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NAVIGATING THE BLACK STUDENT FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE:
EXPLORING WAYS PEER MENTORING CAN ENHANCE
ENGAGEMENT AND BELONGING AT A PWI

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Coastal Carolina University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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with a specialization in Higher Education Administration.

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ABSTRACT

Studies indicate that minoritized students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) may struggle with engagement and establishing a sense of belonging. Peer mentoring may play a role in enhancing these opportunities to foster academic performance and retention. The sense of belonging and engagement for minoritized students at a PWI is essential to their academic sustainability. This qualitative narrative analysis study uses Strayhorn's (2012) theory of college students' sense of belonging as the theoretical framework to explore the peer mentoring experiences of 10 Black first-year students participating in a stand-alone model. Interviews were used to acquire insight into peer mentoring's influence on belonging and engagement while attending a PWI. The themes that emerged were (1) *Connectedness and Inclusivity and* (2) *Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support.* The findings indicate peer mentees' connection to peers and peer mentors through bonding and social involvement experiences. Peer mentees were made aware and utilized academic and campus resources from academic referrals, mental health wellness, and food insecurity referrals. Strayhorn's theory of college students' sense of belonging showed that most mentees felt connected, valued, and mattered to their peer mentors.

 Keywords: minoritized first-year students, peer mentoring, sense of belonging, engagement, predominantly white institutions, qualitative narrative analysis

DEDICATION

I would like to thank my parents (Richard and Edythe Frazier) and younger brother (Kelvin Frazier, PhD) for believing in me and encouraging me throughout this process. I would also like to thank my 91-year-old grandmother (Pearlene Warner Garvin) for instilling in me the importance of putting God first in everything I do and encouraging me to stay the course.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Minoritized first-year students are a growing population at postsecondary institutions across the country. Many of these students are the first to attend college in their families and see it as a path to change their socioeconomic status. Many minoritized first-year students attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) at which they face challenges such as self-exploration in a place where they may be the racial minority, psychological changes as they navigate microaggressions and lower expectations, and finding friends and role models who are like them. It is essential that these students build connections with individuals on campus with whom they may culturally identify. The first year of college can be pivotal as it is important for students to make a successful transition from high school to college. "During the first year of college, students find friends and role models, learn how to socialize, and undergo identity development and emotional changes" (Harrell & Capco, 2021, p. 7). Peer mentoring is one strategy utilized to ease the transition of minoritized first-year students to campus.

In Fall 2021, undergraduate students at 4-year institutions in the United States were 52.2% White, 13% Black/African American, 22.1% Latino/Hispanic, 7.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.7% Native American/Alaskan, and 4.4% two or more races (IPEDS, 2021). A growing population in postsecondary education, minoritized students belong to a racial, ethnic, cultural, or social group that has not been served by our educational institutions in the way White or affluent students have been. For example, Wingrove-Haugland and McLeod (2021) states that Wirth (1945),

> Defines minoritized as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural
>
> characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for

differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of

collective discrimination (p.2).

Wirth (1945) is used in this context to understand the history of minoritized groups.

These individuals have been marginalized and underrepresented, have experienced systemic

discrimination, and may face barriers to equal access to education. There has been a long history

of segregation and inequitable access to postsecondary education for people of color; however,

more higher education scholars have a research interest in narrowing racial gaps, transforming

college and university campuses, and creating conditions that no longer marginalize persons of

color (Harper, 2013). Wirth (1945) definition of minoritized populations often refers to

Black/African Americans, Latinxs/Hispanics, and Indigenous peoples (e.g., American

Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian) who, nationally, have graduation rates that are

significantly lesser than their White peers (Ajayi et al., 2021) and the term used in particular

situations and institutional environments that sustain a disproportionate number of Whites

(Harper, 2012).

Minoritized students also seek guidance and support while obtaining an education.

However, minoritized students at predominantly White institutions (PWI) may face

microaggressions and discriminatory practices that stifle their sense of belonging and willingness

to engage on campus. In a study conducted across three PWI campuses, 84.4% of students

identifying as African American and 3.1% of Latino/a students reported experiencing some form

of microaggression (Williams et al., 2020). This racist behavior towards minoritized students is

problematic in the areas of student belonging (Stebleton et al., 2014), engagement (Cooper,

2018), retention (Yomtov et al., 2015), and persistence (Motsabi et al., 2020). Peer mentoring is

a strategy that may assist minoritized students through such experiences as peer mentoring may positively influence belonging and engagement on a college campus. Peer mentoring is a widely used strategy to establish engagement and belonging (Cooper, 2018), connecting individuals with values, attitudes, understandings, and skills that characterize educational practice as learning (Irby et al., 2013).

Strayhorn's (2012) college students' sense of belonging theory will guide this study. This theory pertains to understanding basic human psychological needs such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Strayhorn, 2018). It brings awareness to providing healthy spaces for values and relationships that can only be developed through open participation (Sherman & Burns, 2015). There are limited studies that address the sense of belonging theory as a collaborative framework model in peer mentoring and its impact on student success (e.g., Carragher & McGaughey, 2016; Hall et al., 2020; Kazlauskaite et al., 2020; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). The limited research related to Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory and peer mentoring is a gap in the literature that this study aims to address because belonging matters (Allen & Kern, 2017), and it is necessary to explore the role peer mentoring plays in the belonging and engagement of minoritized students at PWIs.

Statement of the Problem

Minoritized students at predominantly White institutions (PWI) struggle to find specified spaces on campus where their cultural heritage is highly regarded (Ellis et al., 2019). Racially and ethnically minoritized college students are historically underrepresented on college campuses. In addition, those who make it to college often face barriers to success, such as microaggressions (Williams et al., 2020), discrimination (Valverde, 2012), and feelings of

isolation (Brooks & Starks, 2015) at PWIs and are expected to find a sense of belonging all on their own (Strayhorn, 2023). A sense of belonging creates an environment where students feel cared for (de Klerk, 2022), and is a factor that has demonstrated an impact on the success of minoritized, low-income, and first-generation students (Strayhorn, 2018). Another factor that positively impacts students' success is student engagement, defined as feeling legitimated and supported by a university community (Coates, 2007). Peer mentoring can promote first-year minoritized students' sense of belonging and engagement by connecting experienced peer mentors to support and guide first-year students, helping them to transition into university life (Burton et al., 2013).

This study explored peer mentoring and its role in minoritized students' sense of belonging and engagement at a PWI. Minoritized students' educational pathway to degree attainment can be more arduous while attending a PWI (Stebleton et al., 2014). The pressures of academics, self-exploration, and stress to improve their socioeconomic status can be overwhelming. Peer mentoring may help alleviate these pressures. Peer mentoring can contribute to minoritized students finding joy on college campuses through engagement in a campus community and belonging with peers and mentors. Peer mentoring is an effective strategy to enhance a sense of belonging and improve engagement and the overall satisfaction of first-year students transitioning into higher education (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016).

Fostering student participation and promoting engagement initiatives can be a challenge in higher education when attempting to retain minoritized students. Connecting peer mentoring into an all-encompassing program motivates and enhances student engagement among selected student bodies (Cooper, 2018). All-encompassing programs are initiatives that include targeted

populations and are comprehensive covering an array of activities to support mentees. Peer mentoring models can connect minoritized students significantly to their institutions and peers, boost self-esteem and confidence, and increase cultural awareness. These factors are essential to the academic success of minoritized students at PWIs. Students might have a greater sense of belonging, desire to be involved, or sense of engagement if they find aspects of campus joyous at a PWI (Tichavakunda, 2021). This study explores whether mentoring can serve as a powerful tool to improve minoritized students' sense of belonging and engagement on a PWI campus.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative analysis study is to examine the role peer mentoring plays in cultivating the engagement and sense of belonging of 10 minoritized students participating in a first-year peer mentoring program at a PWI in the Southeast of the United States. Minoritized students are often unaware of expectations, financial barriers, and academic rigor that may affect their success (Pena et al., 2022), and peer mentors can help minoritized students adapt to university life (Martin et al., 2009). A minoritized student's sense of belonging and engagement is also vital to their academic success on a university campus. When minoritized students experience microaggressions from peers, faculty, and staff, such as being excluded and made to feel like they do not belong, they feel like outsiders on their own campuses (Williams et al., 2020), and peer mentors can provide social and emotional support (Seery et al., 2021). Examining the role of peer mentoring can provide a further understanding of minoritized students' sense of belonging and engagement and, ultimately, what institutions need to do to improve the retention, persistence, and graduation of minoritized students at PWIs.

Theoretical Framework

This study connects Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory to peer mentoring practices. The theory, which consists of seven core elements, focuses on the sense of belonging, derived partly from Maslow's (1954) model of hierarchy. A sense of belonging has been studied and written about since the 1950s (Allen & Kern, 2017). The college students' sense of belonging theory refers to students' perceived social support in higher education, a feeling of connectedness, the occurrence of mattering or feeling cared about, recognized, valued, appreciated by, and essential to peers or others (Johnson et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2012). Peer mentoring is a partnership where peers work together to accomplish a common goal through sharing their understanding of the university and academic resources (Seery et al., 2021). It can build connections to the university through mentors, mentees, and faculty to counterbalance barriers that mentees face, such as isolation, rejection, and alienation (Strayhorn, 2022). Racial-ethnic minorities experience a lower sense of belonging, higher levels of impostor syndrome, which are feelings of self-doubt, and reduced adaptation to college at Predominantly White Institutions comparable to White students, and these imbalances impact their college outcomes (Graham & McClain, 2019). By connecting first-year minoritized students with peer mentors, academic and social integration can positively impact a sense of belonging in college (Hall et al., 2020).

There are seven core elements of Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory: a basic human need, fundamental motives driving human behavior, heightened importance in a new setting, mattering, social identities, engendering other positive outcomes, and continual basis (Strayhorn, 2018). These tenets can improve motivation, retention, and achievement

(Johnson et al., 2020). There are two types of basic needs: latent and expressed. Latent needs are subconscious feelings and thoughts, and expressed needs are conscious and present (Strayhorn, 2018). Fundamental motives can affect human behavior, are a basic human need to establish a sense of belonging, and can direct students' behaviors to or against academic achievement norms (Strayhorn, 2018). Heightened importance in a new setting stems from a need for a sense of security or relatedness through acceptance by others (Strayhorn, 2018).

Mattering is a relational aspect of a sense of belonging and the person must believe someone cares (Strayhorn, 2018). Social identities affect college students' experiences to establishing a sense of belonging as it relates to race, gender, class, sexual orientation and beliefs (Strayhorn, 2018). Achievement, engagement, well-being and happiness are all positive outcomes from engendering a sense of belonging to create a bond to the campus (Strayhorn, 2012). A sense of belonging should be practiced continuously to strengthen and regularly influence commitments and behaviors (Strayhorn, 2018). Mentorship aims to increase the sense of belonging on college campuses and the development of minoritized students' academic goals (Hall et al., 2020), as peer mentoring can challenge conventional norms and foster social change within similar backgrounds. The focal point is how students from minoritized backgrounds find their sense of belonging, regardless of many barriers presented on campuses (Johnson, 2013).

The seven tenets of Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory are defined in more detail in the following sections.

Basic Human Need. Basic human needs refer to one's essential need for food, water, sleep, shelter, etc., and are the minimum resource required for lasting physical well-being. A sense of belonging is a basic need of college students, after the needs for food and safety, and

shares equal salience in higher education (Strayhorn, 2012). A college student's belonging needs must be fulfilled ahead of other higher-order needs like self-actualization and knowledge. (Strayhorn, 2005).

Fundamental Motive. Fundamental motives affect human behavior as people want to feel unique, part of something greater, cherished by others, desired, appreciated, supported, and somewhat crucial as the focus of someone else's love (Strayhorn, 2012). Students who feel isolated in educational settings may form friendships with marginalized peer groups with similar hurdles (Strayhorn, 2012)

Heightened Importance. Heightened importance is a shared sense of socially built meaning that provides safety or understanding (Strayhorn, 2012). Students may struggle with studying, learning, and remembering information until they find belonging in learning spaces (Strayhorn, 2012).

Mattering. Mattering is the belief that one cares and is a social trait of a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). The concept of mattering is a motive that can motivate all behaviors (Strayhorn, 2012).

Influenced by Identities. Social identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion meet and cross in ways that concurrently influence the sense of belonging, may not always be displayed equally for all people, and may adversely affect college students' experiences of belonging at a university (Strayhorn, 2012).

Positive Outcomes. Positive outcomes lead to various results, such as accomplishment, engagement, wellness, contentment, and optimum functioning in a specific setting or field

(Strayhorn, 2012). Promoting a sense of belonging can support a campus environment for solid relationships; severing those bonds may be difficult or impossible (Strayhorn, 2012).

   Sense of Belonging (SOB) Continuous. SOB continuously stabilizes and consistently influences one's commitments and behaviors by forming bonds of support that signal attention, dependence, and importance over time, exhibiting a rightful and valued place of personal acceptance (Strayhorn, 2012).

   Some strengths of this theory include that a sense of belonging matters, guides human behavior, and can lead to positive psychological outcomes and success (Strayhorn, 2020). However, social support is necessary and focusing on social support alone will not raise optimal student performance, which can be perceived as a weakness in human functioning (Strayhorn, 2020). A weakness of this theory is the individual ways that people seek and experience belonging because of personality traits or perceptions and experience belonging in diverse settings as individual differences and context act as vital roles in our interpretation of belonging motivation (Allen et al., 2021). Another weakness of this theory is the degree to which people are motivated to belong can vary based on characteristics and psychological dysfunction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Kelly, 2009). This study will address these strengths and weaknesses in the data analysis as the core elements of a sense of belonging are represented in the coding process and appreciating the interaction between individual and environmental influences that shape belonging.

   A sense of belonging and student engagement are two viewpoints that can explore essential ways that individuals may make sense of the role and identity of their institution. Student engagement is described as the time and energy that students allocate to academically

motivated activities and the scope to which the institution attains students to participate in activities that lead to student success (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Schroeder & Kuh, 2003). It involves students in impactful activities and experiences including in-class dialogues, faculty-student partnerships, peer connections, and deep-active learning among other factors (Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). Institutions can execute immediate changes to engagement practices when they confirm which areas of student engagement need attention (Kuh, 2001).

This theoretical framework has been chosen because there is limited research on Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory in relation to peer mentoring. However, in a qualitative study examining the sense of belonging of first-year students during COVID-19, Potts (2021) found that participants' experiences aligned with Strayhorn's theory implicating that social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging, and belonging engenders other positive outcomes. In another study using Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory, Vaccaro et al. (2015) found that for students with disabilities, relationships with peers helped with social integration, developing self-advocacy skills and academic success. By using this framework, it will add to the credibility of limited established literature, thereby providing additional ways that belonging and engagement on campus can be enhanced through peer mentoring.

Research Questions

This qualitative narrative study examines how peer mentoring of Black students at a PWI can influence a sense of belonging and engagement. This study addresses the following research questions: (a) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in

their sense of belonging at a PWI?; and (b) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their student engagement experiences at a PWI?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it shares the narrative experiences that 10 minoritized students face on a PWI campus to support institutional change to establish a sense of belonging. This study aimed to recruit students from multiple racial groups who identified as minoritized; Black/African Americans, Latinxs/Hispanics, Asian, and Indigenous peoples (e.g., American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian). However, only Black students self-selected to participate. Second, the findings of the study provide insights for PWIs on how to better engage minoritized students in extracurricular activities on campus. Third, the study identifies ways PWIs can foster inclusivity practices to achieve academic performance in Black students. Fourth, this study may encourage PWIs to implement strategies to boost the mental well-being of Black students to negate feelings of isolation, depression, or anxiety. Fifth, this study emphasizes supportive interventions provided by campus resources to design programming to promote inclusivity on college campuses. Sixth, the study identifies the sense of belonging and engagement connection to the peer mentoring relationship using the stand-alone mentoring model. Lastly, institutions can become change agents for students who are isolated, silenced, and made to feel othered for inclusion, retention, and recruitment purposes. Students from historically marginalized backgrounds face gaps in persistence and college completion rates based on factors such as income, race/ethnicity, and first-generation status (Aud et al., 2010; Cole et al., 2020; DeAngelo et al., 2011; Seidman, 2005) and peer mentoring has been successful as a strategy to support first-year students (Martin et al., 2009). This study serves to advance the

literature on minoritized students using Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory to explore the role peer mentoring plays on their sense of belonging and engagement at a PWI as there are only a limited number of studies that focus on the use of peer mentors to increase students' sense of belonging at universities (van der Velden et al., 2023; Yomtov et al., 2015).

<p style="text-align:center">Assumptions of the Study</p>

This research study was anchored on whether participants would share honestly with me about their experiences of peer mentoring playing a role in their belonging, engagement, and impact on student success. As a member of this community, I understood that completing a college degree has challenges and successes. Through the mentorship engagement, there is likely a connection between the challenges and experiences shared by mentors and mentees. It was also expected that saturation would occur as these individuals share similar backgrounds and experiences at a PWI. It was important to ensure data was accurately interpreted. I believed that since I shared a similar background with participants and shared individual findings with each other, I provided a credible depiction of their narratives. I understood that subjective interpretation may be a factor due to this shared background, but allowing participants to member-check the results minimized this concern.

<p style="text-align:center">Definition of Terms</p>

The following definitions are used in this study when referring to peer mentoring, minoritized students, mental well-being, student engagement, sense of belonging, and Predominantly White Institutions (PWI).

Mental Well-being: "The concept of well-being refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience" (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p.142). The mental well-being of first-year

students is crucial to their academic success. Mental well-being is a concept of positive mental health and contributes to all aspects of human life (Tennant et al., 2007). First-year students may struggle with the adjustment to college life because of homesickness and the new environment.

Minoritized Students: People of color, members of other historically oppressed social identity groups, and those having low socioeconomic status in college can be described as minoritized students (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Social identities can contribute to the marginalization of minoritized students. These individuals also self-identify as a minority and have experienced being marginalized due to membership in a historically underrepresented social identity group (Williams et al., 2020). These students often have barriers to success because of unfamiliarity with the campus culture, feelings of isolation, and microaggressive behaviors of some members of the university community.

Peer Mentoring: Peer mentoring, which involves senior students disclosing their own experiences with incoming freshmen, is widely practiced across universities to help with the transition from high school to higher education (Bhatia & Amati, 2010; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Seery et al., 2021). Peer mentoring involves an association in which a more experienced student aids a less experienced one with their academic and social integration into college life (Collier, 2015; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2023). This type of engagement is a cost-effective tool to retain and persist first-year students in college and can foster experiences of belonging on campus. "Peer mentors who recently experienced many of the same changes provide new students with activities that create a sense of belonging, safety, and reassurance" (Harrell & Capco, 2021, p. 7). The transition from high school to college can be difficult for first-year students and peer mentoring can assist with this adjustment.

Predominantly White Institutions: "Oversimplified, "predominantly white" can be taken to mean that more white students are enrolled at the institution than are students who are members of underrepresented racial groups" (Bourke, 2016, p. 13). A PWI is an institution where the majority are white students compared to Hispanic Serving Institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Alaska Native Serving Institutions, Native Hawaiian Serving Institutions, and Minority Serving Institutions. PWIs have a history, demography, curriculum, climate, and set of symbols and traditions that embody and reproduce whiteness and white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022).

Sense of Belonging: The experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to a campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (de Klerk, 2022). First-year students that exhibit belonging experiences are likely to be more engaged on college campuses and have a positive effect on mental health outcomes. "Students' sense of belonging at school is central to both their psychosocial well-being and their academic success" (Chiu et al., 2016, p. 175).

Social Identities: Historically marginalized and discriminated groups have worse achievement outcomes and well-being compared to that of high-ranking social groups because of race, class, gender, religion and sexual orientation (Dasgupta et al., 2023). These identities have been used to oppress minoritized groups affecting their mental well-being and may have adverse effects on college students' experiences of belonging at a university (Strayhorn, 2012).

Student Engagement: Student engagement can be defined as engagement practices, including active learning, participation in challenging academic activities, forming strong communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational opportunities, and

feeling supported by university learning communities during the student experience (Coates, 2007). The engagement of first-year students on campus is crucial to their overall sense of belonging and helps yield positive mental health outcomes. "Student engagement has been a focus of efforts to understand and enhance student learning and higher education for over 70 years" (Groccia, 2018, p. 18).

Conclusion

This qualitative narrative analysis study's significance and potential impact is for colleges and universities to develop and implement more peer mentoring programs to foster belonging and engagement. "Scholars and various institutional agents need to invest more energy in understanding the unique gendered experiences of women and men of color on campus" (Harper, 2014, p. 138). Mentoring supports professional success in many fields; mentoring increases the retention of diverse groups of students (Zaniewski & Reinholz, 2016). This study establishes how access to peer mentoring impacts minoritized students' sense of belonging and student engagement. Upperclassmen should serve as peer mentors to first-year students. As more advanced peers, mentors both normalized and empathized with the experiences of their mentees, encouraging connection to a community (Zaniewski & Reinholz, 2016).

We must understand ways to retain and graduate minoritized students as these students face microaggressions, isolation, and lack a sense of belonging on college campuses. Exploring ways that peer mentoring plays a role in their success is the intent of this study. A responsive strategy for students is peer mentoring, a supportive experience providing help, guidance, and advice (Shaughnessy, 2013). The sense of belonging theory is the selected theoretical framework. This framework (Strayhorn, 2012) can provide a lens for how the data is analyzed

and interpreted. It can empower institutions to create more inclusive opportunities for active engagement to promote academic success through mentoring. Minoritized students can significantly impact their college experiences by encouraging positive peer-mentor relationships. Peer mentors can make meaningful connections, model good behavior, offer pathways to learning, and share their student experiences with their peers (Cooper, 2018). The significance of this study is mainly to identify how peer mentoring plays a role in enhancing a sense of belonging at a PWI and to encourage institutional change.

The next chapter will review literature about minoritized students, their sense of belonging, engagement, peer mentoring, and some mentoring models. This literature will focus attention on minoritized students' experiences at a PWI and the importance of peer mentoring this population of students. Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory is used throughout the review to bring context to the framework. Chapter three will provide insight into the chosen methodology, participant site, and methods of data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations, positionality, and limitations will also be addressed. Chapter four will provide the findings of this study with emerging themes. Chapter five will discuss these findings and provide recommendations for future areas of study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To provide an understanding and some context to this qualitative narrative analysis study I examined the role peer mentoring plays in the sense of belonging and engagement of minoritized students at a PWI. This chapter begins with a review of literature related to minoritized students, their experiences in postsecondary education, and the history of inequitable access to postsecondary education. Then, I examined the literature to define and conceptualize engagement and a sense of belonging to understand how they influence the experiences of minoritized students at PWIs. Next, I addressed how engagement and feelings of belonging can work together to foster opportunities for peer social interactions. I also gave a broad overview of peer mentoring followed by the research site's peer mentoring program model used on many college and university campuses. Following this, I examined literature related to the importance and impact of peer mentoring for minorized students and their lived experiences at PWIs. Despite the opportunities provided by PWIs to encourage student engagement, some minoritized students may still need help to establish a sense of belonging, and this review of literature examined the research surrounding this problem.

Minoritized Students

"To be "minoritized" is to be treated as a member of a group that is suppressed by and disadvantaged relative to the dominant social group" (Wingrove-Haugland & McLeod, 2021, p. 2). Minoritized groups have endured racism that engenders marginalization that imposes varying degrees of harm; and navigates institutional norms that encourage White privilege (Harper, 2013). Black students have been ostracized longer than they have been offered opportunities to matriculate at many PWIs (Harper et al., 2009; Harper, 2013). Minoritized first-year students

encounter feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and worries about academic success, among other concerns (Strayhorn, 2022); however, a sense of belonging can buffer these negative experiences (Brown et al., 2022). Harper et al. (2009) argue that it may appear that minoritized students have made vast strides in higher education, but much remains to be done to secure equity and increase participation. Minoritized students may have a lower socioeconomic status background entering college. Traditionally, in postsecondary education, students from affluent backgrounds are more likely to be admitted and persist to graduate from college than those with low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Baker & Vélez, 1996). Minoritized students have experienced exclusion, multiple forms of oppression, and unjust treatment while attending institutions (Wingrove-Haugland & McLeod, 2021). A sense of belonging and engagement sponsors academic achievement and mental well-being (Brown et al., 2022). For example, Brown et al. (2022) found that when minoritized first-year college students attending a PWI recognized discrimination during their first month of college, these students reported feeling significantly less like they belonged at their university by the end of the first semester of college. Griffin & McIntosh (2015) also found that students more often choose to intentionally engage in culturally based organizations, making a distinction between groups with a racial and ethnic focus.

Minoritized Student Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions

Even though there is an appearance to provide a welcoming environment, minoritized students still experience racial discrimination and bias (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016), as PWI's have a long-standing history of prejudice and racism as from establishment, colleges in the United States were openly tied to white supremacy by the action of depriving the Native

Americans of land and property, and through the enslavement of Africans (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). Subsequently, racism is structurally embedded in the history and policies that systematically disadvantage racially minoritized people in educational settings (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023). For example, Bonilla-Silva and Peoples (2022) states that according to Wilder (2013):

> The first five colleges in the British American colonies—Harvard (established in 1636), William and Mary (1693), Yale (1701), Codrington (1745) in Barbados, and New Jersey (1746)—were instruments of Christian expansionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the American slave trade and slavery (p. 1491).

Harvard, the oldest of these institutions' first Black student graduated in 1870, 234 years after Harvard was founded (Chaddock, 2017).

In its historical whiteness, PWIs remained mostly White until the 1970s which has shaped the racial climate, lack of diversity, and many racial issues fought in higher education today (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). The Supreme Court's decision to desegregate schools has most definitely ignited change; however, there are always individuals that will drag their feet and not comply with new standards (Ryan, 2014). Institutions must work to reimage institutional values, how the curriculum is facilitated and created, the development and implementation of policies, and how educators and practitioners are trained to work with minoritized student populations to build community (Brooms et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Harper (2012) found that in a study examining seven published journals that all 255 articles from these journals supported people of color viewing and experiencing campus racial climates differently than

White peers; however, only 21.6% journal articles show usage of the words "racist" and "racism" while 63.1% used words unfriendly or negative instead of naming experiences as racism. Minoritized students at a PWI can experience microaggressions and discriminatory practices, creating an unfriendly environment that can affect their mental well-being and academic performance because they may experience mixed emotions when faced with racism or discrimination for the first time in college (Valverde, 2012). Microaggression has been associated with adverse physical and emotional health outcomes for decades, damaging young people, particularly in educational settings (Williams et al., 2020), and instructors may think minoritized students were admitted due to their cultural backgrounds rather than academic achievements (Valverde, 2012). Peer mentoring can provide students with an outlet to discuss frustrations to assist with navigating disparagers, as they may also feel invisible at a PWI. Minoritized students can feel invisible in the eyes of white peers and faculty who do not show acknowledgment or appreciation toward them (Haynes, 2022) and experience more racially charged encounters at PWIs than at other institutions (Brooks & Starks, 2015).

"Racist structural conditions and practices are material and create inequitable learning experiences for racially minoritized students" (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023, p. 645). Minoritized students may lack access to opportunities to add to their educational experiences and feel pressured to work twice as hard as their white counterparts. Due to inequalities in educational access, students sense the pressure to work twice as hard to enjoy the privileges automatically afforded to white peers (Haynes, 2022). Peer mentoring can be used to combat the need to work harder since mentors can help mentees maneuver as a result of prior knowledge of experiences. The approach peer mentors formulate to steer such hurdles can ignite minoritized

students' overall engagement and sense of belonging as mentees may be reluctant to ask university administrators for help when struggling academically or adjusting to college life for fear of being perceived as inadequate and unsuitable for academic rigor (Brooks & Starks, 2015).

Minoritized students face structural challenges associated with curricula. Standardized curricula that are supposedly designed to enhance academic rigors for all students raise political or social contexts to cultural narratives and undermine the experiences of marginalized communities; however, promoted as race neutral, reinforce White supremacy (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2023). This barrier can minimize the academic success of minoritized students. Another experience that minoritized students may face at a PWI is financial challenges related to the cost of college and expenses. Hu (2010) found that financial aid awards may influence the engagement experience of students participating in college activities as aid may relieve students from other responsibilities and provide the ability to spend more time on campus pursuing educational opportunities. "Poor economic conditions may make it difficult for university students to negotiate the financial demands of paying for a college degree and associated living expenses" (Twill et al., 2016, p. 1). The pressure of being a minoritized student coupled with financial constraints can severely impact a student's mental health. Minoritized students at PWIs are exposed to higher stigma, less institutional assistance, and less community support than White students, which can contribute to difficulty positively coping with competing stressors (Keels, 2013). Peer mentoring can be used to provide intervention measures through engaging in college resources to create a more centered approach to the mental well-being of minoritized students, as feelings of isolation can create emotional and psychological stress (Valverde, 2012).

A strategy to achieve the need for a sense of belonging is to promote and nurture supportive

environments at PWIs (Sinanan, 2016).

Minoritized students at PWIs may face an atmosphere where racism, sexism, and

homonegative attitudes exist (Chambers et al., 2012; Guyton & McGaskey, 2012) and racism

and sexism can be psychologically and academically poisonous (Harper, 2014). Minoritized

students who identify as LGBT encounter homophobic and heterosexist views from Christian

peers in classes and campuses (Chambers et al., 2012; Guyton & McGaskey, 2012), which can

affect achievement and attitudes during their educational experiences as campus culture and

climate are significant factors (Doan, 2011). For example, Lemley (2014) found:

> Students whose religious, ethnic, or cultural identities are viewed askance by Christian
>
> peers, or students whose sexual identity or political affiliations create anxieties about
>
> their relationship to core institutional values, may experience a sense of not "fitting in"
>
> with their learning community (pp. 56-57).

A peer mentoring relationship can provide social and emotional support focusing on

engagement through social networks (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011), as psychosocial challenges and

lack of social support can harm persistence (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). Stewart (2009) found

Black students' knowledge of their social identities may be more complicated than just

navigating race and in their self-concepts, understanding of life events, and relationships with

peers and while Buck (2018) found peer mentors to possess caring and non-judgmental

dispositions. Institutions working to create inclusive spaces for minoritized students are

necessary to foster a sense of belonging. "An important precursor to students' lowered sense of

school belonging is experiencing racial/ethnic discrimination on campus in the absence of a

strong and protective ethnic identity" (Brown et al., 2022, p. 13). "Given the role that mentoring can play in countering discrimination and exclusion, with regard to microaggressions as well, mentoring has the potential to aid in coping with the microaggression experience" (Nair & Good, 2021, p. 3).

<center>**Strayhorn's College Students' Sense of Belonging Theory**</center>

Peer mentoring programs are a crucial means of establishing student belonging and engagement, assisting with transition to institutions, raising retention rates and fostering academic success (O'Brien et al., 2012). This practice is important in the overall feelings of connectedness and social support with a campus community. For example, Strayhorn (2019) defines sense of belonging as:

> In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (p. 4).

This requires institutions to create conditions in which the environment is supportive, students feel connected, valued, and included to enhance students' academic success and well-being. Before Strayhorn (2012), the term sense of belonging was introduced by Hurtado and Carter (1997) as an individual's place in relation to a group or community. As the need for more knowledge of belonging practices expanded, Strayhorn (2012) formed his theory by developing more specific elements of belonging. These core elements include having a basic human need for all people, human behavior is a fundamental motivation that drives one towards or against academic success in an educational setting, belonging in certain contexts can be varied,

belonging is the feeling that of mattering to others and affected by social identities, fostering positive outcomes with engagement and achievement, and belonging needs will change over time. These elements have been found to be instrumental in the areas of having a positive influence on academic scholarship (Strayhorn, 2012). O'Brien et al. (2012) found social and personal benefits are related to peer mentoring. In this study, peer mentoring increased belonging and reduced stress as it related to the transition into college and better social engagement experiences.

Crisp and Cruz (2009) found that institutions established peer mentoring programs to increase engagement, belonging, and retention. A sense of belonging is important for first-year students of color to foster positive experiences at PWIs. Sense of belonging is not just relationships, but also carving out physical spaces for people to come together. Chester et al. (2013) found that more than half of mentees expressed feelings of connectedness and belonging from involvement in a peer mentoring program. Early engagement and belonging occurrences are important factors for the continued retention of students. Strayhorn (2018) describes peer mentoring as a notion of "academic spotters" as such programs aid black males in support for social integration into college empowering their educational success. As this theory acknowledges that belonging positively plays a role in higher retention rates, academic achievement, and overall student satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2012).

Sense of Belonging and Engagement

A strong sense of belonging often correlates with increased engagement as students' sense of belonging and participation at school are two of the most important measures of student engagement (Organization for Economic Cooperating and Development, 2003). Gillen-O'Neel

(2021) found that a sense of belonging is a vital proponent for sustaining student engagement among all students, but especially among first-generation students. When individuals feel a daily connection and value at a university, they are more than likely actively willing to participate, contribute, and be involved in activities on campus. For example, Brooms et al. (2018) found:

An important construct for students' transitions and integration to college is developing a sense of belonging, which is centered on a feeling of cohesion within a university, city, or community and is related to how students – especially Students of Color – may develop a sense of membership or mattering in the university (p. 31).

London et al. (2011) and Shernoff et al. (2017) support a daily connection between belonging and engagement. Since belonging and engagement are heavily linked, peer mentoring programs were established to offer strong interpersonal and academic support to increase student engagement on campuses (Cooper, 2018). Brewster and Ashley (2019) also found that data supported student engagement, self-efficacy, and mentoring positively impacting the retention of minoritized students.

Peer mentoring can assist minoritized students with establishing a sense of belonging on campus. This population may often require additional support from campus resources, and peer mentors know to offer suggestions about what resources minoritized students may find beneficial. As experienced students, peer mentors share their knowledge and skills through casual social interactions to help new students develop academic abilities, better understand university life, and engage with their institution and student cohort (Dawson et al., 2014). This student engagement practice aids in academic preparedness in the classroom and continues to provide minoritized students with the tools necessary to navigate common social apprehensions

outside the classroom such as homesickness, depression, and anxiety. Strayhorn (2022) found that students interpreted their general and academic health and well-being at the start of college as challenging and unsettled, mostly due to social adaptation concerns brought on by college transitions. The academic success of minoritized students in the classroom is vital to overall degree completion rates and peer mentors can gain rapport to decrease educational barriers. Peer mentors in the classroom offer students support, and this relationship allows students to be more forthcoming about their progress and difficulties than they would with their instructor (Cooper, 2018).

Sense of Belonging

This section builds on the previous section and describes the concept sense of belonging in relation to the theory. Students' sense of belonging is consequential not only for general development but also for retention outcomes and academic achievement (Lemley, 2014). For example, de Klerk (2022) found:

In terms of college, a sense of belonging refers to students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (p. 154).

A sense of belonging is a psychological factor in the success of first-year minoritized students on college campuses, as it is associated with students' social adjustment and academic success (Strayhorn, 2022). A sense of belonging is the nature of students' building positive relationships with others on college campuses (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019; Strayhorn, 2022). The social support on college campuses and minoritized students' feeling of

being cared about are significant to student success outcomes. Strayhorn (2009) found that African-American males at PWIs who interacted with peers of a different race and who held different interests reported higher levels of sense of belonging than those who did not interact with diverse students. Research indicates that diverse intercommunications among minority students can increase their sense of belonging at PWIs (Palmer et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2009). Institutional programmatic experiences that are offered can be aspects that allow for minoritized students to build connections with faculty, staff, peers, and the institution and should be a goal of any institution that wants to improve the success of their students (Brown et al., 2022); since previous research shows only 36% of Asian Americans, 22% of Black Americans, and 15% of Latinx Americans attain bachelor's degrees compared to 53% of their White counterparts (Burke & Park-Taylor, 2022; Kena et al., 2016).

Experiences of discrimination and bias harm the sense of belonging of minoritized students attending PWIs, as previous research has shown that institutional interaction can have positive benefits for their feelings of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Studies have shown that institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion can shield the adverse effects of discrimination and bias on minoritized students' sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hussain & Jones, 2021). Additional studies have examined students' sense of belonging as the cohesion among diverse students or peers (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) as well as belonging to a place (i.e., classroom; Freeman et al., 2007) and belonging to a campus milieu (Cole et al., 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012); however, few studies have examined the adverse effects of minoritized students' first-year experiences related to discrimination and bias (Brown et al., 2022).

A few studies addressing a sense of belonging and educational outcomes suggest that belonging significantly predicts successful persistence in college (Hausmann et al., 2007; Locks et al., 2008; Museus et al., 2017). Establishing a sense of belonging is essential for minoritized students while attending a PWI. Hausmann et al. (2007) found that designing interventions specifically to enhance a sense of belonging on a college campus yielded positive results for student persistence. A sense of belonging may increase students' attachment to their academics while seeking and using campus resources, alleviating stress to improve mental wellness and leading to persistence and success (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Locks et al. (2008) found that positive interactions with diverse peers provide a greater sense of belonging at colleges and universities. Peer mentoring can help minoritized students to establish a feeling of belonging. This strategy is effective in assisting students to learn, develop a sense of belonging, and overall transition into the campus community by embedding a curriculum to offer strong interpersonal and academic support (Cooper, 2018). This experience matters to the connectedness and social support of minoritized students to hinder any barriers to academic success and mental well-being, as performing well academically is critical to future success (Valverde, 2012).

Belonging can undoubtedly be associated with persistent use of campus services and positive mental health outcomes (Gopalan & Brady, 2020), as researchers have discovered that students who have established institutional belonging seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent (Strayhorn, 2012). As a campus resource, peer mentoring can cause a shift in cognitive and behavioral awareness from dialogue and discourse (Eddy & Kirby, 2020), when people in positions of power may have the most trouble with allowing diverse perspectives to enter a conversation because it will allow others to question their privilege (Wang, 2018).

However, peer mentoring explores new directions, and tolerance of slip-ups brings valuable insight into improving services for vulnerable and stigmatized populations (Buck, 2018). This strategy used on a college campus can promote belonging and engagement as minoritized students are an oppressed population that struggles with a sense of belonging, and it has cognitive triggers and behavioral indications (Strayhorn, 2023; Wang et al., 2019). Glazzard et al. (2021) found that peer mentoring can provide safe environments for mentees to share personal situations and obtain beneficial support in terms of mental health. Gower et al. (2022) also found that a sense of belonging is a key factor for positive mental health outcomes as peer mentoring benefits social connectedness. There is extensive research that has shown a sense of belonging fosters student success in postsecondary education, particularly for historically marginalized students (Braxton et al., 2000; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Newman et al., 2015; Rhee, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008; Thompson, 2001; Tovar & Simon, 2010). Stebleton et al. (2014) found that of 145,150 students from across six large public research institutions, 27.3% were first-generation and 72.7% were non-first generation. The first-generation students had lower ratings of sense of belonging and satisfaction than non-first-generation students and discovered that they have a higher recurrence of reporting feeling stressed, depressed, or upset in contrast to non-first-generation students as a sense of belonging is significantly associated with mental health.

Engagement

Engagement practices such as peer leadership interventions may yield more desirable outcomes than other approaches (Harris III et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2006). A critical element of student success at colleges and universities is engagement. The National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE) defines (undergraduate) student engagement as the amount of time and effort that students put into their classroom studies that lead to experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. Specific attention to how the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services induces students to participate in and benefit from such activities (NSSE, 2011; Vaughan et al., 2016). Institutions may find it difficult to identify ways to engage first-year minoritized students at PWIs due to the nature of campus climate and challenges of inclusion of culture (White et al., 2018). White et al. (2018) found that minoritized populations may sometimes feel challenged by their white peers to prove themselves in the classroom or when working together on a project, therefore creating barriers rather than opportunities. Sense of belonging is also affective, as there is an emotional, temperamental, and dispositional response to perceptions of connectivity to the campus (Wood & Harris III, 2015). The ability to engage in campus engagement activities may become limited if institutions are not creating spaces for their minoritized student population. Student engagement is necessary for quality education and successful college outcomes (Hu & Wolniak, 2013).

"The achievement gap between students of color and White students is present in the classroom before students step foot on the college campus" (Doan, 2011, p. 33), as previous research suggests that minoritized students become more engaged and gain more from their experiences if enrolled at institutions that are perceived as inclusive and affirming (Nelson Laird et al., 2007). Wood and Harris III (2015) found that institutions where Black men were extremely engaged in active and shared learning contributed to higher levels of belonging. Minoritized students experience microaggressions daily at PWIs and, when voicing against inequity, can be categorized as emotionally inept, nonconformist, an annoyance, and troubled

with social, academic, emotional, and physiological consequences (Jones & Reddick, 2017). It is extremely tough for minoritized students to thrive in this setting. Racial/ethnic inequalities in student outcomes are a reality at most colleges and universities nationwide (Harris III & Bensimon, 2007), and minoritized students' sense of belonging can be weakened in institutional environments that are predominantly white, triggering heightened feelings of isolation and marginalization (Cabrera et al., 1999; Chavous, 2005; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Maestas et al., 2007; Wood & Harris III, 2015). Institutions cannot change their history; however, acknowledging the present pains of minoritized students through the extension of inclusive and equitable treatment can foster a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2023).

There has been previous research that indicates negative social experiences of minoritized students affecting their sense of belonging and academic performance while adjusting at PWIs (Cabrera et al., 1999; Harper & Newman, 2016; Hurtado et al., 2007; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Schwitzer et al., 1999; Smedley et al., 1993; Terenzini et al., 1994; Thompson & Fretz, 1991). Minoritized first-year students face tremendous stress during their first year in college as extensive literature in higher education explores the salience of psychosocial outcomes such as a sense of belonging and mattering to foster connection experiences and identifying support in college to assist in their success (Cole et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2007; Schieferecke & Card, 2013). For example, Kuh (2009) found:

Moreover, engagement increases the odds that any student—educational and social background notwithstanding—will attain his or her educational and personal objectives, acquire the skills and competencies demanded by the challenges of the twenty-first century, and enjoy

the intellectual and monetary advantages associated with the completion of the baccalaureate degree (p. 698).

O'Brien et al. (2012) found that engagement in a peer mentoring program helped mentees develop knowledge and confidence so that they could feel that they could achieve success at their university. They also reported a significant decrease in stress associated with being at university.

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring is a strategy that may assist minoritized students through such experiences as it may have positive influences on a sense of belonging and engagement to work against systematic racist and oppressive institutional structures (Strayhorn, 2023). Students arrive at institutions already engaged in extensive relationships (e.g., family, employment, and organizations) and will establish new ones through their studies, which need to be recognized to engage students with innovatory program design and delivery (Senior & Howard, 2015). Mentoring has been an effective way to communicate with students about becoming successful in college from individuals who have been through the postsecondary system (Yomtov et al., 2015). Mentees describe mentors as people with knowledge who can aid in the development of others. There are often two leading roles of mentors: training in career functionality and providing functional advice to guide professional implementation and growth (Schenk et al., 2020).

Peer mentors support first-year students by offering opportunities to build community while helping them learn how to build relationships with professors and discuss difficult situations halting academic success. Peer mentors displayed that most students evaluated the

interpersonal qualities of the peer mentor highly, believed the mentors facilitated integration into the university and provided academic, career, and emotional assistance (Yomtov et al., 2015). Building community and bridging opportunities through mentoring can foster college readiness skills that are a continuous barrier to postsecondary student success. The practice of mentorship can support the transition of first-year students to a university and foster a feeling of home in the academic environment while teaching them the skills to become successful in college (Schenk et al., 2020). Mentoring can promote the first-year development of students and guide them along a practical career path toward graduation and building the skills necessary to compete in a competitive job market (Nick et al., 2012). Literature shows how mentoring tends to restore structural disadvantages, such as barriers to career growth and can impact academic success experienced by women and other minorities (Warhurst & Black, 2019).

Previous studies propose that university peer mentoring programs may increase students' feelings of engagement, which can impact retention (Crisp et al., 2020; Tinto, 1997; Yomtov et al., 2015). For example, Yomtov et al. (2015) study of 304 freshmen mentored and unmentored found that mentored students felt significantly more integrated and connected to their university at the end of their first semester compared with unmentored students. Mentors can give guidance and structure to many issues that mentees encounter. Unmentored students can fall prey rather quickly to the rising pressures of life. Compared to their unmentored peers, adolescents with innate mentors during childhood were less likely to engage in gang activity, be involved in physical altercations, and have unprotected sexual intercourse throughout young adulthood (Hagler, 2018). This reference shows the significance of a mentoring relationship, and the

positive implications mentoring can have to form a sense of belonging and foster engagement methods to adulthood.

University retention and graduation rates, career development, and the ability of first-year students to feel a sense of belonging can be influenced by mentorship. "College students' sense of belonging, mainly early in their college careers, may be vital for their academic motivation and success" (Freeman et al., 2007, p.204). Reducing the barriers between students and faculty can help facilitate a more successful first academic year experience for minoritized student development. Institutional change that focuses especially on the success of racially diverse and other underserved students should engage those individuals through institutional procedures that support their contributions and strengths (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). Mentoring can improve student confidence to cultivate student engagement and the sense of belonging of first-year students during their transition into a university or college setting (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016).

Research has shown that mentors with similar marginalized racial and socioeconomic circumstances build the most impactful mentorships with their mentees (Hagler, 2018; Santos & Reigadas, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). For example, Stanton-Salazar (2011) found that shared cultural backgrounds enabled mentees to navigate educational institutions while maintaining their cultural and familial values and Santos & Reigadas (2002) reported higher self-efficacy, greater satisfaction with the program, and recognized their mentors to be more helpful, compared to students with mentors of dissimilar ethnic backgrounds. Mentoring occurs one-on-one and can be derived from a similar cultural background to form trusting bonds with like individuals (Schenk et al., 2020). College can be hard for minoritized students; however, institutions can

change existing practices, policies, and procedures that influence barriers to students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2023). Peer mentoring can contribute to first-year students' sense of belonging to a college campus (Burton et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2009), and by belonging, higher levels of well-being, social relationships, and educational and occupational outcomes can benefit both during school years and throughout life (Allen & Kern 2017).

"Long-term studies propose that logically, organic mentoring relationships are associated with supporting, long-standing educational outcomes, but there is little to no information to spot the instruments motivating these possible effects" (Hagler, 2018, p. 150). Natural bonds can be used to establish a mentoring relationship between peer mentors and first-year college students. Studies show that students can be open to learning more from mentors who have similar backgrounds and are on the same career path (Yomtov et al., 2015). Overall, a sense of school belonging is a critical exponent to the probability that first-year minoritized students will persist to their sophomore year at a PWI (Brown et al., 2022).

Peer mentoring aims to interact and build relationships to encourage students to seek help (Cooper, 2018). Peer mentoring can be used to cultivate a sense of belonging to empower minoritized students and combat barriers to success in the classroom to improve academic performance. The process of this concept can be challenging for students with experience in oppressive situations due to cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic status (Wang et al., 2019). Previous research said that Black students attending a PWI have experienced a lower degree of belonging than their white counterparts (Strayhorn, 2012), and more research should be implemented to understand how Black students' sense of belongingness may be influenced by peer mentorship (Graham & McClain, 2019).

The following mentoring program models promote first-year students' sense of belonging and engagement opportunities at colleges and universities. The most common types are presented to provide examples of successful mentoring models and are not exhaustive. Offering such models at institutions can develop a welcoming environment for students of color to encourage them to remain on their campuses (Brown et al., 2022).

The Stand-Alone Program Model

This section is provided to give context and background information about the study's research site. Peer mentoring programs that offer learning support to students outside the classroom as an additional university support system and are voluntary and can have weak attendance rates are considered stand-alone models (Cooper, 2018). Engaging in comfortable peer climates can enhance positive student outcomes in achievement, belongingness, and academic efficacy (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Hall and Jaugietis (2011) found in a six-year study that peer mentoring significantly enhanced first-year students' experiences and that the effects of these benefits have strengthened throughout their time in the program. Many universities and colleges have implemented these mentoring programs to foster student success and sense of belonging initiatives. The peer mentoring program allows the peer mentors to demonstrate cultural competence while working with diverse groups of peer mentees and to practice effective communication and problem-solving skills (Burton et al., 2013).

Hill and Reddy (2007) found that first-year students viewed mentoring as a valuable means of student support as it assisted in the needs of new students to deal with issues that new students would be unwilling to discuss with academic staff. Glaser et al. (2006) also found that peer mentoring programs are a critical factor in the successful transition of first-year students

into a university, and new students engaged in mentoring found it most beneficial by exhibiting

higher levels of success. Ehrich et al. (2004) supported the idea that these programs help to

improve grades, attendance, and behavior. DuBois and Karcher (2013) stated that the need for

such programs has increased over time as the need for mentoring increases.

Importance of Peer Mentoring Minoritized Students

Throughout the years, mentoring students has been proven effective in higher education

(Carragher & McGaughey, 2016) as educational outcomes such as critical thinking and cognitive

development become present from student participation promoting a sense of belonging and

connectedness to the campus environment (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2009; Moore, et al., 1998;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), which may be particularly important for Black students, reporting

less involvement outside of the classroom (Allen, 1992; Flowers, 2004; Nelson Laird, et al.,

2007). Mentoring can assist in the overall retention and persistence rates of minoritized first-year

students who recently graduated high school and this mention is relevant as it provides context

for understanding students' academic backgrounds. This can provide these first-year students

with support, guidance, and academic and campus resources to navigate challenges for improved

academic performance. Although the United States' high school graduation rates are at an all-

time high (83%), the U.S. lags behind nearly two dozen comparably developed nations and

considerable gaps in the U.S. in graduation rates by race and income (Hagler, 2018, p. 154).

High school graduation rates can influence college readiness and how students navigate

challenges in their first year in college (Hagler, 2018), and mentoring can serve as a strategy to

assist with the transition from school to university, enhancing the first-year student experience

(Hall & Jaugietis, 2011). Students are often matched with peer mentors as available social

support to establish a sense of belonging and a connection to the campus. They can have respectable outcomes due to excellent matching by the end of the relationship (Strayhorn, 2012).

      Historically, minoritized populations are often low-income and first-generation and can be oppressed and unknowledgeable about resources to achieve academic success at a PWI (Sinanan, 2016). This can mean that navigating college successfully may become extremely difficult while facing barriers to success because of assumptions, perceptions, or expectations placed by others (Valverde, 2012). Black students are the least satisfied with the racial climates on their campuses; being minoritized also supports the notion that perceptions of adverse campus climates are not specific to only Black students but other minorities as well (Cabrera et al., 1999). Peer mentoring can lead to a decrease in minoritized first-year students' feelings of belonging and student engagement by providing opportunities for connection, support, and acceptance.

      Minoritized students often cross distinctive financial circumstances that affect their experience in higher education (Pena, 2022). Peer mentors were established to aid first-year minoritized students with achieving educational, financial, or personal barriers to success. An institution's ability to offer mentoring to first-generation and low-income students can demonstrate retention strategy efforts of minoritized identities. It can foster a sense of belonging through student engagement to address academic struggles and structural issues. Mentors can coach students through learning processes, attending to matters that faculty might not have the time for at the individual learner level (Henry et al., 2011).

      Many colleges and universities have established programming to engage students with peer mentors to assist in a successful transition from high school to college, as institutional

structures, policies, and various practices must change to produce conditions for students' sense of belonging in education (Strayhorn, 2023). These programs can provide purposeful cultural support to acknowledge and affirm identities, experiences, and backgrounds as an engagement mechanism. Engagement practices can help students who most need it to offset limitations in their academic development and cultivate a campus culture that fosters student success (Kuh 2009). Effectively designing university peer-mentoring programs can target low college retention and tackle graduation rates of minoritized students. Forms of mentoring have been faculty-to-student, student-to-student, peer tutoring, and peer leaders in the classroom. The mentees can reference the success of student-to-student mentoring and comparable programs in helping to have a sense of connectedness to the university, which sequentially should project a lower likelihood of stopping college (Yomtov et al., 2015).

Minoritized first-year students are important to the success of institutions, and institutions should provide the advantage of resources for academic success and to promote better college experiences. The partnership between a student and a peer mentor can help establish clear and clean goals to influence academic performance by allowing mentees to voice their needs to self-advocate. These goals can be career or educational goals and can highlight students' strengths and weaknesses of students to better understand their abilities. Goal setting and career pathways signify that mentoring comprises measurements of the student's strengths, challenges, and skills and supports placing academic or career goals and decision-making (Henry et al., 2011). Peer mentors are trained to assist with this practice and can support a sense of belonging and engagement on campus. Kuh (2009) found that students engaging in educationally meaningful

activities helps to balance the scales, especially for students from low-income familial backgrounds and others who have been historically marginalized (Kuh, 2009).

Impact of Mentoring Minoritized First-Year Students

Being minoritized is not a matter of being a part of a group that amounts to less than half the population of one's society; it is a matter of being treated as a member of a group that has been suppressed by and is disadvantaged compared to the dominant social group by being systematically denied socioeconomic equity (Wingrove-Haugland & McLeod, 2021). Historically, underrepresented populations struggle with a sense of belonging and student engagement at PWIs and should engage in mentorship practices to facilitate this need. "Mentoring is not a common practice. However, nationally representative data show that only 15% of youth reported having a formal mentor before age 18, and fewer than 1% of adults have served as formal mentors" (Hagler, 2018, p. 150). Low-income students are often first-generation students. These students have yet to learn what it will take to earn a college degree. These students must receive needed guidance regardless of their income level, which is more likely to increase the dropout rate. Black et al. (2019) stated that first-year, first-generation minoritized students listened more to their mentors' advice and trusted them as authority figures due to previous postsecondary experience. Additionally, students from poverty-stricken backgrounds are roughly twice as likely to stop college compared to working-class students and five times more likely to stop college than money-making students (Hagler, 2018).

This information leads to the need for mentoring. Research shows that minoritized first-year students who are well-matched to mentors can establish positive outcomes for academic success. At the end of the mentorship, satisfaction ratings regarding the matchup showed that

75% of mentors and 80% of mentees felt they were either "very well" or "quite well" matched (Nick et al., 2012). Other research indicates that the match between shared ethnicities positively impacts mentoring outcomes (Ajayi et al., 2021; Blake-Beard et al., 2011). Institutional support for mentoring is vital to aid in the success of first-year students' retention and graduation rates. Understanding the worth of obtaining a college degree for both the individual and society, it is valuable to inspect indicators that affect university retention and graduation rates (Yomtov et al., 2015).

Institutions of higher learning should secure institutional funding for mentoring first-year students to address university retention and graduation rates. Salinitri (2005) found that out of fifty-six first-year low-achieving students, 50% of mentees reported that mentors were influential in all areas of mentor responsibility, and over 80% shared that mentors were influential in referring resources, providing strategies for academic improvement, etc. Even in institutions with satisfactory financial support and resources, underprivileged and racial or ethnic minority students experience several barriers to success (Hagler, 2018). One of those barriers is a feeling of not belonging to the institution or the culture within the institution. An undesirable transitional phase can end in feelings of not belonging, ultimately leading to debilitating signs of psychological anguish (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016.) As higher education administrators, it is important to allow students to feel a sense of belonging and enable students to grow personally, academically, and professionally through the power of mentoring.

Relationships outside of mentoring can exist through engagement and breaking down academic barriers. Peer mentoring allows mentees to be engaged and establish a lasting relationship. Peers are perceived to be more on a level to develop a bond. This bond can aid in

educating students on self-advocating to faculty. They also perceived the relationship to be better quality and provided more career advice to the mentees (Nick et al., 2012). Establishing relationships can be crucial to nurturing the success of first-year students.

Mentoring relationships with caring, nonparent adults are associated with positive youth outcomes (Hagler, 2018). When mentoring relationships are formed organically, this can benefit first-year students positively. Mentoring can equip first-year students with the knowledge and education to secure careers after degree attainment. At-risk students who are mentored improve first-year credits and first-to-second-year retention (Sneyers & De Witte, 2018). Compared to students who are not, mentored students typically excel academically and are retained.

If intentional mentoring is established, the mentors are rewarded within the relationship. The journey can also be one of mutual discovery as the mentor relationship should be 'mutually beneficial, and the mentor should continue to learn and develop as the mentoring relationship strengthens (Scanlon, 2009). This process will enhance the knowledge base of peer mentors to better assist first-year students in navigating college success practices. Peer mentors' involvement in the mentees' lives will undoubtedly strengthen their social skills (Schenk et al., 2020). Mentoring can positively change the lives of first-year students. Mentoring can make a difference regarding a sense of belonging and student engagement. In a comprehensive review of more than 200 mentoring studies, nearly all reports of mentoring have only positive results (Warhurst & Black, 2019).

Conclusion

Peer mentors have a unique relationship, and the benefit of connecting minoritized students to complete college successfully can be a life-changing experience. The use of

Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory in peer mentoring programming can provide mentees with a sense of connectedness, value, respect and mattering playing a powerful role in shaping the minoritized student experience (Strayhorn, 2012). The Stand-alone model fosters a solid approach to student engagement, a sense of belonging, and positive academic results. Peer mentoring can establish a unique relationship that can influence academic to low-income communities regarding health education and behavioral interventions (Oliver et al., 2020). Although nearly twice as many connections of other races have been reported by Black students than do whites, Black students also report having a weaker sense of belonging at their school (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

This literature review has acknowledged that minoritized students are at-risk when there is no sense of belonging or student engagement on campus, and peer mentoring can influence academic performance and mental well-being. "Peer mentoring demonstrates a belief in the value of the individual and expresses a commitment to ongoing development, capacity building, and the expectation of contributing to one's own life through empowerment" (Gower et al., 2022, p. 2). Minoritized students may also face food insecurity and mental health concerns, and peer mentors can affirm trust to discuss available resources on campus. Research on peer mentors' roles and activities has identified several evident support areas: social, emotional, and practical (Schwartz et al., 2020). Peer mentorship can be an asset on campus for minoritized students to reach positive outcomes as community-building initiatives can expand opportunities for positive intergroup socializing and help reduce the negative interactions that minoritized students experience at PWIs (Brown et al., 2022).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative narrative analysis explored the role peer mentoring played in the engagement and sense of belonging of minoritized students at a PWI. This qualitative research method explored the participants' lived experiences and gained an in-depth understanding of their thoughts and feelings. A qualitative approach allowed flexible adjustment to my approach and to organically ask questions during the study. The narrative analysis methodology was the interpretation of personal stories shared by individuals. It linked the relationships between people and revealed the close relationships between words in the text (Franzosi, 1998). It focused on transcribing human interactions by observing participants' narratives to uncover themes and meanings. Narrative analysis also recognized recurring themes and patterns that may have otherwise been isolated but became apparent (Bhattacharya, 2017). It also provided rich qualitative insight, added therapeutic value, and was engaging and accessible. As the researcher, I attempted to identify the content, structure, and form of the participants' life stories based on the qualitative data collected through individual interviews, analyze them, and separate voiced to disclose unique perspectives (Mertens, 2020).

I chose this methodology as it provided context to individual stories through narratives. I wanted to focus on the stories of minoritized students to gain an in-depth understanding of how a sense of belonging and engagement have been established from peer mentoring practices while uncovering the nuances and complexities that may not show through other research methods. Subjective experiences can reflect perspectives and meanings of lived realities (Bhattacharya, 2017). The sample size in a qualitative research study can be small, effective, and controlled to protect the anonymity of the participants. As a qualitative researcher, I could be more subjective

to diverse perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints to allow participants the freedom to express their voices authentically (Bhattacharya, 2017). Analyzing the experiences and perceptions of participants is valuable for exploring students' experiences in the mentoring program.

I chose to use narrative analysis to highlight participants' voices sharing their experiences, events, stories, and narratives. This process exposed meaningful patterns and insights. Narrative analysis in qualitative research is how researchers understand participants' stories and narratives from their personal experiences. "Narratives are shaped by contexts, but they also create new contexts by mobilizing and articulating fresh understandings of the world, altering power relations between peoples, and constituting new practices" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015, p. 3). Personal narratives gave me an overview of the experience of each minoritized student during their first year of college. Narrative analysis examined the impact on a sense of belonging and campus engagement. "When students have a strong sense of belonging, they see improvements in mental health, academic performance, and retention" (Pena et al., 2022, p. 3). These factors can be detrimental to minoritized students' success. Participants had a safe space to fully share their inner narratives that a structured interview would not allow. It is salient to emphasize the transcription of narrative interviews to include pauses and filler words to legitimize self-narratives.

Qualitative narrative analysis was used in this study to focus on the experiences of minoritized students at a PWI. Weaknesses of this approach were researcher subjectivity, potential for bias, and limited generalizability; however, strengths to combat such weaknesses were member-checking, in-depth exploration of experiences, rich data, and data collection and analysis flexibility. The research questions guided this study about peer mentoring and its

influence on minoritized first-year students' sense of belonging and engagement at PWIs. These questions were aligned with Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory to explore minoritized first-year students' lived experiences with peer mentoring (Strayhorn, 2012).

Research Questions

This study will address the following research questions: (a) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their sense of belonging at a PWI?; and (b) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their student engagement experiences at a PWI?

Research Site

The following section details the setting, population, and recruitment strategy used for this study to give context to the study. Pelican University is a regional university in the southeast part of the United States with 10,000+ students and a 16:1 student-to-faculty ratio. In 2023, the demographics of first-time first-year students was 6.9% Hispanic, 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 0.8% Asian, 15.6% Black/African American, 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 4.4% two or more races, and 71.2% White, which makes it a predominantly White institution.

Pelican University established a peer mentoring program called Mentors Advising Peers (MAP) in 2014. MAP was designed as a stand-alone model program to assist with the transition to college by improving academic performance, fostering a sense of belonging, and having support within the university community to help students with any initial challenges and uncertainties. MAP is a traditional peer mentoring program for minoritized first-year students, providing tools for overall well-being and academic success. During their first year, this program

partners each new student with an upperclassman who serves as a peer mentor to assist with the transition from high school to college life.

At the start of the 2023-2024 academic year, MAP welcomed sixty students into the program, thirty-one mentors and twenty-nine mentees. The recruitment process for peer mentors consists of three in-person interest meetings during the summer publicized through social media, flyers, and word of mouth. Interested students complete an application, participate in a two-round in-person interview process, and hold at least a 2.5 GPA requirement. To recruit mentees, the professional staff advisors work in partnership with the Office of Admissions to receive contact information for all incoming minoritized students. Advisors email incoming students to encourage them to join MAP. Interested students fill out an application and participate in interviews. MAP has found that interviewing mentees first produces serious interest and engagement with the program.

Each peer mentor participates in training that takes place in the summer and in the fall. The first training is virtual as peer mentors take the Question, Persuade, Refer (QRP) Gatekeeper Training for Suicide Prevention curriculum (Hangartner et al., 2019). All peer mentors meet during the fall for a four-part, five-hour training session with professional staff advisors. The peer mentors' training includes a self-inventory assessment, advocacy, and intervention, the expectations of what it means to be a mentor, and a summary discussion of the QRP curriculum.

At the start of the semester, mentees are invited to participate in a retreat with mentors that consists of a full day of team-building activities and a game night to form organic relationships. Mentees move on campus earlier than other first-year students, and families and key campus stakeholders are invited to join students for an on-campus welcome dinner. Mentees

are introduced to possible peer mentors through connection experiences at move-in, the welcome dinner, and the full-day retreat. Mentees and mentors establish rapport through icebreakers and activities throughout the day. Following the retreat, mentees are given a sheet with all mentor names and are asked to rank their top three mentor choices. If there were overwhelming responses for a particular mentor, then similar majors, life experiences, and the connections witnessed through retreat are used to match mentees with mentors. This program takes a more organic approach to matching and mentoring minoritized first-year students rather than only matching them according to academic disciplines.

The peer mentors are very involved in campus life. Many are members of sororities, fraternities, clubs, and other organizations. Peer mentors and mentees also have many occasions to engage as a whole group by participating in many engagement opportunities semesterly. Workshops centered around academic success, community service, cohort-building activities, and campus networking partnerships are offered. Study hall meetings are held monthly, and mentees can meet with an assigned Academic Success Coach.

MAP has an executive board comprised of four student members to govern the activities and mentorship experiences. There is no set number of meetings the students must have. Peer mentors and mentees have an interaction tracking system used to document their meetings. Meeting data are used for program improvement. Peer mentors are expected to fill out a form after each interaction with their mentees. The completed form is provided to all professional staff advisors to understand what is discussed in the mentor/mentee meetings. This allows mentees to quickly receive additional support. Through previous engagement experiences to establish trust, the mentor/mentee meetings can lead the mentees to ask questions and understand ways their

peer mentors can support them. The mentorship relationship is built upon trust so that mentees will feel comfortable discussing concerns. Even though mentees are aware that information may be shared with professional staff advisors, they still may share due to a sense of responsibility and the assumption that peer mentors can help address the situation.

MAP also helps mentees learn how to engage with professors and communicate effectively. Students may become frustrated with their faculty or be afraid to speak with them privately. Grades can decline when students are uncomfortable addressing faculty, causing even more significant problems such as financial aid and academic suspension. Peer mentors can answer questions and offer advice about navigating campus resources.

The MAP program is an appropriate site for this research because it provides peer mentoring to minoritized first-year students at a PWI. Since the conception of Pelican University, a small percentage of minoritized students have attended. Despite the region's majority white demographics, this program provides peer advisement and connection to on-campus resources and services to improve mentees' academic success and personal development. Due to these educational and personal performance components, this program is an appropriate site to conduct this study and explore the role peer mentoring plays in establishing a sense of belonging and student engagement for Black first-year students.

Data Collection

The following information is given to provide an understanding of how participants were recruited to participate in the study, who the interview participants are, and how data was collected through individual interviews.

Recruitment

The population of interest for this study is traditional college-aged Black/African American men and women who were mentored by a minoritized peer mentor in the MAP program during their first year at Pelican University. Participants are identified as members of a group that has been minoritized due to race, ethnicity, or marginalized identities while pursuing a bachelor's degree in any discipline at Pelican University. Other races and ethnicities were considered for this study (e.g. Asians, Latinxs/Hispanics, American Indians/Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians); however, only Black/African Americans displayed interest. I began the recruitment of participants for this study by first meeting with MAP staff members to share information about the study. I recruited 10 participants using purposive sampling, which strengthened the study by selecting participants with specific experiences related to the research questions and participants provided rich, detailed backgrounds. "The reason for purposive sampling is the better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigor of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results" (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653). Homogeneous sampling is a type of purposive sampling used in this study to involve participants with similar characteristics of being a minoritized student mentored in their first year of college.

I first went through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process to obtain permission before recruitment. I received a letter of support from the MAP director to submit with the IRB paperwork. After approval, I asked the MAP staff to send out an email to eligible participants for recruitment. I provided MAP staff with the participant invitation and recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) and the screening survey (see Appendix B) to participate in this study. I

used Qualtrics to build the screening survey, and it captured the signatures of interested participants to obtain informed consent. I collected contact information such as names, emails, and cell phone numbers to keep accurate records of participants. I sent via email to each participant the interview questions and a link to schedule a meeting time and date using Google calendar. Once confirmed, an email with virtual interview information was sent.

Participants

The ten participants selected were Black/African American as no other races responded after submitting the screening survey. The participants identify as men or women who participated in MAP in the 2020-21, 2022-23, and 2023-24 academic years, as this study aimed to examine the influence of peer mentoring at a PWI. Participants were given the chance to select their pseudonyms, and I was creative in their spelling to further assist with the confidentiality of participants. Six to twelve participants were needed to achieve saturation (Coenen et al., 2012; Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Morgan et al., 2002; Namey et al., 2016). Once saturation is achieved, new data will no longer spark new insights or reveal unique perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Table 1 displays the participants' profiles and demographics. A more detailed narrative of each participant is also included in chapter four.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Names*	Race	Gender	Sexual Preference	Year in MAP Program	Year	Major	First-Generation	Receives Pell Grant
Anne	Black/African-American, Caribbean	Woman	Pansexual	2022-23	Sophomore	English	No	No
Anthony	Black/African-American, Caribbean	Man	Heterosexual	2023-24	Freshman	Engineering Science	No	Yes
Britnee	Black/African-American, Caribbean	Woman	Heterosexual	2023-24	Freshman	Biochemistry	Yes	Yes
Ellysabeth	Black/African-American	Woman	Lesbian	2020-21	Senior	Psychology	No	No
DeeJai	Black/African-American	Woman	Heterosexual	2020-21	Senior	Exercise Science	No	Yes
Hazel	Black/African-American	Woman	Heterosexual	2022-23	Sophomore	Biology	No	Yes
Jaymee	Black/African-American	Woman	Heterosexual	2020-21	Senior	Biology	No	No
Jim	Black/African-American	Man	Heterosexual	2022-23	Sophomore	Biology	Yes	Yes
Sahra	Black/African-American, White	Woman	Lesbian	2020-21	Junior	Marine Science	No	No
Teyah	Black/African-American	Woman	Heterosexual	2022-23	Sophomore	Public Health	Yes	Yes

*Pseudonyms are provided to protect the confidentiality of participants

Note: All students lived on campus while participating in the MAP Program and received in-state tuition

Interviews

Before each interview, all participants completed an informed consent providing the researcher with permission to video and audio record. I interviewed anyone that was interested and met the criteria. Ten participants were adequate to achieve reasonable data for depth of analysis to focus on the richness and depth of each participant's experience. A financial incentive of a $25 e-card was provided after member-checking to participants to enhance motivation and engagement to obtain insightful data.

Ten semi-structured interviews were completed via Zoom with open-ended questions. I explained the audio and video authorization form and requested signatures via a link provided in the chat feature in Zoom. I reviewed the interview protocol (see Appendix C) before the beginning of each interview to establish the flow and order of the discussion. Each interview was about 30-60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed to understand participants' first-year mentoring experiences as minoritized students and how mentoring experiences impacted their academic performance. A semi-structured interview can establish confidence that the results from the participants' experiences are accurate, credible, and believable (Forero et al., 2018). In an interview format, I asked follow-up questions and allowed participants to add information to the discussion that may have been unclear to me. This procedure strengthened the process of obtaining rich insights that led to a scholarly understanding of peer mentoring experiences and students' engagement and sense of belonging.

Interviews provided the opportunity to explore meanings, perspectives, and motivations about the influence peer mentoring can have on the sense of belonging and student engagement of Black first-year students. Conducting one-on-one interviews enabled the collection of detailed

personalized information. The interview protocol with script and guide has been included in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

After each interview, I memoed self-reflections, observations, and takeaways to help gather my thoughts. I wanted to be aware of my implicit biases and assumptions as a member of this population. I did not want my personal views to cloud the authenticity of the analysis so that the study could maintain its rigor and transparency. Memoing assisted with the organization of my thoughts on the data and aided in generating emotional coding, themes, or emerging ideas from the data. The researchers' notes, memos, and intuitive journals can be used as a form of triangulation to substantiate the collected data (Forero et al., 2018).

After collecting data, I listened to the recordings. I read and reread transcripts to familiarize myself with the content and ensure accurate transcribing by Zoom. I removed the time stamps and line numbers to clean up the transcriptions to condense them to upload into Dedoose to begin the data analysis. Dedoose is a web-based application, to manage data analysis. I began an in vivo coding process by analyzing phrases from participant interviews, thus leading to emerging themes. Then, based on the seven core elements of Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging theory, I created a priori coding, reviewed, revised, and combined into themes. This type of coding focused on pinpointing emotional experiences, points of view, or feelings from participants through their narratives and aid in identifying recurrent themes, patterns, and narratives (Bhattacharya, 2017). Using in vivo coding also emphasized the actual spoken words by the participants and helped highlight specific words and phrases that may not have been understood through other coding methods (Manning, 2017).

Round 1 – In Vivo Coding

My first round of data analysis began with reading transcripts and identifying codes from phrases and sentences using the in vivo coding method. In vivo coding utilizes codes taken directly from what the participants are saying and applied to capture and represent the essence of entire excerpts (Saldaña, 2015). For instance, 'peer mentor engagement' appeared 25 times, 'peer mentor sense of belonging' appeared 10 times, and 'peer mentor academic support' appeared six times in the experiences of participants with their peer mentors. All three of these examples are codes taken from the words of the participants.

Round 2 – Descriptive Coding

After the in vivo coding was completed, I then began the second round of coding using a descriptive coding process by coding an Excel file with the in vivo codes and participant's excerpts. Descriptive coding utilizes a one-word code that summarizes the main topic of the excerpts (Saldaña, 2015). I read the codes and excerpts and applied one or two-word descriptive codes. For example, 'mentorship' appeared 161 times, 'campus involvement' appeared 52 times, and 'inclusion' appeared 41 times. These codes describe actions and behaviors from mentorship engagement.

Round 3 – Structural Coding

Round three, which consisted of structural coding, was completed to address the research questions. This process is generally done in the initial coding but aligning the codes to each research question and structuring themes and sub-themes was completed after all rounds of coding. Structural coding applies a content-based analysis to represent a topic and is then used to

categorize the data (Saldaña, 2015). The codes provided a roadmap to creating themes and sub-themes.

After reviewing each excerpt used in chapter four, a prior coding was added to provide more context with belonging and a sense of connectedness to their peer mentors. A priori coding, which is a method of predetermined codes and is designed to keep on track with analysis progress (Saldaña, 2015) was also applied to excerpts. Strayhorn's seven core tenets were used as a priori codes in this study to add further credibility to participants' interviews with the understanding that all or no tenets may have been represented in the excerpts from participants. The tenets used are the following: (1) *Sense of belonging is a basic human need;* (2) *Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior;* (3) *Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in specific contexts, at certain times, or among certain populations;* (4*) Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering;* (5) *Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging;* (6) *Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes;* (7) *Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change*. These tenets were defined in Chapter 1.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

I used two forms of triangulation in this study, multiple methods to enhance understanding of a particular experience (Birt et al., 2016). The first is participant triangulation, which gathers information from participants, ensuring diverse viewpoints to build a more comprehensive understanding of each narrative (Forero et al., 2018). Participant triangulation was used to gather perspectives of experiences from participants and, by doing so, enhanced the

credibility of this study through member-checking to provide a more comprehensive understanding. All participants were provided with the opportunity to member-check; however, four responded and six did not.

The second was investigator triangulation, allowing a peer researcher to analyze my data independently to reduce bias and promote consistency (Forero et al., 2018). Investigator triangulation strengthened this study by limiting researcher subjectivity and potential bias to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of narratives for overall trustworthiness. "Member-checking of any sort should lead toward trust in the researchers" (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 27) and is the process of reviewing results with participants to check for accuracy and alignment with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). After reviewing the findings with participants for accuracy, this process led to the credibility of this study as participants determined the data's authenticity. I have chosen these two triangulations to legitimize the study further and assist with accuracy and confirmability. Another process used in this study to build credibility was prolonged engagement by spending time with audio, transcripts, and member- checking to gain a deep understanding of the narratives. Spending an extended period listening to recordings and reviewing transcripts leads to prolonged engagement with the data to encourage accurate interpretation of findings by reviewing the data analysis (Stahl & King, 2020), to uncover subtle patterns and unforeseen insights that contribute to the depth of research.

Researcher Positionality

I identify as a member of a minoritized population that struggled to find a sense of belonging and student engagement connectedness on a college campus. As a member of this community, I understand that completing a college degree has challenges and successes. I

identify as a first-generation college student, navigating college was extremely difficult and posed many barriers that impeded my academic success. I recognize that these struggles were not the same for all minoritized individuals but reign true for many. No research can ever be completely objective. Still, my cultural background provides a particular lens through which I understand the world and the barriers created by systems of oppression. It is understood and acknowledged that this information could hold different meanings to people with different identities. As a higher education professional for almost twenty years, I have worked with many minoritized students struggling with a sense of belonging, engagement, and mental health challenges due to these concerns. I have also developed, advised, and implemented mentoring programs in two-year and four-year college sectors to combat these issues, influencing my approach to this study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations include confidentiality, informed consent (video and audio), voluntary participation, the potential for harm, results communication, and the potential impact I may have on participants and contrariwise. Participants were permitted to establish their pseudonyms to encourage voluntary participation through confidentiality. The program currently has about sixty students, with significant data on peer mentors and mentees from previous years. I anticipated the likelihood of a pre-existing relationship with participants; however, an earlier association may prompt additional rapport building and a greater breadth of view. Before the interview, I shared questions with participants to bring awareness to the conversation cues.

Confidentiality was maintained by storing the data and transcripts securely and locked. Data will be kept for three years after the research concludes and destroyed afterward. Informed

consent was given and signed by each participant, and detailed information about the study was presented. I am responsible for upholding the integrity of this study and allowing participants to approve direct quotes that may be used in the study. I asked semi-structured, open-ended questions and probed with follow-up questions when needed. I appreciated that protecting the rights of the research participants is of the utmost importance and would enhance the trustworthiness of the research.

Limitations of the Study

There was a chance that participants may struggle with recall bias, meaning that they may recall a particular incident or experience differently from how it took place. Since the questions are related to a sense of belonging and engagement, participants could have traumatic narratives explaining their positions and encounters. Subjective interpretation can also limit the study as the data may not accurately depict my interpretation. It was vital to have the participants read over any quotes and view themes and patterns to provide transparency throughout the process. The ethical considerations of potential to harm are also a limitation of this study. As stated before, this research could surface negative and positive experiences and encounters. Establishing a safe space for feelings to be validated or supported is essential and the ability to provide participants with campus resources information is important. This study is focused on minoritized students and their sense of belonging and engagement at a PWI. Transferability refers to the range to which effectiveness could be achieved in another sample and setting; on the other hand, generalizability refers to the range to which a sample statistic affects the whole population and its many situations (de Leeuw et al., 2022). This information may not easily be generalized to other settings or populations, due to sample size and the nature of the study. The

limits to the context in peer mentoring may draw opinions to the effectiveness of these programs and uncover elements of the relationships that may contribute to the sense of belonging and engagement of minoritized students.

Conclusion

This qualitative narrative analysis study examined how peer mentoring may enhance minoritized first-year students' sense of belonging and engagement experiences at a PWI using Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging theory. The sense of belonging theory aligned with the research questions and worked to identify the peer mentoring gaps in the literature. I selected 10 minoritized first-year students enrolled at Pelican University who have been mentored by a minoritized upperclassman in the MAP program. Semi-structured interviews presented the narratives of the 10 minoritized first-year students. My methodology is qualitative narrative analysis to understand their lived experiences from their narratives. Purposive and homogenous sampling was used to structure the data collection process with the following coding methods: in vivo, descriptive, a priori, and structural. With respect to this study, I am a member of a minoritized population and believe establishing a sense of belonging while in college is paramount to minoritized students' success. Interviews were conducted, and coding followed and introduced findings of whether peer mentoring can enhance the engagement and belonging of minoritized students in their first year of college. In the next chapter, findings related to the research questions will be shared. Main themes and their related sub-themes will be described with excerpts from transcripts used to support each theme.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Peer mentoring programs are used to engage and support first-year students' transition and acclimation to a new environment. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of peer mentoring in first-year Black students' sense of belonging and engagement at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). The study addressed the following research questions: (a) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their sense of belonging at a PWI?; and (b) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their student engagement experiences at a PWI? Ten Black students who attended Pelican University in their first year of college were interviewed for this study. I used narrative analysis methodology to explore personal narratives that describe the lived experiences of ten Black students during their first-year peer mentoring experience at a PWI.

The excerpts included in the chapter were taken from semi-structured interviews and participants were provided with these excerpts for member-checking. The findings of this study were also peer-reviewed by a colleague with content knowledge. After the findings from the data were condensed, two main themes and four sub-themes emerged (see Figure 1): (1) *Connectedness and Inclusivity* and (2) *Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support.* This chapter will begin by providing a brief narrative describing each participant. Following that, I will present each of the two themes along with excerpts from the interviews to support the findings.

Figure 1
Themes and sub-themes
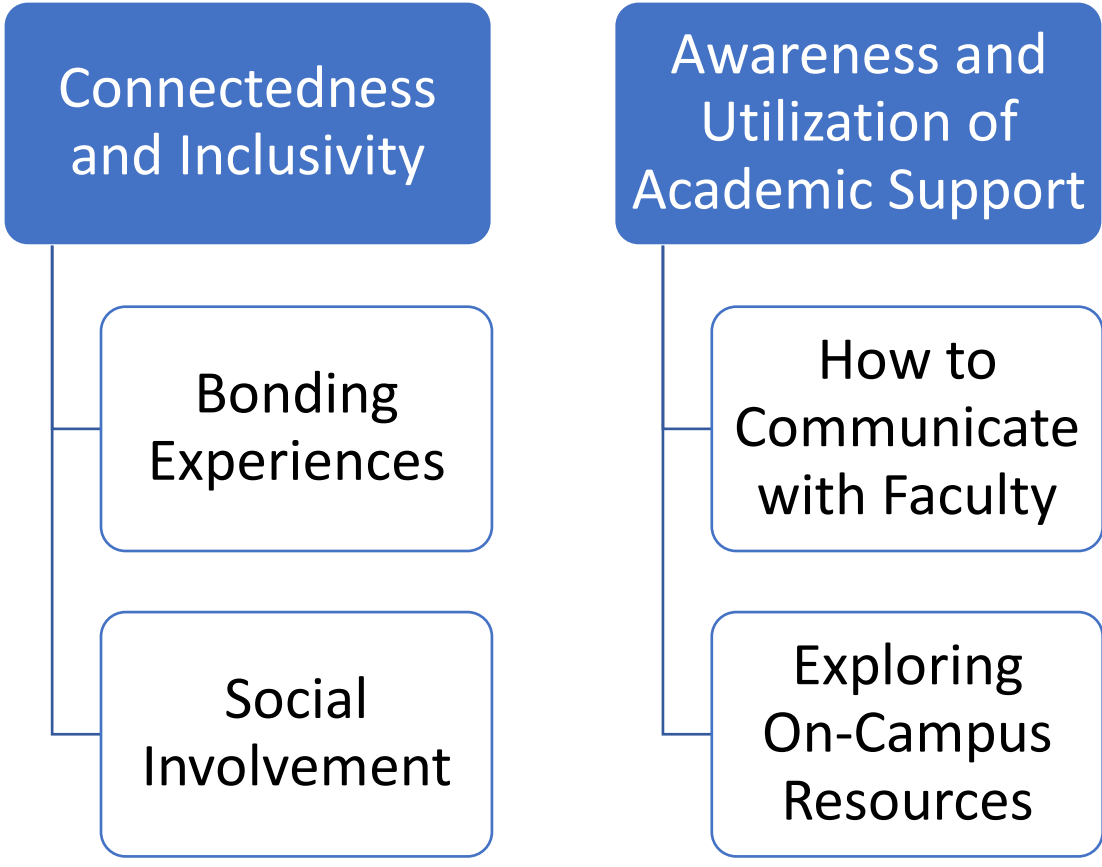
Participant Narratives

Each of the ten participants articulated their experiences and the role peer mentoring played in their sense of belonging and engagement at a PWI. The following sections provide a brief narrative depiction of each participant drawn from their survey response and interviews.

Anne

Anne is an 18-year-old pansexual Black woman, a sophomore majoring in English. Anne is not a first-generation student and does not receive a Pell grant. She participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2022-23. Anne expressed great enthusiasm to participate in this study and was excited to hear she was the first interviewee. Anne was very talkative and had much to say about her experience in peer mentoring and at Pelican University. She explained that there were no factors that led to her decision to attend a PWI. She disclosed that she grew up around White people and that she thought she might fit in from prior adolescent experiences. She also applied to some Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) but decided not to attend. She did not disclose a reason for her decision. Anne is involved on campus with on-campus jobs and as a peer mentor in the MAP program. She is also a member of an honors society. When asked about her experience at a PWI, she explained that "my experience is surprisingly going well; however, I have noticed that there are times when I am the only minority in some spaces on campus." She views Pelican University as positive and inclusive.

When collecting data in the screening survey, Anne wrote the following background information:

My family background is African-American on my mother's side and Caribbean on my father's. I was raised in the south. I went to a majority White elementary, middle, and

high school. I was always a very academically focused child with A/B grades throughout high school, and I graduated a year early with honors. I am a big mental health advocate finishing a year of weekly therapy and now being on medication. I come from a very Pro-Black, Black excellence-focused family environment. I am very talkative.

Anthony

Anthony is an 18-year-old heterosexual Black man who is a freshman majoring in engineering science. Anthony is not a first-generation student and received a Pell grant. He participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2023-24. Anthony completed his first semester of college before speaking with me about his mentoring experiences. He mentioned that he attended Pelican University because it was affordable compared to the other HBCUs he applied to. Pelican University provided Anthony with much greater financial aid which influenced his choice to attend. Anthony is involved on campus with organizations such as Men of Standard and Student Activity Board and is on a men's club sports team. When asked about his experience at a PWI, Anthony said, "I was overwhelmed at first because I did not see many people who looked like me." He stated Pelican markets itself as an inclusive campus and agrees to an extent that it is but feels minoritized voices are not always heard on campus. Anthony wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey, "I am from a military family and completed an associate degree before enrolling. I am of Caribbean descent."

Britnee

Britnee is a 19-year-old heterosexual Black woman who is a freshman majoring in biochemistry. Britnee is a first-generation student and received a Pell grant. She aspires to become a psychologist. She participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2023-24.

Britnee also completed her first semester of college before speaking with me about her mentoring experiences. She explained that she did not want to apply to HBCUs because there would be too many opportunities to have fun. She laughed when she said Pelican University is not much better at focusing. Britnee is involved on campus with two on-campus jobs, Women for Empowerment, and plays on a women's club sports team. When asked about her experience as a person of color, she described her experience as being a bit odd. She explains, "Black people dress very differently and have different interactions with professors." Britnee views Pelican University as inclusive since it has many culturally centered initiatives that make it more comfortable for people of color to attend.

> Britnee wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey: My family dynamic is pretty much the exact image of a stereotypical low-income Black family. I do not have a great relationship with my mother, and I just met my biological father, who is from the Caribbean, over the summer. I have 10 siblings (I think 8-9 are half-siblings, but I do not share whole blood with any of them). I suffered a lot of mental health issues throughout middle and high school and did not receive much help. However, school was always my happy place growing up, so I took classes like biology and psychology to help me get a better understanding of what was happening to me. I have always been a gifted student and am now in the honors program.

DeeJai

DeeJai is a 21-year-old heterosexual Black woman who is a graduating senior majoring in exercise science. DeeJai is not a first-generation student and received Pell grants. She participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2020-21. DeeJai explained that her choice

to attend Pelican was predicated by her mother as this school was close to DeeJai's hometown. "My mom's heart was set on Pelican, and she was paying the tuition." She also chose this institution because it was the only college that offered her major, as the HBCU she contemplated did not. DeeJai is involved on campus with on-campus jobs, the Student Activity Board, and in a leadership position in an organization. When asked about her experience as a person of color, she laughed, saying it has not been awful but wished the environment was more welcoming. DeeJai also arrived on campus during COVID-19. She admitted that she would like to see more Black women professors after only having one Black female professor during her four years at this university.

DeeJai wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey, "I come from a single-parent household with my mom and grandmom. I won the Black Student of the Year Award and Living a Legacy presented by my church".

Ellysabeth

Ellysabeth is a 22-year-old lesbian Black woman who is a graduating senior majoring in psychology. Ellysabeth is not a first-generation student and does not receive Pell grants. She participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2020-21. Ellysabeth mentioned, "I wanted to attend an HBCU; however, Pelican offered the best financial aid package of every institution I applied to." Ellysabeth is involved on campus with on-campus jobs and leadership positions in two organizations. When asked about her experiences, she said it has been good. She started her first year during COVID-19. She had to find creative ways to adjust to periods of isolation and joined the MAP mentoring program.

Ellysabeth wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey:

My mom and dad are divorced. My dad and 2 older sisters are in the military. My mom recently got married, so I ended up no longer qualifying for Pell Grant, which is crazy!!! I am heavily involved on campus serving in a number of leadership capacities. I am graduating in May 2024.

Hazel

Hazel is a 19-year-old heterosexual Black woman, a sophomore majoring in biology. Hazel is not a first-generation student and received Pell grants. She participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2022-23. Hazel, too, wanted to attend an HBCU, but felt that she wanted to get away from all her friends and go out on her own. Hazel is involved on campus with leadership positions in two organizations. When asked about her experiences, she said, "I felt kind of uncomfortable and out of place when I first arrived on campus, especially with all White roommates." She stated that she loves Pelican University largely because of the different events and she feels included.

Hazel wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey:

I have 3 siblings in total; two sisters and one brother. I am also an aunt with two nieces and one nephew. As far as education, I graduated high school in June 2022. Throughout high school, I remained on the A-B Honor Roll and was also a part of our JROTC program for all 4 years.

Jaymee

Jaymee is a 21-year-old heterosexual Black woman who is a graduating senior majoring in biology. Jaymee is not a first-generation student and does not receive Pell grants. She participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2020-21. Jaymee said that she initially wanted to attend an HBCU; however, the perception was that they are unorganized, and she felt she would receive a quality education at a PWI. Jaymee is involved on campus with leadership positions in organizations, women for empowerment, and as a peer mentor in the MAP program. She is also in an honors society. When asked about her experiences, she said, "It is harder to find Black friends on campus, but I discovered ways to make friends and be in places where I feel seen and included." She also arrived on campus during COVID-19.

> Jaymee wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey:
> I am from the south. I come from a two-parent household and I have a sibling that is 6
> years older than me. I grew up in a suburban environment and spent most of my time
> with my grandparents and sister because my parents had to work. I have achieved many
> things throughout my college career. I have joined clubs and honor societies and made
> connections and friends.

Jim

Jim is a 20-year-old heterosexual Black man who is now a sophomore majoring in biology. Jim is a first-generation student and receives Pell grants. He participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2022-23. Jim stated that he wanted to go to a liberal arts school, and it was the most affordable. Jim is involved on campus with Men of Standard, MAP E-Board, and as a peer mentor in the MAP program. When asked about his experiences, he revealed that it

was a major adjustment for him as he is from an urban area where everyone, for the most part, looks like him; however, meeting new people was fun. Jim said, "I found a safe space within my community of individuals I met on campus; I found my people." Jim relayed that everyone is represented at his institution.

Jim wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey:

I am a sophomore biology major on a pre-med track. I am from the south. I participated in MAP as a freshman in the 2022-2023 academic year and am currently a MAP Executive Board member. I currently have a 3.7 GPA and am on the dean's list.

Sahra

Sahra is a 21-year-old lesbian Black woman who is a junior majoring in marine science. Sahra is not a first-generation student and does not receive Pell grants. She participated in the MAP program in the academic year 2020-21. Sahra explained, "The main factor in my decision to choose Pelican was the affordability as it was one of the cheapest schools I applied to." When asked about her experiences, she talked about the Presidential Election and racial tensions rising on campus. Sahra joined the Pelican community during COVID-19, experienced isolation, and as a result, her mental health suffered.

Sahra wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey, "I am from an older Black family; my dad is in his 60s, and my mom is white. I guess I could be considered a "bad kid" when I was a teenager."

Teyah

Teyah is a 19-year-old heterosexual Black woman who is now a sophomore majoring in public health. Teyah is a first-generation student and receives Pell grants. She participated in the

MAP program in the academic year 2022-23. Teyah mentioned that she did not do well academically when she was a student at a predominantly Black high school as she was misbehaving and did not take academics seriously. She later transferred to a predominantly white school and excelled. She decided to attend Pelican to continue her academic success. Teyah is involved on campus with women for empowerment, a membership in an honors society, two on-campus jobs, a leadership in an organization, and as a peer mentor in the MAP program. When asked about her experiences, she said that "there are a lot of white things to do here. And sometimes Black people don't feel as included".

Teyah wrote the following background information in the interview screening survey, "I am a first-generation Black African American woman. I am an honors student in multiple honor societies, and I am studying public health".

Research Findings

Participants were very candid about their experiences as minoritized students at a PWI while involved in the MAP program. The following sections will describe each theme and sub-theme in detail, with excerpts from the interviews to support the findings. Each of the sub-themes came from a code that was prevalent during the analysis, so the tables in this chapter will provide an overview of each theme, a description of the theme, sub-themes and their descriptions, and the number of times the code related to each sub-theme appeared in the transcripts and how many participants (cases) had experiences linked to the themes and sub-themes.

Research Question 1: How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their sense of belonging at a PWI?

The findings associated with research question one address the overall connection between peer mentors and mentees through bonding experiences, social involvements, and feelings of inclusion. The mentoring relationships assisted with the participants' ability to find a sense of belonging on campus to foster connections and build community. The following excerpts and narratives articulate their experiences from participation in the mentoring program and related positive outcomes.

Connectedness and Inclusivity

The responses associated with this theme speak to how peer mentors promote a sense of belonging through coaching, advice, and encouragement for peer mentees and demonstrate how peer mentors and mentees are directly connected through engagement experiences. Terms that were identified from participant interviews as *connectedness* and *inclusivity* included references to feeling like part of the group, having a friend, being able to confide in the peer mentor, and mattering. This theme was divided into two subthemes, Bonding Experiences and Social Involvement, which are further explained below. All but one participant acknowledged a connection with peers and peer mentors because they did not regularly meet, and no follow-up was initiated by either mentor or mentee, eventually severing the mentorship relationship.

Mentees established various connections to peers and peer mentors to create a sense of belonging at a PWI through coaching, advice, and encouragement. Connection describes the mutual relations between peer mentors and peer mentees to develop a bond. Nine participants in this study shared positive experiences of connection with their peers and peer mentors. Participants expressed how close their relationships with their peer mentors were as a result of their connections, common interconnections with their peers and peer mentors, promoting of

mattering and care from their peer mentor, and closeness with peer mentors, leading to thoughts of them as a big brother or best friend. Some participants entered the MAP program during COVID-19, and most shared positive experiences; however, one experienced no connection to their peer mentor.

Interviews with the nine participants highlight aspects of Strayhorn's (2014) sense of belonging theory as they revealed a sense of connectedness, acceptance, value, inclusivity, and encouragement through others. Bonding Experiences became a sub-theme that emerged from peer mentors' and mentees' establishment of mutual relations to create a bond. Social Involvement also appeared as a sub-theme from the participation, inclusion, and engagement practices during the mentorship experience. Nine participants in this study shared positive social involvements with their peers and peer mentors with comments. Participants reported engaging via text, check-ins, FaceTime, and social media platforms, while other participants referenced receiving advice and feedback from their peer mentors. One participant has no sustaining excerpts representing her social involvement with the peer mentor or connection with peers or peer mentors. The nine participants' excerpts displayed Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory, as each excerpt revealed a continued sense of connectedness, acceptance, value, inclusivity, and encouragement through others (see Table 2).

Table 2

Theme One: Connectedness and Inclusivity

Main Theme	Meaning of Theme	Sub-Themes	Meaning of Sub-Themes	Code Count	Cases Count
Connectedness and Inclusivity	Promotes a sense of belonging through coaching, advice, and encouragement for peer mentees.	Bonding Experiences	Peer mentors and mentees' mutual relations with one another created a bond.	21	9
		Social Involvement	The participation of inclusion and engagement practices of peer mentors and mentees during the peer mentoring experience.	49	9

Bonding Experiences

Nine participants in this study shared their connection experiences with their peers and peer mentors. The bonding experiences sub-theme served to summarize the participants' mutual relations established with one another to create a bond through participating in activities together and being a shoulder to cry on. Most participants commented on their experiences of connecting with their peer mentors. Britnee and Ellysabeth shared a common interconnection with their peer mentors as they received helpful advice, adding to their feelings of connectedness. Ellysabeth reflected:

What really made us like lock-in is, when I was in a relationship at the time, and when I tell you I was struggling because I was being done so wrong, and I'm a very emotional person. It was starting to take a toll. And so, I ended up confiding in her about it. And she

said let's meet up for lunch, and like we sat there and we just talked about everything, and she just gave me the best advice.

Ellysabeth was struggling with a situation with her romantic partner. She was vulnerable and explained the situation to her peer mentor. Because of her vulnerability, she stated she received "the best advice." A bonding moment occurred from this interaction. Ellysabeth also said, "She was there for me as a mentee; she literally let me cry about what I was going through." Ellysabeth felt accepted, valued, and respected as a result of this interaction with her peer mentor.

Britnee reflected, "If I need like to talk to someone about something immediately, I can text her, and she'll like help me through it, you know. Give me advice if I needed and whatnot." This communication showed Ellysabeth and Britnee that they were cared about and mattered to their peer mentor. These excerpts show a continuous sense of belonging as they felt a connection to their peer mentors, and the connectedness influenced their commitments and behaviors by forming bonds of support with each other.

Hazel explained that she had no connection to her peer mentor upon the start of their mentorship:

The whole experience was valuable. It helped me because when I first met my mentor I didn't know her from a can of paint. But as we continued to meet and go to the different activities we got closer, and then with being orientation leader, we were together over the summer as well.

She explained how they eventually became closer through shared activities, and their bond grew over the summer. Hazel exhibited a continuous sense of belonging, as these

interactions provided a closeness over time. She was actively bonding with her peer mentor, and she explained how the whole mentoring experience was valuable to her, adding, "I felt more included when I was in the mentoring program". It gave her a person she could meet with regularly to do different activities, which created a bond.

Jim, Anthony, and Teyah discussed how they felt close to their peer mentors. Jim stated the following:

My mentor was like a big brother to me. It didn't feel like it was forced or like it was even a program. So, I thought he was doing this for me because he had to. But it wasn't like that at all.

Jim was excited to share his mentoring experiences. He described a deep connection to his peer mentor as he thought of him as a big brother. He appreciated that his mentor treated him like he cared and not like it was his job. His mentor conveyed that Jim's well-being mattered to him, and because of this reassurance, Jim felt respected and valued. He felt a true bond with his peer mentor, which became Jim's staple of connectedness. Anthony said, "Yeah, I would definitely say my expectations were not only met but also exceeded because my mentor not only served as a guide to me, but now they're almost like a bigger brother to me." Anthony appreciated that his expectations were met and that his peer mentor was there to guide him. This engagement was a positive outcome that met and exceeded Anthony's expectations.

Teyah connected with her peer mentor and proclaimed that her peer mentor had become her best friend. Teyah shared similar sentiments to Jim and Anthony by stating:

During this peer mentoring, I met basically my best friend, even though she was a senior, and she graduated. We still talk to this day. So just having that person as a guidance and

building that relationship throughout the year, my expectations were met. It was well

worth it [laughter].

A person that Teyah did not know before arriving at campus became her best friend. Teyah's peer mentor provided support and was someone she could always talk with about anything. Their bond is still strong even after the peer mentoring relationship ended. Participants had unique relationships with their peer mentors and felt a part of something greater, exhibiting fundamental motives. They felt supported, appreciated, cherished, and mattered to others. Jim and Teyah connected to their peer mentors in ways that they did not expect, and Anthony gained a brother.

Sahra gracefully articulated the conditions that made her sign up for peer mentorship and how this grew into a meaningful and fun peer mentoring connection. Sahra shared:

I'd say my mentor and I connected as a freshman, like not having many friends, and again

with it being a COVID-19 year and us being on lockdown. My mentor was some of the

only interactions I had because we weren't really supposed to leave our rooms or interact

with anybody. So, I think it really made me feel like I belonged my freshman year, and I

think I would have felt like I didn't belong without it. So, it was really hard for me to

adapt to campus and stuff, and I really thought that it would be good. One of my good

friends was also in MAP. So, we decided to do it together. And it was it ended up being a

lot of help and a lot of fun. I connected with my mentor.

Her decision to join MAP was primarily based on COVID-19 and its impact on her ability to move around campus. She could not have the standard college experience because health and safety restrictions limited her campus mobility. However, she believed that signing up for MAP

fostered her sense of belonging on campus, and she would not have felt like she belonged without the bond she created with her peer mentor. Her decision to join the MAP program had a positive outcome as she found belonging in the engagement with her peer mentor.

Ellysabeth and Sahra created a bond as they were good friends, and they decided to embark on this peer mentoring journey together. This journey became of heightened importance as it became a shared reason to engage because these connections were some of the only ones during Sahra's first semester in college. She reported that some of her only interactions were with her peer mentor. These interactions were a fundamental motive for Sahra, affecting her behavior as she felt cherished and supported by others.

Sahra, Ellysabeth, DeeJai, and Jaymee were all in the MAP program during the start of COVID-19. Most shared the same positive experiences for joining the program due to isolation and the inability to connect on campus with other individuals during the global pandemic; however, Jaymee did not connect with her mentor. Jaymee said she never felt a connection with her peer mentor as they were always busy with other obligations. She even mentioned that when they did meet, she did not truly feel a connection because they would be on their phone and not engaging with her as much as she would have liked. Jaymee shared:

At first, when we first met, we connected in person, and we sat and had a conversation. But after that, I had a mentor who was very involved on campus and different organizations, and I think it was just a busy time in their life. So, we communicated it might have been every 2 weeks after that, and then it just trailed off. It might have been like once a month, and then it was just nothing.

She mentioned that the peer mentoring relationship had just stopped. Neither of the two reached out to each other during that time. Bonding Experiences is how the mentors and mentees experienced a connection with each other. These connection experiences created a bond, resulting in mentees feeling a sense of belonging and being cared for. This sub-theme addresses RQ1 as it describes the role that peer mentoring plays in the sense of belonging of first-year Black students at a PWI.

Social Involvement

The responses associated with this theme describe the collective social involvement, moments of inclusion, and engagement practices between peer mentors and peer mentees. Excerpts are included to showcase peer mentors' and peer mentees' social interactions. The participant's responses describe the role that peer mentoring played in the sense of belonging of mentees during the peer mentoring experience. All but one participant acknowledged having social involvement with a peer mentor, as they did not meet socially or engage in the mentoring experience. Social involvement became a sub-theme from encounters between peer mentors and mentees.

Nine participants commented about social involvement on campus with their peer mentors. This sub-theme signifies peer mentors' and mentees' participation, inclusion, and feelings of belonging during the peer mentoring experience. Their peer mentors embraced a social relationship with peer mentees. Anne shared a powerful connection with her peer mentor because she was included in regular texts, and the peer mentor acknowledged Anne when they saw each other on campus. Anne shared the following:

I viewed my mentor as this really perfect person, you know, who had all these friends and stuff. It looked like they belonged. So, if they know me, that must mean I'm okay. We texted. "Yeah, how are you doing good?" And then, if I saw them on campus, they would talk to me, and we have a little chat, and then mainly, our bigger interactions were at the mandatory events we would go to. So, I went, and because my mentor was the only person I really knew, I automatically sat next to them and then talked to them.

This social development emerged as they would talk to each other, and Anne felt comfortable sitting next to her peer mentor at events. Anne displayed a fundamental motive, feeling supported and cherished by her peer mentor. Anne mentioned that her peer mentor also made her feel included when she did not know anyone else in group settings. She noted, "If I felt kind of out of place, it was someone who knew me. My mentor." This is influential in the relationship that Anne and her peer mentor shared. She felt a sense of belonging because her peer mentor knew her and was willing to join Anne at events. Similarly, Anthony had strong connections with his peer mentor; he described a moment when his peer mentor would not let him attend an event alone if he did not feel comfortable. This act showed that Anthony's comfort level mattered to his peer mentor. The mentor's presence played a positive role in cultivating a sense of belonging at a PWI. Anthony identified:

Yeah, they helped to make me feel belonged and included because they were able to direct me to areas where I would feel like I belonged. Also like if there was ever a time where I was alone and felt like I didn't belong they would be able to come there with me, so I wouldn't be alone.

Anthony felt that his comfortability mattered because his peer mentor took the time to join him at events, include him in social involvement activities, and include Anthony in his schedule to ensure he did not feel alone while attending campus events.

This shows a closeness between Anthony and his peer mentor. Anthony also explained that this closeness was apparent between him and his mentor and among the other peers in the MAP program. Anthony explained, "But aside from just him. The overall program, like even other mentors and mentees, we've all become very close. And it's just really nice to be able to have that space, especially with other people of color." Their identities were influenced as he engaged with individuals of the same race, exhibiting positive feelings for the ability to connect with other people of color in the program overall. Anthony shared that he felt a safe space within the mentoring program because of other people who looked like him. This feeling established a sense of belonging for him.

In addition to Anne and Anthony, Britnee verbalized similar mentoring experiences, stating that their connection experiences consisted of texting often. Britnee shared the following:

We text a lot. We might call every once in a while, we went to some of the on-campus events together. Our whole MAP group together went to events. We went to a couple of the homecoming events together, too.

They also connected by going to group events together, and this social involvement allowed Britnee to socialize informally with her peer mentor. Britnee also shared the peer mentor would formally check in with her to see how she was doing mentally and with her academics. This connection showed Britnee that her peer mentor was genuinely interested in her well-being. She knew she could always count on her peer mentor whenever she needed to talk to someone

immediately to help her through concerns. Britnee shared this about her social involvement with her peer mentor:

> She always checks in to see how I'm doing like, I said. We talk like a couple of times a week, so those would be checkups asking. Oh, how you've been doing, how you've been feeling, you know. How's class been going? Blaze blah! Blah! Blah! She checks up on me, and I'm pretty good a lot of the time.

> Mattering is present in the excerpts of Anne, Anthony, and Britnee, representing the belief that one cares. This shows an influential connection, as their peer mentoring relationship held a strong bond.

> Anne, Ellysabeth, Teyah, Anthony, and Hazel remember engaging with their mentee formally and informally by text and check-ins, FaceTime, and social media. Anne said the following:

> I think we engaged once a week through text and maybe twice a month in person. It wasn't frequent at all. My freshmen year I didn't really have too many issues. So I wasn't really going to her for anything. But it was just little check-ins.

> Anne expressed her social involvement with her peer mentor. She stated they did not socialize by text that often, but her peer mentor would formally check in with her to see how she was doing. Anne appreciated her peer mentor taking the time to check in. Conversely, Ellysabeth had many meetings and happenstances with her peer mentor. She expressed how she was always happy that she could lean on her peer mentor for social support. Ellysabeth stated, "We texted and we talked in person. We also ran into each other at school events, and then we talked and engaged as well." Ellysabeth and her peer mentor socially engaged outside of their normal

mentoring relationship when they ran into each other at various events. Ellysabeth said she was always happy to see her peer mentor on campus because they would hang out together. Ellysabeth explained that she was at a campus activity and randomly ran into her mentor. Ellysabeth shared:

> I remember during my sophomore year, I went to an event, and I saw my mentor. She ended up introducing me to her sorority sisters, and then from there, one of her sisters actually became friends with me too, and like we were cool. She always felt like someone I could confide in if I ever needed any help. So, it was just like this is someone else I can rely on, too, if I ever need it.

Ellysabeth smiled while she reminisced about her feeling of inclusion. She felt a sense of pride and respect that her peer mentor volunteered to include Ellysabeth by introducing her to some of the peer mentor's friends who then became her friends after meeting them. She was provided multiple support networks to add to her feelings of inclusion. Hazel also had a similar experience of inclusion when she ran to her peer mentor, and they introduced her to the person they were with. She stated, "That was one of the ways that I felt included, she would introduce me to people they were around."

Teyah commented about several instances where she engaged socially with her peer mentor. She smiled while she spoke about how her peer mentor showed she cared about her. Teyah said, "We had study nights, and we engaged over text, FaceTime, and just doing outings with each other. We engaged multiple times a week or whenever I needed her. She was there." She said she appreciated these outings with her peer mentor and that her peer mentor was there for her whenever she needed them. Teyah also mentioned, "Anytime that I needed help. She was

there, a text away. A call away." Teyah and her peer mentor became close as these social involvement activities created a strong bond. Her peer mentor helped her tremendously in other areas as well. Teyah said, "She helped me prepare for interviews. She even helped me with interview clothing." Teyah also said:

> She would ask me about everything I had going on, she still does it to this day. She asks me about everything I have going on, and just like, are you sure you want to add that on your plate? Are you sure you have time for that? So just making sure I didn't run myself dry.

Teyah demonstrated mattering as the belief that one cares and has a continuous sense of belonging because they engaged multiple times a week. Her peer mentor was a text or phone call away, and Teyah appreciated these moments through her expressions.

Anthony recalled that he and his peer mentor engaged socially over social media and text. Anthony stated the following:

> So, having someone to help me figure things out. And then also, just generally, how the school works. It's been like just a great thing to have. And I feel like if a lot of other people had the same opportunity that I had then they'd be in a great position as well.

He feels that others should share his mentoring experience as it puts him in a great position socially. Anthony said it was fantastic having someone help him navigate the campus. This level of socialization meant the world to Anthony as they also became extremely close. Anthony said, "My mentor and I usually engaged over text. But we interact over social media and things like that, too." Anthony has heightened importance as they have a shared reason to

engage, finding safety and understanding from his peer mentor. His peer mentor understood his needs to help him effectively navigate campus life.

Hazel mentioned that she socially engaged with her mentor over text and would eat together. Hazel described the following:

My mentor and I would engage maybe every week or two. She introduced me to a lot. I really appreciate her, and we still talk. Sometimes, we'd text and check up on each other, but I think it was every week or so, and then sometimes, we would go and get lunch on campus and stuff. And that made me feel included, too. I thought to myself, "Now I got somebody who's willing to, like, go eat lunch or things like that." We would go to the dining hall a lot and, like, meet and just talk and do our weekly or bi-weekly check-ins.

These moments were held close by Hazel as these were her ways to actively engage with her peer mentor socially. She mentioned they are still in contact after the peer mentoring experience ended. Hazel discussed how much this relationship meant to her in this context. Even though the peer mentor graduated, they still made time to socialize with Hazel. Hazel experienced a continuous sense of belonging as they engaged socially regularly. She also showed signs of mattering; her peer mentor is still in contact for support and guidance.

DeeJai, Jim, and Sahra referenced the social interactions they experienced with their peer mentor, who provided advice and feedback. DeeJai recalled the following:

I can't expect everybody to respond to situations the same way as me and that's something that I'm still working on now. So, I think that was the biggest thing, because I expected my mentor to respond to situations and be like, Oh, well, yeah, you were definitely right. They were like, no, no, you were off the ledge a little bit with that. You

weren't in the right with that one. Okay! So, you don't think the same way as me. But I

think that was the biggest takeaway that I've learned from my mentor engagements.

DeeJai expected her peer mentor to always agree with her on matters; instead, her mentor

challenged her to see ideas differently. She learned an important lesson from her peer mentor:

there are various ways to look at situations, and her way of thinking may not always be the best.

This social involvement interaction led to a new level of fundamental motive affecting her

behavior and understanding. She laughed while telling this story and mentioned seeing a new

perspective.

Jim also recalled moments of mattering when his mentor displayed inclusive behavior.

Jim stated the following:

He made me feel like I belonged because he kept looking out for me like he took me

under his wing. Another reason I can tell he cared about me was that if we went

somewhere together, he would say text me when you get home.

Jim felt included when he and his peer mentor would hang out together. He discerned such a

feeling of inclusion that he wanted to become a mentor, sharing that he wanted to pay it back and

be a mentor to someone else. Jim articulated how often he and his peer mentor socialized. Jim

voiced the following:

I always felt like I could talk to him. He said a couple of times if something is wrong, just

tell me how you are feeling. He would check up on me. If we didn't talk, he would text

me, be like, "Yo Jim, what's going on?" When the MAP program was over, and I was

leaving for summer break, he'd say like, "Hey, have a good break." He even said,

"Thanks for being so awesome." I said, "Thank you for being so cool." Yeah, that really

stuck with me. We are friends to this day. I still think of him as my mentor, even though he's not my mentor anymore. He did a really good job of making my mental health feel good.

Jim was able to recall his last contact with his peer mentor before the summer break, demonstrating their strong social connection. This ended his first-year experience and his peer mentorship participation. Jim experienced mattering because his peer mentor expressed care for him.

Sahra shared that her peer mentor did a fantastic job of encouraging her when she needed it. Sahra said:

> There would definitely be some times when I would feel discouraged about schoolwork and stuff like that, and my mentor was really good at like keeping me encouraged and giving me like I'm really bad at writing, and my mentor was actually the first one to tell me about the writing center, and like encouraged me to use it because he said it, that it helped him a lot freshman year. And so, I think that was one thing that really helped me academically.

This social interaction kept Sahra on the right path academically, and she felt appreciated and supported by her peer mentor. Sahra also mentioned that she is still in contact with her peer mentor because of the strong bond she created when she needed support. Sahra said, "I still talk to my mentor sometimes. It also made me feel more welcomed on campus and feel like I belonged more because I knew more people." She said that this social experience made her feel more welcomed on campus, which heightened her importance as she felt valued and appreciated.

Social Involvement was participation and acts of inclusion between mentors and mentees. These interactions created connection experiences to foster belonging. This sub-theme addresses RQ1 as it describes the role that peer mentoring plays in the sense of belonging of first-year Black students at a PWI.

To recap, nine out of 10 participants explained experiences of connection to peers and peer mentors and positive experiences of social involvement with their peer mentors. One participant did not experience social involvement or a connection with their peer mentor. Peer mentoring can be used to build connections and support meaningful social involvements to foster a sense of belonging at a PWI campus. These connections can create lasting bonding experiences and promote social involvement activities. Bonding Experiences and Social Involvement promoted belonging through coaching, advice, and encouragement practices of peer mentors.

Research Question 2: How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their student engagement experiences at a PWI?

The findings associated with research question one address the overall connection between peer mentors and mentees through bonding experiences, social involvements, and feelings of inclusion. The mentoring relationships assisted with the participants' ability to find a sense of belonging on campus, foster connections, and build community. The following excerpts and narratives articulate their experiences from their participation in the mentoring program and the positive outcomes.

Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support

Across their responses, participants also shared multiple instances of advice provided or referral to academic and campus resources by their mentor to encourage academic achievement,

the second theme from the findings. The participants' responses demonstrate a link to (RQ2) as they describe the role that peer mentoring played in guiding and navigating communications with faculty, including course advice. Terms that were identified from participant interviews as *awareness* and *utilization of academic support* included references to asking for advice and guidance to email faculty, referrals to faculty office hours, academic, mental health wellness, and food insecurity referrals. How to communicate with faculty became a sub-theme that emerged from the peer mentor's capacity to offer resources for support, such as providing suggestions for how to navigate challenging discussions with faculty and providing advice regarding coursework. Exploring on-campus resources emerged as a second sub-theme as peer mentors referred mentees to wrap-around support systems established to enhance the college experience by providing academic, personal, or financial support (see Table 3).

Table 3

Theme Two: Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support

Main Theme	Meaning of Theme	Sub-Themes	Meaning of Sub-Themes	Code Count	Cases Count
Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support	Emphasizes referral or advice given by peer mentors to promote the academic readiness of peer mentees.	How to Communicate with Faculty	Peer mentors guide navigating communications with faculty, including course advice.	26	8
		Exploring On-campus Resources	Peer mentors refer mentees to wrap-around support systems established to enhance the college experience by offering academic, personal, or financial support.	26	7

How to Communicate with Faculty

Eight of the ten participants identified receiving academic support from their peer

mentors. This sub-theme results from peer mentor guidance on navigating communications with

faculty, which includes coursework advice. Their peer mentors also provided participants with

valuable insight to promote academic success. Two participants did not receive academic advice

from peer mentors. Anne, DeeJai, and Anthony recollected when they discussed best practices

for contacting faculty with their peer mentors. Anne stated the following:

Recently, I asked for advice on asking my professor to take an exam early. They said just

be honest with them and truthful. And I think I was having an issue with another

professor and wanted to send an email. And then she was saying to always just be honest

and just send the email. Even if you don't know what's going on in class, just go to their office hours.

Anne wanted to take an exam early and recalled her peer mentor telling her to be honest with her instructor. This is an example of the advice given to Anne by her peer mentor. They also encouraged her to visit the instructor's office hours for extra help. Anne appreciated the advice and found positive outcomes in being able to take the exam early. This interaction also ties into fundamental motives, such as showing support given by her peer mentor. DeeJai wanted to speak with her professors about extra credit opportunities to raise her grade. DeeJai reported the following experience:

> So, one of the biggest things was towards the end of the semester. I was trying to figure out like, okay, if I email my professors, are they going to raise my grades, or is it just not worth it? And my mentor was like, always email, your professors; he was like, it doesn't matter if they are the meanest ones on the planet. You always email your professors, and you always ask for extra credit if they give it out. He was like the worst they can say is, "no". So, I think that's the biggest thing. But also, when it came to it. He also told me to remember how I was in the class. So, if I wasn't talking in the class if I wasn't doing anything, or if I didn't put enough effort into it, then take that into consideration. That's what they're going to take into consideration. So those were like one of the biggest points when it came to dealing with professors and everything.

DeeJai contacted her peer mentor for some advice about approaching faculty. DeeJai mentioned how helpful the academic advice was for her as she experienced a positive outcome and received an extra credit assignment.

Anthony mentioned that he had never had any negative experiences with his instructors but found the advice of his peer mentor helpful. Anthony replied with the following:

> Yeah, I didn't really have any negative experiences with my professors because they were all like I guess you could say cool, but he just told me if there's ever a point in time where I need to talk to my professor, then I can do that and should do that. The biggest thing is to reach out to them and communicate. If I have something that I need help with, or if there's like a tough spot that I need to get help through.

His peer mentor urged Anthony to actively communicate with his instructors if he has personal or academic concerns. Anne, DeeJai, and Anthony showed heightened importance as they had a significant feeling of belonging from their peer mentors to help cultivate a welcoming, valued, and supportive environment to discuss academic and personal concerns. These peer mentors were perceived as safe and knowledgeable of how to leverage the tools available in these types of situations.

Anthony, Hazel, and Sahra all have memories of peer mentors providing study tips, studying together, or providing academic assistance. Anthony said the following:

> My peer mentor definitely, positively influenced my academic performance, because whenever I needed someone to study with, they were always there for me, or they would make time for me, and they always made sure that my grades were in a good spot, not just like a suitable spot, because they know that I'm capable of better. They made sure that they were in a good spot, and I'm thankful for it because now I've been able to be on the Dean's list.

Anthony appreciated his peer mentor's time promoting his academic readiness and influencing his academic performance. His peer mentor helped him secure a spot on the Dean's list for outstanding academic achievement. Anthony's excerpt described how his academic performance mattered to his peer mentor, who made time for him and cared about his grades.

Hazel said she and her peer mentor had the same major and could assist her with academic questions. Hazel said the following:

> We were in the same major. So, she said to me if I needed any help with anything just reach out to her, or if she couldn't help me with it, she'd be able to find me someone in the same major who could. So, being that she's already familiar with a lot of things around the campus, she would be able to get me some help. She always checked on me like academically, making sure, like, you know, my grades were at least a B or higher. If I told her I had something less than a B, she would be like, "Okay, what do you feel is pulling you down, or what do you feel is a weakness in the class?" She would try to help push me to do better academically. She also recommended office hours. I wasn't a big fan of them when I got here. I was like, there's no way office hours are going to help me out, but it did.

Hazel enjoyed the fact that she shared the same major. It made it easier for her peer mentor to give course advice and instructor recommendations. Hazel knew her peer mentor's prior experience on campus was an advantage. Hazel mentioned that she did not believe that the peer mentor's advice of office hours would benefit her, but she quickly realized that it was the key to her success.

Teyah was also offered advice related to office hours:

Yeah, she would always advise me to use the professor's office hours, even though I still probably need to use them [laughter]. She always encouraged me to use the office hours and email professionally. She helped me just to stay focused. She helped me clear my plate. She would help me make sure my plate wasn't too full. She would make sure I was studying at a good time. To have good time management skills and not stress studying. She would just make sure that I was prepared academically and made sure I didn't lack. She would make sure I didn't overstimulate. She would make sure I didn't do too much where I would break down.

Teyah mentioned how her peer mentor helped with time management and studying techniques. They would ensure that Teyah did not overexert herself in other areas to be successful in the classroom, influencing her academic performance. Teyah mentioned how attending office hours helped her to better understand the course material, resulting in a positive outcome. Teyah felt appreciated for the ways her peer mentor helped her academic readiness.

Sahra stated that her peer mentor assisted with coursework advice by identifying better study habits. Sahra reported:

The peer mentor definitely contributed to my better academic and study habits. They definitely shared quite a few study habits with me, and I feel like that was really helpful because I came into college not having many study habits. I was able to go through high school not really having to study. So then, when I got to college, it was like a big smack in the face that I really had to learn how to study and adjust to being able to do my work outside of school and on my own time. That was a really hard adjustment for me, and I feel like my peer mentor really helped out with it.

Sahra explained that she was not used to studying for class or exams and appreciated her peer mentor offering study tips since she did not have prior study experience. The study tips and habits she acquired from her peer mentor helped as she had no real prior experience with studying. This became a positive outcome for Sahra as she has become more academically prepared. Britnee and Jim recalled times when they received encouragement, support, and advice from their peer mentors. Britnee said the following:

> She always encourages me to keep my grades up whenever I tell her about like how I'm feeling down. She always gives me some kind of positive word to help me keep going, or she might advise me to talk to Stacey or my therapist. If I do need help studying with something, and she knows how to help, then she will. She always checks in every couple of weeks, just to see how I'm doing grade-wise.

Britnee explained that her peer mentor always encouraged her to keep up her grades and provided words of inspiration. Britnee mentioned how impactful that was on her as she dealt with mental health concerns. The peer mentor also checked up on her to ask about academic progress and presented strategies for academic success. The peer mentor agreed to help Britnee to study, and this help revealed a positive outcome for Britnee as she was able to pass the class.

Jim recalled the advice that he received from his peer mentor:

> I think that out of all the advice he gave me. The best thing he told me was to be focused and don't let stuff take you off task. No, girls like don't go to all these parties like just stay on task. That's the biggest thing I think he taught me; he would do it himself, too, and not just tell me to do it. He was at every study night for MAP. So, I think the best thing I learned from him is to focus on academics. Stay on task and go to class, too.

He thought very highly of his peer mentor to take such advice related to girls, staying focused, and going to class. Jim smiled while he was speaking about this experience he had with his peer mentor. Jim noticed that his peer mentor did not just give advice but followed their own. He mentioned how he gave more merit to the advice because his peer mentor mirrored it in their own life. The academic guidance related to tutoring, faculty, and course advice provided by the mentors presented academic readiness interventions. The mentees found this advice beneficial to their overall educational success.

While most participants experienced positive engagement outcomes due to the contributions of their mentors, not all had the same experience. Two participants did not receive academic advice from peer mentors. Each stated that there were no existing problems with faculty, so they did not need any advice from peer mentors to navigate concerns.

Exploring On-Campus Resources

Seven of the ten participants acknowledged receiving referral information about campus resources from their peer mentors, a second engagement practice leading to positive outcomes for first-year Black students at a PWI. This sub-theme represents peer mentors who refer mentees to wrap-around support systems established to enhance the college experience by offering academic, personal, or financial support. Peer mentors provided insight into campus resources promoting academic readiness. Terms that were referred to as *exploring on-campus resources* from participant interviews included academic centers, psychology/health, social, and basic needs resources. Three participants' peer mentors did not connect them to campus resources.

Academic Resources

Academic Resources offered on campus and to which mentees were referred included the library, the Math Center, and the Writing Center. Anthony, Hazel, Jim, and Sahra spoke about academic resources while explaining their struggles in math, and their peer mentors encouraged tutoring assistance within the Math Center. Anthony responded with the following experiences:

My mentor referred me to the Math Center because I was struggling with this certain concept in math, and he let me know how helpful they were to him. So, I just went and checked it out, and it was a really great resource for me. He also referred me to a place on campus, where I was able to check out a camera because he was aware that I needed to use an actual camera to take pictures for a class so he referred me to them, and I was just able to check the camera free of charge, and then just bring it back.

Anthony mentioned how he struggled with math and was unsure how to get help. His peer mentor referred him to the Math Center. He even had an assignment that required the use of a camera. His peer mentor knew where to go to check out one. His mentor informed him that he could check out a camera at the library, and he did. Anthony said that if it had not been for his peer mentor's referral he would have tried to secure the funds to buy a camera, as he could not afford to purchase one at that time. He completed the course successfully, with a positive outcome.

Jim also discussed a time when he was referred to the Math Center as he was not doing well in his pre-calculus class:

So, I remember vividly that I was doing really, really bad in math pre-cal my first semester of school. You know it's bad when your teacher reaches out to an academic

coach so you can do better in his class. I remember seeing my mentor once and saying, man, I'm struggling in math, man. He told me about the Math Center; I didn't really know about it. He told me to go there. I got to the point where I was going at least three times a week, sometimes even more, just for studying. He told me to go to the instructor's office hours too, and my grades kept getting better and better. Once, I had a test and got a 99 on it. So, I ended up passing that class with an A like, a high A, because the quizzes got dropped. So that was really, really helpful for me. My first semester of school, I had a 4.0 GPA.

Jim shared that his peer mentor referred him to the instructor's office hours and Math Center. Although unfamiliar with the Math Center, he decided to listen to his peer mentor and visit for help. Jim said he found this resource beneficial and passed the course with an A. Similarly, Hazel and Sahra shared experiences, noting that their peer mentors encouraged them to go to tutoring as well. Because of this suggestion, Sahra and Hazel successfully completed their courses, also achieving positive outcomes.

Psychology/Health Resources

Britnee, Anthony, DeeJai, and Sahra all mentioned mental health wellness referrals as their peer mentors referred them to areas on campus to receive mental health intervention. Britnee said:

She referred me to Stacey, even though I had already known Stacey. She referred me to talk to her about more of the like mental health stuff and like just things that I needed on a personal level that I wouldn't have thought of before.

Britnee opened up about how her mental health has been an ongoing struggle. Britnee stated that she was able to meet a counselor that she identified with on campus, and this identified a positive outcome.

Similarly, DeeJai mentioned how her peer mentor jokingly said she should visit the Mental Health Center. "He referred me to the Mental Health Center. He would joke around and say, "You need help." He would be like, "No, you need help, so counseling definitely.""

Initially, DeeJai said she hesitated because she felt she would be judged or labeled crazy from the stigma of needing help; she found the resources referred to by the peer mentor beneficial, demonstrating a positive outcome. Sahra's peer mentor also referred her to the Mental Health Center as she had mental health concerns associated with COVID-19 isolation requirements. She said that she found that resource beneficial, showing a positive outcome.

Social Resources

A few participants were referred to the Belonging Office for additional support as the MAP program was housed in this office. Sahra said, "So, my mentor suggested the Belonging Office. They told me that the Belonging Office is always a safe space. And I've learned that throughout my years being here." Britnee talked about her experience with her peer mentor, referring her to the Belonging Office, saying, "She referred me to Stacey, even though I had already known Stacey. She referred me to talk to her about more of the like mental health stuff and like just things that I needed on a personal level that I wouldn't have thought of before." Each participant who mentioned this referral also stated that it was helpful in obtaining positive outcomes. The Belonging Office offered various activities and support services around engagement with these students.

Basic Needs Resources

Two students also noted that their mentor referred them to the food pantry on campus, which they used as a resource to meet basic needs, showing a positive outcome. DeeJai mentioned, "My peer mentor referred me to the pantry at one point. Because I think I said I was hungry, "He said you should go to the pantry." That was my first time finding out about the pantry, and I've been hooked up ever since." Teyah said her peer mentor referred her to the pantry when she did not have money to purchase food. She said they would go together, stating, "We went to the pantry together."

Participants received peer mentor referrals of campus resources for *academic, mental health, social, and basic needs support*. This sub-theme addresses RQ2 as it describes the role that peer mentoring plays in the engagement practices of first-year Black students at a PWI. These resources were provided when participants discussed personal, academic, or financial concerns with their peer mentors. To summarize, eight out of 10 participants received academic advice from their peer mentor, and seven out of 10 participants explained and experienced referral to campus resources by a peer mentor; however, three participants' peer mentors did not connect them to campus resources. Each stated that they were knowledgeable of campus resources and did not need to utilize them as they were doing well in all classes.

Conclusion

The themes that emerged were (1) *Connectedness and Inclusivity* and (2) *Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support*. Connectedness and Inclusivity promote a sense of belonging through coaching, advice, and encouragement for peer mentees. *Bonding Experiences* and *Social Involvements* were sub-themes that described feelings of connectedness and inclusion.

Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support emphasize referrals or advice given by peer

mentors to promote the academic readiness of peer mentees. *How to communicate with faculty*

and *Exploring on-campus resources* were sub-themes that described awareness and utilization

establishing positive outcomes for mentees. Peer mentoring played a role in establishing a sense

of belonging and referred mentees to on-campus engagement opportunities. Mentees' sense of

belonging and on-campus engagement experiences became apparent from the appreciation,

value, respect, and mattering displayed by peer mentors' ability to listen and provide plausible

positive outcomes. Chapter 5 discusses the study's contributions to the literature on a sense of

belonging, engagement, and peer mentoring and will conclude with a discussion of the

limitations of the study, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The findings from this study describe the role peer mentoring plays in the sense of belonging and engagement of Black first-year students at a predominantly White institution. This chapter provides an overview and discussion of the study's contributions to the literature on a sense of belonging, engagement, and peer mentoring for Black students at a PWI. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

This study indicates that peer mentoring assists Black first-year students with establishing a sense of community, increasing academic performance, promoting social connections, and fostering their psychological well-being at a PWI. The findings convey how peer mentoring can assist first-year Black students to feel a sense of belonging at a PWI with respect to the first-year mentees' experiences and their relationships with their peer mentors. Participants shared that peer mentors helped mediate their feelings of isolation and loneliness and promoted positive feelings of inclusion and belonging. Peer mentoring successfully influenced the sense of belonging and engagement of participants in this study.

The findings from this study align with other research regarding a sense of belonging and academic interventions such as peer mentoring. Studies report that a student's sense of belonging seems to be flexible and receptive to programmatic and policy interventions, such as academic intervention (Strayhorn, 2022; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Yeager & Walton, 2011), with a need for more research about how these interventions improve the sense of belonging of ethnic minority students (Stebleton et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2022). Qualitative methods used by limited belonging scholars have put a focus on better understanding how academic interventions might shape the

beliefs, feelings, and cultural adversities of college students (Strayhorn, 2022), and this study expands on this research to determine the ways in which peer mentoring can impact student engagement and sense of belonging experiences of Black first-year students at a PWI.

Gillen O-Neel (2021) states that very few studies examine a sense of belonging and engagement using daily approaches (e.g. feelings towards the school and in-class engagement) (London et al., 2011; Park et al., 2012; Shernoff et al., 2003; Shernoff et al., 2017). Providing first-year minoritized students with access to regular peer mentoring interactions can allow students to connect culturally through shared experiences. This study adds to the literature by offering findings that utilize Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory alongside the lens of peer mentoring. The majority of belonging literature does not highlight process rather it emphasizes the relationship between belonging and variables such as persistence, academic success (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman, 2002/2003), or campus involvement (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012; Vaccaro et al., 2015). Strayhorn's theory describes a variety of circumstances that influence one's belonging of diverse students, but this is the first time it has been applied to peer mentoring.

Oliver et al. (2020) found that peer mentors who are also members of similar communities frequently share parallel cultural views, practices, and experiential knowledge that extend a shared understanding of the encounters faced by community members. This study was designed to explore how Strayhorn's (2018) theory of college students' sense of belonging framework can be applied to understand how specific aspects of peer mentoring contributed to students' sense of belonging. The study provides evidence to support and enhance Strayhorn's

college students' sense of belonging theory within the context of peer mentoring relationships at a PWI.

This qualitative narrative analysis study was conducted at Pelican University, a predominantly White institution in the southeast of the United States. The participants were 10 students who identified as Black and participated in the MAP mentoring program during their first year of college. Data analysis consisted of three rounds of coding using in vivo, descriptive, and structural codes to increase credibility. The following two themes resulted from this study: (1) *Connectedness and Inclusivity and* (2) *Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support.*

Summary of Findings

This study addressed the following research questions: (a) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their sense of belonging at a PWI?; and (b) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their student engagement experiences at a PWI? The following sections will summarize the findings related to each of the research questions.

Peer Mentoring and Sense of Belonging

First-year Black students who participated in a peer mentoring program at a PWI stated that connections to peer mentors through bonding experiences and social involvement factored into their sense of belonging. Most participants shared how they felt a sense of belonging as a result of their experiences of support, mattering, and connectedness through activities, formal and informal check-ins, FaceTime, and social media interactions.

Peer Mentoring and Engagement

First-year Black students who participated in a peer mentoring program at a PWI stated that their referral to and utilization of academic and campus resources were aspects of peer mentoring that factored into their engagement. Most participants shared experiences of advocating their needs to faculty and exploring referred on-campus resources that provided positive outcomes, and a continued sense of belonging. These activities and relationships built through peer mentoring positively impacted students' engagement practices.

Discussion of Findings

Colleges and universities have implemented student peer mentoring as an economical way to endorse positive social and academic outcomes for beginning and continuing students (Milne et al., 2007), using more experienced students to provide such support (Martin et al., 2009). Black first-year students are historically underrepresented on college campuses and, as a result of marginalization, face barriers to such success, which established this study's need. This study focuses on several related and interwoven experiences. First, the findings from this study suggest that peer mentoring plays a role in cultivating a sense of belonging for Black first-year students at a PWI. Peer mentoring can establish a supportive environment where mentees feel a sense of belonging. Through the development of a supportive environment and a greater understanding of connectedness to the institution and program than their peers who may not participate in peer mentoring, institutions can help minoritized students develop a sense of belonging, which is a pathway to improve student retention and success (Raymond & Sheppard, 2018). Second, the findings indicate that peer mentoring plays a role in fostering Black first-year students' engagement experiences at a PWI by nurturing supportive communities and networks

with their mentors. Peer mentoring participation can mutually benefit peer mentors and mentees with consistent interactions and engagement that cultivate inclusivity and encourage connections (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Gershenfeld, 2014; Flores & Estudillo, 2018).

Effective mentoring programs provide positive outcomes and can be successful in increasing engagement and feelings of integration into the college environment for students from underrepresented minority groups targeted by mentoring programs (Collings et al., 2014; Crisp et al., 2017). Third, peer mentoring offered spaces for engagement and empowerment as mentors provided support, encouragement, and guidance that successfully empowered first-year students to navigate academic and social settings. All participants identified as Black/African American and shared similar backgrounds and experiences. These factors undoubtedly influenced the narratives and supported the patterns and themes that developed during the data analysis. As I also shared a racial identity with participants, I needed to reflect on my subjective perspectives, biases, and preconceptions. To mediate these, I provided participants the opportunity to review the findings to ensure they resonated with their experience. When a Black researcher selects Black participants, this may communicate shared experiences to reduce the emotional burden of racism, as a White researcher only validates experiences of racism (Mizock et al., 2011). This shared positionality may have also contributed to the honesty and openness of participants to engage in discussions of a sensitive nature.

The experiences of participants in this study align with Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging theory in relation to positive academic outcomes in that the findings show that participants used various campus and academic resources referred to by peer mentors and provided mentors with more intervention strategies can prove beneficial to mentees. The findings

indicate that the academic advice provided by mentors was beneficial to first-year Black students through positive outcomes. The peer mentoring experience provided participants with engagement opportunities using campus and academic resources recommended by their peer mentors, as mentoring can incorporate support, guidance, empowerment, education, and career progression (Sampson & James, 2012; Shaughnessy, 2013). This research advances the exploration of mentoring's impact on student success interventions and outcomes to better equip Black students at PWIs. Significant usage of campus resources promoted the academic readiness of Black first-year students. The theoretical implications of Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging theory can improve positive outcomes to foster academic achievement by using various campus resources to promote connectedness, respect, value, and appreciation of Black first-year students at PWI.

There is limited research on Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory applied to peer mentoring; thus, this study fills a gap in the literature. Tenets from Strayhorn's college 'students' sense of belonging theory were represented in the data. The tenets are as follows: (1) *Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior,* as mentees expressed feeling supported and appreciated as they established a continuous trusting relationship, the sense of belonging they felt encouraged them to interact with their peer mentors; (2) *Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in specific contexts, at certain times, or among certain populations,* as Black mentees felt a sense of belonging through connectedness, appreciation and mattering to others which can be more critical while attending a PWI. (3) *Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering,* as mentees felt a stronger sense of belonging when their well-being mattered to peer mentors; (4) *Social identities intersect*

and affect college students' sense of belonging, as mentees felt better supported by mentors of similar cultural backgrounds, interests, and degree programs; (5) *Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes,* as mentees speak of moments of positive outcomes from advice or referrals provided, such as successful completion of courses; and (6) *Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change,* as mentees experienced conditions of feeling awkward in social situations and the realization that mentors would join them allowed mentees to feel a greater sense of belonging. Relationships often continued after the conclusion of the formal peer mentoring, which allowed a sense of belonging to be satisfied in subsequent years. Peer mentoring created student engagement experiences and a sense of belonging opportunities for mentees.

Connectedness and Inclusivity

In the findings, most participants showed that positive connections with their peer mentors fostered a sense of belonging on campus for them as first-year Black students through bonding experiences such as feeling like part of the group, having a friend, being able to confide in the peer mentor, and mattering. Positive relationship-building with others on campus is an element of a sense of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019; Strayhorn, 2022). These findings align with Colvin and Ashman (2010), who found that peer mentors identified with roles such as connecting links and trusted friends, and peer mentors and mentees realized the benefits of being attached to the campus. Individuals who feel connected and that they belong are more likely to contribute and be engaged on campus (London et al., 2011; Shernoff et al., 2017). Strayhorn's (2018) theory centers connectedness, value, mattering, bonding, and positive outcomes and suggests that students who are more engaged with peers and the campus

community will gain opportunities for connections and developing relationships. This was seen in the findings as participants connected and felt a part of the group, found value in having a friend, bonded by being able to confide in the peer mentor, discovered that their well-being mattered to their peer mentor, and achieved positive academic outcomes as a result of advice and exploring on-campus resources referred by their mentor.

Mentoring is an effective and successful method to guide students through the postsecondary system (Yomtov et al., 2015). This was seen in this study as students connected to their peer mentors and received referrals to on-campus resources. In the findings, most participants recognized that social involvement with peer mentors influenced their belonging and engagement. Check-ins, conversations, texts messages, and social media interactions from peer mentors seemed to be the most prominent method of social involvement, which mentees felt mattered. Strayhorn's (2018) theory states that mattering has key factors: responsiveness, trust, realization of self, significance, and occasionally gratitude. One participant stated that their peer mentor provided the best advice, while others referred to their peer mentor as older brothers or a best friend. Peer mentors were seen as a safe space for peer mentees to share mental concerns or academic stressors. Foxx's (2021) findings concluded that safe spaces were not just physical environments but were instead the individuals and the groups of individuals who made up those spaces. Also, Foxx stated that safe spaces engaged and drew Black students because they provided five forms of care: acceptance, understanding, social, academic, and financial resources. In this study, participants felt a sincere connection with their peer mentors deriving from each check-in experience which aligns with research about safe spaces; their peer mentor was a safe space for them. In summary, peer mentees established a connection to mentors

through bonding experiences (e.g. feeling like part of the group, having a friend, being able to confide in the peer mentor, and mattering) and social involvement (e.g. check-ins, conversations, texts messages, and social media interactions). These connectedness and inclusivity occurrences assisted with fostering peer mentees' sense of belonging at a PWI.

Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support

In the findings, participants shared that their peer mentors provided academic guidance and referrals to campus resources offering a blueprint for how mentees can advocate for themselves within the classroom and understand on-campus resources to assist with better academic outcomes. Through these experiences, peer mentees gained positive outcomes which increased their academic knowledge and ability to ask for help. Dawson et al. (2014) mentioned peer mentors were experienced students that share their knowledge and skills through casual social interactions to help new students develop academic abilities. This may lead first year students to increase their utilization of campus resources because of established trust with their peer mentor (Gopalan & Brady, 2020), which was seen in this study. The findings indicate that peer mentors provided advice related to academics and on-campus resources. This aligns with Raymond and Sheppard (2018) who found that mentors provide support and encouragement by sharing academic resources and advice, empowering and developing their mentees' ability to succeed educationally. The advice from participants' peer mentors produced positive outcomes for mentees.

Colvin and Ashman (2010) identified peer mentoring roles in their study, such as learning coach and student advocate, and these roles can lead to improved overall confidence (e.g., academic and self-esteem). The findings from this study highlight that peer mentors served in the

roles of learning coach and student advocate for the participants and offered beneficial academic

advice related to faculty, coursework, and referrals to campus resources as peer mentees gained

positive outcomes from the advice provided by mentors. Mentees trusted their peer mentor

enough to ask these important questions affecting their academic performance.

Participants in this study formed meaningful attachments with their mentors that resulted

in their engagement with academic resources on campus. "The drive to belong can be satisfied

by a few meaningful attachments that engender feelings that fuel belongingness: feeling

appreciated, respected, and valued" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 39). Strayhorn (2018) states that a sense

of belonging is related to college student involvement on campus as students will feel a stronger

connection with others and, ultimately, improve academic outcomes, which was seen in this

study.

In summary, the findings indicate that peer mentors fostered a sense of connectedness to

mentees through mattering and spending time engaging and answering questions. Mentees grew

to trust peer mentors as they proved knowledgeable about navigating academic concerns. Peer

mentees viewed their mentors as strong supportive networks and trusted them enough to follow

their advice. Mentees understood that mentors have navigated similar hurdles and trusted their

advice. As Black et al. (2019) mention, Black students confirmed listening more to their

mentors' advice and trusted them as authority figures because of previous postsecondary

experience. As shown by the participants' powerful experiences with their peer mentors that

influenced their connectedness and feelings of inclusion and awareness and utilization of

academic support resources, students' academic and social involvement can influence their sense

of belonging on campus through strong supportive networks that can improve retention (Strayhorn, 2012).

Limitations of Study

There are limitations to this study. First, self-selection bias may have contributed to the findings as participants self-selected to participate in a peer mentoring program (and self-selected to participate in the study), restricting the generalizability of the findings to the broader student population. Second, this study had an overwhelming quantity of women participants, which lessened the male perspective. Third, this qualitative study focused on one student population in one location, in one mentoring program, and at a specific institution; findings cannot be generalized to other contexts but may be transferable to other peer mentoring programs.

Implications for Practice

There were only 10 participants selected for this study, which does not depict all participants' opinions of peer mentoring and its impact, which is the rationale for this study. While the findings are not generalizable to all populations, they do create practical recommendations that may be transferable to other institutions and settingsThe following section lists four implications for practice that are drawn from the data findings, and their significance is explained.

Peer Mentoring Programs

The following recommendations for the design of peer mentoring programs and how they train their peer mentors are based on the findings from this research study.

Program Design

Peer mentoring programs should consider the contents of their mentee orientation, types of activities, and meeting styles when designing programs to support Black students' transition to postsecondary education. Research indicates that peer mentoring aims to improve the transitional adjustment of first-year students studying at a university (Martin et al., 2009). Students of color may arrive in an academic setting with different expectations than high school and being Black at a PWI may add to the complex nature of issues and educational challenges (Sinanan, 2016). The findings suggest that peer mentoring may help mitigate potential issues and challenges faced by Black students at a PWI. Peer mentoring programs should consider ways to foster more inclusion opportunities for mentees, as findings suggest that participants established a sense of belonging at their institutions through peer mentoring support. This may be achieved by including a variety of opportunities for engagement between peer mentors and mentees and ensuring that mentors are trained about campus resources and how to foster feelings of connectedness, valuing, respecting, and appreciating students.

The findings in this study reveal that peer mentoring can enhance first-year Black students' belonging and engagement at a PWI. Participants shared feelings of inclusion, connectedness, respect, and appreciation for the peer mentoring relationship, and further research can harvest additional strategies to foster conditions at which Black first-year students can feel a connection between peer mentors and the university as a whole. During orientation, icebreaker activities can be incorporated to allow students to share experiences, interests and goals to build a sense of community and foster connections with other participants. The findings indicate that mentees found mentorship more impactful because they shared the same or similar majors with

mentors. Mentor matching can be facilitated based on similar career goals and academic major programs. Peer mentoring programs can organize cultural celebrations, identity workshops, leadership opportunities, and feedback sessions to promote a sense of belonging and engagement opportunities among Black first-year students. Participants reported that they interacted with their mentors in both informal and formal settings, so programs should support multiple settings for engagement. Through a holistic peer mentoring program design, institutions can improve connectedness, value, respect, and appreciation, which can promote a sense of belonging and engagement for Black first-year students at PWIs.

Mentor Training

Peer mentors should have support and proper training to effectively mentor first-year students. Peer mentoring programs often facilitate training to support peer mentors, and based on the findings from this research, training should include information about academic resources and academic success strategies, advocacy, relationship building/maintaining, and mental health. Mentor training could review a range of campus resources, so they have the knowledge to appropriately refer their mentees. Workshops on academic support services and offering opportunities for role-playing scenarios can equip mentors with knowledge and an ability to show mentees how to navigate such concerns. Collier (2015) states that peer mentors should learn about building an academic plan, making referrals, using campus technology systems, supporting students in crisis, leading a mentor meeting, academic policies, and academic success strategies. In the findings, the participants communicated that peer mentors provided academic advice, which was beneficial to their academic success. Peer mentors shared information about resources on campus, such as the mental health center and academic tutoring, and guidance about

engaging with faculty. This training can ensure that mentors are well versed about university resources and support services to refer mentees effectively.

The findings in this study show that peer mentors were trusted individuals with credible knowledge about academic and campus resources and were prepared to answer questions or concerns brought forth by their peer mentees. Mentors were familiar with campus resources, assisting mentees with navigating academic and faculty concerns more effectively while providing information about support services and extracurricular opportunities for engagement. The findings also indicate peer mentors offered help with studying habits, time management skills, and strategies for engaging with faculty leading to positive outcomes. This added value to the peer mentors as they either knew how to navigate concerns or the proper on-campus resources needed to thrive.

Mentees view peer mentors as a source of value, respect, and connectedness, and it is important that they are supported in their roles. The findings indicate that mentees established trusted relationships with their peer mentors. Peer mentors can be trained to have regular check-ins and follow-ups with their peer mentees. This can improve the sense of belonging and engagement aspect of peer mentoring as mentors show a genuine interest in the mentee's life and challenges. Active listening workshops can be used to establish, build, and strengthen trust within the mentorship. Peer mentors can be trained with techniques to enable understanding to respond to mentees' concerns. Goal setting is also an effective training to provide mentors to help mentees set realistic goals. This exercise will provide mentors with knowledge of mentees' dreams and aspirations to help provide guidance on how to achieve them, thereby fostering an environment of respect and understanding.

The findings also indicated that mentors referred students to advocate for themselves to faculty. Peer mentors share their knowledge of faculty members' expectations for students and their tried-and-true personal strategies to effectively meet those expectations (Collier, 2015). Peer mentors can assist and urge students to meet with their instructors and provide support to guide them through this helpful conversation. With a disproportionately low prevalence of faculty from poor, working-class, and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds in primary and secondary schools, Black students holding these identities may struggle to find trust and develop a sense of belonging at school (Hagler, 2018). Black students may have similar backgrounds to their peer mentors. With this knowledge, peer mentors can be trained in strategies to help mentees identify their own needs, strengths and goals to empower mentees to advocate in the classroom for greater academic success. Mentors can also train in confidence-building approaches to help mentees build self-confidence and become more confident to advocate when necessary.

Based on the findings, the mentees expressed having mental health concerns, and training about college student mental health will prepare peer mentors to engage with mentees in social, academic, personal, and financial capacities. Mentors are often the first point of contact as a pre-established relationship of trust makes the mentees more comfortable sharing vulnerable thoughts and concerns. So, it is important to provide mentors with training to identify when a mentee may be struggling. The mentors' ability to know how to respond to such crisis situations and where to refer students is important to provide in a training. Mentors should have training in crisis intervention to know when and how to refer mentees to other areas of support. The theoretical implication of Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory shows that belonging

contributes to the mental well-being of Black first-year students as mentees feel a sense of connectedness, value, respect, support, and mattering to peer mentors. The findings highlight the need for understanding mental health and campus resources for mental health because mentees disclosed being referred to the mental health center due to mental health concerns. Equipping peer mentors with education about mental health first aid gives them tools they can utilize in times of crisis and in day-to-day interactions to both support mentees and contribute to their sense of belonging. Being intentional about how mentors are trained has the potential to increase their efficacy as mentors and, ultimately, the success of their mentees.

Campus Resources to Improve Sense of Belonging and Engagement

The findings indicate that participants engaged in academic resources on campuses which resulted in positive outcomes. Therefore, I recommend enhancing campus resources to include aspects of belonging to benefit Black students. The following campus resources can be provided by institutions to accommodate Black first-year students with student-centered support services, monitoring multidimensional student needs. The findings indicate that participants in this study discussed various connections to the campus community and utilization of resources referred to by their peer mentors. Means and Pyne (2017) suggest that universities that seek to improve academic success for Black first-year students should pay close attention to the role of belonging in academic spaces (e.g., mental health, social identity-based centers, student clubs and organizations, faculty relationships, academic support services, etc.), as it is an essential element to creating comprehensive support opportunities for success. This author's findings contribute to my findings and recommendations.

Participants utilized their peer mentors' knowledge of academic resources on campus and how to communicate with faculty. These interactions promoted belonging and engagement on campus. School belonging is the foundation of a student's social and emotional needs, as a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need (Allen & Kern, 2017). Peer mentors introduced these resources to mentees in this study, as peer mentoring provides support in both academic and psychosocial areas (Burton et al., 2013). I recommend continued support for the well-being of mentees by continuing the ability for mentors to build a support community and providing a listening ear. Much research demonstrates psychological benefits related to the sense of belonging, and individuals feeling of belonging within groups and networks have higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Allen & Kern, 2017). The theoretical implications of Strayhorn's (2014) sense of belonging theory can improve positive outcomes to promote the usage of student support services, as the findings show a positive connection to Black first-year students' provided academic advice and on-campus referrals established belonging at a PWI. While not a comprehensive list, the following are examples of resources that are important to promote experiences of belonging and engagement at colleges and universities, consistent with the findings of this study.

Mental Health Counseling

The findings indicate that peer mentees expressed mental health concerns and were referred to the on-campus Mental Health Center. A sense of belonging is connected to positive mental health outcomes (Allen & Kern, 2017), so increasing a sense of belonging may positively impact students' mental health. Mental health is key to a student's ability to engage and belong. Student suicide is a leading cause of death among individuals between ages 15-24 and is the

second cause of death for college students; data collected in 2015-16 indicates that there has

been an increased number of college students who have considered or attempted suicide (Kaplin

et al., 2020). For example, Gower et al. (2022) found:

> With this knowledge, it is possible that peer mentoring can help alleviate depression and
>
> offer a positive outlet for building connections. Mentorship can promote a sense of
>
> belonging and improve health and well-being, while social support and peer mentoring
>
> have a protective influence on health (p. 2).

Mental health counseling offices at institutions have several licensed therapists who meet

with students to improve their psychological well-being. I recommend hiring more therapists of

color or individuals with extensive cultural competency training, as college counselors can only

allocate 30-45-minute sessions and do not have the capacity to meet regularly with a large

population of Black students. "Sense of belonging is related to positive mental health when it

provides the means through which one is integrated into a community such that he or she feels

needed and valued and contributes to the community in return" (Stebleton et al., 2014, p. 9).

Students can build a rapport with their peer mentors and feel comfortable enough to express or

show signs of mental health concerns. Counseling can aid in encouraging better mental health

practices, and I recommend this to provide a gateway to improved academic performance.

College counselors can play a significant role in helping to engage and retain Black college

students by addressing a sense of belonging and mental health issues (Stebleton et al., 2014).

Retainment of diverse and culturally competent mental health counselors and key student

affairs staff is essential, and minoritized students should be targeted to promote more culturally

tailored resources since this group underutilizes mental health services (Lederer et al., 2021).

Increased mental health resources and utilization by students can help Black students form a strong sense of belonging on campus and flourish with positive mental health outcomes.

Academic Tutoring

The findings indicated that peer mentors referred mentees to on-campus tutoring services to help with academic concerns. This referral proved to have positive academic outcomes for mentees. I recommend continuing this approach to academic success as academic tutoring supports the understanding of course content so that students can be better prepared for class, assignments, and tests. Academic tutoring may also help students with time management skills and prioritization of assignments to meet deadlines set by instructors. Peer mentors may also serve as peer tutors if majors and classes align. "Peer tutoring has demonstrated its capacity as a pedagogic strategy benefiting students, teachers, and the learning community to which they belong" (Fougner, 2013, p. 504). Black students may have more confidence in starting a dialogue with their peer mentors about their inability to understand course content rather than their instructors. I recommend offering a safe and supportive environment for Black students to feel valued and respected. Students' awareness of their feeling of belonging shapes their academic progress, academic achievement, and social acceptance (Jackson et al., 2023).

Clubs and Organizations

The findings indicate peer mentees were referred to clubs and organizations by mentors already involved in these groups. Mentors provided knowledge of these clubs and organizations to promote on-campus engagement opportunities for mentees. I recommend Black students have representation at the leadership level to have access to making more inclusive decisions to be reflective of the entire student body. A sense of belonging supports how students comprehend

accessible social support services on campus and whether they feel connected to campus life (Strayhorn, 2014). Peer mentors can also assist with exposing Black students to clubs and organizations on a college campus. Students away from home may suffer from homesickness and finding a similar interest may attain a sense of belonging. "Existing organizational programs and structures put the onus of responsibility on students for finding organizations and spaces where they feel comfortable and happy" (Nunn, 2021, p. 11). Institutions can provide race/ethnicity-specific clubs and organizations to foster positive and safe spaces for Black students as it is the institution's responsibility to assist with the development of all aspects of their identity (Brown et al., 2022). I recommend inclusive programming to honor culture, history, and contributions from the Black community.

Students can actively seek information about clubs and organizations they may find interest in. It is even possible for students to create and develop a club and recruit other peers from their residence halls with the same cultural backgrounds to join. "Joining student organizations or simply being open to building friendships in the dorm can create strong social belonging for many students" (Nunn, 2021, p. 16). If a student is struggling to find a sense of belonging, peer mentors can give information about clubs and organizations for students to join. Clubs and organizations can promote emotional and social core competencies such as self-determination, confidence in oneself and the future, engagement with others, and prosocial bonding (Bohleber et al., 2016). Active recruitment can make efforts to reach out directly to Black students to promote clubs in spaces that are frequented to foster a sense of community and belonging on campus.

Food Insecurity Support

The findings indicate that peer mentors referred mentees to the on-campus pantry for basic needs support in relation to food insecurity. Mentees found this support beneficial as it gave them access to food which yielded positive outcomes. I recommend culturally relevant foods to be housed within the pantry to show respect for diverse cultural traditions. Students facing food insecurity are a problem on many college campuses. "Recent estimates from 2021 indicate that 10.2% of Americans living in the United States were food insecure at least once during the last year, while 89.8% of U.S. households were food secure" (Oliver et al., 2023, p. 1). Students not only have to worry about housing, grades, and a sense of belonging but also must worry about securing meals for sustainability. Studies have shown that students who experience food insecurity are in poorer health and have a higher rate of depression, lower grades, and more academic challenges than other students (Maynard et al., 2018). Unfortunately, Black populations are at a larger risk of food insecurity while in college. "Additionally, low-income and minority populations continue to experience greater food insecurity rates compared to other populations" (Oliver et al., 2023, p. 1).

Black students facing food security may have access to a pantry located on campus. I recommend emergency support to provide access in times of immediate need. "Undoubtedly, food insecurity is a major social determinant of health, and an assessment of how it may impact college students' mental health is imperative" (Becerra & Becerra, 2020, p. 2). Peer mentors aware of this concern will likely express this resource to students. Food insecurity, the lack of access to nutritionally adequate food that supports a healthy and active lifestyle, is a growing concern in the college student populations with demographic characteristics, including being

from a low-income background or specific racial or ethnic backgrounds (Loofbourrow et al., 2023).

Food insecurity affects students' health and academic performance in the classroom negatively. Educators, school leaders, and school psychologists may benefit from understanding the different levels of impact to make more sound decisions about strategies and intervention measures to introduce (Allen & Kern, 2017). "In the college student population, food insecurity has been observed to be detrimental to student physical health, mental health, sleep patterns, and academic outcomes including GPA and retention" (Loofbourrow et al., 2022, p.12). Universities can intervene to address food insecurity concerns and improve mental and physical health by referring students to support services. This act can increase self-confidence with knowledge of support services and resources on campus and show improvement at the end of a semester or year academic performance (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016).

Black students may have parents who are either unable to assist or will not assist once they reach 18 years of age. Food insecurity has been connected to low-income communities, which can deter students' ability to pay for food, tuition, and housing and force them to make concessions on how they choose to spend their money (Hamilton et al., 2020). This is a problem for many colleges and universities.

Faculty-to-Student Connections

Peer mentoring can break down faculty-to-student barriers by empowering first-year students with the tools to have direct conversations with faculty. The findings indicated that peer mentees were being referred to faculty office hours and taught how to advocate for themselves via email. I recommend cultural competency training for faculty to understand the diverse

backgrounds and experiences of Black students and ways to support them. "With the feeling of empowerment, you can overcome any obstacle or barrier you encounter; it is just a matter of putting in time, expending effort, and applying a strategy" (Valverde, 2012, p. 16). Many students feel uncomfortable asking questions in class or attending office hours. Providing first-year students with mentors can teach them how to advocate through conversations and help with their comfort level in having such conversations. Thus, in addition to insufficient academic training, as well as a wide variety of everyday barriers, underrepresented college students' lower persistence and completion rates can be partially accredited to problems in achieving a sense of social, academic, and cultural incorporation on campus (Hagler, 2018). I recommend representation in the curriculum as black scholars can be incorporated to show the faculty's interest in diverse academic content.

Black first-year students, through mentoring, can understand how to communicate effectively with faculty for academic performance. Institutions can assist with this goal by employing more faculty of color in various subject areas and educating existing faculty about issues and concerns minoritized students may face (Sinanan, 2016). Guidance to engage in difficult conversations can cultivate a sense of belonging to feel more invested in one's education and provide support for connectedness to the institution. The efficiency of a mentoring program was assessed through students' position of belonging, connectedness, supposed academic and social assistance, and awareness of campus resources and services (Yomtov et al., 2015). Resources at a college campus are important for students to connect with. Mentors can inform these students of resources, highlighting the benefits of using each one. This practice will encourage students to connect with these resources when needed.

Mentoring can impact first-year students' retention and, ultimately, graduation rates. First-year students have a significant amount of stress, anxiety, and depression as they are often not college-ready and unable to navigate college resources successfully (Pena et al., 2022). First-year students may also lack a sense of connection to the university, may be unfamiliar with campus culture, and may not take advantage of academic and financial resources (Pena et al., 2022). This population then becomes at risk of dropping out or academic suspension. It is important to have peer mentors in place to guide students in understanding collegiate expectations as faculty may not have time to engage in this way. Mentors can instruct students through learning methods, focusing on matters that faculty might not have time to assist with at individual learner levels (Henry et al., 2011).

Recommendations for Further Research

Listed are recommendations for further research supported by the findings. Peer mentoring programs that utilize different models can compare and evaluate the effectiveness of their programs to develop best practices and aspects that positively contribute to successful mentoring relationships. A comparative mixed methods study could be utilized to examine participant narratives and also analyze the persistence and retention data of these participants in the program compared to other minoritized first-year students who are not mentored. This comparative study could compare and contrast the approaches used by mentoring programs (e.g., stand-alone, embedded, group mentoring, etc.) to foster a sense of belonging and engagement practices of all first-year minoritized students. Narratives and data on persistence and retention from different styles of mentoring can be analyzed to improve mentoring experiences as mentoring styles can affect mentee academic performance (Leidenfrost et al., 2014).

A couple of participants in this study mentioned that having the same or similar majors as their peer mentors was helpful concerning referrals to campus resources, study tips, and academic course and faculty advice. These participants also placed emphasis on the ability to study with their peer mentor as a result of sharing similar or same majors. One participant confirmed that their peer mentor may have significantly contributed to their academic performance if the peer mentor was enrolled in the same major. Conducting a mixed methods comparative study to identify if shared majors influence mentees' academic performance in contrast to mentoring relationships with dissimilar majors, may uncover best mentee/mentor matching practices. The interpretations of experiences of mentors and mentees can be both impactful and powerful to provide insight into more resources and interventions to support such populations.

This study was designed to explore how Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging framework can be applied to understand how specific aspects of peer mentoring contributed to students' sense of belonging. The study provides evidence to support and enhance Strayhorn's (2018) theory of college students' sense of belonging within the context of peer mentoring relationships at PWIs. So, constructing or using an existing scale to measure and implement Strayhorn's college students' sense of belonging theory can serve as a model that incorporates peer mentoring. Studies using a scale could fill the gap in the literature regarding peer mentoring and Strayhorn's theory and will work as a mechanism to help Black students find belonging and foster opportunities to be more engaged on college campuses.

Conclusion

This study addressed the role that peer mentoring plays in the belonging and engagement experiences of first-year Black students at a PWI. Institutions that are invested in the retention of Black first-year students can offer peer mentoring as a gateway to forming positive and lasting mentoring relationships. Peer mentoring is an empowering experience that gives students a sense of community, purpose, and camaraderie (Oliver et al., 2020). This study addressed the following research questions: (a) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their sense of belonging at a PWI?; and (b) How do first-year Black students describe the role that peer mentoring plays in their student engagement experiences at a PWI? The themes that emerged are: *(1) Connectedness and Inclusivity and (2) Awareness and Utilization of Academic Support.* The findings showed that most participants indicated peer mentoring plays a positive role in their sense of belonging and engagement at Pelican University through bonding experiences, social involvement, how to communicate with faculty, and exploring on-campus resources. I concluded that there are clear connections between peer mentoring relationships as a catalyst to Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory, as most participants disclosed feelings of connectedness, respect, value, mattering, and positive outcomes from their peer mentoring relationships. It is important to consider that peer mentoring can contribute to Black first-year students' ability to develop a sense of belonging and to become engaged at PWIs. There must be conditions in which Black first-year students can engage and find a sense of belonging on PWI campuses. Belonging does not just happen; it is authentically created.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Invitation & Recruitment Flyer

Dear Students,

My name is Ricky Frazier. I am a PhD candidate at Pelican University and would like to invite you to take part in my research study entitled, *"Navigating the Minoritized Student First-Year Experience: Exploring Ways Peer Mentoring Can Enhance Engagement and Belonging at a PWI."* Your valuable insights and experiences can contribute significantly to the understanding of peer mentoring and its impact on creating a more inclusive and supportive campus environment.

I am looking to recruit participants who were MAP mentees during the 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23, or 2023-24 academic years, who identify as Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, Native American/Pacific Islander, Asian, or Two or More Races and college-aged 18-22. If you meet these criteria, you are invited to participate in a one hour zoom interview on a date and time of your choosing between now and January 15, 2024. After the data analysis concludes, you will be contacted by email for member checking to review findings related to your interview. You will email me if these results are inaccurate. If not, email is received it is the assumption of the researcher that the information sent to you is accurate. For your participation in this research study, you will be provided a $25 e-gift card presented after member checking concludes.

Please click [here](#) to take the screening survey!

If you are interested, please contact me at:
xxxxxxxxxxx or (XXX)-XXX-XXXX

Thank you for considering participating in this study. Please, consider signing up! This will give you the opportunity for your voice to be heard!

Study Participants Needed

A doctoral student at CCU is currently seeking participants for a research study investigating the potential influence of peer mentoring on the sense of belonging and engagement among students at a predominately White college campus.

Who can participate?

- **College-aged students (18-22)**
- **Was a mentee in the first year of college during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, 2022-2023, or 2023-24 academic years**
- **Social identities (e.g. Black, Hispanic, Asian, and/or Indigenous**

What will I do?

- **One-on-one 45-60-minute Zoom interviews to explore your thoughts, experiences, and perceptions related to peer mentoring, sense of belonging, and engagement on campus.**
- **30-45-minute member-checking meeting after data analysis**

You will receive a $25 e-gift card for completing the study.

Take the screening survey

rb.gy/22bdcq

For questions contact:
Ricky Frazier

Appendix B: Screening Survey

Navigating the Minoritized Student First-Year Experience: Exploring Ways Peer Mentoring Can Enhance Engagement and Belonging at a PWI

My name is Ricky Frazier and I am a doctoral student at XXXXXXXXXX. I am also a XXXXXXXXX on campus as well. This study is not being completed in my capacity of my professional role, but in my role as a student only. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study entitled, "Navigating the Minoritized Student First-Year Experience: Exploring Ways Peer Mentoring Can Enhance Engagement and Belonging at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)."

The purpose of this qualitative narrative analysis study is to examine the role peer mentoring plays in cultivating the engagement and sense of belonging of 10 minoritized students participating in a first-year peer mentoring program at a PWI in the Southeast.

To be eligible to participate in this study, you need to meet all of the following criteria:
1. Have participated in the MAP program as a mentee in the 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23, or 2023-2024 academic years.
2. Be between the ages of 18 and 22.
3. Are from a minoritized race or ethnicity (Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Native Alaskan, Two or more races).

For this research study, your participation will be required for a short screening survey on the next pages about your demographics that should take anywhere from 5-10 minutes. Then, if you meet the criteria you will be contacted to schedule a 45-60 minute Zoom interview in which you'll be asked to address semi-structured interview questions about your experiences in a mentoring program and its influence on your belonging and engagement. A few weeks after the interview, you will be contacted by email for member checking to review findings related to your interview. You will email me if these results are inaccurate. If not, email is received it is the assumption of the researcher that the information sent to you is accurate.

You are free to talk with someone you trust about your participation in this research and may take time to reflect on whether you wish to participate or not. If you have any questions, please contact me. You do not have to agree to participate in this research study. If you do choose to participate, you may choose not to at any time once the study begins. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing from the study at any time. If you are a Pelican student, your decision to participate or not will have no affect your grade.

During this research study, it is possible that you may experience remembrance of feelings of isolation, lack of belonging, and racist or negative behaviors from experiences on campus. After the screening process, I plan to provide you with the expected questions for the interview so that are prepared for any questions. I can also share resources at Pelican University that can help you process the interview such as counseling or advising if needed.

By agreeing to participate in this research study, you may benefit by allowing your voice to be heard through your experiences, perspectives, and challenges from your stories. This may also encourage a sense of respect and recognition for your knowledge and insights.

For your participation in this research study, you will be provided a $25 e-gift card presented after member checking concludes.

Unless you provide consent to the contrary, the confidentiality of your participation in this research study, your responses or any individual results will be maintained by the PI and all members of the research team. Note that confidentiality will only be violated when required by law or the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association. This usually includes, but may not be limited to, situations when your responses indicate that you, or another clearly identified individual, is at risk of imminent harm or situations in which faculty are mandated reporters, such as instances of child abuse or issues covered under Title IX regulations. For more information about Title IX, please see the University's webpage at: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

As the Principal Investigator on this research study, I plan to share the results of this study by writing my findings in a dissertation, and potentially through scholarly publications and presentations. Your identity will be kept confidential.

 If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me by phone at (XXX)- XXX-XXXX or email xxxxxxxxx.

 My faculty advisor on this study is Dr. Sheena Kauppila and she can also be contacted by phone (XXX)-XXX-XXXX or email xxxxxxxxxx

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services is responsible for the oversight of all human subject research conducted at Pelican University. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant before, during or after the research study, you may contact this office by calling (XXX)-XXX-XXXX or emailing xxxxxxxxxxxx

This research study has been approved by the IRB on November 17, 2023. This approval will expire on November 17, 2024 unless the IRB renews the approval prior to this date.

Consent
By signing the box and clicking the arrow below you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read this consent form, and agree to participate in this research study. You are free to skip any question that you choose. Please print a copy of this page for your records.

What academic year did you participate in MAP as a Mentee?
- o   2020-21 (1)
- o   2021-22 (2)

- o   2022-23 (3)
- o   2023-2024 (4)
- o   None of the above (5)

How old are you?
- o   18 (1)
- o   19 (3)
- o   20 (4)
- o   21 (5)
- o   22 (6)
- o   None of the above (7)

What is your race or ethnicity?
Select all that apply.
- ☐ Black/African American (1)
- ☐ Latino/Hispanic (2)
- ☐ Native American/Alaska Native (3)
- ☐ Asian (4)
- ☐ Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (10)
- ☐ White (8)
- ☐ Other (7) _____

       This demographic information will be kept confidential and will be used to provide context for your interview responses.

What is your gender identity?

- o   Man (1)
- o   Woman (2)
- o   Non-binary (3)
- o   Genderfluid (4)
- o   Transgender (5)
- o   Other (7) _____
- o   Prefer not to answer (6)

What pronouns do you use?

- o   she/her/hers (1)
- o   he/him/his (2)
- o   they/them/their (3)
- o   Other (4) _____
- o   Prefer not to answer (5)

What is your sexual identity/sexual orientation?

- o Heterosexual (1)
- o Gay (2)
- o Lesbian (3)
- o Asexual (4)
- o Bi-Curious (5)
- o Pansexual (6)
- o Bi-Sexual (7)
- o Other (8) _____
- o Prefer not to answer (9)

Are you a first-generation college student?
- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)
- o Unsure (5)
- o Prefer not to answer (4)

Do you receive a Pell Grant as part of your financial aid package?
- • Yes (1)
- o No (2)
- o Unsure (5)
- o Prefer not to answer (4)

- o What is your state residency status for Pelican University tuition purposes?
  In-State (1)
- o Out-State (2)
- o Prefer not to answer (4)

What year are you in college?

- o Freshmen (1)
- o Sophomore (2)
- o Junior (3)
- o Senior (4)
- o Prefer not to answer (5)

What is your enrollment status?

- o Full-Time Student (12+ credit hours) (1)
- o Part-Time Student (less than 12 credit hours) (2)
- o Prefer not to answer (3)

Where did you live while participating as a **Mentee** in MAP?

- o On-Campus (1)
- o Off-Campus with Family (2)
- o Prefer not to answer (3)

Please provide a short bio (e.g. family background, type of adolescence neighborhood environment, personal and/or academic achievements) for me to review before your interview.

_____

_____

_____

_____

If you are interested in participating in this research study and receiving a $25 digital gift card for your participation, please provide the following information.

Full Name

_____

Email Address

_____

Phone Number

_____

How would you prefer to be contacted?
Select all that apply.

- ☐ Email (1)
- ☐ Phone Call (2)
- ☐ Text Message (3)

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Interview Script

Hello and welcome! My name is Ricky Frazier and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at XXXXXXXXXX. I am conducting research on mentoring first-year minoritized students as it relates to student engagement and a sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today as we delve into this important topic. This interview aims to better understand how mentoring can retain first-year students and what barriers may exist. Prior to this interview, you received the interview questions. Do not feel like you must answer every question posed to you, as you may not have one. That is ok! Feel free to share all points of view. We will have 45-60 minutes to discuss, and this discussion will be recorded so that I do not miss any valuable information. Do I have your permission to record this interview? Please feel free to expand upon my questions as I want raw qualitative data to add to my research as there are no right or wrong answers. I may ask an additional question between responses to probe for further clarity. Your participation will be kept confidential in any reports written. Let us begin with you introducing yourself for the recording.

Interview Questions

Background
- What factors influenced your decision to attend a Predominantly White Institution?
- Tell me about your experience being a person of color on your college campus?
  - How do you perceive the campus environment in terms of inclusivity and representation?
  - Can you provide examples of inclusive programming or events that have made a positive impact on your experience as a person of color?
  - How does your experience here as a person of color compare to your past experiences in school?
- What does it mean to you to be pursuing a college education?

Peer Mentoring
- Why did you sign up for a peer mentorship?

- What did you expect from this relationship? Were these expectations met? How?
- How frequently did you communicate with your peer mentor(s)?
- In what ways did you engage with your mentor?
- What was the most valuable takeaway you have had in the mentoring experience?
- What was the least valuable takeaway you have had in the mentoring experience?
- In what ways did your peer mentor influence your academic performance?
- Did your mentor refer you to any resources on campus? If so, which ones? Were these resources beneficial or not beneficial? Why?
- Did your peer mentor give any advice related to working with faculty? Can you tell me about this or give an example of how they helped you?
- Is there anything you would like to highlight about your mentoring experience that was not asked or discussed?

Belonging
- What does a sense of belonging mean to you?
- In what ways do you feel like you belong, or don't belong, on the campus?
- How do you think the institution can assist with your sense of belonging?
- Did the presence of a peer mentor help to cultivate a sense of belonging? If so, how?
- Can you describe specific experiences or events that made you feel a sense of belonging or rejection?
- Are there other minoritized students in your classes? If so, how does that make you feel?
Social
- How would you describe your identity?
- Do you ever feel any conflict or challenges regarding the various aspects of your social identities on campus?
- Do you think you have grown since freshmen year? If so, in what ways? How did having a peer mentor attribute to this growth?
- If experienced, how do you manage to cope with any challenges associated with belonging, discrimination, or microaggressions?

Engagement
- What clubs and/or organizations are you involved in on campus? In what ways does this involvement influence your overall sense of belonging?
- What campus resources did your peer mentor refer you to and why?
- How do you think your mental health was impacted by being a student at a PWI?
- Did your peer mentor support your mental wellness? If so, how?
- In what ways are you engaging with your campus community?
- How do you engage with peers socially?
- How do you engage with peers within your major?
- Have you encountered any challenges related to participation and engagement on campus?
- How do you engage with faculty or staff on campus?

- o How might these encounters be influenced by your social identities?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix D: Graduate Student Research Incentive Grant Award Letter

Office of Research

February 7, 2024

Ricky Frazier
Education Sciences

Dear Ricky:

On behalf of the University Research Council, it is my pleasure to inform you that you have been awarded a Graduate Student Research Incentive Grant to support your graduate work at ██████████████. More than double the available funding was requested, and based on the committee's rankings, tiered awards were made at the levels of 80%, 60%, 40% or 0% of the requested funds. Please notify me immediately to confirm that you accept this award.

Project Title:	Navigating the Minoritized Student First-Year Experience: Exploring Ways Peer Mentoring Can Enhance Engagement and Belongs at a PWI
Project Period:	February 16, 2024 – February 15, 2025
Award Amount:	$400.00

You will receive a separate notification with your grant account number, as well as additional details regarding financial and reporting requirements for managing your award. Please be aware that students cannot be account managers for university accounts, so your graduate advisor/research mentor will serve as the manager for this account. However, each grant recipient is responsible for monitoring expenditures and staying within budget.

Once again, congratulations! If you have any questions, please contact me (██████████████) or Patty Carter (██████████████) in the Office of Research (██████████████).

Sincerely,

Rob Young
Associate Provost for Research
Chair, University Research Council

Cc   Dr. Sheena Kauppila, Graduate Advisor

Appendix E: IRB Approval

███████████████

November 17, 2023

Ricky Frazier

████████████████

RE: Navigating the Minoritized Student First-Year Experience: Exploring Ways Peer Mentoring Can Enhance Engagement and Belonging at a PWI

Ricky,

It has been determined that your protocol #2024.78 is approved as **EXPEDITED** by the ████████████ Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Federal Policy for the Protection of **Human Research Subjects Categories #6 & 7,**

> #6 – Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes
> #7 – Research on individual or group characteristics, behavior, or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

This approval is good for one calendar year commencing with the date of approval and concludes on **11/16/2024**. If your work continues beyond this date, it will be necessary to seek a continuation from the IRB. If your work concludes prior to this date, please inform the IRB.

Approval of this protocol does not provide permission or consent for faculty, staff or students to use university communication channels for contacting or obtaining information from research subjects or participants. Faculty, staff and students are responsible for obtaining appropriate permission to use university communications to contact research participants. For use of university email to groups such as all faculty/staff or all students, requests should be made to the Provost's Office after the research protocol has been approved by the IRB. Please allow at least one week to receive approval.

Please note, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to report immediately to the IRB any changes in procedures involving human subjects and any unexpected risks to human subjects, any detrimental effects to the rights or welfare of any human subjects participating in the project, giving names of persons, dates of occurrences, details of harmful effects, and any remedial actions. Such changes may affect the status of your approved research.

Be advised that study materials and documentation, including signed informed consent documents, must be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the research and shall be accessible for purposes of audit.

If you have any questions concerning this review, please contact Patty Carter, IRB Coordinator, at ████████████████

Thank you,

Stephanie Cassavaugh

Stephanie Cassavaugh
Director, Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services
IRB Administrator

cc: Sheena Kauppila