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**"A fly in the buttermilk:" Descriptions of university life by  
successful Black undergraduate students at a predominately  
white southeastern university**

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## “A Fly in the Buttermilk”: Descriptions of University Life by Successful Black Undergraduate Students at a Predominately White Southeastern University

“And so a lot of times I felt out of place, because you see all white faces. You know I’m the only fly in the buttermilk, so that took some getting used to...”

These words, shared by a black student during an interview for the present study, poignantly reflect the essence of the experience of being a minority student on a predominately white university campus. The impetus for this study of that experience was our realization that the graduation rate for black students was lower than the total rate for the university (four-year graduation rates are 19.6% versus 16.8%; five year rates are 36.1% versus 50.7). Available data provided no ready explanation for this discrepancy, although preliminary information from a research project concerning graduates of the university’s nursing program indicated painful and alienating experiences among black students (Thomas & Davis, 2000). These early results led to a decision to enlarge the research team and to broaden the study to include students in other undergraduate majors. The purpose of this study was to obtain the first-person perspective of the students themselves, a perspective missing from most of the literature about the academic experience of black students.

### *Review of Literature*

Minority groups in the United States currently constitute 25% of the overall population, and it is projected that before the year 2015 one-third

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of the population will consist of individuals culturally and ethnically different from the white majority (American Council on Education, 1988; U.S. Census Bureau, 1993). This national pattern of cultural change is also reflected on college campuses where increasing numbers of minority students are enrolling and, far too often, dropping out. Predominantly white institutions of higher education, in fact, often devote intensive efforts to minority student recruitment but find that subsequent retention is a significant problem. In predominantly white institutions, 70% of black students do not complete baccalaureate education compared to 20% of those from historically black institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992; Steele, 1992). Throughout the 1990s the national college dropout rate for blacks was 20–25% higher than that for whites (Steele, 1999). This discrepancy is often explained by inferior academic preparation of black students prior to college entry. Extant data, however, strongly suggest that academic concerns are not paramount in the high attrition of black students (Echols, 1998) and certainly not the sole reason for their premature departure from campus (Steele, 1999). Given this possibility, attention must be given to nonacademic factors that influence attrition.

In a meta-analysis of 113 studies covering research on minority students from 1970 to 1997, a number of social, academic, family, and institutional factors were found to be linked to academic success (Echols, 1998). Over 1500 institutions and 46,000 minority students (Hispanic Americans and Native Americans as well as black students) were represented in Echols' analysis. Supporting a theory proposed by Tinto (1975, 1987)—regarding the importance of social integration in promoting graduation—this analysis revealed that integrative experiences were a highly significant predictor variable. Negative or nonintegrative experiences (loneliness, alienation, and so forth) were positively correlated with voluntary withdrawal from college whereas positive or integrative experiences enhanced minority student persistence. Fostering educational attainment were factors such as an ability to be bicultural yet also maintain a cultural identity and to avoid becoming disheartened by racist events.

Several authors suggest that the predominately white university campus does not present a hospitable atmosphere for minority student learning. If educational offerings are Euro-centric, culturally different students may feel unappreciated or come to devalue their own cultural group (Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999). If faculty are operating on the basis of negative stereotypes in the classroom, whether consciously or not, minority students may become acutely uncomfort-

able, mistrustful, or demoralized. Dominant group members are known to have ambivalent attitudes toward minority groups (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999) producing an increase in their positive or negative behaviors toward members of the minority group (Katz & Hass, 1988). Such inconsistent behaviors on the part of white faculty, at the very least, may be confusing to black students. It is likely that black students have negative or ambivalent attitudes toward whites based on race-related issues and personal experiences (Shelton, 2000). Thus, a number of factors many serve to complicate the establishment of good relationships between white university faculty and black students.

Another significant aspect of campus climate with great relevance for the comfort level of African-American students is the behavior of white students. Many black students are not used to being in classes with the large numbers of white students they encounter on a predominantly white college campus. Many, in fact, are accustomed to attending schools where they comprised the majority: Despite national resolve to accomplish integration, more than 70% of black students went to schools with more than 50% minority enrollment, and 36.5% of these students went to schools with a minority enrollment of 90–100% (Bjerklie, 2001).

All students, having absorbed years of indoctrination by families, peers, and mass media, come to the university with stereotypes about people different from themselves. As noted by Paul (1999), children already have definite stereotypes about other racial groups by the time they are five years of age, and black children are aware early of the negative stereotypes that whites hold toward their racial group (Sigelman & Welch, 1991). Contemporary emphasis on “political correctness” also may serve as a confounding factor. For example, research by Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, and Kraus (1995) suggested that white college students are socialized to avoid stereotyping blacks and thinking about racial differences whereas black college students are socialized to emphasize racial group membership and to notice differences between themselves and whites. Commenting on these findings, Shelton (2000) observed that such socialization patterns are opposite to one another and may create conflict that could be exacerbated on a predominantly white college campus.

While the extant literature sheds light on several important aspects of the black college experience, conspicuously absent are the voices of black students themselves. Most studies, with the exception of Steele’s laboratory experiments, have used structured questionnaires to measure variables preselected by researchers. As Echols (1998) noted upon con-

cluding her meta-analysis of 27 years of studies: "This field is ripe for phenomenological and other types of qualitative inquiry where intense, depthful exchange and evaluation of ideas can be achieved, adding texture and color to the portraits the numbers are helping us to paint" (p. 164). This reading of the research literature suggests that an optimum research strategy for enabling such voices to emerge must make the use of an open-ended interview procedure, a strategy implemented in the present study.

### *Method*

Interview procedures have been found useful in enabling researchers to develop first-person descriptions of diverse human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989; Kvale, 1996; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) have characterized the phenomenological interview as one in which a participant is enabled to describe his or her experiences of some phenomenon with as little direction from the interviewer as possible. Unconcerned with issues of causality or mechanism, phenomenological interviewing concerns the "what" of an experience and seeks to capture the specific meanings uniquely characterizing that experience. Once noted, these meanings are then named using either the language of the participant or the more conceptual language of the investigator's discipline.

After the initial question is asked, a phenomenological interview proceeds largely under the direction of the participant. Freedom is afforded the participant to locate frames of reference both for the interviewer and for him or herself. Because of its conversational tone, the researcher encourages dialogue to flow without a preformed agenda of items to be covered. Questions emerging within the flow of the dialogue are meant to provide clarity and understanding; additionally they may serve to promote more focused and intimate dialogues. Descriptions deriving from interviews of this type supply a rich and nuanced source of information concerning the personal meaning attributed by participants to the phenomenon under consideration (for a more extended discussion of phenomenological interviewing and interpretation, see Kvale, 1996; Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; and Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

### *Participants*

Participants in the present study were 11 black undergraduate students at a large southeastern state university. This institution, which is a research-oriented land-grant university, has an overall enrollment of

some 26,000 students. Of this number, some 1550 or so are black and approximately 1400 are Asian or Hispanic. Of the 11 black undergraduate students who were interviewed, seven were women whose ages varied from 21 to 24 and four were men whose ages varied between 22 and 26. Participants were purposefully selected because they had successfully completed all requirements for their degrees and were about to graduate. We chose to interview successful students (i.e., those who were about to graduate) because we felt they would be able to provide us with a description of their experiences uncontaminated by fear of academic difficulty or failure. We also chose graduating students because we felt they would enable us to track any significant changes in their experiences during the four- or five-year course of their undergraduate education. As may be noted in Table 1, participants majored in such diverse fields as engineering, psychology, accounting, education, and English.

#### *Procedure*

Since the goal of phenomenological interviewing is to describe the meaning of some particular event(s) as experienced by the participant, a central concern is for the interviewer to hold in abeyance (as much as possible) his/her own presuppositions regarding the experience to be described—a process termed “bracketing” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). The purpose is to make the interviewer sensitive to her own issues. In preparation for the present set of interviews, the interviewer conducting all 11 interviews participated in a bracketing interview designed to highlight her presuppositions regarding having been a black

TABLE 1  
Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

	Age	Sex	Major
# 1	23	F	Psychology
# 2	21	F	Social work
# 3	24	F	Psychology
# 4	22	F	Sports management
# 5	21	F	Human ecology
# 6	21	F	Education
# 7	21	F	Logistics/transportation
# 8	22	M	Accounting
# 9	26	M	Electrical engineering
#10	23	M	Psychology
#11	22	M	History



undergraduate student. The interviewer, who is currently a faculty member in the College of Nursing, was born in Jamaica and now lives in the U.S. Her interview was conducted by another member of the research team skilled in phenomenological interviewing; the specific opening question to which she responded was: "Please describe some experiences that stand out to you from your own college experiences."

Once this interview was completed, it was transcribed verbatim and submitted to an interpretative group for an analysis of themes. The results of this analysis revealed that even though the interviewer reported little or no difficulty in identifying with black colleagues and students, she is aware that she normally does not view the larger white society in as racially defined terms as do most blacks. In fact, she believes that growing up in a predominately black society (Jamaica) seems to have given her more comfort in dealing with Caucasians. The construct of "outsider within," proposed by Collins (1986,1999), has relevance here. The Jamaican interviewer has "insider" knowledge of Southern American culture through a long period of residence here and commonality with study participants by virtue of dark skin, but she is also an "outsider" because her earlier life background differs from theirs. While she cannot fully grasp, initially, what "insiders" (participants) have experienced, she can be fully open to listening to them, continually seeking to understand their experiences. It is not necessary that the interviewer (or the other members of the research team) had the same life experience as the interviewees. For example, one does not have to have a history of depressive illness to conduct a phenomenological study of depression. In fact, naiveté regarding participants' experience may permit even closer attention to the nuances of their narratives. A black interviewer was chosen to minimize the mistrust students may have felt toward a white interviewer. We believe this aim was accomplished. The quality of the resultant interviews, rich with details of painful experiences, is evidence that interviewees did feel comfortable with their Jamaican interviewer despite her outsider status.

### *Participant Interviews*

Individual interviews for all 11 participants were scheduled at their convenience and were conducted in a comfortable and convenient environment for the participant. The initial question opening each interview was as follows: "Please describe what stands out to you about your college experiences here at University X." From audiotapes of these interviews, a verbatim text was transcribed for each participant. Each of these typed transcripts was interpreted with the help of the six-member, multidisciplinary, interpretive research group presently in place on our

campus. Using hermeneutic techniques to be described in the following section, significant meaning units in each transcript were identified, carefully analyzed, and formulated into an overall pattern of themes.

The process of interpretation followed in this study is one in which one group member assumes the role of the interviewer and another takes the role of the participant. Given these assignments, the transcript is read aloud until a change in topic is perceived to occur, at which point the reading stops for a period of discussion concerning that passage. When this takes place, various group members highlight phrases that seem to stand out and/or to express significant meanings to them from the perspective of the participant. On the basis of tentative interpretations, meaning statements are formulated for use in developing themes for this, and ultimately all, transcripts. The present process of analysis proceeds in a circular fashion such that interpretation of later passages continually informs thematic meanings deriving from earlier passages. It is not atypical for the first interpretation of a single transcript to require as many as two to three hours.

Once an overall thematic analysis is developed, members of the research group evaluate it in terms of the joint criteria of plausibility and illumination (Pollio et al., 1997). Findings are considered plausible if the specific descriptive themes are supported by textual evidence; they are considered illuminating if they provide the reader with a new and revealing understanding of the phenomenon as lived/described by participants. Meeting both conditions implies that an interested reader will be able to read the results of an interpretative study, see connections between the interpretation and the text, and come away with an expanded view of the phenomenon. After continuously considering these two concerns against the developing thematic structure, adjustments are made until agreement is reached concerning the thematic meaning of the experience; such meaning is then expressed by exemplary quotes for each theme.

### *Results*

An interpretive analysis of transcripts revealed that five major themes characterized undergraduate experiences described by participants. Each of the five major themes was labeled by a phrase actually used by one or more participants; this was done to preserve the student's own language in describing specific meanings. Themes, however, are not to be construed as independent of one another but as interrelated aspects of a single overall pattern or gestalt. The five themes, as derived from the present set of transcripts, are as follows:

1. "It Happens Every Day": Unfairness/Sabotage/Condescension.
2. "You Have to Initiate the Conversation": Isolation and Connection.
3. "They Seem the Same; I'm The One Who's Different."
4. "I Have to Prove I'm Worthy To Be Here."
5. "Sometimes I'm Not Even Here/Sometimes I Have to Represent All Black Students": Invisibility and Supervisibility.

*Theme 1. "It Happens Every Day": Unfairness/  
Sabotage/Condescension.*

All 11 participants reported incidents of unfairness, sabotage, and condescension. Wearily, they described incident after incident. Actions of faculty, classmates, and the larger community contributed to their perceptions that the university failed to offer "an environment that's healthy for black people." One participant described the situation in the following terms:

"I call my mother like every other week. I have a new story for her every week: 'They had nooses hanging out of trees this week, and they said it was an art project and they didn't understand why we would be offended . . . Or somebody wrote 'nigger this, nigger that' and this white girl bumped into me and called me a 'nigger.' . . . She bumped into me and walked off.'" (P6)

Study participants were distressed by the presence on campus of graffiti and objects that symbolized or overtly conveyed racism:

"I remember actually my first week here, my first day of class. I passed by (name of residence hall), and there was a great big Rebel flag hanging in a guy's window as curtains. I really didn't expect to see anything like that . . . I didn't expect to see things like 'Niggers go home' written in the men's room wall. And you know, KKK carved on the desk." (P8)

The University administration was not perceived as being particularly interested in investigating racist graffiti on campus buildings or other racial incidents that were occurring:

"With racial slurs written in the residence hall, it disturbed a lot of people because . . . the housing administration was not conducting interviews or anything trying to find out . . . who did this." (P4)

Many incidents related by participants involved professors or university staff who were perceived to be condescending and/or treating them unfairly on the basis of race. The following two examples from Participant 3 are illustrative:

"I went to class every day, I took notes every day. . . . I probably made a C because I was black. So what I did was I went to talk to him [the professor], and he was like very, very vague about it. . . . He couldn't give me any kind of evidence . . . any kind of rationale to why I should make a C. . . ."

One professor's behavior was so offensive to a female participant that she left some of the classes:

"A couple of times I just walked out of class because she would say things in her lecture that really upset me."

Later in this interview, the participant revealed that she went to talk to this professor about her feelings. The professor retaliated:

"She told me that she had been thinking about recommending [me] for a scholarship that's offered through the department for black students, but 'you have to have the grades for it.' And I was like, 'Actually I have a 4.0 in the department.' And she just laughed, 'Well, I don't know what your grade will be in this class' . . . I came out with a C in her course. And I really did think it was unfair." (P6)

Classmates often were perceived to be sabotaging their efforts, as depicted in the following examples:

"They [classmates] wanted me to redo my part"[of a collective essay assignment involving four white girls, another black girl, and herself]. . . . "If I don't redo it, they're going to try to sabotage my grade....And I don't see why I have to rewrite my part. I think that she should rewrite her part, the white girl. . . . I felt that . . . because I was black, they didn't think I knew what I was doing." (P3)

The words of Participant 5 aptly summarize this theme:

"It [racist treatment] happens every single day. It's real and racism is probably never going to go away, not ever. . . . I can't even count on three hands how many times I've been discriminated against in food stores...on campus, in the university center, I mean just everywhere." (P5)

*Theme 2: "You Have to Initiate the Conversation":  
Isolation and Connection.*

This theme emerged as participants described their experiences of seeking to make successful connections with various segments of the university community. These include students of the same race, students of different race, campus groups, faculty/staff, extracurricular activities and campus employment.

The first two excerpts deal with the issue of needing to initiate any kind of activity on campus, whether it be getting notes or entering into a conversation.

"I mean for the, for most of my classes that I've been in I had to initiate the conversation to let them know that I am a black person and I can talk. And I have good sense . . . but mostly in my experience I find that I have to initiate it, and that's another obstacle that I think I have to get across, to create relationships with people so that I can fit in the classroom." (P3)

“When you’re in a classroom full of white people and you have to initiate getting notes, you already have preconceived notions that they are not going to want to give them to you. I mean for me, I feel that, I mean if they don’t talk to you, what makes you think they want to give you notes?” (P3)

Students also reported being disconnected specifically from white students.

“I mean there’s been classes where I’ve sat in where I will be sitting in the middle of two white people who know each other or whatever. And they would be talking a group up and do group work and they would completely bypass me and go to each other. And I’m just like that’s fine. I mean that’s fine, if you don’t want to sit with me then okay. I’m not going to go home and cry about it or anything, but bump you. So it’s hard, it is hard.” (P6)

Another student was taken aback by the attitude of one of her white peers. After making a comment about deficits in inner city schools, one of her classmates responded as follows:

He got totally upset and he was saying, ‘Well, if you wouldn’t be so violent, you being black of course, if you wouldn’t and stop scaring your teachers and cussing and fighting, hitting your teachers, you know they wouldn’t be scared to teach. You know, it’s your fault you don’t have good teachers because you just act so bad that the teachers don’t want to teach in your schools.’ (P7)

There also were some excerpts in which students even described alienation from other black students:

“I don’t feel like other black students are ambitious enough, and I think some of them act very stereotypical and I really don’t like that at all. I mean you know how white people say you act certain things, loud and everything like that, and they are like that . . . It’s kind of annoying to me, kind of embarrassing for me to see them act like that, so I do not want to hang around them. But I just don’t, haven’t felt I just fit in with the black students here.” (P1)

“That’s the way I feel, is just everybody has a chip on their shoulder and I get the vibes like the black female is my own worst enemy. And I’m not trying to, I don’t give that off I don’t think, but it’s kind of like we can’t, if somebody’s doing something good then it’s like, oh, they’re trying to be this or they’re trying to be that. It’s not oh, they’re really doing a good job.” (P5)

In addition to experiences of disconnection and the need to initiate relationships, participants also described examples of connection. Some of these involved connection with other people—some students, some professors—still others, to one or another organization. All in all, however, the African-American student reported that he or she had to be cautious and the one to initiate connection.

“Yeah, I guess, as far as my fitting in and making friends at (University X) each year, I think it would be a lot better if people took initiative and did things they like to do. For example, like I said, this past year or two I’ve been involved definitely in poetry . . . doing stuff that you enjoy, and finding people with common interests and that kind of thing and doing stuff together I think that would make it a lot easier for a lot of blacks, because when they come up here they don’t know.” (P10)

“As you break through your freshman level classes and you start going more into your major classes they’re smaller more personalized, you get to interact with your professor one on one, and most of those professors I dealt with take it back, with all of the professors I dealt with, things have gone rather well.” (P9)

“I mean I’ve had some really good experiences here. I joined a sorority my freshman year, and my second semester there was really good. I’ve learned a lot of life lessons and working with black women. Got into some really wonderful honor societies, met some people, and got a chance to join some groups on campus. Black Cultural Program committee, I was part of that. I was part of Student Government Association for a year, so I’ve touched a little bit around campus, just to get a feel for it.” (P5)

*Theme 3: “They All Seem The Same, I’m The One Who’s Different.”*

All 11 participants focused on experiences of being the same in some ways and different in other ways from those around them. Students were aware of how important it was to them to be the same as others in learning and social settings. Feeling different was seldom a positive experience and often made participants feel “mad,” “frustrated,” “isolated,” or “bothered.” Situations in which differences stood out were viewed as “crazy,” “amazing,” or “comical.” Participant 4 stated, “I don’t see a lot of (people) like me. And that bothers you.”

Participant 2 described her experience of realizing that she was different:

“It kind of dawned on me, you know, I am the only Black in this group. I guess I am different in a way. . . . I never just saw myself as being isolated or different from anybody else. Until she [the instructor] brought that up. . . .”

Some participants learned for the first time that being seen as different could mean being seen as inferior. One participant had learned this from his best friend, who is white.

“And he’s [my white friend] just like ‘you’d be amazed at how backward some people can be.’ He’s known people that feel that way. Who really feel that just because you’re black you’re inferior, just not as good, not as capable as a white person. And I just can’t believe those attitudes are still around, but it’s not all bad I guess. It’s still in knowing, to deal with, to know that still exists.” (P8)

Some participants also described how they were different from other black students:

“And you know, I’d try to explain to them, ‘We’re all different, so I can’t answer, you know, for all blacks or for minorities period as a whole.’” (P2)

Participant 1 focused at a more personal level:

“I feel like sort of an outsider because I really don’t. . . . I never really fit in with other black students here. . . . I have a different way of thinking or something. I don’t talk like the black slang and everything, and so they are like you know, ‘You’re trying to be white.’ And you know, I’m just being me. . . . I mean they all seem the same, I’m the one who’s different.” (P1)

Another participant described the experience of intentionally being different from other black students:

“. . . you know how hard it is with black people without an education. You have a chance to get an education to better yourself, you ought to make the best of it. And when people don’t that really bothered me a lot, too. I didn’t understand why, and so when I saw that I was like, I’ve got to do different. . . . I’ve got to do the best that I can, and at least graduate.” (P 10)

Most participants thought they were, to some degree, the same as other students:

“But after you sit down and talk with them, actually you’re not too much different than they are, you just come from a different place and you have a different skin color, but for the most part you have a lot of things in common.” (P9)

“Just because you’re not from the same area or have the same accent or language doesn’t mean you don’t have a common bond or goal, or you can’t understand each other.” (P4)

Participants talked about the need to help faculty and white students understand that black students are able to learn the same as others. One participant described how she “plays the game:”

“But I’ve held a 4.0 for two years in these [white] professors’ classes, so they look at me as being kind of one of them. I’m accepted into their kind of, their culture, because I know how to play the game to get what I need.” (P5)

Some participants indicated a need to connect to other black students and faculty, even though they appreciated an opportunity to get to know others different from themselves.

“But it turned out to be a good experience, hanging out and finding out about the white kids and stuff. But then there was a certain level of degree where you still feel left out, if you’re not really connected with people of your own race.” (P3)

One participant deeply questioned her need to have only black friends in college when this had not been her experience in high school:

“I honestly can say I don’t know why. . . . because I’ve never just had so many people of my same culture and same ideas and beliefs that I have, to be my friends all at one time.” (P4)

Participants described their need to be in classes with black instructors and, perhaps even more, to be in classes with a sizeable number of black students:

“I’ve had two black instructors since I’ve been at (University X). I never thought about that before, and that’s sad. You know, the vibes in their class is totally different from any other classes I had, and I want to say it was because there were a lot more black people in these classes. . . . I think out of all my classes I have taken here my best experiences have been in classes with black professors. And sadly to say that’s just how it is. I felt at home in those classes. I felt like I learned more because I didn’t have to spend time fighting somebody I guess and saying quit looking at me or having to pick my words very carefully, or there have been times when I felt like I hindered class discussions.” (P6)

In summary, the experience of same/different for black students in this study can best be described in the words of one student:

“It’s crazy, it’s crazy up here, but it’s a learning experience. I think that is the positive thing that I can say about it. It’s a learning experience for black people. You will come here and you will learn that you are black. And that it means something. And what it means to you depends on how you take it. It really does depend on how you take it.” (P6)

#### *Theme 4. “I Have to Prove I’m Worthy To Be Here.”*

A common theme in participant narratives was the idea that whites saw blacks as a group and individually as less capable until proven otherwise. Participants described how they had to work harder to overcome such preconceived ideas and succeed in spite of the obstacles presented.

“I had the feeling then, and even still now, when I walk in a classroom that they’re already . . . that everybody’s eye is on me, that everybody is watching me, wanting to see what I am going to do. How is my performance going to be? And I feel like I have to work harder, study more, answer more questions, ask more questions, to prove to both my teachers and to my fellow classmates that, you know, I am worthy to be here. I’m deserving to be here. And, you know, don’t automatically doubt my academic capabilities just because I am black.” (P7)

“I’m always on my Ps and Qs and know that I’ve got to do better than anybody else. I have to. And I’m not sure that that’s, you know, absolutely true in somebody else’s eyes, but just the situations I’ve been in and the way peo-



ple have treated me, it makes me feel like Oh, I have to do better than best for them to see what I'm really capable of doing, what I'm really, really capable of doing." (P5)

"And I'm proud that I'm black and that I'm doing it. But it's almost like I have to prove a point. Just like with Dr. Smith. She assumed that I didn't have the grades. I was like "No baby, I have a 4.0 in the English department." So why should I have to give you my credentials just because I'm black?" (P6)

In the classroom the need to prove oneself led to more effort and more stress on the part of black students who saw classroom interaction as crucial for their success. Some participants identified specific strategies they employed.

"In my history class I sit in the front row, and I sit in the front row of every class. I have to. And I do this because I feel . . . I want the professor to know that I am in the classroom, that I want to learn and that I'm paying attention." (P3)

"I have to work ten times harder to make an A because, due definitely to the teacher's teaching techniques in the classroom. Most of my classrooms I feel, like I said before, that the teacher tends to teach towards another area in the classroom. So what I have to do . . . I have to call upon the teacher, get her attention, and ask whatever problem that I have to see if she can help me solve it. I kind of feel neglected. So what you have to do is you have to let them know you have good sense. And that's one reason why I said I worked ten times as hard." (P2)

The need to prove themselves was not limited to interactions with faculty, but also occurred with peers in a variety of settings. Strategies and extra effort were needed there too:

"And so I went with the mentality I could prove something to my professor and that sort of thing. But then what shocked me was having to prove it to my peers as well. Like I say, a lot of them assume that you're on some kind of minority scholarship and you're here because of affirmative action and that sort of stuff. No, just because I'm black doesn't mean I get special privileges you know, but they automatically assume that. It's like you really had to prove it, you really had to show them that hey, not all black folks are dumb or lazy or apathetic or whatever." (P10)

Group work in particular was problematic for participants who felt they had to prove themselves to other group members.

"Sometimes it feels like I have to prove myself, not so much now that I'm a senior. I guess that's why, I don't know. But a lot of times when I'm in classes I'm working in a group, but there's not that many black people in (College X), and when we're just forming ideas and working on something, it's kind of like for the first 30 minutes I'm ignored until I prove to them that yes, I know what I'm talking about." (P8)

In the experience of one participant there were clear expectations, even anticipations, of failure:

“So it’s like when you come here and if you’re in one of their groups, they’re looking at you. Once you’ve been assigned to their group, sort of sneering up their nose sometimes, some people, not all. And you know, they’re just standing back to wait and see what you’re going to do. You know, it’s almost like they’re waiting for you to mess up. They’re waiting for you to miss their one group meeting and say, ‘Oh, well, she doesn’t contribute.’” (P7)

One participant did not see the need to prove oneself as limited to the university but as a more ubiquitous experience she expected to encounter in the workplace.

“And you know, you may not think, that I’m good enough but I know I’m good enough. But sometimes I get really frustrated when I continuously have to prove myself. I have to prove myself all the time, but I think we have to continuously do that throughout society anyway. When I get my first job, I’m going to have to prove that I can do this, just to do the work that I do. But sometimes I feel like blacks have to prove themselves just a tad bit more because people look at our color as a discrepancy and not as a difference and just a uniqueness about ourselves. So I think that we have to go that extra mile to say hey, I’m actually prepared and I’m qualified to do this job.” (P5)

In addition to the need to prove themselves individually with faculty and peers, some participants described efforts to prove themselves collectively.

“It shouldn’t take all of that to prove to the whites on campus and to the president and the student newspaper. We shouldn’t have to have walks and send in letters every week just to say hey, we’re doing what we’re supposed to do. That’s what we’re supposed to do. I mean we’re here to get an education, to do our best, to get a degree, that’s what we’re supposed to do.” (P6)

*Theme 5: “Sometimes I’m Not Even Here/Sometimes I Have to Represent Every Black Student in Here”:  
Invisibility/Supervisibility.*

A final theme described in the present set of interviews was that of relative visibility. This theme expressed the participants’ experiences of being noticed or not being noticed, wholly as a result of being black. This experience took many forms which led to a feeling of being uncomfortable because of standing out. This was illustrated by the young man in this paper’s opening quote who said:

“And so a lot of times I felt out of place, because you see all white faces. You know I’m the only fly in the buttermilk, so that took some getting used to . . .” (P10)

This was clearly an experience of being hypervisible and of feeling out

of place. The image of “a fly in the buttermilk” is not only about hypervisibility, but also has a potentially self-derogatory tone. One young woman commented on such experiences as intimidating and, ultimately, hindering.

“. . . but when there’s like two black people in a classroom and a hundred white people in the classroom, to me it made me feel kind of intimidated. And definitely if I felt that they didn’t want to help me, for example if I had to miss class and I had to get notes, I didn’t have that relationship with somebody to where I could call them up and say “Hey can I get those notes?” And so for me it hindered my education experience and made me have to work harder.” (P3)

A different student noted that she experiences both invisibility and hypervisibility. Since there are few black students visible to her, she feels even more alone:

“And I feel like when I go to classes and if I walk in and I see that there are no other black faces, I automatically sit down and I say; ‘Lord, it’s going to be one of those semesters.’ And I don’t think that I should have to feel like that in school.” (P6)

Hypervisibility was not only a personal inconvenience, it also had overt negative consequences in classes where professors were perceived as having difficulty with black students:

“(Professor X had) been picking on me all semester because I’m the only black person. I mean she asked me to sing the Black National Anthem. And I was like, ‘No, I can’t sing, I’m sorry? I mean, she would use words like ‘you people’ and (it was) just horrible. She was horrible . . . I found that they would have a hard time talking about blacks, slavery, and when we would get to history, they would have a hard time talking about that when I was in class. . . .” (P6)

One side effect to hypervisibility is that the student is sometimes treated as a representative of all blacks. This became a significant sub-theme in itself.

“Because in most of my classes when we talk about an issue that deals with black people I become like the black representative of the United States of America. I become that. I really do. And I’m like, I don’t represent the black population of the US . . . It’s like I know what I think but I don’t know what the rest of the black people in the world think.” (P5)

“I guess they would just ask questions about black people in general you know, and expect you to have the answers. Whether, you know, do all black people like chicken? You know, I don’t know. I’ve never met all black people, you know.” (P10)

The reverse experience to hypervisibility is invisibility. In these incidents, the students reported being deliberately ignored.

“In like asking for their help with something, or like, they were just like, some of them, like if you were waiting in line for snacks or something, they would like, go around you. You’d be standing there and they’d be like picking the next person in line.” (P1)

“And I can remember some of my classes, going into some of my classes, not really being recognized because I would raise my hand and it would be like I wasn’t there. I didn’t really understand that, because I know people see me. I know I’m not invisible.” (P5)

“I would be standing here and there was a white girl beside me and people would come up to ask a question and they would look right at her. I was like “I’m right here.” And that’s happened in every job I’ve had at University X.” (P8)

While the issue of visibility has a range of manifestations, one woman summarized its consequences quite succinctly.

“I mean, just college itself is already intense. I just don’t think that anybody needs any added pressures. But you come to (University X) and you’re black, it automatically is there.” (P6)

### *Discussion*

When we want to understand what stands out for people in a given situation, phenomenological research gives voice to their experiences in a singularly powerful way. The descriptions shared by our participants can help us understand what being “a fly in the buttermilk” is really like. Only through such understanding can we begin to experience some of the challenges faced by black students at predominately white institutions.

All of the experiences reported by our participants as figural events in their college careers were superimposed on the backdrop of a white dominated world. After careful analyses of the transcripts, the essence of our participants’ experiences might read as follows:

Unfairness, sabotage, and condescension are everyday occurrences in the white world in which I live at the university. In order to connect with students, faculty, administrators, and others on and around campus, I must be the one to initiate interaction, and I must also prove I am worthy as a student or friend. I am continuously made aware of how different I am, especially when I am the only black student in a class. Life is full of opposites: I feel as if I am seen as the same as other blacks by many whites, yet I often feel different from other black students. Perhaps the most common experience I have is one of extremes: Either I am invisible or I am its opposite—I am super-visible.

All participants reported positive experiences when they were students

in a predominantly white university. They also reported negative experiences that might have overwhelmed students with lesser strength and/or resolve to succeed. As discussed earlier, other studies have pointed to numerous factors connected to higher dropout rates for black students in predominantly white universities. Four of the five themes capturing participant experiences offer support to prior findings although one potentially important theme (invisible/supervisible) has rarely been discussed in the research literature. All five themes, however, may help university faculty and administrators come to understand prior research in a way that leads to a better environment for all students.

The unfairness/sabotage/condescension theme was an especially crucial element of our participants' hurtful experiences at their university. It was voiced clearly in the statement of one participant who said, "It happens everyday." Numerous prior studies echo our participant's reactions to insensitive and sometimes racist acts. Participants in survey studies completed by Smith (1980) and Allen, Nunley, & Scott-Warner (1988) reported that 55–78% of students, staff, and faculty described their institutions as hostile and unwelcoming to black students. Kirkland (1998) found that black students reported insensitive attitudes of Caucasian faculty and students, along with lack of support, as the most frequently reported stressors they faced. A study by Fisher and Shaw (1999) found more than 50% of their participants reported feeling unfairly treated by faculty, and a large proportion noted racist treatment and subsequent feelings of anger. It was clear that most of the hurt our participants experienced came from the unfairness, sabotage, and condescension they perceived as happening every day. While the perception of generalized injustice such as that reported by our participants is undoubtedly important in their affective response to life on campus, it also has a potential adverse effect on academic performance. Members of socially stigmatized groups may protect their self-esteem by adopting coping strategies such as deemphasizing the value of academic success or discounting academic feedback, either positive or negative, as a valid indicator of their performance and ability (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2002). Either behavior may result in poorer academic achievement. The pervasive nature of the unfairness/sabotage/condescension mandates a coordinated institutional and faculty response if efforts to increase success of black students are effective.

The themes of isolation/connection and same/different are also supported by previous research. The first of these themes is represented by the statement, "You have to initiate the connection," whereas the second is embodied in the words of one student who said, "They seem all the same; I am the one who is different." Taken in combination, these

themes illustrate the complexity of interpersonal relationships described by participants as they worked to survive in a predominately white university.

The theme of isolation/connection denotes a perceived barrier participants needed to overcome to achieve academic success. It is well documented that the inability to develop a connection with some aspect of the university will generally result in failure. Tinto (1975, 1987) noted that nonintegrative experiences of loneliness and alienation were positively correlated with withdrawal from college whereas positive or integrative experiences enhanced minority student persistence. D'Souza (1991) cited institutional alienation as the most significant characteristic experience of black students attending predominately white universities. The perception expressed by participants—that they always had to initiate a connection—is complicated by feelings of alienation and of being different from other students.

Participants reported that when they arrived on campus they felt isolated as though no one was reaching out to them. University-sponsored programs to help students make successful connections were not always perceived as helpful or effective but instead cliquish and divisive. Connection with white students appeared to be easier for participants who had previously attended a white high school, supporting the idea that preparation for racist treatment enhances the possibilities of coping (Nghe & Mahalik, 2001). It was clear, however, that connecting with other students, white or black, was quite difficult for some participants. Tinto (1975, 1987) pointed out that the ability to be bicultural while maintaining a cultural identity was significant in fostering educational attainment. Unfortunately, individuals who are marginalized on the basis of race often internalize stereotypic images of themselves in addition to their own more differentiated identities—a splitting of self image (Hall, Stevens, & Meleis, 1994). When this occurs connection with others will be more difficult and the difficulty is compounded by a feeling of being different.

“A fly in the buttermilk” was one participant’s way of describing his perception of an experience that stood out for all participants: being alone in a class with many white students. All participants reported how comforting it was to have other black students in their classes and what a pleasure (albeit a rare one) it was to have a black professor. This feeling of being different also reflects a more general feeling of alienation from white students and the overall university community. This is not surprising in light of Judd et al.’s (1995) contention that while whites may be socialized to avoid stereotyping and thinking about racial differences, blacks are socialized to emphasize racial group differences

between themselves and whites. In addition, however, some participants felt they were different from other black students and reported being criticized for being too serious about grades and for not talking black slang. In turn, some of them were critical of other black students whom they saw as too loud and boisterous and lacking a commitment to academic success. It seemed that many of our participants saw other blacks as the same and themselves as the one who was different. While the themes of isolation and difference are perhaps reflective of the ambivalent attitudes reported by blacks regarding whites (Shelton, 2000) and by dominant groups towards minority groups (Fiske et al., 1999), it is clear that the “I am different” theme relates to an obstacle salient to our participants’ university experience.

Having to prove one’s worthiness represents a potentially serious barrier to success for black students in a predominately white university. Unique to minority or marginalized groups, the assumption of unworthiness is associated with a particularly detrimental factor—stereotype threat—that seems to impair performance of even the most skilled achievement-oriented and confident black students (Steele, 1999). In a series of experiments Steele found that “stereotype threat” tends to depress test scores and that dramatic improvement occurs when such threat is lifted. What impairs student performance is the threat of doing something they feel may inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype. Mistrustful of the faculty, black students often try too hard, rather than not hard enough. Steele likens this to “John Henryism,” a phenomenon observed in blacks who seem to be emulating that legendary figure whose superhuman work efforts led to his death. The sense of being seen through the lens of a negative stereotype as unworthy leads to fear of doing something to confirm that stereotype, decreased class participation, increased anxiety, and often poor academic performance in spite of ample ability and preparation.

It also appeared that while our participants perceived the need to prove their academic worth and engaged in behaviors to do so, they also had the goal of invalidating negative prejudices about the academic ability of black students. Although, in one sense, they did not want to be spokespersons for the black race, they did want to do all they could to improve negative impressions the university community might hold concerning the ability of black students to succeed.

In terms of visibility/invisibility the participants in our study perceived themselves as being at both ends of a continuum. One participant stated it this way: “Sometimes I’m not even here. And sometimes I have to represent every black student here.” Reading participant transcripts gives one the impression that there is some truth in the sweet bliss of

finding a pleasant middle ground between the extremes of being cast in the spotlight and of being totally ignored.

For major time periods in their college careers, participants reported themselves swinging from one extreme to the other. They reported that professors often called on them in classes to speak for the entire black race when racial issues were broached. This supervisibility left them feeling out of place and uncomfortable in a majority of their classes. Conversely, when not in the spotlight, they often experienced themselves as invisible to the white university community. Participants reported that they were almost never invited to join white students in a study group and often were ignored when assigned to a project group. When participants were employed at campus stores, they noticed that whites sought assistance from less competent white personnel if there was a choice between black and white clerks.

Our participants, however, were not the first African Americans to describe interrelationships between personal identity and the larger white community in terms of visibility. In the classic novel by Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952), the metaphoric play of light and shadow describing interactions between the narrator and his social setting was used to capture the complexities (and situatedness) of black identity itself. Equating identity with visibility in this way suggests there is an optimal level of visibility in which the person, in conjunction with others, decides how—or even whether—to seek visibility in some setting. In the present case, the theme of invisibility captures student experiences of an absence of validation for who they experience themselves to be whereas the theme of supervisibility expresses student experiences of having one's identity defined by other, usually more powerful, persons in the present setting. In neither case does the student feel primary authorship for the identity attained, and this is precisely what participants were trying to describe when they noted that “sometimes I'm invisible and sometimes I have to represent every African American in the class.”

As transcripts were analyzed, it became clear that there were some differences between participants on what has come to be called cultural identity. A conceptual understanding of these differences might help us better integrate the perceptions of our participants and the behaviors they reported for others in the predominately white university setting. The five stages of cultural identity as described by (Atkinson, Morton, & Sue, 1989; Sue et al., 1999; and Sue & Sue, 1999) include the following: Conformity, Dissonance, Resistance and Immersion, Introspective, and Integrative Awareness. These stages as discussed by Sue and Sue (1999) and Atkinson et al. (1989), relate to the experiences of oppressed people



as they struggle to understand their own culture, the dominant culture, and oppressive relationships between the two.

For the dominant white group, the conformity stage is marked by a generalized belief that white is right. For such individuals there is no personal responsibility taken for perpetuating racism, and there is a general lack of awareness about racial issues. The dissonance stage begins when a white person is forced to deal with contradictions in his/her attitudes and behavior. For example, a person in this stage may feel some guilt from being afraid to speak out or take action on racial issues. The resistance and immersion stage is characterized by an overreaction or a severe shift in personal values on racism. Individuals suddenly see racism everywhere. This new awareness often leads to anger toward others for their intolerance. A “White Liberal” syndrome may develop and be manifested in two complementary styles: the paternalistic, condescending, protector or an overidentification with minority group members. Whites soon discover that neither of these roles is appreciated by minority groups and often results in rejection by minority group members. The introspective stage seems to mediate between the two extremes of white identity and the rejection of whiteness. Feelings of guilt or anger that have motivated the person to identify with one or the other group are realized as dysfunctional, and individuals in this stage develop rational beliefs about who they are and what their responsibilities are in developing personal identities. The integrative awareness stage occurs when whites realize that race does not define any specific person. There is a sense of self-fulfillment as the person comes to terms with what his/her role in racism might be and what are effective ways of dealing with the eradication of racism.

It would appear that our participants encountered some students and faculty in the first stage (conformity) of identity development. Stealing Black History Month posters would be a stage one activity as would asking participants to speak for their entire race. Participants also reported encountering some resistance and immersion behaviors in the university community. One professor cried because of the guilt she felt about “her responsibility for slavery;” another thought it would be nice if our participant sang the Black National Anthem for the class. It seems clear the participants enjoyed several meaningful interactions with students and faculty where they were treated as individuals rather than members of a group. In this context, they responded by being able to form connections with other individuals based on common interests that crossed skin-color boundaries. Despite these experiences, it seems clear that most of the hurt our participants described came from experiences expressed by Theme I: “It Happens Everyday”: unfairness/sabotage/condescension.

For minority group members the stages of cultural identity are described in a slightly different way (Atkinson et al., 1989 and Sue & Sue (1999). Movement from one stage to another for minority-group members is characterized by changes in attitude toward self, toward others of the same minority, toward others of a different minority, and toward members of the dominant group. For example, minority-group members move from an appreciation of the dominant culture, to depreciating the dominant culture, and then to a selective appreciation of people regardless of race. In other words, in the final stage of cultural-identity development, individuals withhold judgment of other individuals based on the groups to which they belong. That is, some white individuals and some black individuals are good and some are bad, and not all members of the oppressed and dominant classes act and behave in the same way. Minority-group members move from rejecting their own culture and group (Stage One) to rejecting the dominant culture and group (Stage Three), to selective appreciation of individuals from both groups (Stage Five).

Some participants reported difficulty in connecting with their fellow black students because attempts to connect with white students were viewed as “trying to be like them.” It would appear that some black students tended to reject the dominant culture whereas others were able to appreciate individuals regardless of race. It may also be the case that some black students viewed participants who were appreciative of white students as attempting to reject their own culture.

### *Recommendations*

We believe the understanding we gained from listening to the voices of our participants will help inform actions of students, faculty, and any predominately white university that wants to improve the learning environment for all students. Our participants shared strategies that led to successful graduation. The common thread running through the stories was a perceived ability to move beyond unfairness, sabotage, and condescension and to find common ground on which to build relationships. They felt that it was important to be the one to initiate connection, deal with being different and with being either invisible or supervisible, and to accept the perceived need to “prove I am worthy.”

The students reported incidents and feelings emanating from classroom content, from assignments, from faculty comments, and from non-verbal communication. Faculty members must realize that academic achievement in their courses is influenced as much by intangibles as by pedagogy and just as pedagogy can be improved, the environment can

be enhanced if the willingness is there. Faculty members need to examine what they do to promote an atmosphere that contributes to black students' perceptions that they need to prove they are worthy to be in college. Why did student participants feel they faced unfairness, sabotage, and condescension every day? What can faculty members do to help these students be seen, not as representatives of all blacks, but as individuals with unique goals and needs? How can faculty members help students connect with one another? Would it be possible to set aside a part of class time for students to work collaboratively in a safe and trusting environment? Would it be possible for students, in smaller classes or in small groups, to "check in" for a few moments at the beginning of class where they share something going on in their lives?

Several recommendations resulting from this study concern ways in which faculty and the university can improve the learning environment for minority students. University personnel need to develop and constantly evaluate ways to help black students connect with various segments of the university. Faculty members should be encouraged to learn about cultural identity development, examine their own behavior to assess where they are in this regard, and set goals for further development. Much of the negative faculty behavior reported by our participants was described as being done out of ignorance. Cultural competency is not only possible but should be mandatory for administration and faculty alike.

We recommend that faculty members find ways to hear the stories of their black (and other) students. While phenomenological research can be most helpful, it seems more feasible for departments to devise ways to encourage as many students as possible to share personal stories with faculty. If interviews are conducted, faculty members need to learn how to ask questions that do not interfere with students' perceptions and descriptions of their experiences.

Having looked at the experiences of successful black students just before graduation, we think it is also necessary to study the experiences of students who lack confidence about their ability to graduate. The nature of their experiences may lead to different recommendations than those found in this study. In addition, we need to study the experiences of both black and white faculty members in regard to the education of black students. We also need to study other minority groups to determine differences and similarities, as well as groups of students at various levels of undergraduate and graduate school. The more we can enable the life experiences of all students to be heard, the more we can develop an understanding capable of leading to a healthy environment for all students and all faculty.

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