A Sense of Trust Through the Eyes of African American Doctoral Students: An Examination of How a Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education Can Create an Environment of Inclusiveness

Zelda M. DeBoyes

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A SENSE OF TRUST THROUGH THE EYES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN DOCTORAL STUDENTS: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION CAN CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT OF INCLUSIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological research study explores whether trust influences the experiences of African American students, particularly those in doctoral programs at predominantly White institutions. Recent studies suggest that colleges and universities can benefit in several ways by building and maintaining student trust. However, the body of research typically provides a general understanding of the role and benefits of student trust in the academic arena through the eyes of White students only. Very few studies examine the benefits of student trust for a diverse population, and even fewer address African American students enrolled in predominantly White doctoral programs.

This research provides an alternative perspective of trust by identifying factors specific to African American doctoral students enrolled at the University of Denver using a conceptual framework that examines trust, invisibility and other factors. The primary data was obtained through separate in-depth interviews with eight African American doctoral student participants who shared their experiences, thoughts and perceptions of trust at this predominantly White institution. Narratives of four of the participants highlight their reflections and academic encounters in a racial environment.

Using Creswell’s (2007) approach to phenomenological analysis, four key themes emerged from the data as essential elements to establish a sense of trust: a strong sense
of Blackness, a support system, the level of visibility and the relationship with the higher education institution. Findings from this research study suggest that race remains a salient factor for the study participants, even though a climate of inclusiveness in the classroom and strong support from faculty were described by most. However, on-going encounters of racial slights remain prevalent today for several of the students in this study.

Study results offer implications and recommendations for academic professionals and leaders that suggest a re-examination of efforts to recruit and retain African American faculty, staff and students, as well as to create inclusive excellence through leadership at every level of the institution.
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PREFACE

Prompted by my own experiences within the institution of higher education, a “system” that all too often renders students of color like me invisible, the purpose of my research project is to examine the role of trust in creating an environment of inclusiveness for African American doctoral students at the University of Denver. This research provides a different, but valuable perspective in the existing dialogue on this topic and this preface allows me the opportunity to evaluate my motivation as a researcher who shares the demographic characteristics of the study participants.

In this analytical reflection I wish to consider racial interviewing through the eyes of the racial insider. For example, I am a dark-skinned African American woman, who possesses none of the physical features that are remotely similar to the majority group in our society. In this institution of higher education, that does not reflect and may not appreciate my skin tone, hair texture or innate values, I ask myself, how does one become a strong, confident, contributing member of the research academy? My response has been to create my own and seek the voices of those most like myself. As I reflect on my study, however, I wonder if my racial attributes outweigh the fact that I am also a doctoral student addressing similar issues facing the research participants? However, Twine and Warren (2000) note that the general message in the research community is that minority scholars are the best qualified to conduct research on minority communities. Additionally, Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker (2002) argue that demographic
characteristics may be central to the access and quality of information shared during participant interviews in qualitative research. Although I feel that other researchers can and have told the African American story quite eloquently, I believe a participant observer’s story, such as my own, adds depth to the research.

However, the question must be raised: has my Blackness enhanced or impeded my research efforts? I believe this study captured the very essence of the participants’ experiences. I also believe their voices were candidly richer as a result of my role as researcher. May this dissertation provide insight and guidance for other African American doctoral students at the University of Denver, as well as all members of the research academy, as we grapple with ways to create and sustain an environment of inclusiveness for those that look like me.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education in the United States face several unprecedented challenges in the 21st century (Altbach, Gumport & Johnstone, 2001; Kerr, 2001). One such challenge is an ever-increasing perception that the public’s support and respect for higher education has steadily declined (Bok, 1992). As a result, improving the public’s trust in colleges and universities has emerged as one of the major issues facing higher education in the new millennium (Michaelson, 2003).

The importance of public trust in developing and maintaining long-term relationships has been the focus of research in many disciplines, including higher education. Of particular note in the body of research regarding trust in higher education has been the trust of students: prospective, current and alumni (Ghosh, Whipple & Bryan, 2001; Kramer & Tyler, 1996; Siedentop, 1998). Recent studies suggest that colleges and universities can benefit in several ways by building and maintaining student trust (Ghosh et al., 2001). However, the existing research typically provides a general understanding of the role and benefits of student trust in the academic arena through the eyes of White students only. Few studies examine the benefits of student trust for a diverse population, and even fewer for African American students enrolled in predominantly White doctoral programs. Examining how a sense of trust may impact African American doctoral students’ perception of higher education at predominantly White institutions in terms of the quality of academics, organizational behavior, campus climate, and environment has the potential to provide insights and guidance for academic leaders at all levels.
As the author of this research study, my goal is to give voice to the concerns of a sampling of African American doctoral students by capturing their lived experiences. This research examines factors that create an environment of trust and enable African American doctoral students to survive the particular challenges they face, and to thrive at any predominantly White institution. Therefore, the primary research question under investigation is: What factors create an environment of trust for African American doctoral students in a predominantly White institution of higher education?

African American Doctoral Students

Access to higher education is an integral part of African Americans’ long struggle for equality (Allen, Epps & Haniff, 1991, p. xiii). For generations, high school graduates have been told, “In order to get a good job, you need a college education” (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2003, p. 10). In an effort to “get ahead,” many African Americans have followed this advice. Since 1980, Black enrollment in U.S. graduate schools has more than doubled. According to the Survey of Earned Doctorates, a federal agency survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center for the National Science Foundation, the proportion of U.S. doctorates earned by African American students reflect a modest increase from 5% in 1997 to 7% in 2007. Most African American students look upon higher education as the route to upward mobility and an increased standard of living, and are heeding the call to further their educational and professional opportunities through graduate studies (Allen, 1981; Allen et al. 1991; Williamson, 1999; Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991).
Although predominantly White institutions in the United States have become more racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse, African American students continue to encounter challenges (Perna, 2000; Quezada & Louque, 2004). One of these challenges includes the exposure to an environmental climate of prejudice and discrimination. Another is a lack of mentors who are faculty of color (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Feagin, 1992; Ellis, 2001 Perna, 2000; Quezada & Louque, 2004). These issues remain prevalent today for many African American students on campuses throughout the country (Cabrera, et al., 1999; Chavous, 2002; Feagin, 1992; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

Gay (2004) notes that research and scholarship on the quality of the intellectual and social lives, as well as the professional development of graduate students of color, particularly African American doctoral students needs major improvement. According to Williamson (1999), until many predominantly White colleges and universities demonstrate a commitment to students of color and their academic and psychological survival, African American students will continually attempt to create an environment conducive to their success. Feagin and Sikes (1995) suggest that in an attempt to find refuge from unwelcoming environments on many predominantly White campuses, African American students increasingly are instituting a self-imposed segregation or exclusion. Feagin and Sikes (1995) further posit that this practice serves a number of purposes. Primarily, self-segregation appears to be a defense mechanism to insulate African American students from the harsh realities of institutional racism. In light of these findings, my objective is to examine the concept of trust, the factors that influence
trust and how a sense of trust impacts the overall foundation of relationships between African American doctoral students and predominantly White institutions. For, essential in the evolution of relationships, whether between mentor and protégé or higher education institution and student, is the element of trust or the sense of trust (Willie et al., 1991).

Background of the Study

Studies conducted in the past two decades have begun to focus on various factors that affect the experiences of African American students on predominantly White campuses (Allen, 1985; Allen et al., 1991; Cabrera et al., 1999; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Perna, 2000). These factors include academics, social networks, and campus climate. According to Chavous (2002), African American students at predominantly White institutions have reported feeling alienated and invisible due to their race. This is important in light of the research that suggests perceiving a hostile racial climate on campus has been associated with lower academic and social adjustment (Allen, 1988; Chavous, 2002). In contrast, research suggests that many African American students at predominantly White institutions who perform better academically report perceiving faculty and peers as generally supportive (Chavous, 2002). The academic and professional success of numerous African American students correlates with their positive or negative experiences with higher education (Allen et al., 1991; Cabrera et al., 1999; Chavous, 2002; Feagin, 1992; Perna, 2000; Willie et al., 1991).
The experience of a college education (undergraduate and graduate) brings opportunities for growth and development as students acquire more knowledge and encounter new people, ideas and values (Aries & Seider, 2005). According to Cabrera et al. (1999), there are notable variations when race and ethnicity becomes part of the equation, including an increase in the differences in withdrawal behaviors, psychological distress, and maladjustment. However, Nettles, Thoeny, and Gosman (1986) note that cognitive and non-cognitive factors explain college experience for all students, including African Americans. A key factor to consider is African American students’ sense of trust in an institution’s ability to insure that their educational experience provides opportunity for growth and development. Witty (1982) argues that the absence of a representative number of minority educators and administrators in a pluralistic society is damaging because it distorts social reality for African American students. Additionally, Willie and McCord (1977) found that some African American students tended to distrust predominantly White colleges and universities. The source of this distrust was sometimes a simple, isolated incident involving an instructor’s evaluation that a student felt was unfair or the unsatisfactory resolution of a dispute with the university (Willie et al., 1991). Considering the research that indicates African American students in predominantly White institutions have historically been exposed to a climate of prejudice and discrimination in the classroom and on campus, I candidly question how these experiences might influence African American doctoral students’ sense of trust in higher education.
The recent focus on student trust captures the importance of students in the overall dynamics of higher education (Ghosh et al., 2001; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992). According to Trow (1996), one of the fundamental links between higher education and society is trust. Colleges and universities depend on the trust of various stakeholders: students, parents, alumni, donors, research sponsors, legislators, and the public. According to Ghosh et al. (2001), student trust provides a basic explanation of why a student may or may not elect to attend or graduate from a particular institution of higher education. However, little attention has been focused on examining African American doctoral students’ sense of trust in colleges and universities (Ghosh et al., 2001). In this context, it is important to examine the role trust may have in the relationship African American doctoral students establish with their college or university, as well as with their academic success.

Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of this research study was to identify the factors that influence the role trust plays in establishing strong student relationships with institutions of higher education. Having a strong relationship with one’s college or university may be defined simply as a sense of belonging (Chavous, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Much of the research on African American students at predominantly White institutions indicates that they encounter difficulty in social and academic integration, which may adversely impact their sense of belonging (Chavous, 2002). According to Fries-Britt and Turner (2002),
while concentration on academics is essential to success, most African American students also need some social outlets for their emotional well-being.

As noted earlier, the importance and benefits of trust have been the focus of research in many disciplines. Benefits include greater commitment and cooperation with reduced costs (Kramer & Tyler, 1996; Moorman et al., 1992; Salmond, 1994). However, my examination of the literature identified that little attention has been given to the relationship of trust in relation to African American students, particularly those enrolled in predominantly White doctoral programs. Therefore, the overall purpose of this research was to fill this gap in the existing literature by developing an understanding of trust and how students’ sense of trust impacts African American doctoral students’ perceptions of their academic experiences in predominantly White colleges and universities.

Definitions Used in the Study

**African American/Black**: Americans of African descent. The term African American and Black will be used interchangeably in this study (Wright, 2003).

**DU or Institution**: For the purpose of this research, refers to the University of Denver.

**Faculty/Students of Color**: For the purpose of this research, this phrase will be used for academic professionals and students who are not defined as Anglo.
Invisibility: Franklin (1999) defines invisibility as an inner struggle with the feeling that one’s talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognized due to prejudice and racism (p. 761).

Minority: For the purpose of this research, this term will be used for all persons considered to be other than Anglo (Wright, 2003).

Social Contract: In the contractual sense of trust, a social institution is furnished goods and commodities upon the promise or expectation of a future return to society (Hamrick, 1996).

Student Trust: “Student trust” in a college is defined as, “the degree to which a student is willing to rely on or have faith and confidence in the college to take appropriate steps that benefit and help the student achieve his or her learning and career objectives” (Ghosh et al., 2001, p. 325). For the purpose of this research study, trust will be defined as student trust.

Significance of the Study

This research study is of particular importance because a key factor in examining African American doctoral students’ sense of trust is an institution’s ability to insure that their educational experience provides opportunity for growth and development. Tuitt (2003) argues that in order to remain and survive at a predominantly White institution, some African American students have to continuously negotiate the tension between being true to themselves and conforming to traditional pedagogical practices that require they become objective, apolitical, and unemotional intellectual beings. In that light, this
research study is important because the study of African American doctoral students’ experiences on predominantly White campuses may help academic professionals achieve a better perspective on racial and cultural issues that significantly impact higher education. This research will further contribute to the literature relating to trust in higher education, particularly through the eyes (experiences, perceptions, and realities) of African American doctoral students. This study is especially significant in support of past studies, which suggest that the best practices found at historically Black colleges and universities create an environment where African American students not only survive, but also thrive. Finally, this is an opportunity for the higher education community to candidly and openly acknowledge issues of inequity, isolation, and abandonment as told through the voices of African American doctoral students, while fostering dialogue and action on the many ways to establish a climate of inclusiveness.

Trust Defined

…trust is an integral part of higher learning, and higher learning is characterized by a transforming, dialogical learning environment.

Curzon-Hobson (2002)

Among political scientists and some economists, the concept of trust refers mainly to attitudes as measured by survey responses to items on public trust and trust in institutions (Butler, 1991). Higher education experts, by contrast, tend to conceptualize trust primarily as a social structural variable, using it as a linkage between individuals and organizations (Chronicle of Higher Education, May 2003). Ghosh et al. (2001) note that institutions of higher education can benefit in several ways by building and
maintaining the trust of students. There are striking differences in both the conceptualization and use of the term trust.

What is Trust?

Manifestations of trust are easy to recognize because we experience and rely on trust every day (Josang & Presti, 2004). However, according to Josang and Presti (2004), trust is challenging to define because it is often used with a variety of meanings and in many contexts, which usually leads to confusion. Researchers argue that there is no generally accepted definition of the term trust, noting that one obvious reason for this is that the meaning of trust like the meaning of most other natural language terms depends on the context in which it is used (Braendeland & Stolen, 2004, p. 146).

A diversity of opinions exists regarding the definition of trust (Hamrick, 1996). As with many words important to social life in the United States, trust and all its seemingly related concepts—faith, confidence, alienation, malaise—are not well defined (Barber, 1983). However, trust is often viewed as a multidimensional, multifaceted social phenomenon regarded by some as an attitude, and by others as a vital social lubricant (Flores & Solomon, 1998; Josang & Presti, 2004).

Trust in higher education has been a frequently discussed topic in the research literature. Trow (1996), as well as Hamrick (1996), note that one of the fundamental links between higher education and society is trust, that is, the provision of specific goods and services in return for support. Hamrick (1996) depicts the notion of trust as a wide-ranging, yet elusive one. Using the metaphor of “social contract,” Hamrick (1996) aptly describes trust as an investment that is extended to social institutions in order that society
might achieve benefits from the institution. For example, society places its trust in a
government by virtue of the social contract between itself and its government (Hamrick,
1996, p. 5). Hamrick (1996) further notes that in this contractual sense of trust, a social
institution is furnished goods and commodities based upon the promise or expectation of
a future return to society.

Scholars and educators often view trust from a philosophical perspective. Barber
(1983, p.3) defines trust as the ability or competence of an institutional arrangement to
perform its task of representing the majority while protecting the minority in certain
ways. Willie (2000) describes trust as an essential component that must be reconciled
with confidence to secure the blessings of an effective education (p. 259). Willie (2000)
further posits that confidence and trust are components of civil societies and social
organizations. He makes the distinction that these two concepts are important in effective
school communities. Additionally, he argues that teachers cannot educate students in
whom they have no confidence and students cannot learn from teachers whom they do
not trust (p. 255).

According to Kehoe (2000), trust is defined as the foundation of legitimacy.
Furthermore, Kelman (1970) states that if an institution is seen as representative of the
population’s identity and effective in meeting its needs and interests, then it is likely to
engender trust, which is, in essence, the other side of the coin of legitimacy.
Additionally, Leslie (1975) notes that legitimacy is measured by the assessment of
several elements of governance by constituents; it is the foundation upon which the
exercise of authority rests (p. 233).
Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1999), however, describes trust as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to them, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party. Josang and Presti (2004) define trust simply as a tool for making decisions in an uncertain environment. Based on various external attributes of higher education, trust is further defined through a qualitative lens as institutional legitimacy or the extent to which an individual is willing to depend on the institution of higher education in a given situation with a feeling of relative security (Josang & Presti, 2004).

For the purpose of this study, trust was defined as the degree to which a student is willing to rely on or have faith and confidence in an institution of higher education to take appropriate steps that benefit and help the student achieve his or her learning and career objectives (Ghosh et al. 2001, p. 325).

Factors That Influence Trust

DePalma (1992) reminds us that higher education may have been the last great institution in U.S. society to enjoy unstinting public trust, but no longer. There is an ongoing debate among scholars, politicians, and taxpayers that overall, trust in higher education is in decline (Trow, 1996). Michaelson (2002) reminds us that the growing and generalized public skepticism of established institutions, including colleges and universities, may in part explain this decline. The automatic deference that society and politicians used to have toward public institutions of higher education has eroded (Frost, Hearn, & Marine, 1997). However, a telephone survey of 1,000 adults (ages 25 to 65)
conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 2002) challenges the debate regarding a decline in trust. According to the survey findings, 90% of the respondents state they had “a great deal” or “some” confidence in four-year public higher education institutions and 89% expressed high confidence in private four-year institutions and community colleges.

Most studies on trust in higher education focus on the factors contributing to the decline in confidence by the American public. While the factors debated are varied, there are common themes in the literature, such as the cost of education (tuition), the basic disconnect between higher education and students, the controversy regarding research versus education, and the general distrust of governmental institutions (Bok, 1992; Michaelson, 2003). According to Trow (1996) in his study of higher education institutions in the United States and Europe, colleges and universities are fundamentally linked to their surrounding and supporting societies through trust, accountability and the market. His findings define accountability as the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, and to answer questions about how resources have been used and to what effect (Trow, 1996).

A study conducted by Ghosh, et al. (2001) indicates that the lack of student trust in a college or university is likely to have a dramatic effect in the short run by reducing quality perceptions, increasing student turnover and tuition sensitivity, reducing financial contributions, and making it more difficult to recruit new students due to negative word-of-mouth effects. A discussion of the eight key external components (expertise, cooperation, timeliness, congeniality, openness, tactfulness, sincerity and integrity)
identified by Ghosh et al. (2001) as significantly influencing students’ trust in higher education follows:

**Expertise.** Expertise is defined as a college’s perceived mastery and technical competence in its field of education (Ghosh et al. 2001, p. 326). According to Moorman et al. (1993), expertise inspires trust. The quality of student learning, not teaching per se, is what ultimately matters. Learning should pertain to what is or will become important for the students enrolled in the program (Massy, 2003). Massy suggests that department leaders should carefully analyze how professors teach, how students learn, and how they all approach assessment. He further notes that department heads should consult the literature on pedagogy in their academic disciplines and collect data on what works and what doesn’t.

The body of research literature notes that expertise also matters for African American doctoral students. Teaching and learning that reflects and validates their culture are essential to the basic foundation of student trust. As Tuitt (2003) suggests, an inclusive pedagogy embraces the whole student (mind, body and soul) in the learning process. He defines expertise as being culturally relevant and inclusive education. Unfortunately, all too often, African American doctoral students have to function in an alien and often hostile environment in which they consistently encounter irrelevant curriculum and frequently are taught by culturally insensitive and uncaring instructors (Gay, 2004, p. 266).

**Cooperation.** Cooperation is defined as the perceived willingness of a college to work together with students for a common good (Ghosh et al. 2001, p. 326).
Additionally, studies suggest that commitment to a college or university is more likely when the institution is believed to be cooperative rather than individualistically oriented (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Ghosh et al. 2001; Pruitt, 1981). For example, when policy makers are asked to identify the biggest issues in higher education, they often cite college costs and high tuitions or access for underserved students. Although those issues are important, resolving them will make little difference if colleges and universities don't deliver high-quality education in an environment conducive to learning (Massy, 2003).

For African American doctoral students, the perceived cooperativeness of an institution is reflected in its willingness to engage the local African American communities through community service efforts, the ability to establish opportunities for mentors, and the college or university’s willingness to provide more resources and access for students of color (Willie et al, 1991). Cooperation may also be viewed simply as an institution’s willingness to provide and/or maintain activities of interest to African American doctoral students, for example Black Greek affiliations.

**Timeliness.** Ghosh et al. (2001) define timeliness as the efficiency with which a college responds to student needs. Austin (1991) argues that timeliness increases both user satisfaction and trust in the service provider. Improved timeliness and quality of information delivered to students and faculty facilitate better decisions, and drive operational efficiencies. Institutions of higher education must accomplish this while also dealing with declining budgets and increasing government requirements. The willingness of a college or university to respond to African American doctoral students’ concerns regarding social and academic issues in a timely manner reflects this factor of trust.
Leovinger’s “supportive community” criteria discusses the interpersonal needs of African American students at predominantly White institutions, noting that supportive interpersonal relations are not only desirable but necessary for personal development during the college years (Willie et al., 1991).

**Congeniality.** The act of being pleasant to students is likely to increase their trust in institutions of higher education (Ghosh et al. 2001). Congeniality is defined as the extent to which a college or university shows friendliness, courtesy, and goodwill toward its students (Ghosh et al., 2001). Customer satisfaction and increased perceptions of service quality have been linked to congeniality (Ghosh et al., 2001; Zeithmal, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). Although the civil rights movement had a significant effect on changing racial interactions in this society, racism continues to plague the United States (Sue, et al., 2007, p. 271). According to Harrison (2000), institutions of higher education are not exempt from incidents of racism and unfairness. She notes that all too often in academic settings, African American doctoral students are exposed to various manifestations of a hostile racial climate such as unfair treatment, underestimation of abilities, and denial of opportunities by White professors and students.

**Openness.** Issues of higher education can be ambiguous and confusing to students; however, colleges that are perceived as open typically are afforded increased trust (Ghosh et al. 2001). Openness is defined as a college’s perceived motivation to interpret and disclose ambiguous higher education issues to prospective students (Ghosh et al. 2001, p. 327). Openness and involvement are believed to be value-added functions in higher education. Non-disclosure of prior campus incidents of racial misconduct is one example
of a lack of openness by colleges and universities that may impact trust for many prospective African American doctoral students (Ghosh, et al., 2001).

**Tactfulness.** Ghosh et al. (2001) define tactfulness as the level of etiquette a college displays during exchanges with students. Often, higher education institutions have to communicate information about students that is embarrassing or sensitive in nature (Ghosh et al., 2001). Studies indicate the importance of tact in communicating findings that did not meet students’ expectations or were embarrassing (Ghosh et al. 2001; Moorman, et al., 1993).

**Sincerity.** Sincerity is defined as the extent to which a college is perceived to be honest and to make promises with the intention of fulfilling them (Ghosh et al. 2001; Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Zaltman and Moorman (1988) note that when a student senses that the college is sincere or “tells the truth,” he or she extends greater trust towards the college. Schlenker, Helm, & Tedeschi (1973) suggest that when a party fulfills a prior promise, the current promise is more likely to be relied upon. Additionally, learning how to build confidence for African American doctoral students by creating personal and institutional systems of support through sincere and open communication is crucial (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Willie et al., 1991).

**Integrity.** Greater perceptions of integrity lead to greater student trust. An institution’s perceived unwillingness to sacrifice ethical standards to achieve organizational objectives is defined as integrity (Ghosh et al. 2001). Integrity has been shown to be a significant determinant of subordinate trust in superiors (p. 328).
Ghosh et al. (2001) argue that with increased student trust, prospective students are more likely to enroll, current students are less likely to transfer or drop out, and alumni are more likely to use their money and their voices on behalf of their alma mater. Additionally, Ghosh et al. (2001) propose that increased trust is likely to lead to positive experiences in higher education and better evaluations of those institutions. A model of students’ trust of higher education emerged from their analysis that established a theoretical foundation to frame students’ experiences in higher education. While in theory, these eight components are pivotal to establishing an environment of trust for all students; my objective was to examine how these factors influence African American doctoral students’ sense of trust as they struggle to maintain visibility at the University of Denver.

Conceptual Framework

According to Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, and Smith (2004), the study of African American doctoral students conducted at a predominantly White Carnegie I Research Institution identified four emergent themes characterizing the responses of the participants. In theory, these four themes represent factors that might influence a sense of trust or create strong feelings of invisibility for African American students. The themes identified by Lewis et al., (2004) include feelings of isolation; we stand out, relationships with peers and negotiating the system. The following provides a brief synopsis of the themes.
Feelings of Isolation. According to Lewis et al. (2004) and Jones (2004), feelings of isolation emerge as the most powerful theme and the most serious problem, characterizing the experiences of African American doctoral students in predominantly White institutions. The feeling of isolation is often the result of being one of few, which reinforces the lack of identity, recognition and validation.

We Stand Out. Along with the strong sense of feeling isolated, African American doctoral students are keenly aware that they stand out on campus and in the local community (Lewis et al., 2004). Lewis et al. (2004) further note that the perception of “standing out” can be overwhelming for African American doctoral students, particularly those from predominantly minority schools and communities.

Relationships with Peers. Lewis et al. (2004) identify a feeling among African American doctoral students that their informal student networks are crucial components of the personal, emotional and academic support needed to succeed. Therefore, relationships with peers are an essential component in African American doctoral students’ support systems.

Negotiating the System. For many African American doctoral students, mentors and allies are critical to their overall success. Relationships with faculty and staff are essential to African American doctoral students’ abilities to effectively navigate the system (Gay, 2004).

While in reality these themes are likely to be pivotal to establishing an environment of trust for all students, my objective was to examine how these factors influence African American doctoral students’ sense of trust as they struggle to battle the
negative dynamics of invisibility at the University of Denver. The experience of invisibility often creates inner conflict for the individual because it requires choices about ways to make oneself visible while striving for acceptance (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000).

Invisibility. African American doctoral students are challenged daily with managing personal stress arising from racial slights and the subjective experience of invisibility in many predominantly White institutions of higher education (Franklin, 1999; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). Franklin’s (1999) concept of the invisibility syndrome model (Table 1) addresses the issue of invisibility.

Table 1 - Invisibility Syndrome Model

Ethnic invisibility represents society’s racism and comfort level; while Ethnic visibility represents personal choice and comfort level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHNIC INVISIBILITY</th>
<th>ETHNIC VISIBILITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Recognition</td>
<td>Recognition</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Satisfaction</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Validation</td>
<td>Validation</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Legitimacy</td>
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<td>No Respect</td>
<td>Respect</td>
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<td>No Dignity</td>
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<td>No Identity</td>
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The invisibility syndrome is a conceptual model for understanding the intra-psychic processes and outcomes involved in managing the personal stress arising from racial slights and the subjective experience of invisibility among African Americans (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000, p. 33). According to Franklin (1999), the invisibility syndrome model is a paradigm to aid in understanding the myriad of factors determining adaptive responses to racism and invisibility. Ethnic invisibility represents society’s
racism and comfort level with race and include: no recognition, no satisfaction, no validation, no legitimacy, no respect, no dignity and no identity (Franklin, 1999). Consequently, the tenets of ethnic visibility include: recognition, satisfaction, validation, legitimacy, respect, dignity and identity (Franklin, 1999). The invisibility syndrome model provides a lens through which to effectively examine the factors that influence trust for African American doctoral students at predominantly White institutions.

The four themes identified by Lewis et al. (2004) and the concept of invisibility identified by Franklin (1999), provide the conceptual framework to examine the factors that create an environment of trust for African American doctoral students at a predominantly White institution of higher education in this research. Figure 1 represents that conceptual framework.
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRUST FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN DOCTORAL STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

Conceptual Framework

Feelings of Isolation

Relationship with Peers

We Stand Out

Negotiating the System

TRUST

Figure 1
Student Trust and Invisibility

According to Ghosh, et al. (2001), increased student trust is likely to lead to positive experiences and evaluations. However, for many African American doctoral students, the on-going encounter of repeated racial slights can create a feeling of “psychological invisibility.” Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000) define “psychological invisibility” as a feeling of not being seen as a person of worth, of being “invisible.” Many African American students in predominantly White colleges and universities feel alienated and disaffected from their academic settings and experience overt or veiled racism (Williamson, 1999). The significance of this alienation in the interracial, interpersonal environment of higher education can lead to invisibility for African Americans through second-class citizenship (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Jones, 1997). Invisibility is further seen as the inner struggle with the feeling that one’s talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognized because of prejudice and racism (Franklin, 1999, p. 761).

Franklin and Boyd-Franklin (2000) posit that adaptive behavior and the psychological well-being of African Americans can be affected by personal experiences and perceived prejudice and discrimination (p. 33). Franklin (1999) argues that being able to discern behavior as racist and then responding consistently with one’s sense of self, is representative of the personal struggle for visibility against racial slights that make one feel invisible as a person (p. 764). As African American students struggle for success and recognition at predominantly White institutions of higher education (Williamson, 1999), the relationship between trust and invisibility must be fully
examined to grasp the factors that influence the development and maintenance of student trust.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this research was the following: *What factors did African American doctoral students identify as being most conducive to creating an environment of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education?* My inquiry was guided by the following secondary research questions:

1. *How did African American doctoral students define and conceptualize trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education?*

2. *How did African American doctoral students describe and understand factors that influence their sense of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education?*

3. *What impact, if any, did the degree to which African American doctoral students perceive themselves as visible or invisible influence their sense of trust?*

These questions were used to investigate the influence trust has on the academic experiences of African American doctoral students at the University of Denver. The study further examines various factors that African American doctoral students describe as being essential to the overall development of trust in their relationships with their educational institution. By identifying these factors, this study sought to develop suggestions for optimizing the academic and social experiences for African American doctoral students. Most specifically, while I address the gaps in the research, it was my
primary objective to conduct this dissertation study to gain an in-depth understanding of the entity of trust and how it influences academic experiences for African American doctoral students, particularly those students at a predominantly White institution of higher education.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter One introduces the reader to the purpose and significance of this research study. Relevant definitions are provided and trust is defined along with the factors that influence trust. The conceptual framework and research questions are also discussed.

Chapter Two provides a detailed review of the literature from prior research germane to this study. Through the examination of literature, I describe the experiences of African American doctoral students in higher education. To effectively examine the concept of trust through the eyes of African American doctoral students enrolled in predominantly White institutions, a history of Blacks and higher education in the United States is crucial to the discussion. A brief review of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is included. Additionally, the challenges facing African American doctoral students on predominantly White campuses, where they are often faced with issues of invisibility, is discussed. The chapter concludes with the factors that influence trust for African American doctoral students.

In Chapter Three, I describe my research methodology for this study. The chapter outlines the overall rationale for the use of the research design and data collection process
used to address my research questions. The participants’ experiences were examined through the use of a phenomenological research approach to gain full awareness of the factors that influence African American doctoral students’ sense of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education.

Chapter Four outlines the results of the research conducted by presenting data provided by the student participants through narratives.

Chapter Five presents the analysis of the findings, as well as the textural and structural descriptions of the participants using poetic vignettes.

Finally, Chapter Six summarizes the findings, discusses the implications of this study, and proposes recommendations for improving inclusiveness for African American doctoral students at a predominantly White institution of higher education and further research. This chapter also provides the conclusion and the afterword.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Most assessments of the state of African American students in predominantly White colleges and universities have relied heavily on numbers, such as enrollment rates, grade point averages, and graduation rates. Yet a deeper examination of the experiences of African American students in these places requires something more than numbers gathered in school records and surveys or in classroom testing. We need to listen closely to what African American students tell us about what happens to them and how they feel, act, and think.

Feagin & Sikes (1995)

Chapter Two provides a detailed review of the literature from prior research germane to this study. Through the examination of the literature, I describe the experiences of African American doctoral students in higher education. To effectively examine the concept of trust through the eyes of African American doctoral students enrolled in a predominantly White institution, a historic review of Blacks and higher education in the United States is crucial to the discussion. This includes a brief review of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Additionally, I discuss the challenges facing African American doctoral students on predominantly White campuses where they are often faced with issues of invisibility. The chapter concludes with the factors that influence trust for African American doctoral students.
African American Graduate Students in Higher Education

The participation of African American students in graduate education has experienced a series of changing trends since Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). Fifty years after Brown granted desegregated education at all levels, researchers are still examining whether much has changed in the way White colleges and universities address the dynamics of African American students in higher education (Allen, 1982; Cabrera et al., 1999; Chavous, 2002; Brazier, 1998; Dorsey & Jackson, 1995; Perna, 2000; Williamson, 1999). Today, on campuses and in classrooms across America, African American students continue to experience isolation, racism and discrimination, as well as ambivalence by White students, faculty and administrators (Chavous, 2002; Feagin, 1992; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Lewis, et al., 2004). This first segment of Chapter Two discusses how the literature describes the historical and current experiences of African American students in predominantly White graduate institutions of higher education. In order to fully and effectively develop a complete understanding of the issues and problems facing African American doctoral students in higher education, this subject must be examined from a historical perspective of Black education in America.

The History of African American Graduate Students in Higher Education

The pursuit of postsecondary education for African American students has been wrought with challenges. For over a century, American society has struggled with issues of segregation and desegregation in higher education (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994, p. 406). Although approximately 92% of the African American population resided in the South
prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, the experience of African Americans in higher education was limited mainly to the North (Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Willie et al., 1991).

According to Roebuck and Murty (1993), for decades it was illegal to educate African Americans in the South, however, some free African Americans attended school in the North and a number of slaves were self-taught. Research indicates that only 28 Blacks received baccalaureate degrees from colleges and universities prior to the Civil War (Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Willie et al., 1991).

While there is an ongoing debate among historians about the origin of racial segregation in the United States in the decades after emancipation, much of this debate begins with the court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Wright, 2003). *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) was a landmark decision in the jurisprudence of the United States, upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation even in public accommodations (particularly railroads) under the doctrine of “separate but equal.” According to Wright (2003), this case set the stage for almost 60 years of legal segregation in America. Although *Plessy* did not address higher education directly, the “separate but equal” doctrine resulted in the establishment of separate schools for White and Black students (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994). Therefore, immediately after the Civil War, Black colleges and universities were established to provide elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education for freedmen and to prepare them to teach other African Americans (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Roebuck and Murty (1993) point out that during the period from 1896 through 1954, a segregated public school and higher education system was developed due to an atmosphere of southern White hostility. Despite the severe inequality in education
and racism in general, literacy among African Americans increased (Wright, 2003). Wright (2003) notes that Higgs’ research regarding Black achievement is captured in this quote:

... if the true literacy figure a half-century after emancipation reached only 50 percent, the magnitude for the accomplishment is still striking, especially when one recalls the overwhelming obstacles blocking Black educational efforts. For a large population to transform itself from virtually unlettered to more than half literate in 50 years is an accomplishment seldom witnessed in human history (1977, p.120).

There were several consequences that occurred due to segregated schools, such as economic exploitation and inferior education (Wright, 2003). Furthermore, according to Stefkovich and Leas (1994), under the segregated system of schooling in the South, there was little, if any, opportunity to obtain a postgraduate degree and professional training. Therefore, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched an all-out attack on segregation as it applied to the education of African Americans in graduate and professional schools (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994). According to Gunther (1985), the NAACP contended that Plessy’s doctrine of “separate but equal” was suspect when it came to higher education (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994). Two court cases, McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents (1950) and Sweatt v. Painter (1950), laid the groundwork for the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954) (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994). The case of McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents (1950) painfully illustrates some of the challenges African American graduate and professional students faced at White institutions of higher education during this era. In this case, George McLaurin, an African American student with a master’s degree, applied to the doctoral program in education at the University of Oklahoma. The university
turned down his application solely due to his race. At that time, several Oklahoma state statutes made it illegal to maintain or to attend schools that enrolled both White and Black students. However, a district court held that these statutes were unconstitutional. Based on the state court decision, McLaurin entered the doctoral program; however, he was required to sit in a special, designated area in classrooms, in the library, and in the cafeteria (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994, p. 410). Ultimately, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the University’s actions.

In the case of *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), the all-White University of Texas School of Law rejected the application of Heman Marion Sweatt, an African American mailman living in Houston, solely because he was Black. At that time (February, 1946), no law school in the state admitted Black students. Sweatt brought suit against Theophilis Painter and other members of the University Board of Regents, requesting that the court issue an order compelling the board to admit him. The court agreed with Sweatt that in denying him the chance to obtain a legal education, the University was denying his right to equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. But instead of ordering that Sweatt be admitted, the court held his case over for six months to allow Texas time to create a separate law schools for Blacks. When it opened, Sweatt refused to register. He appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, who ruled that the University of Texas must admit Sweatt to law school because the separate all Black law school was not equal.

Four years later in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the Court overturned earlier rulings going back to *Plessy* by declaring that state laws establishing
separate public schools for Black and White students denied Black children equal educational opportunities. Handed down in May 17, 1954, the Court unanimously stated in no uncertain terms that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” As a result, \textit{de jure} racial segregation was ruled a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. This victory paved the way for integration and the Civil Rights Movement. After the Court decided \textit{Brown} and the cases that grew out of it, there could be no more officially sanctioned segregation in public education or any other public institutions.

With the ruling on \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} (1954), the Supreme Court explicitly affirmed the rights of African Americans to have equal access in the public arena (Wright, 2003). Unfortunately, even after the \textit{Brown} case, many African American graduate students were denied access to White institutions of higher education. Regardless of the federal and state legislation, many considered African Americans to be second-class citizens unsuitable for literacy (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 1998). Grant, Tate and Ladson-Billing (1996) argue that the full implementation of the \textit{Brown} decision did not occur until the enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 (Wright, 2003). In 1964, the U.S. Congress enacted Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion or national origin in any federally funded college or university (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996, p.170). In theory, this opened the door for African Americans to gain access to graduate education.
King and Chepyator-Thomson (1996) found a sharp increase in Black enrollment in the late 1960s as White colleges and universities opened their doors to African American graduate students. Recent studies also indicate that enrollment of African Americans in graduate programs has increased over the past two decades due to aggressive affirmative action recruitment plans in many U.S. graduate and professional schools (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Willie et al., 1991). However, the dropout rates among minority students at each transition point in the higher education pipeline, including graduate and professional schools, are substantially higher than those for Whites (Willie et al., 1991). Thompson (1999) confirmed this finding and found that although the number of African-American doctorate recipients has increased in recent years, the overall percentage of doctorates awarded to African Americans in the mid-1990s was exactly the same as it was during the late 1970s (p. 23). The early 1970s reflect a dramatic increase in African American undergraduate and graduate students at predominantly White institutions, which is attributed to the African American Vietnam veterans who took advantage of the GI Bill (Thompson, 1999). Although the raw number of African Americans receiving graduate degrees has increased, the fact remains that the attrition rate among African American graduate students on predominantly White campuses continues to escalate (Watkins, 1998).

Opening predominantly White colleges and universities to African American students and other racial minorities is essential if the increasing numbers of such students who wish to pursue higher education are to be accommodated (Willie et al., 1991). But whether or not they will stay the course and obtain advanced degrees may depend a great
deal on their campus experiences (Willie et al., 1991). Historically Black colleges and universities have traditionally been viewed as institutions of higher education that create learning environments for African American students conducive to obtaining advanced degrees.

**Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)**

Stewart, Wright, Perry and Rankin (2008) define historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as those founded primarily for the education of African Americans. Today, 105 HBCUs exist, representing a vital national resource (Stewart et al., 2008). While there has been continual controversy about the place and role of HBCUs within the larger framework of higher education in the United States, Roebuck and Murty (1993) note that their central goal remains the education of African American students for service and leadership roles in the African American community. Success patterns of HBCUs include performance level; degrees awarded, and post graduation success. Scholars argue that the successful performance of HBCUs in enrolling, retaining, and graduating African American students contributes to a substantial portion of the African American middle class leadership (Roebuck and Murty, 1993). Past studies reflect higher completion rates for African American students attending HBCUs than at White schools (Roebuck and Murty, 1993; Stewart et al., 2008). Fleming (1984) also found that Black students who graduated from predominately White colleges and universities derived lower levels of intellectual and psychosocial development than their counterparts who graduated from HBCUs. HBCUs still grant high proportions of the baccalaureate, graduate, and professional degrees earned by African American students.
In summary, historically Black colleges and universities continue to function as institutions necessary for the education of many students who otherwise would not obtain college degrees. Research findings clearly demonstrate that HBCUs continue to play a vital role in our diversified higher education system, and offer African American students the chance to develop a healthy Black identity. HBCUs are no longer special-purpose institutions that are responsible for the education of African American students only (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Advocates for HBCUs contend that they provide assets unavailable in White institutions including: (1) to provide an accepting environment with emotional support, (2) to serve as repositories for the black heritage, (3) to foster ethnic pride and self esteem, (4) to enhance opportunities for the development of leadership roles, (5) to offer programs designed to meet the unique needs of Black students and the Black community, and (6) to educate students with learning deficiencies.

Stewart et al., (2008) further note that HBCUs provide positive campus environments, increased levels of engagement with peers and faculty, and faculty diversity. They also offer cultural affirmation, student organizations, and opportunities to showcase leadership achievement (Stewart et al., 2008). Using the assets typically associated with historically Black colleges and universities as a backdrop, the remainder of this chapter will focus on how the social and academic environments at predominantly White institutions negatively or positively affect the educational experiences and sense of trust of African American graduate students. The following is a discussion of the challenges that face African American doctoral students daily at many predominantly White institutions.
Experiences of African American Doctoral Students at Predominantly White institutions

Past Studies and Findings

Watkins (1998) posits that the decision to enter a doctoral study program is one of the most crucial steps in an individual’s career. She suggests that it involves intense thought and consideration of one’s lifelong goals and a driving internal force to become one of the best. Watkins (1998) further notes that, due to the seriousness of this pursuit, it has the potential to become one of the most frustrating and stressful times in the student’s life (1998, p. 6). Thus, the student strives to “fit” in order to become a member of the elitist club (Watkins, 1998). Consequently, a supportive environment may play a significant role in the overall success of any doctoral student. Lewis et al. (2004) describe a supportive environment for African American doctoral students as having institutional support systems including supportive social and academic environments on campus, positive relationships with faculty, increased peer interaction, assistance with adjustment issues, social integration, and low perceived individual/institutional racism.

In their study of African American doctoral students conducted at a predominantly White Carnegie I Research Institution, Lewis, et al. (2004) identify four key themes that impact their educational experiences: feelings of isolation; we stand out; relationships with peers and negotiating the system. These themes provide a conceptual framework for examining the relationship between African American doctoral students and predominantly White institutions of higher education.

Feelings of Isolation. On most predominantly White campuses there are few African American professors, students, administrators, organizations or activities, and
consequently the campus climate offers little with which African American doctoral students can identify (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). According to Gay (2004), graduate students of color, including African American students, complain about feeling only tolerated or endured, sensing that discussions are going on and decisions are being made around them to which they do not have access or knowledge until after the fact. Many students express feeling terribly isolated; for others, the feeling of isolation is described as being “invisible” (Lewis et al., 2004). African American doctoral students note in a survey that, due to feelings of isolation, “they considered leaving the academic program entirely to return back to previous jobs and lifestyles” (Lewis, et al., 2004, p. 233). Additionally, Feagin (1992) found that feelings of isolation are compounded by the chronic inability of Whites to see African American doctoral students as individuals at predominantly White institutions, a problem that generally exacerbates feelings of “standing out” for Black students.

*We Stand Out.* The persistence of African American doctoral students in predominantly White institutions is, in part, a function of the student’s involvement in campus life (Willie et al., 1991). The social relationships many African American doctoral students experience on predominantly White campuses cause them to feel that they are on trial (Willie et al., 1991). Willie et al. (1991) argue that it is extremely hard for people on trial to feel respected or part of the community.

While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title VI of Executive Order 11246 prohibit blatant discrimination against people of color, many argue that subtle forms of discrimination against students of color still exist in the higher education system
Racism makes social integration within academe almost impossible (Harrison, 2000, p. 217). Many African American students experience and are faced with racism in the form of racial micro-aggressions and racial invisibility. Both have a negative impact on the campus racial climate (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

According to Solórzano et al. (2000), campus racial climate is broadly defined as the overall racial environment of the college campus (p. 62). Furthermore, past research studies describe the collegiate racial climate as an important part of examining access, persistence, and graduation in undergraduate, graduate and professional education for African American students (Solórzano et al., 2000). Research findings suggest that when a collegiate racial climate is positive, it includes at least four elements: (a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color, (b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color, (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color, and (d) a college or university mission that reinforces the institution’s commitment to pluralism (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 62). These four elements help to minimize African American doctoral students’ perception of “standing out.” Additionally, a positive campus climate provides respect, dignity and identity for African American doctoral students, however, a lack thereof creates an environment validating students’ feelings of invisibility.

Willie et al. (1991) posit that supportive interpersonal relations, opportunities for friendships, participation in the life of the campus, and a sense of progress and success in their academic pursuits are critical for the well-being of all students, but particularly for African American doctoral students for a sense of identity and legitimacy, and visibility
(Franklin, 1999; Tuit, 2007; Willie et al., 1991). Relationships with peers are an essential component in this support system.

*Relationships with Peers.* Connecting and interacting with peers who understand them is beneficial to African American doctoral students as they progress through the academic program (Lewis et al., 2004). Blackwell (1987) found that African American students need a critical mass of to form viable networks. According to Willie et al. (1991), these relationships may include student-to-student mentoring when the availability of mentoring professors of the same race as students is insufficient to help them negotiate the system. Gay (2004) encourages students of color to enroll in classes together as much as possible to avoid being “the only one,” thereby diffusing the glare of the spotlight. Furthermore, Gay (2004) recommends students continue to “speak their truths” as a way to avoid complicity in perpetuating their own isolation and the marginalization of their advocates.

*Negotiating the System.* At least 25% of the African American doctoral students in a research study cited a lack of involvement in research projects with faculty; many also lacked meaningful mentor relationships (Ellis, 2001). Research indicates that mentoring is important in helping all students negotiate the academic terrain (Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1992). Freeman (1999) noted that mentoring can be particularly important to individuals in an environment that is culturally different from their own.

Faculty mentors are essential in doctoral education and career development (Willie et al., 1991). According to Willie (1987), mentors not only teach and advise; they also sponsor. Mentors believe in their protégés. They share their own dreams and
experience with their protégés, as well as sharing in the protégés’ pain and
extremely difficult for minorities to find mentors in predominantly White institutions.
African American students report smaller percentages of mentor/mentee relationships as
part of their doctoral experience than White students (Harrison, 2000). Faison (1993)
reveals that African American doctoral students overwhelmingly credit having a faculty
mentor with completing their doctoral degree. Freeman (1999) suggests that once
students know that the mentor is there for them, trust will come. According to Willie
(1991), mentors sometimes, provide a link of trust between individuals and institutions
that African American students want and need African American mentors. The cultural
and interracial differences that exist between African American students and the
predominantly White faculty are often an inhibitor to students’ academic progress
(Steward, Jackson, & Jackson, 1990; Allen, 1985). Without a reasonable connection with
a mentor, many African American doctoral students lack overall satisfaction with their
educational experience.

Stephens, Campbell, James and Lide (1994) suggest that prospective African
American doctoral students are likely attracted to institutions already known for
accepting, graduating and placing other African American students. Therefore, an
institution’s ability to promote their programs on the basis of these factors, primarily by
using faculty members, students, and staff members as sources of information and
influence, clearly demonstrate the university or college’s willingness to help African
American students negotiate the system (Stephens et al., 1994). In essence, these institutions successfully illustrate environments that encourage trust. Additionally, these colleges and universities are successful in increasing the visibility of African American doctoral students through recognition, satisfaction, validation, legitimacy, respect, dignity and identity.

While the work of Lewis et al. (2004) focuses primarily on suggested ways for improving doctoral training for African American students, this research examines how these same themes influence the overall sense of trust for this particular student population. In addition, the theoretical work of Ghosh et al. (2001) on student trust provides the framework for experiences of African American doctoral students. The following body of literature speaks to the sense of trust as it relates to institutional climate and the overall relationship African American doctoral students have with the institution of higher education, specifically a predominantly White institution.

Trust: Institutional Climate and Relationship

Some scholars have attempted to explore the issue of attrition and persistence of minority doctoral students by examining the attitudinal and interpersonal dynamics of the campus experience of these students (Lewis et al., 2004; Willie et al., 1991). However, Willie et al. (1991) note that due to a dearth of empirical studies in the area of minority experiences at the graduate level, much about this phenomenon must be inferred from the experiences of undergraduates. Lewis et al. (2004) found that factors such as social and academic integration or campus racial climate, which often lead to high attrition rates for
African American undergraduates, also do so for African American doctoral students in predominantly White institutions.

Studies clearly indicate that as undergraduate and graduate student bodies of American colleges and universities continue to grow in diversity, the quality of educational experiences for African Americans continues to be a major issue in higher education (Simpson, 2001). Subtle forms of discrimination against African American students still exist in the postsecondary educational system (Simpson, 2001). A college education indeed broadens an individual’s employment opportunities and opportunities for self-development, but comes with personal costs (Aries & Seider, 2005). Aries and Seider (2005) cite McGuire’s distinctiveness theory as predicting that a person’s distinguishing traits such as ethnicity, race and gender become more salient in a higher education environment (1984). Aries and Seider (2005) further note that for African American doctoral students, many of whom represent the first generation in their family to pursue postsecondary education, entrance to a predominantly White institution of higher education typically means encounters with faculty and students from different backgrounds than their own. Additionally, they suggest that it is not uncommon for students of color entering a predominantly White institution to feel intimidated, uncertain of the competition and concerned about how they will adjust to their new circumstances (Aries & Seider, 2005). Studies consistently indicate that students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds at predominantly White institutions often face covert, as well as overt, racial challenges (Chavous, 2002; Feagin, 1992; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).
Findings from various research studies, both past and recent, suggest that African American doctoral students who attend predominantly White colleges and universities experience greater racial tension and hostility in their environment, express lower levels of satisfaction and greater levels of isolation and feel less identified with the institution than do White students (Chavous, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Thompson & Fretz, 1991). Stanley (1990) found that experiences with racial discrimination on campus were the most significant factor in African American students’ decision to forego the pursuit of advanced degrees. While many predominantly White colleges and universities typically have superior resources to offer students in graduate programs, such as the number of Ph.D.s on the faculty, the quantity and quality of the library holdings, and the size of the endowment or state appropriation, this does not always result in success for African American graduate students (Anderson and Hrabowski, 1977). The literature suggests that for African American doctoral students, their perceptions of the way race functions in predominantly White institutions are especially important in their social and academic adjustment (Chavous, 2002). According to Harrison (2000), issues of social and academic integration, as well as experiences of racism are the key differences in the doctoral experience for African American students attempting to find their way within White academe. Many of these experiences typically have a significant impact on the students’ overall views of the institution, particularly in the areas of integrity and cooperation. As higher education institutions examine their role in creating an environment that has a positive impact and promotes satisfaction, achievement, and personal growth for students of color, those responsible for teaching and helping African
American doctoral students must create models that take into account the unique needs and experiences these students bring to the college campus (McEwen, Roper, Bryant and Janga, 1990).

The research on student trust done by Ghosh, et al. (2001) provides a relevant lens in my examination of institutional climate and the African American doctoral student’s relationship to a predominantly White institution of higher education. Figure 2-4 illustrates their model integrating campus climate and student relationships with the institution. By examining student experiences through this lens, the current research offers some insight into what it means to establish an environment conducive to student trust.

African Americans have faced many challenges throughout history in their pursuit of education, including higher education. Many of the struggles for equality and access have been fought and won in the nation’s courts, from the demise of “separate but equal,” to the enactment of civil rights for African American students in higher education. The body of literature relevant to this topic clearly articulates the experiences of African American graduate students at predominantly White institutions, noting that racial discrimination on campuses still exist for many students (Chavous, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Stanley, 1990). Although the literature is rich with information on the experiences of African American graduate students at predominantly White institutions, few if any studies have been devoted specifically to how the sense of trust impacts the learning environment for African American doctoral students. Based on the conceptual framework provided by Lewis et al., (2004), this study examined the factors that
influence a sense of trust for African American doctoral students at a predominantly White institution, which may be closely linked to their academic and social experiences.
Based on the work of Ghosh, et al. (2001), this theoretical and analytical framework guided my exploration of the literature as I examined the eight components of trust in the model of student trust.

**Climate of Institution**

**Expertise** is defined as a college’s perceived mastery and technical competence in its field of education.

**Cooperation** is defined as the perceived willingness of a college to work together with students for a common good.

**Timeliness** is the efficiency with which a college responds to student needs.

**Integrity** is defined as the college’s perceived unwillingness to sacrifice ethical standards to achieve organizational objectives.

**Relationship with Institution**

**Congeniality** is defined as the extent to which a college shows friendliness, courtesy, and goodwill toward its students.

**Openness** is defined as a college’s perceived motivation to interpret and disclose ambiguous higher education issues to prospective students.

**Tactfulness** is defined as the level of etiquette a college displays during exchanges with students.

**Sincerity** is defined as the extent to which a college is perceived to be honest and to make promises with the intention of fulfilling them.
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TRUST

Figure 3

TRUST
Relationship with Institution

Tactfulness
Congeniality
Sincerity
Openness
FACTORs THAT INFLUENCE TRUST

Figure 4

50
The most rapidly growing population sector in the United States today is that of racial and ethnic minority groups (Willie et al., 1991). Willie et al. (1991) note that as the nation becomes increasingly aware of the need to enlarge its pool of teaching and research scholars who have earned doctoral and professional degrees, African Americans and other minority groups should be targeted because they continually represent an underdeveloped resource for higher education.

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two has implications for higher education as academic professionals grapple with ways to recruit, maintain and graduate African American doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. It reveals that African American doctoral students on White campuses across America continue to face unique challenges such as racism, discrimination, and institutional abandonment. As Gay (2004, p. 267) explains, these students frequently spend their time physically isolated and feeling excluded from the mainstream dynamics of graduate studies.

Encounters with teachers and peers of the majority culture often culminate in feelings of invisibility (Franklin, 1999). The subjective sense of invisibility takes the form of a struggle with inner feelings and beliefs that personal talents, abilities, and character are not acknowledged or valued by others, nor by the larger society, because of racial prejudice (Franklin, 1999).

In light of these findings, further research of student trust to fully capture the factors that influence positive, as well as to identify negative academic experiences that impact student trust for African American doctoral students is essential. The current research examined the degree to which African American doctoral students were willing
to rely on or have faith and confidence that a predominantly White institution of higher education would take appropriate steps to benefit them and help them achieve their learning and career objectives (Ghosh et al., 2001). Given the financial implications of alumni who trust and support their alma mater, colleges and universities should be eager to discover and incorporate new ways to influence positive experiences for their African American doctoral constituents.

Summary

In Chapter Two, a historical perspective of race and higher education was discussed. Chapter Three details the research methodology and design used for data collection and analysis, and discusses the role of the researcher.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative research is an inquiry process that explores a social or human problem…

Creswell (1998)

Introduction

Chapter Three discusses the methods used in the current research, beginning with an overview of phenomenology and my rationale for its selection for this study. The research site, participants, the interview process and how data was analyzed is also included. Additionally, my role as researcher, including the benefits and limitations of the research, is presented.

Methodology

The description of persons, places, and events is the cornerstone of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 69). Therefore, qualitative research is the methodological approach best suited to examine the factors that influence African American doctoral students’ sense of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education. The quest to explore human experience, search for meaning, and then share understanding begs for pictures, sounds and feelings, not numbers and ratoiocation. Qualitative researchers assume that there are aspects of reality that cannot be quantified.

According to Jackson, Drummond and Camara (2007), qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding the experience of human beings using a humanistic,
interpretive approach. Most qualitative researchers believe it is both possible and important to discover and understand how people make sense of what happens in their lives (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2000).

Although qualitative research explores the human experience, it is difficult to define clearly. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) generically describe qualitative research as being multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject under investigation. Simply stated, qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 3). Patton (2002) further explains that a qualitative approach to research involves inquiry into the meanings people make of their experiences when not enough is known about a phenomenon for standardized instruments to have been developed. According to Creswell (1998), qualitative research is an inquiry process, which builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, and reports the detailed views of informants.

Qualitative research holds no single method of data gathering over any other (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), however, the art of the interview truly captures an individual’s story. The in-depth interview method was used for this research study. The purpose of this method is to allow others to enter into the interviewee’s perspective. As Seidman (2006) so eloquently states:

_I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing. Telling stories is a meaning-making process (p.15)._
Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit (Patton, 2002, p. 341). While the word interviewing covers a wide range of practices (Seidman, 2006, p. 15), for the purpose of this research study it refers to the in-depth, phenomenologically-based interview protocol. According to Seidman (2006), this method combines life history interviewing and focused in-depth interviewing, informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology.

As I reflect upon the scholarly discourse on research methodologies along with the various class readings and discussions concerning quantitative and qualitative research, I agree with the assertion that some questions are not answerable by empirical means and therefore must be addressed by a qualitative methodology first. According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenological research methods address human experiences not approachable through quantitative approaches, to allow scholars to search for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations. Campbell and Wasco (2000) explain that a researcher must establish rapport and trust to facilitate the disclosure of information from their participant. The phenomenological interviewing techniques allowed me to establish this rapport and trust and I was able to gain full awareness of the factors that influence African American doctoral students’ sense of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education. I also gleaned a clear understanding of their lived experiences through this method of data collection.
Methodology

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of lived, human, phenomena within the everyday social contexts in which the phenomena occur from the perspective of those who experience them (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 121). The purpose of phenomenology is to understand an experience from the participant’s point of view, to grasp and appreciate more clearly the human “phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994). Although the origins of phenomenology can be traced back to Kant and Hegel, Vandenberg (1997) regards German philosopher Edmund H. Husserl (1859–1938), as “the fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century” (Groenewald, 2004). Husserl first used phenomenology as a means to study how people describe things and experience them through their senses. Husserl’s basic philosophical assumption was that we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness (Patton, 2002, p. 105).

Research method refers to how data is collected (Jackson et al., 2007). Kaplan (1964) describes method as the tools, techniques, or procedures used to generate data. In conducting qualitative research, interviewing is a set of techniques for generating data from individuals and/or groups using structured, semi-structured, or unstructured questioning formats (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 25.) There are several types of qualitative inquiry and modes of qualitative data collection, such as phenomenology (Jackson et al., 2007).
A phenomenological approach to research requires the researcher to suspend all judgments about what is real, until he or she is more certain. Husserl (1913) defines this suspension of judgment as “epoche;” it is both a strong attribute and great limitation to a phenomenological approach.

According to Van Manen (1990), a phenomenological approach seeks the essential nature of a phenomenon; for that which makes some-thing what it is and without which it could not be what it is (p. 10). Patton (2002, p. 104) notes that phenomenology can refer to a philosophy, an inquiry paradigm, an interpretive theory, a social science analytical perspective or orientation, a major qualitative tradition, or a research methods framework. Patton (2002) also insists that to gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, those who have “lived experience” as opposed to secondhand experience (p. 104).

The qualitative inquiry technique of phenomenology was the most appropriate vehicle to capture the essence of what it means to be an African American doctoral student at a predominantly White institution of higher education. The topic of trust, by its very nature, requires face-to-face dialogue to capture how an individual feels about it, how they make sense of it, and how they talk about it (Patton, 2002). In prior research, I used a quantitative method via a short survey to examine African American students’ experiences. The respondents expressed frustration because they did not have the opportunity to personally discuss their relationship with the institution of higher education. Throughout the current phenomenological study, I accepted what was revealed and presented it without judgment.
Methods

*Site Selection*

It was my goal in this research to examine how African American doctoral students experience a sense of trust at the University of Denver (DU), a predominantly White institution of higher learning. According to the University of Denver’s Diversity Statement, the institution is committed to creating a campus climate with an ethos of respect, understanding, and appreciation of individual and group differences, while encouraging the pursuit of social justice within and outside the university.

The University of Denver currently serves more than 10,000 students annually. There are 120 graduate degree programs available, covering many different departments. DU graduate and professional programs offer students close working relationships with the University’s faculty and many opportunities for research, scholarship and community service. While the University’s student population consists of undergraduate and graduate students from all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and 87 countries, African Americans enrolled in graduate programs represent less than 3.5% of the total student body (www.du.edu). The Office of Institutional Research reports that, as of March 2009, approximately 6% of the students enrolled in doctoral programs were African American or Black.

In an effort to establish a campus that reflects the community, DU has had a long-term commitment to attract members of historically under-represented racial and ethnic groups, as well as a commitment to create a rich academic, intellectual, and cultural environment for everyone. Additionally, in 2006, the Center for Multicultural Excellence
initiated a campaign to introduce the concept and practice of "inclusive excellence" at DU (Appendix B). Based on the concept of inclusive excellence proposed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the University’s concept of diversity is the inclusive, comprehensive, and omnipresent notion that diversity is the responsibility of everyone on the campus (i.e. administrators, faculty, staff, and students) as opposed to one unit or department shouldering the responsibility (www.du.edu/cme). In light of these continual efforts to embrace and celebrate diversity in all segments of academic and campus life, as well as the attempt at self-examination via a recent campus climate survey, DU was an excellent choice as the site for this research study.

**Pilot Study**

As a model of my full research study on a smaller scale, I conducted a pilot study. The focus of the pilot study was to practice my interview techniques and gain confidence in my interview protocols. Two African American doctoral students participated in the interview series. Based on the students’ recommendations, a few interview questions were edited for improved clarity. The data from the pilot study has not been included as part of this research study on African American doctoral students.

**Participants**

After obtaining approval from DU’s Institutional Review Board, I began the process of locating participants who met the inclusion criteria. Merriam (1998) explains that based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, the researcher needs to select a sample from which he or she can learn the most (p. 48). This particular strategy was identified as particular to phenomenological research (Crabtree &
Miller, 1999, Creswell, 1998). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a small group of subjects within their context makes up a purposive sample and phenomenological studies typically consist of one to twelve participants. Moustakas (1994) contends that by its nature of intensity, a small sample is necessary. In addition, Creswell (1998) posits that in a phenomenological study, it is essential that the sample have the experience of the phenomenon being studied.

To select the participants, a recruitment email was sent on my behalf by a staff member from the Center for Multicultural Excellence to all doctoral students who self-identified as African American or Black according to registration records. For the purpose of this study, it was my hope that each participant’s identity be strongly rooted in the African American culture; that is the students would be aware that race and education has long been a source of struggle and challenge for African Americans. While battles for educational equality are not violent today, the challenges are just as intense for many African Americans (Ellis, 2001). African American doctoral students continue to struggle to find their place in predominantly White institutions (Tuitt, 2003); therefore the issue of race is extremely salient to this research study.

Each potential participant contacted via email received an introduction letter describing the study and its purpose (Appendix D). The email also included a brief screening questionnaire (Appendix F) with several questions to identify a purposeful sample of African American doctoral students willing to participate in the study. The emailed information included the number of interviews and the approximate length of time anticipated for completion.
The overall criteria for participant consideration in this research study included the following: (1) Both male and female African American doctoral students, (2) At least 25 years of age, in an effort to include participants who were mature with a strong sense of self, (3) Currently enrolled at DU, (4) Students in a doctoral program with a minimum of one quarter of graduate education completed. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants’ identities. All interview data was treated confidentially by the researcher.

Sampling Selection

A total of 33 African American or Black doctoral students were sent emails soliciting their participation. Of the 33, 10 elected to return completed screening questionnaires that expressed interest in participating in my research study. One participant identified as Black but not as African American and therefore did not meet the criteria defined for the study. Another participant expressed an interest in participating, however, did not respond to follow up emails. Therefore, eight students participated in the complete series of interviews. Additional communication occurred via email to confirm and finalize logistics, i.e. interview appointments and locations.

Data Collection Process

In an effort to critically examine the factors that influence, facilitate, build and maintain trust in higher education for African American doctoral students, and to examine the role the institution plays in the development of student trust, the following methods of data collection were used: institutional documents, a series of phenomenological interviews and the researcher’s field notes.
Institutional Documents

The first phase of the data collection process involved an analysis of various documents from the University of Denver, such as the vision, value, diversity and mission statements that reflect the institution’s commitment to inclusiveness and collaboration regardless of race and ethnicity. Documents of this nature typically reveal an institution’s view of the world.

To accomplish the analysis of documents, I contacted the Penrose Library to gain access to the university’s archives, anticipating that information gathered would help establish a sense of DU’s history as well as a working knowledge of recent developments. The review of documents was conducted primarily to learn about institutional characteristics, and noted trends and occurrences over the past 20-25 years in relationship to African American doctoral students. The greatest attention was paid to information descriptive of the most recent years.

Interviews

The pilot study (noted earlier) was essential to my efforts to establish and confirm the appropriate population (doctoral students), the most effective interview questions, as well as the most suitable research method (phenomenology). The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and uses open-ended comments and questions (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114).

Qualitative research varies by type, purpose and quality. According to Newman (2000), the interview is one of the most commonly used methods for gathering qualitative data. Qualitative findings grow out of three kinds of data collection: in-depth, open-
ended interviews, direct observations, and written documents (Patton, 2002, p. 4). Patton (2002) further notes that the standardized, semi-structured interview should be used when it is important to minimize variation in the questions posed to interviewees (p. 342). For the purpose of this research study, individual, face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with the participants. The interview protocols are provided in Appendix G.

Given the topic under study, each of the participants was formally interviewed three times. Each interview took approximately 60-90 minutes and was conducted by myself, the sole researcher. All interviews were conducted in person. In an effort to minimize distractions and interruptions, the interviews were conducted at a location most convenient to each student. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The informed consent form (Appendix E) was discussed at the onset of the first interview to confirm the participant’s understanding of the intent of the research. The first interview solicited general background information, i.e. the student’s life history. In addition, this interview also served as an opportunity to further discuss racial identity with each of the participants based on their response to the initial email letter and the screening questionnaire. The second interview encouraged participants to describe their academic experiences through the lens of my conceptual framework. This interview also introduced the concept of trust and explored the students’ definition of trust, primarily as it related to DU from a general perspective. Participants were also invited to describe the factors, if any, that influenced their sense of trust with DU. The third and final interview
served as an opportunity for the participant to discuss trust, visibility/invisibility and offer recommendations to improve African American doctoral students’ sense of trust in DU. It was also an opportunity for this researcher to address any areas that required further clarification.

The purpose of the individual interviews was to understand how participants defined the factors that they identified as being most beneficial to creating an environment of trust at a predominantly White institution of higher education.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings (Patton, 2002). Data analysis on qualitative data can simply be defined as a process of making sense of field data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meaning (Miller & Salkind, 2002, p. 151). This interpretive analysis proceeded simultaneously with the data collection.

My analysis of the data attempted to identify the factors African American doctoral students believe influence their ability to develop and maintain overall trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education. There have been specific, structured methods of analysis in phenomenology, especially by Moustakas (1994) and Colaizzi (1978). However, the phenomenological analysis approach described by Creswell (2007) was used for this research study as follows:
1. First, my personal experiences with the phenomenon under study were described. (Preface).

2. After reading all typed transcripts, I developed a list of significant statements. I then highlighted statements (from the interviews) about how individuals experienced the topic.

3. I then took the significant statements and grouped them into larger units of information called “themes.”

4. I wrote descriptions of what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon. This is called the “textural description” of the experience—what happened—and includes verbatim examples.

5. I then wrote descriptions of how the experience happened. This is called the “structural description,” in which the inquirer reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced.

6. Finally, a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions was written as poetic vignettes. These represent the essence of the experience and are the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study. These paragraphs tell the reader what the participants experienced with the phenomenon and how they experienced it.

Methodological rigor was attained through the application of verification, validation, and validity (Meadows & Morse, 2001; Creswell, 2007). According to Meadows and Morse (2001), the verification standard is fulfilled through literature searches, adhering to the phenomenological method, bracketing past experiences, keeping
field notes, using an adequate sample, the identification of negative cases, and interviewing until saturation of data is achieved.

Data Management

Data was collected and emerged out of three, 90-minute interviews per participant. Therefore, each participant contributed 4-5 hours of data for a total of 36-40 hours of data collection. Each interview audiotape was immediately transcribed and reviewed for content after each interview, then reviewed to confirm that the transcripts were copied verbatim. Once a transcript was reviewed, the data was analyzed and coded. The transcripts of all interviews were coded to provide confidentiality. To further protect the participants’ identities, only the transcriber and I had access to the tapes, which are now stored in a locked cabinet and will be destroyed in three years. After each interview I recorded my observations via handwritten field notes. I examined and organized my field notes to insure they were complete. This provided an invaluable opportunity to generate emergent insights (Patton, 2002).

My conceptual framework structured the analysis through data triangulation. By combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and data sources, my objective was to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single methods, single observer, and single theory studies (Denzin, 1989). The field notes from observations and my personal experiences revealed different aspects of empirical reality, thereby corroborating the reports from the interviews with the research participants (Patton, 2002). By triangulating data sources, I was able to check for consistency regarding what the African American doctoral students said about their sense of trust between the time of the first
After critically reviewing data from all interview recordings and field notes, the next step was to identify and code major themes and patterns that emerged from the data of each participant in the study. The analysis of information from students who did not fit within major patterns provided a contradicting perspective, also useful for the researcher. This disconfirming data is a source of rival interpretations as well as a way of placing boundaries around confirmed findings (Patton, 2002).

After all the transcripts were coded, I cross-referenced them to relate one participant’s report to another. The codes related to the research questions in an effort to improve the reliability of the study. The next step involved putting the data in categories using a sorting process, which involved creating potential categories by crossing one dimension with another, then working back and forth between the data and one’s logical constructions (Patton, 2002). Using the conceptual framework, field notes and interviews, I developed a matrix for data comparison. The final step involved transforming data into clusters of meanings using coding. The textual description of what was experienced and the structural description of how it was experienced emerged from the data (Creswell, 1998). Finally, the data analysis involved packaging what emerged into key themes with the goal of acquiring an in-depth understanding of the study and giving voice to the African American doctoral student participants.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research has to do with whether or not the explanation fits the description (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 69). According to Patton (2002), trustworthiness of the data is tied directly to the trustworthiness of the person
who collects and analyzes the data (p. 570). In addition, Merriam (1998) posits that the real question of reliability in qualitative research is whether the results are consistent with the data collected.

This study relied on the four techniques of trustworthiness commonly used by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These techniques increase the probability that credible findings will be produced and include peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Jackson et al. (2007) also note that good qualitative research applies standards of trustworthiness such as member checking; stepwise replication, and audit trails, each of which seeks to verify the substance of what participants said so that interpretations are not subjective iterations of the researcher’s own belief system. Additionally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress that peer briefing and the use of external auditors serve to enhance the credibility of a study by assessing whether the findings resonate with those not connected to the research.

Copies of the interview transcripts for each participant were provided to them to verify accuracy. By employing this strategy of member checking, trustworthiness was established. By doing this, I as researcher noted that my study of others’ experiences bordered my experiences as well and this had implications for social scientific interpretation of the data collected (Jackson et al., 2007). Fellow doctoral students from DU served as peer reviewers for this research. For example, I presented my initial findings to a classroom of doctoral participants in an Advanced Research Seminar and openly solicited critical feedback and recommendations for improvements. These two
techniques of trustworthiness were taken to insure reliability for this much-needed research.

Role of the Researcher

Bracketing

In phenomenology, the researcher transcends or suspends past knowledge and experience to understand a phenomenon at a deeper level (Creswell, 2007, p. 269). Colaizzi (1978) describes bracketing as a process of setting aside one’s beliefs, feelings, and perceptions to be more open or faithful to the phenomenon. Bracketing, which is also called *epoche* as explained earlier, describes the act of suspending judgment about the natural world. Bracketing is a way for the researcher to acknowledge, but set aside assumptions, thoughts, opinions, and pre-suppositions about the topic (Moustakas 1995; van Manen, 1994). The researcher must *bracket* any prior knowledge about the topic, i.e. keep preconceived understandings from entering the analysis (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). Silverman and Marvasti (2008) conclude that bracketing means ontological detachment from the topic. They explain that to accomplish bracketing, phenomenologists must employ methods to meditatively clear their minds by breathing deeply and becoming focused and fully conscious of the participant’s words, story, or description. Based on this requirement, I bracketed my own feelings about being an African American doctoral student at DU, including judgmental thoughts and prior knowledge, by using journaling and detailed interview preparation.
My Role as Researcher

My role as the researcher in this study was as research instrument, data collector and interpreter. Moustakas (1994) describes the researcher’s excitement and curiosity as inspiring the search. As an African American doctoral student at DU studying the experiences of other African American doctoral students at DU, this research was highly relevant personally. Both my racial background and my experiences at DU strengthened my familiarity with the subject matter. However, this familiarity can either enhance or reduce credibility depending on how it enhances or detracts from data gathering and analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 566). As the researcher, I fully understood the philosophical perspectives behind the phenomenological research approach, especially the concept of studying how people experience a phenomenon (Miller & Salkind, 2002, p. 152). Even though, as an African American woman, I have experienced feelings of marginalization based on racism and sexism, I successfully bracketed my own ideas about being an African American doctoral student in a predominantly White institution. Therefore, all effects of researcher bias were minimized.

My role of researcher in this study was also to give voice to the participants. It was my desire to illuminate the continuing need to establish an environment that is conducive to building and maintaining trust for African American doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. Any reader of my study should come away with the feeling, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Miller & Salkind, 2002, p. 153).
Benefits and Limitations

The key benefit of this phenomenological study was that it allowed African American doctoral students to gain insight into how they view their relationships with DU through the lens of trust. By identifying the factors that influence their sense of trust in a predominantly White institution, African American doctoral students might experience more comfort in recognizing and articulating the issues essential to optimizing their educational experience. Another benefit was in identifying ways for administrators and faculty to address the needs of African American doctoral students in a predominantly White institution of higher education.

As in any research effort, there are several limitations with this research. First, the small number of participants (eight volunteers) may limit the findings. Additionally, participant perceptions and experiences may not be representative of other African American doctoral students at this institution.

My role as researcher may also be viewed as a limitation. Each researcher brings a certain amount of personal bias to his or her research project. As the primary research tool, I may have failed to disassociate myself sufficiently, allowing my own personal perceptions to affect the findings and conclusions. Additionally, I may have misinterpreted statements made during the interviews, misread body language and attitudes, or may not have truly and accurately captured the thoughts and feelings of the participants. To minimize these limitations, I audio taped all the interviews, documented my observations of the participants’ mannerisms through field notes and communicated with each participant following the interviews to confirm their responses.
A final limitation: my interview questions were developed as a result of the research questions generated to address the gap in the literature. The interview questions, therefore, effectively channeled the participants’ responses. It is my belief that these possible limitations are outweighed by the benefits.

Summary

Chapter Three provided a detailed summary of the methodology used for this research study. In this chapter, I described how a phenomenological research design enhanced my ability to gain meaningful answers to my research questions. Chapter Four discusses the data collected.
CHAPTER FOUR

NARRATIVES

Introduction

Chapter Four presents the synthesis of data collected during in-depth interviews with African American doctoral students who served as my research study participants. This study was guided by the primary research question: What factors did African American doctoral students identify as being most conducive to creating an environment of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education? My inquiry was also guided by the following secondary research questions:

1. How did African American doctoral students define and conceptualize trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education?
2. How did African American doctoral students describe and understand factors that influence their sense of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education?
3. What impact, if any, did the degree to which African American doctoral students perceive themselves as visible or invisible influence their sense of trust?

While some African American students at predominantly White institutions of higher education have positive experiences during their doctoral studies, many do not (Gay, 2004). According to Gay (2004), many encounter discrimination, hostility,
isolation, tokenism and marginality. Gay further notes that students of color are often discouraged, silenced and sometimes even abandoned. My interviews with eight African American doctoral students serve as a means to help break the silence and encourage their voices. As one doctoral student pointed out, “my dissertation is my voice.” Voice is defined as the meaning of experience captured through the language that resides within one’s story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study also provides a vehicle for open and honest discussion on race, trust and the dynamics of higher education in a predominantly White environment.

This chapter introduces the reader to the African American doctoral students selected to participate in the study. These students have graciously and candidly told their own stories of growing up “Black in America” and how their experiences with race and racism have shaped their view of the world of higher education. Each participant has openly described his or her experiences as a doctoral student at a predominantly White institution by providing a clear description of the factors that influenced their sense of trust in higher education based on these experiences.

Composite Description of the Research Participants

Although the number of African American students in higher education has increased, African American students are still in the minority in doctoral programs (Ellis, 2001). The situation at University of Denver (DU) is no different. According to information obtained from the institution’s Center for Multicultural Excellence, there are approximately 34 African American or Black students currently and actively enrolled in
doctoral programs at DU. In order to protect the identities of the African American doctoral students, I used African pseudonyms. However, due to the relatively small population of African American doctoral students on this campus, merely assigning pseudonyms did not offer the protection necessary to insure a complete shield of confidentiality for my research participants. As I grappled with the presumption that the privacy of research subjects should always be protected (Patton, 2002), I felt a composite description of the research participants would serve two purposes for my analysis. First, it would provide a detailed but general overview of the participants, thereby establishing another layer of identity protection. Additionally, using Moustakas’ (1994) concept of the phenomenological method that examines the developing themes of each of the participants in order to depict the experiences of the group as a whole, it is through this collective form of description that we understand the participants as a group. The following description provides a composite of all eight of the participants in the study.

The African American doctoral student participants in this research study come from various regions in the United States. Their ages range from 25 to 55. Some of the students are just beginning their doctoral journey, while others are currently writing their dissertations. The doctoral programs in which the students are enrolled are not referenced anywhere in the analysis in order to protect participant confidentiality. Their general demographics are provided in Table 2.
Table 2 - Demographics – African American Doctoral Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender/Age</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Years in Ph.D. Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akente</td>
<td>M/50</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashanti</td>
<td>F/42</td>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebony</td>
<td>F/33</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imani</td>
<td>F/39</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malik</td>
<td>M/42</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngozi</td>
<td>F/55</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nia</td>
<td>F/25</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuri</td>
<td>F/35</td>
<td>Mid-West</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based upon 24 interviews, I consider the research participants to be highly intelligent, civic-minded, intellectually grounded, comfortable in their own skin, in essence extremely proud of their Blackness, and willing to endure some unpleasantness to obtain their long-term goals of higher education and career advancement. One student articulates subtle frustration by noting that *It is what it is; nothing more, nothing less.*

Every one of the participants had a clear sense of what the doctoral degree means to their long-term goals. One student describes the doctoral degree as potentially being the means or opportunity to be a part of the decision-making process:

*I felt I wasn’t at the real decision making table where I could actually make some impact and advocate for students. I was kind of the field worker providing the students and helping them get through the process, but I wasn’t actually helping to improve policies that might impact their experience, which is why I decided to go back to get my doctorate.*

That said, all experience similar racial challenges at this predominantly White institution: feelings of isolation, standing out due to the lack of students of color, the lack of faculty of color, and levels of invisibility to some degree. Several share experiences of feeling like an uninvited guest in a strange land (Lewis et al., 2004). One student sees it
as trying to be invisible... not wanting to stand out, or not wanting to be different.

Another describes being on campus and not feeling welcomed and explains personal feelings of isolation:

$I have feelings of isolation all the time. Both as a non-traditional student and then being the only African-American in my workplace at this institution... And as the only current staff that has decided to pursue a doctorate. So there is very much an attitude about that. Primarily from people who are above me, my supervisor and her supervisor. A sense of if you do it, you’ll do it on your own time, and you’ll do it on your own.

Several students report working on campus in environments that lack racial sensitivity or fail to foster respectful participation for them as employees of the university. Asked about the impact of one’s racial identity on their experiences, one student adamantly states: My racial identity impacts everything that happens to me. Absolutely!

Several students, male and female, note that because there are so few people of color, especially African Americans, they are often called on to offer their "expert" opinions on behalf of all African Americans. Additionally, being verbally passionate about a topic is often mistaken for anger, and classmates are quick to label the student participants as angry Black men and women.

However, through it all, each feels as though they have the support system in place, both personally and professionally, to survive the challenges. Most express a moderate level of trust in the institution to take appropriate steps that benefit and help the student achieve his or her learning and career objectives. One student expounds:

$I definitely see this as a privilege and a blessing to be here. Currently, in academia I have a high level of trust, especially my advisor.
Another speaks of the program and its faculty members:

*It has been a very good program for me. That is my experience here. I’ve always been able to be me. Most of my professors have allowed me to express myself openly and vocally. The issues, the conversations... I brought an awful lot to the table. So my perspective and how I handled issues were embraced.*

However, not all the participants’ experiences were such that they were willing to give the institution high marks for inclusiveness and trust. One student angrily opines that the institution fosters an environment of racism and hostility:

*There is a privileged, entitled, mean spirit around this place. The people with authority on this campus, which make up the institution, just choose to be racist and hostile. In fact, it’s better for them. The more hostile they are, the more they exclude people, and the better they are in terms of their position in the university. It pays off, so why would they do anything different?*

Another student making a similar observation states, *it’s hard for me to think of trust and this institution in the same sentence.* The statements and perceptions, such as the ones described above, suggest that although their backgrounds are quite disparate, many of the experiences and observations of these eight research participants are similar (Madden, 2008).

*The Talented Tenth*

Du Bois (1903) uses the term "the talented tenth" to describe the likelihood of one in ten Blacks becoming leaders of their race in the world, through methods such as continuing their education, writing books, or becoming directly involved in social change. He further suggests that this small, select group of Blacks must be educated so they *...may guide the Mass away from the contamination of the worst in their own and other races.* Du Bois held that throughout the history of Black Americans, it has been the
educated and intelligent that have led and elevated the masses and the sole obstacles that
nullified and retarded their efforts were slavery and race prejudice (Green, 1977)).

According to Du Bois (1903):

... in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their
knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a
higher civilization. I know that without this the Negro would have to
accept White leadership, and that such leadership could not always be
trusted to guide this group into self-realization and to its highest cultural
possibilities.

A century later, Du Bois’ words are reflected in each of these African American
doctoral students. Early in the interview process, all students indicated that they came
from backgrounds and environments that valued education. Additionally, each study
participant demonstrated through their words and actions that they are committed to their
education as a means to social change.

In examining their interview transcripts, I found that several students are strongly
committed to working directly with other students, particularly African Americans in
higher education. The following quote from one of the students illustrates the
commitment to being an active participant in the higher education arena.

I realized that I didn’t know very much about this whole college thing. So
somewhere along the way I realized that there must be other people who
were like me and that’s who I wanted to be of service to in my career. I
really am committed to making sure that as many students as possible
have access to information. It doesn’t have to come through their family
or their neighborhood, but I have this strong belief that there are ways
that we can reach so many people with this information. It’s not secret.
We need to make it more public. It’s kind of like my mission.

Another student expresses a strong commitment to students in the K-12 system:

I believe I have an inherent duty to do well on the backs of those that have
paved the way for me. And I not only do the best myself, push myself
educationally; I help others push themselves as well. That’s one of the reasons why I do what I do in the classroom. I do my best to not only teach but to try to encourage kids. That’s why I won’t take a job in the deepest of suburbia; I go to the straightest of the inner city to give back what someone has given to me.

Several are extremely involved in their churches. All are clearly and actively involved in their communities. These students truly represent the tenets of ‘the talented tenth’ of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

**Presentation of Descriptive Narratives**

According to Bochner (2001), narratives honor people’s stories as data that can stand on its own as a pure description of experiences. Wolcott (2001) contends that description is the very foundation of qualitative research. In order to help my participants make their experiences more understandable to those who otherwise may not understand (Miller & Glassner, 1997), I employed the use of descriptive narratives. The narratives focus on stories told by the research participants during their three interviews. Each interview was taped and transcribed. In addition, field notes were immediately written to capture my observations, following each interview. The transcripts represent all the data collected including life history, educational background, racial identity, concept of trust and experiences at DU. Guided by my research questions and using coding categories, I was able to identify the themes that African American doctoral students believe establish their sense of trust in creating strong relationships with a predominantly White institution of higher education. Using narratives or their stories, it is my goal to see the world from the perspective of these students.
To minimize redundancy in data reporting, only four research participants were selected for detailed narratives. However, the study findings include reports on all the interview data. The descriptive narratives of the following four students: Ebony, Nia, Malik, and Ashanti, are representative of all participants and their varying levels of trust.

As I introduce each student, I provide a brief, light-hearted summary of our first meeting to create a visual of the setting that framed the interview. The interview setting is important since it was often the first face-to-face contact I had with the research participant. Each of these introductions, told in my voice through my eyes as researcher, is promptly followed by the detailed descriptive narrative told in the student’s voice. Each narrative is enriched by direct quotations from the student’s interview transcripts that answer my research questions. Details that might provide clues to the student’s identity have been omitted. However, all information presented is accurate and represents the experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of these African American doctoral students that attend a predominantly White institution.

**Ebony**

Ebony was one of the first students to respond to my call for research participants. Although I did not recognize her name, I was more than eager to get my first opportunity for *real* data collection. So I promptly responded to her email. We quickly scheduled a meeting at my office during the lunch hour. The stage was set. On the day of the interview, she arrived somewhat late, rushing in clearly out of breath and extremely apologetic for being tardy. I was pleased that she was able to make our appointment.
She was a beautiful, mocha brown skinned young woman, who looked much younger than her screening questionnaire revealed. Although this was truly the first time we had met, there was an immediate and easy rapport as we laughed through small talk. Once we began, I knew our meeting would last longer than sixty minutes, perhaps more than ninety. She was articulate and her candor was refreshing. With the eagerness of someone who has a tale to tell, Ebony artfully and thoroughly answered my questions. Each response to my open-ended questions was lengthy and immediate. Each reply from Ebony begged for additional probing. While she indicated early in our discussion that she was pleased to be a participant and wanted my research study to be successful, she clearly wasn’t willing to give canned answers or paint a rosy “feel good” picture of the institution. In fact, her feedback was anything but “feel good.” Ebony’s perspective of trust as an African American doctoral student is through the eyes of one who has experienced several challenges at DU.

Before we could explore those challenges, I wanted to first review her background. Although Ebony has resided in the state of Colorado for many years, she is actually a transplant. The product of a privileged middle-class family, she attended private schools and was one of very few brown kids in them. While she noticed cultural differences, she always found herself feeling at home in the communities of which she was a part. Ebony further explains:

*I never really had difficulty being able to make connections to other people or to transfer into different cultural settings. From white, to brown, to whatever. I never had those issues.*
In light of this response, I asked Ebony what images of self her community created for her. I also asked if those images impacted how she viewed herself. Taking a moment to reflect on the questions, Ebony was keenly aware that she viewed herself as being privileged.

*It’s interesting in terms of my orientation towards the world. When I think of the world, I wonder what the world has to offer me as opposed to what I have to offer the world. I just assume that, there’s a certain sense of entitlement. That I can have whatever it is that I go after, that no door is closed to me. That the world can bend a little bit if I just put myself in the right places. And if I bring my “A” game in to the table, the world will absolutely bend towards me. I think that’s a sense of privilege that was shaped by my environment.*

When asked to explain, Ebony elaborated by providing a brief, but insightful explanation:

*It’s the private schools, it’s the maids, it’s being around white privileged people who had similar feelings. Even though I know that there are some very real realities that kind of mitigate that sense of entitlement a little bit. I think I still, as a middle class black woman, have a certain sense of privilege that was for sure shaped by the way that I grew up.*

*I think the other remarkable difference would probably be that I really have an understanding of how cultures shape an individual and how institutions shape an individual, because those have clashed so much for me over time. My identity as a Black woman has intersected with being in institutions of privilege and power and the cultures that I gain cultural or political capital in. This determines whether or not, how successful I may or may not be. Having to put all of these pieces together, I think is really difficult and speaks to the question of how your environment has shaped you.*

Ebony’s statements introduce the role that gender plays for African American women in doctoral programs, where race and gender may complicate the educational process. Based on investigations of the intersection of race, gender and class, Ellis (2001) reports that women of color interpret their experiences within a different
framework than others. Ellis suggests that it is highly possible that African American women’s expectations of the doctoral experience differ from those of African American men, as well as White women and men. Therefore, their realities may be different, their journeys more challenging. In response to that difference, as Ebony notes, they create alternative ways to survive, gain cultural or political capital, and succeed in doctoral work.

Shifting gears, we began to focus on DU and Ebony’s relationship with the university. Ebony has a strong sense of her Blackness. Like many of the participants, Ebony’s comfort level for being on a predominantly white campus is a given based on years of being one of few in other educational settings. Based on those past experiences, she clearly understands the challenges inherent for any African American doctoral student at a predominantly White institution. When asked about her racial identity in this setting, she did not hesitate to speak honestly and had much to say:

For me everything boils down to the negotiation of racial identity. How you negotiate race to bodies, how you negotiate the expression of peoples’ identities, everything boils down to that. Why is it that when people like my teachers and my classmates, introduce me or talk about me to other people who don’t know me, they always say, Ebony, our African American doctoral student. But they never feel the need to say, Jennifer, our White doctoral student in the program. In other words, I don’t think that it would happen unless I was in a black body and had a black identity. It’s not just being in a raced body with the politics attached to it, but it’s also the degree to which we negotiate, the degree and the way in which our identity is read and the degree to which it’s negotiated with other people.

Unfortunately, a by-product of this heightened awareness of her Blackness is a self-imposed invisibility as evidenced in this statement:

I’ve allowed somebody to punch me over and over and over and over again; and I’ve never punched back. The internalization of this treatment,
which is pain that further pushes me into invisibility. It’s not even them doing it anymore, now it’s me doing it to myself. I could have been a much better student. I’m a good student, but I know there’s so much more in me. I see it in the differences where my visibility is high and how I perform and where my visibility is low. I can see it in myself.

Ebony is a young woman that is driven and strongly committed to obtaining her life goals. One of those goals is completion of her doctoral program by any means necessary. hooks (1994) posits that the vast majority of faculty members often use the classroom to enact rituals of control and the unjust exercise of power. At various times throughout our interviews, the pain of this use of power to silence and exclude in a learning environment is evident in the tremor in Ebony’s voice, her posture, her words:

I’ve never really felt like I was a nigga, I just never felt it… People may have thought it… I never owned it. But I have been forced to own it, in this academic setting, in the classroom, on the campus. By in large I’ve lived my whole life without having to own it. There may have been moments, but I didn’t have to own that identity. In this place, because of my commitment to my education and needing to get this degree, I have had to own that identity. That is something that I’ve had to do as a choice to be here. In other words, the institution has said, either you pick up this identity or you don’t succeed. I felt like I’ve had to in some ways own this identity in order to succeed. Now I’m constantly rising up and rebelling against that, but I certainly don’t lie to myself about the fact that I’ve had to take on this nigga identity in many ways in order to move ahead. So I guess what I’m trying to say to you is that hurts.

With this as her backdrop, I asked Ebony if she could articulate her thoughts on trust and this institution:

Trust in any institution, in my mind, means being transparent and accountable. That power is accessible and that the resources of the university are accessible. I think at a White institution there is an additional labor that needs to be done in order to build trust with different kinds of people who have not historically been included in those institutions. So I think for a White institution to gain trust or to have trust they have to do that additional piece. I need to trust that I’m gonna be able to get an education if I work hard at it. I’m willing to do my part.
When I show up and I’m doing my part, I fully expect if this were a trusting relationship, that the university will do their part.

In our final interview, it was apparent that Ebony’s experiences with DU have been and continue to be less than favorable. At the onset of her doctoral pursuit she was the lone African American student in her program. This fact has had a significant impact on her strongly held thoughts on trust in this institution. With the slight smile of DaVinci’s Mona Lisa, she explains:

Through the experiences that I have had at this institution, I must be absolutely crazy to spend another day here. I have to, like my Black ancestors who came to this country, were on those plantations and had to dig deep for their spiritual grounding in order to go on another day. What I’ve had to do at this university is have faith.

She continues by noting that while there are parts of the institution that she does trust, there are also definite areas that she does not trust, primarily this institution’s representatives:

I trust that when I register for a class, the class is gonna be there. I trust that this university is not a puppy mill school. And I trust they are serious about research. I trust that this institution will invest in the university even if the university doesn’t include me. Finally, my doctoral program is on the cutting edge of the field and the practices of the field. It’s positioned nicely in terms of being able to produce scholars who are seen as leaders in this area. Therefore I trust their expertise.

However, I don’t trust the institution itself. Largely the agents, the representative agents of this institution, all the way up through the dean, the trustees and the highest ranking people there. I have no evidence to say that this is a place where I can have a sense of trust.

When asked about her on-going relationship with this institution and the impact on her sense of trust, Ebony attributes much of her distrust to the mixed messages received over time. According to Ghosh, et al. (2001), a key factor of establishing
student trust is the extent to which an institution of higher education is perceived to be honest and to make promises with the intention of fulfilling them. Ebony challenges this institution’s level of sincerity based on that definition:

_The institution puts itself out there as a place that says affirmative action is not just what we say we do, it’s what we do... So I guess if you say things like that, it means to me that I, as woman of color, have a place here. Being a woman of color isn’t preventing you from competing, isn’t gonna be a barrier to your competition, isn’t gonna be a problem for you. You may have other problems, but that ain’t gonna be one of them. But what I have found is that as an institution, they work really hard to silence and make invisible a black identity and an identity that is other than White and privileged. How can you say you’re this when I see that your actions are really this? How can you punish people for trying to be visible in an institution? How can you treat people in a way that hurts them, or denigrates them, or refuse to uplift them, or makes them feel like they are not a part of the educational rigor that you say you’re about. So in terms of the institution and trust or visibility and invisibility, I guess I don’t trust that they are that institution of equal opportunity if they can’t negotiate visibility and invisibility. They choose not to be open, so I don’t trust them..._

While Ebony clearly enjoys the academic rigor of the institution and is pleased that she is associated with a program that is the trendsetter of the decade, she continues to have a low sense of trust in the institution and its agents. Consistently throughout our interviews, she highlighted various factors and ways that individuals at this institution reinforce a sense of invisibility and isolation for her as an African American doctoral student. In closing, Ebony reiterates that the Ghosh, et al. (2001) model strongly captures a workable definition of student trust which explains her sense of invisibility at this institution, as well as her sense of shame and isolation. This final statement captures the trials and tribulations Ebony has experienced during her doctoral journey at this predominantly White institution:
I am constantly given this message, overtly and covertly... Here’s the norm, here’s what we expect, here’s what we pride and value, and you are less than...

While Ebony confesses that it is quite painful to say those words, she closes our interview with a reaffirmation that she will not just hang her head and walk away. She firmly states that she will not do it. Once again, she reiterates her commitment to obtain her doctoral degree by any means necessary.

Nia

As I rushed into the busy coffee shop on a cool February Monday, I was greeted with the rich, potent aroma of well-brewed coffee. The shop was warm and filled with early commuters, with newspapers held securely in the pits of their arms or visible from well-used briefcases. While many patrons were doing the “coffee to go” ballet, several were just getting comfortable in their selected seating areas: a cozy booth or a table situated in the middle of the action. Amidst this chaos sat Nia, a young woman quietly reviewing her day-timer. She appeared to possess a quiet confidence and I immediately thought of one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa: Nia, Swahili for purpose.

She slowly glanced up as I greeted her by name. With a broad smile, she said she was both excited and nervous about our interview. I gave my assurance that I would go easy on her, a statement that made both of us laugh.

As we began, Nia said that she was relatively new to the doctoral program but felt she had been involved long enough to fully respond to my questions. I started my interview with inquiries about her background, family and racial identity. Nia describes her background as being privileged:
Growing up in a mixed family, race was never an issue. It was a great experience. I’ve always considered myself real privileged. My parents set the example for that with statements like ‘you don’t mix with those people.’ You’re better than that. You don’t mix with them. It’s not related to color or race; it’s related to socio-economics.

Nia’s statements capture the internal struggle for African Americans, where socio-economic status creates a great divide. Therefore, her parents’ statements reflect their desire to, in the words of Du Bois (1903), *...avoid contamination of the worst of their race.* However, Nia sees her race as being part of her privilege:

*Being Black is an American success story. Because in a sense we’ve done so much and we have so many great heroes because we’ve been fighting for so long, just for simple things. I just feel empowered to actually be Black.*

I asked additional questions about her race and its impact on how others view her. Pausing before answering, Nia slowly explains:

*When I think of how others view me, it’s always race first because people already make their preconceived notions based on my race. I have been at institutions of higher education where race was a major factor. So, I try not to live up to the stereotypes. I make a conscious effort to make sure I’m not perceived that way.*

When I asked her to clarify, she replied: *as the angry Black woman!* Nia feels that it is important to educate others about her Blackness. Based on her strong sense of Blackness, I questioned why DU was selected for her doctorate work. Laughing softly, Nia said she was fine with the fact that it’s a predominantly White institution due to past White institutions she has attended. Upon further reflection:

*I just know that for me to be successful, regardless of the institution, I need to know where support is and where I can find it. I have that kind of support at this institution.*
Throughout our three interviews, Nia characterized a strong support system as crucial to the success of African American doctoral students, particularly those at a predominantly White institution. Because “support system” can be defined in different ways, I asked Nia how her classroom experiences impact her thoughts on support. She replied that it meant having a strong sense of belonging. According to Goodenow (1993), belonging refers to a student’s sense that he or she is an important and vital part of the classroom community. Other studies indicate that classroom social interactions influence African American students’ perceptions of belonging and connection to the academic community (Booker, 2007). Nia’s thoughts on belonging continue:

*Compared to past graduate programs, at this institution you have a whole different level of thinkers in my program, and I love the classroom. In fact... coming to class, I love it; I love the exchange of knowledge. There’s never been a point where I felt disrespected or, anyone invading on my gender or race or anything like that. So, the classroom is great. Really my interaction on campus is just getting from point A to B so I just notice visually that I just don’t see many Black students. For example, when I go to the library I don’t see many Black students, and the Black students that I do see are typically African; not African American.*

While the classroom may represent an environment of inclusiveness, other areas of the institution may appear less welcoming. Like many students on campus, regardless of race and gender, Nia is employed by DU, and as an employee has faced some racial issues. She describes her working environment as creating the most challenges for her as an African American doctoral student and recounts feelings of isolation, standing out and the strong awareness of feeling invisible.

She candidly describes an incident that involved a work colleague who never spoke to her or engaged with her in any meaningful way. He acted as though she did not
exist. She felt this behavior was intentional since she observed him engaging in conversations daily with other co-workers, all of whom were White. However, unlike their other co-workers, Nia had participated with this employee on several committees sitting directly across from him at a conference table. Furthermore, her work area was directly across from his.

I was sitting at my computer and the guy I’m sitting across from, I’ve worked with him on several occasions. I had to be with him all day and we’ve spoken, everything... And I see him all the time, he walks by me every morning. And like everyone, he looks past me, no one looks at me in my face... although I say good morning, they look past me.

And so this guy walks by one day, the same guy I’ve interacted with two or three times...and he says, oh, hi, what’s your name? And I’m like, I’ve introduced myself numerous times, you walk by me every day. He said, are you new, did you just start here. I wanted to throw my pen at him. I know every shirt he wears every day, and he sits right across from me. Before that I’d been on the elevator with him. I’m like I’m the only Black female in this building, I’m pretty sure you’ve seen me, I’m pretty sure you have. But I guess I really was not seen. I guess for him I am invisible.

Therefore, she felt the micro-invalidations or slights (Sue et al., 2007) were racially motivated as a means of isolation or were based on a lack of racial sensitivity.

According to Sue et al. (2007), racial micro-invalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. Below is the description of her interaction with this White male in the workplace at DU:

According to Nia, while DU did not directly create an environment of distrust, its employees established a workplace atmosphere that fostered racial and gender
insensitivity and racial mistrust. Like many of the other participants, Nia explains that it’s important to have coping mechanisms in place to survive racial incidents:

*I feel annoyed some days. But then when I come home I’m kind of like, coach myself in my head... “why do I let these people bother me? Just go in there and do what you need to do.” And that’s the kind of attitude I have with it some days. I’m like, you know what, I’m just gonna go past it...and I’m over it.*

I went on to explore her concept of trust through interactions with professors and classmates in the institution and Nia talked respectfully and fondly about her relationships outside her work environment:

*I feel more motivated every time I speak to my professors. Every time I meet with them and show them my work, and they give me critical feedback. But I feel more motivated by their critical feedback. They really have mastered that integration style where you can make that critical analysis and also motivate at the same time. My advisor does this very well. I love consistency. If you’re not consistent with me, it throws me offbeat. And my classmates are also great. Everyone works together.*

In subsequent interviews, I asked Nia whether she felt a sense of trust based on a level of inclusivity. She describes the components of inclusiveness as:

*Being consistent to the institutional mission, being consistent when no one’s looking... Implementing it, following what you say and having the necessary resources for individuals...*

Citing diversity as an example, she explains:

*The institution says it wants diversity–someone to look different–but they want them to think the same way. So, that’s not diversity. They want someone who can bring something, a different piece to the pie, but I don’t think this institution is ready for that. I don’t think as a whole the university is really ready for that piece.*

Nia further explains that the message for many students of color is: yes, we as an institution want a racially and ethnically diverse student population, as long as the
population acts and thinks like the majority. Drawing upon past experiences in predominantly White institutions of higher education, Nia expresses a clear understanding of what trust in the system means to her:

_I come from a point where I just didn’t trust the institution. I believe I trust in this university. I must come willing. I must come assuming that the system is going to do the right thing. I come willing to promote the trust in the university. I have to come open minded and say I trust, I am going to this school, and I am going to trust that they will give that same trust back to me. See, when I stepped in the doors of this institution, I gave it all of the trust I had. As times goes by I will see if I still trust it. I hold it faithful that they will do the job they need to do whether it’s my classes or funding, that I give them that trust. I will hold them to that._

Despite this relatively high level of trust, Nia still expresses her apprehensions concerning upper management at DU:

_In my general opinion, I don’t completely trust upper management. I believe it is biased and doesn’t bring the students’ voice in. I don’t feel students have access to upper management. It would be helpful to have town hall meetings and stuff like that. At previous institutions, the president hosted monthly forums to address students’ issues. That’s being accessible. I haven’t seen it at this institution._

In our final interview, Nia describes her trust in the institution as being relatively strong based on the relationships with her department, including faculty, advisors and peers. For her, the department represents this relationship of trust:

_It’s basically having a building relationship. A consistent relationship! A marriage with the university and knowing that I’m not gonna be left outside. If you don’t build trust here with the university, you may not build that trust later in the job, in employment or even in yourself. If the system as a social construct doesn’t work for you, you may feel that way with everything. So, you need a positive experience here to carry out anything else you want to do._
As a first year student, Nia looks forward to building upon this relationship of trust. In closing, Nia summarizes that she currently believes DU can be trusted to help her achieve her learning and career objectives.

_Malik_

Malik is one of only two male African American doctoral students that responded to my request for research participants. While each brings a unique perspective to the study, Malik captures the distinct challenges facing male African American students enrolled in doctoral programs at a predominantly White institution. According to Polite and Davis (1999), the African American male experience in education and the related achievement and social outcomes have limited space in academic literature. Polite and Davis (1999) argue that they are all too often characterized in society and in the institution of higher education through a myopic lens that fails to account for their diversity. African American males are often labeled “at risk,” and are continually viewed as culpable for their academic failures, while instructors and institutions are absolved of responsibility (Tatum, 2003). Although Malik, a fourth year doctoral student, will clearly succeed in his program against all odds, according to Tatum (2003), many fall short because:

_The Black male remains a caricature of social pathology and disdain in U.S. society; an enigma of the U.S. consciousness. Despite all the turmoil that surrounds Black males in the United States, particularly the ones who are born into poverty, many continue to value education. They continue to attend schools with the hopes of being rescued from some of the deleterious conditions that envelop their lives (p. 622)._  

I was scheduled to meet Malik at a large bookstore and was excited about interviewing my first male. Walking briskly from the busy parking lot, it suddenly
dawned on me that I didn’t have the slightest idea what Malik looked like or what he would be wearing. Upon entering the building through the coffee shop entrance, I was immediately faced with the fact that there were several guys chilling in the place, drinking coffee and working on laptops, who could be Malik! Thoroughly embarrassed by my lack of foresight, I tentatively approached one, then another coffee shop patron before I finally located Malik. With an audible sigh of relief, I promptly offered my hand as a means of greeting. Rising slowly to his full six feet two inches, Malik appeared to be just as happy to see me. He possessed a firm handshake and an easy, handsome smile. We immediately set out to find a quiet space to talk in an otherwise noisy bookstore, buzzing with patrons. Our best option was a grouping of chairs located a short distance from the maddening crowd of activity. As we sank into sofa-like chairs with large cushy pillows, eager to begin the interview process, we immediately realized that we were not alone. There, slouched in an adjacent chair oblivious to his surroundings sat a young White male lost in some reading material. Without hesitating, Malik informed him that we would be conducting an interview. Malik asked if our presence and activity would disturb him, to which the young male replied, “No.” This young man remained glued in that chair throughout the entire interview, which lasted over ninety minutes. At the end of the interview, as I walked away from the cozy area, I wondered if this young man, with his “fly on the wall” opportunity to hear our interview, was touched in any meaningful way. As I reflected on this incident, I wished I had possessed the forethought and courage to request an interview with him to capture his thoughts and observations.
So, with a witness sitting mere feet away, Malik and I began our interview.

Raised on the East coast of the United States, Malik spoke of growing up in a diverse community. However, he was one of the few research participants that attended predominantly African American public schools, though later experienced many educational environments that were predominantly White:

*I have bounced around from institution to institution. From a racial standpoint, my educational experiences have been mostly negative. However, from an educational standpoint, it’s been positive because I decided to learn whenever I walked into a classroom. That includes this institution.*

When I asked about those negative experiences in higher education, Malik reflected on an incident that occurred while he was pursuing his master’s degree. The incident involved a professor who was also the head of the program. During a heated disagreement about his grade, their discussion escalated to a verbal altercation, ending with a racial slur directed at Malik. Still in disbelief and pain, he describes his most inner thoughts, and, similar to Nia, speaks of survival through the use of interpersonal coping mechanisms:

*It was a total negative experience. It hurts still because in reality even though we’re mature in life, a professor or teacher still has a level of authority over you that you yield this power for them to speak into your life. No matter how much you think you’re independent, you yield that to some extent in order to learn from them. So to that end, yes, it hurts. Yes, it was demeaning, but you heal, you move on, you go back to the “I know who I am and I’m better than that. This is not going to hold me back.” So I graduated and I never looked back. I moved on.*

Directing his attention back to DU and his experiences, Malik explains that the doctoral program he is currently enrolled in is *very interesting:*

*There’re some good things I like about it; there’re some things I hate about it.*
While eager to explore all aspects of his experiences at this institution, I was surprised and humbled by the gentleness of Malik’s voice as he described what he believes is the best of this institution, the professors:

*On the good side, I think that the professors here truly do care. I really believe that they have a genuine, heartfelt interest. I think that they take their education seriously and that they desire to be as neutral as possible. They do their best never to offend. I feel it’s more than just them being professionals. They really are pretty much even keeled across the board.*

Malik sums up a negative aspect in one short statement:

*On the negative side, there is no camaraderie. You’re truly on your own. For me I got here on my own. I’m doing everything on my own, and in one sense, it gives me a sense of pride. On the other side, it makes me wonder why I have to continually beat the bushes just to get ahead all the time.*

Similar to questions presented to the other participants, I asked why he selected this particular predominantly White institution for his doctorate work. Malik responded without hesitation:

*This institution is going to cost more, but you know what, I can get better connections. The connections are better at this institution than others in the state. It was definitely that probability. I just thought that I would get a better education. You know, from an educational point, I’m not disappointed. I don’t think my education is weak by any means. I have the ability to tailor the program. Of course, the price is exorbitant. But overall, I’m very happy with the quality of education that I am getting.*

When asked about his experiences in the classroom, Malik states that many of his negative experiences are due to the classroom climate. While studies suggest that classroom climate for women and men may differ (Ellis, 2001), several of these African American doctoral students, females as well as males, express similar experiences. According to Malik, he too is challenged with being labeled angry:
Yes, my racial identity impacts my experiences at this institution. In class for example they throw out these statements like the angry black man thing. If I’m passionate about something and I speak with passion, I’m angry. “Well, Malik, you need to calm down.” I’m like, everybody in my culture talks loud, it’s no big thing. Even in classrooms. If I see a group of African-American females in my class and they’re just loud, they’re not angry, they just talk loud. They’re naturally loud. Everybody, we’re naturally loud. So, it’s not something I’m trying to hide. “Dude, this is not anger. I’ll show you anger, this is not anger.” You know, this is just passion. So, to that end, sometimes I have to just shut up and just go “okay, mum’s the word.” So, that I feel is one of the funky things…but that’s just a cultural thing. It’s nothing I take personally. I don’t go home and cry about it, but it’s one of those things that I can’t speak up, but somebody else can speak up because they’re not angry.

Aside from the “angry Black male” syndrome, he is also faced with having his opinions viewed as the thoughts and beliefs of the entire African American race. Malik notes that this behavior creates a classroom environment that is uncomfortable for him and he expresses a need for racial sensitivity in the classroom.

I ask about Malik’s relationship with his classmates and peers, whom he describes as predominantly White and female. When asked if he trusts them, he replies sheepishly, with a wide grin:

\[
I \text{ trust them as far as I can throw ’em... Uphill on a rainy day with a bad back and greasy hands.}
\]

On a more serious note, Malik explains that many of his classmates have no interest in his thoughts. Few, if any, are willing to give of themselves. While they will gladly accept help, they definitely aren’t willing to give help. He further indicates that most are wrapped up in their own world:

\[
I \text{ came to this institution with eyes wide open. I wasn’t expecting an institution of love and social acceptability. I wasn’t expecting an institution that would just embrace me for who I am. I expected the staff and the professorial level to do that, and to that level I have not been}
\]
disappointed overall. I can pick out points, but in the big scheme of experience I could say that I really haven’t been disappointed by the staff. The student body is representative of the home school, which they came from, and the societies in which they were raised. I’m not making an excuse for them, but it is what it is and that’s kind of what that is.

When Malik met for our third interview, we examined factors that may impact an African American doctoral student’s trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education, such as support systems, feelings of isolation and relationships with the university. Doctoral students who have good advisers and mentors more frequently believe they are making good process in their programs as compared to students without these resources (Ellis, 2001). While Malik and his advisor have an amicable relationship, the lack of positive reinforcement has created some tension for him. Malik reports that while he believes his advisor genuinely has his best interests at heart, there is a lack of motivation by this professor. Without clear support or positive motivation, the relationship is strained. But Malik made it quite clear that at this point, he was not changing advisors. “The devil you know is better than the devil you don’t” has become his mantra. He notes that he is too close to the end.

Being one of only a few African American males in a doctoral program at this institution generally creates an environment and conditions ripe for isolation and invisibility. When I questioned him about feelings of isolation, especially in the classroom, he responded:

There are two things that will isolate me. One is the fact that there’s no one else I can relate to, so I naturally feel isolation. Not because I have a depression issue, but the fact that I have no one to relate to, so I switch gears and turn to an internal motivation that says, alright, I’m here for this, let’s do this, two hours, let’s knock this out. Uh, so I feel isolated that way. I also feel isolated based upon gender. I’m one of few males in a
field where there are a lot of females. I got nothing wrong with that, it just is what it is. But oftentimes being the only male in the class and being the only African-American kind of makes me feel like, there’s no one I can even relate to. I have to change the way I speak, I don’t want to come off as an angry Black man. I have to kind of change my responses because in a group session no one understands the male point of view when there are mainly females in the class. So, yes, to that aspect I feel isolation. But those are products that couldn’t be controlled. Those weren’t deliberate isolation products.

While those are not deliberate sources of isolation, Malik does express frustration at the lack of access as a means of isolation:

However, sometimes it’s an access issue. It’s a knowledge issue. I don’t know the system. I expect you as a professor or an advisor who knows the system to help me navigate. You know my obstacles, you know the issues I face just because of being an African American male.

Being the only African American male in his doctoral program can be problematic for Malik. As he reflects on the issue of standing out, Malik notes that there is nothing he can do about his appearance:

Because I am the only male, I do stand out and because I stand out I feel isolated. But it is not only my program. When I look across this campus right now, I don’t see any one who looks like me. But I knew that coming here. I didn’t come to this institution with eyes closed, I knew what to expect when I got here.

Malik further states:

My perceptions didn’t prove to be false. I knew that it was a campus that was very Caucasian. That doesn’t mean racism in a sense; it just means the fact that it was very Caucasian. There is a lack of inclusion for others within reason. I knew that. I also knew that the people here would probably be more professional and courteous, but the student body would be just what the student body is.
I asked Malik how these observations and his expectations of this institution impact his sense of trust as an African American doctoral student. Focusing his statements on sincerity of the institution, Malik offers his insight:

*Do I really perceive that this institution is honest; do I really perceive that the institution actually cares or is it just shooting the bull? To that extent, I genuinely feel that their whole job is to educate me and to do its best and that they take it seriously and sincerely. And do they want me educated, yes... Have they really gone out of their way to reach me, no... So, are they sincere? Yes, they’re sincere to the point of fulfilling the college’s role of educating me. They just don’t care about you the person, but they want you educated though.*

Malik defines his idea of trust in this predominantly White institution:

*I define trust as the ability for someone to feel accepted and allow the other person to speak into their lives and accept their input as valid and constructive. When you come to this institution, it’s a little difficult to build trust because first of all, an individual doesn’t look like you. They don’t come from your background. Their views of you are either based upon experience, readings or perception, and it’s hard to somewhat initially give trust. So, initially there is a blanket trust that says, here’s a level of trust that I’m assuming because I respect the role you have which is professorial and I’m a student. This blanket of trust is put out there and you go from there.*

As we approach the close of our last interview, Malik discusses developing a sense of trust as it relates to his concept of being visible in an academic environment:

*Visible in an academic environment for me means two things. One, active participation, and the other is active involvement. Both are fueled by a sense of trust and both are fueled by a sense of acceptance. If you engage me, I’ll be engaged. In a class, that’s the product of the teacher and the student. On the institutional level, if they engage the individuals, they’ll be engaged. They’ll be there, there’s a sense of trust, there’s a sense of belonging. If that doesn’t happen, there’s a sense of isolation. I believe the institution sees me as a member of the student body, but they just don’t see me as an active, viable participant within the institution.*
He elaborates:

*One can’t truly trust an institution if you do not feel visible. The two go hand in hand. When I trust you, I believe the things that you say to me are for my betterment. You have my best interest in mind…that your goal overall is to help me.*

For Malik, the message and the actions of the institution must be in concert and in order to instill trust, the institutional message must be clearly reflected in the overall actions of the university.

*Ashanti*

Walking through Cherry Creek Mall, I couldn’t help but smile to myself in a self-congratulatory way. I had just managed to drive during rush hour from the Aurora Municipal Court to the mall at NASCAR speed without incurring the wrath of the traffic gods, arriving five minutes early for my 6:00 appointment with Ashanti. She chose a great place to meet: the Bistro at Nordstrom’s. I quickly strolled through the cosmetic department, intent on not being distracted by Lancôme, Chanel or Estee Lauder. Arriving at our agreed-upon meeting spot, I was still a minute or two early. Since I knew Ashanti, I wasn’t worried about recognizing her and browsed the clothing racks as I waited.

Glancing at my watch, it was now 6:10. Was I at the wrong store? We did say Nordstrom’s and not Niemen’s didn’t we? Checking my folder for her contact information, I found her cell phone number and dialed as I watched the entrance door.

Wrong number! I dialed the number once again. Still wrong! Now I was worried.

While I didn’t mind a participant being late, *I* certainly didn’t want to be late for our first meeting, and it’s now 15 minutes after 6:00. Since I couldn’t reach her by phone, my only choice was to check the Bistro. As I entered the restaurant I could see Ashanti sitting
patiently in one of the small booths. Rushing to her, I immediately apologized for being late. My past interactions with Ashanti gave me confidence that she would have taken my tardiness, or even a “no show,” in stride. Ashanti, flashing a down home “it’s great to see you” smile, hugged me and everything was okay. As we walked to the counter to order food, Ashanti explained that she couldn’t remember if we had planned to meet at the Bistro or the entrance door. Since she parked on the same level as the restaurant, she decided to come directly to the Bistro. I mentioned getting the wrong number on her cell phone. She realized that she had given me the wrong number on her screening questionnaire. With food arriving in minutes, we returned to our booth to begin the interview ritual. Small talk included brief updates on our doctoral programs, talk of children and the price of clothes at Nordstrom’s. Once the food arrived at the table, the chit-chat stopped and the interview began.

Ashanti has a gentle spirit. Soft-spoken and confident, her quick smile enhances her natural beauty. On campus I’ve had the opportunity to observe her quick wit and keen intellect. She has been in her doctoral program for approximately three years. Asked about her background and identity, Ashanti painted a family picture of assimilation into White America. However, the family’s relocation to Colorado introduced her to a world of diversity and her own Black identity:

*My family moved a lot whenever my father got a new job opportunity. I was raised in White suburbia where there was a push for me to be White identified. I think my parents bought into the belief of success and self-preservation. That happens when you assimilate. We went to all-White churches, Catholic. All our neighborhoods were all White. So for me identity became being like White people.*
It wasn’t until we got to Colorado and I started to see people like me that I started to consider that my identity would include my Blackness. And that was a journey. It was a journey through high school and graduate school, even after graduate school to kind of make up for the lack of that growing up. So now when I look at my community and I think about my identity, the first thing that comes to mind for me is my race.

Similar to many of the other participants, Ashanti has attended other predominantly White institutions of higher education and became involved in a Black student association during her college years. Her intense involvement in the organization was essential to her thriving at these institutions:

It was a very small group of us. We were like, not even 2% of the campus population but that was my community. I didn’t notice that we were the minority because everyone I surrounded myself with came through that association. All of my friends, all of my social activities, all of my study, tutoring program, everything was through that group of people.

Ashanti quickly notes:

That community of people is what really got me through being at a predominantly White institution. I still have to work on how it feels to be in environments where there are no people of color because it just feels really uncomfortable.

In light of Ashanti’s responses about predominantly White environments, I asked about her comfort level of being at DU:

It’s interesting because I was raised in an all-White community, there’s a familiarity about it. Even though it’s uncomfortable, it’s something I know. But because of what my experience has been, I don’t feel always like myself in those environments.

I recently took a class in another department. The class was all White students. The very first day I walked into the class, I felt like I was ten years old again. It reminded me, again, of what it felt like as a kid and I felt totally uncomfortable. I wanted to leave. I didn’t trust myself to speak. I had to get to the point where I felt comfortable, deciding that I would speak with these people because initially I really didn’t want to. I had to move beyond that.
Based on this example, I asked Ashanti why she had selected this particular institution, given its demographic makeup. Smiling, Ashanti states she understands why I would ask this question because she had not considered DU when she began her search for a doctoral program:

*I wanted to get a Ph.D., but hadn’t decided where I was gonna go. It was because of the people that I trusted and knew that I ended up at this institution. It was not on the radar screen at all. I would never, ever, ever, ever have gone here had it not been for those people. The institution’s not me…It doesn’t fit me. I come from working class people, and I come from Black people. And that is not represented at this institution. In fact, I would say, not only is it not represented, but there’s a lack of appreciation. There are pockets on the campus where you’re just not welcomed. It’s not that it’s spoken. It’s a feeling you get when you go into the library and you want to go over to the computers, everyone’s looking at you like you’re not supposed to be there.*

Past studies of African American students’ experiences in higher education indicate that college selections and program selections are often made based on the presence of faculty and students of color. Therefore, a follow-up question addressed whether the people who encouraged her to apply were African American, to which she replied,

*Of course, I would never in a million years have gone to this university if it hadn’t been for the encouragement of those individuals.*

As a student on this campus for the past three years, Ashanti feels her experiences have been impacted by her racial identity. She notes that first and foremost she has been impacted internally, since her natural comfort zone is with people of color. That said, Ashanti states that she does have White faculty members and classmates that she respects.
and works closely with. However, like Malik, her frustration comes from incidents in the classroom that reflect a lack of racial sensitivity:

*I think my racial identity impacts how people see me in the classroom and what they’re looking for or how they interact with me. It’s interesting! Some people think that I can speak for all Black women. Or I think that the questions sometimes are posed in such a way that I’m supposed to be the one that can answer them. I think that happens in the classroom.*

In an effort to illustrate the benefit of having other students and faculty members who look like her as part of her support system, Ashanti relays a story of a classroom incident in which she is seriously offended by a White male classmate. To avoid a confrontation, Ashanti elected to walk away. Later, when she met with two female friends of color, she was able to honestly and safely express her feelings:

*I said come here, I need a moment. They came. We stood in the middle of the street outside the classroom and I vented. They heard me, and they got it. We laughed and we cried... We did all that and I needed that. I wasn’t in the educational moment. I wasn’t trying to help him. I was offended. So that’s why I appreciate that there are some students of color available because I don’t know who else I could have gone to that I would have felt safe.*

In our second interview, I found that having support was essential to Ashanti’s sense of trust in any institution of higher education. When I asked “What does it mean to you that an institution has an environment that fosters a student’s sense of trust?” Ashanti answers:

*What I would be looking for are signs or symbols that would exhibit to me some type of community environment, a place where I can be who I am, that I’d have support, I’d have allies. Since an institution is so big, it would have to be symbolic... i.e. the way they might phrase a mission statement, what they are, how are they setting up classrooms, who are the faculty, who are the people that are in the higher ranking positions.*
Ashanti further explains that integrity is also important to her sense of trust. With a slight frown, she says:

*I don’t know that I ever thought about an institution necessarily having it. I think about individual people when I think about integrity.*

At DU, Ashanti’s sense of trust has primarily been based on her academic and social experiences as they relate to being in a small, cohort-like environment, which has influenced her ability to have trust in the institution:

*It’s a small group of people. When I step outside that group, the experiences tend to be different and those aren’t the ones that will support my sense of trust. So, being in my department, having a group of students that I started with that in a lot of ways we share some similarities in terms of beliefs or values, things like that. Having faculty in the program who are very transparent and share those things as well. All that together creates that space for me...But at this institution, there have been a few instances where I’ve stepped out of that circle and I would say that’s where distrust of the institution has come up for me. When I stand outside of that group, it’s like my armor is on, and I don’t trust anybody.*

While Ashanti’s level of trust for her peers and professors is quite high, she does not express strong feelings of trust or comfort about her experiences with the institution. She defines trust as being relational, transparent and consistent:

*To me, trust means that I know who you are and I can trust that you’re gonna behave the same way you always have. I think transparency is a big piece of trust. That’s why it becomes difficult for me to trust institutions because for me institutions aren’t transparent. There’re a lot of hidden agendas, there’s a lot of behind-the-scenes board meetings.*

According to Blackwell (1987), the most powerful predictor of enrollment and graduation of African American students at a professional school was the presence of an African-American faculty member serving as the student’s mentor. In closing our
interviews, I ask Ashanti if she was pleased with her choice to attend this particular institution. With the same “down home” smile, Ashanti replies:

*I’m going to be honest. To me, I would not be at this institution if it wasn’t for my advisor. Period! And it has not changed since I’ve been in this program for three years.*

Ashanti’s final comments reflect her thoughts on the importance of having a strong support system in place, even if it is only one person. The analysis in Chapter Five will discuss the benefit of having institutional support for African American doctoral students, particularly a system of encouragement that includes individuals that look like them.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 provided the phenomenological narratives of four of the African American doctoral student participants. These descriptive narratives captured the thoughts, perceptions and experiences through the eyes of these students. Based on the findings of this research study, Chapter Five introduces the key themes that emerged from the data using poetic vignettes and also provides the model of trust developed based on these key themes.
CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter Five highlights a major component of the phenomenological research design: the textural and structural descriptions of the emergent data. The primary objective of this research study was to describe factors African American doctoral students identify as being most conducive to creating a sense of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education. During the examination of the participants’ narratives, several themes were identified. This chapter presents the textural and structural descriptions of the key themes using poetic vignettes.

Madden (2008) suggests that if one is to fully understand the key themes from the perceptions and experiences of the participants in a phenomenological study, textural descriptions, including the emotional, psychological, and sensual components of the phenomenon under study, offer compelling evidence. These provide the “vivid accounts of the experiences” of the participants (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135). Moustakas (1994) also notes that structural descriptions provide a “vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience.” That is, the themes and qualities that account for the conditions that evoke the phenomenon.

Each theme identified for this study is introduced to the reader using a poetic vignette, a form of transcription. Glesne (1997) defines poetic transcription as being filtered through
the researcher, but involving word reduction while illuminating the wholeness and interconnections of the thoughts and perceptions of the research participants. These direct quotations, excerpted from the students’ interview transcripts, have been arranged into a poem-like format (Mears, 2005). Through this representation, the reader experiences the intensity of the students’ actual thoughts and perceptions. The poetic vignettes, in the words of the African American doctoral student research participants, constitute their textural and structural descriptions of this phenomenon.

Constructs Used

The conceptual framework for this study was adapted from the theory of student trust by Ghosh, et al. (2001), Franklin’s (1999) theory of invisibility which reflects the inner struggle with the feeling that one is not valued due to racism, and the emergent themes from the study conducted by Lewis, et al. (2004): feelings of isolation, we stand out, relationship with peers, and negotiating the system. Using these models as my conceptual framework to guide my investigation allowed me to explore and gain meaning from the students’ academic and social experiences at a predominantly White institution. These models were also helpful to me in my examination of various factors identified from past studies that African American doctoral students described as being essential to the overall development of their relationships with their predominantly White educational institution.

However, the primary objective of this study was to determine and explore factors that create a sense of trust. It is also my goal to identify the essence of the students’
experiences. According to Moustakas (1994), the essence of an experience is never completely exhausted and the fundamental textural-structural synthesis merely represents the essence at a particular time and place, as seen from the researcher’s vantage point following an intuitive and reflective study of the phenomenon. By identifying the essence of the phenomenon, suggestions for optimizing the academic and social experiences for African American doctoral students at a predominantly White institution built on a foundation of trust can be developed.

Emergent Themes – Model of Trust

Based on my analysis of the data, the findings that emerged consist of four themes: a strong sense of Blackness, support system, level of visibility, and relationship with the institution. The research participants describe these themes as the factors that create a sense of trust through their eyes. The themes are also viewed as being essential to the students’ academic success.

These four themes represent a new model of trust for African American doctoral students attending a predominantly White college or university. They also reflect the factors that create an environment of trust, which may enable an African American doctoral student to survive the many challenges he or she faces, while thriving at a predominantly White institution. Figure 5 illustrates the intersection of the four key themes that emerged from this research. The themes that constitute a strong sense of trust, as well as the corresponding poetic vignettes, are discussed in the following section.
A Strong Sense of Blackness

My Blackness impacts me constantly...I wear it! It impacts my daily experiences a hundred percent of the day. At the same time, my Blackness is liberating. It’s exciting!

The Black Male...
Grew up around some diversity;
For the most part people looked just like me.
Ironically grew up in the era of ‘Black is beautiful’…
Also grew up angry! Young, Black and angry!

Still believe today that I have to work harder, do things better,
Wake up sometimes with the mindset I’m guilty
Everyday I’ve got to prove my innocence.
Still a Black man that puts me three levels down.
I’m the good, the bad, and the indifferent.
No shame, no drawback, no reservations being an African-American
Or Black male. Take that label proudly.

I’m the feared, I’m the tatted, I’m the handcuffed,
I am all of those things.
Everything that I am is on the heels;
The backs of the people that came before me!
I’m black! I wear Black every day!
I wake up in the morning every day and I’m Black!
The perceptions of what Black is in America is always in the back of my mind
As I walk around this White institution.
I truly am fighting the weight of the Black man’s persona.
But there’s a sense of Blackness that is forever embedded in me…
Yes!
I am Black and I am Proud

*The Black Woman*...
Different in my mannerisms and my behaviors;
Got teased a lot about how I talked; you sound White
Teased about how I acted, didn’t care;
It’s the way I was raised. Happens when you assimilate…

The first thing that comes to mind is my race.
I’m viewed in the world by the color of my skin; not my gender
My skin color…sometimes I wish I were darker!
Then, there’s my hair
The style; the length of my hair!
Questions, then more questions about my hair…

Often portrayed as the angry, Black woman!
At times it’s like walking on a moving floor;
I have to challenge the messages,
Not only challenge them but examine them.

Yes, my identity impacts things in the classroom,
There’re so few African-American women
I’m often called on to offer my expert opinion…
As a Black person! As a Black woman! Just call me Dr. Black!

The term Black means we took ownership of something
Something seen as negative…
A community that hasn’t always
Been given a voice in the world,
But yet we have made significant contributions.

There’s a history of stereotypes and oppressions and marginalization
There’s a history of strength and power and wisdom
There’s a shared cultural fabric
And it’s something I trust; really appreciate and love.
I’m a combination of all that.
I’m a part of that Club!
Yes!
I am Black and I am proud…

Similar to research conducted by Ellis (2001) and Lewis et al. (2004), the findings in this study also indicate that race was a salient factor in the doctoral experiences of these eight African American students. Black identity can be described as a way of living; a way of viewing the world and interacting with the environment through one’s Blackness (Looney, 1988). Each participant highlights his or her strong sense of Blackness as a key theme. Their sense of self is characterized by their ownership of their Blackness. This strong sense of Blackness is accompanied by an equally strong feeling of race-based self-esteem or self worth (Goode & Watson, 1992). For example, one student proudly proclaims, *I identify as African-American, and I don’t shrink from it. I’m proud to be Black*… One multiracial student describes not feeling quite Black enough, but feels strong pride in having African heritage.

While little attention has been focused on how racial identity affects students’ daily lives and decision making, one study found that African Americans with strong egos define themselves, whereas those with weak egos are defined by others (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Cross (1995) argued that identity is a cognitive map that functions in a multitude of ways to guide and direct exchanges with one’s social and material realities. Most individuals are influenced by their racial and ethnic identity development (Evans et al., 1998). Each of the students describes a strong connectivity to his or her African heritage and culture. For example, Ngozi, shares the following:

*I identify with my heritage from the continent of Africa, but yet I am real clear that I’m American as well, so the combination I connect with. It’s an extension of my roots and connections. So, I see myself, my*
connections going beyond what’s here in this country and value the legacy of Black people in the African continent and the contributions made to society.

For most, this feeling of connection also includes a sense of history. One student describes it as a history of cultural experiences that has shaped each generation. Imani puts it simply: my ancestry is my core, which cannot be changed. For some students, it translates into a duty and a desire to succeed not only for themselves, but for others. Malik explains:

I believe that it is my duty to help prepare the generation following me to succeed to greater heights as those before me have done for me...

The perception that other African Americans will be judged based on their actions or classroom performance often creates a duty and a desire to succeed. Akente feels the need to embrace his visibility, his Blackness, for himself and other African American males:

I’m the only African-American male in my program, so I feel like I really need to represent men in a positive way. That’s real special to me. So I make myself visible. I make myself heard.

However, Looney (1988) posits that the social impact of racism has caused African Americans to be sensitive to their own Blackness. Historically, the social conditions in this country that have most affected African Americans are: discrimination, poverty, lack of educational opportunities and the struggle for civil rights (Looney, 1988). Zuri firmly believes that the only way to feel equal or to succeed is by gaining access to cultural capital through higher education:

People have presuppositions about me based upon my visible identity as an African American female. That includes my academic ability, my interests, my personality, my background and experiences.
This student’s comments illustrate and reinforce Looney’s point. Whether real or perceived, there is a never-ending challenge for many African American doctoral students to prove that they deserve to be in the program and on the campus, and are worthy of financial assistance or graduate assistantships. Most want to avoid the “affirmative action” stigma.

Looney (1988) further notes that Black identity deals specifically with an individual’s awareness, values, attitudes, and beliefs about being African American. Akente explains:

*My presence, my identity, my vision of everything is through the lens of African-Americans and Blacks. It’s a privilege and honor, but there’s also an invisible tax that I wear to navigate through U.S. society.*

Malik further notes:

*I relate to the struggles, successes and pain. I understand from personal experience and history that hurdles were overcame and how far we still have yet to go.*

The challenges facing African American doctoral students as they adjust to their academic environment are daunting. Nevertheless, the concept that having a strong sense of one’s Blackness is essential to one’s success at a predominantly White institution is prevalent throughout the data. For the purpose of this research study, a strong sense of Blackness means that an African American doctoral student has a clear understanding of their cultural history and wears that history with pride. The student participants in this research study that report having a strong sense of their Blackness exude more confidence in their ability to face and handle the challenges and struggles typically associated with doctoral studies. Each also has a clear sense of what being Black on the
campus of a predominantly White institution entails. As Malik so aptly put it: *It’s just the nature of the beast!*

The participants recognize that the academy produces a “chilly climate” for anyone, but especially for faculty and students of color, particularly African Americans (Gasman, Gerstl-Pepin, Anderson-Thompkins, Rasheed & Hathaway, 2004). This includes measuring up to some preexisting standard (Booker, 2007) or being challenged just for being present. However, for African American doctoral students who have a strong sense of their Blackness and are comfortable in their skin, it is also often an opportunity to hold self and others accountable to a higher standard. For students like Akente, they assume this role proudly. He explains:

> *It’s a learning environment and everybody’s absorbing information. Everything that I do is held at a very high level of scrutiny. But there is also a very high level of expectation. They are like, I know Akente is not gonna let that go. I like that, I like that part and it makes me stand taller, it makes me prepared, and it takes me to a whole other level because people see you that way. You’re on your game. So, they need to be on theirs.*

While their Blackness may create some unique struggles for many of the students, in this academic arena, it also presents daily micro-aggressions in all aspects of their lives. However, they are ready to meet these racial challenges using healthy coping mechanisms: strong support systems, being visible, and with plain old faith. The following theme explains the impacts of an effective support system.

**Support System**
*The more knowledge and information I have, the less support I need. However, I do want support, because I rely on my support system…*

*Professors…*
*Support system*
Professors/educators that care!
Good experiences!
Very inclusive in the classroom!
Unbiased!
Hands off…
A pseudo boundary of professionalism!

An amazing support system..
Not just for the knowledge that they share
Or that they’re really good at their craft and what they do
Not just because they stand beside me to help me fight
But because they see me!
There is a warmth;
There is an embrace that I need in this very cold institution…

*Peers…*
Blessed with the most amazing friends
They are fascinating people…
They’re at DU going through the same busy, crazy life.
My support is really a couple of students.
People that I feel comfortable talking to, sharing things with.
They understand! They push me…
My support group is diverse!
Friends who have gone through the same grind
People who are currently going through a doctoral program like me…
Folks who help me navigate the terrain.
They get me!

*Advisors…*
My advisor is absolutely amazing.
   She is a White woman…
   He is a Black man…
   He is a White male…
   She is a Sista!

My advisor understands not just with the mind,
But with the body all the issues that I experience…
Shares that knowledge with me;
That insider kind of coding that I must have to succeed…

My advisor definitely is a source of strength.
Definitely can push you
Definitely challenges you
Definitely knows what you need …
My advisor’s been in the private, backdoor meetings; 
Fighting on my behalf, 
Won’t let people throw me under the bus so easily.

My advisor and I are struggling; 
But I know this individual has my best interest at heart!

My advisor is present…

I also find support in some of the more neutral things like:
The writing center at DU  
The library…Penrose  
Other departments on campus  
Administrative support staff  
Financial aid office…

That’s what’s saving me. It’s me, God and a couple of allies.

A supportive environment is described as one in which African American doctoral students experience high academic and social integration into programs and activities that may influence their overall success (Lewis et al., 2004). Girves and Wemmerus (1988) define institutional support as financial assistance (receiving graduate assistantships, scholarships, and fellowships) and the students’ perceptions of faculty-student relationships. Both have been found to be the strongest predictors of progress in doctoral programs for African American students (Lewis et al., 2004).

While faculty-student relationship is a major component of a strong support system, investment in a student’s success through financial assistance is also a top priority for many African American students in higher education, particularly those in doctoral programs. Most of my research participants view access to financial support as crucial to the sustainability and viability of African American students in doctoral programs. Several candidly expressed frustration and anger over the lack of financial
assistance, particularly in light of the ever-increasing tuition fees at this private institution. Malik’s comments are illustrative:

*I will not say that I have not been helped; however, I was not helped to the extent that my White peers were helped. I wasn’t offered the same opportunities that my peers were offered. I wish I was. I have received scholarships to which I am grateful, but it was basically enough to pay for one course over one year. It’s like spitting in the winter time, but I am grateful because I did receive something, but I didn’t feel anyone fought for me when I couldn’t fight for myself.*

Imani also shares the same sentiments and frustration as a doctoral student who may not receive financial assistance for future coursework and expresses her concern as she tries to navigate the financial aid arena without fully understanding the system:

*I’m trying to find out more about financial aid and how I’m gonna pay for this thing. But not knowing where my money came from this year and hoping it was gonna appear again...Well, it’s not appearing as it did last year. Okay, where did it come from last year and why can’t I get it again? I haven’t necessarily gotten all my questions answered. I’m trying.*

The research participants strongly view financial assistance as part of the institution’s renewed commitment to diversity and a willingness to insure African American doctoral students successfully progress in and complete their programs. Funding is also seen as being central to the effective recruitment and retention of African American doctoral students at this institution.

Aside from financial support, other factors associated with successful progress for African American doctoral students include full-time enrollment and collegial relationships within the department (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Lewis et al., 2004). The role of faculty and advisors continues to be the primary factor seen as crucial to the progress of doctoral students. However, studies indicate the faculty-student relationship
is extremely critical to the success of African American doctoral students (Allen, 1985; Ellis, 2001; Lewis et al., 2004). The results of this research support the empirical evidence and findings from other studies and the literature on degree completion for African American doctoral students. Each of the participants in this research reports that having a strong support system is critical to their overall progress and success in their respective doctoral programs. For my participants, support system is identified as having good working relationships with an advisor, professors, classmates/peers, administrative office staff and other campus professionals. While no student interviewed expressed a need to have a support system that includes all these different individuals, there is an expectation that at the bare minimum, they have or need a good working relationship with their advisor, a faculty member or a higher education professional. As Ashanti explains:

*My support system is really maybe one faculty person and a couple of students. It’s not a large group, but they’re people that I feel comfortable talking to, sharing things with...They are there for me. That’s my support base and that’s all I need.*

A key component is having an advisor/mentor that is supportive, engaged and present. Ashanti believes her advisor serves this role for her continual progression in the program. Ebony concurs that having a supportive advisor makes a major difference in her ability to advance in her program:

*At DU, my educational support system is small but very good. My advisor is incredible. Obviously because she’s my advisor she studies what I study, so she understands my issues. She can never fully be in the same space with me, but she is very good at standing beside me. I need that in order to get through this system.*
Ellis (2001) contends that having a mentor or a good academic advisor may be the most important component of doctoral students’ lives, however, in some cases students are unable to establish a good working relationship with their assigned advisor. When students are unsuccessful in finding workable student-faculty relationships within their own programs, doctoral students work unofficially with outsiders (Ellis, 2001). Ngozi describes her struggles with finding a permanent advisor:

> I’ve struggled with an advisor, the luck of the draw. Once I entered the department, the program that I’m in, I had an identified advisor. Two years into the program, she took a job at another university. I was then connected with another advisor, a second advisor, and then probably after two years, she also exited the program. So, I’m on my third advisor. Now this individual and the people on my committee consist of individuals who really do not have the expertise in the area that I’m concentrating on. However, all is not lost. I have a friend who just completed her doctoral work last spring and she had a phenomenal advisor. So, I’ve met with her a couple times. She’s just been amazing. She’s not a part of this university at all, but she’s real clear that whatever she can do to help, she’s more than happy to do so. Her only expectation is that when I’m in the place to do it, I’ll help others.

Ngozi’s experience reinforces the importance of having a mentor who is engaged, supportive, and willingly participates by providing feedback. Her story also illustrates the importance of an awareness that strong, effective support may also be found outside of their own programs, departments or institutions.

Lewis et al., (2004) found that the key to student success for the majority of African American doctoral students is getting early support from any faculty member, not necessarily someone of the same race. While most of the students expressed perceptions that having African American or Black faculty on campus will create a more inclusive environment, many describe having strong positive relationships with White advisors and
faculty. Akente speaks fondly of a dissertation committee member who he believes is strongly invested in his success. He notes:

*There have been professors that I feel very close to, they have connected with me. However, there is one particular person that I really am very close to. She’s Jewish. She’s a New Yorker and she’s a Grandma. She’s like, “I am committed to you making it through here.” And I believe that.*

Support persons come in many forms and may provide different levels of support, such as academic assistance and approval, cultural and individual affirmation, assistance finding available personal resources, and guidance in the process of psychosocial adjustment and development (Nasim, Roberts, Harrell, & Young, 2005, p. 346). Not surprisingly, each of the research participants speaks of having some type of support system in place. Other than faculty and advisors, this support varies. While institutional support typically includes classmates/peers and other campus professionals, some students receive support from family members, past doctoral students, and non-traditional sources, such as their church community, neighbors and work colleagues. Students in this study that feel their advisor or faculty professional genuinely cares and is committed to the successful attainment of their degree express more satisfaction in their doctoral experience and a stronger sense of trust in the institution.

The third theme identifies the students’ perceptions of whether a level of visibility influences their experiences.

**Level of Visibility**

As long as I am the one controlling my visibility or invisibility, there is no problem. The problem comes when someone attempts to make me feel invisibility due to their own issues and insecurities...

**Visibility/Invisibility**

Visible in an academic environment
Active participation;
Active involvement!
A sense of trust; a sense of acceptance...
If you engage me, I’ll be engaged.
Invisibility comes with the territory.
Brought on by the institution; Brought on by the person.

Invisible when the institution refuses to acknowledge me;
Refuses to see me for who I am
Refuses to see me as a valuable participant…

Believe the school sees me as a member of the school body,
But they don’t see me as an active, viable participant within the school.
Invisibility is partly the fault of the individual,
And to somewhat extent I take blame.

There’s the expectation that you are to use your voice in class.
You have to back it up.
The nature of the small class sizes it’s hard not to be visible.
Sometimes I’m there but I want to be invisible.

Must rise to challenge others and speak my mind
Be visible from a social justice viewpoint…
This is all leading to my comfort level in being visible
As someone that is being trained to contribute…

In this academic environment there are certain behaviors;
Certain ways of being that are highly regarded…
If you model those things then you become very visible;
just by the nature of the culture of academia…
As a student with research interests that affiliate with the research
Interests of faculty, you become highly visible.
If not, you are less visible…

Visibility depends on where the faculty member is;
In their own understanding, awareness and development.
If the faculty member is open to race and conversation;
Then it seems to be okay to go up against it
Because the leadership in the class says we’re going there.

The level of perceived visibility emerged as a theme denoting that the majority of
the research participants believe visibility/invisibility significantly influences their sense
of trust in the institution of higher education. According to Tuitt (2003), visibility describes the ways in which students are physically, culturally, and emotionally present in the learning environment. Conversely, invisibility is defined as the inner struggle that one’s talents and abilities are not valued or recognized due to prejudice and racism (Franklin, 1999). For the purpose of this research study, ethnic invisibility represents society’s racism and comfort level; ethnic visibility represents personal choice and comfort level.

Feelings of isolation and being invisible are often used interchangeably in research studies, however, during my interviews; I provided a working definition of visibility and invisibility to provide clarity of meaning. Using the classroom setting as my backdrop, the research participants were asked about their ability to be visible or invisible while maintaining a level of comfort. Overwhelmingly, most of the students experience a sense of visibility in the classroom, where they feel encouraged to be visible and have a voice. Some students who express having issues with visibility typically attribute it to their own discomfort with the classroom dynamics or to their confidence or lack thereof regarding knowledge of a particular discussion topic. Reflecting back to when she was a new doctoral student, Zuri expresses feelings of excitement tinged with a hint of apprehension at the mere thought of having a voice in the classroom. She explains:

At first I was excited because it was like this open welcome mat, you know, come bring your voice. But then I got a little nervous like...I don’t know all these people. I don’t know the history of this program, that’s why I’m here. I didn’t feel like I have qualifications to back up what I’m saying. This is just a feeling, or just an experience, so I had to validate the research. It’s getting over that hurdle. I think sometimes I would
purposely want to be visible, stand in front of the class, being engaged, commenting on fellow classmates’ or faculty questions, but sometimes when that challenge came, okay back it up with literature, this was a new way of thinking for me. And I would probably, you know, try to be a little invisible.

Zuri continues her discussion on visibility and invisibility, noting the difference between being a doctoral student and being a campus employee or a graduate assistant. As an employee, she speaks of the pressure to be silence:

In the classroom you may be at the top of the priority, you’re the reason that the faculty member is there and vice versa. But, in a work situation you’ve got to step back and let other voices be heard and just kind of suck it up. And I do. I struggle with that. Interacting with the support staff, I don’t know why, but I feel like when I try to be visible, I am kind of silenced in a way that says, check yourself, you’re just a student here.

Nia agrees and believes her professors respect her input and consistently engage her in the classroom dialogue. However, like many of the students, she speaks of being invisible due to institutional dynamics or philosophical disagreements with the doctoral program. She notes that sometimes she is quite visible while other times she is not. Unfortunately, her visibility is situational:

I think it depends. Sometimes I’m visible and then other times I’m not. In a classroom I feel I’m visible. My voice is heard, everyone sees me... The professor doesn’t pass me. However, at my job on the campus I don’t feel that way; I feel completely invisible.

For Zuri, Nia and several of the other doctoral students, the learning environment is welcoming, engaging and encouraging. Their visibility is a direct result of their own comfort level of speaking up and being heard. However, each of these students speaks of negative experiences relating to on-campus employment that silences their voices, rendering them invisible. Other research participants also speak of incidents on campus
that leave them feeling less than welcomed, invisible or racially frustrated. As non-traditional students, many are already grappling with being “strangers in a familiar place.”

In an effort to insure visibility on campus, in employment or while using facilities and services, support staff, other institutional partners, and employees must be held accountable for respectful engagement and professionalism when working with African American doctoral students.

Akente continues the dialogue on visibility from a historical racial viewpoint. As a student who considers himself to be visible, Akente explains that visibility is not merely being comfortable in the classroom or having an opportunity to have meaningful exchange in a learning environment. Through his eyes, it is the lack of diversity in the curriculum and on campus that play into this sense of visibility:

_This is who I am. I have a voice, I have a place. So I am visible. I’m visible physically. But I can also be visible physically but invisible, silence is accepted. However, does the system create this visibility? Look at the history of schooling for us. When you’re starting from a deficit model, then all of the sudden it feels like we’ve arrived. No! The real racism starts once you get in the walls. You know, they leave their sheets at home. Their racism is in the curriculum, so you’re invisible. It’s ”I don’t see you.” There’s no one that looks like you. There’re low expectations. So I have to be savvy in knowing, I have to be mindful of that. I have to recognize that but I can’t allow that to hinder or stop, or be an excuse. Or be a reason to not perform. There is standard and you have to meet the standard._

The data suggest that while most of the students describe their learning environment as being inclusive and themselves as being visible, several speak of isolated incidents where their experiences with visibility were not positive. As Akente alludes and several others point out, negative classroom incidents create an environment that is
unwelcoming, lacks racial sensitivity, and also reflects inappropriate leadership from faculty. Most students describe being asked to speak on behalf of all “Black folks” or provide the African American perspective. When there is a perception of negative behavior on the part of the faculty, a student may disengage from the learning process (Tuitt, 2003). Ashanti reflects on an incident in her classroom involving a panel of scholars that were scheduled to speak on diversity:

*I had one class that I took outside of my department where it was just really hard because the faculty member did not ascribe to the same types of things that most of the faculty members I work with do. For this particular faculty member, diversity was a separate issue. It was like a sub-issue of the class. So the last day of class we had the diversity panel and they were supposed to cover everything that people of color experience. And not only was that offensive and I almost didn’t go to that class, but I decided to go anyway because I thought, I felt okay about raising my hand and saying some things. But when I got to the class, I guess two of the four people who were scheduled to be on the panel didn’t show up. So this professor came to me and a biracial student in the class and asked us both if we would serve on the panel. We both declined. The fact that she didn’t see that as not okay; to me she symbolizes the rest of this institution.*

Several students speak of being in the classroom when a topic became focused on race; many describe an increased level of discomfort due to the subject matter. However, not all students agree with this observation as Ashanti notes; it depends on your doctoral program and the faculty in the classroom. She speaks of her classroom experiences:

*The experience that I have had is it depended on where the conversations are taking place. In my program, my experience has been that if race comes up in the dialogue, most of my instructors have been comfortable facilitating that conversation. This is based on changes over the years in terms of race and gender being a priority in the classroom curriculum. The department brought Fellows in and instructors in who already have a background and understanding and are okay with the conversation.*
One student speaks of race and visibility in the classroom from a different perspective, in that students are just as uncomfortable defending or reinforcing the Black perspective in classes taught by African American or Black professors. A few students describe an expectation from African American professors to “set the White students straight.” Several feel pressure to agree with the African American professor due to the subject matter, one student likened it to being in *amen corner*. For African American doctoral students, being forced into this role creates a level of invisibility, especially if the student feels that she or he has disappointed the faculty of color, doesn’t agree with the professor or is being perceived as not living up to some invisible standard of Black solidarity or ”representing” as a Black person.

Through their eyes, most of the research participants perceive that they have a high level of visibility in the classroom. This perception is reinforced through communication with classmates or peers, as well as positive interactions with faculty, inside and outside of the classroom setting. However, most have a story to tell in which a classmate or faculty member, regardless of their race or color, lacked racial sensitivity and awareness. Overall, these incidents do not have a lasting impact on level of visibility in the classroom. While the classroom settings may be viewed as open and engaging, very few of the research participants perceive the institution or the campus environment as welcoming. Most of the students speak of being keenly aware of standing out or being invisible and silenced on campus. The final theme addresses the student relationship with the institution.
Relationship with the Institution
The institution is viewed as the people or programs the students are in contact with... Or it is the university as a whole or the source of information.

Not expecting an institution of acceptability.
Not expecting an institution to embrace who I am.
But find it interesting that the college itself; the structure itself isolates students.

They discount that I am an African-American woman or an African-American man…
There may be certain functions about what that means to me,
So in their effort to try to connect with me;
Let me know that they recognize me,
They demean me in a way,
Because they don’t and won’t fully ask who I really am!

The institution fails to acknowledge my physical identity as African-American woman or man, Instead, it’s you’re in this graduate school,
You’re just a student,
You’re here to learn, and you’re here to learn more about life from me.
But even though you’re a student here;
As doctoral students, we don’t come to the table as completely empty vessels…
The institution does not recognize this.
The university doesn’t feel very inclusive overall.

The institution, the educational institution, is so closed
Access to information seems to go with privilege.
No institutionalized system for providing access to information.

My educational experience has been disappointing and frustrating
I’ve had to accomplish in spite of.
I’ve not experienced the outreach.
I feel that once that coursework stops, you’re not connected anymore.
If your advisor isn’t giving you that life support line,
Then one does not continue to be a part of the institution.

This institution does not do much to promote a sense of trust.
I don’t think that’s just about me.
Generally speaking for any person of color on the DU campus;
Don’t see much coming through in the way of emails or invites to participate in things other than sports activities…
No infrastructure for maintaining relationships and connections.
That’s a critical miss.

This institution falls into the stereotypical, traditional university.
There’s definitely a strong system of hierarchy,
There are certain steps and processes you must take
In order to express your voice or to be visible,
To be recognized. If you don’t follow those steps,
Then your chances of succeeding decrease.

There is a very low esprit de corps.
Very low; as a whole!
If you ask someone to identify the institution,
Each one would have a different face of the institution,
Or speak to it from a different tongue.
So there’s lack of identity of the whole of what we as an entity are doing.

Where’s the incentive for this institution to change.
The students come, they adapt, African-American or otherwise,
You’re in an institution where you are a minority not only by physical number
But by physical presence, therefore you as a minority typically come
With the mindset that you have to adapt to the majority;
And primarily you do what you do, you adapt!

In this section, I present the data on the final emergent theme, which highlights
how the research participants describe their relationship with DU. Using the theoretical
framework of Ghosh, et al. (2001), the students examine their experiences through the
lens of several antecedents of trust under the umbrella of organizational behavior and
climate. According to the findings from Ghosh et al. (2001), each of the antecedents has
a relative influence on trust; however several are key to creating and managing trust. The
following antecedents are found to have a significant influence on the relationship
between the student participants and DU: sincerity, expertise, congeniality, and
openness.

Sincerity is defined as the extent to which an institution of higher education is
perceived to be honest and to make promises with the intention of fulfilling them.
According to Ghosh et al. (2001), sincerity has the greatest influence on trust. While
sincerity is found to be the most important antecedent for creating trust, only one or two of the students interviewed for this research study describe this institution as sincere. One student states: *sincerity is based upon a key word…perception.* Most students have perceptions of dishonesty and insincerity. For example, Ashanti explains:

*I don’t know why I’m wondering about this question. I can’t say that promises have been made that have not been fulfilled for me. But I guess I’ve heard several stories from peers where it has not been the case. So, I guess I’m struggling with being able to say that the institution is truly sincere. Because I’ve heard enough that makes me wonder.*

Several students perceive the insincerity of the institution to be linked to financial assistance and other student issues. Zuri expresses concerns with promises of financial assistance, and describes this phenomenon as the *hook ‘em process.*

*Get ‘em in, get ‘em in for their first year and then it’s up to them. I’m very biased, but for doctoral students, I am just fully against getting someone in for the first year or two and then letting them figure out the rest. This is an issue whether it’s funding or accessibility to their advisor. Maybe they came the first year and their advisor had ten advisees, the next year it’s twenty, the next year it’s thirty. So you just really don’t have a sincere understanding of what you’re jumping into.*

Ghosh et al. (2001) suggest that administrators, staff, and faculty should be honest with students and not make promises that cannot be kept. One explanation as to why students may feel a promise was made and then broken is a simple lack of communication between student and faculty or other institutional representative. As Akente notes:

*The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I mean, there’re some great intentions out there. But I think at this particular level, there’s less sincerity.*
Whether a promise is made or merely perceived, if it is not delivered upon, students’ trust in the institution may erode (Ghosh et al., 2001). Therefore, it is crucial that there is open and honest communication between the student and the institution.

Expertise is described as the second most influential antecedent of trust (Ghosh et al., 2001). Expertise is defined as an institution’s perceived mastery and technical competence in its field of education. Ghosh et al. (2001) posit that most college personnel already know the importance of expertise in a higher education setting. The research participants’ interview responses confirm that expertise is an antecedent that this institution is delivering. Aside from tuition waivers, most of the students describe subject expertise as being a key or primary reason for selecting DU for their doctoral studies. The students feel faculty possesses advanced degrees, coupled with practical application from experiences in the workforce. Ebony’s observations summarize the various perceptions of her fellow peers:

*When I think about expertise I think there is some level of expectation that a research university has kind of acquired that level of competence. So I think by choosing a school like the University of Denver, there is this automatic assumption that you’re gonna have this kind of expertise because it’s more renowned as a private research institution. And then secondly, my experience I feel like has been, I am working in an area where it’s demonstrated. There’s some level of expertise, I feel comfortable that the university represents kind of a mastery of my area of study.*

Congeniality is defined as the extent to which an institution of higher education shows friendliness, courtesy and goodwill towards its students. Customer satisfaction and increased perceptions of service quality have been linked to congeniality (Ives, Olson, & Baroudi, 1983; Zeithmal, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). Zuri describes the
institution as *undergraduate-friendly, but not graduate-friendly*, noting that it is even worse for doctoral students, particularly African American doctoral students. A few of the research participants tell of isolated incidents that illustrate friendly and courteous behavior. However, those stories did not reflect the negative contacts most students experience on campus. Zuri describes the environment as feeling a *little schizophrenic* because the classroom or department is so welcoming, but the broader campus environment *does not feel very congenial as far as making the student’s educational experience feel friendly and welcoming*. Students characterize their programs and departments as “respite silos,” in an unwelcoming environment. Overall, based on the definition of congeniality, the consensus of most of the students is that the institution as a whole and its agents are neither friendly nor cordial.

Ashanti notes:

*I’ve experienced congeniality mostly within my department. Everywhere else it’s not always friendly; it’s not even always courteous…*

Although not as influential as sincerity, expertise or congeniality, openness is important to establishing a sense of trust for African American doctoral students. Openness is defined as the institution’s perceived motivation to interpret and disclose ambiguous higher education issues to prospective students. According to several of the students, neither their departments nor the university are open to being transparent or involving students in the decision-making process where it is appropriate. Most students characterize the institution’s openness based on experiences in their own programs or departments. Many complain of the lack of communication, ambiguous staffing decisions, and perceptions of the lack of leadership within their departments.
The research participants in this study describe their relationship with the institution through their perceptions of sincerity, expertise, congeniality and openness. Based on their experiences and observations, the students identify that these antecedents or components are essential to creating a sense of trust for African American doctoral students attending a predominantly White institution of higher education. Consequently, the students believe this institution fails to create an overall environment that encourages a congenial relationship with the university. The students’ perceptions of the emergent themes are presented in Table 3.
### Table 3 - Students’ Perceptions of Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doctoral Student</th>
<th>A Sense of Blackness</th>
<th>Support System</th>
<th>A Level of Visibility</th>
<th>Relationship w/Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akente</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashanti</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Imani</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zuri</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A Sense of Blackness**: A strong understanding of being Black in America.

**Support System**: Support includes a variety of group members (institution, family, church).

**A Level of Visibility**: Comfort level in the classroom and on campus.

**Relationship with Institution**: Comfort with the institution and one’s role as student.

**X** – Area of concern.
Summary

Chapter Five presented the analysis of the findings from this research study, providing an in-depth discussion of the themes that emerged. It also highlighted the textural and structural descriptions of the four key themes that African American doctoral students find most beneficial to creating a sense of trust at a predominantly White institution. Additionally, the chapter introduced a new model of trust for African American doctoral students that attend a predominantly White institution.

Chapter Six briefly summarizes the research findings. The chapter also outlines the implications, the recommendations for higher education and conclusions.
CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As we rapidly traverse the first decade of the 21st century, African American students in doctoral programs must take a fair measure of pride in their accomplishments. Despite facing ongoing challenges within institutions of higher education, African American students continue to pursue opportunities through rigorous doctoral studies. However, the lack of African Americans in doctoral programs remains a concern to administrators, faculty members, and policy makers alike, for future university professors and academic leaders will come from these programs (Ellis, 2001). The new millennium promises to present even more challenges to access, particularly in the areas of financial assistance, student-faculty relationships, and overall academic experiences. This definitely appears to be the case for the African American students who participated in my study. While some may argue that challenges exist for all students in any doctoral program, research consistently informs the literature about specific issues, such as the struggle for educational equity (Ellis, 2001) or environments of racial discrimination, that continually face African American students attending predominantly White institutions of higher education.

The purpose of this research was to develop a model of trust through the eyes of African American doctoral students attending the University of Denver, a predominantly
White institution. My inquiry was guided by a primary research question investigating the influence trust had on the academic experiences of eight African American doctoral students. Specifically, the primary research question for this dissertation study was: *What factors did African American doctoral students identify as being most conducive to creating an environment of trust in a predominantly White institution of higher education?* Building on the findings from my investigation, I sought to provide an understanding of the factors essential to creating an environment of inclusiveness and trust for African American doctoral students. In this chapter, I summarize my findings and discuss the implications that provide insight into what African American doctoral students tell us will positively impact their educational journey and academic achievement. Implications and recommendations for students, administrators and members of the academy are provided for each theme. Chapter Six also provides recommendations for further research. Finally, I conclude this chapter with my reflections as the researcher and an African American doctoral student.

**Summary of the Study**

Four key themes emerged from the data: a strong sense of Blackness, a support system, the level of visibility, and relationship with the institution. These themes were identified by the research participants as being significant in establishing an environment of trust. The results of this study indicate that for African American doctoral students, the classroom and campus environment are more inclusive and welcoming when these factors are present. The following discussion summarizes each theme and notes
unexpected findings, i.e. surprises, implications for faculty, administrators and African
American doctoral students at this institution, as well as suggested recommendations.

A Strong Sense of Blackness

During the screening process, students were asked about their racial self-identify
and its importance. The salience of race appears to be prevalent for most of the
participants, even those that identify as both African American and bi-racial. According
to recent studies, a key aspect of academic and psychological survival in a racially
unwelcoming environment is confidence. Additionally, feelings of self-esteem or self-
worth are necessary precursors for helping doctoral students possess a greater belief in
themselves (Nasim, et al., 2005). This study re-affirms that many African American
doctoral students value their race, their African heritage and share the belief that they
bring a rich and different lens to the learning environment. An unexpected finding or
surprise in this thematic area is that most of the students view their Blackness as a major
component of their identity. The students’ overt connectivity to and pride in their
African heritage reflects a confidence that creates an ability to come to the institution
without preconceived thoughts about trust. In fact, most came to the university with a
certain level of trust and openness. This openness typically remains intact until there is a
violation of the student’s trust. Based on this finding, the following implications and
recommendations for students, administrators and faculty are suggested.

Implications: First and foremost, there is a lack of diversity, specifically a lack of
African Americans in doctoral programs at the University of Denver. Institutions of
higher education are not immune to the stresses and challenges associated with the
changing demographics of the American citizenry. Across the country, institutions of higher education are engaged in various efforts to racially and ethnically diversify their student and faculty populations. These efforts are often in direct response to internal and external criticism and pressures. But, despite over 25 years of affirmative action initiatives, African American doctoral students and faculty continue to be underrepresented in higher education (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi & Richards, 2004).

Approximately 34 African American students are currently enrolled in doctoral programs at the University of Denver, representing less than 5% of the total doctoral student population.

A key implication from this research study is the immediate need to engage in an aggressive commitment to develop and maintain a diverse academic community for a myriad of reasons. While the University of Denver has experienced an increase in its international student and faculty populations, it is still actively engaged in efforts to diversify the campus domestically. The document analysis conducted as part of this study reflects the institution’s commitment to inclusiveness and collaboration regardless of race and ethnicity. The passage below is from DU’s Diversity Statement:

*The University of Denver community is strongly committed to the pursuit of excellence by including and integrating individuals who represent different groups as defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, age, disability, national origin and religion. The University's commitment to diversity in particular requires that we attract members of historically under-represented racial and ethnic groups. To create a rich academic, intellectual and cultural environment for everyone, our concern must extend beyond representation to genuine participation. Our commitment must entail the creation of initiatives and programs designed to capitalize on the benefits of diversity in education, research and service. In sum, our actions must speak louder than our words.*
Many of the African American doctoral student research participants do not agree that this institution engenders a climate valuing and using racial and ethnic diversity. For them, the institution’s actions do speak louder than words. Several students describe being the “only” African American in classes and in their doctoral programs and departments, while others speak of being the “only” African American employee in their campus workplaces, highlighting the challenge of being “a few amongst many.” Students also explain how creating inclusive educational environments is crucial to the elimination of daily experiences of micro-aggressions or racial slights such as micro-invalidations and micro-insults (Davis, 1989; Sue et al. 2007).

For many, and particularly for these African American doctoral students, race continues to matter. While many African American students enter an institution of higher education with the perception and expectation that their race will matter to others, most are willing to trust until a violation of trust occurs. The study results indicate that most of the African American doctoral students in this study believe that White administrators and faculty filter their perceptions of the students’ abilities and levels of interest in the institution through a racist lens. Therefore, several recommendations are proposed to address these findings.

Recommendations: Results of this study suggest that to enhance chances of success, African American doctoral students attending a predominantly White institution should have a clear sense of their racial identity with a high level of confidence and self-worth, and an understanding of “if and how” the institution values them. Therefore, while I highly recommend students come to the institution with openness and trust, I also
strongly suggest they actively seek out the experiences of current African American doctoral students and alumni regarding the racial climate at the university.

For DU faculty members, I recommend personal reflections on the ways race impacts the classroom and using pedagogical practices that facilitate safe learning environments for African American students (Tuitt, 2008). For most doctoral students, the classroom climate remains important to their overall academic experiences; therefore, all faculty members regardless of race must be sensitive to their own racial biases and be aware of racial insensitivity by students and in the curriculum. For example, several students feel an expectation to be the voice of the African American race. This is reported in classes taught by both White and African American faculty members, and creates an uncomfortable environment with a heightened racial awareness for African American students, affecting their learning. The faculty member’s ability to address racial insensitivity and create an environment of inclusiveness is essential to the success of most African American doctoral students.

Administrators must establish a visible presence of racial diversity on campus. As Malik explains:

To improve African American doctoral students’ sense of trust in the University of Denver, first of all, you need more black people in the seats. Another recommendation is to bring in other educated African-Americans so they can be seen. I don’t care if you’re 35 or 40; you still need to see other educated individuals just like yourself who are doing something for themselves. Now, you need to bring them not to the school to say here’s a lecture, go see him or her. No, bring them to your classroom and have them speak to that classroom as a guest lecturer for a week or two, tie an assignment to it, make it work.
However, the need for racial diversity extends beyond the classroom setting; African Americans must be represented at every level throughout the institution. I recommend an increase in the presence of African Americans in all roles on campus, including students, administrators, faculty, and support staff. Administrators must also continually examine their role as leaders who create the message of acceptable and unacceptable behavior in all racial interactions, as well as continually seek to establish a positive racial climate at this institution.

Findings of this study suggest that some African American doctoral students view the campus of the University of Denver as racially unwelcoming. Therefore, the overall recommendation to administrators is to re-establish racial diversity as a top priority. The impetus for re-establishing this commitment is twofold: (1) to increase racial diversity in faculty, staff and students, particularly African Americans, and (2) to insure every employee of the institution is fully prepared to serve a diverse clientele in a multicultural community and create an environment of support. Another finding of this study confirms that the establishment of appropriate support systems is essential to the academic success of African American doctoral students.

Support System

Study findings further validate the importance of having a strong support system as created by the student to meet his or her needs. The findings also confirm that for many African American doctoral students, this support is defined as an advisor or faculty member with whom he or she can work closely and is supportive. The research participants identify advisors and supporters that are racially, ethnically and gender
diverse; their support groups also included faculty outsiders.” While the students continually express the importance of having African Americans in the classroom and on campus, surprisingly, those with non-African American advisors also spoke highly of the ability of these faculty members to make the student feel engaged, encouraged and supported.

The participants reiterate the overall importance of financial assistance. Several speak of the need for access to financial support. This factor ranks high for many of the students in our discussions about support system. As Malik notes:

You need to really have some scholarships for Blacks. You need to financially help students. Not that all Blacks need financial help, but the point is you need to make sure that they feel comfortable as far as access and that you can help them in that area.

Imani concurs as she worries about tuition for the upcoming school year. For her the lack of financial assistance from the university creates a struggle to find funding to complete the program.

Implications: According to the study participants, a caring advisor and an encouraging support system are highly conducive to their overall academic engagement and success. The findings in this study imply that for the students, support is found in a variety of places, including many that are racially, ethnically and gender diverse, and from individuals connected to other institutions of higher education. For administrators, creating viable, consistent financial resources for African American doctoral students is also vital to successful progress. Zuri describes the need for consistent financial support:

Don’t use smoke and mirrors. Getting access is certainly great, but provide real institutional financial support during the full process so the student can fully get through their program.
The study also establishes the need to create mentee opportunities for African American students as they face the academic and social challenges of a doctoral program. An additional struggle for doctoral students is finding ways to remain connected and fully engaged once their coursework is completed. Study participants suggest that this is an even greater challenge for African American doctoral students; therefore long-term relationships with advisors and faculty are essential to degree completion. Due to the importance of a strong support system, providing effective recommendations is critical in addressing this emergent theme.

Recommendations: The results of this study found that support comes from many sources. Therefore, I recommend students assess their academic and social needs early in their doctoral journey and be willing to seek assistance from non-traditional sources. Imani describes her anxiety around navigating the process:

*All those little things make me feel like a teenager again. I just don’t know this stuff. But my peers, as well as my advisor have help provide support.*

While overall the study participants are complimentary regarding their relationships with faculty and advisors, some complain of the lack of communication from their departments or advisors, as well as a lack of response to emails and phone calls. In light of this finding, I recommend faculty reflect on the common courtesy of daily communications. The lack of communication creates a sense of abandonment, and feelings of neglect. Once the student leaves the classroom and starts his or her research efforts, the advisor often becomes his or her only link to the institution. Ongoing communication is critical to a sense of connection. I recommend that early in the
research process, the student and advisor establish a time and means of communication that will accommodate the schedules of both individuals.

For administrators, many of the participants indicate a total disconnect with campus leadership. I highly recommend an opportunity for students’ voices to be heard. This may be accomplished by establishing monthly or quarterly meetings with leaders from various levels of the institution. I also recommend student forums be held at least annually with the Chancellor of the University. Having a forum to express concerns, offer suggestions, recommendations, and experiences of face-to-face communication can be a key source of support for students, particularly African American doctoral students.

*Level of Visibility*

Graduate programs are demanding, and can easily become all consuming (Gay, 2004, p. 272). According to Gay (2004), the consequences of this immersion can create a sense of isolation or invisibility. For many African American doctoral students at predominantly White institutions, academic experiences are influenced by feelings of being invisible on campus and in the classroom. The significance of this alienation in the interracial, interpersonal environment of higher education explains why many African American doctoral students feel devalued and unrecognized at predominantly White institutions (Lewis et al., 2004). The surprise in the findings for this theme is participants’ high level of visibility and its importance.

*Implications:* For most of the students in this research study, peers and faculty create a classroom environment that encourages active engagement and learning, which increases their perception of visibility. Many indicate an environment where they feel
heard and respected. Most expressed feelings of inclusion and engagement in the classroom, as well as in their departments and doctoral programs. However, some describe occasional incidents in the classroom reflecting a lack of racial sensitivity and leadership regarding racially charged discussion topics. Several students also describe feeling unwelcome due to poor customer service in non-classroom settings. Although a campus climate of prejudice and discrimination creates negative perceptions, most doctoral students in this study suggest levels of high visibility since their departmental environments are more important to their academic development, where the classroom climate is the leading component of the environment (Ellis, 2001).

Faculty and administrators should be aware that successful degree completion for African American doctoral students is enhanced by a strong bond between the student and the institution (Willie et al., 1991). Promoting relationships between African American doctoral students and faculty, as well as strengthening the network among students will increase this bond. These relationships help students develop a sense of trust with their institution of higher education, and increase their sense of visibility. One student, Ashanti, indicates the need for advocacy and voice as a means of maintaining visibility:

*I think DU needs to have a faculty of color and a student of color organization for advocacy and support to give students’ voice as well as faculty voice. I think those are like the beginning pieces of moving towards more trust and visibility in the institution.*

Each of the participants describes the need for networking and support by African American faculty and peers as a means to enhance visibility.
Recommendations: A key recommendation to enhance African American doctoral students’ level of visibility is to remain visible in the classroom and on campus. In a predominantly White environment, there is often a tendency for African American students to hide or self-isolate. I recommend that students actively seek the presence of other African Americans, either on campus or in the community. Gay (2004) recommends African American students begin this outreach at the beginning of their program.

Outreach is also a key recommendation for faculty and administrators; I suggest they be willing to take the first step toward student engagement. Another recommendation is to create an environment conducive to establishing a sense of trust for African American doctoral students. This involves addressing one’s own racial biases, providing access to all educational arenas, and creating a classroom environment that enhances student-faculty relationships. Imani sees outreach as merely being present and available. She explains:

*A professor returned my paper with several comments. When she gave my papers back, she said redo this, redo that, and you need to say a little bit more. However, I just want to sit down and talk to her and figure out how I can pull this out of me or how else can I improve myself as I go through this program. The professor has high standards, but they are not outlined in the syllabus or anything like that. And she’s just not available to explain.*

Relationship with the Institution

A sense of trust is impacted by the overall relationship between African American doctoral students and the institution, and certain elements enhance that trust. According to Ghosh et al. (2001), the following antecedents are critical: sincerity, expertise,
congeniality and openness. The data suggest that African American doctoral students prefer an environment that is open, honest, friendly and inclusive. For many of the students, the classroom increases their visibility while providing an environment that instills trust. However, a surprise finding is that most of the students describe this institutional environment as being historically hostile. The University of Denver has a history in the African American community of being elitist and exclusive. The institutional climate for many African Americans doctoral students as created by some campus employees and majority students is perceived as being unfriendly, rigid, unwelcoming and disingenuous.

Implications: The students in this study are a hearty and self-motivated group and will persist in spite of any difficulties encountered (Lewis et al., 2004). However, the results of this study find that the institution excels in its areas of expertise, but fails to create an environment of trust for African American doctoral students in terms of sincerity, congeniality and openness. Ngozi explains:

*I’m not sure that I’ve seen evidence of openness. What I have seen is an effort to educate, that’s the goal but as far as challenging parts of the program that may be unproductive or not effective, I haven’t really seen an attempt to acknowledge that there are some areas for student feedback or input.*

Feeling as unwelcomed guests, the students believe that institutional leadership fails to serve all constituents (Page, 2003). For faculty and administrators, championing the cause of diversity by taking strong, personal stands on the need for change and role-modeling the behaviors required for change is essential to move the institution forward (Cox, 1994). These stances must take place in the classroom and elsewhere on campus.
University leaders’ commitment to educate the academic community about the value of having African American doctoral students in the classroom and on campus is crucial. This commitment by leaders must incorporate respect, service, and equity and bonafide means to create and maintain relationships between the African American doctoral students and the general institution.

**Recommendations**: As African American students embark upon their journeys to pursue the doctoral degree, they must evaluate whether the institution is worth establishing a relationship with; whether the journey will destroy their feelings of self-worth and confidence.

The recommendation for the leadership of this institution is more extensive. Faculty and administrators must establish a renewed commitment to creating a diverse higher education community. Page (2003) suggests that leadership must be committed to at least five key qualities:

1. Commitment to understanding other cultures
2. Understanding and commitment to basic values
3. Culture of trust
4. A conscious development of strategies to attain diversity
5. A willingness to be accountable

Faculty and administrators are encouraged to cultivate a willingness to insure that all voices are heard on the issues of diversity and to maintain open and honest dialogue about a very difficult topic: racial differences. This commitment to open communication and honesty is essential in establishing a culture of trust. Additionally, student support is
crucial to the overall success of the institution’s efforts to create a more inclusive environment for African American doctoral students.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study provide an opportunity to highlight suggestions and recommendations for this institution to create an environment of trust and inclusiveness for current and future African American doctoral students. However, a few limitations and further recommendations for further research are discussed below:

The most significant limitation of this research is the small pool of racially homogenous participants. In further research, I recommend a larger group of participants reflecting a regional influence based on the number and types of institutions solicited to participate in the study.

Another limitation is the salience of race for the majority of the participants. The effects of race and self-worth for these students may have influenced their overall outlook on some aspects of the study. It is important to investigate how students with varying degrees of racial identity view trust.

This study explores the institution through a small number of students, some of whom worked on campus. Future research might explore whether being an employee of the institution impacts a student’s overall sense of trust and relationship with the institution.

The student participants range in age from 25 to 55 and length of enrollment in a doctoral program is 1 -7 years. Future research efforts might examine how African American doctoral students’ experiences related to a sense of trust change over time.
Finally, the participants tangentially discussed support services for graduate students of color, particularly African American doctoral students. Most expressed disappointment in the lack of services available to doctoral students by the Center for Multicultural Excellence. A study of the role that campus services play in helping students develop a sense of trust may inform administrators about ways to effectively address the needs of its African American doctoral student community.

Conclusion

This research provides a general understanding of the benefits of student trust in the academic arena through the eyes of African American doctoral students enrolled at the University of Denver. This dissertation presents a variety of recommendations and suggestions for creating an institutional environment that increases inclusiveness and builds a sense of trust. While this study focuses on the thoughts, perceptions and experiences of only a few African American doctoral students, I hope it continues to illuminate issues as past studies have done, thereby generating another opportunity to have meaningful dialogue on the challenges and struggles facing African American doctoral students at this and other institutions. An examination of the findings may also be an opportunity to revisit the “social contract” that has been extended to the University of Denver by these students as an investment for future benefits from the institution; trust in its basic form.

Throughout the study, students consistently stress the racial implications resulting from a lack of diversity, particularly for African Americans at the University of
Denver. Many express concerns that the institution is uncomfortable dealing with the challenges created by a diverse campus community. If the institution truly supports the notion of diversity in accordance with its statement of inclusive excellence (Appendix B), then it must aggressively shift the responsibility for diversity on the campus to everyone, i.e. administrators, faculty, staff, and students, as opposed to one unit or department shouldering the responsibility. Additionally, the leadership of the University of Denver must also be willing to face the messiness of diversity. As Ashanti notes:

...diversity means conflict. We have all these people with differences and we don’t all agree with each other. So there has to be some facilitation on how we still work together to create something really good even when we don’t agree or get along. DU is not at the point where they’re ready to facilitate that. That’s the messy part of diversity. We feel the tension and we just want to get rid of all the people that we think are causing the tension, so we can go back to our smooth way of decision-making.

This research resulted in a description and analysis of trust through the eyes of African American doctoral students who are insiders within a predominantly White institution of higher education. The implications provided insight into what African American doctoral students tell us will positively impact their educational journey and academic achievement.

Afterword

I think of myself as a black woman in that I share in common with these other people, my black sisters and my black brothers, a history of oppression, a history of joy, and a history of cultural experiences that have shaped each generation... And I’m a part of that!

Ebony
I write this afterword in the wake of the recent racial firestorm created by the arrest of noted Harvard scholar, Professor Henry "Skip" Gates at his home in Cambridge by a White police sergeant. This incident serves to further illustrate the experience of being Black on a predominantly White university campus. Dr. Gates, an African American male, has dedicated his entire academic career to studying race in the United States. Returning home from a trip abroad, a broken front door required him and his driver to break into his own home. An observer passing the home alerted the Cambridge Police Department of a possible break-in. The result was the arrest of a non-violent, law-abiding American for mouthing off to a law enforcement officer. The national debate that still rages on today re-establishes the undeniable fact that race still matters in America. It is through that lens that I examined what it means to create an environment of inclusiveness and create a sense of trust for African American doctoral students in a land wrought with racism.

As an African American doctoral student, I grappled with the struggles facing students like me on campuses across this country and welcomed the chance to tell a small part of our story. The past six months have been an adventure for which nothing in life had prepared me -- a window seat to observe members of a highly exclusive club: African American students enrolled in doctoral programs at the University of Denver. While each participant told their own unique story, they also told the same story: one of pain, disappointment, racial slights, and frustration. But, as their ancestors had done before them, they spoke of dreams, accomplishments, knowledge and opportunity. Through their eyes, which are a reflection of my own, I better understand their sense of
trust in the system that all too often renders us invisible. But like the chameleon, we are still undeniably here.
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Studies in Higher Education.


APPENDIX A: DIVERSITY STATEMENT
Diversity Statement

We believe that one mark of a leading university is its commitment to diversity and the concomitant practice of recognizing and valuing the rich experiences and world views of individuals and groups. Diversity yields many benefits to institutions that successfully cultivate diversity within their educational, research and community service activities. By achieving and maintaining a multicultural constituency of administrators, faculty, students and staff, an institution successfully connects with the demographic reality of society. The institution gains an edge in educational and research opportunities and in preparing students for living and working in an increasingly diverse and global society.

The University of Denver community is strongly committed to the pursuit of excellence by including and integrating individuals who represent different groups as defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, age, disability, national origin and religion.

The University's commitment to diversity in particular requires that we attract members of historically under-represented racial and ethnic groups. To create a rich academic, intellectual and cultural environment for everyone, our concern must extend beyond representation to genuine participation. Our commitment must entail the creation of initiatives and programs designed to capitalize on the benefits of diversity in education, research and service. In sum, our actions must speak louder than our words.

We also believe that in order to achieve our goals, we must create a campus climate with an ethos of respect, understanding and appreciation of individual and group differences. We must encourage the pursuit of social justice within and outside the institution.

A positive campus climate requires the University's sincere willingness to include all its diverse stakeholders in the decision-making process. No individual or group can be marginalized or systematically excluded. We aim for change within the University and ultimately, beyond the University. We seek to be leaders in the creation of a more inclusive and just world.

For more information about our efforts to ensure that the University of Denver continues to be an exceptional private institution that seeks to achieve excellence through diversity, please visit the Center for Multicultural Excellence.

*www.du.edu/chancellor/diversity-statement.html*
Inclusive Excellence

In 2006, the Center for Multicultural Excellence initiated the campaign to introduce the concept and practice of "inclusive excellence" at DU. The concept was unveiled at the 2006, Diversity Summit by Dr. Alma Clayton-Pedersen, Vice-President for Institutional Renewal with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

The AAC&U concept of inclusive excellence moves DU away from a simplistic definition of diversity to a more inclusive comprehensive, and omnipresent notion of diversity by shifting the responsibility for diversity on the campus to everyone, (i.e. administrators, faculty, staff, and students) as opposed to one unit or department shouldering the responsibility of diversity. Inclusive Excellence in practice, also shifts the concept of diversity as a numerical representation (numbers only) of diverse faculty, staff, and students to transforming the institution into a vibrant community that embeds diversity throughout the institution in multiple areas including (but not limited to) demographics (numbers), curriculum, policies, pedagogy, financial resources, leadership, hiring, student learning, marketing, technology, teaching, student advising and more.

*www.du.edu/cme/about/history/html*
Invitation Flyer

Invitation to Participate in a Study about the Experiences of African American Doctoral Students at a Predominantly White Institution

Help Answer Questions Like:

What is your relationship with your educational institution as an African American doctoral student?

Do you feel welcomed and included or do you stand out and feel isolated?

Do you trust the institution to do the right thing on your behalf?

Who: African American doctoral students

What: In-person interviews (location of choice)

When: January 31 – June 30, 2009

Why: To learn about your experiences as an African American doctoral student in a PWI

Researcher: Zelda M. DeBoyes
Ph.D. Candidate, University of Denver
zdeboyes@du.edu
APPENDIX D: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION
Dear Doctoral Student:

Please allow me to introduce myself: my name is Zelda M. DeBoyes, and I am an African American doctoral candidate at the University of Denver conducting research on other African American doctoral students. The purpose of the study is to obtain information relating to how the University of Denver can create an environment of trust for African American doctoral students.

I am looking for ten African American doctoral students to interview over the course of four-six weeks beginning in the Winter 2009 quarter (at least three interviews). These interviews will be about your sense of trust in the institution of higher education as an African American doctoral student at a predominantly White university. Each of the three interviews will be 90 minutes long, spaced two weeks apart. I plan to compensate you for your time at the conclusion of the first interview if you are selected. **I will offer you a $50 gift card for your time.**

Additionally, we will schedule a meeting following the three interviews so that you can confirm your responses and ask any questions. Your name and all of the information which I obtain as a result of our interviews will be strictly confidential. I will use a pseudonym in place of your name.

Your participation in the study will provide a number of benefits: (1) an opportunity for your voice to be heard with regards to African American doctoral students in higher education; (2) an opportunity for you to influence improved learning experiences for African American doctoral students in the future; and (3) guidance for the University of Denver in designing an environment that creates meaningful academic and social experiences of doctoral students, particularly African Americans. In short, your voice will contribute to social consciousness about the learning issues of African American doctoral students at a predominantly White institution.

This email includes a questionnaire for you to complete and return to me at: zdeboyes@du.edu. This questionnaire will enable me to select a sample of ten (10) African American doctoral students who are excited about contributing to this study.

If you are selected, you will hear from me by return email. However, please provide your phone number as well so that I may contact you during the course of the interviews. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 303-739-6450, or email at the above address. Thank you for your time.

Warmest Regards,
Zelda M. DeBoyes
APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY
Consent Form to Participate in Research Study

Purpose
You are invited to participate in a research project studying trust and the experiences of African American doctoral students who attend a predominantly White institution (PWI) of higher education. You have been selected because of your interest in discussing this topic. You also meet the research criteria discussed in the initial interview. Your participation in this study is important because of the ways in which trust may create invisibility/visibility for African American doctoral students. It is through your eyes and voice that this research study shall expose your experiences in a PWI, as well as the factors that create student trust. The understanding of those experiences will better inform administrators, faculty, and classmates of the factors which establish an environment of inclusiveness. This research is being conducted for a doctoral dissertation by me, Zelda M. DeBoyes, a Higher Education student at the University of Denver.

Participant Requirements
You will be asked to participate in at least three interviews that should last about 60-90 minutes each, spaced out over the course of two - four weeks. The interviews will focus on your personal experiences as an African American doctoral student at a PWI to include factors of trust; interpersonal relationships with faculty, the institution and peers; and institutional factors that may contribute to your invisibility/visibility. These interviews will be audio-recorded and you will be given the chance to read through the written record of each interview to make changes and comments. The recordings, transcripts, and other materials will be kept confidential and placed in a locked location in my home. Therefore your name and personal information will be changed on all transcripts and written copies to protect your privacy. No one will be personally identified in the results/findings. Only summarized results/findings of this study and the interviews with pseudonyms will be available to my dissertation committee and to participants in the study.
Incentive for Participation
I am extremely grateful for your participation which allows me to complete this research study. Therefore, I will offer you a $25 gift card to Starbucks or Subway for your time.

Benefits and Risks
Benefits to participation in this study include the opportunity to discuss your experiences as an African American doctoral student at a PWI. Taking part in this research is not expected to involve any significant risks to you. However, you will be talking about your personal experiences and perceptions related to your racial identity, which may result in some uncomfortable feelings. A reference to the on-campus counseling center can be provided upon request. I also have a packet of information regarding other campus resources should you request them. I respect your right not to answer any question or to end your participation in this study at any time.

Participant Rights
Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, there will be no penalty. If you are unable or unwilling to address an interview topic, you are not obligated to do so.
PARTICIPANT’S SIGNED CONSENT

As a research participant, I understand that there are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. If information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be subject to a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

As a research participant, I have read the above paragraphs and understand the conditions of participation in this study. Additionally, I understand that it is not possible to identify all possible risks in a research study, and I believe that reasonable care has been taken to minimize both the known and the unknown risk in the current study. As a research participant, I have asked for and received a satisfactory description of any language I did not understand. I understand that I may withdraw at any time with no penalty. I have received a copy of this consent form.

(Please Circle)

Yes  No  I agree to participate in this study.

Yes  No  I agree to be audio taped.

Participant’s signature          Date

Primary Researcher’s signature          Date
Contact Information
This project is being completed by Zelda M. DeBoyes (303) 739-6440 as part of the requirements for the doctoral degree at the University of Denver under the supervision of Dr. Frank Tuit (303) 871-4573. Please feel free to call with questions about the project. If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the research sessions, please contact Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Sylk.Sotto-Santiago@du.edu, Office of Sponsored Programs at (303) 871-4052. You may also write to Ms. Sotto-Santiago at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

This study and this consent form were approved by the University of Denver’s Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research in December 2008.
Screening Questionnaire: Background Information

Thank you for participating in this research project. This questionnaire will take no more than 10-15 minutes. The purpose of the research project is to understand how participants define the factors that they believe are most beneficial in creating an environment of trust for African American doctoral students at a predominantly White institution (PWI).

Biographical Information:

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Where were you born?
4. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

Racial Identity:

1. How do you self-identify racially? (i.e. African American, Black, Bi-racial, other).
2. When you think of yourself as African/Black American, what does that mean?
3. How important is it for you to see yourself as African/Black American?
4. In which doctoral program are you enrolled?
5. Why did you elect to attend a doctoral program at the DU?
6. Do you feel your racial identity impacts your experiences at the DU? How?

Contact Information:

1. What is your contact information? Email, Phone and best time to call.
2. When would you be available to begin interviews?
3. Where would you like to meet?

The participant invited to take part in the larger study which will require three more in-depth in person interviews. Each interview may last approximately 60-90 minutes.

The first interview will focus on the participant’s life history. The second and third interviews will seek to understand how African American doctoral students describe the factors that influence their overall sense of trust as it relates to my research questions. I will also seek to determine what they describe as the primary components to creating an environment of inclusiveness at a predominantly White institution.

Thank you for your time and help. I look forward to working with you!
APPENDIX G: IN-DEPTH INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS
In-Depth Individual Interview Protocols

The purpose of the individual interviews is to understand how participants define the factors that they identify as being most beneficial to creating an environment of trust at a PWI. While the first interview focuses primarily on gathering general background information in an effort to establish how African American doctoral students describe their experiences at the University of Denver, it will also attempt to determine how the participant racially self-identify and whether they are an approximate candidate for the study.

Let’s review your screening questionnaire.

**Biographical Information:**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. According to your questionnaire, you were born in ____________. How would you describe your community?
3. What images of self did your community create for you?
4. Tell me about your relationship with your family.

**Racial Identity:**

1. How do you self-identify racially? (i.e. African American, Black, Bi-racial, other).
2. When you think of yourself as African/Black American, what does that mean to you?
3. How does a society that oftentimes does not look like you impact your sense of self?
4. Does the racial identity of others matter?
5. What impact does your race have on how others view you?

**Education:**

1. Describe your educational background?
2. Would you say your educational experiences have been positive, negative, or neutral based on your race? Why?
3. Tell me more about the doctoral program in which you are enrolled?
4. Why did you elect to attend a doctoral program at DU?
5. Do you feel your racial identity impacts your experiences at the DU? How?
6. Describe your educational support system?
Questions for Interview #2

The second and third interviews will seek to understand how African American doctoral students describe the factors that influence their overall sense of trust as it relates to my research questions. I will also seek to determine what they describe as the primary components for creating an environment of inclusiveness at a predominantly White institution.

Thank you for meeting with me… I think our first interview went extremely well. Do you have any questions or need clarification about our last interview? The purpose of this interview is to reflect on your current concept of trust and the factors that influence your sense of trust in an institution of higher education.

Let’s begin:

**RQ1: How do African American doctoral students describe and understand the factors that influence their sense of trust?**

1. What does it mean to you that an institution of higher education has an environment which fosters students’ sense of trust?
2. What factors influence your sense of trust in an institution of higher education?
3. How do your academic and social experiences at the DU influence your sense of trust?
4. How do your relationships with your professors; your classmates and Advisor influence your sense of trust?
5. Have you ever experienced any of the following while at DU:
   - Feelings of isolation
   - Feelings of standing out
   - Difficulty negotiating the system
6. Describe your peers.
7. How important are your relationships with your peers?
8. What are your feelings about the campus environment relating to trust?
9. What components do you feel are essential in an environment of inclusiveness?
10. Does your doctoral program or the institution reflect these components? Explain.
11. Describe your concept of trust.
Questions for Interview #3

Thank you for meeting with me today. The information that you have shared with me is extremely valuable to my research efforts. Thank you! In our final interview, I ask that you reflect on how you as an African American or Black doctoral student define and conceptualize trust in a predominantly White institution (PWI). Additionally, we will discuss what impact, if any, does the degree to which you perceive yourself as visible or invisible influence your sense of trust. Do you have any questions before we begin? If not, let’s begin!

First of all, let’s discuss the model of student trust. According to Ghosh, Whipple and Bryan (2001), there are eight antecedents of trust in the model of student trust. I will describe each of the antecedents; please indicate whether it is reflected at your institution. Please explain your response.

RQ2: How do African American doctoral students define and conceptualize trust in a predominantly White institution (PWI)?
1. How do you define trust in a PWI? Student trust?
2. Could you describe your experiences when you first stepped on a predominantly White university campus?
3. What factors have influenced your overall sense of trust in DU?
4. Have your experiences at DU created your sense of trust in the institution?
5. Does your racial identity play a role in your overall sense of trust?
6. What are the aspects of this institution that you generally trust? Aspects you do not trust?
7. Is it important to you that an institution of higher education can be trusted to help you achieve your learning and career objectives? Why?
8. What recommendations would you make to improve African American doctoral students’ sense of trust in DU?

RQ3: What impact if any does the degree to which student perceives themselves as visible or invisible influence their sense of trust?
1. Describe your concept of being visible/invisible in an academic environment?
2. Describe your experiences of being visible/invisible in an academic or social setting at DU?
3. How does the sense of visibility/invisibility impact one’s sense of trust in an institution?
4. What factors increase this sense of invisibility; what factors alleviate the sense of visibility/invisibility?
5. Are there specific things that your professors or classmates do that make you feel more visible? More invisible?
6. Do you feel that your racial identity impacts these situations? How?
7. Do you feel the racial identity of your professors; classmates and peers impacts these situations? How?
8. Do you have any feelings of visibility/invisibility at DU?
9. Comments or recommendations for improvements.