuated concept of in-group sameness within this demographic (George Mwangi, 2014; George Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015) study suggests there is much diversity and dynamism as well as tension and stereotyping within this population that can be explored. It should not be assumed that Black students would find commonalities or engage with other Black students because they are of the same race. Instead, researchers should explore how Black students define their multiples identities and how campuses can create inclusive environments to support students' identities and needs. HBCUs are ideal sites to explore this issue because of their higher proportion of Black students than at predominantly White institutions. However, research on intragroup dynamics and diversity within the Black student population can and should be explored within other higher education settings as well.

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