## Conclusion

As I bring my dissertation to a close, I reflect on my goal, the questions I attempted to answer and my findings. I began this study with a goal of learning more about how African American college students who engage in race or culturally specific activities self-affirm and the relationship between self-affirmation, self-determination and their perceptions of success. I asked six research questions around the topics of collegiate experience, the impacts of self-affirmation and self-determination and why students choose to participate in culturally specific events/activities. The research questions permitted me to bridge a gap in the higher education literature between discussions of HBCUs and PWIs by comparing and contrasting the experiences of the participants at their respective institutions. Using narrative inquiry as a research design, the life history, open-ended interviews with the participants were analyzed with grounded theory and CRT. This methodology and theoretical framework contributed to focusing on student voice in the higher education literature as well. Poems were constructed from direct quotations of the participants demonstrating the researcher's constructivist role. These poems support the data that produced the six major themes of the study: 1) impact of family on self-affirmation, 2) regulation of Blackness, 3) down-playing of Blackness, 4) educating/managing conflict around race, 5) self-affirming in a multicultural society and 6) self-affirmation and self-determination as giving back: hero/shero.

### Implications of the Study

**Theoretical Implications**. My study produced various theoretical implications which I place into conversation with the literature. These implications agreed, in some instances, but also pushed against what other researchers have stated concerning this population of college students.

The first finding from my study, collegiate familial ties, spoke to research in the higher education literature. Tinto's (1993) Student Departure Theory states students will either affirm to or away from college. While I do agree with Tinto that there is a moment when African American students will choose to affirm towards or away from degree completion, Tinto (1993) argues an abandonment of all familial ties must be done in order to affirm towards degree completion. This abandonment was not true for the participants of my study. None of the participants abandoned their familial ties with their biological families. Instead, the participants took on a collegiate familial structure in addition to their biological ones. Conversely, Guiffrida (2005) expands Tinto's (1993) theory and includes low versus high familial support as a determinant in affirming towards or away from degree completion. While I recognize this expansion of Tinto's (1993) original theory to be a very interesting one, my study cannot confirm nor disconfirm Guiffrida's expansion. The participants stated having familial support, minus one, and all described themselves as higher achieving students.

The second finding, self-affirmation as inclusion and exclusion, was a much unexpected finding. During my pre-research phase of reflexivity I did not imagine I would find the African American students regulating who and how their peers are allowed to self-affirm. Brown & Davis (2001) state African American students attending HBCUs automatically gain access to a social and cultural capital. Although this may be true, this automatic access to these capitals is not granted to all African Americans. As Anne told me her experiences of attending Justice University it became apparent to me she is not included in that category of students whom gain these capitals. Specifically, it was Anne's physical appearance which forced her to be an outcast by her fellow African American peers.

The finding of negotiation within the realms of Blackness is one which still has unanswered questions. While I attempted to answer the research question if self-affirmation looks different at the institutions and if the participants' experience changes the definition, I quickly realized how I imagined self-affirmation to look was sometimes different than what I found. Tatum (1997) speaks to the reasoning behind self-segregation of African American students. She offers support from a psychological stand point as to why this population of students chooses to separate from their peers. On the other hand, Tatum (1997) does not take into account the self-affirming facts expressed to me by the participants at Midwest University. The participants discussed the constant desire and need to negotiate their Blackness in order to gain access into various academic or social spaces. This negotiation is a part of their self-affirmation. Tatum (1997) would say these students would be expected to self-affirm by separating first and then integrating back into document culture after building up their valued sense of self. The participants at Midwest take their Black identity and adjust it, on what appears as a sliding scale, to manipulate others into letting 'them in' their circles.

In addition to Tatum's (1997) ideas concerning self-segregating to self-affirm, Baldwin et al. (1990) produce another viewpoint relating to self-affirmation. Baldwin et al. (1990) contribute to the psychological literature self-affirmation for African Americans as Africentric. This belief of African culture as the center of the cultural framework for African Americans was not apparent for the participants at Midwest University at all times. I argue my study does support this concept Baldwin et al. (1990) discuss with the fourth finding of educating White peers on African American societal contributions and racial education institutionally integrated across academic disciplines.

Educating White peers on African American contributions to the United States was a practice of Africentric which the participants at Midwest University chose to partake. This became my fourth finding of the study. Meanwhile, the participants at Justice University had imposed upon them an Africentric approach to curriculum and education as instituted through the university. The university instills an Africentric approach into the psychology of its students by teaching the contributions and achievements of African Americans in every academic discipline. The Africentric approach as it impacts the self-conscious described by Baldwin et al. (1990) guides the purposes of African Americans, leading students to self-affirm through participation in culturally specific events/activities. All the participants admitted to participating, at some point, in African American culturally specific events/activities supporting Cooper and Datnow's (1996) research of African American's self-affirming acts at a predominantly white boarding school. Banks' (2004) beliefs of maintaining cultural identity in a multicultural society also supports the self-affirming acts of the participants partaking in culturally specific events/activities.

One of the most interesting findings during the study was the dual membership which the participants found themselves operating daily. The participants at both institutions quickly realized during their collegiate careers there was a duality of being African American and living in a multicultural society of which they were expected to function. This dual membership emerged itself in the down-playing of Blackness occurring with the participants at Midwest University. The participant's down-play their Blackness regularly to increase their legitimacy and relevancy in a multicultural society. It is difficult to decipher if this down-play supports or goes against Tatum's (1997) ideas of identity one toward self-affirmation. As stated previously, I

argue the participants at Midwest University are practicing self-affirmation but in a manner not typical of the norm.

Another aspect of functioning in dual memberships in society presented itself as the participant's assessment of racial experiences. This assessment was also a characteristic of the participants at Midwest University and not Justice University. Tatum's (1997) psychology points to the process of race realization and it appears to be different from what the participants at Midwest University are exhibiting. The participants question every racial encounter, due to their dual membership as African American in a multicultural society, and make daily determinations as to whether their experiences are racist encounters. The experiences are constantly analyzed and then re-analyzed in hopes of a clear, indisputable answer to a common question. "Is that racist?" The participant's race realization follows Tatum's (1997) psychology, but differs in these ways. Instead of the racist experiences leaving the Midwest University participants to self-affirm and self-determine with other African American students only, the participants choose to self-affirm through evaluation and acceptance of the racist experiences.

In addition to the participants practicing dual membership by down-playing Blackness or assessing racist experiences, their African American identity also serves as means to balance in a multicultural society. The participants at Justice University consistently spoke about the balance they received attending a HBCU, minus an exception. They did not have to concern themselves with race, but instead could focus on their education. As Oldenbrug (1991, 2001) and Whitmire (2006) deliberate alternative spaces, the space of the HBCU is viewed by Justice University participants as an alternative space. This space, while it is the dominant space at the institution, is viewed as an alternative space expanding the ideas of what an alternative space looks like.

The sixth and final finding of my study changed my perception of self-determination. The participants, while self-determining collectively as African Americans have done historically, do not take advantage of the benefits of their collectivism. The participants at both institutions work with their African American peers with the end goal of educating and creating awareness on issues in their communities and campus. These collective acts of education and creating awareness are not viewed as ways which they share the burden of building and bettering their community. The participants go against the historical ways of those leaders in the African American community before them and view the burdens they carry as all their own. This finding was one which did not shock me as some of the others did as I realize we live in a society which is more selfish than in the past. Today's society does not promote collectiveness, working together, or highlights the accomplishments of groups of individuals, but rather focuses on the accomplishments of the single individual. This hero/shero individualistic mindset goes against the very nature of the founding of HBCUs as well. As Brown and Ricard (2007) pointed out the six goals of the HBCU, these six goals are achieved through the collective effort of all the faculty and staff at the institution. The interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum by infusing African American history across all academic disciplines brings a holistic approach to education. While the participants at the HBCU have noticed this approach they do not replicate it.

With moving away from how those before them chose to advance and better the Black community, this finding brings to the forefront more research is needed in order to understand when, how and why generations of African Americans after the Civil Rights Movement have shifted their mindsets.

**Practical Implications.** I am aware there is more research to be done concerning the institutional implications from this study; I do feel there are a few. Institutions of higher education should take note of the various ways the participants self-affirmed. These acts of self-affirmation presented themselves in various ways and call for attention to the role of culturally specific events/activities and environments. The participants acts may have varied between Midwest and Justice Universities, but all participants stated gaining something from participating in a culturally specific events/activity or environment. I would take this finding even further and state the cultural centers are needed on PWI campuses as it provides a way for minority students to self-affirm. I have chosen to highlight this as I am aware in more recent years there has been some discussion on the relevancy of cultural centers on PWI campuses. Any space, whether it is a cultural center or library, which offers a means to build ones valued sense of self is a space which is needed.

**Policy Implications.** As I stated with the practical implications of this study there is still more research to be done the same is true for the policy implications as well. University policies, primarily at PWIs, have stressed to its student body the concepts of inclusion and diversity. However, while doing this they have also stressed individuality should fall behind and conformity be completely embraced. This conformity takes place at universities through the stripping of its cultural centers, traditional programs based on culture and the focus on collectiveness and not individuality. Students are losing the very essence of what makes them unique and what helps to foster learning, experiences of different races, colors, religious affiliations and so forth. In order to progress at the same rate as their White counterparts, African Americans are forced to deny their heritage and who they are and accept a “we are the world” mentality. I argue this mentality is one which can only hinder the educational experiences of

students and the nation as a whole as we prepare future leaders to run an advancing economy and society.

Throughout this study, I incurred some challenges, had moments of enlightenment and many of self-reflection (excerpts from my journal are included). Also, I quickly came to notice the limitations of my study and where I could build for future research.

**Challenges & Enlightenment**

Focusing on self-affirmation, self-determination and success with African American students in college challenged me by forcing me to relive some very negative and hurtful collegiate experiences. I was forced to deal with issues concerning race and my personal navigation of it. As discussed later, I dealt with this issue through self-reflections in my journal.

A minor commonality I noticed amongst the participants at Justice University, which I do not stress in the findings and interpretation section due to its minor role compared to other findings, is the age of the participants. All the participants at Justice University were older than the average age of a senior and older than the participants at Midwest University as well. The participants at Justice University also were all transfer students to the university.

A major finding of the study which amazed me was the individualistic approach towards self-determination. The approach towards self-determination exhibited by my participants was very different from how this has looked historically in the African American community (e.g., Civil Rights Movement). The participants willingly place upon their shoulders daily the responsibilities of bettering the Black community. Although the participants work alongside other students, faculty, staff and leaders in the community to achieve this goal, they perceive the responsibility not as a shared one.

Lastly, the most intriguing part of the study during data collection was Anne's story. I was astounded by the experiences she shared with me as a bi-racial student, identifying as African American, and experiencing discrimination from her fellow African American peers. I quickly realized this regulation of Blackness was operating at its highest abilities at her institution.

**Personal Dilemmas**

Before beginning data collection for my study I was immediately faced with some personal dilemmas. The first dilemma presented itself, even before data collection began. Time was a major factor and concern for me as I had to travel to the two institutions. Working full time and time was a factor as I knew there was a limited amount of days I could take off. Time became more of a concern as right before traveling to Justice University I became aware I was expecting my first child. Even later, traveling to Midwest University became more challenging as concerns presented themselves medically concerning my health and that of my child's. While I was able to conduct six interviews in total, my goal was to conduct eight. Due to my personal situation I was unable to constantly travel back and forth to both institutions in order to meet with new possible candidates for the study.

At Midwest University my dilemmas became much more salient. I struggled constantly with interviewing the participants, as I found it very difficult for me to understand how they were negotiating their Blackness at their institution. Having attended PWIs from middle school to the present, I dealt with racism and diversity very differently than the participants at Midwest University. I often found myself speechless, upset, and even at some times angry with their reasoning for negotiating their Blackness in the manner which they did. I even felt myself wanting to challenge (and did challenge) a participant because he was negotiating his Blackness

so much at times as if he did not really identify as being African American, but only when it was convenient for him. As I write this, I find myself still with a slight level of resentment, hurt, and even intrigued that the participants at the PWI felt in order for them to be successful they had to put down the *race card*, so to speak, and negotiate their Blackness constantly. This negotiation was done in order to participate and function within the *diverse* institution they found themselves obtaining a higher education. This negotiation amongst the participants is something which I would like to explore further in the very near future and see if the PWIs push toward diversity has a correlation, if at all, as to why some African American students feel the need to negotiate their race/culture to this extent, if they do at all.

Reflecting back on the interview questions, I would have liked to have dug deeper into the notion of success and get a better definition from each participant concerning and why they agreed or disagreed with the one presented to them. As I conducted more and more interviews, I found myself digging deeper into this, but this was something I did not stress in the beginning when first starting data collection.

**Limitations**

Conducting this study, I found a few limiting factors. A major limitation to this study is the number of participants. As I said in chapter three, this study doesn't allow me to make generalizable claims due to low number of participants and the study is not longitudinal, however, this study does allow for claims to be made concerning the connections between self-affirmation, self-determination and success. There is also an inconsistency in the number of site visits between institutions. Justice University had one site visit and all interviews conducted in one day. Midwest University had two site visits with interviews conducted on two different dates. To be consistent throughout the study, both institutions should have had the same number

of site visits. The increased number of visits could have also allowed for recruitment of more participants.

**Self-reflections: My Journal**

As I conducted interviews and ran into different personal dilemmas along the way, I found journaling my experience as a researcher to be extremely helpful. As I mentioned previously this study forced me to deal with some personal issues regarding my own collegiate experience. Journaling these personal issues provided an outlet of which to better understand myself and how I felt about the participants in the study.

Journaling allowed me to confront the inner conflicts I had concerning race and trust. Due to my experiences in college, with both faculty and students, I developed lack of trust for Whites on my campus. Now, knowing this, I know this became a part of my own self-affirmation as I retreated to the comfort of peers sharing the same racial identity as myself. After one interview I wrote:

> *As time went on I didn't trust anyone that wasn't Black. The Black students… not saying all Blacks I encountered had my best interest at heart, but we carried the same burdens and struggles… no matter the economic background. On some level we were all niggers. And while I don't feel this same lack of trust for Whites, I am still very much aware of my racial identity and how it is perceived by others. To some extent I see a lot of myself in Anne and a little in Alexandra. Is it all about race? Should that be the first thing I think of when I feel I'm not treated fairly?*

Another area which I constantly was journaling was the personal connection I felt to each participant. Some of the researcher/participant connections were stronger than others, primarily the connection with the participants at Justice University. In many instances I reflected on how

sad I was listening to their stories and yet proud. Each participant had persevered a trial or tribulation, whether they recognized it in the same manner as I did or not.

> *My heart hurts for these students. They carry so much daily. It almost seems the students at Justice are more aware of their race or rather have a different, more aggressive approach. I'm not sure???? But I do know I have a bigger appreciation for the HBCU. I know it's worth more than ever… it takes away the race, minus Anne, and allows students to focus on what really matters… an education. I'd love to just talk to Anne… write about her only. Her story is amazing! I can say that I am proud of each student, all I spoke with. They are all so intelligent, so focused, so determined to be successful. "BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY!"-Malcolm X.*

**Future Research**

After completing the study I re-read my journal several times and was lead to various future research ideas. In the near future I plan to build on this study of self-affirmation, self-determination and success for African American college students. I will expand the study by adding the perspective of African American students attending predominantly Black colleges (PBCUs). I am interested to include this population of students at this type of university as they are new to the discussion in the higher education literature. I feel the perspective of this population of students can be a great addition to my study. After including students attending PBCUs within the current study, I plan to begin longitudinal studies with African American freshman through their senior year and post-graduation in order to better understand the role their institution plays in their desire and need to self-affirm. In including this new population of students, I will also gather experiences of bi-racially mixed students in order to see if Anne's

experience is unique to her or if other students attending other institutions have similar experiences to her as well. I would like to explore the phenomenon of these experiences to note them in the higher education literature, as they are currently not at the forefront of discussion. I am hoping the study will lead to causal claims concerning university policy, higher education policy and what is needed to ensure African Americans self-affirm at their institutions to increase graduation rates.