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## **Black African Students in Predominantly White U.S. Higher Education Institutions: Drivers Influencing Their Identification and Commitment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Black African students are increasingly choosing the United States as their preferred destination, and many choose to study at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate reasons that may influence their identification and commitment to those PWIs. We interviewed 20 sub-Saharan Africans at two predominantly White Southeastern universities. Findings revealed that construed external image, overall satisfaction with the school, promotion of the institution, and willingness to maintain membership shape the extent to which Black African students are identified and committed to their university of choice. Furthermore, the study also found that prestige does not appear to influence Sub-Saharan African students' identification and commitment to a school in the United States., but race has mixed effects depending on how it gets interpreted by students. These findings suggest implications for research and practice for student affairs professionals to better serve and retain their international populations.*

**Keywords:** Black Africans, identification, commitment, higher education, predominantly White institutions

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Higher education has been dubbed a “global commodity traded across countries and cultures” (Irungu, 2013, p. 163) as students frequently travel across the globe searching for new educational opportunities, perhaps unavailable in their home countries. The United States is often a destination of choice for international

students, as students come from all over the world, representing at least 220 countries (Umeri, 2022). Higher education programs in the West are often perceived as being better quality and offering more variety in areas of study, as well as having more student support services, as compared to other colleges and universities abroad (Irungu, 2013). Consequently, for the past five years, the United States has hosted more than 1 million international students. For example, in the 2019-2020 academic year, 1,075,496 international students were enrolled in American universities (Institute of International Education, 2020). According to Open Doors report by the Institute of International Education, there were 42,518 Sub-Saharan African students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions in 2021-22. In 2021-22, Nigerian students represented approximately 40% of sub-Saharan students in the United States with a total number of 14,438 (Institute of International Education, 2022). Ethiopia, Ghana, The Democratic Republic of Congo, and Zimbabwe had each more than 1,000 students in the United States. The 2023 report by the Institute of International Education Open Doors indicated that sub-Saharan Africa had the highest growth among world regions, growing by 18%.

International education has become a big business in the United States, as international students have contributed \$44 billion to the American economy (Institute of International Education, 2016). Colleges and universities strive to recruit and retain international students both for their tuition dollars and the diversification and cultural exchange opportunities they bring to campuses and communities (Irungu, 2013).

Given the increased international representation across American campuses, extant research has begun to explore the lived experiences of international students in general. However, much of the literature fails to differentiate among various countries and cultures, assuming that all international students share the same experiences and challenges (Mwangi et al., 2019). On the contrary, “African international students tend to have more difficulty adapting to their new environment than other international students” (Umeri, 2022, p. 6). They may have very different experiences given the differences in their cultural values (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2013, Irungu, 2013; Umeri, 2022), perceptions of community and ways of learning (Mwangi et al., 2019). These differences are reflections of identity and directly contribute to African students’ ability to develop relationships and feelings of belongingness in their new environment (Bastien et al., 2018; Mwangi & English, 2017). On the other hand, Lin and Scherz (2014) found that Asian international students experience linguistic challenges that affect their ability to participate in classroom discussions, understand lectures, and develop social relationships with faculty, staff, and peers. Latina students, however, are resistant to social integration, but they also face racial discrimination and stigmatization at PWIs (González, 2006).

In other areas of research, scholars have also explored college students’ identification and commitment to their universities, particularly in terms of students’ satisfaction with their school, the distinctiveness and prestige of the school, belief in the school's goals, their strong desire to exert efforts for the success of the school, and the willingness to maintain membership (Myers et al.,

2016). Again, however, how African students come to feel belongingness in American universities has not been extensively explored.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate drivers that may influence Black African students' identification with and commitment to stay at predominantly White U.S. higher education institutions. Our findings will significantly contribute to the international student literature, particularly the experiences of Black African students in PWIs in the United States. Additionally, universities will better understand how they can more effectively recruit and retain those students to further both the institution's financial growth and its student diversity. The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1:** What drivers influence the identification of Black African students with predominantly White higher education institutions in the United States.?

**RQ2:** What drivers influence the commitment of Black African students to predominantly White higher education institutions in the United States?

**RQ3:** To what extent does race influence Black Africans' identification with and commitment to predominantly White higher education institutions in the United States?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Sub-Saharan African Students in the United States**

Sub-Saharan Africans are a particularly fast-growing segment of the international student population, many of whom make their "first point of contact" with a higher education institution (Mwangi et al., 2019). The United States remains a preferred destination for Black African international students (Institute of International Education, 2019). Kigotho (2015) found that the quality of the educational system and the availability of funding for talented students attract Africans to the United States. Despite the growth of higher education in many African countries as well as a growing competition from other countries, the United States will likely continue to be the most attractive destination for sub-Saharan Africans (Kigotho, 2015).

As early as 1963, researchers took notice of the growing African student population. Veroff (1963), for example, was particularly interested in the attitudes and knowledge that African students would take back to their home countries, and how these future social leaders of their foreign homelands might approach world cooperation, politics, and economic decisions. Pruitt (1978), on the other hand, was concerned less with the future implications of Africans being educated in the United States and more with students' everyday experiences and challenges on American campuses. Very few students were comfortable with the American culture (Pruitt, 1978). Most experienced discrimination and homesickness, as well as problems adjusting to the new climate and communicating with Americans. Still, a majority reported being satisfied with the education they were receiving and often credited the university's international office and programs as helping them maintain a positive attitude toward their home away from home (Pruitt, 1978). Similarly, Adelegan and Parks (1985) explored the difficulties of adjusting

to American culture and learned that many African students feel torn between letting go of one culture to adopting another. African students may also be underprepared and have difficulties adjusting upon arrival due to a lack of orientation before departing their home countries (Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997).

Since then, scholars have continued to examine the lived experiences of the growing population of African students studying in the United States. For example, Caldwell and Hyams-Ssekasi (2016) explored African students' preparations to leave their home countries, while Mwaura (2008) focused on their lived experiences and challenges once they arrived at their PWIs in the U.S., including their increased awareness of race. Caldwell and Hyams-Ssekasi (2016) found that Western universities sometimes assume that international students are rich, leading to an inappropriate orientation and understanding of Black African students.

### **Organizational Identification and Commitment**

The notion of organizational identification and commitment refers to the degree to which an individual feels they are attached to an organization. Ashforth et al. (2008) argued that to understand identification, it is important to have a clear understanding of what identity is. According to Ashforth and colleagues (2008), "Identity is a self-referential description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the question 'who am I?' or 'who are we?'" (p. 327). In other words, identity is all about how individuals define themselves and the groups in which they are members.

Identification then is "the perception of oneness or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). In the organizational context, individuals are considered as identified when they embrace the values and the goals of the organization and make them their own.

Mowday et al. (1979) focused their investigation on the attitudinal commitment of employees from different organizations. Attitudinal commitment is when an individual's identity is congruent to that of the organization or when "the goals of the organization and those of the individual become increasingly integrated" (Mowday et al., 1979, p. 3). A committed individual shows the desire to stay with the organization. In other words, "Committed persons should be more likely to want to remain with an organization and work towards its goals" (p. 1). For the authors, organizational commitment has three main characteristics: "1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; 2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and 3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization" (p. 4). The intent to stay and intrinsic motivation are positively related to organizational commitment (Mowday et al., 1979).

At first glance, the two constructs certainly seem to overlap in some characteristics. However, from the definitions of identification and commitment, it appears that the two concepts are somehow different. Primarily, "Identification is self-referential whereas commitment is not" (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006, p. 579). Cheney and Tompkins (1987) also argued that identification and

commitment are distinct but intertwined concepts. For these authors, identification refers to the connection one has with an organization, while commitment depicts some sort of action about an organization. Cheney and Tompkins (1987) constructed a matrix of four quadrants produced by intersecting the two concepts: I. low identification/low commitment; II. low identification/high commitment; III. high identification/low commitment; and IV. high identification/high commitment. Indeed, as quadrant III illustrates, one may identify with an organization without being committed to it. For example, with the current study, a student may integrate the values and goals of their school, yet not take action to contribute to its promotion and growth.

## **Students' Institutional Identification and Commitment**

### ***Predictors of Students' Identification***

Myers et al. (2016) examined students' relationship with their university to find factors that affect their identification. The authors found a statistically significant effect of "construed external image of the university, trust in the university, satisfaction with the university" (p. 223) and students' organizational identification. Furthermore, students identify more with the institution when they believe that it considerably helped them achieve their goals Myers et al., (2016). Also, students are more prone to make financial donations to their university when they identify with it. In the same sense, Mael and Ashforth (1992) researched alumni's identification with their alma mater. They found that organizational distinctiveness and prestige positively affect organizational identification. Also, the authors found that satisfaction with school and sentimentality are predictors of alumni's identification with their alma mater.

Dutton et al. (1994) indicated that when employees have the subjective belief that their organization is great, they tend to identify more with the organization. The authors argued that construed external image (the way employees believe outsiders perceive their organization) has a positive effect on employees' identification with their organizations. In the student context, Black African students may identify with their U.S. institutions because of the perceptions others have of those universities.

### ***Predictors of Students' Commitment***

Students are considered committed to their institution when they display positive behaviors towards it. Many drivers may facilitate the development of such positive attitudes in international college students. Paswan and Ganesh (2009) found that international students' loyalty toward their American universities is influenced by their satisfaction with education service augmenters. Financial, campus life, and social interaction augmenters have a significant effect on international students' satisfaction and loyalty to their universities (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009). Better provision and availability of those education service

augmenters could increase the attraction and retention of Black African students in predominantly White U.S. higher education institutions.

Similarly, Pham and Lai (2016) found that international students' commitment leads to their loyalty towards their host institution. Commitment to their study is the result of the ability of international students to connect emotionally with their host institution and environment at large. The possibility for international students to discover new places, get jobs, and feel secure are key factors that contribute to their commitment and overall satisfaction. Consequently, when the needs of Black African students are met, they may commit and stay loyal to that host institution.

### **Race as an Influencer of Identification and Commitment**

Little research has been conducted on the experiences of Black Africans in PWIs in terms of their identification and commitment. It is important to explore the role of race as potentially something students from Sub-Saharan Africa consider when deciding to study in the United States, and whether race is an element that influences their identification and commitment.

Race has long been and is still a serious issue in the United States. It has long been used to exclude certain groups, particularly Blacks, from higher education. Indeed, higher education institutions were built in the United States to educate rich White men (Thelin, 2019). In PWIs, Black students are often ignored from classroom discussions, harassed by the police, and denied access to on-campus social life (Love, 1993). The specific case of Black African students in the United States has been investigated by Awuor (2021). Black African students are often stereotyped as not being intelligent (Awuor, 2021). Therefore, they have to work harder to prove those perceptions wrong. Constantine et al. (2005) reported that White professors and graduate teaching assistants have sometimes used racial slurs such as "stupid nigger" (p. 62) to refer to African students. Also, the relationship between Black Africans and African Americans has not always been friendly. Although they share the same skin color, African Americans usually perceive sub-Saharan African students as foreigners (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). On the other hand, Fries-Britt et al. (2014) found that Black students from Africa cannot relate with their peers African Americans on race and racism in the United States. Despite the presence of racial discrimination, prejudice, and harassment toward Blacks on American campuses, the United States remains a favorite destination for students from Africa (Kigotho, 2015). Researchers found that in the face of racism and discrimination, Black African students develop a sense of motivation and determination to succeed (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Mwangi et al., 2019). Therefore, it seems critical to understand better the experiences of Black African students and the extent to which race may influence their identification with and commitment to predominantly White American institutions.

## **METHOD**

### **Sampling and Participants**

Upon IRB approval, 20 students from a convenience sample of Black African college students, at two midsized Southeastern universities were recruited to participate in the study. The principal investigator sent the consent form via email to potential participants through the international offices of the two PWIs. Six of the participants identified as females, and the other 14 self-identified as males. Participants had to meet the following criteria to participate in the study: (a) be at least 18 years of age, (b) be currently enrolled or had completed a degree program as an international student in a predominantly White institution in the United States, and (c) be Black from an African country. Participants were from Burkina Faso (1), Ethiopia (3), Guinea (1), Ghana (2), Nigeria (10), South Africa (1), The Democratic Republic of Congo (1), and Zimbabwe (1). Ages ranged between 19 and 55, with an average age of 25 years. Eleven participants were in a graduate program or had completed one, and the remaining nine participants were undergraduate students.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews followed an interview protocol for consistency across participants but also allowed flexibility for the researcher to probe, clarify, and expand on points of interest during the conversation (Tracy, 2020).

The interviews conducted via Zoom were recorded, lasted about 300 minutes in total, and were transcribed verbatim using Otter. The in-depth interviews allowed us to reach saturation before the 20 interviews were conducted. First, the data were compiled and organized using MAXQDA, a qualitative and mixed methods data analysis tool. Participant responses were analyzed using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to give labels to pieces of data that reflected the influencing drivers found in the extant literature reviewed above. More specifically, we looked for examples of construed external image, prestige, and overall satisfaction as influencers of identification and evidence of promoting the host institution and maintaining membership as influencers of commitment. We also looked for indicators of race influencing students' connections with and behaviors on behalf of their universities. When statements and expressions were repeated more than twice by participants, they warranted a code. For the sake of confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms reflecting their nationalities. University names were also altered to protect the identity of participants and institutions.

## FINDINGS

### Identification Influencers

#### *Construed External Image*

Nineteen out of the 20 participants reported the way others perceived their host institutions influenced their decision to study at a particular university and their connection to it. For example, Tony said,

For me, I think partly, it was easy because I felt like I was more in touch with it based on the people that are already on the ground. I had a lot of people that I was communicating with about HOU. So, before I even set foot on campus, I felt like I already knew what I was going to expect.

Tony and others reported that their choice to study at their host institution was mostly influenced by what other people were telling them about the university. The people to whom they were listening to included students who were already at the institution, as well as participants' mentors. When people they knew and trusted shared positive messages about the university, it made participants feel more connected to and identified with the institution.

#### *Prestige*

In contrast to expectations, these Black African students reported that prestige was not a driver that influenced their identification with PWIs in the United States. 100% of the respondents reported that prestige was not important to them. As long as their chosen major was available in the institution, they were fine with that. For example, Mami said,

None of the schools that I applied to here had anything to do with prestige. I guess it had more to do with whether it was close to family or what they offered in terms of my major, class size, the environment I would be living in.

Jo also reported that prestige was not important to him. Simply coming to the U.S. to get an education was prestigious enough. He shared the following response:

When I was coming [prestige] was not a big factor for me. I was just more interested in getting into a school that provides scholarships and diversity. So, [prestige] wasn't really a big factor in my decision. The simple fact of coming to the United States as an African student is a factor that is highly perceived by other citizens or Africans. I don't care about big names like going to Harvard or Princeton or, you know, those big names.

Mami and Jo's responses reflect similar sentiments shared by participants who, overwhelmingly, were not concerned about the grand,



prestigious reputation of their chosen universities. Since it was already considered prestigious to simply study in the United States, they were much more influenced by the institutions' areas of study.

### ***Overall Satisfaction with the Institution***

Findings suggest that Black African students' satisfaction with their host institution influences their identification with it. Their perception of the international office at their university, their interactions with faculty, and the financial support they received were key drivers that influenced their satisfaction. For example, Yayus said,

I will say that the international office is playing a very important role because they are like the first contact with international students. When I first came into the country, I was amazed by the warmth, the reception that I was given. So, the first day I got into the international office they let me see all the staff. They were really excited to have us. It's something I really, really liked. That gave me a sense of belonging on the first day.

Participants' interactions with their professors also influenced their satisfaction and consequently their identification with their host institutions. Tony said,

The professors are really amazing. Partly because most of them have gone to school with international students, most of them had experience teaching international students. So, they always had the answers to most questions, if not all that I had regarding the program, regarding what I would do when I graduate, like basically anything. I could talk to most of my professors and most of them had a lot of insight. So, it was really easy to interact with them without feeling as if you didn't belong.

As these responses demonstrate, positive relationships with key university personnel are critical to creating a sense of belonging for Black African students. Specifically, positive experiences with international offices as well as with faculty members are likely to influence students' overall level of satisfaction with their host institution. That satisfaction will likely lead to students' greater identification with the university.

### **Commitment Influencers**

#### ***Promotion of Host Institution***

This study found that students who identified with their institution were more committed to its promotion. They were eager to talk positively about their school and to encourage other Black Africans to attend their school. For instance, Jo recounted how he continues to promote his alma mater in various ways, saying,

I still post about them. I talked to some colleagues, friends of mine back home, about them. I think I've helped a couple of students to it. I tell them how good the school is to help them prepare for their career. I think that those are some of the behaviors I have exhibited so far. Talking about it with prospective students on my own without being paid. I still have their shirts; I put them on sometimes.

Similarly, Chrome agreed to promote the university he attended to people he knows and encourage them to consider an education there: "I think I will continue supporting it by maybe continuing promoting the university wherever I go. To my friends and to my family, and my relatives, so that they may come to study here." Jo, Chrome, and others reflected on how they promoted their institutions, some even after graduating. Their actions suggest they were and are still committed to behaving in ways that help the universities they attend(ed).

### ***Maintaining Membership with the Institution***

Participants spoke of their commitment in terms of their willingness to maintain membership with their host institution. It is not uncommon for international students to start an academic program at one institution and complete it at another one through transfer. However, some international students start and complete their programs at the same institution. Elements that influence that decision to stay include their satisfaction with their programs and the overall environment they are in. Jo mentioned that he did not want to start everything all over again. He shared the following response to the question about why he stayed and completed his program at his institution:

First of all, I felt really comfortable in the environment in the city. I was able to take care of my living expenses. I was enjoying the research I was doing. I didn't want to start all over again. So, I think everything just added up. For me, the research was good. I didn't want to start over again. What I was getting as stipends was just enough for me to take care of my living expenses and see me through my studies; there was no need for me to really change even to actually consider it at that point.

From this response, it appears that when students do not have to stress about their living conditions, when they have decent financial support, and when they are satisfied with the quality of their program, they are more likely to start and complete their degree program at the same institution.

### ***Race as an Influencer of Identification and Commitment***

The data suggests some differences of opinions across participants when it comes to the role that race plays in cultivating Black African students' identification and commitment to their universities. Ten out of 20 participants discussed drivers such as diversity and race as being important to their desire to maintain membership at their host institutions. For example, Tony mentioned that

the diversity of students, faculty, and staff was a key factor that kept him at his university. He explained,

I feel like it was the environment was really amazing, so much that I felt like four years went by pretty fast. This is partly because of the diverse environment in terms of people from different backgrounds like Americans and non-Americans. And, the professors as well were really understanding. There was a diverse group of professors as well from different countries. So, it was always easy to feel like I belonged in this institution, because I'm not the only person from a different background. I mean, the staff is made up of people from different backgrounds, and so is the student body. So, that motivated me, and I never really thought of leaving because of that, because I felt like I was just part of a large group of foreign students and professors just trying to make sure that, you know, they do their part and remains in the local culture, and the local culture generally, was accepting. So, I don't really see any reason for me to want to move because of that.

In short, for Tony and others, a diverse campus community was important and contributed to students' desire to stay at their university.

In contrast, other interviewees reported that race was not a reason they considered when coming to the United States and was not an influencer on their decision to stay or not. For example, Jo said that race was not a driver that made him feel connected to his institution. As he said,

I feel like [race] doesn't really influence it that much. Like I said, initially, I feel really connected to the school, they were really supportive. Whenever I have issues, I go to the school authority, they were really helpful. We have a body for international students, the international student office department was helpful. So, I wouldn't say race played a major role or influenced my connectedness to the school.

In the same sense, Yayus reported that race and racism were not drivers that could influence his sense of belongingness and commitment to an institution either. However, he seemed to interpret race more negatively, as in experiencing racism. He mentioned that he had specific goals coming to the United States and did not pay much attention to acts of racism. He acknowledged,

I know a lot of people are very concerned about the issue of racism especially when it comes to the United States. But when I came here, I think I had an open heart. I'm not expecting some acts of racism, but I'm open. I can tell when someone is being a racist. I think the way I just place myself and my state of mind just didn't make me see even an act of racism, I just don't care because there's something I'm actually looking out for.

Furthermore, none of the participants had considered attending any Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Some participants said they did not know anything about them. Others cited the lack of support for Black

African students in those institutions and the lesser quality of infrastructures as deterrents that prevented their consideration. For example, Tony mentioned that he had never heard of an HBCU before coming to the United States, as he elaborated,

I had never heard of historically black colleges and universities until I came to the United States. So, it was never a consideration in the sense that I never really knew that they were actually in existence. But when I got here, I started to read more about them and understand what they're about and how they came to be. But, to answer your question, no, I never really considered attending, and because I never knew that they were in existence.

For Jane, HBCUs were not an option because of their bad reputation in terms of quality of infrastructure and lack of support. She admitted, "I didn't consider them because their reviews were so bad. And like, the dorms were not handled well either. Like, it was worse than UBC." As the data indicate, HBCUs are not very well known amongst Black African students seeking to further their education in the United States. Students who were familiar with those institutions did not even consider attending them because of the lack of decent-quality infrastructures and financial support. Also, it is worth noting that the sometimes tense, sometimes cooperative perceptions that Black African students and African American students have of each other might be a reason why participants in this study did not consider attending HBCUs.

In short, when asked about race, the term appears to have incited different meanings for participants. Whereas some interpretations leaned positively toward diversity across the campus community, other students thought of negative acts of racism. Therefore, opinions differed about the role race plays in the identification process of students.

### **Disidentification Influencers**

Although it was not a primary focus of this research, the data revealed some reasons that contribute to students' disidentification or schizo-identification. While most participants shared their perceptions of what influenced their identification with their university, a few participants also shared some factors that impede their identification, creating schizo-identification, that is, a tension of simultaneously feeling connected and disconnected to the university. For example, on the one hand, Wouro reported that her relationships with her professors are excellent. She shared,

To my professors? I can't even stop talking about them. I would love and love to give Dr. X like a hundred percent of my credit. She's very friendly, like she understands everything. And she's easy to connect, she's not judgmental. She listens. She gives advice. She welcomes everyone. She's there to help. Yeah, I can't stop talking about her.

On the other hand, despite that university attachment due to the positive relationship with her professors, Wourou thought her institution was the worst when it came to infrastructure and financial support. Therefore, she simultaneously seemed to both identify and disidentify with the university and is not planning to recommend it to anybody:

OK, to be honest, I wear their shirts most of the time, but it's because they give them for free. But I do not promote the institution. Why would I do so? Like, if someone came and asked me there that it's hard for them to choose between this institution and any other school, I would tell them to choose the other school. Well, I mean, the education is really good. But the system is not OK.

Despite often wearing the university logo, which is typically a sign of identification (Cheney & Tompkins 1987), Wouro's disidentification seems to be greater. She said she was not planning to graduate from her current host institution. She was in the process of transferring to a different university.

Just like Wouro, Jane was not planning to graduate from her current institution either. She disidentified and was not committed to the institution because of her unmet financial needs coupled with the poor quality of infrastructure. She said about her host institution: "I don't think I am going to support it. They are already taking all my money." She was not planning to encourage other Black African students to attend the institution either. She said: "I haven't invited someone else, but I don't think I am going to do it."

When Black African students lack financial support from their host institution, when the quality of infrastructure such as housing is poor, they are likely to disidentify with it.

In summary, this study found that identification influencers include construed external image and overall satisfaction with the institution. However, prestige does not appear to be a driver that contributed to these Black African students' overall identification with an institution. Regarding commitment influencers, the study found that students who were committed were more likely to promote their institution and were willing to maintain membership with it. Another interesting finding was the disagreement surrounding race which for some, influenced students' identification and commitment to a PWI, but for others, it did not. The data also suggested the important role of faculty, infrastructure, and financial support in shaping students' identification with the university and their intentions to stay or leave.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Black Africans' Identification**

The purpose of the first research question was to determine elements that influence Black African students to identify with a PWI in the United States. We found that construed external image was an influencer in Black African students'

identification with predominantly White U.S.-based higher education institutions. This confirms previous studies that focused on organizational identification and identification predictors (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Myers et al., 2016). For Black African students, people in their home countries tend to have an overall high perception of the American educational system. Therefore, the external good image people have about education in the United States facilitates their identification with their host institution. Indeed, getting a degree from a U.S. higher education institution is often perceived by some Africans as a gateway to success. A U.S. degree allows the beneficiaries to better position themselves in the job market in their home countries as compared to their peers who remained at home for their education.

In contrast, unlike previous studies that concluded that prestige influences students' identification with their school (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), we found that prestige was not an influencer of these Black African students' identification with PWIs. Indeed, for them, receiving education in an institution in the United States is already prestigious. As Irungu (2013) pointed out, "Nationals around the world, those from Africa included, hold the US higher-education system in high esteem" (p. 163). Regardless of the higher education institution, as long as Black African students had their major at an institution, they tended to identify.

Also, it is important to note that prestige may not appear to be a reason for identification in this study because none of the participants went to what is considered a prestigious university. Participants were from mid-size universities in the Southeast. Although most of the participants reported that they did not apply to any prestigious schools, the findings may have been different if we had explored the topic with students from more prestigious universities.

We also found that overall satisfaction with the host institution was an identification influencer for Black African students, thus, supporting findings of previous studies (e.g., Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Myers et al., 2016; Paswan & Ganesh, 2009; Pham & Lai, 2016). Similar to Kigotho's (2015) findings, drivers that determine their satisfaction with their institutions include the availability of financial support, the quality of programs taught, and their positive relationships with faculty and staff, particularly at the universities' International Offices. Studying in the United States can be out of reach for many Black Africans. It therefore seems obvious that making higher education in the United States accessible to more students coming from sub-Saharan Africa would result in their satisfaction and identification with their host institutions. Also, International Offices in American universities usually constitute the primary source of information and assistance for international students in general. Understandably, African students identify and commit to their host institutions when they are satisfied with the relationships and services they receive from those International Offices.

### **Black Africans' Commitment**

The second research question examined commitment influencers. We found that committed Black African students are likely to promote their predominantly White host institution. They engage in that promotion in various ways. Committed students will promote their institution on social media and invite other students to join their university. This finding supports Mowday's (1979) theory according to which committed individuals would make extra efforts to promote their organization. It is not surprising that when students identify with their institution because of the support system that is made available for them, the quality of the programs they receive, and the good relationships with their professors and staff members, they will be determined to take extra measures that would contribute to the promotion of that institution.

We found that maintaining membership with the host institution is an indicator of Black African students' commitment to PWIs. Students demonstrate continued membership with their host institution through behaviors such as wearing shirts that have the institution's logo, attending various events, and donating to the institution. This finding also supports Mowday's (1979) theory according to which committed individuals are willing to maintain membership with their organization. Indeed, it seems to be natural to expect that when students identify with their institution because of their satisfaction, they will be willing to continue to be a part of that host institution. Black African students who are committed to their institution maintain membership because they are also looking for ways to give the same educational opportunities they had to other students. That is why it is not uncommon to encounter African alumni hosting events on behalf of their U.S.-based alma mater in their home countries to help recruit students.

### **Role of Race in Identification and Commitment**

We found that race was met with mixed feelings by these participants concerning its influence on Black African students' identification and commitment to PWIs. When interpreted as diversity, these participants said that race influenced their decisions and connections to their institutions. They appreciated a diverse campus community and felt more identified and committed when faculty and students alike were diverse in make-up. This finding is a significant contribution to the developing literature on Black African students' experiences in the United States. According to participants, universities with more campus diversity across both faculty and students seemed to positively affect Black Africans' experiences and identification. However, when race was interpreted with a more negative connotation of racism, it was not necessarily an important driver affecting students. While some participants acknowledged the presence of racism in the United States, they did not let it affect them in negative ways. Indeed, one may assume that debates on racism might be a reason that would deter Black Africans from being willing to study in a predominantly White

institution. Our research suggests that Black African students seemed not to pay much attention to issues regarding race and racism.

We also found that most African students are not familiar with the existence of HBCUs, and those who are familiar with them, are not interested in studying in those institutions mainly because of the lack of financial support. This lack of financial support for African students in HBCUs is probably because those institutions are usually underfunded and have limited resources. HBCUs will certainly need to communicate better if they are looking to expand their reach to more international students.

### **Schizo-identification**

Three of the participants fall in the schizo-identification category. On the one hand, these participants felt like they belonged to their institutions because of the positive relationships they had with their professors, the staff, and the quality of their programs. On the other hand, the students reported that they are planning to transfer to other institutions because they are completely dissatisfied with the financial support system and some infrastructures on their campuses. This finding supports previous work by Albert et al. (1998). They defined schizo-identification as the limbo state when an individual both identifies and disidentifies with an organization, an attitude that generates a conflicting identity. We found that lack of financial support and unmet needs in housing may lead to students' disidentification even when they identify with their school because of positive faculty interaction and quality programs.

The findings of this study have important implications for university administrators. Recruiting and retaining international students in general, and Black African students specifically, require a good amount of effort from U.S.-based universities. Although recruitment may not be a major issue for many, retaining students and then encouraging them to identify and commit to their host institution is not an easy task. All participants in this study reported that financial support is a major driver that contributed to their identification and commitment. Therefore, we suggest that decision-makers in PWIs should strive to provide more financial support to Black African students who decide to join their universities.

Also, international offices should strive to maintain positive relationships with their Black African students. Assessing the needs of those students regularly and providing various resources that will improve their cultural adjustment and sense of belongingness will highly contribute to their identification and commitment to their host institutions. For example, programming activities where students can participate and share their cultures with others may go a long way in helping new students establish relationships, make connections, and overall feel like they belong in their new environments. Creating opportunities and events for students to have some interactions with their peers White students could be beneficial. International students have generally reported that it is difficult to make friends with American students during their stay at their host institutions (Thelamour et al., 2019). We believe that multicultural events organized by international offices involving international as



well as domestic students would help bridge that gap (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018).

Our research advances knowledge on organizational identification and commitment with a focus on Black African international students' experiences in U.S.-based higher education institutions. We conclude that, for the most part, higher education institutions in the United States already have a positively construed external image among Africans. Participants in our study reported that the simple fact of getting a degree from the United States constitutes a big accomplishment in the eyes of many in their home countries. Therefore, with the United States being the preferred destination for Africans, universities should put more emphasis on recruitment efforts in that part of the world. However, recruiting is not enough. For universities to recruit and retain those students, they should make sure to provide substantial financial support. Other augmenters such as housing infrastructures, academics, and social integration have been reported by students to be identification and commitment influencers (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009).

Furthermore, faculty members who are usually in direct contact with Black African students have a big role to play in their identification and commitment to the host institution. Providing training on how those faculty members should interact with the students will be helpful. When students do not have positive relationships with their professors, they tend to quit the school for another one. Therefore, we would highly recommend that universities provide cross-cultural communication training to faculty as well as staff members. Besides, faculty members in PWIs should learn to provide positive and constructive feedback to African students instead of just ignoring them when they intervene in classroom discussions.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

We acknowledge that participants in this study were selected from two midsized universities that are not considered prestigious. Our finding on prestige could therefore change if we included participants from prestigious universities. Therefore, generalizing the findings on prestige among Black African students should be done with caution.

Despite the limitations, this research on Black African students' identification and commitment to PWIs in the United States has provided significant insights into those students' experiences. Black African students highly contribute to the diversification and cultural exchange opportunities in higher education institutions in the United States. This being the first research on Black African students' identification and commitment to their host institutions in the United States, we recommend that more research be conducted in this area to determine more influencers that may contribute to their identification and commitment. Those findings will help student affairs professionals meet the needs of the Black African students they serve. We found that Black African students in predominantly White American institutions seemed to not pay much attention to race and racism. We recommend that future research investigate Black African

students' experiences and attitudes toward racism and discrimination in the United States.

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