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STRATEGIES MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE WOMEN USE TO NAVIGATE  
MONORACIAL SYSTEMS

by

Minisa Michiko Chapman-Huls

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Marilyn L. Grady

Lincoln, Nebraska

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# Strategies Multiracial College Women Use to Navigate Monoracial Systems

Minisa Chapman-Huls, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2009

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An exploration of the college experiences of multiracial women uncovered the strategies they used to navigate the monoracial system of predominately white institutions. A purposeful sample of 18 women who were multiracial was chosen. Data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Participants' stories represented multiracial experiences at thirteen different undergraduate institutions. A participant's precollege experiences, identity and the college's peer culture impacted how she approached social situations in the highly homogenous and monoracial setting at college. Participants took on the roles of pacifist, non-conformist, and activist to successfully navigate college environments and social scenarios. The findings also support prior study on the identity development of multiracial college students. Childhood experiences shaped the racial identity of participants that was affirmed and challenged, but not changed by college factors and experiences. Significant factors to the identity development of participants at college were academic courses, faculty and peers. Implications of the findings and limitations of the study are discussed.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

*“Mixed-race isn’t post race. It’s not less race. It’s more race. In order to dialog about mixed-race, we need more understanding. It’s not a dialog to forget about issues of race” (Stuckey, 2008, p. 7).*

Has America entered a post-race era? After nearly four decades of integration and diversity initiatives, have Americans successfully mastered a level of multiculturalism? With the recent candidacy and inauguration of the 44th President of the United States, Barak Obama’s mixed heritage (his mother, an American, white; and father, black from Kenya) has brought new light to the topic of race and what it means to Americans. Some Americans argue that his historical presidency marks an era in which race does not matter. (Early, 2008; Rogers, 2008) Others, such as MAVIN (an advocacy group for mixed-race people) Vice President, Louie Gong, voice that mixed-race means more race. Suggesting that the nation’s growing diversity and changing social attitudes require more attention and understanding (Stuckey, 2008). American voices regarding the first black (or less often noted: first biracial) president have varied the spectrum from dismay to hope (Lipka, 2008). Perhaps the fact that his election has brought to the forefront such pointed discussion of race is reason enough to determine that race continues to be a dilemma for Americans.

Although mixed-race individuals and interracial families are recent hot topics, there have been records of multiracial individuals who were the products of integrated families, consensual relationships, as well as rape, since the beginning of U.S. history. (Wallace, 2001) Still, it was not until the peak of the Civil Rights movement where factors such as desegregation and the passing of anti-miscegenation laws led to an increase in multiracial families and a greater acceptance of them (Chapman, 2005). The 1954 landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, paved the way for large-scale desegregation. The Supreme Court ruled unanimously that segregation in public school is unconstitutional. This decision overturned the long-standing authority of “separate but equal” facilities for whites and non-whites.

*Loving v. Virginia* (1967) is another key civil rights case now celebrated on the twelfth of June by many multiracial individuals and blended families. The United States Supreme Court sanctioned Virginia’s anti-miscegenation statute, the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, unconstitutional— ending all race-based legal restrictions on marriage. The case involved Mildred Jeter, a woman of African and Rappahannock Indian descent, and Richard Perry Loving, a white man. In attempt to circumvent the Racial Integrity Act, a law prohibiting marriage between whites and non-whites, the couple was married in the District of Columbia in 1958; however upon their return to Virginia they were charged with violation of the statute and sentenced to a year in prison. The Loving’s moved to Washington, DC, to defer incarceration for 25 years, a condition of their sentence. In 1963, the American Civil Liberties Union filed for suit on their behalf based on the Fourteenth Amendment. This ultimately led to the unanimous Supreme Court Decision

that states could not legally prohibit interracial marriage (Harris H. , 2002). In its ruling the court wrote:

Marriage is one of the "basic civil rights of man," fundamental to our very existence and survival.... To deny this fundamental freedom on so unsupportable a basis as the racial classifications embodied in these statutes, classifications so directly subversive of the principle of equality at the heart of the Fourteenth Amendment, is surely to deprive all the State's citizens of liberty without due process of law. The Fourteenth Amendment requires that the freedom of choice to marry not be restricted by invidious racial discrimination. Under our Constitution, the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual and cannot be infringed by the State (Wallenstein, 1995).

Despite this Supreme Court decision, race-based restrictions on marriage remained, although unenforced, in several states until 2000 when Alabama became the last state to revoke its law against interracial marriage. (Wallenstein, 1995)

Still, the effect of such laws touch real and current families. During a keynote presentation at the 2008 National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Convention, Soledad O'Brien, CNN Television Journalist, shared the impact of laws like the Racial Integrity Act on her own family. O'Brien's parents, her mother, Cuban (black) and father, an Australian of Irish descent, were immigrants who met at John Hopkins University in Maryland in 1958. Because Maryland was one of the 19 states still upholding laws forbidding marriage on the basis of race, her parents married in Washington, D.C. then made residence in New York.

The *Loving v. Virginia* ruling also invalidated the standard that a person with even the smallest portion of non-white ancestry should be classified as colored. This is referred to the “one-drop” or “hypodescent” rule, a key component of the Racial Integrity Act. Despite the 1967 decision, the one-drop theory is still influential in society. Over three decades later, stereotypes of interracial relationships and individuals of mixed heritage are deeply embedded within our racial ecology (Wallace, 2001).

The disparate treatment of intermarriage is a direct result of racism and racist practices of segregation and discrimination... The offspring of so-called interracial relationships have not been accorded a distinctive identity... This failure to accommodate what are regarded as interracial relations and people in the United States is, at heart, an unresolved American identity crisis... and makes the resolution of the general race problem virtually impossible (Fernandez, 1992, p. 132).

Korgen (1998) spoke to the influence of societal norms pre- and post-Civil Rights Movement on how multiracial individuals self-identify, “... the majority of Americans with both an African American and a white parent born immediately prior to the Movement perceive themselves as black” (p. 3). Additionally grandchildren of mixed white and black parentage may not know that they are multiracial or choose to identify as black because their family members were not provided opportunities to self-identify outside of “black” or “colored.” Further, multiracial individuals who physically appear to have black ancestry are often considered non-white by others unless an individual makes his or her racial identity explicit. Still how multiracial individuals identify themselves is

changing. Korgen continues, "...most young adult offspring of black/white couples define themselves as biracial" (p. 3).

Issues of categorization, how multiracial individuals are racially identified and how they self-identify, are imperative to the discussion of this population. The U.S. Census reports tell a story about societal views regarding multiracial individuals. Data on race has been collected since the first U.S. Census in 1790 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The category "mulatto" was added in 1850 to monitor racial mixing among blacks and Native Americans, as well as blacks and whites (Leong, 2006). A visit from a census enumerator determined an individual's race by making "common sense" judgments based on the individual's physical appearance. This was known as an "eyeball test," although in some cases, the enumerator would ask the individual for clarification (Wilson, 2001). The mulatto category was dropped by 1920, however Census 1930 formally established the one-drop rule (Leong, 2006). As previously explained, this rule was directed at individual's mixed (black and white) parentage. It held the standard that an individual with even the smallest amount of non-white blood was to be classified as black or colored. The practice of eyeballing for the purpose of racial categorization and the one-drop rule ended in the 1960s (Wilson, 2001).

To counteract the problem of identification error, the Bureau of the Census asked the head of the household to fill out the census form, rather than having a census enumerator do so. This procedural change caused a shift in the meaning of racial categorization, from race as a feature of how others (such as census enumerators)

perceive an individual to race as a product of how the individual sees himself or herself (Leong, 2006, p. 3).

Despite the historical identification of multiracial individuals, the establishment of a socially-recognized multiracial identity is relatively recent. This is indicated by Census 2000. Perhaps in response to Census 1990, where despite direction to choose one racial group over half a million people unequivocally marked two or more races, Census 2000 enabled respondents to select more than one racial category as their self identification (Nobles, 2000; Leong, 2006).

According to the 2000 U.S. Census (2001), there are more than 6.8 million individuals who identify with two or more races. That is 2.4% of the nation's population or about one out of forty Americans. This is a relatively small number, however studies estimate this will change (Gibbs, 1991; Korgen, 1998). The National Science Academy has indicated that the multiracial population could rise to 21% by the year 2050 (Leong, 2006). Additionally, unlike their parents who were raised during the reign and remnants of the one-drop theory, "today's youth are being raised in a society that increasingly espouses the virtues of diversity and that has made real efforts to stress the legitimacy of multiracial identity" (Harris H. , 2002, p. 624). In fact 42% of individuals who indicated two or more races were under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Therefore we can expect the number of self-identified multiracial individuals to increase.

The multiracial population is not only increasing in number, but also in voice. This is already felt on our nation's college campuses which have been described as "low-hanging fruit for those interested in organizing multiracial Americans"(Stuckey, 2008, p.

6). Higher education needs to be better prepared to take on the issues that these trends will yield.

Institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have to deal with difficult challenges regarding multiculturalism. In fact, mission statements for institutions of higher education continue to be ambiguous in their definitions, leaving in question the institutions' true identities and roles in this age of adaptation to technology, demographics, and societal change. Most mission statements emphasize students, teaching, community service and diversity as priority issues, yet these values do not appear reflective of their practice (Watson, 2002, p. 1).

Although American colleges and universities reflect upon more than thirty years of programming aimed at minority student retention, the success of their intentional efforts toward multiculturalism and acceptance of diversity is minimal at best (Watson, 2002, p. 3).

Traditionally created to support the needs of monoracial students of color, diversity initiatives may not be inclusive of the issues particular to multiracial students. The increase of mixed-race students poses a different set of challenges for universities that begin with the recruitment process for admission and carry on beyond graduation. Multiracial students continue to find themselves in situations where they have to confine their identity. Standardized and admissions forms; stereotypes and negative attitudes toward mixed-race individuals and interracial marriage held by by faculty, staff and monoracial peers; and a need for support and space have been identified as issues that

challenge the development and experience of many multiracial college students (Chapman, 2005; Nishimura, 1998; Renn, 2003; Renn, 1998; Sands & Schuh, 2004).

Further, conventional identity development models used to help enrich the college experiences of monoracial students make a poor fit for multiracial students. As a result of the differences between monoracial and multiracial identity development, in the early 1990s stage models were developed (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995). Soon after, more widely-accepted non-linear models developed by Root (1990, 1996) and later viewed through a “post-modern lens” by Renn (1998) were created. Still there is little empirical research focusing on the experiences and identity development of adult multiracial students (Chapman, 2005; Nishimura, 1998; Renn, 1998, 2003; Sands & Schuh, 2004). The majority of higher education institutions have made little progress in providing “systems of support that reflect and validate their very being” (Kenney, 2002). Our nation’s colleges and universities must examine current strategies for addressing the needs of this uniquely diverse student population. First educators and administrators must consider how multiracial students make sense of their ethnic and racial experiences (Wallace, 2001).

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#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The increase in number and influence of multiracial students create new opportunities and challenges for universities— particularly predominately white institutions. A system that generally requires individuals to adjust to a traditionally monoracial and homogenous environment is becoming less stable as more mixed-race students arrive at the doorstep of our nation’s campuses (Korgen, 1998).



The fluidity of racial identity further complicates matters involving mixed-race students. Racial identities can be distinguished along several dimensions including internal, external, historical, and expressed racial identities— and any combination of these (Goldstein, 2000; Harris & Sim, 2002). “As America slowly acknowledges that being a member of two or more racial groups is as legitimate as being a member of any single racial group, confusion arises about who is multiracial” (Harris & Sim, 2002, p. 615).

In Chapman’s (2005) study regarding the experiences of biracial college students, the fluid nature of a student’s racial identity must be acknowledged to better support students.

Each multiracial student will come to college with a distinct history and perspective on race. Additionally, they may present themselves physically in one way, but connect psychologically and emotionally, even culturally, in another. Each student will be at a different place developmentally and will identify differently. Considering the diversity of the population, administrators, practitioners, and educators must have support mechanisms in place to help these students transition successfully (p. 192).

Chapman’s description of the university setting as a “highly racialized climate (e.g. admission forms, affirmative action, race-based scholarships, financial aid distribution; and multicultural student organizations, programs, support services)” (p. 27) demonstrates the enormity of the equally relevant matter of serving students better, that is the potential implications for university administrators and federal agencies.

---

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that multiracial college women use to navigate predominately white institutions. The discovery of successes and challenges faced by multiracial individuals may have implications for administrators, faculty, staff and students of predominately white institutions. The findings of this research may also help to address questions regarding the multiracial experiences and racial identity development among this group and to better meet the needs of these students. Finally this study aims to build on existing literature and add new information to the limited body of literature concerning the experience and identity development of multiracial college students.

---

## DEFINITIONS

There is no biologically precise way to distinguish between the races. Race is a social construct determined by societal norms and laws to establish a hierarchy that ensures who has access to power (Korgen, 1998). A single racial group includes multiple ethnic groups and, traditionally, membership is ascribed by phenotype, or by genotype (racial ancestry), or both (Wallace, 2001). It is with this understanding that the following terms are used and defined in this study.

**Monoracial:** a person having biological parents of the same racial or ethnic category.

**Biracial:** refers to an individual with parentage of two different and distinct federally recognized races or ethnic groups.

**Multiracial:** often used synonymously with the term biracial, this term refers to a person whose parents are of two or more different and distinct federally recognized racial or ethnic groups.

**Racial identity:** refers to the “dimension of a person’s overall self-concept that is grounded in his or her experiences as a member of a broad racial group.” (Wallace, 2001, p. 34)

**Ethnic identity:** Stems out of the shared cultural elements (such as values beliefs, behaviors, mental associations, ways of speaking, traditions, etc.) which are shared by a group with common geographic and/or religious heritage. Since a person’s ethnic identity is grounded in his or her cultural experience as well, an individual may identify with an ethnic group in which they are not wholly recognized as a member due to their physical appearance (Wallace, 2001, p. 32).

In addition to the above stated definitions, I have adopted the practice of Renn (2003), “In an effort to create parity between mono- and multiracial descriptors, I do not capitalize the names of racial categories (e.g. black, white, asian) except when a word relates specifically to a nation of origin (e.g., Samoan, Chinese)” (p.1). Further, the terms multiracial, biracial, and mixed-race are used interchangeably throughout this document.

---

## LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

A responsible researcher articulates assumptions and biases that shape the context and inquiry of a study (Watson, 2002). This research study focused solely on the

experiences of multiracial women. A study by Brunnsma (2001) reported a possible gender interaction with phenotype in the influence on identity of multiracial individuals. Wallace (2001) found that multiracial women in particular “are prone to unwarranted appraisals of their physical appearance and come to realize how their looks symbolize an “exoticness” that is valued in society” (p. 115). Wallace found that by the time multiracial women reach college, they expect these types of experiences and some have determined strategies in response to such attention. Additionally, women college students face both similar and different challenges as men college students. As a result of the differences, the researcher chose to limit this study to explore the experiences of college women.

This study was restricted to the interviews of eighteen multiracial women. Griffe (2005) offers several limitations to interviews:

People interviewed may not be able to say what they think, may not have an opinion, or may not be able to state their opinion in a clear way; individuals available for interviews may not have the desired information; and respondents may be unwilling to discuss what they know. In addition, interviewing requires high level questioning skills and an active interpretation (p. 36).

Furthermore, “the interview is co-created between the evaluator and the respondent. It is the job of analysis to give concrete form to the meaning of the interview” (p.36).

The participants were selected through purposeful sampling and network selection. The age and racial/ethnic make-up of participants varied, as well as the time during which participants attended their undergraduate institutions.


My role as primary instrument in the data collection and analysis of interviews poses limitations to the findings of this study. As a biracial individual I have a vested interest in this population. I grew up in an environment where most of my parents' friends were interracial couples, and many of my friends were multiracial individuals. Additionally, I am in an interracial marriage and have two multiracial children. These relationships and experiences shape my perceptions regarding the experiences of other multiracial individuals and may play a role in my analysis.

Furthermore the following philosophical assumptions shaped the context and inquiry of this study:

- Multiracial college students change the campus community in significant and positive ways.
- Multiracial individuals cannot be grouped as a “homogenous multiracial mass” (Leong, 2006).
- Multiracial college students face different challenges in their racial identity development than monoracial college students.
- Multiracial students have unique developmental needs that are not being addressed at the post-secondary level.

“Attempting to purge yourself of personal goals and concerns is neither possible nor necessary. What is necessary is to be aware of these concerns and how they may be shaping your research, and to think how best to deal with their consequences. In

addition, recognizing your personal ties to the study you want to conduct can provide you with a valuable source of insight, theory and data about the phenomenon you are studying: experiential knowledge” (Wengraf, 2001, p. 76). Several measures have been taken to ensure the integrity of the research. The interview questions and protocol have been carefully developed to encourage participants to describe their experiences in a rich, thick manner. Researcher bias, particularly due to the qualitative approach of the study and the fact that I am a biracial individual, will be addressed through self-examination, adhering to the interview protocol, and by conducting procedures to validate the research (such as member checking and peer review). Additionally, the findings will be reported in as much detail as possible. These steps will aid in the transferability of the findings to other groups and settings.



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A literature review was conducted prior to and throughout the duration of the study. Published literature about multiracial persons was approached critically and with purpose to build upon and add to knowledge and understanding within the field. The literature relevant to this study falls into the following categories: identity development of multiracial persons, psychological studies of impact of multiracial identity, categorization of mixed-race persons, racial attitudes concerning mixed-race, and the college experiences of multiracial individuals. Included in this dissertation are only the contemporary articles from 1998-2009.

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#### IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF MULTIRACIAL INDIVIDUALS

The majority of literature on multiracial individuals centers on racial identity. In fact almost all of the articles discussed in this chapter are directly linked to identity even if I felt it more fitting to categorize the work under a different heading. For example, how a multiracial person identifies directly impacts the psychological well-being of an individual, as does how one self-identifies or attaches a racial label, and one's experiences. Most of the empirical studies regarding multiracial individuals contribute to the understanding of the development of multiracial children (Gibbs & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991; Herring, 1992; Kao, 1999; Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993; Tizard & Phoenix, 1995; Winn & Priest, 1993) and leave gaps in knowledge about

identities, experiences, and psychological outcomes of multiracial college students. These works reflect inconsistent views concerning the identity development of multiracial individuals such as earlier studies revealing negative outcomes and contemporary research indicating no difference from or even an advantage over monoracial peers.

In the 1990s psychologists Poston and Root offered models for the development of a healthy multiracial identity that speak to the specific challenges and experiences of multiracial individuals. Poston (1990) introduced a stage model that was similar to traditional monoracial models, but was developed to address the unique experiences of multiracial college students. In Poston's model, multiracial individuals move through a series of levels as described below:

- Personal Identity- the individual maintains a personal identity that is independent of group identity because these have not yet developed.
- Choice of Group Categorization- the individual feels compelled to choose an identity based on personal factors, such as appearance and cultural knowledge, from one or both parents' heritage groups.
- Enmeshment/Denial-the individual feels guilt, self-hatred, and rejection from one or more groups due to the choice made. In order to move beyond this level, the individual must resolve the guilt and anger.
- Appreciation – the individual becomes receptive to their multiple heritages and broadens their reference group orientation even if he or she holds a heritage preference.



- Integration – the individual possesses a multicultural existence and perceives value in all of his or her ethnic identities (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995; Renn, 2008).

Root (1990) developed a non-linear model with four strategies, called “border crossings” to positively resolve multiracial identity tensions. Unlike multiracial stage models (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995; Kich, 1992; Poston, 1990), these strategies “do not depend on an orderly progression through developmental stages but which relies rather on an individual’s ability to be comfortable with self-definition, across, and/or between categories” (Renn, 200, p. 402).

- Acceptance of the identity society assigns— usually a minority group, due to fragments of the one-drop theory, the individual takes on the identity of the racial group which others assume he or she belongs.
- Identification with both racial groups— the individual identifies with both or all heritage groups despite resistance from others.
- Identification with a single racial group— the individual chooses one group to identify with, independent of pressure from others.
- Identification as a new racial group— the individual identifies with other multiracial individuals and may move fluidly between among ethnic groups (Renn, 2008).

In 1996, Root proposed an updated model of healthy biracial identity development that describes how a multiracial individual resolves identity tension in one of four border crossings: having “both feet in both groups” (p. xxi) or able to merge multiple identities simultaneously; choosing ethnic identity based on the context of the

setting- situational race; sitting on the border describes a multiracial identity that is not deconstructed; and creating a home-base in one ethnic identity and makes forays into other identities from time to time.

Starting in the mid-1990s studies about multiracial individuals were less clinical in nature and provided specific implications for educators. Contemporary research (Chapman, 2005; Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008; Renn, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003; Wallace, 2001) models frameworks were first developed by Poston (1990) and Root (1990) and are discussed further in this section.

Chapman (2005) conducted a qualitative study to explore how biracial students described the role of the college campus environment on the development of their racial identity. A purposeful sample of 13 participants who were biracial or multiracial graduate students were interviewed face-to-face or by phone. Chapman's findings suggested that early childhood experiences laid the foundation for the racial identity of participants upon entering college. Additionally, college courses, instructors and peers were named as salient factors in the participants' racial identity development on campus. Participants of the study recommended that university administrators deconstruct traditional models of racial classification and develop programs and policy that are inclusive of all students.

In Chaudhari & Pizzolato's (2008) grounded theory approach to study the multiethnic college student ethnic identity development and its relation to epistemological development, they found that multiethnic identity development aligned with Renn's (2000) existing multiracial identity development model and suggested a revised meaning of situation identity for mixed-race students to include the likelihood

that a student with one parent of color and one white parent will experience situational ethnic identity pattern.

Renn (2000) conducted a qualitative study on 24 multiracial college students by method of interviews with all participants, written responses by participants, observations of and archival data about each campus on the topic of multiracial issues, and a focus group of 3-4 students per campus. Renn introduced a model for how students “occupy” campus spaces. Participants identified as monoracial, multiracial, or as moving among options. The results of the study indicated the following five patterns of racial identification: 1) The student held a monoracial identity, 2) the student moved between existing monoracial categories, adopting situational definitions of monoracial identity, 3) the student held a new identity-based category, a multiracial identity, 4) the student holds an extraracial identity, opting out completely by deconstructing racial categories; and 5) the student moved among and between all options (1-4). The major determinants of students’ identities were campus racial demographics and peer culture.

In continuation of the above study, Renn (2003) explored the influence of specific environments on the racial identity choice of mixed-race college students using an ecology model of human development. In this second phase, data were collected from 14 mixed-race students in the rural southern Midwest. As in the first phase, the students participated in open-ended interviews and a written exercise. Additionally three to four participants per institution participated in a focus group. Renn also collected archival material and observed the campus racial climates and student events. The identities of the participants were among five non-exclusive patterns determined in the first phase of

the study. Results from this study indicated that 33 of the 38 participants identified in more than one pattern, three identified with one racial category, and two identified with the multiracial pattern.

The findings of Wallace's (2001) research explored ethnic and racial identity formation among high school and college students of racially mixed heritage. Data came from surveys with students at a public high school and a private university in the San Francisco, California area. Wallace examined the cultural dynamics of the home and considers processes of enculturation and discourse acquisition in the development of ethnic identity. The results of the study suggest that participants perceived ethnicity as situational, donned on certain occasions, but does not correspond in any meaningful way to a person's day-to-day interactions; or perceived ethnicity as lived, emerging out of one's daily experiences and interactions with the world.

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## PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES OF IMPACT OF MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

The literature reflects inconsistent views concerning the identity development of multiracial individuals. Some studies found multiracial children were more likely to experience higher degrees of problems associated with racial identity development, social marginality, and academic and behavior concerns (Gibbs & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991; Herring, 1992; Winn & Priest, 1993) Other studies' results indicated multiracial individuals overall were not marginalized, demonstrated no significant difference in academic performance, and were emotionally secure with a positive self-concept (Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993; Tizard & Phoenix, 1995; Kao, 1999).

Until of 1990s, the dominant view of multiracial individuals was characterized by the “tragic mullato,” a person of mixed black and white ancestry who lives on the margins of society, never fitting within the circles of historically polarized white or black groups. The “marginal man” conceptualized by Park (1928) and Stonequist (1961) guided much of the early literature regarding the impact of multiracial identity and theories that direct service providers (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995). Current research regarding the psychological concerns of multiracial individuals has not resolved conflicting findings of previous studies.

Kao (1999) examined whether biracial youth have a psychological disadvantage because of their biracial heritage. The study investigated whether school performance of the biracial students was more closely related to their minority or white counterparts. Data from the study found no evidence of lower global self-esteem or a specific self-esteem among biracial youth. Biracial participants were not marginalized in their schools and their popularity was comparable or surpassed their monoracial peers. Kao concluded that biracial youth are not more psychologically disadvantaged than other youth.

Ramo, Jaccard, and Guilamo-Ramos (2003) investigated the expression of depressive symptoms in adolescents who are of afro-latino descent. The afro-latino group was compared to three other groups of adolescents: European American, African American, and latinos. The researchers found that across all ethnic groups the females tended to show higher levels of depressive symptoms than males, that older adolescents tended to have higher levels of depressive symptoms than their younger counterparts; and afro-latino females tended to show higher levels of depressive symptoms than the other ethnic groups.

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## RACIAL CATEGORIZATION OF MIXED-RACE PERSONS

The heart of the societal controversy that surrounds mixed-race is that these individuals by existence subvert the establishment of race and its social and political power. Thus issues of categorization- how multiracial individuals are racially identified and how they self-identify, are essential to the discussion of this population.

The brief history and discussion of the U.S. Census reports outlined in the introduction addressed how multiracial individuals have been identified by the government. The Census 2000, a significant marker in the history of mixed-race people, enabled respondents to select more than one racial category as their self identification. According to the 2000 U.S. Census (2001) there are more than 6.8 individuals who identify with two or more races. Despite the progress of the U.S. Census, other institutions, including many American colleges and universities, have yet to extend monoracial categories to include multiracial individuals.

Affirmative action is perhaps the most controversial race-related issue currently facing policymakers in America. The use of race in admissions to institutions of higher education is routinely subjected to intense judicial, academic, and public scrutiny. However, in the affirmative action debate, one of America's fastest-growing demographics is routinely overlooked— individuals of multiracial background (Leong, 2006, p. 1).

Racial categorization schemes found on most formal documents are “unable to capture the fluidity of multiracial identity, creating internal tension for any applicants

who wish to describe important aspects of their racial identity” (Leong, 2006, p. 2).

Further, there is debate whether or not multiraciality as a separate racial group is supported by conventional definitions, even though it is widely supported as a category option (Leong, 2006; Renn, 1996). Still remains a question. The issue of how multiracial individuals choose to identify themselves. Much of the literature on multiracial individuals explores the variables that influence racial categorization of these individuals (Bratter, 2007; Brunnsma & Rockquemore, 2001; Harris & Simm, 2002; Korgen, 1998; Talbot, 2008).

Unlike earlier studies that assess the tendency of monoracial parents to declare multiple racial identities for their biracial children, Bratter (2007) examined the impact of a multiracial parent on the racial classification of children. The data used in this study came from the 5 percent Public Use Microdata Sample of the 2000 U.S. Census and compared multiracial families of two monoracial parents with multiracial families of one multiracial parent and one monoracial parent. Results showed that compared to multiracial families of monoracial parents, a child of a multiracial parent who shared a race with the monoracial parent (i.e. white-asian mother and white father) was less likely to classify as multiracial due to use of a label reflecting a shared monoracial category. Additionally, when parents’ races did not overlap, multiracial classification was more common in households if the other parent was white or American Indian.

A study by Brunnsma and Rockquemore (2001) explored the link between phenotype and physical features to the racial identity of biracial individuals of black and white heritage. They tested Rockquemore’s typology of the racial self-understandings of biracial individuals using survey data from a sample of 177 participants. The respondents

for the Survey of Biracial Experience came from a private liberal arts college and a large community college in Detroit. The sample of biracial individuals was varied widely in self-report of skin color, while the majority of respondents described their socially mediated appearance as ambiguous. There was no association between skin color and the way that biracial individuals racially understood themselves, rather results showed that biracial individuals do make identity choices within circumscribed cultural contexts influenced by the individual's assumption of how others perceive his or her appearance.

Harris & Sim (2002) examined the fluidity of race among multiracial adolescents. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health they measured school race, home race, best single race and parent-based race. The data revealed inconsistencies in racial classification between self-reports, as well as between self-reports and parent-based reports. The authors suggest that a shift from the one-drop rule way of thinking about race to more contemporary understandings about a socially constructed race significantly impacted racial classification patterns. Further, nearly all patterns of racial classification depend on the mixture of the multiracial group.

Korgen (1998) concluded from her study of the transformation in the racial self-identification of black-white biracial individuals that biracial adults raised after the Civil Rights era are much less likely to identify as black than are biracial individuals born prior to 1965. From her work consisting of semi-structured interviews and supplemental data, the author suggests that a growing social acceptance of a biracial identity and an option to choose a category outside of the five-race framework accounts for this change.

Talbot (2008) set out to explore the experiences of biracial individuals coming to terms with selecting a racial label. In the study, Talbot distinguishes between identity



development (an internalized sense of who one is as a racial being) and self-labeling (becoming comfortable with a label one can share with an external world). Participants were biracial, having parents from two different monoracial minority groups. Ten men and women completed email interviews. Participants' racial labels changed over time from childhood to adulthood, indicating a role to be played by the university setting to positively impact identity development and the process of choosing a racial label. The study indicated that a lack of role models posed as a challenge to choosing a racial label.

One empirical study examined how colleges and universities in the United States collect and encode racial and ethnic data for multiracial students. Padilla & Kelley (2005) aimed to determine how many institutions of higher learning have implemented the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) 1997 guidelines that allow individuals to "mark one or more" races on forms requesting racial data. In this study, 298 colleges and universities were surveyed. Analysis of the data showed 27% offered students some kind of option to identify their mixed heritage on admissions applications. Allowing students to mark more than one race and the use of a "multiracial" category were the two most popular options provided on applications. Only three percent collected data in a way that fully complies with OMB guidelines and encodes mixed heritage students in the way they self-report. The researchers concluded that institutions of higher education in the United States are failing to identify their mixed heritage students accurately.

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#### RACIAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS MULTIRACIAL INDIVIDUALS

Little is written concerning the racial attitudes towards multiracial individuals in a contemporary and scholarly context. Although there were several studies in the 1990s

(Herring, 1992; Nishimura, 1995; Wardle, 1991, 1992; Nishimura and Bol, 1997) suggesting that counselors need to better meet the counseling needs of biracial children, Harris' (2002) study was the first to focus on the personal perceptions of biracial individuals by school counselors. Three-hundred twenty-eight school counselors located in nine states from the South Eastern region of the United States completed a 25-item survey addressing the counselors' educational backgrounds with multicultural issues, experiences working with multicultural individuals, and perceptions of biracial children – specifically in academic, behavioral and identity-related matters. The results determined a correlation between the existence of promoted cultural diversity programs in schools and school counselors' perception of biracial children. In general, the participants perceived that biracial children might face added challenges in comparison with their monoracial peers due to how their families are perceived in society.

Increased attention to mixed-race has spawned a need for inclusive practices for counselors and educators alike. Recognizing that the perceptions and attitudes toward multiracial individuals among professionals in place to assist them and their families impacts how they interact with them. Jackman, Wagner, & Johnson (2001) conducted two studies to develop a tool to assess adults' views of multiracial children. The Attitudes Toward Multiracial Children Scale (AMCS), a 43-item scale, was administered to undergraduate students in psychology courses. The results showed that people of color had higher AMCS total scores than did the white students. Additionally the results suggest that the AMCS can be used to research adults' attitudes concerning the psychosocial development of multiracial children.

Although the above-stated studies focused on the attitudes of monoracial adults and Neto and Paiva (1998) sought to extend research regarding the color attitudes of children toward phenotype, namely black and white. They employed a translated version of the Preschool Racial Attitude Measure II (PRAM II) and the Color Meaning Test II (CMT II) to investigate racial preferences of 88 eight-year-old black, white and biracial children from Libson, Portugal. The results of the study provided additional evidence that pro-white and pro-light-skinned biases are pancultural tendencies. There was a general tendency among all the groups toward a pro-light-skinned/anti-dark-skinned bias with the degree of bias being somewhat less among black and biracial children. The researchers suggested that biracial participants were significantly different in their preference patterns compared to white participants. This finding justified multiracial subjects as a distinguished group for the purposes of research on color and racial attitudes.

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## EXPERIENCES OF MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

Interest in racial identity development among diverse college students broke the surface in the 1990s and the 2000 Census sparked additional interest in the complexity of multiple identities by recognizing a multiracial category (two or more races).

Contemporary research reflects the emerging demographics and issues of diverse campus student bodies (Chapman, 2005; King, 2008; Nishimura, 1998, Renn 2000, 2003; Sands & Schuh, 2004).

Chapman's (2005) study explored the undergraduate experiences of thirteen multiracial graduate students. The purpose of the study was to discover how biracial

students described the role of the college campus environment on the development of their racial identity. Overall, participants revealed that their experience in college was salient to their racial identity development. The findings reported that collegiate experiences provided opportunities to challenge notions about a participant's identity, to solidify what participants already knew about themselves, and to learn about the contributions of their heritage groups to society. Classes, professors, staff members, and peers were salient factors in the racial identity development of participants.

Nishimura (1998) did a preliminary qualitative study with members of an undergraduate student support group for multiracial students enrolled at a Midwestern university. The project focused on multiracial college students' attitudes regarding the challenges they experience on campus. Data came from extensive semi-structured interviews with three of the members the student group, followed by a focus group session with all the members. The issue of race as a non-issue was prevalent among participant experiences. "Messages such as 'color doesn't matter, we're just people' were meant to be loving, but group members viewed such a perspective as unrealistic" (p. 49). Participants revealed an added challenge in the identity development of multiracial individuals due to a lack of understanding, "most people, including their parents, do not know what it is like to be multiracial" (p.49). Furthermore, discomfort in the presence of traditional minority student groups emerged as a challenge for participants due to issues of ethnic legitimacy.

Referenced in a previous section, Renn (2000) conducted a qualitative study on 24 multiracial college students by method of interviews with all participants, written responses by participants, observations of and archival data about each campus on the

topic of multiracial issues, and a focus group of 3-4 students per campus. Renn introduced a model for how students “occupy” campus spaces, identifying as monoracial, multiracial, or as moving among options. The meaning of space and peer culture were two major themes that emerged from the research.

Renn (2003) studied biracial students using data from an ongoing study of 24 college students from New England (Renn, 2000) and collecting data from an additional fourteen students in the rural southern Midwest. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner’s ecology model of development, Renn explored the influence of postsecondary environments on multiracial identity. Based on the research, Renn suggested that institutions enhance curriculum to promote student identity development, align curriculum and co-curriculum to support new ways of thinking about identity, and engage peer culture to promote boundary crossing.

Sands & Schuh (2004) examined how the experiences of biracial students affect persistence at colleges and universities. Data drawing from the interviews of six students at one institution suggest that segregated peer groups and lack of services for biracial students serve as challenges. Based on the findings, the authors recommended that universities expand racial categories on admission applications, develop programs and services specific to biracial student development, and create a learning community specifically for first-year biracial students.

## SUMMARY

A review of literature reveals that there is little empirical research regarding the experiences and identity development of multiracial persons; and even less focusing on

the college experiences of mixed-race students. An increase in the number and voice of multiracial individuals precipitated an increase in the number of contemporary research studies that aim to explore and understand the identity development and experiences of these individuals.

The evaluation of studies on multiracial individuals drew largely from modern theoretical frameworks of healthy identity development models developed in the 1990s first by Poston (1990) and Root (1990). Research on multiracial individuals published between 1998 and 2009 fell into five categories: identity development of multiracial individuals, psychological studies of impact of multiracial identity, racial categorization of mixed-race, racial attitudes towards multiracial individuals, and experiences of multiracial college students.


- Identity development- Drawing from the works of Poston (1990) and Root (1990), studies from the mid-1990s and the 21<sup>st</sup> century found identities of multiracial to be fluid and include monoracial, multiracial, situational and extraracial identities. Family influence and physical appearance were salient pre-college factors to identity development; cultural knowledge, college courses, and peer culture were significant factors to identity development at college.
- Psychological studies of impact of multiracial identity- Studies regarding the psychological well-being of multiracial individuals are inconsistent. Current research regarding the psychosocial status of multiracial individuals is needed. Older studies reflect negative outcomes for multiracial children (more likely to experience higher degrees of problems associated with racial identity development, social marginality, and academic and behavior concerns). While

studies in the mid-1990s produced more positive results (not marginalized, demonstrated no significant difference in academic performance, and were emotionally secure with a positive self-concept).

- Racial categorization- There are several investigations on how multiracial individuals are racially categorized and how they self-label. The range of literature considers the impact of the one-drop rule, parents, phenotype, age and racial categories available on how multiracial individuals are racially categorized or label themselves.
- Racial attitudes- There are a few scholarly works addressing the racial attitudes toward and among multiracial individuals and their families. Most of these investigations examine the racial attitudes of counselors and other professionals who work with children or the measure of these attitudes. One study looked at the attitudes of biracial children with regard to color preference. Results indicated that racial preferences among biracial children are significantly different from white children. The researcher concluded that biracial children should be considered a separate racial group in research.
- Biracial college student experience- Although still modest in number, there has been a surge in qualitative research exploring the identity and experiences of multiracial college students. The literature includes psychological, sociological, and ecological models for understanding the identities of the population and the factors in the college setting that impact student development. The findings reveal that campus peer culture, cultural knowledge (often obtained through

courses), and negotiating “spaces” are salient to the identity development of multiracial college students.

There is a need for more empirical research regarding the identity development and experiences of multiracial individuals and college students. Thus the purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that multiracial college women use to navigate predominately white institutions. Secondary functions of this study were to address questions regarding the multiracial experiences and racial identity development among this group, to build on existing literature and to add new information to the body of literature concerning the experiences and identity development of multiracial college students.





## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

*The overall significance of any study is never realized fully until one understands the research methods and procedures used in the research investigation. This fact is particularly important when conducting qualitative research where the research methods and processes for data gathering and data coding are often unique to the participant group or phenomenon being studied (Watson, 2002, p. 25).*

### PURPOSE

The purpose for conducting this study was to explore the strategies that multiracial college women use to navigate predominately white institutions. The discovery of successes and challenges faced by multiracial individuals revealed implications for administrators, faculty, staff and students of predominately white institutions. The findings of the study addressed questions regarding multiracial experiences and racial identity development among this group. Finally the study extended existing literature and added new information to the limited body of literature concerning the experience and identity development of multiracial college students.

The following research questions were developed to address the purpose of this study.

### GRAND TOUR QUESTION

What strategies do multiracial college women use to navigate predominately white institutions?

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#### SUB QUESTIONS

1. What is the multiracial woman's self-assigned racial identity?
2. What life experiences have aided in the formation of the multiracial woman's racial identity?
3. What is unique about the multiracial college woman's experience?
4. How has the college experience contributed to the development of the multiracial woman's racial identity?

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#### CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A qualitative research study was conducted to explore the concepts described in the purpose statement. Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.” (p. 15) Creswell (1998) further suggested that a qualitative approach is viable when “a topic needs to be explored... variables cannot be easily identified, theories are not available to explain behavior of participants or their population of study, and theories need to be developed.” (p. 17)

For this study the concern is, “How multiracial women navigate monoracial systems?” Empirical literature regarding the development and experiences of multiracial

individuals is lacking. Furthermore given the nature and history of this population, determining who is multiracial adds a unique dimension to the study of multiracial persons that suggests any number of variables that might shape how a individual gives meaning to social experience. These qualities make this study a sufficient candidate for qualitative research. Through qualitative methods and processes of inquiry, the researcher sought to discover patterns of relationships among the voices of participants.

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## RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative study employed the practice of semi-structured interviews to examine how participants self-identify, what unique experiences or challenges they faced at the university regarding their identity, and what strategies they used to overcome these challenges. Nineteen interviews were conducted in a mutually-established location that was convenient for the participant and allowed for privacy and minimal distractions. Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by a hired transcriptionist. Research participants chose pseudonyms or one was determined by the researcher upon the participant's request. To check for accuracy of the transcriptions, the researcher compared the transcripts with the audio-recordings and made any necessary changes. In addition, participants were sent a copy of the transcript with instructions for reviewing and making corrections.

One-on-one interviews lasted approximately 30-90 minutes. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations determined by the participants. Follow-up interviews were conducted over the phone or by email to clarify information when appropriate. One interview was not captured by the transcriptionist due to a technical mishap. After

several attempts to retrieve the audio from the recording, the participant was contacted to reschedule, however a second interview was never accomplished. The data from this interview is not included in the findings.

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## DATA COLLECTION

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### INSTITUTIONAL APPROVAL

Collection of data began upon approval of the study by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska is responsible for reviewing and authorizing study protocols for research involving human subjects to ensure protection of participants and compliance with federal regulations in both research design and conduct. The present study required an expedited review since there were less than minimal risks to participants and targeted subjects were not considered vulnerable.

It is the responsibility of the primary investigator to protect the rights and welfare of the research participants. Prior to their participation in the study, potential subjects were fully informed regarding the purpose of the study, the interview process, and the right to discontinue their participation at any time. In addition, collected data was handled with discretion, following methods prescribed to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

More specifically, participants were provided a copy of the informed consent document prior to the first meeting. This allowed informants to review the rights and responsibilities of the participant and researcher, ask questions or decline participation.

Prior to the interview, subjects were asked to confirm consent for participation in writing. Participants were given time to read the consent form and an opportunity to ask any questions before the interview began.

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### SAMPLE SELECTION AND ACCESS

Participants in this research met three basic criteria: they are the child of parents from more than one federally-designated racial or ethnic category, they are women, and they have graduated from of a predominately white institution (PWI). Because the nature of this study hinges on the social dynamic of experience, the present research focused solely on the experiences of multiracial women to rule out variables that might be associated with sex (Brunsman, 2001; Wallace, 2001). Additionally, consideration was taken regarding type of institution. It is reasonable to believe that a multiracial person might have a different experience at a historically black institution, hispanic serving institution, or native institution than at a predominantly white institution. The focus on predominately white institution was an attempt to maintain consistency. Furthermore, I sampled college graduates so that participants could reflect on their undergraduate experiences; thus providing more thoughtful and articulate responses to the research questions than if they were still living the experience.

Because multiracial individuals who are willing to discuss their experiences are not easily identifiable, purposeful sampling was utilized to recruit volunteers. Purposeful sampling is the deliberate selection of subjects who will provide optimal insight into an issue. Participants are considered information-rich sources and are chosen from a population according to preset criteria (Wengraf, 2001). The criteria guiding the sample

population in this study were multiracial women who graduated from a predominantly white institution. Additionally, the ability of the participant to offer a full, descriptive account of her experiences was carefully considered.

Nineteen participants were recruited through personal contacts and referrals. I identified and contacted five women through personal association who met the criteria to inquire whether they would be interested in participating in the study. Through network selection, a strategy that “enables the researcher to use personal contacts to locate other potential participants,” these individuals were asked to identify new potential participants (deMarrais, 2004). Referrals were contacted by telephone, email or letter to request participation in the study. This sampling procedure was used to obtain additional participants until saturation was achieved. This occurred when the investigator learned no new information from the data, just prior to the nineteenth interview. Flyers were also utilized to obtain further participants, but yielded no informants.

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#### SELF-AS-INSTRUMENT

The role of the primary investigator as primary instrument in the data collection and analysis of interviews limits the generalizability of this research study. As outlined in the Limitations section of the dissertation, my relationships and experiences shape my perceptions regarding the experiences of other multiracial individuals and may have played a role in data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the way in which participants perceived me may have influenced their responses to interview questions. Interview design and protocol can help lessen the affects of researcher bias. Dilley (2004) wrote, “The structure of the interview event shapes the meanings made (and conveyed) by both

the interviewer and the respondent. (p. 129) Several measures were taken to ensure the integrity of the research. Adherence to a carefully developed interview protocol and actions to validate findings, such as member checking and peer review aided in the transferability of the findings to other groups and settings

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## INTERVIEWS

Qualitative research assigns value to the ‘voice’ of the participants (Watson, 2002). The voice of the eighteen women studied in this project was captured through face-to-face interviews. Interviewing allows the researcher to put behavior into context to better understand a phenomenon (Dilley, 2004). In this study, the behavioral focus was on the strategies employed by multiracial women to navigate monoracial systems. In developing an interview plan, Wengraf (2001) suggested to “bear fully in mind all the knowledge derived from your discipline... about face-to-face interaction and about the specificity of the society and the setting and the types of people involved, especially yourself” (p. 4).

The interview protocol and questions model the design established in a study by Chapman (2005). Interview questions were developed to examine how participants identify, what unique successes or challenges they faced regarding their racial background in the university setting, and what strategies they used to overcome these challenges. These questions were developed using the CRQ → TQ → IQ/II pyramid model (Wengraf, 2001). In this model theory questions (TQ) are clearly distinguished from interview questions (IQ). “The theory questions ‘govern’ the production of the interviewer-questions, but the TQs are formulated in the theory-language of the research

community, and the IQs are formulated in the language of the interviewee” (p. 62). See Appendix D.

To improve communication and the effectiveness of interview questions, the idiolect of informants was also considered during the interview. Semi-structured, rather than structured, interviews were conducted to allow some flexibility in the protocol. Semi-structured interviews are described as a method in which the researcher begins with guiding questions, then follows the lead of the participant, inquiring as information emerges during the conversation (Creswell, 1998).

I practiced forms of active listening such as these summarized by Wengraf (2001):

Positive forms of active listening: attentive listening posture; a degree of eye-contact; and non-verbal sounds like ‘hmm’; allow the interviewee the length of pauses; of silences that they need to think through or recall the material they are trying to access; give non-verbal support in a non-intrusive way and stay quietly focused and attentive while the interviewee struggles to retrieve memories and other resources for ‘answering in depth’; if strong emotions arise during the interview, you should be prepared, if necessary, to ‘mirror’ them; if you do make a verbal intervention, it is important to use their words-for-feelings— and indeed their words-for-anything— rather than use your own, which may mean something different to them (p. 128).

The explicit observation technique (EOT) was also used to enhance the methods of this study. Explicit observation technique is a systematic way to make implicit elements



during an interview explicit in a “descriptive and nonevaluative way” (Brown, 2006, p. 196). In this technique, observations of gestures, facial expressions and other non-verbal cues are reflected back to the interviewee to attach meaning through a verbal response.

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## MANAGING AND RECORDING DATA

Participant interviews were audio recorded using two digital recorders. Audio-recorded data was transferred to CDs to be transcribed by a hired transcriptionist. The CDs were labeled with a number, such as “interview 1” to maintain anonymity. Further, the transcriptionist signed the Institutional Review Board Confidentiality Agreement to protect the privacy of participants. To check for accuracy of the transcriptions, I compared the transcripts with the audio-recordings and made any necessary changes. In addition, participants were sent a copy of the transcript with instructions for reviewing and making corrections.

Follow-up interviews were conducted by phone or by email to clarify information when appropriate. One interview was not captured by the transcriptionist due to a poor recording. After several attempts to retrieve the audio from the recording, including a review of the original digital recording, the participant was contacted to reschedule; however a second interview was never accomplished. The data from this interview is not included in the findings. All data, including audio CDs and the interview protocol sheets that link participant names and pseudonyms, are kept in a locked storage cabinet. Raw research data is only accessible to the primary and secondary investigators of the study. These records will be kept for three years after an external audit.

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## DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

Analysis of data is simply the interpretation of the transcript. The constant comparative method, or “the process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories,” (Creswell, 1998, p. 57) was employed to analyze data. This method allows the researcher to unitize the interview transcripts into meaningful pieces, and then organize these pieces into themes. The data was hand-coded rather than computer-coded in order to gain familiarity with emerging themes. Using the words of the informant, I assigned a code to each paragraph or statement that was written in the left-hand margin. Next a cut-and-paste strategy was used to organize data into patterns. Each transcription was assigned a color and copied onto a corresponding colored paper. Using scissors, each coded statement was cut from the colored transcript. Color-coded statements of similar value were arranged in piles. Once the cutting process was complete, the color-coded statements were stapled to sheets on a legal pad of paper with an assigned code value for the group listed at the top of the sheet. These sheets were transferred into word documents so that statements of similar value could be accessed for review and further analysis. Compiling the codes of similar values enabled themes to emerge from the data. The three overarching topics: foundation for success, the college experience, and strategies for success revealed sub-themes and are discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Precautions were taken to prevent negative personal consequences as a result of the study. IRB protocol was followed concerning the rights and privacy of participants.

Informants were made aware of their rights as well as the responsibilities of the researcher during recruitment, informed consent, and at the interview.

The fact that interview questions concerning the participant's multiracial experience, undergraduate experience, and identity development may bring up sensitive topics was considered prior to data collection. I acknowledged that participants may become upset or uncomfortable when answering these questions. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer questions that they were uncomfortable answering and that they could withdraw participation from the study at anytime.

To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used in the study to protect the privacy of participants; and I maintained confidentiality of the participants during and after the research process. Data were stored in a locked storage cabinet. Interview files will be deleted after transcription, data analysis, and review by an external auditor.

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## VALIDITY

Several measures were taken to ensure the integrity of the research. The interview questions and protocol were carefully developed to encourage participants to describe their experiences in a rich, thick manner. The findings of the study were reported in as much detail as possible, and I used the voice of participants as much as possible. Additionally, credibility was established through member-checking (allowing participants to check the data for accuracy).

Researcher bias, particularly due to the qualitative approach of the study, has been addressed through self-examination, adherence to the interview protocol, and by conducting procedures to validate the research. As the primary instrument for data

collection, I was aware that the information obtained during the interviews was a result of my interactions with respondents. My role in constructing meaning of the data during analysis was considered. A peer reviewer was utilized to verify that the findings and recommendations of this study are credible. These steps aid in the transferability of the findings to other groups and settings.

## PARTICIPANT VIGNETTES

Eighteen women described their multiracial experiences. Participants met the following criteria: woman, a child of parents from two or more different federally recognized racial designations, and a graduate from a predominately white institution. They were selected based on the process described in this chapter. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to ensure anonymity. Most participants chose a pseudonym at the interview meeting. On four occasions the participant asked me to create a pseudonym for them. In these cases I chose a pseudonym to match with their name and ethnic background.

Twelve of the participants identified with a multiracial identity. Five of the participants identified with a monoracial identity. One participant did not identify with a racial designation; rather she identified with an ethnic designation. See Table 1.

The participants attended thirteen different undergraduate institutions. Three participants transferred during their undergraduate careers. Eleven participants graduated from undergraduate institutions in the Midwest. Five graduated from schools in the East. One attended and graduated from an undergraduate school in the Southeast. One attended and graduated from a university in the Southwest.

Table 1

<b>Name</b>	<b>Mother's Race</b>	<b>Father's Race</b>	<b>Identifies As</b>
Aja	Thai	German/Irish/French descent	Biracial
Brigitte	Korean	Black	Multiracial
Chloe	Black	White	Black
Christy	Japanese	Mexican	Biracial
Debbie	Black	White	Mixed
Denise	White/Canadian	Mexican	Biracial
E. Lynn	Native, Cheyenne Tribe	White	Native American
Gabrielle	White	Black	Biracial/Other
Jasmine	Thai	Norwegian descent	Biracial
Jennifer	White	Black	Biracial
Kalena	Thai	White	Amerasian/Biracial
Lauren	Dutch/ European	African American, Native American and Cajun	Dutch, but not necessarily Caucasian
Lavern	White	Black	Biracial
Naomi	Japanese	African American	Multiracial
Rae	White	African American	White
Roxanne	Filipino	Black	Black
Savannah	Filipino	White	Filipino/Asian
Yuri	Japanese	Black	Biracial

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## AJA

Aja, grew up in a military family and was taught “never to look at race.” She applied this to how she views others as well as how she interprets how others view her. Very proud of her heritage, Aja was slow to speak— thoughtful about her answers to interview questions. She made it clear that her identity presented no internal or external conflicts during her childhood or college experience and that the challenges she faced were largely a result of economic or other social issues. This is a reflection of the attitudes her parents instilled in her and her sisters growing up.

Aja attended college in a small town in a largely rural state in the Midwest. Her fair skin, freckles, and motivation to “just blend” allowed her to fit comfortably among the predominantly white student body. Aja made a connection between her financial and educational preparedness and being of color by contrasting her challenges to those of white students on her campus.

It was money, a lot of times just money. You know, I had to work during college, and a lot of the people didn't. A lot of the caucasian students', actually, families will pay for college for them or, you know, just had money saved up. I mean, really hard, I mean, when you wanna be out, meeting and having fun, you're actually working because I needed it for school. And making sure that you qualified for all the loans so that you could continue to keep going every year.

Aja was heavily involved in her sorority, which she credits as the most significant resource to her success at the university she attended.

Aja was one of five participants sampled from network selection.

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#### JASMINE

Jasmine attended public school until she reached high school. She describes her public school as quite diverse and very different from the private Catholic high school she attended. Like many of the participants, Jasmine identified her community as a reflection of the schools she attended— with the exception of her junior high school which was more diverse. Jasmine did not recall the relationships she and her family had with community members; except that they did not fit in.

I think like we always kind of stuck out. Like for example our church that we go to, it's Lutheran based, but it's pretty loose. The service that we go to, it's a little bit more contemporary, but it's mainly middle aged white people. And I've probably been to a couple different churches just to find people my own age and that's more racially diverse and my dad, he kind of is hurt by the fact that I want to go to a different church because it's not, you know, racially diverse. But he needs to understand that that's what I'm looking for. Like I want to connect with people. The funny thing is, is that I know for a fact that we stick out like a sore thumb. Nobody comes up and talks to us.

It was easy to believe that Jasmine was well-liked by her peers in school— with her universal good looks and laid-back personality. Her loyalties were spread among

different high school cliques. She wanted others to share in her appreciation of diversity. Jasmine felt especially connected to her mother's associations with the city's Thai Association. Jasmine participated in Thai dancing and became best friends with a member's daughter who was also biracial. This, coupled with numerous visits to Thailand, significantly impacted her identity as a Thai woman.

Jasmine's search for diversity in her predominantly white community did not stop after high school. She attended the large state university in her hometown because it was the most diverse college in the state. In college she sought out other students of color, feeling out of place among the majority white students on her campus. Unable to afford a year of study abroad, she decided instead to participate in an exchange program with a diverse, liberal arts college in the Northeast. This experience was significant to her identity development during her college career.

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## SAVANNAH

Quick-witted and light-hearted, Savannah spoke concisely about her experiences as a multiracial person growing up. She spent little time pondering issues of race as a young person. It was not until she moved away from her military community and to a large university in a surrounding state that she was faced with issues of identity.

Well, again, like I said, when I got here I didn't even think about race, you know, because I didn't, I don't know, my experience in high school— I didn't have to think twice about it. So once I got here, as a freshman, all of a sudden I'm forced to look at race and be like where, what are you, you know, what side are you



gonna go on, you know; and I realized, and I think that helped, you know, why I just identify more as Filipino today is because of having to make that choice when I got here as a freshman, you know. And, I mean, they make you— it was kind of like you were forced. (Laughs) And so it's like, "You're not white— now what are you?" You know, so, "Filipino, I guess." And it just stuck with me. So, I guess yeah, having to make that choice, and not being accepted in the standard mainstream white— amongst the white students, so that experience was pretty shocking to me almost. So it kind of shaped who I am. And then meeting other groups, you know, like, it's just like a thing that Natives, you know, they're all identifying themselves with this, so, you know, I'm gonna let them know what I'm identifying as— or other ethnicities. I guess it kind of makes you look more to your own ethnicity, so.

She sought out other "brown people" upon her arrival to the university she attended and found them in racial/ethnic student organizations and in a residence hall set aside for students in the general college and athletes. A resident of the honors residence hall, Savannah never spent time there "because it was all white people." Instead she made a connection with students at the "people of color's dorm" that have lasted beyond her college career. The friendships she established there and within the Filipino and asian student organizations are most significant to her identity development in college.

Savannah was one of five participants sampled from network selection.

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KALENA

Kalena feels “lucky to have grown up in very accepting community.” She grew up in towns in diverse military communities in the United States and overseas. She voiced that because of the way she looks, with her porcelain-like skin and straight brown hair, she faced limited challenges due to her racial identity. Still she is sensitive to the obstacles others have to overcome due to their racial identity or skin color.

As a student in college and then as a student affairs professional at the same university, Kalena passionately advocated for other students of color. She spoke of her service as an undergraduate student leader in one of the most diverse student organizations on campus. As a master’s candidate, she dedicated her research to the study of latino college student experiences. Now as a professional in higher education, and as one of few people of color on her staff, she promotes services and policies that are inclusive to all students. Kalena acknowledges student involvement as a resource to gain an appreciation of diversity and to explore issues of identity development because it was significant to her identity, “My curricular activity was [most significant to my identity development]... Just again to have the opportunity outside of the class, in the classrooms, and just learning about education, and just doing some things you don’t wanna hear about it because that being for extra credit. But once you get outside the classroom and you’re a part of these organizations, you get the opportunity to work with people that are different than you.” Kalena’s trip to her “mecca,” Thailand, with her mother during her college career was most significant to her identity as “amerasian.”

Kalena was one of five participants sampled from network selection.

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DENISE

Denise met with me on a Saturday in the student union where she currently works. Had it not been for her pregnant status, which she mentioned in a prior email, I may not have recognized her as the person on the other side of this blind meeting. Later Denise spoke to the fact that she is often mistaken for a white person. She recognized that this played a role in the experiences she faced as a young person and college student. Her features, phenotype and name leave few clues to her racial identity. This is often the case for multiracial students.

Denise grew up in a predominantly white community in the southwest. However after her parents' divorce she spent time in two different households. She described this experience:

I felt like I was able to get two very different experiences, but at the same time have them kind of merge in a way in which I felt like I benefited a lot from that. Although, it did create a sense of a little bit of identity crisis in a way, depending on who I was with most often. So like when I was with my dad, I think I tended to relate to more of that, you know, Hispanic or Mexican culture; but when I was with my mom I was definitely more integrated into, you know, caucasian culture. But yet knowing that I was taking kind of the best of both worlds, I figured that I was integrating them together kind of through my daily experiences.

Denise, an active student and athlete in her high school, “did not feel like she struggled to exist within the community” she lived in. She stated that interracial families were not uncommon and she generally fit in among the other families.

Denise's involvement in a bridge program for first-generation students served as significant to her identity development at college. The friends she gained from this experience were much more diverse than the primarily caucasian friends she had at home. For the most part, Denise felt like she belonged among the student body at-large as well as within the diverse student population of the bridge program. She described an ability to "ebb and flow" between groups of students. Although she admits her experience may be different than other students of color because of the way she looks, she talked about the dilemmas she confronted with white students and faculty because they assumed she was white. Among students of color, Denise volunteered information about her mixed heritage so that her peers were not left to question her legitimacy to participate in certain programs. Still her own insecurities regarding how others perceived her as a student of color served as an internal challenge to overcome.

Although Denise possessed an interest in social issues as a high school student, her involvement with the bridge program prompted her to ask questions about herself and also helped her to realize that this interest came from her mixed heritage. She was very passionate about civil rights and devoted her college career to exploring this as a sociology and criminal justice student. Denise talked about her passion for social change and social injustice issues as it continues to play out in her current role as a student affairs administrator at a private university.

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#### GABRIELLE

Gabrielle spent half of her childhood in diverse military communities and the other half in predominantly white, rural settings. Her father retired from the Army when

Gabrielle was ten years old so that he could attend preacher schooling in the southeast. Unique to other participant experiences, Gabrielle was homeschooled up until her sophomore year in high school. Much of their social group and community interaction was determined by her parents' associations, which happened to be primarily white families.

Gabrielle's ties to her father's family were strained due to their rejection of her mother. Her father's family "strongly identified as black" and did not accept her white mother. The negative experiences she faced with regard to her father's family had a significant impact on her identity development. She connects her efforts to disassociate herself from her black heritage to this relationship.

The transition from high school to college was smooth for Gabrielle. She had navigated predominantly white situations all her life and possessed cultural tools that allowed her to sail these waters with relative ease. Gabrielle's college campus was divided into two groups: students at large, who were predominantly white; and black students. Gabrielle had little to do with the black student group that she described as "Pretty exclusive. It was either, you were with us or you weren't. And it was almost looked down upon if you weren't with them, when you were black." Their attitude toward her made her feel like she had to choose a black or white identity.

Gabrielle attended three universities during her undergraduate career; she chiefly attributes Christian University to her identity development at college. She spent the most time there and her experience thereafter was in a non-traditional status due to her marriage after her sophomore year in college.

Gabrielle was one of five participants sampled through network selection.

Gabrielle and I are members of the same congregation.

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#### BRIGITTE

Brigitte spent the first five years of her childhood in Korea. When her father was reassigned to a military base in the United States, Korean was her primary language. Her grandmother moved to the States shortly after their arrival to take care of Brigitte and her brother while her parents worked. Korean traditions and celebrations were a normal part of Brigitte's childhood. These factors contributed to her racial identity.

Upon high school graduation, Brigitte moved to the south to attend college in the town of her father's roots. Although the college and city offered more diversity, the racial climate was unwelcoming. She was not accustomed to the racial segregation that was prevalent on campus and in the surrounding community. She faced added challenges with her father's family who did not accept her multiracial identity, even calling her names and making irreverent comments about Asians. After her first semester, Brigitte transferred to a state university located in her hometown where she felt like she belonged. Here she found her niche among the international student population, she commented, "I also made a lot of friends with international students, because that was something we could relate to. I mean, it was just weird how a lot of them could—knew that, you know, I really wasn't like a born American. I mean it was just weird how they could find me."

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#### LAUREN

Lauren and I met in her home while her two young children played quietly in the next room. Lauren talked a little about how people try to categorize her as black because of the way that she looks, but recognized that people will have trouble distinguishing the appearance of her multiracial children whose paternal heritage is caucasian.

Lauren was the only participant who does not identify with race. Rather, Lauren identifies as a multicultural person. Her experiences living abroad in Holland significantly impact her self-label. When Lauren moved from Holland to “middle of nowhere” in America’s Heartland, she primarily spoke Dutch. This experience provided her with strategies that helped her to negotiate social situations later in the college setting.

I was in a lot of, like, special education classes because they didn’t have, like, English as a second language, you know. So I was in like those classes with a couple of the kids who— I’d have to do that, you know for maybe a period a day or whatever it was. But that experience also— I met people that were different. Not, just had different situations— and I think that it just provided me with a skill that like get along with whoever. And so in college it was easy.

Although Lauren does not identify with race, she did identify herself as African American during the college admissions process for financial reasons. She was awarded an academic scholarship for students of color at the private institution she attended. She described the racial climate as “comfortable,” but acknowledged that her African American peers, particularly men, had a much different experience than she did. Lauren attributes the difference to her outlook on life. She commented, “I think a lot of it’s me. I think that that experience sort of provided me with the confidence that got me

anywhere. You know I'm gonna get by, you know. I don't perceive things as the world's out to get me. What can I get out of the experience?"

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#### CHRISTY

Christy grew up in a predominantly latino community in southern California. The makeup of her high school was largely made up of latino and black students. Given her childhood experiences, it was no surprise to learn that the transition to her predominately white institution was that of "culture shock."

Although she matriculated successfully, Christy never quite found fit among her peers in the university setting. She had separate groups of friends who she leaned on for different occasions, never intermixing the groups of friends in order to prevent racial tension and an awkward situation for herself. She said that she never felt completely accepted by the members of the Mexican student group and asian student group, the two main student organizations she participated in, because of her multiracial identity. Additionally her diverse groups of friends, which included white and black students, was interpreted by some members of the Mexican student group as disloyal.

Christy did find support through culturally relevant courses and faculty of color who accepted her and connected with her as an individual independent of race.

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#### JENNIFER

At the time of our meeting Jennifer was about two months post-college graduation and had been recently accepted into veterinarian school. She was very proud of her



accomplishment— not only because of what she had achieved for herself, but for the black community.

I'm really proud of my race and what I am. And, uh, well the races. (Laugh) And the fact that I will be one of few black women or multiracial women to be a vet, I am really proud about that as well. I don't know I guess it's amazing. I'm proud of who I am, proud of who my parents are, and proud of my family in general.

Growing up in a predominately white community Jennifer felt accepted, but not without hardships as the only interracial family in the neighborhood. In hopes for a better experience, Jennifer's mother sent her to the high school with the most diversity in the city because the high school they are zoned for was predominantly white. Jennifer enjoyed her high school experience and felt like she fit in among the other students at school.

Jennifer attended the flagship state university about an hour away from her hometown. She was not prepared for the contrast between her high school and the college racial climate. Jennifer's college experience was split between two campuses— her social campus, which is where she lived; and her academic campus, which is where she attended class and studied. Jennifer described her experience on her academic campus as negative. She felt like she was “on her own.” She portrayed her classmates as students from small towns who had never even seen a person of color before. Her first week at school a passerby in a car called her a nigger, which was a significant event in her identity development.

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### E. LYNN

Educated on issues of race, E. Lynn was thoughtful and articulate in her responses to questions about racial identity and her experiences. In her own words, “I have devoted my career to [issues of race and social justice].” We met in her office after hours where she counsels students in the TRIO programs, a federal program targeted to assist low-income, first-generation college students to progress through the academic pipeline.

E. Lynn comes from native and white heritage, but identifies as Native American. She grew up on a reservation in the Midwest therefore native culture was a large influence in her life. As a young person, E. Lynn was marginalized for being “half-breed.” She also was isolated for being Cheyenne, which is different from the tribe that primarily resides on the reservation. She excelled as a student and school became her “escape” from issues at home and in the community.

E. Lynn was an active student in college, involved in both mainstream and identity-based student organizations. E. Lynn “branched out” to identity-based groups outside of her heritage and leaned on faculty of color when resources for native students were unaccommodating. Coursework tied to her sociology major and ethnic studies minor helped her to explore herself and were significant to her identity development. E. Lynn’s involvement with a native non-profit organization off-campus this experience solidified her identity and provided an outlet for her to serve as a social activist.

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### RAE

Rae was the only participant to identify as white. Although her physical appearance causes others to automatically put her in the “black box,” she “would be surprised to look in the mirror and not see someone who was white.”

Rae, like her sister Gabrielle, was homeschooled through her sophomore year in high school and grew up on military bases until her father retired when she was an adolescent. Her family lived and associated in predominately white circles, which was the source of her friends. Limited experiences with a black community and negative experiences with her father’s family significantly impacted her identity formation.

Rae attended Christian University, which she described as segregated by race—largely white and black student groups. During the interview, she spoke passionately about the black student who criticized her for making friends with white students. The words of Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, highly acclaimed literary historian and critic, and Director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, at a university honors conference significantly influenced her racial identity.

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#### NAOMI

Naomi has a striking appearance, brown skin coupled with distinctly almond eyes, which often draws in inquirers about her racial makeup. Naomi is comfortable talking about race and is confident in her multiracial identity. She spoke effortlessly and in detail about her experiences in relation to her identity development. Undoubtedly her own study and research involving multiracial individual and college student development has allowed her further opportunity to thoughtfully consider her own experiences.

Naomi grew up in military communities in Japan and the United States which she described as diverse and celebratory of ethnic heritage— multiculturalism realized. Her family ties and “freedom to identify multiracially” without pressure from family or the community influenced her identity development as a young person.

A recognized student leader, Naomi was elected homecoming queen at the university she attended. Although her close friends were women of color, she easily navigated the predominately white campus making friends as a leader in several mainstream student organizations. Naomi created an international women’s student organization when an identity-based student organization did not fit her developmental needs, nor that of her circle of friends. This was the most significant experience to her identity development as an undergraduate student.

Naomi was one of five participants sampled from network selection.

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#### CHLOE

Chloe lived in predominately white communities growing up. She was raised by a single-parent, until her mother married just after Chloe entered high school. Although her mother’s career required them to move a lot, her primary residence was in a southern state located on the east coast. Chloe’s candid talk about the south led me to deduce that the state’s history and culture impacted her identity development and self-label. Her mother, who Chloe identified as black, comes from black and native heritage. She shared that her mother’s issues with her own identity influenced Chloe’s identity development. Her mother lived in white communities, restricted Chloe from having black friends, and in Chloe’s words, “wanted her to be white.” Despite her mother’s efforts, Chloe

identifies as black. She attributes her close ties to her mother's family and the fact that she never knew her white father to her identity.

The college setting provided Chloe the opportunity to make black friends and explore the black community. She was an active member of the black student organization and connected with black faculty. For Chloe, multiple identities merged in the college setting. Academic courses and identity-based student organizations provided avenues to explore her sexual and spiritual identities as well.

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#### YURI

It took years for Yuri to appreciate her unique physical features— distinctly asian almond eyes, brown skin, and loose black curls. Teased as a young person for looking different, she was insecure about her identity. As she grew older and others began to notice the beauty in her differences, so did she.

Yuri's identity was situational. She sees herself as a multiracial individual, but when she is at home with her mother she relates more with her Japanese roots; and when she is out interacting with friends and others in the community she feels more of a connect with her American and black heritage.

Yuri's college experience was significantly impacted by her involvement with the multi-culture center and the black and asian student organizations. In her words she hated school her first year, but after she discovered these peer groups she felt like she belonged and had a place at the university.

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#### ROXANNE

Roxanne spoke of her experiences bluntly and with humor. Had her interview been in a public setting, people in passing may have been offended by her language. Her talk of “chinky-eyes,” “blonde-moments,” and “small boobs” would mostly likely raise an eyebrow or two. Still, these comments were appropriate to our conversation about her experiences and identity development and speak to her personality and light-hearted attitude toward the topic.

Growing up in a diverse military community, Roxanne shared that although interracial families were not the norm, but was not rare. In fact her circle of friends grew from her mother’s friendship base which was largely Filipina women who were married interracially. Still, her parents instilled in her that the world sees her as black in their attempts to protect her from and prepare her for a largely biased society.

Roxanne attended college in her hometown. She lived at home throughout her collegiate career, but was an active student on campus. She described her university as diverse and having a warm racial climate; however she tried to avoid contact with white students to prevent situations where she had to educate them about race or mixed-race. Roxanne participated in both the black and asian student organizations. Her elected position as president of the asian student organization was significant to her racial identity development. She saw her role in that position to bridge differences between the two student groups. Her efforts led to more integration between the organizations that had a lasting effect.

Lavern's childhood experiences were largely shaped by her father's travels with the military. As a young person she grew up on a diverse military base in Germany, then while her father deployed to serve in Desert Storm, her family moved to a predominately white community to live with her mother's family. As an adolescent she moved to a uniquely diverse military community in a largely white and rural Midwest state. These experiences impacted Lavern's identity development, which was fluid in nature, shifting with the environmental circumstances.

Lavern's experiences at college provided her opportunities to explore her identity in ways that she had not in her childhood. For the first time she felt connected to her black roots, making friends with a group of black women during her freshman year. Additionally, her coursework in psychology and American ethnic studies broadened her world view and allowed her to study and research multiracial identity. Finally, the initiative of an administrator to reach out to a student developed into a mentorship that continues to support Lavern's personal and academic goals. Based on her own experience and research, Lavern touts mentorship as a key element to college persistence for students of color.

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#### DEBBIE

Not presuming that race is the heart of every issue, is a theme that resonates in Debbie's conversation about her experiences. Growing up, her father instilled in her to "work hard, do her best, never make excuses, and always look to see what you could have done better." This attitude shaped her racial identity and how she interprets how others respond to her identity. Debbie talked about race as a non-issue in her childhood

and college experiences, referring to herself as oblivious of any racially charged incidences. A pretty woman, Debbie also shared that she easily navigated the college setting because of her physical appearance. I concur that her tall, dancer's silhouette, light skin and long wavy hair likely found favor among universal crowds.

Because the university she attended was located in her hometown, when she transferred there she “fell right back into my familiar.” Although she matriculated through college, she does not describe her college experience as successful because she did not get involved in student activities and maintained a primarily off-campus student life-style. Likely due to her approach to racial incidents and her limited campus activity, for Debbie the university setting provided narrow experiences that challenged or supported her identity development. However, an academic course did impact her in a way she describes below:

It kind of awakened the black woman inside me. I mean, see, I can't even say it like that— it just awakened something in me, and maybe it was black, maybe it wasn't— it's who I am.

## FINDINGS

After the eighteen participants were interviewed about their experiences as multiracial college students, three overarching themes emerged that addressed the research questions. The three overarching themes were: foundations for success, college experiences and strategies for success. In the following chapters, the three themes and their sub-categories are presented.



## CHAPTER 4

### FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS: DEVELOPMENT OF STRATEGIES TO SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATE MONORACIAL SYSTEMS

Having a fuller understanding of the participants' identity formation prior to college helped to provide a fuller picture of their biracial experiences. This section will address the identity process experienced by these biracial students before their arrival to the university.

Childhood accounts as told by participants brought to light the foundation of strategies to successfully navigate monoracial systems. They expressed how significant events and life situations, particular to family and community, during their school age years played a role in their racial identity development. Having a better understanding of the participants' identity formation prior to college put into context their experiences and responses to challenges while at college. As participants shared their stories, it was evident that the foundation of success strategies transpired from the shaping of their self-concept and challenges they faced as young people.

#### RACIAL IDENTITY AND FORMATION

Twelve participants hold some form of a multiracial or biracial identity, five identified with a monoracial category, and one participant identifies with a cultural identity.

#### MONORACIAL IDENTITY

Five participants self identify with a monoracial designation. Four of these women identify as a person of color. Rae was the only participant to identify as white. When asked about her racial identity she hesitated to give an answer:

Oh that's a hard question to answer actually. I would say as far as my— to answer the question that you specially asked as far as my racial identity— I would say that I identify less with the African American part of my heritage.

She revealed that her struggle to self-identify articulately in part is because she is reconsidering how she perceives herself.

I guess that's probably a question that I am considering more as I get older— Definitely when I was younger I didn't identify [black] at all. I mean I was looking not to change, but I would be surprised to look in the mirror and not see someone who was white. That was how little I identified with being [black]. As I got older it was the expectation of [identifying black] was definitely thrust upon me a lot more. Which for quite some time made me identify even less with the African American side, kind of out of sheer perverseness. As I've gotten older, I have probably tried to identify with it more, but I would say that it wasn't a strong part of my upbringing. I would say that I can acknowledge it now— I guess don't get offended that people put me in that box just automatically. I guess that's a very long version of: I don't know.

In response to the question, “Do you identify as white?” she answered, “Yes.” Later she explained the formation of her self-concept, which was largely shaped by negative experiences with her father’s family.

Remembering as a child, the major challenges that I remember were with my father’s family who very, very strongly identified with their African American heritage and rejected our family for not identifying as strongly.

However it was her father’s reaction that was most significant to her own racial identity.

I guess the one thing that really stands out to me was remembering being embarrassed by the way my father changed when we’d go to visit his family. As we would cross into the city he would become a different person. He would speak differently. And it would be, you know, from the perspective of a child, he would speak differently, he wouldn’t— and I mean my mother was a little bit into English and we definitely were always, you know, corrected with grammar and made sure that we talked to anyone else using proper grammar— and as a child I certainly didn’t have the understanding of how to describe it, but I just knew that he sounds different. He laughed differently. He was not— I don’t know; he was just a different person. And I remember, I mean I guess now looking back on it, especially with their reaction [to our family] I can understand it. But I would say that was probably a big— something that played a big part in my identity— and my, kind of decision to reject that [part of my heritage].

E. Lynn identifies as Native American, “I primarily identify as Native American, but I am biracial. According to current standards, I’m multiracial. Don’t understand what that one means, but I just consider myself Native.” Family and cultural access played roles in her racial identity formation. E. Lynn grew up on a reservation in the Midwest and even though her dad is white, he also grew up on the reservation, so Native culture was a large influence in her life. E. Lynn talked about her experience growing up on the reservation where she not only faced racial discrimination, but also tribalism. She was considered “half breed” in her childhood community, but also marginalized because she is of Northern Cheyenne descent, which is not the tribe that primarily resides on the reservation she grew up in.

Being marginalized for my blood quantum. Being pushed to the margin for being half. Definitely— it made me very strong in my ethnic identity. And it made me very strong in just being who I was. Like, I did not want to stay there. I wanted to leave. And I definitely wanted to leave and go somewhere where people would accept me.

One might come to the conclusion that being pushed to the margins of a community that is native might be encouraged to identify as non-native, but E. Lynn explains, “The caucasian side— I struggle because I didn’t grow up around a lot of white people or caucasian people or just whatever— European or whatever you want to call them. So I don’t fit in as well.” Later she added, “I had absolutely no caucasian influence, and my white family was very prejudiced.”

Relations between and among members in her blended family further encouraged her to find strength in herself. E. Lynn's family consisted of three older white siblings from her father's previous marriage, an older sister who is "full-blood Indian" from her mother's first marriage, and a little sister who is also "mixed-blood." She expressed how she was put in the middle of the dynamics of her older monoracial siblings having to get used to their parent's interracial marriage. She discussed the impact of her family on her identity after her white siblings moved away to live with their mother.

Me and my two sisters, we're very tight. But, yeah, going family to family—it's not as good, no. No. There was a lot of inappropriate comments, and ignorant comments and, yeah. We were called half-breed and being treated a little differently. Yeah. And just hearing comments like if you go to a white town where it's white cousins, you know, just hearing the comments about the reservation school or how reservation school is bad, and Indians don't know how to act. My dad even promoted that. And my grandpa, on my dad's side was very racist. He was always saying something about somebody. And my mom's side, we didn't interact with them much because they were in another state, obviously like an 18 hour drive alone. So, but when we were up there, they would accept us. But I would know they would talk about us because they would say something about "veehos" which in our language means white, white man, so I'd know that they were talking about us, about my dad or something. And they would definitely make it clear to us that we were biracial up there—half breeds.

It was Chloe's negative experiences with white people that influenced her to identify as black, including the relationship she had with her step-father and the lack of relationship she had with her biological father.

Well, I'm black. I would consider myself black. I guess. Most of the time. I mean, I guess. I don't know. [People that know me] know that I'm biracial, but I guess I identify more with black people than with white people. I mean that people that know me know that I— it's not like I hide [that I'm white] is what I'm saying.

She went on to explain her racial identity formation, "Well, I don't really identify with the Irish part at all because I didn't know my father. He wasn't like around or anything. So I don't even know him. I just know things about him because my mom told me or whatever. So I don't really— I can't really identify with that part. So I just kind of identify with the black part."

Chloe briefly mentioned her step-father during the interview. In response to a probe about their relationship, she stated, "Well, yeah [my mom married my step father] when I was 14 or 15. But they were together before that. He has just recently taken on this father figure, so I don't know. It's kind of interesting— because he use to be a prick. And so I guess I just— it's like all white people I come in contact with are just mean."

Savannah and Roxanne both identify as monoracial individuals because of how others perceive them to be. Savannah comes from Filipino and white parentage, but she identifies as Filipino. She reasons, "I guess I seem to tend to go towards more the Filipino side just because I don't look white. People never assume that I'm white, so then

I kind of naturally go to that one [Filipino].” Interestingly, because of her phenotype, when she self-identifies as Filipino the response she generally receives is “confusion” because others mistake her to have some other racial or ethnic background.

People assume that I’m Latina, Native American, Puerto Rican, black and white [mix], everything but Filipino. But overall I guess, you know, I positively fit in some sort of a minority, brown look to me.

Roxanne’s racial background is Filipino and black. Her identity is also influenced by what others perceive her to be— black.

Well, I pretty much go by what I look like because when you first look at me, I have dark skin, dark hair, so most people identify me as black. I’ve never had [anyone say], “Filipino lady, come over here.” It’s always, you know: the black girl. Which always is funny because [when I tell them my mother is Filipino] they’re like, “Oh, I always knew you weren’t *all* black.” I’m just thinking, “Right, you didn’t know until I said something.” So you know that was always strange to me.

Roxanne’s parental warnings about how others might treat her solidified that society sees her as black.

Yeah, [my parents] did talk about stuff like that. They did talk about since [you’re] black you’re going to have to do stuff better. You know, you’re going to have to do really, really good for someone to notice you because they expect you not to do well. And when you do well, they’re going to question why you did so

well because— maybe you cheated or you just don't have the ability and you know so that was that. Sometimes they were protective about the whole black/Filipino thing, but not really. It was just more that— well you're going to be around Filipino people and they're not going to accept you. They're not going to care that you're half Filipino. Because you're only half they are going to be like, "Well, you're not part of us," you know.

### MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

Twelve participants hold some form of a multiracial identity. Unlike their peers described in the previous section, "it may not be necessary to emphasize one heritage over another." (Phinney, 1996, p. 142) The individuals described in this section feel strongly that their self-concept encompasses both (or all) groups of their racial make-up, an undeconstructable multiracial label, or a situational identity.

Kalena takes on an identity she coined "Amerasian," which speaks to her American (white) and Thai parentage, "they can't be separated out." For her there is no choice to be made. She confesses it is not always easy because she lived most of her life in America, also because most people perceive her as white. She deliberately gives homage to both parts of her heritage.

I'll admit that, because I was mostly raised in the United States, it's easier to tend to go with a white Americanized culture as opposed to the asian culture. And depending on the different types of cultures, I mean there are so many different asian cultures, too. But, I guess, I don't really— I can't choose. And even when it



came to my wedding, you know, we did both parts. We had the American traditional wedding ceremony and a Thai reception ceremony. Right, [my husband is], white. He's all white. So my children are now considered white because they're three-quarters white. They've got very little asian in them. My son looks like he's got something and my daughter looks nothing asian. So, I don't know— it's hard to really separate them out.

Debbie's mother is black and her father white. She identifies with a "mixed" identity where she is neither one nor the other.

So I would definitely say that I'm mixed, and I think that I'm a mix in many ways, and I don't feel like I'm one or the other. Most people have always appeared to be confused, 'Are you white or black?' Well, it's never, 'Are you white?' But I consider myself mixed.

In our discussion about her racial identity, she challenged the notion of how racial identity is determined.

I almost feel like people [in high school] identified their race like who it is that they hang out with. But I was hanging out with asian people— that didn't make me asian, you know it didn't make me Filipino.

So I mean, I just say mixed because that's what I am. I mean is your racial identity what your blood is made of? Is your racial identity the music you listen to, the clothes that you wear? And I think those are questions that, you know— So, it's just very frustrating when people try to tell you that you have to behave

this way because your melanin levels are here. And your facial features are here. I think that's why I've always been confused. But I never probably said race is this, therefore I am this. So, I think I've boiled it down to, well, it's what your blood is. So, I'm black and white. That's what I am.

Naomi refers to her identity as “a kind of hybrid” of the two racial/ethnic groups that comprise her multiracial identity that cannot be separated. She describes the complexity of having to explain her identity to others.

I am multiracial. Mixed-parentage. My mother is Japanese and my father is African American. Generally when people ask, because it's kind of confusing going into the whole, you know, do you mean race or do you mean ethnicity, and so I usually just say, you know, I'm multiracial, my mom's Japanese, my dad's black. But personally I do believe there are differences between race, which I always call myself black and ethnicity, which is Japanese and U.S. citizen. I really identify as a kind of a hybrid because I don't have terribly, you know, Japanese experience— you know I couldn't say that I have experienced things as a Japanese person because I am seen as an African American, although I think that if I had to choose between the two that would probably be the more— I guess more obvious race of the two because I've lived in the United States and in a multiracial community, even overseas, was still a U.S. community. And so I generally identify as multiracial because it's really a mixing of the two and that's what my experience comes from. There's really no separation, you know, between those two.

The racial demographics of Naomi's childhood community, what she describes as an unusual, diverse military community in a predominately white state of the Heartland, allowed her the "freedom" to identify as a multiracial person. Pressures to take on a black identity were not felt because there was not a black community to navigate.

Specifically I would say that being in a military community, and then also living in kind of South Dakota where it was predominantly white— that was significant to my racial identity, too. Whereas if I would of grown up somewhere, say a majority African American community, I think my experience would have been very different. But for me, you know, being in a kind of a predominantly white community that kind of gave me more freedom to identify multiracially. It was more of an option because there were other people that looked like me around there; and because there wasn't a predominantly African American community there, so that wasn't necessarily a way that I would turn to look as to identify. And of course white would not be a way that I would identify. And so I think, you know, just in terms of living in that kind of environment was maybe different from how I identify. I think living in a military community once again, that was pretty diverse. It had multiracial individuals in the community who were influential. You know, because some military bases that are housed in some parts of the country, like the south, or where there are more people of color, once again that would have been different. But we happened to be, you know, in the Midwest and, so it was just a different story. And so I think that had an influence.

Naomi talked more about the freedom to identity as a multiracial person as it relates to her family.

I also think that I didn't ever, kind of like feel like I had to deny any part of who I was either because, just my childhood, my family, you know, we lived in Japan, and had a very good relationship with our Japanese relatives. And then our relatives that live in the Northeast, my dad's side, we also have a, a good relationship with them. And there was never any pressure from either of them [to identify a certain way]. There may have been when my parents got married, but there was never any pressure for me, you know growing up with them. And we weren't made to feel different. I mean I think there's obviously some differences for our Japanese families, you know that were apparent, but not like we weren't part of the family. And so I think that my the family members were also kind of a big influence. And you know and I think my parents were very good about just talking... Like I remember I sometimes I would say well I'm half Japanese and half black and my dad would be like, "What do you mean by half? Like this half of you this, and this half of you that?" And I was like— so it kind of got me thinking of like half is not [the best way to describe who I am], you know, because it's kind of like I said, a hybrid, that you can't be separated, you know, there's no like lines drawn. And so I think that kind of language in our house also was very influential.

Aja went to high school with Naomi in the same military community. Outside of this small community, people saw Aja as white, "they thought I was all caucasian so I

mean, they didn't look at me by any kind of ethnicity or anything, they just thought of me as a person, but I don't know if that is how I always view it." Most people perceive her as white, but she sees herself as "a mix of all ethnic nationalities" that encompassed her heritage. Actually, she connects more with being asian, but identifies herself to others as, "half Thai, a little bit German, Irish and French."

Aja was taught by her family "never to look at [race]. I mean they never made that a big subject in our home." However, because of the negative experiences her parents shared as an interracial couple, her father was concerned that Aja and her sisters might be treated differently by others, so he instructed them to mark caucasian on forms.

Growing up all the way until my last year at high school, my dad had always had us put Caucasian [on forms]. But then as times have changed and people got more comfortable with nationalities as being mixed or being asian, black or anything like that, he then had us put "Other" our senior year— sort of identifying more with the asian. That's actually what I do— is I identify more with [asian].

This had little bearing on her racial identity. She commented, "I mean on paper, we knew what we were doing. It was no big deal, you know, we knew who we were." More significant was the military community she grew up in. She recalls that identity was not as much of an issue for her there as it was once she left high school.

And granted my mom, with all of her Thai friends— a lot of them were married to Caucasian husbands, so a lot of us were pretty much the same, our foods would be the same. So you just kind of felt like it was, "Carry on."

Denise talked about her racial identity in relation to responses on forms because, as she disclosed later, most people see her as white. Although she considers herself to be biracial, Denise understands that when inquired about her racial identity, people generally want to know the ethnic make-up of her parents and she responds accordingly.

You know, that's a tough question for me. Because I think depending on what document I'm signing, or what application I'm filling out— it just changes based on what they have. But I do consider myself to be biracial. Usually if there's the category listed: Mexican American slash Caucasian. Those are the ones that I tend to go to. But typically if it is only offered Mexican or Caucasian, then I will put Mexican on there. So, it really depends on, you know, the categories that I'm provided and if I'm asked to fit within a specific category. But if I'm just asked generally, I usually say I'm half Mexican, half Canadian.

Denise's parents divorced when she was in grade school. She attributes much of her identity to her experiences spending time in two different cultural households that valued the other culture. Her multiracial identity describes a kind of situational identity, one of four "border crossings" prescribed by Root (1996).

Growing up, because my parents were divorced, I guess when I was about 10 years old, and I lived primarily with my mom, and spent weekends or every other weekend with my dad, I felt like I was able to get two very different experiences, but at the same time have them kind of merge in a way in which I felt like I benefited a lot from that. Although, it did create a sense of a little bit of identity

crisis in a way, depending on who I was with most often. So like when I was with my dad I think I tended to relate to more of that, you know, Hispanic or Mexican culture; but when I was with my mom I was definitely more integrated into, you know, caucasian culture. But yet knowing that I was taking kind of the best of both worlds, I figured that I was integrating them together kind of through my daily experiences. For example when I go hang out with my dad and his family, you know, they're often speaking Spanglish and using terms or eating foods that I wouldn't necessarily eat when I'm with my mom. So you know that was very different. Or if I ever went to Canada with my mom to visit her family, again, I was eating foods, or learning terms that on my dad's side I wouldn't necessarily be hearing or doing, So because they had divorced at an earlier age for me, you know, they still were kind of separated more so than I think had they remained married. And that experience, you know, may have been a little bit different. Interestingly, I mean just kind of hearing stories from my mom when she was with my dad she actually spoke better Spanish than my dad— and spoke, or actually wrote, Spanish— that my Dad can't do. And so, you know, for her to kind of acclimate to that side. And then even from my dad's perspective because they went to live in Canada for a couple years as they were married he still had friends that he goes to Canada often to visit, and, you know, so he kind of has taken some of their— like for example, they call it chips, and it's French fries and vinegar that they eat. And, you know, so he kind of has an awareness and a sense of that; but I haven't necessarily been able to see that happen together, only just from shared experiences that they tell me about.

Yuri's a descendent of Japanese and black parentage. She shares her reaction to those who ask the all too familiar question for multiracial individuals, "What are you?"

If I wanted to be smart and be sarcastic I say, "Oh, I'm human." But if, you know I'm like, you know being serious about it, I would be like, "Alright, you do mean racially?" And if they say yes, then I will let them know that I'm half black and Japanese.

Yuri identifies as biracial, yet attributes her situational race to the limited access to a Japanese community where she lived in a beach town on the east coast. For her because socially she had more access to black people she identified that way out in the community, but at home in her "comfort zone" she identifies more with her asian background.

Well, for the record, I don't really know a lot of Japanese people my age, you know, so I can't— I don't really interact with a lot of them that's my age. But as far as my mom, you know, I live with my mom. You know she plays a very strong role in my life, so I see and feel the Japanese side of me when I'm with her. But as far as my social life, of course I see more black people on a daily basis. I interact more with black people my age. And then I have this good relation with my father, even though we don't live together, but that's like part of my American side. So, I don't know. My asian side is more so, you know, when I'm with my mom at home; and then the black side or American side is when I'm outside of the comfort zone of my home.



Christy did not describe her situational identity in terms of the heritage of her parents, Japanese and Mexican. She views the world through a “mixed” lens, but can also identify with being Mexican. She does not feel a connection to her Japanese heritage. Even though she has spent some time visiting in Japan, she attributes her identity formation to the predominantly Mexican community she grew up in southern California.

Brigitte sees herself as “multiracial, as comprised of black, Native American and asian.” She spent her early childhood with her mother’s relatives— living in Korea from birth until age five.

I was actually born [in Korea]. My brother and I were born there and we lived there until my dad was transferred to the Midwest. So I was about 5 when I came to the States. And so Korean was my first language, you know, that I learned and that was the culture I knew. So I pretty much had to adapt to the American culture, English language, and everything else.

Brigitte stated, “I think growing up I identified with the Asian part and it basically had to do with because I don’t really know my dad’s family.” This with the practice of Korean traditions and language in her home contributed to her world view.

I think my mom, she really feels strongly about keeping the [Korean] traditions. So we did do a lot of that. You know for example, I’m sure you heard of the Chinese New Year, well the Koreans also have the same New Year. And so she kept that. Lots of other holidays— Korean holidays, you know, we participated in

that. She would have friends over; she would have a big meal. We would call relatives in Korea, also wearing some of the traditional outfits. I mean, so she really made a point to know to keep that part of us alive, and for us to remember. And we also spoke some Korean in the home, especially when my [Korean] grandmother was staying with us for about five years [while living in the Midwest]. So it was very important that we not forget that part of the family.

The influence of Jasmine's Thai mother shares a role in how she perceives herself.

I probably identify more with Thai because my mother— and my parents are still together, but you know— my mother raised me. I eat the food; I've been to Thailand, so I know the culture. Norwegian culture I really don't know too much about it because I think my dad is like third or fourth generation.

However she acknowledges that how others see her is different depending on who they are. She explained the response she has received from others,

I think for the most part people understand why I choose [biracial]. But if I were to choose, asian, they would kind of say, "Well, you don't look like it." So they like have a question mark, or they say, "Well, you're also half-white," like I'm denying my other side, which I'm not because my dad helped raise me; he's a great guy and I would never deny that part. So I think for the most part people are a little bit more accepting if I were to say I'm biracial.

Aja's identity is situational. She talked about how she self identifies differently in the U.S. and Thailand.

I guess for the most part I would say that I would identify as asian, here, but then if I were to go to Thailand, I would say I'm biracial because they obviously know [I'm not "full" Thai]. I guess it depends like which country I'm in. In Thailand I don't know enough Thai... And they look at me and they say, "You don't look Thai at all. Why are you saying that you're Thai?" You weren't born here, you know."

Jasmine made frequent trips to Thailand growing up through adulthood. These experiences were significant to her identity formation. She spoke to this, "I'm very thankful for the opportunity that I was able to go to Thailand and learn more about the culture...I understand, okay, yes, I am an American, I was born in America, but you have the best of both worlds: You're half-white, you're half-Thai. And just going to Thailand makes me realize that it is unique, you can embrace both cultures."

"I personally claim biracial, although I know that when I walk outside my door people see me as a light-skinned black girl." The course of Lavern's identity has come full circle. She was the only participant to describe her racial identity as an evolution. While all the other participant identities stayed the same from school age to post-secondary levels, for some adjusting to different social contexts (situational race); Lavern describes a process of identity shifts that were influenced by her family, teachers, and peer groups. Lavern's situational identity might be better categorized as Root's fourth

border-crossing option where an individual is at home in one camp for an extended period of time. (Root, 1996, p. xxii) She describes this in detail:

My mom always told me I was golden so I was like, OK, great I'm golden. Let's see then we moved to the Midwest— I was about 7 years old and my dad was in Saudi serving for Desert Storm. I lived in a predominantly white – besides like Native American kids. So only then when my teacher had us, you know, do the test with the bubble stack— What race are you? She went around the classroom and asked people what race they were... I was going to mark golden. And the teacher said, “No, Lavern, you're black.” And so after that I was like, OK, I guess I'm black. I didn't exactly know what that meant. So from that point on, you know, like all of a sudden I felt black.

During high school Lavern moved to a diverse military town in the Midwest, “I went to Kansas and my town-... We have a lot of mixed people, so I kind of identified with them, and race wasn't really emphasized too much.” She went on to say, “So then, I probably thought myself as biracial, but I didn't really think about it too much because I was surrounded by all different types of people. But I knew I wasn't white. I could never be white.” Upon high school graduation, Lavern attended a large predominately white institution in the same state as her high school. In that environment she identified as black because she felt “like it's really white here. I felt my minority side just really popped out a lot.” Near the close of her tenure at the university she researched biracial identity and came to the notion, “You can choose what you want to be, but I choose for myself biracial, golden— that's what I am.”

Jennifer's racial make-up is white and black. Although she is also often mistaken for a "light-skinned black girl," she characterizes her identity as biracial or "both." As a child Jennifer observed that her physical appearance was different from her white mother. This coupled with the experience that she is seen by others as different, played a large role in her identity development.

When my dad was at work— I mean he never was really home— only on the weekends. The person that I talked to, you know, that really took care of me was my mom. So seeing my mom all the time, I knew that I wasn't just black. So I guess I would say that I identified myself as biracial when I decided to identify myself because when I was little I didn't really care.

Her own conclusions about her identity as a child were solidified by others' reactions toward her and her mother in the community.

When I was in first grade one of my friends asked if I was adopted. I was like, "No." And I thought it was like the dumbest question ever. The only person she'd ever seen me with was my mom, you know, bringing us to school. It was really then that I was like, well why would she ask me that? And then my mom told me, you know what we all look like and why it might not be, you know, the same as more and more people see you. That's what I remember her saying.

Gabrielle's self concept reflects the influence of her father. When asked about her racial identity she responded, "You know, I don't know if I could come up with a name for what I am. I guess [biracial] would be, you know, if I were to pick a term, that'd be

what I would use. Instead of using black or white or whatever.” Later she recalled family conversations about race:

But I think, you know, dealing with things like that— like I said earlier, a lot of it was, you know, it was a very open thing in our family that we talked about all the time, the being biracial or multiracial, or whatever you want to call it. A lot of times, especially my dad, didn’t want to call it anything. And maybe that’s where I come from not wanting to call it anything. He even has a problem with multiracial or biracial. He doesn’t think that that is a fair— and I don’t know why, but he feels like that’s not what you should call it. I don’t know if he had a term he would call it, but, I think he feels like you’re more just a person. And I think that’s the way that we always thought of it.

Most people assume that Gabrielle is black so she generally volunteers information regarding her racial make-up to disassociate herself from that part of her heritage. She upholds certain societal stereotypes regarding black people and culture.

...I grew up more in the white culture than in the black culture. Because we were a very like— and not that Black people aren’t educated— but we were very like, we did a lot of like cultural things: going to museums and doing a lot of— My mom’s an artist, so we did a lot of like art things and, you know, they made sure that we were very educated. And I think that I can associate with those who, even though they are educated sometimes act like, you know, speak like— they’re odd or things like that. And I, I just can’t associate—I just, it doesn’t work for me.

For Gabrielle, negative experiences with her father's family caused her to reject an identity connected to their race. She explains,

Well, when I was younger I don't remember ever really thinking about [race]. I remember that my dad's side of the family had a problem with [my parent's interracial marriage] in the beginning, and I remember knowing about that. I think that it's possible that— I don't want to call myself black and I wonder sometimes if it's because of the way that his family maybe felt about us. And I'm sure that's not fair to feel, but I think that background has played a part that I don't want to call myself black because I feel like his family has problems with my mother. And so, because of that, as unfair as it is, you like lump that together as, you know, black.

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#### IDENTITY OF NO RACIAL DESIGNATION

Although most participants who identify as some multiracial category voiced their understanding of race as a social construct or at least as a concept that is not as easily defined as the seven categories prescribed by the federal government, one participant firmly states she has no racial identity. Rather, Lauren identifies as *multicultural*. Lauren's identity fits in a fifth pattern described by Renn (2003) as "opting out" of racial categories. She explained how she responds to "what are you?"

I always tell them it's really none of their business, and that it doesn't really matter. I'm quite a mix. My mother's Dutch— so European. I grew up in Holland so I probably identify more with that. My father is African American,

Native American and Cajun— mixed together. So I'm kind of all those things. I don't really identify with any particular race. I always check "other."

She further described her multicultural identity.

I guess, you know, it's just more the cultural aspects of Holland— growing up there and just the more open-minded kind of thinking. So I identify with being Dutch. But I don't know if I would necessarily identify myself as Caucasian. So, it's about the culture. I'm multicultural in a more global sense of the word. Who I am has been influenced by the cultures in which I grew up in.

Both her maternal and paternal families played a role in this identity formation:

I was certainly influenced by my grandparents, when I lived [in Holland]. But I remember too, going and visiting my dad's family, and they lived in the South. And— very poor, you know, in the ghetto. And it was such a polar opposite, you know, not only because of the, like, black and the white, but just economically as well. I remember going to my dad's family, and it just was different. Like, everybody was my cousin; but not everybody was my cousin, you know. And so just, you know, it influenced me in terms of like what is family. What's important? There was definitely, I would say, like on my mom's side of the family if you screwed up or shamed the family in any way then you were no longer part of that family. And that was not the case of my dad's side of the family. In fact, it almost seemed that the more you screwed up, the more important you were as family, you know. So, it was just very different. And I



think that probably influenced me in terms of how I see family. You know, that it's important to forgive, but at the same time, to have reasonable expectations of people. (Laughs)

Her upbringing in the military also played a role in her cultural identity. Upon moving to the United States, the military community she grew up in was diverse and race was a nonissue.

When we moved to the Midwest, there's an Air Force base there, it was just very diverse. I would say it has changed somewhat now, but where I lived was probably one of the most diverse places in the state. So that was very comfortable. People didn't really ask or care [about race] when I lived there. It wasn't until I came to college that people started being curious. With the Air Force there's people coming and going all the time. And so there was always, you know, new kids moving in and always interesting to find out where they were from. More so [people cared about] where all you have lived, as opposed to what's your ethnicity.

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## FORMS

Forms requesting information about race pose a unique dilemma for multiracial individuals, "Our system of racial classification forces people to choose only one racial category when asked to self-identify," (Wilson, 2001). The U.S. government addressed concerns regarding the labeling of multiracial individuals, allowing individuals to indicate two or more races on the 2000 U.S Census. Still, as indicated by participant

comments, forms do not properly reflect the variation and fluidity of multiracial identities. Gabrielle commented,

Yeah, I normally do other. I actually have a big problem marking either black or white. I don't feel like I fit in either category. I mean when I've been forced to mark one it really bothers me. [On that occasion] I normally put black. I've been told before that you're supposed to mark whatever your father was, but I don't know if that's true. So I, that's the only way that I mark. But if I can get away with it, I don't mark anything.

For some participants, filling-in-bubbles on standardized forms marked a first encounter with racial quandary. Debbie talked about the first moment she remembers having to think about her own identity.

I think my racial turmoil identity problem started back in fourth grade because we were taking standardized tests and the [teacher] told me to mark what the race of your father was. So I'm like, "OK, my dad's white." And she goes, "No, you have to mark black." "But my dad's white." "Well, you mark what your dad is, but if you're something other than white, then you mark that." And I was just totally confused after that point. And I'm like, "Well, make up your mind, lady—am I white or am I black? I mean, what is going on here?" It's so weird. I think that was back before they realized that white men would date women of color.

The whole testing thing— mark what your dad is, but if he's white mark black— didn't make any sense to me. People asking me to choose one or the other. It was

real interesting, looking back. That was the rule. Whatever you did is, that's what you are— unless you got “one drop.”

Similarly, Lavern shared an elementary school experience when her teacher instructed her to mark black on a standardized test form.

The way in which participants responded to box-checking fell into four categories: their response mirrors their identity, their response is different from their identity, their response depends on certain factors, or they do not respond to items requesting race— “leave it blank.” Yet, it is still a question as to how multiracial individuals choose to self-select when given the option.

For three participants the issue of filling-in-the-bubble was straightforward. Savannah and Roxanne both self-identify with a monoracial designation and this is reflected in the way they complete forms. Aja identifies as both biracial and asian, but on forms she marks asian. This was not always the case, however. In high school, her father instructed her to mark caucasian because he was concerned how school personnel might see her. Then her senior year, he directed her to mark “other.”

He just didn't want us to be treated differently in schools. And wanted people to view us— didn't want to associate me being asian because some people weren't acceptable of it. I think it was more of the experience that both my mom and dad had gone through [as an interracial couple]. But when it actually started to be more of a benefit to us, he wanted us to identify as asian, which is where we were at. And I didn't know if maybe that— the main value in things like when we did tests for scores like the SATs and we heard that they look at those differently

because of your race— when you were applying for scholarships and grants and things like that. That played a big role of how you got extra assistance.

Aja is not the only participant to use the system of having to choose a monoracial identity for official purposes to her advantage. Discussed throughout this section is the motivation of a benefit in how some participants mark their identity.

Two participants self-identify in a way that is different than how they indicate their race on forms. Rae explains,

I would not [mark white] simply because other people don't— wouldn't identify me that way. If it were completely up to me then, yes, I probably would [mark white.]

She later identified a time where she realized that it could be “advantageous to appear to identify with that side of my heritage,” referring to her father’s black roots. I remember when, I remember finding out that, one of the... admissions counselors at school had... suggested that I not receive a scholarship because I checked other on my application instead of checking black. And if I didn't identify with being black, then I shouldn't get any money for being black. So... I definitely started to realize that it was advantageous to sometimes appear to identify with being black.

Debbie was the other participant to check a box that did not match her self-identification. She identifies as mixed, but marks black on forms. “On standardized forms I mark myself as Black. And I definitely did that in high school because they told me I'd get more scholarships that way.”

Several participants discussed how the context of the inquiry or the availability of category labels made a difference in how they indicated their race on forms. Lavern and E. Lynn talked about how a personal agenda for a larger community influenced how they checked boxes. “If they don’t have a multiracial category and they have other, I may choose other. But it just depends. Sometimes I’ll choose black, sometimes other, but I prefer to pick multiracial.” Lavern continued, “Like it depends on what the study is for, or what the test is for. Like for me GRE, I picked black because I thought if I did really well, this would be beneficial for the black community in general.” Usually E. Lynn marks Native American on forms, “because it helps our numbers— natives. So, but sometimes I’ll say both. It depends.”

For Denise it was a matter of what categories were provided. Denise commented,

Depending on what document I’m signing or what application I’m filling out it always kind of— it just changes based on what they have. But I do consider myself to be biracial. Usually if it, you know, if there’s the category listed: Mexican American slash Caucasian. Those are the ones that I tend to go to. But typically if it is only offered: Mexican or Caucasian; then I will put Mexican on there. So, it really depends on, you know, the categories that I’m provided if I’m asked.

Naomi indicates a multiracial or biracial identity on forms, but it looks different depending on what options are made available as well. She even goes as far as to create her own category.

If there's an option of multiracial, I do mark multiracial. If there is not, I usually put asian and African American or black, and sometimes I'll add my own column and check it myself.

Christy and Lauren only complete racial questionnaires if a multiracial bubble is available, otherwise they leave it blank. Jennifer, the youngest of the participants, does not recall ever seeing a form that made her choose a monoracial category. Depending on the multiracial category provided she opts to indicate other, multiracial or simply leaves it blank. Other participants always leave racial questionnaires blank.

I just leave [forms] blank. When I was growing up, my dad always said, "Well, why should you have to choose one race over the other because you're not one race or the other. Never choose." I mean, you know, it's better to just leave it blank. So, I've always been doing that.

When I was a kid I just didn't check it. And no one ever caught it. You know. So I figure if they want to come back and ask me then let them. (Laughs) So I just wouldn't fill that part in.

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## CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Family, community and education were among the top sub-themes that emerged from childhood accounts as told by participants. Challenges during school age years faced by participants and their family members set the stage for the development of strategies to successfully navigate monoracial systems in the post-secondary education setting.

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## GROWING UP IN A MILITARY COMMUNITY

Twelve participants grew up in households with ties to the military. These participants talked about moving and living in different parts of the country and world mostly as small children. Ten participants lived and attended school in the same military community from at least adolescence through high school graduation. Three participants, Aja, Naomi and Savannah were high school classmates. Rae and Gabrielle, sisters, were homeschooled through their sophomore year in high school. Although all participants stated that the cities in which they lived were predominately white, they remember their affiliated military base and immediate community with much more diversity.

It was pretty different from— well, was a very different upbringing since I grew up on an Air Force base. Everybody was coming from all different places around the world. When I talk about this now— I mean it was strange for me growing up, I never thought about race because everybody was from all different races, coming from all around the world— so you really didn't think twice about it. Everybody was equal— I guess that's kind of what it was like growing up on a base. Our small little community. We were our own little mini city. But the surrounding areas were either white or Native American....Once we left our little base area and went into like the surrounding cities, you know, you get looks, people reacted differently to you, especially if you were walking around with your asian mother and your white father, or you know whatever you be. So you get different looks from people just because they are themselves just used to [only seeing] white or Native Americans, so. (Savannah)

Well, I was actually an Air Force brat, so I was born in Japan. My parents met in Thailand— Dad stationed in Thailand, married mom, moved to Japan, had me. So I was actually tri-lingual— so I spoke English, Thai, and Japanese till I was three. And I was on an Air Force base so it's every rainbow, you know, everybody there, every ethnicity. So it wasn't really an issue. So that would have been—and then came to the States. We lived in the South, again, you know, just multiracial. Moved to the East and again, I'm, you know, young so I'm really not affiliating anything [with race] at that point... And then, let's see, moved to the islands. Very, yeah, great, fabulous. I was part of the majority now because, you know, the minority were the whites even at junior high and stuff... And then moved to the Midwest. Went to high school that was in the military community there, so still very racial, multiracial because it's right off the base. High hispanic population. We had a lot of African American students bussed from a different part of the city... And then I go to Heartland State University, and— wow, where is everybody? Goodness gracious. (Kalena)

My father was in the Air Force and so we, my family, grew up in a military community for the most part. We spent most of my childhood that I can recall in two places one was in Japan— on an Air Force base in Japan, which is right outside Tokyo; and then one in the Midwest as a teenager. And like I said, they were both military communities. When we were in Japan, we lived on the base. We went to school on the base. There were, you know, it was all English-speaking. Mostly students came from military families. Pretty diverse. A lot of



multiracial individuals and biracial individuals. Especially I would say half-asian and half— caucasian or black. And then in the Midwest, while it was still predominantly white, it was definitely a military community and so it brought in a sense of diversity that typically wouldn't be seen in the western part of that state. And I thought it was very comfortable and safe environment to be in as a person of color and as a multiracial person just because I was definitely wasn't looked as an anomaly in that community, even if it was predominantly white. I would say [members of the community] treated us like friends and family. I think we were a close knit community. Wasn't very large. But I think, once again, coming from a military background and kind of dropped in the— the Midwest, it really brought everyone together. (Naomi)

When we moved to the Midwest, there's an Air Force base there, it was just very diverse. I would say it has changed somewhat now, but where we lived was probably one of the most diverse places in the state. So that was very comfortable. People didn't really ask or care [about race] when I lived there. It wasn't until I came to college that people started being curious. (Lauren)

[The community I grew up in] was fairly mixed. I didn't really see a lot of the asian people or the asian community until I was like through high school. But, you know, being that my father was in the Navy, I traveled a lot like before I turned nine. You know, like, I was born in the islands, stayed there for a year so I don't really remember anything of that. Then we actually went to Japan for about three years. We stayed on the base so it was like a very well mixed community

school on the base. And then went to the Southeast, stayed on the base as well so it was pretty much well mixture. So, going back to, you know what you said as far as the area that I guess I grew up in, I mean it was pretty much mixed in general. (Yuri)

I grew up in the East. I still live in the same house I didn't move or anything. My neighborhood was mostly American, black and white. A very good mix. There were, I think two or three other Filipino families in my neighborhood, and we were close with them. And, when I went to school, there was also a good mix, you know. Probably in each one of my classes there were probably three or four other kids that were either Filipino or mixed or something like that. So, it wasn't normal, but it wasn't rare [to be multiracial]. I don't know if that sounds right, but, I wasn't the only one in there. (Roxanne)

I love it. I went to a diverse high school. It was Filipinos, we had Hispanic, we had black, we had white, I think we were the second most diverse school in the area. I mean, my best friends growing up, one was Filipino and the other was half-black, half-Filipino. And then I got along with anybody else who was in my classes. But I hung around mainly Filipinos and white kids. But yeah, it was very diverse. I loved where I grew up. Parts of the city are completely bleached; and then other parts are very dark. But the place where I grew up was kind of middle class, maybe families that— we really just had everybody. And it was just a place where everybody came and it was just really, really cool. The part of town that I

grew up in. So, yeah, my dad was in the Navy— that’s how we came here from, so yeah. (Debbie)

Some participants who grew up in military communities in the Midwest and Heartland areas talked about the cultural oddities of such a diverse community in states that were so homogenous. Brigitte described the sometimes unexpected bonds that developed between and among different groups of people of color and white as well, “It was interesting because my dad being from the south knew about segregation, knew about racism and it was interesting because he came to the Midwest with a mindset that all whites were against minorities and blacks. And he found just the opposite. He found how accepting and embracing they were— that they treated people as people. And so that was the same type of feeling I got growing up there. So I never felt really different growing up there, you know, because people pretty much accepted us as people. I mean they didn’t like put a label on us saying, oh you’re black or asian or whatever.”

It was this sense of acceptance that most participants who grew up in military communities remembered as children. Some participants attributed this to the relatively large number of other families in the community who were also of mixed racial backgrounds; or the exposure to different people and countries allowed community members the education of a multicultural view, therefore accepting of differences.

To me being biracial, mixed was normal. A lot of my mom’s friends and their husbands also had that type of relationship where their kids were you know from two or three different races... Or four! Whatever the makeup was. And so that was normal for me, seeing two different colors in a house. It was weird for me to

see people not like us. So, like why are your parents the same color, you know? We were a military family so a lot of people [in the community I grew up] were military background. And most of my mom's friends also, like I said, had the same military background— and also biracial background. (Roxanne)

A lot of people [in the community where I grew up] were pretty open. Being in the military, a lot of people [in the immediate community] were exposed to different nationalities so I didn't see that they had problems with us. Then there was the ones that would be— I don't know what they are called, like cowboys or into the whole cowboy thing. You could kind of sense that they would hold back a little bit of things that you think they might want to say. But we kind of just moved away from some of those things: negativity. But I think there were enough people that were accepting of different nationalities that I didn't see much of that. (Aja)

Overall racial climate and culture: I would say that [the community I grew up in] was a very welcoming environment when it came to race and ethnicity. You know, I'd say like a lot of my peers were just very used to seeing multiracial, biracial, and monoracial minorities as well in this [military] community. People came from all over the United States, just because of the nature of being in the Air Force. I think they were also just accustomed to being open and to meeting new people because part of this culture is having to move, and for some families having to move a lot, and just being prepared to meet new people. And just having lived overseas, a lot of people are coming from overseas and have kind of

immersed into different cultures as well. And so, I thought it was very inclusive.  
(Naomi)

Naomi later added that a focus on commonalities among the military families and rural families that lived in this small community contributed to her feelings of belonging, “I think there was also kind of, there was a lot of shared goals, and shared values in that community which I think helped a lot, because there wasn’t that kind of fear of people that were different than you. And so yeah, so it was a very comfortable and safe. I wouldn’t say that it was necessarily— like, color blind, because people definitely valued their ethnicity and heritage, but the cultural kind of heritage. And in fact, we didn’t really talk specifically about it, but it was definitely celebrated.”

The issue of race as a non-issue was a common thread among participants who grew up in military communities. Naomi talked more about it in length at different points in our meeting.

And like I mentioned, we didn’t necessarily talk about race, you know as an issue, but it wasn’t something that was— was not discussed either. It wasn’t something that wasn’t apparent, that it wasn’t something that people were ashamed of, but wasn’t something that people were scared of talking about. It just wasn’t as much of an issue growing up... When we started leaving that bubble [of our military community]— I say bubble— is when we started hearing more negative things about being known as somebody different than people in the external community.

Naomi described this concept further as a unique level of multiculturalism within her community.

Well, I think you know, generally, there were other families that looked like our family in the community... You know it's like, being able to navigate in a community that you're accustomed to, that you're a part of, that's not really different than you. And so, you know, growing up— that other family members, or friends' parents and their families, or boyfriends' parents and their families, or teachers in grade school and high school, you know, I think they definitely were a good support system because they— the message was very consistent. For the most part, the message was very consistent... And even in the families that were, you know, a monoracial family... the message that, you know, we can get along in this community of individuals. I never went to someone's home and felt like out of place because of my race. Or, you know, so that message of kind of inclusiveness... You know, to talk about multiculturalism, like in our classrooms and different things like that. But I think when you have to talk about it, then it's not where you want it to be, you know. It's like multiculturalism is being in a community or it was just a world where you don't hardly talk about it. ...you don't have to be as intentional about putting, you know, a black history month, or about putting in a certain part of history that addresses American Indians, or Native American history. You know, it's just there because we believe that those people are valued. And so, that's what I believe multiculturalism to be. And... in this little town that we lived in the Midwest that was consistent, that was there, it

was this kind of multicultural place where, you know, you just felt very comfortable and you didn't feel like you had to explain yourself. And this is, you know, quirky— I'm speaking, to race and ethnicity, you know, because I think as teenagers and high school students, there are other things that you have to deal with. But specifically to race and ethnicity, I think it was very consistent. You know with teachers, they had the same expectations of everyone. And in our school we also had teachers that were from, you know, we had black teachers, we had Hispanic, Latino teachers and coaches, and we had young teachers and older teachers, and teachers from the south and, you know, a lot of retired, you know military people, so they were coming from different parts of the country, too. And so I think that was reflected there. And so, you know, everywhere we went it was just kind of reflection of that same message.

Because military bases are racially heterogeneous and interracial families are not uncommon in these communities, other participants voiced that race was a non-issue in their childhood upbringing as well.

And granted my mom, with all of her Thai friends— a lot of them were married to caucasian husbands, so a lot of us were pretty much the same, our foods would be the same. So you just kind of felt like it was, "Carry on." (Aja)

I've said this to a lot of different people, I really didn't think of race at all in high school. Like it didn't really occur to me— like it wasn't until later, after I graduated— I'd look and like, Garcia— this is terrible. And I'd think, wow he was

Mexican? I never thought about it. (Laughs) Until afterwards— when I [went to college], at least then in high school it was all good. (Laughs) What's the deal? Or somebody who was part asian, and I never thought twice about it. But, it wasn't till I came to the U. And I got here and thought it would be just like, you know, how we grew up; and then I realized once I got here, I had to choose. (Savannah)

People didn't really ask or care [about race] when I lived there. It wasn't until I came to college that people started being curious. With the Air Force there's people coming and going all the time. And so there was always, you know, new kids moving in and always interesting to find out where they were from. More so [people cared about] where all you have lived, as opposed to what's your ethnicity. (Lauren)

Well, I grew up in Germany. It was an Army base and we didn't really emphasize race at all because everyone was from everywhere on a military base. (Lavern)

[My community] was a breeding ground for success because there were so many people like me. And it wasn't an issue as far as your race wasn't a big deal. Because there were so many mixed people it was commonplace and no one really pressured because there were so many mixed people. It's not like there's one mixed people and the whole school's white and black, you have to pick, so who were you going to hang out with. It wasn't like that. We had our own clan of mixed people that we could hang out with and nobody cared who was what. So



that just made it really easy. It almost made it a non-issue, which was kind of nice. And then you get up to the university and it is kind of an issue and that.

Rae and Gabrielle described a different experience as military dependents. Their father retired from the Army when Gabrielle was ten years old and the family moved to a non-military community so that he could attend preacher schooling. Unique to other participant experiences, the sisters were home schooled up until their sophomore years in high school. Much of their social group and community interaction was determined by their parents' associations, which happened to be primarily white families.

Rae spoke to this:

Lived on military bases a lot of [my childhood]. I certainly never went out of my way to avoid having black friends or knowing people who were black, certainly. That wasn't at all the way I was raised. But we just seemed to end up in predominately white areas.

I was home schooled for most of my school experience. I was home schooled up through sophomore year. Junior year, I went part-time to the local high school, and senior year I went full-time.

[My high school] was definitely predominantly white. But I don't really know what percentage because that was definitely the height of my non-identification with the African American side of my heritage. I'm sure there were— I guess if I think about it, I can remember black people being there, but it was one of those,

“well if you’re going to reject me, then I’m not even going to notice you.” So I don’t, I don’t really know.

Gabrielle remembered the military bases they lived on as diverse communities, however when their father retired and changed careers to become a preacher, the communities she grew up in as a teenager were predominately white.

Actually most of the community I grew up in would probably be white, but with my dad being military, it was mostly military base. So it was big mixture being a military base, but I think the majority was white. And as far as family, I normally was with my mother’s family, so I was normally with more white than black, I suppose.

Her experiences growing up in military communities varied from region to region.

[How people in the community treated my family] depended on the community. If we were in somewhere more deep south— being military obviously we move all over the place. We lived in the Southeast for little bit, you know, if we traveled anywhere into like the deep south states, we were given really dirty looks. Like we’d walk into a gas station or something like that— sometimes we were given really dirty looks. And I think it was just, it was something that we knew, it was something that we expected, and it was like, “Oh, that person gave us a dirty look. They’ll get over it.” It was just something that we just all knew. It was a very open thing about our family, you know, and it was like if someone had a problem with it, then that was, you know— there’s nothing we could do about it. And

some people just believed that way, and we just, you know, shrugged our shoulders, got over it, and said okay, you know, they can give us dirty looks.

After her father retired from the military she spent the rest of her childhood growing up in two predominantly white communities described below.

My associations revolved around the congregation and school of preaching there, especially since I was homeschooled at the time. The school was predominately white, but there were some black families. All of the children my age were white, though, so that is who I associated with. The [racial] climate was varied depending on where you were talking about. The school and congregation itself were both very accepting of diversity. I don't remember ever feeling anything negative around them. The city was different, depending on the part of town that you went to. I remember getting dirty looks and things sometimes, but not that often. I know that one time we did go to a congregation in the South for my Dad to preach at while in school, and they requested that we not come back because of the racial mixture [of our family]. There were a couple of other congregations like that, especially in the deep southern states.

The makeup of the city where I went to high school was predominately white. I associated mostly with the congregation there, our close neighbors, and some people at school, once I went [to high school]. There was one black family, I think, in the congregation and two mixed couples as well. As far as the neighborhood and school, I remember a few, maybe one, asian student— and I

was sort of friends with her, but the rest were white. Our neighborhood was only white.

For the most part, Gabrielle remembers feeling like she and her family belonged and “fit in” within the communities they lived. She reasoned, “I think that maybe goes back to me being majority— like most places that we were in, like congregations for church and stuff, were predominately white. So I felt more comfortable being in a predominantly white situation anyway because that’s what I was always in. So I didn’t feel out of place in that predominantly white high school.” For her, it was more about religion than race.

Yeah, I guess in a way [we belonged]. Racially I don’t think I really had a problem. Maybe like, as far as religious beliefs and stuff, maybe not fitting in so much. But racially, I didn’t feel out of place.

I don’t think, even though I had friends in school, I think that religiously there were like barriers there that caused— and maybe it overlapped into race and I didn’t realize it. I just attributed it all to, you know, religious beliefs. I don’t know if it overlapped or not.

Still, she later told me, “The climate of both [communities I lived in as a teenager] was very welcoming and I don’t remember any negatives about it. That said, I think that I still felt uncomfortable just because of what we talked about before and me not really knowing who I was or wanted to be as far as race was concerned. I know I always

wanted people at school to know that I was mixed, but I don't remember it having to do with their actions.”

## OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Most participants struggled to talk about the challenges they and their families faced with regard to their ethnic or racial makeup. Many participants voiced that the challenges they had to overcome during their childhood were not anchored or connected to race. Among the challenges disclosed were conflict within the extended family, issues felt by participants' mothers, and incidents of racism. Participants leaned on their parents and teachers to help them overcome challenges. Education and school involvement were other avenues described to help them to be successful during their high school.

Several participants talked about how their families were not much different than any other family in their community therefore there were no challenges for them to navigate other than the types of issues that most all families face. Others inherited a philosophy from their parents that refuses to attribute challenges to race; rather these participants focus on what they can change.

I don't think we really faced any challenges. I mean it's just kind of hard to speak for my, you know, parents from that standpoint, but as far as a family as a whole, I don't think we ever faced any challenges due to the fact that we were a mix. I mean, we had everyday normal challenges, you know, that any other family had regardless of what your race or ethnicity is. And so I didn't feel that it was any additional problems or whatever from that. (Brigitte)

You know, I don't recall any challenges, because of race. There were probably more challenges, just because of economics. You know, my parents— my mom wanted trees, and so the neighborhood that they moved into was probably a more affluent neighborhood and then in between the time that they purchased the house and they closed on the house, like the interest rate sky rocketed, like 70%, or some insane number like that. And so it was always a real struggle for them, you know, just to to piece it all together. And that was not necessarily the experience of the people that lived around us. So, yeah, you know, I probably had that experience more than anything racial. You know, it was, why can't you go skiing for two weeks or, you know, whatever. (Lauren)

Truthfully, I've always been kind of oblivious to people discriminating or turning their nose up at our family. And I never really noticed it. I remember once, a long time ago because I had talked to my mom actually about this— about what it had been like for her, you know, with a white man. It seemed like the only really time which, she's oblivious too. (Laugh) The only time that she really thought that their race had played any factor in anything is one time they'd been denied an apartment. And she thought that that had been the reason why. But, I just live life— and my dad always instilled that you work hard and you do your best, and that's how you get through life. Don't make excuses if you could have done more. Always look to see what is it you can do. So I never assumed that people were discriminating or treating us unfairly or whatever. I just figured, oh, I need to work harder, or I need to get all my ducks in a row; not, you know, the world's

an evil place. And I'm glad that he did that because I would hate to go through life always trying to point a finger instead of bettering myself. So, I didn't really notice. If there were troubles, I didn't notice. (Debbie)

But I don't know if it's that's how I always view it. Sometimes— I don't know, growing up my parents have always taught us never to look at those things. I mean they never made that a big subject in our home. So that when we're out and about, you know, if people were looking at us differently or looking at my mom differently, we never really kind of know a lot of those things because it wasn't always a subject of, like, they're looking at me because I'm this, or they're treating me this way because I'm this. (Aja)

See now, I mean I think there were individual teachers— like I said, I played basketball, individual coaches that I worked with that I think were helpful to me; but I don't know if it was as much as, you know, trying to help me navigate or learn how to, you know, exist within the community because I felt like, you know, I just kind of did that. Because I didn't really feel like I was struggling in that area. So outside of that, you know, I can't— because I didn't really— I mean even, you know, growing up going through high school and things of that nature, I never felt like, you know— because my dad would come to my basketball games and my mom would come to other things, but they wouldn't typically come together. And, you know, I never got that question or that, you know, issue of, okay what—“You sure that's your dad?” you know. (Laughs) “Your mom looks,” or “You look a little different,” and “Is that really your dad?” you know,

or anything like that. Like it just never, it never came up. And I don't know if it's partly because in that community interracial relationships weren't as— you know, I mean they were, I guess, they were more common than not and so maybe that was part of it. But I never really got that sense that, you know, I would have to learn how to navigate through it. Because I didn't really feel like people were, you know, thinking that there was something just a little different; or maybe they were they just never, you know, told me. (Denise)

Similar to Denise's experience, Naomi said, "Well, I think you know, generally, there were other families that looked like our family in the community... You know it's like, being able to navigate in a community that you're accustomed to, that you're a part of, that's not really different than you." Still Naomi felt her parents prepared her for challenges she might face as a person of color in a world outside of her "bubble."

I think as a young people we didn't really talk about those things... I think you know, I don't think specifically we ever had conversations about that, but I know that we in general, like our family, but you know— we're not a typical family that will just kind of allow things to happen. You know, if we thought we were treated rudely, whether it was because of race or not or, you know, being mixed-race or whatever; we wouldn't stand for that, you know. And so I think sometimes your actions are often a greater lesson than— We had little conversations, you know, about how people should be treating you, how you should be expect to be treated, and how you should treat other people. And so, you know, yeah. But I can't recall any specific conversation, but I do know that



my parents never made it sound like the world was going to be fair or that the world would be a perfect place to live; and that we always had to be prepared and just, you know, always try our best and you had to work hard; and that things that always come to you and things you might have to deal with: how you look or your education or whatever it may be. And so, I wasn't totally like surprised that I would be treated differently or [it's not like] I wasn't real prepared to leave, you know, the home as in my person of color, or minority, you know. And so, yeah, but I danced around my answer, but I do know there's like lessons that our parents taught us throughout our lives, but I just can't pinpoint specific discussions we had about them.

For Gabrielle's family it was more a matter of their religious beliefs than race. She stated, "Yeah, I guess in a way [we belonged]. Racially I don't think I really had a problem. Maybe like, as far as religious beliefs and stuff, maybe not fitting in so much. But racially, I didn't feel out of place."

E. Lynn talked about how traditional family challenges, such as economic status and family conflict, compounded challenges related to the racial makeup of her family.

Oh, economic. We're poor. We're a poor family, so that was really a struggle. I remember my own family— because I have three older white siblings from my dad's first marriage, and then my mom has a daughter from her first marriage, so she's full blood Indian, and then there's me and my little sister, so we're the mixed bloods or the biracial children. And I can remember being treated differently. You know, I can remember people treating my parents differently

when they'd be out because my mom's very apparently ethnic, you know, brown. She's very native. Some people think she looks asian, so whatever. My dad's very white looking, so it was obvious they were a biracial or interracial couple.

E. Lynn also talked about the challenge of being “marginalized for my blood quantum” in her community and the dynamics of her blended family during her childhood. She stated, “Me and my two sisters, we're very tight. But, yeah, going family to family— it's not as good, no. No. There was a lot of inappropriate comments, and ignorant comments and, yeah. We were called half-breed and being treated a little differently. Yeah.”

Other participants shared stories about extended family as major challenges to overcome during their childhood experience.

So, they do treat me, I would say a little bit differently. And I— especially my mom's parents. And it could be because, you know, we aren't able to really see them that much; and there is somewhat of a language barrier. I mean I can communicate with them a little bit, but my [Thai] language speaking skills is not really good. And yeah, I would say on my dad's side, my grandparents— she doesn't like, I would say that I really— because I would eventually like to live overseas and my grandma just doesn't understand that. She's like, “why do you want to go over there?” and, you know, “It's so much better here in America.” And so she just kind of has that mentality like, you know, why do you want to go over there and learn more about the culture and immerse, enrich yourself. And she thinks they eat weird food. Yeah, and I would say that she's a lot more closer

with my cousins who are white, than with myself. So, yeah. I'm like, "Well it's a part of my culture, you know, I'm half Thai, Grandma. And I find it very interesting and I love the food, I love the culture over there." And she's like, okay. So— (Jasmine)

Rae and Gabrielle both shared that the treatment received by their mother from their father's family served as a major challenge during their childhood and greatly impacted their identity development.

Remembering as a child, the major challenges that I remember were with my father's family who very, very strongly identified with their African American heritage. And rejected our family for not identifying as strongly. (Rae)

Well, when I was younger I don't remember ever really thinking about [race]. I remember that my dad's side of the family had a problem with [my parent's interracial marriage] in the beginning, and I remember knowing about that. I think that it's possible that— I don't want to call myself black and I wonder sometimes if it's because of the way that his family maybe felt about us. And I'm sure that's not fair to feel, but I think that background has played a part that I don't want to call myself black because I feel like his family has problems with my mother. And so, because of that, as unfair as it is, you like lump that together as, you know, black. (Gabrielle)

In the discussion concerning childhood challenges, several participants focused on the challenges their mother's faced with regard to the racial makeup of their family.

Well, growing up, we also had like— [people in our community] would ask if we were adopted and things like that. Mom would either just would not answer, or tell them, “No, these are my children.” And I guess it was, it was more of people not understanding how a white woman has black children, or well, it was just that— because we were always that: black, because we were pretty dark. (Laughs). So I guess that was kind of hard for my mom. (Jennifer)

Ill treatment of participant’s mothers due to language was a notable challenge for some participants to overcome.

I did notice like when we are out and about, that a lot of people tend to talk to my dad more than my mom. They’ll have eye contact and discuss more things to my dad than my mom, thinking that my mom can’t understand what they’re saying. I remember when I was younger, I had broke my arm and my mom had brought me into the hospital, and this actually was the military hospital, and I was in a lot of pain, and I don’t think I was getting any help. You know, my mom wanted someone to kind of react to the situation a little bit sooner, and they didn’t. And they wouldn’t want to deal with my mom, so they had to call my dad, and my dad came in, and, you know, they tend to think that my mom didn’t really speak a lot of English, but my dad said she could fully understand. And she was here for these things and, you know, my dad and the other guy kind of got into it about not treating her equal like everybody else, and how he had to come in on his work time to come and talk to the guy. [People] thinking that the communication wasn’t there. (Aja)

I guess I feel like my mom probably had more challenges than my dad, just because he's, you know, a white American. But, I know like sometimes I'd get really mad going into a store and people wouldn't understand what she was saying or, you know, kind of talk down to her just because she was asian. But—even though she'd been here for 20 some years, and she knows (Laughs) what you're talking about. So, but I guess, I don't know, it was— What was the rest of the question?... I don't know, at first it used to make me mad and then I came to the realization that they just didn't know. They weren't ignorant, they just didn't know. They just didn't know how to respond. And, I think a lot of times they'd come, they were curious, so they were asking questions or maybe they couldn't understand her, I don't know. (Savannah)

I would say some things I probably didn't notice as a child growing up that probably had occurred, you know... But I'm sure that things like that had occurred. But I can't think of anything specifically that happened to us because of our race. So, trying to think. I would say that, you know, like, leaving the community, you know— I think with my mother being Japanese, too, that the language thing would come up a little bit more often. I think people were making judgment calls on people that don't speak, you know, like true English or clearly. And I think my mother is very easy to understand, but she has the accent, not as easy to understand. But I think there's an assumption there that, you know, she couldn't speak for herself or that she wouldn't be understood. And so I think there were some, you know, there were things that I didn't notice at the time

because my, you know, my mom and just being out and about at restaurants, or and how people treated her, you know, differently. (Naomi)

But I mean, being that my mom came to America with not, you know, not knowing a lot a English, you know what I'm saying? I've noticed that people tended to treat her a little bit different, you know, because they couldn't understand what she says, or, you know, she's asian and they will treat her like she doesn't understand, or like a foreign person typically, and so I did notice that with her... Well, I always felt like I was the— I don't know like the spokesperson for my mom, you know, like especially when we were together, like I would always try to interject when someone's talking to her or something just because I don't want people to think that she doesn't know what's going on and, you know, she doesn't know how to speak English. So, I felt like, you know, I had to take control of the situation. So the main thing that we had to face is just people being ignorant and they don't have the patience to try to understand, or, you know, just, they're just being ignorant about the situation. That was the main thing that I faced or that, you know, we experienced... I mean, you know, if someone's talking to her and they don't understand her, then I will clarify this is what she meant. You know, but, it's not like I was like, "You're ignorant, you should chill out," or nothing like that. You know I just kind of was like the median between the ignorant people, or not even the ignorant, but just the people that just can't understand her. I mean even till this day, she would have me call people for like, like cable, you know, she wants to order cable, I will call them and get all the

information and tell her, because she doesn't really understand them and they don't really understand her, so, you know. (Yuri)

I remember like people making fun of my mom's accent. Yeah, and like saying that, you know, they would go through our refrigerator and like saying like we had weird stuff. And I'm like, this is weird? And I would go through their refrigerator and I'm like *this* is weird, you know. And I didn't even know like what mayonnaise was until, probably like third grade. I was like what's mayonnaise? Like you know, little things like that. But, I guess like I just took it like okay, our family is unique and I don't know, I thought our food was really good. And now I'm like thankful because my mom, she cooked mainly Thai food and she would not let us— like we didn't have any soda in the house, or Twinkies or anything. So, the only like crazy snack thing that we had was fruit rollups, and back then, it was actually made out of fruit. Okay, yeah I would say probably something like that. And also, too, when my mother was trying to look for a job when my brother started kindergarten— we're just two years apart, so I was 7 years old at the time— so this was like 20 years ago. She had very tough time finding a job. Because, you know, back then they weren't really accepting of, you know, people who were especially born in asian countries. Even though she was educated— you know, she received her college education, she had a Masters degree here. So it took her a long time to find a job. (Jasmine)

Racial incidences, particularly first experiences with racism, stood out in the minds of some participants in the discussion of childhood challenges. Yuri, Chloe and

Debbie spoke of the taunts from school age classmates. Chloe and Debbie felt it was particularly difficult to make friends with black, female peers. Debbie stated, “I never got along with black girls through high school, junior high school... I’ve had people come up and tell me you look like a snob when they didn’t even know me... And I think, that a lot of times people just look at me because I’m quiet and sometimes I look serious— that, oh, she’s a snob. She doesn’t want to talk to anybody. She thinks she’s too good. And it always made me mad because like you don’t ever come up and talk to me. You know, it’s my responsibility because I’m light-skinned and you’re skinned? It’s the stupidest thing I ever heard... But, yeah, I think I’ve gotten the hardest time from black girls. I don’t know if they thought I was better than them— I never did. I guess they thought because I looked the way that I did, that I had to identify with certain things, but I didn’t.”

Yuri would come home crying because of the way her peers harassed her in school.

When I was younger, like in elementary school, I got teased a lot because the way I looked. You know, they sing those like little asian songs that, you know, to taunt me. And I actually grew up like having a lot of insecurity. So I can even recall going home you know crying to my mom like, oh my god, like you know I’m ugly, or I have, you know, a weird face or something like that. And then after a while like when I started going to middle school and high school like, you know people actually started seeing like the beauty side of me like oh you look different, you know, you have nice hair or something like that. So, like growing



up I had a lot of insecurities because I was asian, or not even because I was asian, just because I looked different. But then like I said, as I grew up, you know, I kind of started feeling comfortable with, you know the way I looked and things like that, and my race in general, so.

Others recalled more specific racial incidences. Jennifer for example, talked about a time in first grade when her friend asked her if she was adopted after seeing Jennifer and her mother together at school. This incident challenged her self-concept as she became aware that others see her and her family as something unusual. Kalena was six years of age when she was faced with her first racial dilemma.

My very best friends: one was Japanese, one was Filipino, one was black, actually, and a white boy, you know, there was this little core group of us. And I remember this one time we were swimming in, Grant was his name, his swimming pool. One of those big cow drinking trough tank things, you know, and just floated around, and so Stephanie, Grant and I were swimming around, and Grant's dad comes running out. He was just red in the face, he said, "She can't be in the pool. Get out!" So, I'm like well, I think, I don't know why. I'm going to go home. And I was crying, "Mom, Dad, I can't play in the pool, why?" And Dad just starts in with him, like you've got to be kidding me. I'm in the first grade. "Bigotry," he had to explain to me [that some people are racist]. I was like, what? You know, you don't understand. What? Then I go, "She's dark?" So yeah, so, wasn't allowed to play with Grant. Well, around then— yeah, I still played with Grant, I'm sure I did, but you know, just you're 6 years old and to be

told that, you know. I'm surprised that I was even allowed to go— but again I don't know, maybe it's because asian's different than black. I just— I never understand why people think the way they do, but-

Lavern told of several racial incidents that occurred while living with her grandparents in Wisconsin while her dad was away at war. These incidents served as major challenges for her family and played a large role in her identity development.

Oh, lots of challenges. I remember, well just stories my parents told, I can't remember. I was about 3 and we lived in Louisiana. So I don't count that because... I don't remember it. But in Louisiana, I have an older sister, and she and my parents I guess experienced a lot of racism directed towards them. They even had a cross burned in the front yard. And they immediately had to leave, because they feared for you know, being lynched. So that was that. And then in Wisconsin, I personally had to see a lot of racism. I was in a white school and these children never ever seen a person who looked different from them before, besides the three Native kids, and they didn't pay hardly any attention to them. And, the first couple weeks of school were fine, everyone wanted to play with me. I'm like, yea, I'm the popular girl. And then after a couple of weeks, things changed. The parents found out that I was not white. (Laugh) And they told them to stop playing with me. And they called me names. They said your mom's a bitch for marrying a nigger, go back on the boat you came on. Said your skin's brown because you eat the food. And the teacher who was a white woman, she protected me in a way, like, you can come play in here and stay with me during

recess. Stay with me during PE, you don't have to play with them. I didn't know how to protect myself. I never experienced that before. So at seven years old I was like, is this? My parents never— they never prepared me for that. And so I was just dumbfounded. And my sister, my younger sister, she looks white, or at least Puerto Rican, Mexican, Puerto Rican so she never faced that. But my hair's kinky, my lips are big, my skin is brown, and so I don't look like a white person.

Family and education surfaced as themes in conversations about overcoming childhood challenges. Parental support, family relationships, education, school culture, teacher encouragement, and school involvement all served as resources to help participants and their families successfully navigate monoracial environments.

Well, we always did things as a family, and we had fun doing things as a family. I mean we didn't have a lot of money growing up, but we didn't really know it. I mean there was all these things that we were still able to do, to see. And just being together as a family and doing these things just made us closer and stronger, you know. So. (Aja)

I think most resources that I used was just family... But I think, you know, dealing with things like that, like I said earlier, a lot of it was, you know, it was a very open thing in our family that we talked about all the time— the being biracial or multiracial, or whatever you want to call it. A lot of times like, especially my dad didn't want to call it anything. And maybe that's where I come from not wanting to call it anything. He even has a problem with multiracial or biracial.

He doesn't think that that is a fair— and I don't know why, but he feels like that's not what you should call it. I don't know if he had a term he could call it, but I think he feels like you're more just a person. And I think that's the way that we always thought of. And so, if there was a problem, we would talk about it as a family. But I think more family was more any kind of resource than anything else. (Gabrielle)

I think it was my parents. I mean, you know because then they really believed in getting a good education and, you know, bettering ourselves. And just coming from, you know, their background, my mom grew up in a time when there was, you know, the Korean, as well as when the Japanese invaded her country. And so she was deprived of a lot of the things that, that we take for granted. And with my dad being from the south, I mean he was deprived of a lot of opportunities that you know most, you know, white Americans have. And so they really pushed for us to have a good education, and made sacrifices for us to get that. And also, I belonged to a church, you know, which was very encouraging; and also going to a private school which was very well— I mean that set the foundation for my future successes. So I'm thinking it's just a combination of a lot of things, but I think that the top of the list is my parents. (Brigitte)

I think my parents did a really good job of really just kind of protecting us. I never felt very hostile towards anyone or any hostility towards me. Every once in a while though that— sometimes there's people would question what I would eat, or, you know, like why does your house smell? I mean, I never noticed it, you

know... I think one of the weirdest things though that was when my mom went to church, there were all Filipino churches or whatever. And she would go first and I didn't really know why she would go. I think it seemed like she was scoping the place out, to see how they would treat us within a black group. Because she wouldn't bring her kids and she wouldn't bring my dad, and so she could, she would just be a Filipino woman. And she would observe how other Filipinos would talk, and how other Filipino, white couples would talk and she would totally be like, "I can't go to this church because of some of the things that they say against black people." You know, why am I going to bring my family to church when this is how I feel? You haven't even brought them in yet. And so, I think that wasn't maybe the only thing, but I think that was the only choice of my mom because she was kind of just feeling things out with that.

In addition to protective parents, extended family also played a role in Roxanne's ability to overcome challenges with regard to racial and ethnic identity.

I had just some really, really good family both, you know, on my mom and my dad's side. My dad's family was in New York and North Carolina, and I would always get letters or phone calls and they would visit or we would visit. And just they would always be supportive. We never felt like, weird because we were half-Filipino, half-black. And the same thing with my mom's family. You know they would write us and say hi to us, you know. Even though they were in the Philippines, they were still very supportive. My parents had high expectations of us, and just expected us to do well. So that was all we had. That was our only

choice. Even if you were going to be bums, you had to be the best bums there. So, yeah. (Laughs)

Moreover, Roxanne's teachers also significantly impacted her childhood successes. She mentioned, "I had really good relationships with my teachers. And I think maybe that's why I became a teacher. They just talked to me and they listened, but they didn't really make me feel different." Other participants also talked about the educational setting— knowledge, involvement and teachers specifically— as resources to navigate monoracial communities.

There were a lot of times too where my parents would say, "Be proud of what you are," you know, and "You're beautiful," you know, "Continue to do really good with your education, because nobody can take that away from you." It was just more of a lot of encouragement that my family gave. (Aja)

Well, to me in, in high school, my big thing was performing. So, drama, theater, chorus, singing and that type of thing. And I think being in that community itself is very accepting of anybody and everybody. And I had support of my choir director, my drama teacher, my— all the teachers were great at making sure that education was a first. And, I don't know, maybe the fact that my upbringing for my family in particular, my mom only got up to about an elementary school education because in Thailand she had to help the family make money and that type of thing. And then dad, eventually got a bachelors degree through the Air Force. So for my family you didn't just graduate high school, you had to graduate

with a Masters degree. I mean because both of my cousins, older than me, my mom put them through school. One's now a judge, and one's a head master of a school in Thailand. And one's actually now working on a Ph.D. My brother has a Ph.D. in physics so he went a little further. But, you know, I guess my parents were very, very helpful in the fact that it was our job to get A's and be very active, and so we didn't have to have a job. You know as long as we kept up our grades, were active, and you know in the community and so many— like I said, it was the performing aspects, I did a lot of the metro area swing choirs, that kind a stuff. So I think I got a lot of my support that way, and yeah because it is just an accepting community in itself... So, you know, again I guess I was lucky that I grew up in a very accepting community and, and then in particular interests that I had, was a very accepting community as well. Yeah. (Kalena)

Discussed earlier in this section is Naomi's description of her school and its "consistent message" regarding multiculturalism. She relayed that this community and educational setting helped her to overcome challenges and impacted her identity development. Debbie also attended a diverse high school, which she felt "made it easy" for her to navigate and allowed her to be successful. "[My community] was a breeding ground for success because there were so many people like me. And it wasn't an issue as far as your race wasn't a big deal. Because there were so many mixed people it was commonplace and no one really pressured because there were so many mixed people. It's not like there's one mixed people and the whole school's white and black, you have to pick, so who were you gonna hang out with. It wasn't like that. We had our own clan of

mixed people that we could hang out with and nobody cared who was what. So that just made it really easy. It almost made it a non issue, which was kind of nice.”

Jennifer shared that her mom wanted a diverse experience for her as she entered high school, sending her to a high school out of their zone. Her mom “thought that it was prejudice down there, and that we wouldn’t be accepted.” The diverse friendships she developed at her high school helped her to be successful in that community.

For E. Lynn school served as an escape:

[My parents] didn’t [overcome challenges in our community]. They ignored it. I did. They didn’t. They don’t deal with it. So education, school— that was my escape.

Her parents supported her efforts in education. E. Lynn’s success in academics and school activities helped her to be successful in that community.

Well, my parents must have with the school and education they were— they promoted education to us, so that’s good. And then I was a good student, so I think teachers, you know, there’s so many I could name, kind of groomed me and helped me. And I did fairly well on the standardized testing and that probably helped. And then I did other things, like sports I’m sure and, you know, kind of a well rounded thing.

Lavern’s achievements in academics did not go unnoticed by her community members. She said that teachers and counselors helped her to navigate successfully in this setting.



And my job was to be the smart one. And so I needed to do well [in school]. At home I had to keep on pursuing academics, and so I was involved in, you know, any kind a academic activity: debate, choir, band, anything dealing with school I was in it. And so, because I succeeded in those things people in the community I think, didn't really notice color anymore. They're like, "Oh, she's just Lavern, she does well on these things." Well, my teachers I felt were as a whole [helped me to find my way]. And one counselor helped me out with some kind of anger issues. But mostly teachers, yeah.

## SUMMARY

Multiracial individuals develop strategies to navigate monoracial systems as they are confronted with how they fit (or do not fit) within the rules of racial ecology. A number of combinations of variables contribute to how multiracial individuals identify. Family relationships, phenotype, community, and childhood experiences are among the variables that surfaced in conversations with participants about racial identity. Five participants self identify with a monoracial identity. Four of these women identify as a person of color, one participant identifies as white. Twelve of 18 participants hold some form of a multiracial identity. These individuals described a self-concept that encompasses both (or all) groups of their racial make-up, an undeconstructable multiracial label, or a situational identity. One participant occupies a multicultural identity rather than a racial identity.

Family, particularly parents, often set the foundation on an individual's view about race. Several described positive and supportive relationships with and among

family members that shaped the development of participants. Some participants described how negative or strained relationships with family and extended family members impacted their identity development. In some families race and mixed heritage were topics openly discussed in the home; other families chose not to talk about issues of race. Often participants took on the views of their parents.

Family functioning and community racial socialization were topics that emerged from childhood accounts as told by participants. They shared how challenges and successes within family, community and education settings shaped their development and earned them skills to navigate social situations. Six participants described their communities as: predominately white (3), predominately Latino (2), or predominately native (reservation) (1). Most (12) participants grew up in households with ties to the military. Described by participants as “unique,” “diverse” communities, these participants voiced that the social situations they faced during their childhood were not attributed to issues of race; rather race was a non-issue in these communities. Among the childhood challenges disclosed included conflict within the extended family, challenges felt by mothers, and incidents of racism, most often described as single events. Participants leaned on their parents and teachers to help them overcome challenges. Education— inclusive settings, excelling in academics and activities— served as another resource to help participants develop their identities and find their way in those communities.

The foundation of strategies to successfully navigate monoracial systems materializes from the development of a multiracial individual’s identity and the

challenges faced as a young person. The childhood accounts put into context the experiences of participants and their responses to challenges while in college.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE: TEST OF STRATEGY

For many multiracial individuals, the college experience is the first real test of their racial identity. No longer protected by the efforts of their parents and communities, participants talked about the college experience as what is often called in the student affairs field as an “ah-ha!” moment— a realization that the world is different than how they understood it to be.

Went to high school in that military community, so still very racial, multiracial because it's right off the base. High hispanic population. We had a lot of African American students bussed from a different part of the city... And then I go to Heartland State University, and— wow, where is everybody? Goodness gracious. (Kalena)

Well, in high school I really didn't think about— well I thought about racism, but it wasn't like, it directly affected me. It just kind of felt that, in high school I seemed to get along with everybody and everybody seemed to get along with me. Everything was just fine. But then, when I got to college, I was just kind of— it was a lot different. (Jennifer)

Jennifer went on to tell about a time she was walking on campus and was called a nigger for the first time. That account is described in detail later in this chapter.

E. Lynn, grew up on a predominately Native reservation. She was candid about the climate of the university she attended and described the transition as “culture shock.”

I’m just going to speak freely about this. I know, especially now, where I am in life, and my career, that you got to understand that native, we are the highest dropout rate still in the country, you know, hands down. Smallest minority, biggest dropout numbers. And I think that a lot— and I’ve heard a lot of, over the years, a lot of people didn’t think we could do it. We weren’t going to be successful. So they had a deficient perspective to us. I wouldn’t put it past them. I’ve heard in athletics, people won’t recruit very talented Indian athletes or Native athletes because of that, because they’re not good students. And I would also say that we were—especially back in my day, we were not given, the same opportunities that probably other urban students, you know more traditional urban minority students would have been given. You know, with like AP classes or the up and down programs that they’ve got going on now. Or back then they had them, but they were in like more metropolitan areas. And I would definitely have to say with being a sociologist and coming out this cultural capital, it’s a big shock. It’s a major culture shock. Not that that’s bad, but I don’t know if anybody was willing to bridge those gaps between the two cultures. And like, we’re poor, it’s a poor segment. Oh, yeah.

For Christy, coming to college was *the* ah-ha moment of her college experience.

Christy grew up in a diverse, predominately latino community in southern California.

When she was asked to describe the factors that were most significant to her identity

development during her college experience she stated, “I think sometimes it’s more the thing with the Mexican American student group. And the whole idea of minority was never, I guess in my vocabulary until I came to the University. So they’re like, you’re a minority now, you know. The caucasians are the majority— so.”

Savannah also described her transition to campus as the pivotal moment in her racial identity.

Well, again, like I said, when I got here I didn’t even think about race, you know, because I didn’t, I don’t know, my experience in high school— I didn’t have to think twice about it. So once I got here, as a freshman, all of a sudden I’m forced to look at race and be like where, what are you, you know, what side are you going to go on, you know; and I realized, and I think that helped, you know, why I just identify more as Filipino today is because of having to make that choice when I got here as a freshman, you know. And, I mean, they make you— it was kind of like you were forced. (Laughs) And so it’s like, “You’re not white— now what are you?” You know, so, “Filipino, I guess.” And it just stuck with me. So, I guess yeah, having to make that choice, and not being accepted in the standard mainstream white— amongst the white students, so that experience was pretty shocking to me almost.

Denise’s arrival to the university she attended was most significant to her racial identity, but in a different way. Her experience prior to college was primarily white. She explained,

In high school, I probably didn't think about it as much as I did in college, and especially now. It wasn't really until probably my freshman year when I went through a college bridge program for first-generation and students of color... It wasn't really until that time, did I really start to think about, you know, what does it mean to be either first-generation... and because I was around folks— students of color, also starting to kind of get a sense of, “Oh wait, you know, there's something more, there's something in addition that I should be kind of exploring a little bit more. And my friends then at that point, started to become more diverse. They weren't all caucasian, you know, they were asian and latino and African American and— much more broad based because now we're in this cohort together. And it just kind of really started to focus in what does this mean for me, and what am I supposed to be learning and what am I supposed to be doing?

The participants came from thirteen different undergraduate institutions (see Table 2). Three participants transferred during their undergraduate careers. Most (11) participants graduated from undergraduate institutions in the Midwest. Five graduated from schools in the East. One attended and graduated from an undergraduate school in the Southeast; and one attended and graduated from a university in the Southwest. All universities attended held predominately white student demographic statuses.

Proximity to home and educational costs were the two most influential factors regarding college choices among participants, but a combination of these factors and others determined where they attended.

Well, it's near home; it's like 15 minutes away. I got a lot of money to go there. Close to home. I didn't really want to leave my mom. And I had similar looking community, you know... (Lavern)

I felt that for me that it was important to be somewhat close to family. And so Midwest Private University was just, like an hour away. (Laughs) Which is far enough away, but yet close enough. I knew that I needed the smaller environment, you know, smaller classes, where, I could have some of that one-on-one attention. And, then also, because it was less expensive for me to go there than it would have been to the local state university, because Midwest Private offered so many scholarships and grants; and at that point that they have, you know, quota motivation to get more multicultural students. And so they, you know, were willing to throw whatever they needed my way so that I would choose them and it worked. (Lauren)

Because it was close to home. And not only that it was a good university, so it was close to home, so that was, too. (Yuri)

I wanted a place that was close to home, so I applied to only three places really. And I got a full ride to Heartland University, so that's why I came here. (Jennifer)

I wanted to go back home. My aunt went there and my mom went there. (Chloe)



Table 2

<b>Name</b>	<b>University Pseudonym</b>	<b>Academic Major</b>
Aja	Great Plains State University	Psychology
Brigitte	South Palm College, North State University	Textiles, Clothing & Design
Chloe	South Palm College	Spanish, African American Studies
Christy	Heartland State University	Communications
Debbie	East State University, East Beach University	Dance
Denise	Southwest University	Sociology, Criminal Justice minor
E. Lynn	Heartland State University	Sociology, Ethnic Studies minor
Gabrielle	Christian University, Star City University, Founders College	Elementary Education
Jasmine	Northlakes State University	International Studies, Japanese minor
Jennifer	Heartland State University	Veterinary Science
Kalena	Heartland State University	Community Health Education
Lauren	Midwest Private University	Psychology
Lavern	Amber Waves State University	Psychology, American Ethnic Studies minor
Naomi	Northplains State University, Snow Mount State University	Human Services, Sociology minor
Rae	Christian University	Public Relations
Roxanne	East Beach University	Spanish, Education minor
Savannah	Northlakes State University	Sociology
Yuri	East Beach University	Communications

Brigitte thought she wanted to experience something different than what she was used to at home, but quickly learned that her campus was a far cry from the multiculturalism she experienced in the military community she grew up in. She transferred to the state university in her home town after the first semester.

Basically because, you know, I was from that state. I did try to go to college in my dad's hometown my first year of college. I wanted to experience something outside of home, so I decided, you know, well maybe if I go to college there I'll get to know my dad's family a little bit better, because as I mentioned, I really did not know them. And I thought this would be a great opportunity for me to get to know them while I'm studying down there. So you know I went down there and I knew after the first month there it was just not for me. I didn't feel comfortable down there. I felt that there was still racism down there. I couldn't believe the segregation, because that's not where I was raised in. I mean in my community, everyone was together. I mean, there isn't like a distinct white or black or indians or hispanic live in one area or the other. I mean everything just blended in. And to me that was like a culture shock, and it was a lot of things. And so I did not feel like I fit in down there. And so I transferred back into my home state, you know, where I felt like I belonged.

Aja and Savannah also wanted to try something away from home.

[I] wanted to kind of move away from home, be a little more independent. I mean if— I could have gone to school near my home, but, yeah, I would have probably

lived at home and I wouldn't have really been on my own. Then I thought, we move around a lot, it hadn't been too hard to meet a group of friends. (Aja)

Because I wanted to go to a larger city first of all. The city I was most interested in didn't have any dorms there in any of the colleges, so. (Laughs) And then I had one friend that was coming to Northlakes State University, that I knew down here so. Well, I mean there's about— I mean, it's one of the largest universities in the country, so you'd think it'd be a lot more diverse than it is... (Savannah)

Several participants received full scholarships to attend their university.

Educational costs were salient to the college decision of many participants.

[I chose this university because I was awarded] a scholarship. (Laughs) It was a well, you know, it's interesting, I think it, academic slash... (sigh) you know, I'm not sure if it was minority related or not. I'm not sure of the bridge program was affiliated with the scholarship, like I don't remember if it was, or if there was a small stipend that came with the bridge program. And then I got the full tuition because I know you had to have a certain GPA to get it. But I don't know if they were combined or not, I don't remember. But I know I had gotten two separate, or, you know, I know there was some connection there, because the bridge program, I think did provide stipends to participate. (Denise)

[I attended East Beach University] because my boyfriend graduated college. See that I was not bright. I honestly I had a full-ride to East State University and transferred [when moved back home]. And now I have student loans for my

transfer to East Beach University. So, I don't understand why East State gave me a full-ride when I'm so stupid. But anyway, yes, and we broke up one month after we both got home. Of course add to the, yes, the irony of the situation. (Debbie)

But because of my senior year in high school, and my parents divorced— Prior to divorce we had a lot of family problems, not to mention we were poor. And I didn't want to go far away and have no money to get home. So it was an economic decision. And the university funded me pretty well. And then they had a bridge program— that was a big influence. Because there were activities after graduating [from high school]. I remember doing that. It was good. It was definitely, and it helped me bridge the gap. It really showed me how— not to put my [high] school down, my alma mater down, but it was really deficient in terms of curriculum for college. So that really helped me segue or bridge in the fall semester. (E. Lynn)

I think I chose it because actually, chose Christian University— we were in a bad situation where we were. My dad was preaching in a congregation that was really rough and I needed to get out of the situation. And so I actually skipped my senior year of high school and went to college early. I was accepted early, to Christian University. They accepted me and gave me a full scholarship. So I went ahead on because It was just too stressful in that situation with the congregation. And so I went on to Christian just to get out, which is why I chose Christian University. It was where my sister was so I knew the, know I knew the

school, and I had other friends who went there from childhood who were going with my sister. And so I knew that I knew people there, and that it would be a good environment to be in.

Gabrielle transferred to Star City University and Founders College in support of her husband's career. He attended preacher school in Star City and then obtained a job in a city outside of Founders College. She stated, "I chose the Star City University because that was where my husband was going to school and I wanted to keep on going to school. And then Founders College, I actually chose because of the major of the school."

Jasmine was the only participant to voice the student demographics as an element to influence college choice. In addition to proximity to home and educational costs, she stated, "And I wanted— and in other parts of the state there isn't a lot of colleges that are diverse. I mean the Northlakes University is the most diverse one. Not extremely diverse, but the most diverse. But that is why."

Participants were asked to describe the racial makeup and climate of the universities they attended. All participants portrayed predominately white student demographics. Comments included, "all white people," "predominately white," "majority white," "mostly white," "very white," "very caucasian," "lots of white," and "pretty white." It was the status of university racial climates that varied among participants. Still, most participants felt that their student bodies were relatively warm using "open," "accepting," "good," "comfortable," and even, "trying" to describe the racial climate.

The homogeneity of institutions of higher education alone did not determine if multiracial individuals feel accepted among the larger campus community. Some participants described in detail the factors that contributed to the racial conditions of the campus.

Yuri, Roxanne and Debbie all attended East Beach University. Although they recognize the university as predominately white, to them it felt diverse.

Well, like I told you, I mean, I actually did see the stats of it, and it did say, you know, majority white, but if I never saw that and I just went to the school, like, I didn't feel that at all. You know like, even though I might of saw more white people on campus, I didn't feel like it was a majority white school. Like I felt it was very diverse, and it was a comfortable setting for me. Being that it is an international college, I saw a lot of different races and different types of people. So, I felt very comfortable, and I felt like it was a very open and cultural university. (Yuri)

I thought it was cool. I never felt anything weird. But I think it's because I also surrounded myself with those type of people, you know— I was really active in the student organizations and, you know I met people, well you know, the Greeks, and they were really cool. And, you know the Black Greeks, the— I guess Black Greeks, I don't know if you call them, but you know historically— But yeah, they were all really cool. I never felt any rifts or any craziness... But in a way it's kind of a small school even though there's— I don't know how many thousand kids there— but a lot of the people that do hang out [in the student center] tend to be

the really active students, and those were the people— a lot of them happened to be black, a lot of them happened to be hispanic, a lot of them happened to be asian. And it was like, there was a really, really good mix there, you know. And I think all the other, like white kids must have just went home or something. (Laughs) (Roxanne)

Yeah. It was more—it was probably not as diverse as the high school, it was not. But, it was definitely more diverse and more integrated than the university I transferred from, because that school was very segregated... From what I experienced it was sunny skies, fair weather. I didn't notice a whole lot of tension. I think everybody was kind of open-minded, and it being— I mean East Beach University, this area especially is such a transient area, I think people have to be more accepting because we're exposed to so many people from so many places and there's so many ways of doing things... (Debbie)

Debbie goes on to say that her experience might be such because of the way she perceives others' actions; and the way that she looks and is received by others.

Again, Queen Oblivious. I really didn't feel like I was limited or affected by my race. I'm sure that in some ways I was, but I was not really— even notice, you know. I figured if I wasn't working my hardest, then that's why an opportunity was not offered. Or— I definitely never felt like I was denied anything, or that people wouldn't take me seriously or whatever because of what I looked like. I never felt that. I never felt that. And then I mean not to be— whatever: Being a

pretty girl, we would get what we want anyway. Nobody cares what color or whatever. When you're a cute girl, people favor you— it's just the way it is. So, if anything I felt more favor than definitely being limited by the fact that I look Brazilian. I mean, that's what's so in right now. (Laugh)

Denise described the racial climate at her southwestern institution as “pretty good,” but also relayed that “the way that I look,” referring to phenotype, may play a role in her experience. She acknowledges here and in other parts of our conversation that others often mistake her as white, therefore they don't respond to her in the same way as her less ambiguous friends of color.

I would say, you know, pretty good. Again, I don't remember having, um, any kind of serious or major events that, you know, made me aware of any kind of racial tension or crisis, or, you know, a feeling of people not being accepted. But again, because of the way that I look, I wouldn't necessarily see that as much as my friends who would have much more of a personal experience just on the basis of, you know, how they looked.

Along those lines, Lauren said that her feelings of “comfort” regarding the racial climate of her university was not felt by the black, male students she knew.

Oh, it was comfortable. Yeah, I don't think that there was, you know, really any tension in terms of [race]. I would say that probably, where you would get, like the racial tension it would be case— people just more like in the larger society. But it's a very, you know, liberal arts. So, for me it was, you know, I think it



was— I made some friends that are black there, and part of that group of 7, and who were males and their experiences would be much different.

Similar to Roxanne, Jasmine limited her associations to her diverse group of friends. She did not feel equipped to talk accurately concerning the general racial climate of campus.

It is— I would say the majority is white. Definitely... Well, it's hard to say. I guess I really didn't notice if they were cold or warm, but ...the university's always claimed— they usually claim that they're trying to make the school more diverse, and they want to help students of color. If they're cold or hot, I don't know, I really didn't hang out with— I hate to say this, but didn't really hang out with a lot of White people; and if I did, they were like, you know, totally cool with like the students of color ,or they were more like, I wouldn't say outsiders— But like for example my one friend, she's a total hippie, and she just kind of like, yeah, whatever— we are different. So yeah, I really— I can't say, so I don't want to give you any wrong information.

Savannah attended the same university, she learned right away in her residence hall experience that she did not fit in with the larger campus community.

Pretty white. Actually. I mean, you had to go seek out your minority functions. It was weird, my freshman dorm, you know, I just chose the dorm and didn't think twice about it. Find out that it's the oddest dorm of all. (Laughs) It was, people that I didn't know and I didn't have any relation to— so I never stayed in

that dorm because it was all white people. I don't think I saw a single brown person or person of color at all in there. So I had to go find them, you know, I had to go see where they all were hanging out. And then when I found them, I was like, "Oh, here you guys are."

She commented that the university was "accepting," but put minority groups "off to the side." Then described the campus attitude toward non-white groups as "they're part of the U, they're not really what makes the U."

Several participants talked about segregation along color lines as a depiction of their university's racial climate. E. Lynn talked about segregation among the students of color, which was promoted by the organization of the office for multicultural affairs.

White. It's all white. Predominantly white... I think they were trying to figure out what to do, but because of that, they were very segregated. Like black faculty worked with black students, or native, which there weren't very many, native faculty or staff worked with the native students. Or even asian, I remember she was assigned to, the worker rep was assigned to the asian students, too. So, asians didn't even have a representative at all. Latino same thing, or back then it would have been "hispanic" or the "Mexican" person really just worked with Mexicans. They didn't even look anything outside of Mexican either. And I would say there was a lot of problems between the black students and Mexican students. And I do sort of remember that. And it was— they called back then this Brown/Black Struggle that was going on. And native, we were just kind of, in my opinion, always left to the wayside anyway. (E. Lynn)

Brigitte transferred to a university closer to home due to the segregation and racial conflict she felt at South Palm College. She felt accepted and welcome at her alma mater, but admits they could improve in diversity issues.

It is mostly white; predominantly white. The students I graduated from high school attend the university there. You know, there are some minorities, but I mean its not— just a handful. I thought it was pretty good. I mean, like I said, I mean, they really— I didn't feel like I was made to feel differently than anyone else. I mean, all my professors, and the students, you know, they treated me just like they would treat anyone else. You know, sometimes I wished that there was more diversity or diversity related activities, but you know, that hit, you know, negates the fact that I felt welcome and accepted there. I mean I felt a lot more welcome there than I did down south where there was a lot more, you know diversity, so.

Rae and Gabrielle spoke in length regarding the divide between black and white students, the two major racial groups, at Christian University. They were the only participants to describe an experience in which they felt more comfortable with the majority white student population than within subcultures of students of color.

The overall culture was not particularly racially charged. I would I would say it was fairly tolerant. Yeah, as far as the overall, that's what I would say. Think there definitely subcultures that weren't quite that. I'm trying to think how to word this cowardly. (Laugh) Well, I don't want you to think that— There was a

distinctly frosty, culture, subculture among the students who were African American. Frosty or remote towards the rest of the students. Particularly hostile to anyone they considered a traitor— Meaning people who either were black and hung out with white kids or even had white friends; or were multiracial and had white friends or hung out with white kids. I— let's see, I was there for about a year and a half before any of the black kids spoke to me. (Rae)

Gabrielle shared similar thoughts regarding the racial conditions at Christian University.

I never had any problem [fitting in]. At Christian University, though, it was very split. It was either, you were with a black group or you were with white group. There was really no, like intermingling. Unless you wanted to like cross mingle. You know, you either hang out with the black people, and they all hung together, they were like their own group, and there were probably 30 of them on campus, you know, and that was it. And they all hung together. And so you either hung out with them, and they all sat together at dinner, they all sat together in chapel, they all sat together for everything, or you were with the rest of the school, which was predominantly white. And there were like asian and a couple of other ethnicities, but it was predominantly white. And the climate of the rest of the school was: they didn't care what you were. Now the climate of the black group was pretty exclusive. It was either, you were with us or you weren't. And it was almost looked down upon if you weren't with them, when you were black.

Gabrielle went on to share her experience at Star City University and Founders College. She framed her comments in the context of her changed circumstances because marriage after her sophomore year impacted her level of interaction with other students. She felt no racial divides at the commuter Star City University and described the racial climate as “just a busy environment,” then made this comment regarding her alma mater:

Founders College, to be honest, (Laugh) I actually saw a commercial for Founders College the other day, and I noticed how they kept putting a black person in the commercial, and I was like, you do not see that many black people there. It just doesn't happen. And so, most of the—I don't know if I knew anyone who was black. I think there was a basketball player maybe in one of my classes who was black, but that was it. And we said hi to each other sometimes, but as much as I said hi to the other people. And so I didn't feel like there was a divide there either. I didn't see like a black group and then the rest of the school like I did at Christian.

Some participants' comments implied there is weight added to a large white student body from rural areas or small towns. These conversations were different than participants who attended institutions located in metro areas along the east coast.

It was very caucasian. And very like, rural even though it was located in a city. I met people from places I didn't even know existed, you know. And they're like that's here in the state. And I was like, you've got to be kidding, you know. And their graduating class had like five. And I just was like, that's a bizarre thing.

You know, that was very, like— and many of them from those small towns had never seen a person of color. You know. (Lauren)

Only three participants talked about what might be considered cold racial climates. The issue of a student body largely from rural areas was at the heart of these conversations.

The overall racial climate, I would say that it was pretty intensive. There wasn't a lot of support for students of color. I think there was just enough of them to feel like they were doing something, but not a lot. Yeah, it was very, you know, segregated, or you know, segregated community. You know like the black folks hung out together and the white people stuck together. And yeah, so that's kind of pretty much how it was. But it also was a negative— I mean, it wasn't the most negative place to live, but I think that because the majority of the people there were white from small towns, or, not necessarily small towns, maybe from the city, but were definitely from the Midwest, you know, small Midwest places and came with that mentality, too. And so the majority of students were coming from these small towns. And so, in this college town, you know, in this state, you know, they weren't accustomed to seeing black people. And a lot of them will tell you that, oh, this is the first time I ever, you know, have ever met a black person, or whatever. So, in that way I think it was very interesting— that they weren't prepared for, you know, dealing with people of color, like on a daily basis you know. (Naomi)

I would say it's somewhat, kind of racist— with some of the teaching, some of the students. There was— a lot of them are from small rural areas in the state where they've never seen a mixed person before. (Laughs) So, I guess that would be the description of it. (Laughs) (Christy)

Jennifer attended the same university as Christy, when I asked her to describe the racial climate she talked about her experiences on Campus B, which is located a few miles away from the main campus, Campus A, in the same city. Campus B serves chiefly agriculture-related majors, including animal and veterinary science majors.

Well, I'm biracial and a city girl, so it's really different having classes with white men or white girls from the country. And it's just really different because they don't really know, once again, they don't really know what they're saying, or when they say it they don't expect somebody to be offended by it. But usually if they talk about any type of race that affects me...just because I feel like, well if you say it, even though it's not about me, you know, what can you say in front of other people, when I'm not around; or like, what color do you use. So it was just kind of hard to go to classes and like know that I wasn't accepted, and it was hard for me to like be in study groups with other people.

Chloe talked about the undercurrent of racism as part of the campus culture.

You always felt things like that, so you always don't know because there people aren't really (sigh) racist in front of you. So, it's always like, you do something and you think that— Like I was involved with some clubs, like the

black student Association, and I was involved with another group there, and it was like you talk to the student body president or something, and then the union would tell you one thing, then all of a sudden, you know, a white Greek fraternity or something wants something and they are like, “Oh, we don’t have money, or whatever, and you know like— (Laugh) You know, it was always— it’s like a underlying. I mean there wasn’t, I don’t remember any incidents or anything like that, but it’s just always seems to be occurring that way, you know. (Chloe)

For Lavern, the racial climate of her campus changed over time. A highly public conflict with the black student group on campus and the university newspaper impacted what she considered an open climate prior to the incident.

Ooh it just depends on the time. When I first got there I felt pretty open, but like I think it was my junior year where they had a black student conference where black student organizations from other universities attended. And the Collegian, which is the student newspaper, did not report this, but maybe in one little picture. And they have like four stories of the rodeo going on. And so the blacks student association got really upset. And so they started to talk to the advisor of journalism, things like that, and this huge conflict blew up. And there was racial comments in the forum of the paper saying, why does the union smell like fried chicken, and where’s my watermelon at? And so this huge racial thing just popped up. That was in print in the forum. They no longer have the forum because of these things. It really— it just went out of control and so there’s all this animosity and the black students... they were campaigning to get rid of him.



He eventually did get fired. And they had more diversity training for people in the student union, or the new student paper. But it was just tension, huge tension. Yeah [it got better with time].

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## CHALLENGES TO IDENTITY

The heart of participant interviews centered on their college experiences. Overall participants see their college experience as positive, despite some challenges. For most participants, the college setting was a major transition with regard to racial makeup and climate. It is the positive and negative experiences that helped to shape or emphasize their identity and ideas about race. This section addresses the factors that serve as challenges and support for multiracial students on college campuses.

“To succeed in college, students from all racial groups need to experience a variety of challenges in and out of the classroom while finding something or someone to connect them to their respective campus environments” (Watson, 2002, p. x). The challenges faced by students of color on college campuses are widely felt by multiracial students, still multiracial students have challenges unique to their racial identity unfamiliar to students of color at large. The following addresses the challenges faced by participants of this study with regard to their racial identity.

Many participants voiced that the larger campus culture impacted their college experience and served as challenges for multiracial students and students of color overall. This is addressed above in the details regarding participant descriptions of racial climates at the universities they attended. Participants recognize that their universities “are trying” with numerous programs and policies in place to encourage students of color, still they

voiced that the fruition of these attempts are not always felt by students. While some participants made recommendations on where these universities can improve (discussed in Chapter 7), others spoke freely regarding their negative experiences as it relates to their identity.

As described earlier in this section, the racial climate of the greater university community, particularly noted by participants from rural, Midwestern states negatively impacted the way that participants perceive the campus culture. Regarding this issue Naomi stated that the white students on her campus “weren’t prepared for dealing with people of color on a daily basis.” She gave an example:

...we did a kind of pot luck for a roommate situation, like there was no one, you know, kind of black, including myself, students or women students who you know stayed with that same roommate that first year. Like, oh, you think that you’re going to put you with another white girl. There was not like one, you know, no one thinks that they’re going to end up with a black student as their roommate, you know. And so it was like interesting how, like that was kind of like the joke that we had— we always had to change roommates each semester because of that.

A lack of understanding or power to change things from people put in place to help students of color, such as administrators and staff of multicultural centers also posed unstable campus cultures for multiracial students. Naomi continued,

I mean, you know you kind of find your way and, at least find your safe group that you hang out with and I also think it was important, you know, the support wasn't that great, but there was some there. You know, we had two gentlemen who were kind of responsible for advising people of color, one was Native American, his brother actually was the one that was recruiting me. And the one was hispanic. And so, you know, once again, the black students were kind of like can we please have someone that, you know, identifies more with our, you know, with who we are and things. And, you know, I think they tried their best. But yeah, it wasn't, definitely it was not a strong environment in support of diversity, you know. Like with the newspaper, they always came out with this kind of piece, they wrote this big article, you know, on April 1<sup>st</sup>, April Fool's Day, and it always had some very inappropriate comments about, you know, race or ethnicity. I remember one, we had an advisor for a group that we started—a lot of the women of color on campus started— and our advisor, she was a Spanish professor, and I remember that they had something in the newspaper about her, and I remember it just kind of being like her being “very spicy” and like “calliente” and very— it was just very inappropriate, you know that they would ever be OK to do to any other professor, or use that kind of language about a professor, and it was very— it kind of commented on her, you know heritage and ethnicity, but not in a positive light. And I remember in that article there was a couple things that they mentioned. I think it was something about blacks that was very insensitive. And so things like that— We didn't have a lot of good experiences with that newspaper. And then whenever we wanted to, you know, do something about it,

of course there's always that whole idea, it's freedom of speech. So there was never any support in that way. And like I, once again, you know those multicultural counselors that were responding to us, and they were, you know they're really nice, you know, nice people, but they never really advocated for us. When we needed them most, you know. There was, they never kind of pushed the envelope or pushed [the administration] just a little bit.

Kalena voiced frustration regarding lack of support from administration as well. Once a student and now a staff member of the university she attended, she has a broad view of the campus culture, which she felt has made small strides.

The entire time that I went to the university and now while I'm working here, we're always trying to increase and invite and bring more students and faculty and staff of color. We are fortunate to have a chancellor in the interim in there, who really focused on increasing the committees, the concern for minorities and women. But again, it just, it never seems to be a priority really. You know, they just money's spent on other unfortunate things. But, I don't know. You know, it's taken us, God, how long to get the culture center [incorporated with the rest of campus]? You know, it's always been on the outskirts and [so if students want to get together], you know, they've got to go [far]. Now before you had to go even rather off campus [to get together]. And then now we're over here again, you know, just slightly off campus— and it's not a handicap accessible, so, I mean not allowing these students of color with any disability to be able to move freely and

down the stairs. But you know they, finally incorporated— it actually got an academic component to it.

Offices designed to support students of color not only have to confront issues with the larger university, but also groups within the offices. These large-scale issues are felt by the students. Multiracial students in particular are affected because they may not fit the models or definitions used to help students in these facilities. E. Lynn spoke to this,

I think they were trying to figure out what to do, but because of that, they were very segregated. Like black faculty worked with black students, or native, which there weren't very many, native faculty or staff worked with the native students. Or even asian, I remember she was assigned to, the worker rep was assigned to the asian students, too. So, asians didn't even have a representative at all. Latino same thing, or back then it would have been "hispanic" or the Mexican person, really just worked with Mexicans. They didn't even look anything outside of Mexican either. And I would say there was a lot of problems between the black students and Mexican students. And I do sort of remember that. And it was— they called back then this Brown/Black Struggle that was going on. And native, we were just kind of, in my opinion, always left to the wayside anyway.

Rae also talked about her frustration with staff members of minority affairs offices, but for her the scenario was different. She was passionate about the lack of support she received from the black student group advisor because of her racial identity. She also felt that he negatively influenced the culture of the black student group on

campus, which made for a distinct divide between black students and white and non-black students.

Well as I stated said that earlier, there was one admissions counselor who was the like advisor for the minority students, and he was kind of their ring leader. (Laugh) he was the sponsor for the multicultural club, which we mockingly called the “Black People Mad at Everybody Else Club,” because that’s really what it was. (Laugh) And he was the one who said that I shouldn’t have gotten my scholarship because if I didn’t identify as black then I shouldn’t get a scholarship for minority students because I wasn’t good enough. I wasn’t a good enough minority to be considered for the scholarship. He was definitely the ring leader in the racist end of it that was among the black students. I definitely had some run-ins with him. Well it wasn’t until later that I found out that he had tried to end it—as he actually told me, and this was while I was dating [this black guy] and so I was kind of part of the group then, and he said, “Well, I didn’t want you to get the scholarship because you checked other.” It made me angry. It still makes me angry. Because the scholarship didn’t say— it wasn’t the “If We Think You’re Black Enough” scholarship. If you are a member of a minority, or a multiracial, then you are a minority. I mean it’s not something that, you know, that it’s a pretty objective classification, it’s not something that you should be able to take away because you don’t think somebody’s black enough. And you shouldn’t be able to decide what black enough is. So I Mean it still— I find it hard to express how angry it made me and makes me— that a group that spends all their time

complaining about how other people wouldn't accept them, would reject someone for who they were.

Some participants felt as though they did not fit in with the campus culture because they were not accepted by their white peers. This was also addressed in the conversation regarding campus racial climates. Jasmine, Savannah and Yuri "surrounded" themselves with other students of color because they didn't feel accepted by white students at large. Savannah's experience during her first week at the university spoke to this.

I don't think I fit in really at all with any of the white students. Even though I'm half-white. It's sort of like, you know, that I was something else too, so I didn't—like I never went to any of the frat parties or nobody asked me to pledge a sorority or anything, so like, (Laughs) I don't know, I just didn't go to any of those functions that like my— I had a roommate my freshman year, she was white and she was doing all these different things on campus that I didn't, you know, and I was like I'm the brown people so, you know, I wasn't going to those things. Nobody asked me to go to any of those things. So I wouldn't really fit in at all, until I found later like minorities or people of color, so then we all bonded. Yeah, it was actually the dorm—it was a dorm that two of my girls that I befriended, and that's where they had lived in that dorm my freshman year. So I was, you know, I was spending all my time freshman year over there, just because that's where all the minorities were. So sophomore year I moved into that dorm. And that was like the dorm with all the like football players and like all the athletes, so— All the

minorities and athletes. There wasn't a lot more minorities in the honors dorm.  
(Savannah)

When Lavern's core group of friends, all black women, left the university for various reasons, she felt alone even though she had other peer groups. She stated, "Then when [my friends] were all white, I was kind of on my own. So I had to deal with white people and educating them about stupid things like hair and skin color and why people do this and why do they do that? And so it's just like realizing how, you know, naïve or how racist people really are who pretend to be your friends." In fact, most participants shared that their group of friends were overall students of color. This is discussed in latter parts of the dissertation.

Some of the issues traditionally known to students of color were salient challenges noted by participants. Several participants talked about their experiences in classes as "the only"—that is the only person of color.

I looked around these giant lecture halls counting the brown people. And of 300 people maybe five were black or whatever. And then in psychology, it was... whiteness. And my friend who's one of my best guy friends, he's still there in a Ph.D. program, and he and I like had to bond together to make sure we stuck it out. The faculty in the psychology department are all white, all male and they're very egotistical. So we had to like make sure we were going to make it. (Lavern)

Challenges— One thing, there was really few challenges—well, you'd walk into a class, and you know, there was a couple hundred and you'd see maybe 2



minorities, and then somehow we'd all end up sitting next to each other. So, you know, we'd all sit next to each other [as though to say,] "You're my partner." So we had to— (laughs) So I mean I guess you just kind of get over it and you just start, you know, making friends and talking with people who, I don't know, who have a fear. It was something like when you're asked to like pair off in class they would all, you know, like all the, white students would go, you know, right away and pair off, and I'm standing there. (Laughs) And I didn't look like a gangster, but just yeah, it was— I guess I overcame it by, you know, doing what I had to do, you know, going up to them, speaking to them, or, you know, letting them know I was not that type. (Laughs) (Savannah)

As a multiracial person in class, Christy said that the other students often made somewhat of an exhibit of her class participation.

There were sometimes where I felt like I was like this, I wouldn't say like a spectacle I just, I wanna say like the fact that they were like, "Oh my God, you're from San Diego, you're Mexican-Japanese, and, wow, you're trying to be in the group with me say or something for a group project." Or sometimes, like I had a, group person that would kind of like, give me the cold shoulder which that was really stupid, right. So, (Laughs) that was some experiences.

Jennifer talked about the difficulty of dealing with being the only person of color within the campus culture of Campus B twice during our conversation.

While I was welcome in vet science, I would say going to class was, I mean I was the only person of color in any of my classes. So that was kind of hard. Even within relation going to study with anyone that truly felt comfortable with me and I felt comfortable with them... It was just kind of hard to go to classes and like, know that I wasn't accepted, and it was hard for me to like, be in study groups with other people. So most of my friends were on Camps A, and I would just hang out with them later. So I would just kind of go to classes and, (Laugh) do homework by myself and, that kind of thing.

Jennifer also talked about how her teachers "always picked her out" because she was the only person of color in her classes, which is familiar to students of color.

Savannah and Lauren also shared this experience:

Well, I know, I mean just getting called on— specifically if they wanted, you know, another perspective on whatever topic it was, you know, and they pointed me out for some reason. And I assumed that it was because I had been a minority student, so they wanted that, you know, especially in sociology classes, of course they wanted to see the whole view of things. So, I guess getting picked on more frequently— And I never had to like do more work because of it or anything, but— (Savannah)

You know, I think some of them, my teachers— You know, occasionally— and this, I would say, was just more my freshman year— I got the "can you give us your perspective, from like, you know, the African American background." And

I'd be like, "my perspective?" And then I'd give them something completely against what they were expecting, you know. And so I think they learned very quickly that, "she's not gonna be that person." And so then they just stopped, you know, and for myself. You need to know this person, you know. How can they do that? None of the African Americans' perspectives would even be the same. So, (Laugh) they didn't. They would look at me like that is not their way of obviously looking at that. (Lauren)

Gabrielle avoided being singled out by going against what she thought might be the "typical black thing to do." She explained, "As far as like being in classes and academic experience, I don't remember ever anyone ever saying anything or doing anything. I know that I would always try though, not to pick like the typical black thing to do. Like in a research project or something, I would always try to not pick like the black person, because I didn't want people to think that I was picking the black person because they thought I was black. So I tried to always make sure that I wasn't doing what they would expect that I would do. Because I always felt like you know the black people always pick the black people. They always picked Martin Luther King Jr., always picked Rosa Parks, or, you know, it's all about like black heritage. And I didn't want to look like I was doing that, so would always try not to, and picked someone completely different." Additionally, Gabrielle volunteered information about her heritage in classroom situations so that others would not assume she was black.

Sometimes I volunteered information that my dad was black and my mom was white, and I think sometimes I did that just because I didn't want people to

assume that I was black. And I was volunteering that information. “Oh, I don’t know if you know, but my mom’s white and my dad’s black.” And I would just volunteer that information. And I think just because I didn’t want people to assume. And so no one ever really did, because I made that known.

Students of color often feel the brunt of insensitive or outright racist comments and jokes in campus spaces. Multiracial students are not immune to these confrontations. Jennifer shared an experience during her first week at the university. Often described as “fighting words” because of its repercussion, she was called a nigger by a passerby.

And when I first got here, it was the first time I got called a nigger. So, it was interesting. I mean I had been called names before like Oreos or, you know, it’s just— I don’t know, it didn’t hurt as bad. But, (Laugh) yeah, so... Well I was actually crossing a street, and a passing car yelled it out her window. Oh yeah and I was really just stunned. Because I didn’t know— well let’s just say I was kind of angry, but I was just— it also made me sad. So I just went, oh well. (Laughs) And I actually heard other stories like that, too, with passing cars, yelling names at people... And it really upset me because that, it was just like they really don’t know who I am, or I mean it could have been anything else, but that was the name they called me. And I mean, it was just, I don’t know. (Laugh)

In reference to the challenges she faced on campus, E. Lynn spoke of the unintentional and intentional comments other students made. An additional challenge was determining the motivation behind what someone said or asked.

Oh. Well, a lot of ignorance, both unintentional and intentional. Some people didn't accept me as a minority so to speak, other people would ask very— what would be offensive questions, but sort of out of innocence. So I had to deal with a lot of, “Do you live in a teepee questions?” you know, very laconic references. Mascot issue was always in it, so it was a big issue. And it was hard to convey how that could be offensive to me as a Native American, or just how to convey how that's racist towards Native Americans. People just didn't help. They literally thought we lived in museums. So that was a challenge. And I didn't handle it well at first. I was very defensive to it. And I'm probably being polite about myself by saying that. But it was frustrating. But I, I learned. Probably about the time I was a junior or senior I understood. And sometimes what would happen, too, and this would come from more in the caucasian classes, they would say that I was angry or hostile or literally— which was very difficult to say. And then we'd get in these discussions. I don't know if they so much wanted to accept it, you know if that was their guilt, or if they were being cry baby, I don't know, I couldn't tell you their motivation. It was hard. But I wouldn't change it.

Because Denise is often mistaken to have a white identity, she often hears comments that may not be said in front of her if she looked non-white. “I definitely have had experiences, because people assume that I'm white, that they would be more willing to share information about how they feel about certain things than they would not [share] had they assumed I was of a different background, which is good for me because then I get to see true colors and hopefully be able to address that in a way that, you know,

provides some education and some awareness. But, you know, at the same time is a little bit, you know, frustrating because then you wonder how much of it you really are missing as far as people not wanting to show their true colors and share their true feelings and, you know— I'd much rather deal with somebody who's explicitly racist or, you know— than somebody who's just walking the political line and telling you what you know you want to hear.” She gave the following illustration about a conversation she had with a white student who had asked her on a date.

And he started talking about his sister, and how frustrated he was with his sister because she was marry—or she was dating a Mexican. And that he really felt like he was lazy and, you know, all the typical stereotypes that you could think of about why her, his sister should not be dating him. But it was a “good thing” that he was only half-Mexican, because then he had, you know, some other— again, I had not ever shared my background with him— and so, you know, he was like, “So what movie do you wanna see.” And I was like, “Well you know, (Laugh) I feel like I probably need to go back home. And he was like what? And I was like, “Yeah, you know, I'm feelin', a little—” and I shouldn't of said it, and I should of probably been a little bit more educational and, you know, accepting of him, but I was like, “I'm feelin' a little tired, feelin' a little lazy,” you know, and I kind of played off on that a little bit. And he was like, “What are you talkin' about?” I said, “Well, you know, I have to tell you that I'm half-Mexican as well, and that if you have these concerns, obviously, you need to rethink who you're going to date,” (Laugh) and how that worked. And so that really kind of caught

him back. And, again, probably shouldn't of been, I guess kind of rude in that regard, but, you know, at the same time it was like, are you kidding? But again, some people make those assumptions; you get to hear those things. And had I looked differently, he probably wouldn't of ever asked me out in the first place. But at the same time, it also provides an opportunity I think, to provide some awareness, and some, you know, good conversation (Laugh) about what it means to make assumptions.

Insensitive and bigoted remarks not only came from some white students, some monoracial students of color also hold stereotypes and prejudices of other groups. Roxanne said the difference between her experiences and that of her monoracial peers is that she has a greater understanding of people and differences. She shared the impact she had with her Filipino peers.

About, you know, how each culture felt-how my black culture felt towards asian people, how asian people felt towards black people. You know some of the things that they would say were just really hurtful. "Can you hold up, I'm still in the room? You know, half of me is hurting inside, you know." I was just— I didn't like it, you know. I just felt that there needed to be more dialogue between the two groups. And there a total misunderstanding and total ignorance, you know, or just total, "Well I don't feel like learning about them." And I never understood why people would be that way. But I think that's because, you know I'm very—I'm the type that people should just get in line. You know mix is cool and having friends of a different background should be normal. You know should be like this is my

black friend, you know. I'm thinking this is just my friend, (Laughs) you know. So, I always felt that I always had to always be a mediator or an educator every single day... I— not like my duty, but I was a voice that they never heard before. And since I was Filipino they thought, “Well, I guess I should trust this voice,” you know.

First-generation college students are traditionally students of color. Aja made a connection between money and color, as well as education preparedness and color— two significant issues of first-generation students.

It was money, a lot of times just money. You know, I had to work during college, and a lot of the people didn't. A lot of the caucasian students', actually, families will pay for college for them or, you know, just had money saved up. I mean, really hard, I mean, when you want to be out, meeting and having fun, you're actually working because I needed it for school. And making sure that you qualified for all the loans so that you could continue to keep going every year. And probably another challenge would be, I don't know, English has been kind of an issue for me. I mean I probably don't educate myself on that as much as I should, but growing up in a family where my mom doesn't have a high school education, and then that's all my father had, you know, you tend to learn from your family, and then I don't think that I pushed myself a lot to learn it in school. So it kind of affected me a lot with papers and stuff in college. Because I needed help from people, through tutoring and things like that for it. That's about it. (Laughs)



Savannah concurred that money was a challenge during her college experience noting that, “not all of us can call mom or dad, you know.” She recommended that financial aid advisors become more sensitive to this need in order to support an ideal campus for multiracial students.

Although friends, namely other students, served as the biggest support resource among multiracial students, peer group relationships outside and sometimes connected to these circles posed a challenge for some participants. In fact, acceptance among peers was probably the most eminent challenge among participant voices. Finding fit among the larger white student population was a test of identity for some participants described earlier in this chapter. Christy and Lavern talked about having to navigate experiences with their white friends. Christy “hung out with a broad range of people,” but never felt close to any group of students. She also did not feel comfortable intermixing groups of friends, either, as she illustrates below.

I hung out with my white friends, but sometimes, bringing another black or brown person with me was not really expected. And I didn't want to, you know, sometimes they make— like joking, racial comments, and I just didn't want to have my friends there, and think that I thought it was okay that they did that. So it was like, they're not going to change. So I, you know, I'm not going to subject you to that and then have you, you know, argue with them in front of me. So we just wouldn't. Just really ridiculous. So... [They accepted me, but may not have accepted my friends of color] probably because I'd known them over a few years, and if they'd make a comment to me about my race, I'd go make a comment back

to them, and I'm really like quick on, you know, making a side-joke or remark back to them, and so they would just kind of like shut up or, you know, it was all like joking. But I know enough that knew they would think that was racially motivated, and would be like, "Can't believe they said that to you. Why do you let them say that to you?" (Laughs)

Lavern talked about "having to deal with and educate" her white friends on issues of race then gave the following example:

And so it's just like, you know, really realizing how, you know, naïve or how racist people really are, who pretend to be your friends. I remember one time when one of my roommates, who was also in band, she's white, was making some kind of off-color comment. And I'm like, "What are you doing?" "Oh, I'm sorry Lavern, I forgot, you know. I really don't think of you as one of them." Oh, okay, that's how you are.

Several participants do not feel accepted by the larger group of students of color on their campuses. Still small in number compared to the white student body, these groups were often represented as a racial or ethnic student organization.

I went to this program [where you can sign up to befriend an international student who was going to the U] and the lady, she's Chinese, and she was like— and I told her that, I wanted to kind of brush up on my Thai speaking and I wanted to, you know, get connected with a Thai student. And, she's like, "Well, why?" And it was— which I thought was kind of like, why not, you know. But she— you know

she's like, "Well why?" and I said "Well, I think it would be good for, you know, for one, they'll become Americanized and they'll be, you know, they're in a new country and I would like to tell them like, you know, I'm half-Thai, but then I also can show them like what American culture's like because it is very different. There's a lot of big differences between the two cultures. And she's like, proceeded to tell me, which I hear quite often, "Well, you don't look Thai at all." And then she said, "Well didn't your mother teach you Thai?" And I said, "Well she did a long time ago, but I lost a lot of it, and I would like to, you know, just get to know a native speaker. And so that was one of my experiences that I was like, why are you giving me a hard time for? (Jasmine)

Jasmine spoke of another group, the Thai student organization on campus, in similar fashion, "I did go to the Thai student organization, but they were like mainly from Thailand and they spoke Thai— and I didn't really feel very comfortable there. They didn't— you know, it didn't feel very good." She went on to say that other ethnic student groups did welcome her participation. This is addressed later in the chapter.

Christy did not feel accepted within members of the Mexican American student organization because she did not speak Spanish, but developed friendships with the members over the first two years of her involvement. Later she felt that the friendships she established in the group were conditional to her involvement with the organization. Once she became more involved with other student organizations, members of the Mexican American student organization treated her differently. Speaking about her peers she said, "Although I thought they were my friends and they really weren't, and it's kind

of like, “Oh, you’re in this organization, so we’re your friends, and now that you’re not in it... they’re not gonna like associate with you.” Having such a diverse group of friends growing up and then also at college, Christy became frustrated with the isolating attitude of the members of the Mexican American student group. She felt that members criticized her associations outside of the group, including who she chose to date, “Then in the Mexican student organization, like, some of the cliqueness started showing more after a few, couple years being in it. And, it was like if you want to spend your time outside of the organization— They would really bring outside business to the table during the meetings. And that was kind of frustrating. So... The thing when I was in the Mexican student group, they would be like, “Oh, you just don’t date all these brown people because all you like is black guys or the athletes, and then asian, or— I dated a white guy here for the first time. I don’t know, yeah. And there was, kind of a either, somewhat hypocritical, but like both typical mentality about Mexican— to marry a Mexican. Or things that— or even date a brown person, “Why don’t you date them?” and to me it was such a small group of latinos on campus, we just like got to be like just really low, and so we just couldn’t like date them (Laughs).”

Christy was also involved with the asian student organization. She described her experience with this student group also as frustrating, but for different reasons. “I was in asian student organization, but I was [the only one of] Japanese descent. Everyone else was Vietnamese. And so they would— I mean I don’t take it personally, but they would just start talking in Vietnamese, and I kind of got frustrated like, “What are you guys talking about? You need to speak English please.”

Yuri was involved in both the asian and black student organizations at her universities. When asked if she felt accepted by both groups, she said “definitely,” then later changed her mind. Yuri stated that it was her own insecurities that caused her to perceive that she was not accepted as a legitimate member of these racial/ethnic organizations.

Definitely. I definitely felt accepted in both. At the same time, in the asian organization, I felt that they were a little bit more cliquish, and they were really—I don’t know, like the asian organization stands out more to me, probably because I was more involved in that organization. But, at the same time, I kind of didn’t feel fully accepted because I was, you know, half-black, and most of the people that were in there were like just regular asians, you know. So, but as far as the black organization, I wasn’t like actively involved, but I kind of felt a little bit, you know, not fully accepted either because it was a black organization. But it wasn’t anything that stopped me from being involved or that really stood out. But, I think that’s just my insecurities, you know like I’m not full-asian, so I don’t feel fully asian in this organization, and [same for the black organization].

Lavern named her inability to fit in with the white or black students as a challenge during her campus experience, but she did find some support from a group that embraced all American ethnicities.

Generally it was just me trying to deal with not fitting in anywhere. I didn’t really fit in with the black student organization. Like I felt like they were against

whites, and I'm like, I can't do it because my mom's white. And then with the white students, they just really didn't get it. And so I joined this American ethnicities student group, which is just people of all backgrounds coming together talking about diversity, and I was highly involved in that organization. Yeah, the president of that, she was biracial, black-white as well.

Naomi described her experience navigating both the white student population and the smaller black student population at her university as pivotal to her identity development because it was the only time where she felt uncertainty about her own identity.

I think this is probably the one time in my life where I was like very kind of floating around and in this kind of ambiguous state of where exactly do I fit. Because my peers were for the most part, my close friends were people of color, black people, African, African Americans— My closest friends. Not because I didn't have other friends, because I did. Because like I think coming from where I came from, I can probably pretty easily navigate, you know, in the monoracial environment, in the white environment. And I enjoyed participating in what I think was called majority activities that you don't see a lot of students of color participating in— like being an orientation leader and being a resident assistant and things like that where there are not as many students of color who participate in that. And so, you know, I did develop real strong relationships with other students too. But I definitely kind of identified more with being a person of color and being kind of a black person when I was there. Because this community is

not accustomed to diversity, they really see things in black and white, you know. And so, but interestingly enough, even the black community there thought in that way too [in black and white]. You know, for me to identify multiracially was very interesting, kind of, (Laugh) and I don't know if I ever kind of vocalized that out loud because I don't think anybody ever asked me, like "How do you identify?" There is some assumption, you know, they knew who I hung out with then, but they also knew that I was not— I was different. And like I had a girlfriend, "Well because [Naomi's] not really black," you know, like what does that mean? And she goes, "Well you know how you're kind of different, and, you know, asian and, you know." And so, you'd get comments like that... You know I still hung out with the same people, even if they still commented and joked around about who I was and how much I belonged. They were still my friends, you know, and kind of embraced me I guess, even my differences, you know. And I just didn't let it bother me anymore. And so it was really, definitely a very short period of my life where I was hung up with like, how am I identifying?... So yeah, that was definitely a different part of my life. And definitely not like, as much support when it came to, you know, just being able to feel like I could be myself and not have to think about— I felt like I had to be very careful about my language and I also felt very uncomfortable being myself during that time, and acting how I wanted to act because then you'd either like be, you know, you're not acting "black enough," or you're acting "too white," whatever that means. I had a lot of guilt about maybe not knowing enough about the African American community or the history, and not being able to identify like kind of fully with

that community... And so that was kind of a challenging time for me to a little more reflective.

E. Lynn's ties to the students of color on campus were strong, but not without their challenges. She sometimes felt marginalized by her friends because she is multiracial. Her friends would make comments about her ability to relate to the hardships they faced due to race, but she believed her mixed heritage made her more sensitive to these hardships.

I think sometimes we would be quicker to be left out to dry. Like, "Oh, you don't understand anyway." Sometimes it was intentional marginalization of pushing us aside, or sometimes it was unintentional. You know kind of like that. "Oh well you kind of look like a white girl anyway," kind of comment, or "You don't have to worry about it because you're a native." That's just a weird concept, like, everyone likes natives. And, "It's cool to be, so exotic and something that I just did not understand." Especially me being a half-white, and this is really what irritates me and why I've devoted my career to it, I could blatantly see my monoracial friends or peers being treated differently because of color of their skin. I definitely would pick up on that because I have my whole life. Definitely resent that kind of treatment. And so I would find myself, which would be funny because I'd be getting more mad for them, and they'd tell me to calm down and don't worry about it, 'cause, you know, what do you gotta worry about it for. But it was, it's, it was a weird dynamic. So I'm not trying to sell them up the river or anything, but it was stressful.



For the most part, Chloe felt accepted by her black student peers. She said that her problems with students within the black student organization had more to do with skin color than the fact that she was biracial. She said that other girls who were black and “light-skinned” felt the same challenges she did within the black student population. Because this was an issue for the black community at large, she did not see this as a challenge to overcome due to her identity

Rae shared that she fit in with the majority white students on her campus. Regarding the white student population she stated, “How I fit in. I think I noticed it more than they did that I wasn’t white, but I never had any problems fitting in with any of the other students.” She later described in length how the black students on campus treated her.

None of the people who were black would really speak to me at all. (Laugh) That was definitely a challenge. To some extent I tried— well for a while I didn’t even notice it. I noticed that they were very influenced, but I didn’t think that much about it, and didn’t really notice that I specifically was being shunned [by the black students] until I started overhearing nasty comments, and then realized that that was why... Now some of it was done in my face, but most of it was not said to my face. They considered me uppity, let’s see, what word would they use, it was conceited, arrogant, uppity, too white. I can’t even remember what all else... The people who I met in the first few days, were mostly white. I mean, you know, the school was like 95% white, there was a pretty good chance, (Laugh) that you’re gonna meet quite a lot of white people in the first few days

and so the group that I ended up hanging out with was predominantly white. I didn't think anything about it until I realized that I was completely shunned by everyone who was black... I thought they just didn't really talk to anybody who wasn't part of their group. And call me naïve, but it just didn't really occur to me that they were refusing to talk to anybody who had white friends until they actually said things like that, and then I realized that. So once I started dating a guy who was, part of that group, and who was— he had a few white friends so he was kind of the edge of the group, but most of his friends weren't white, so he was okay... I was there for about a year and a half before any of the black kids spoke to me. And that was in greeting, in passing.

Gabrielle described her experience with the black students on campus in similar fashion. Their attitude toward her made her feel like she had to choose a black or white identity. She did not feel comfortable with the black students because she was used to having everyone “mixed together.” She felt more comfortable with the white students even if she was the only one mixing it up.

About how like, especially at Christian University, just feeling like, you know, I have to pick one or the other. And not feeling too much comfortable with the black group, just because it wasn't what I was used to. And I felt more comfortable with the white group. So I think I just overcame it by, you know, I just decided that I wasn't going to be with them, and they looked down upon me. You know, I don't remember ever really talking about that. I think it was more of a decision I just made. That was the way that they were... And I think that that

comes, you know from my background, since everybody's mixed together anyway— in my household, everyone was mixed together. So I just don't understand why we're all so segregated, and it just doesn't make sense to me, so I'd rather like— I think that's why I'd rather be the odd one.

In those situations, when Gabrielle was the only person of color in a group of white students, she made known her racial background, “I think I made sure that everyone knew, once again, that I wasn't black, and I don't know why I felt like there was something wrong with that. It was like, I made sure that everyone knew that, and so then I felt comfortable. Like I feel like once people know that, then I'm okay. I just don't want people to like put that on me. Like I have to make sure that they know that I'm not black, you know. That I'm not like put into a category that they wanna put me into. And so like I made sure that all my friends knew that, and then I was okay.”

In discussion about college social situations, some participants talked about challenges with dating. In a campus dating pool overwhelmingly populated by white men, some participants felt that their opportunities to date were limited because white men did not find them attractive to date because of how they looked or how others might respond to interracial dating.

Well, I didn't date any white guys, because I've never really known a white guy to come up to me and ask me for my number or anything like that. I mean well basically my friends were people from the black student organization and the organization for minority organization of my academic major, and a few people

outside of it. So sometimes we sort of dated, but yeah, I guess I went through the organizations to find my dates. (Jennifer)

Right, well, I guess as far as dating, it was— I never dated any white guys. Until recently I went out with a few. But anyway, (Laughs) but no, so I didn't, you know... It wasn't by preference at all, in fact they didn't even look my way at all. They didn't, you know, they just never paid any attention to us, and I found that, even now they don't seem interested. I guess there's enough, you know, beautiful, pretty little white girls around so they didn't bother. At least at the U. (Laugh) (Savannah)

Patricia shared similar experiences with white men, however she did end up dating and then marrying a white classmate, but not without confrontation.

I do remember socially I guess, when I started dating my husband, there were some problems. Not at the school, except for that one teacher who told him that, you know, he would have problems later on in life if he decided to marry me. There were some family problems, not from my family but from his. So I guess that's considered social because we were dating. Some problems with his family socially with us dating. I don't remember if they're really being— I guess, the only other thing that I can think of is if I would be interested in someone, like dating someone or whatever, I found that I was more interested or more drawn to like white guys— not that I wasn't interested in those who were of minorities, because there were some black guys that I was interested in, but because I wasn't

part of that group, it just didn't ever really happen.. I think that there were a couple guys, and they never actually said anything, but it was almost, because it was in the south, it wasn't into the scene. And there were a lot of people who were from like deep south, southern heritage, don't ever step out of the box kind of families. It was almost like they were interested, but weren't about to go there, you know. It was just too risky of a place for them to go. And even though they never said that to me because no one's about, you know— most people aren't gonna say, I'm sorry I can't date you, because of your racial makeup. But, it was almost like I got that impression from them. Or it was almost like I'm interested, but, I'm sorry, we can't be doing this.

Additionally, is the issue of the small selection of men of color to date; and how the students of color responded to participants dating outside of expected circles.

And it was interesting because we always had these debates with the black guys on campus about them dating white women versus us dating black guys. Because they always had issue whenever we would like one of us would date a white guy, but most of them [dated white girls]. There were never like couples within our group, like couples of, you know, women from our group with any of the African American men. And, you know, they would always kind of joke around and say like, "We don't really take these white girls seriously," you know, "They buy us things and drive us around," and, you know, "I wouldn't take them home to my mom, but, you know for now it's a good situation." And of course, you know, tell us that we always had like attitude problems, and, always wanted our way— and it

was like this double standard, you know. And then when any of us, like when I dated a guy briefly who was white, it was like this huge deal for me to do that, you know. And they weren't like really mean about it, but definitely you know, gave me a hard time. I know that they kind of had some issues with it, which is funny because they never could explain it based on their own personal situations... But apart from that there wasn't a whole lot of interracial dating on campus. I mean I wouldn't say that the guys that were black on campus weren't, you know, great guys, but the pool was definitely small if you were a person of color because your option of dating a white person from small towns was not a big option because you weren't the kind of person they were looking for necessarily. And then dating any of the black guys wasn't always an option because they were such a small group and with a small group the selection's not— is a little different. And so, so it was definitely interesting, an interesting relationship we had with the men of color on campus. (Naomi)

Dating. Let's see. Definitely dated minority men, or back then it would have been minority men. Let's see, latino and black mostly. I haven't had a native boyfriend since, I left home probably. Just because there weren't any native men. I hate to sound like that, but we [were like] brother and sister, and friend, or they had partners, so, it was limited. White— never felt like I could date a white man ever. I just never have. People tell me that I've been hit on, but I mean I just never had a eye for that... Why is that? Because of segregation I think. And that's probably how I was socialized. I grew up in a segregated community, for

all intents and purposes: this little Brown community in the middle of the white Midwest, for lack of a better description. And so I think I think I was intimidated by white men, too -Big time. Because I just didn't know what to say, how to act, or I felt like I'd be judged. That's probably from negative experiences growing up. So, never been an option. (E.Lynn)

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## RESOURCES FOR SUPPORT

With regard to racial identity, multiracial students face a number of challenges that are similar and unique to that of other students of color. Overall it is the balance of challenges and support that make a student successful in the collegiate setting. In pre-college scenarios, family and teachers played a significant role in support of multiracial individuals. Inclusive educational settings and participation in academics or school activities served as additional resources in the development of identity in pre-college settings. The college experience presented parallel and new challenges to multiracial students. Friendships developed in student organizations were the most prominent source of support attained by participants. Additional resources included race/ethnic-related courses of study and individual staff or faculty members.

Making connections to their campus environment through individuals and groups was paramount to the success of multiracial students. Finding a "niche," whether it was someone or something, was the most noted resource named by participants. For several participants, programs designed to recruit and retain students of color established a place to meet friends. Denise, Christy, Jennifer, and E. Lynn found the bridge program at their university to be helpful in making the transition from high school to college both

academically and socially. Denise said that the racial diversity of the friendships she made through this program were most significant to her racial identity development. This “cohort” served as a resource for her throughout her undergraduate experience. Bridge programs often introduced participants to other resources for students of color, such as offices for minority affairs and multi-culture centers.

Yuri “hated” her college experience at first because she felt like she was on her own. It was not until she discovered the multi-culture center during her sophomore year that she enjoyed college. She said that the center helped her to be successful in college by providing her a place to “hang out” and “network” with new people. This is how she became involved in other student organizations. For Yuri it was not only about the people she met, but also the programming the center provided. The various racial/ethnic student organizations would host public speakers and workshops that “really opened her eyes up to issues of diversity.” These were major influences on her identity development.

Jennifer concurred, the culture center at her university served as a safe place to go “whenever she needed to talk to someone.” It also helped her to “connect” with other black students and students of color. She said that students of color “can relate to each other” even with their differences because they share in common how the majority white campus responds to them.

Racial— and ethnic-based student organizations also served as support systems for participants. Some participants held memberships in one or more student organizations that reflected their parentage, some were members of racial/ethnic groups whose focus was more broad, and others belonged to racial/ethnic student organizations that did not



share their heritage. Participants were actively involved in racial/ethnic student organizations that they felt accepted them and others.

Lavern described her freshman year as the “happiest time” at her university because her closest friends were all black women and she felt strong ties to her black identity and black culture. This experience was important to her identity development. When they left she did not feel comfortable with the black student organization, but she did find her place as an active member with the American ethnicities student group. She was particularly close to the president of the organization.

I was really close to the girl who was the president of the American ethnicities student group. She’s biracial and so we kind of like, you know, got together and like, “You get it, you feel this?” “Yeah, I feel it too.” Yeah. So just finding that someone whose life you can understand, you know, I didn’t want to give that up. It was very rare to see other biracial people... But, I had a really good “mixed-dar” out there and I looked out for like people like me.

With regard to identity development, Denise “branched out” to different groups to obtain support on campus. Her friendships extended to several racial/ethnic student organization as well as mainstream student groups.

Oh, it was fun. And I don’t know say I mean I branched out to different... um... organizations, that would be like, you could see would be general, and maybe more mainstream. And then the Mexican American student organization, I was part of that for a while; and I am part of the alumni. The Native American

student organization— I did them for a little bit, but I, sort of didn't get interested in that after a while— my priorities changed. And I was, basically involved with the black student organization, for a little bit. I definitely went to their functions and supported that... So I definitely learned very quickly to branch out. I had a lot of like African American or black friends. Definitely a lot of Mexican friends— biracial, some of them were. Some of them didn't identify as biracial though, so it just kind of depended. And other groups, I can remember my friends, I think different, some gay. So I kind of had a kind of a multicultural group. And I definitely made connections with mostly like black faculty and staff. Just because I felt like they could understand at least somewhat what I was going through or whatever.

Having “good people around” also helped Savannah to be successful in college. She surrounded herself with members of the Filipino and asian student organizations as well as sought out friendships from students of color at large.

I found my group of brown people, that you know, (Laughs) we all, brown meaning like any minority you know. Lump them into sort of into the— because the group I did hang out with, they're Native American, latino, asians, black, white— you know we had the, probably the most diverse group of any groups that were like on campus.

Additionally, Savannah's asian student counselor helped her to push through hard times at the university.

When the identity and social needs of Naomi and her friends were not met by the black student organization on campus, they founded an international women's student organization.

We decided to create our own international women's student organization, which was made up pretty much, the group of ladies that I hung out with: a lot of international students and women of color on campus... And we came out with some real neat events, raised some, a lot of money for different organizations and had a kind of like a sisterhood that we were able to develop. And so for me I think that was probably the best support system I had there, was that group of ladies... We were very visible on campus. I think we felt some kind of satisfaction from it too, because we felt we were contributing to diversity on campus... in a really significant way that the university had not seen before. It kind of like reminded me, you know, that we were different from kind of the majority of students there. And that, you know, we were special and unique, that we can contribute. And we were going educate, too, and not just kind of get by... And so, I think for me, it allowed me to really express kind of my multiracial, my mixed heritage, and I didn't feel, you know, like I was rejecting any part of me, or I always felt that I could celebrate being a diverse person and what that meant... And I think that was the, you know, you know the purpose of the organization is to really just celebrate who you were, and not kind of put boundaries, you know, over what a person of color should be like.

Naomi, along with Kalena and E. Lynn were highly active in mainstream student organizations, that is organizations generally made up of white students that address needs for the greater student body population, in addition to racial/ethnic student groups. These groups also served as sources for support. Kalena explained,

My curricular activity was [most significant to my identity development]... Just again to have the opportunity outside of the class, in the classrooms, and just learning about education, and just doing some things you don't want to hear about it because that being for extra credit. But once you get outside the classroom and you're a part of these organizations, you get the opportunity to work with people that are different than you.

Aja was also involved with a traditionally mainstream group. She was the only participant to find friendship and support from a sorority. The diversity in the house played a role in where she placed membership. She explained that her sorority was a group that she identified with.

Like student organizations, academic programs were also specified as sources for identity development and support. Jasmine entered the university undecided about a major. Her core group of friends was established in a program, largely consisting of students of color and athletes, to help these students matriculate into academic programs. Similarly, Gabrielle said that the honors program at her university helped her to establish a close group of friends. In fact this is where she met her husband. Her "honors crew" was bound through their interactions in honors facilities and classes. Rae was also involved in the honors program, but for her it was an honors trip that provided insight

into her identity and significantly impacted her identity development. She told “a moment of epiphany” when she heard Dr. Gates, a black professor at Harvard, speak:

And I don't even know what the whole speech was about, but I just remember him talking about how black people shouldn't criticize other black people for being themselves, that there's no one way to be black... That it doesn't matter—that being black is part of who you are, not how you are. And I can remember I was so moved, and validated, and just amazed and impressed and everything like that. That here was somebody who, everybody at the school was talking about as being this like wonderful example and one of the leaders of the black community, and he was saying, it's okay to be who you are... I don't even know how to describe it. That was probably like what is the biggest moment of my college career as it relates to my racial identity. And I think that's when I started thinking maybe it's okay to be black. Maybe I don't have to hate black people, maybe I don't have to hate being black. Maybe I don't have to hate myself, (Laugh) for being multiracial, for being part-black. That maybe I can just be me.

Academic courses were also a resource for identity development. Debbie took a class that focused on black music that “awakened something in me, and maybe it was black, maybe it wasn't, it's who I am.” Naomi took four years of Japanese language and culture courses. Re-learning her language made her feel “reconnected” to her roots and she became “excited about her culture again.”

Some majors naturally encourage exploration and thought regarding issues of race and identity. Lavern, Denise, Savannah and E. Lynn were all sociology majors in college and shared an interest and passion for social issues.

I think it's just my research. Getting into my research and really discovering what it is: listening to other people's experiences, reading about it, and understanding that this is a valid identity— I don't have to pick. And so by doing this research myself and not having someone tell me who I am, helped me really figure out who I am for myself. (Lavern)

The whole pursuits of sociology or, you know, sociology of education that's been my area of education. Ethnic studies, obviously I had a minor in. That was, not just obviously native classes, I took chicano and Mexican American classes, too. Back then that was all it would be— now there's more stuff. I devoted my career to that... The classes, or the course work itself, really helped me explore myself. Especially when I got up into my sociology major, where there's very advanced level theory. Especially like race theory, critical race theory, feminist theory— that definitely helped me. (E. Lynn)

Finally, faculty and staff served as resources to support the identity development of participants. University personnel who were helpful to participants included faculty of color as well as white faculty. The characteristics that encompassed these individuals were “served as a mentor,” “real,” “connected,” “role model,” “supportive,” “open,” and “accepting.”

## SUMMARY

The transition from home to the university setting was salient to the identity development of participants. The challenges voiced by participants show that there are still strides to be made in order to maintain a university setting that supports and embraces all students. Challenges in both academic and social settings fell into three different categories: challenges with campus culture, challenges traditionally known to students of color, and challenges with peer groups. Because university settings are still largely segregated into white and non-white students; and constituents on college campuses view multiracial individuals as having dual heritage, these individuals are often faced with the dilemma of navigating two or more sub-populations on campus. The addition of multi-culturalism posed a challenge for participants who, may not be of white or other heritage, but because of their pre-college experience can successfully navigate dynamic racial scenarios. Some peer groups considered a participant's ability to ebb and flow between groups as a matter of loyalty to the group.

Interestingly, participants did not necessarily see these issues as obstacles. In fact, many hesitated or even denied that they faced "challenges" with regard to their race or their identity prior to giving the examples illustrated in this chapter. Some participants wanted to make clear that their college experience was overall positive and did not want to come across as complaining. Others felt as though their experience is not necessarily unique and that all students face challenges. Some of the participants expressed that their outlook on life and its challenges is what separates them from their monoracial peers, particularly those of color. For example, Lauren made the comment, "I think a lot of it's

me. I think that that experience sort of provided me with the confidence that got me anywhere. You know I'm gonna get by, you know. I don't perceive things as the world's out to get me. What can I get out of the experience?" Similarly, Roxanne made the statement, "You know, I felt like I stuck out when I wasn't around people that treated me right. But I think they would have treated me wrong even if I was full black, white or whatever. They were just negative people anyway. But maybe that's just my perspective on things, you know. I never took it as, "They're treating me wrong because I'm black, or they're treating me wrong because I'm mixed; they're treating me wrong because I'm part-Filipino." Their comments suggested that perhaps "challenges" holds too negative a connotation—most participants felt that the issues they faced regarding their identity helped to shape who they are.

Participants found support to overcome challenges in the friendships and groups they held memberships. With regard to identity, race and ethnic-related student organizations naturally emerged as the most eminent student group from which participants drew support. Generally, participants made connections with other students of color regardless of shared heritage due to common ground in how the campus community at large responded to non-whites. Faculty and staff who were accepting and supportive of participant needs and goals became resources significant to identity development independent of the faculty member's race.

Finally, education about race and identity in programming, workshops and courses were interesting and helpful sources for some participants with regard to identity development. Several participants dedicated their college career and even life's work to social issues including social justice and identity development.



## CHAPTER 6

### STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

An exploration of the experiences of multiracial individuals shed light on the strategies they use to navigate monoracial systems. A number of variables including upbringing, experience, personality, and identity shaped how these individuals approached social situations in the highly homogenous and monoracial setting at college. Participants took on the roles of pacifist, non-conformist, and activist to successfully navigate college environments and social scenarios. Although some participants showed tendencies regarding their approach no one participant utilized a given approach every time.

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#### PLAYING THE ROLE OF PACIFIST

Playing the role of a pacifist refers to a multiracial individual's ability and desire to be open to and accepting of others even in the midst of identity confrontation. Nearly all participants used strategies that emphasize understanding or acceptance. Participants who identified as multiracial by nature of their self-concept took on this function; however this approach was also used by participants who identify with a monoracial designation.

Some participants viewed their identity as an opportunity to bridge differences among student groups or provided them an advantage over monoracial students to move in and out of student groups with little conflict. Roxanne and Yuri participated in both the black and asian student groups on their campus. Roxanne used her unique racial

background to be a “mediator and educator” between groups. Her peers accepted her as a legitimate voice because to them she understood where they were coming from. Denise spoke of her ability to “ebb and flow:”

Interestingly, again one of the benefits (Laugh) I think of coming from two different cultures is that you really feel like you can kind of ebb and flow in and out; and that you, I mean from my perspective, I didn’t feel like I had to be cliquish about who I hung out with... So I never really felt like I was, outcasted by one area or one group for another, because I felt like, you know, I had broad enough experiences where it didn’t make me feel like I was, you know, not accepted in one versus the other.

Several other informants participated in two or more racial/ethnic student organizations, even ones that were not related to their own heritage. These participants utilized strategies that fit under the pacifist umbrella. Savannah and E. Lynn’s experience in this capacity allowed them to find support when the number of students of Filipino and native students, respectively, were low and resources were limited. Savannah relied on the common interests and struggles of students of color at large to make a connection with her peers in these groups. E. Lynn “branched out” to ensure her own success when her circumstances changed during her college career and she did not necessarily relate to the other native students on campus. Learning to be “diplomatic,” a skill she acquired from her family relationships, helped her to navigate social situations at college as well.

Having the attitude that the “world is not out to get me” was another peace-keeping strategy. Some participants saw this as a difference between themselves and

monoracial students of color. Gabrielle learned not to take mistreatment personally. In childhood scenarios, her parents de-emphasized race when people gave her family dirty looks while traveling in the south. While people of color generally think of racism as, “You don’t like me because I’m whatever,” she sees it as, “You don’t like it because it’s different, not necessarily because it’s what I am. You don’t like the difference of it.”

What some individuals might consider discriminatory or bias to race, Debbie sees as a responsibility to do more or work harder; and Lauren sees as an opportunity to learn.

Debbie’s father instilled in her the attitude, “Don’t make excuses if you could have done more. Always look to see what is it you can do.” Lauren said, “I don’t perceive things as the world’s out to get me. What can I get out of the experience?” Likewise, Roxanne made the statement, “You know, I felt like I stuck out when I wasn’t around people that treated me right. But I think they would have treated me wrong even if I was full black, white or whatever. They were just negative people anyway. But maybe that’s just my perspective on things, you know. I never took it as: They’re treating me wrong because I’m black, or they’re treating me wrong because I’m mixed; they’re treating me wrong because I’m part-Filipino.”

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#### PLAYING THE ROLE OF NONCONFORMIST

Because of the challenges they face with regard to identity, most participants affirmed a good sense of self. Playing the role of a nonconformist refers to a participant’s desire to stay true to herself, whatever that means for the individual. Not to be confused with being rebellious, generally the attitude behind a non-conformist

approach to a social situation is to “be proud” of oneself and validating that through action.

Although some participants shared a pressure to choose an identity that they do not relate to, they held to an identity of their own. How participants resolved issues related to a bi- or multiracial identity was a strategy utilized to navigate campus spaces. First coined by Root (1996) as “border crossings” then updated by Renn (2000, 2003) participants fell in one of five or a combination of the five border crossings during their university stay. “Having both feet in both groups” is the first type of border crossing described by Renn (2004, p. 21). Roxanne is an example of this navigation strategy. As a woman who identifies herself to others as black, the college experience most significant to her identity development was leading the asian student organization. She held perspectives as a black woman, which she said is how most people identify her, and as a Filipino woman, which her asian peers recognized, simultaneously.

In another option described by Root (1996) an individual practices “situational race.” For the most part Denise existed painlessly within the predominantly white communities of her childhood and university. She attributes this to her phenotype which is fair— she is often mistaken as having a white identity. She also found fit within the smaller cohort of racially and culturally diverse students in the bridge program and minority pre-law student organization. Her ability to navigate and understand both groups is illustrated in her perspective. When asked what experiences she had that was different than her monoracial peers she talked about “human issues that you can see and feel on both sides.”

That, the prejudice really runs across the gambit. And so, you know, to be able to see that and to say, “Oh, it’s not just, you know, this particular ethnicity’s issue, it’s a human issue and that you can see and feel it on both sides— and know that it exists— I think you know is helpful in dealing with people as individuals and knowing that they’re human, and that there’s got to be a sense of, “OK, well let’s just kind of think about this,” and bring an awareness about it that I think, being biracial has allowed me.

In a third option an individual “embraces a multiracial label that cannot be deconstructed” (Renn, 2004). After “definitely a very short period of my life where I was hung up with like, how am I identifying,” Naomi reaffirmed a multiracial identity that is neither a Japanese perspective or black perspective.

So I guess I wouldn’t say that I, you know, identify with either of them separately. Of course I’m to the point in my life now, I definitely don’t. So I’m very clear about how I feel about my identity choice, being multiracial, and so I guess I can’t really— it’s kind of a hard question to answer because I don’t know how I identify with them separately, you know.

Lavern “felt strongly about [her] black identity” during her freshman year when all of her friends were black women. This was the first time she felt a real connection to black culture and her black heritage. When the group dissipated due to marriage or dropping out of college so did her connection to black students on campus; she maintained friendships with a primarily white group of students within the honors and

band programs throughout the remainder of her college career. This is an example of the fourth border crossing where an individual is at home in one camp for an extended period of time. (Root, 1996)

Lauren does not identify with race, rather she sees herself as a multicultural person. This is an example of what Renn (2003) refers to as “opting out” where an individual chooses not to participate in race. These five border crossing describe a multiracial identity that does not conform with generally accepted standards of monoracial models.

Participants honored racial individualism in other ways, too. Several participants shared how they add a column or leave blank items on forms that request information about race. To some participants this makes the statement that racial identity does not apply to the individual, should not matter, or is indefinable. Gabrielle talked about going against expectations and stereotypes; and volunteering her racial identity before others put her in categories she did not fit.

When Rae pretended to be someone she was not in order to get in with the black students on her campus, she learned that they still did not accept her. She later came to the realization that “I just had to be me and they were just gonna have to deal with that.” This understanding is what she attributes to her success in that college community.

Debbie set herself up for success by “knowing people going into situations” and sticking to what is “familiar.” E. Lynn also talked about avoiding identity confrontation in similar fashion, “A lot a people don’t know what I am when they look at me, so if there’s a lot of questioning, or making me confirm who I am, validate who I am, so I tend to stick around the ones that know me so I don’t have to go through it all.” The racial

climate at South Palm College was enough to make Brigitte transfer to the university of her hometown where she “felt welcomed and accepted.” These participants staked their individualism in their own comfort.

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#### PLAYING THE ROLE OF ACTIVIST

Several participants shared their desire to advocate, vocalize, or otherwise ardently support multiracial and other social issues. By and large this comes from their experiences as a multiracial person. Aja said that her post-secondary experience made her “more conscious of [discrimination]” and her experiences led her to feel more comfortable to speak up on behalf of others, like when patients are treated differently because of their perceived race or culture in her current work as a nurse. Playing the role of the activist refers to a multiracial individual’s desire to take initiative in support of their own experience or the experience of others, particularly as it relates to race or identity.

Seeking out students of color was a strategy used by many participants to develop a source of support during their post-secondary experience. Savannah, Kalena, and Christy made concerted efforts to find people of color when they arrived at their predominantly white universities. In relation to Savannah’s residence hall experience she said, “I don’t think I saw a single brown person or person of color at all in there. So I had to go find them, you know, I had to go see where they all were hanging out. And then when I found them, I was like, ‘Oh, here you guys are.’” Kalena grew up in a diverse community, she “finally found the culture center,” which is where she discovered her

“niche, finding some color on campus.” She described her reaction to the primarily white campus environment.

You know, I’m used to being around a lot of women, very influential women of color, and not many to be found [on campus]. Wow. I mean it seemed like I was always the one that helped bring up the ethnic makeup of some organization that I was a part of.

Christy took this strategy to her class selections as well, “I knew it was a predominantly white campus, so I always tried to seek out classes— the class subjects that were like, you know... I’d try to get the professors that were minority professors with— because I felt they would relate, not that they would relate more to me, but they would have a more, not so confined outlook on their teaching, so.”

Making use of help-seeking skills was another strategy taken up by participants. As described in Chapter 5, several participants sought out assistance from identity-based peer groups, multi-culture centers, offices of multicultural student services, and supportive faculty and staff (regardless of their racial makeup). Some students found support in mainstream activities, as well. The advice to “seek help” and “get involved” was touted by participants during interviews. Naomi and her friends extended this strategy when they established their own student organization when their identity and social needs were not met.

I was also one of the founders of what we called an international women’s student organization. We were really interested and we kind of were missing kind of that



sorority type of experience. Because they had two sororities, both were white, so historically white sororities, and 2 fraternities, which were also very, you know, white. And so there wasn't that kind of black group experience that you get on some of the larger campuses, or other minority Greek organizations... And so we wanted to do our own thing, you know, but instead of going the Greek route, we decided to create our own organization, which was made pretty much the group of ladies that I hung out with: A lot of international students and women of color on campus. And, you know, honestly there was probably less than 20 of us, but that was kind of like the core group of ladies. And we came out with some real neat events, raised a lot of money for different organizations and had a kind of like a sisterhood that we were able to develop. And so for me I think that was probably the best support system I had there— was that group of ladies.

Some participants led and currently lead a life of social activism ignited from their experiences as a multiracial individual. E. Lynn mentioned more than once during her interview that she has devoted her career as a student and professional to social issues; and was provided opportunities to be an activist in classes and through her work with the Native American center. These experiences helped her to solidify her identity. Denise's interest in social justice also influenced her academic course and led her to support other students as a career choice.

I mean it led me to work in student affairs, it's led me, you know, in particular to work— when I was working in multicultural student services, because I do make those connections. It's led me to be focused on, you know, social change issues,

and social injustice issues. Again, because I think I've been able to see it on both sides.

Similarly, Naomi and Lavern's personal experiences have propelled them to study the phenomenology of multiracial identity development and the experiences of multiracial individuals in graduate scholarship. They both advocate for social issues within the context of their work in higher education.

As a student Kalena sought to increase the number of students of color in the mainstream activities she was a member of. In a pay-it-forward attitude, she recalled how a friend encouraged her to apply for a position one of the top two honor societies of her campus:

I wasn't going to apply for Mortar Board society because I didn't think I'd get accepted because I was a student of color and I wasn't in the Greek system... And a friend of mine that was in there... she goes, "You should apply. I mean, look at your grades, look at what you're involved in, look at what position you have," all that kind a stuff. And so I did; and got on; and I made sure that I was on the selection committee and made it my goal that when we did selections, that everybody in Mortar Board, when we read applications, we knew that if somebody was the president of any of the identity-based student organizations, you know, all those student groups, that that's important... You had to get high points for that person. And especially if they're, you know, they have good grades, they're helping in the community. And so I want to say that when you know, when we brought on that next class, we probably increased the minority


makeup of the Mortar Board by 50%... They also— I don't know if they realized that they need to go to— that with the minority students you've got to go to them because they're not going to know where to go to. So, you know, I don't know that I had any personal trials and tribulations, but I saw other people and helped them to understand where they could go for help and assistance. Yeah.

Kalena tried to advocate for student of color in this way also as the advisor for the group later in her tenure at the university. She summarized her efforts, "The entire time that I went to the university and now while I'm working here, we're always trying to increase and invite and bring more students and faculty and staff of color."

## SUMMARY

Chapter 6 addresses the grand tour question of this research study: What strategies do multiracial college women use to navigate predominately white institutions? From an exploration of the college experiences of multiracial individuals emerged the strategies they used to navigate this monoracial system. Ecological factors in addition to a participant's identity, precollege experiences, personality, and the school's peer culture impacted how she approached social situations in the highly homogenous and monoracial setting at college. Participants took on the roles of pacifist, non-conformist, and activist to successfully navigate college environments and social scenarios. Although some participants showed tendencies regarding their approach no one participant utilized a given approach every time. Each in their own unique style, participants balanced their ability to bridge and confront in managing relationships with monoracial peers and

faculty members in order to achieve in the college setting. From the stories of these multiracial women it is understood that they are strong, independent, highly-motivated individuals with well-developed self-concepts and an ability to forge supportive relationships that include social, academic and professional elements.



## CHAPTER 7

### THOUGHTS AND SUGGESTIONS

#### IMPLICATIONS

I would be remiss to suggest that multiracial students share a blanket experience. As is found with other populations, general themes emerged in the study, yet as individuals each participant voiced a unique experience that was shaped by a number of variables. Still due to the nature and scope of the multiracial population, generalization is that much more limiting. Some inferences that can be made of traditional racial minority student groups (i.e. a black student arriving to college likely identifies as black; it is probable that a black student arriving to college has felt discrimination due to her race or color) cannot necessarily be made of multiracial students. Multiracial student experiences are more different than they are the same. Multiracial students with one white parent may have very different experiences than those with two parents of color. Still, even within groups of shared heritage (all black-white mixtures or all Filipino-black mixtures) experiences with regard to identity development are unique. Results from this study show that even multiracial siblings with similar precollege and college experiences may not identify the same way. What we can gain from this research however, is some insight into the experiences and identity development of multiracial women. Also knowledge about the internal and external tools that multiracial women use to negotiate challenges can be beneficial to professionals. Participants were asked to give advice to help monoracial students, faculty, staff, and administrators support a more ideal campus

for multiracial students. They were also asked to dream up resources that should be available to support students who shared their personal college experiences. Their recommendations speak to the factors that helped them to find their way with regard to their racial identity, and also highlight holes in their experiences that universities need to make efforts to fill in order to support a campus environment that enriches all students. Based on the findings of this study and the recommendations of participants, this section addresses the implications for academic and student affairs administrators, staff and faculty.

In general multiracial women desire campus environments that are not without challenges, yet are open, accepting and supportive of the needs of all students. The need for more “understanding” from their peers and educators in all contexts of the university setting was a reoccurring theme. Multiracial women want to be seen and treated as individuals not anchored only to race. A campus that supports the identity development of multiracial individuals respects them for who they are, not, as commonly asked, “what” (referring to racial makeup) they are.

Some participants talked about the lack of human response on college campuses that may not be directly connected to race, but contribute to a perception of an intolerant climate in a real way. Simple acknowledgements such as eye contact, a smile or greeting have been replaced with traveling cell phone conversations, texting, and other barriers that prevent students from engaging with students between classes and outside of comfortable circles. Some participants see this as a moral issue— the suggestion to be more accepting and treat people fairly is all too obvious to them, but difficult to translate into propositions that equate actual change. Perhaps some issues are beyond the scope of

this dissertation, and determining where to start change that produces an ideal campus environment that supports multiracial individuals is like establishing which came first, the chicken or the egg. From the findings of this study, participants recognize that all constituents of the campus community play a role: administrators, faculty, staff, and students, including multiracial students. Participants encouraged these constituents to “step out of comfort zones” in order to promote change that will enable a supportive environment for multiracial students. To this end, they suggested that faculty take risks and “own up to mistakes as it relates” to addressing issues about race, culture and other social issues in class; that white students ask questions and speak out against intolerance; and that all students choose and participate in organizations, activities and academic courses that challenge and support their own identity— racial or otherwise.

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#### UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

Administrators, as policy makers and those ultimately responsible for university outcomes, might be encouraged to establish an ideal campus environment that supports multiracial students because, in essence, this kind of campus creates a community that is supportive of all students. Because multiracial women see an idyllic campus as one that treats them as individuals with personal experiences and identity needs, this would render a community that treats all students in a way that sees them as unique. This concept does not translate into services that fit every need, that would be naïve and impossible, rather this implies an attitude equipped to assist students unassuming of their experiences, status, and identity.

More concretely, participants suggested that their ideal campus prepares all students for the “real world.” Participants spoke confidently that “soon everyone will be multiracial” and that monoracial students, particularly white students, came to the university underprepared to deal with the minimal diversity of a predominately white institution. Universities, they suggested, did monoracial students a disservice if they did not utilize the college environment to better prepare students for diversity beyond the campus gates. Several participants further noted that faculty and staff members of predominantly white campuses also have limited experience with diversity and are in need of preparation for the already changing demographics of student faces.

The findings of this study reveal that administrators of colleges that support an ideal campus environment for multiracial students:

- Ensure the student body, staff and faculty reflect of our diverse society.  
Faces that mirror that of that of students is a visible signal to them that they belong to a community. For many participants who faced challenges traditionally confronted by students of color, this was particularly important. Additionally for several participants, a faculty member of color suggested an ally to approach for guidance or assistance.
- Are able to negotiate conflict that arise between university constituents (individuals and groups) in a way that is sensitive to cultural differences.  
Some participants recognize that monoracial students and university personnel come to the campus setting unexperienced with diverse situations. How conflict due to cultural misunderstandings or outright bigotry is managed sends a message that reinforces exclusivity or



inclusiveness. “The positive aspect of this situation is that staff need not have a grasp of traditional cultural paradigms to understand the experiences of biracial students. What they must have is the sense of responsibility to combat ignorance and assist a student in succeeding” (Calleroz, 2003, p. 176).

- Require students, staff and faculty to learn about cultural differences in a way that is engaging and on-going. The lack of understanding and acceptance of multiracial identity was a general complaint of participants. Participants suggested that one-time diversity workshops were not sufficient to meet this need. Students and university personnel need integrated and continual training and education in working with multiracial individuals and people from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, hands-on learning, specifically “forcing students” to work with and learn about people different from themselves was recommended. Staff who advise identity-based organizations and work in multi-culture centers are familiar with monoracial identity development models, but are not necessarily familiar with or accepting of the identity of multiracial students. Participants turned to these centers and organizations first when faced with identity dissonance.
- Demonstrate their commitment to diversity in how they allocate funds and facilities to groups and programs. Many participants spoke of their universities as “trying” with respect to racial climate. The fact that most participants attended a university on a race-based academic scholarship,

proved to them that the university was making efforts to bring more students of color to the campus. Further, the availability of programs and services specifically for students of color demonstrated this endeavor. Still, there were recommendations by participants to increase diversity among the study bodies by providing funds to recruit and retain these students; and to improve conditions of the facilities designed to support diversity efforts. A few participants spoke about the inequality of opportunities available to mainstream student groups and identity-based groups. For example, unlike historically black Greek organizations, predominantly white Greek organizations often have houses located on campus grounds. These and other disparities tell students that “you’re not what really makes the university.”

- Are conscientious about how they administer and promote programs that aim to support students of color. A few participants who attended college through race-based scholarships faced internal and external challenges with regard to their award due to their racial identity. Often scholarship programs meant to draw racial minorities overlook the implication of multiracial applicants. What qualifies a student for a race-based award; and how qualifications are evaluated are concerns that need to be explored by administrators. Additionally, programs designed to meet the needs of students of color should consider the needs of multiracial students in the design and promotion of these services. Lastly, it was suggested that administrators combat assumptions that race-based programs provide

opportunities for “at risk or remedial students” through careful marketing of these programs.

- Validate a multiracial identity in official (forms) and theoretical contexts as a legitimate and healthy option for mixed heritage students.

Admissions and other forms do not capture the identity of multiracial individuals. Participants were challenged by determining how to “check boxes,” and some leave these items blank. Administrators must consider how to collect data in a way that is inclusive of a diverse student population that transcends traditional models. On the surface what seemed to many participants as an easy addition to a standard form, in reality is quite taxing. Providing options that reflect multiracial identities are not easily transferred into data that is required by federal and other agencies. Still, these are issues that need to be addressed by administrators of higher education and other institutions in order to accurately portray the changing demographics. Finally, administrators ultimately responsible for upholding the missions of universities set the tone in a trickle-down effect for how multiracial students and their needs are perceived and managed. University administrators must consider how multiracial students can be impacted by policy and practices as it relates to data collection, funding, curriculum, and student development.

Participants were asked how student affairs personnel can contribute to a campus environment that is supportive to the needs of multiracial students. In line with previous research, multiracial women emphasized the importance of “spaces” where they felt accepted and “safe zones” to explore racial identity. The knowledge and personal perceptions of multiracial persons and identity among student affairs practitioners play a vital role in how multiracial students are welcomed into these occupancies and impact the identity development of multiracial students in ways participants proved to be significant. According to informants staff who supported their identity had a positive impact on identity development, but for some participants staff who criticized their identity negatively influenced their college experiences.

Participants recommended professional development for staff that alerts them to the dynamic identity options for multiracial students. Additionally, the researcher advises training regarding sensitivity to and knowledge about multiple identities. A holistic approach is advised in working with multiracial students who are developing racial, cultural, sexual, and other identities integrally. These issues are often compartmentalized in different offices in student affairs. Further, as reported by participants, due to strong familial ties with parents, student affairs personnel must find ways to include family in the development of multiracial students. For some participants, cultural expectations with respect to gender played a role in identity development that often are not aligned or even contrary to the values of university. For these reasons, staff need to be equipped with knowledge about different cultures, yet assist students unassuming of their experiences and identity.

From a programmatic point of view, participants' specific recommendations to increase the awareness about and acceptance of multiraciality paralleled programs that are already widely practiced across college campuses. This suggests that these types of programs may not be reaching multiracial students, perhaps due to traditional ways of recruiting participation from students of color that are not inclusive to multiracial students. For some participants there is a level of discomfort that is associated with programs and services aimed at students of color. Central to this issue are internally or externally felt issues of legitimacy. Identity, racial appearance and cultural knowledge are factors that contribute to their sensitivity. Advisors and staff responsible for helping students succeed must look beyond monoracial paradigms to role model and foster an environment that is accepting of diversity in identity and affiliation among students of color.

According to the findings of this study, mentors as positive influences on identity development are relationships that student affairs practitioners should continue to promote in formal and informal ways. Additionally, programs that emphasize cultural diversity, not race, like the "power game" have been used by student affairs practitioners to educate students about social issues in ways that multiracial women appreciate. Participants suggested that these kinds of discussions be encouraged in small, diverse groups where a level of trust has already been pre-established.

Although all participants emphasized the value of identity-based groups (historically known as minority student organizations), how participants saw the purpose and membership of these groups varied. While some participants felt that monoracial identity-based student groups met the need of multiracial students founded on mutual

experiences faced by students of color at large; other participants talked about the need for student organizations that specifically address the needs of multiracial students; still others were against separation of students based on racial identity and proposed that student organizations that promote racial diversity at large were comfortable resources. Even if participants did not engage in any such student organization due to preference or availability, they shared that the existence of such programs was important to meet identity needs of students. Opportunities to participate in student organizations that already exist or create their own student group that reflect, challenge and support their racial identity in healthy ways must be available to students in order to support an ideal campus for multiracial students.

Student affairs practitioners, particularly those who work with programs that directly serve the needs of students of color, are often the first point of contact for multiracial students who seek out assistance regarding a racial identity issue. Staff must be prepared to assist students who do not look like traditionally served racial minorities. Furthermore, they must examine their own perceptions about multiracial students and their families then role model behavior and language that are inclusive of multiracial identity development. Student affairs practitioners can serve as allies or when fitting, mentors, to multiracial students who desire this type of guidance and relationship. Staff can also positively impact students by referring them to opportunities or resources that may support their identity development. Student affairs practitioners may need to look off campus for support venues that meet the individual needs of multiracial students. Establishing connections with community resources that target ethnic or racial identities are clear places to start.

## FACULTY MEMBERS

Classroom experiences served as a significant source of both challenge and support to identity development. Although participants expressed a need for more faculty of color, members who were accepting and supportive of participant needs and goals became resources, even mentors, and significant to their identity development independent of their race.

Faculty members must recognize the impact of their role in classroom experiences of multiracial students. Participants expressed that how a professor treats issues of race, ethnicity and culture in the classroom can influence or affirm bias that already exists on predominantly white institutions. They recommend that faculty members obtain diversity training and actively integrate issues regarding race, ethnicity and culture into their teaching.

Professors set the tone with regard to the validity of multicultural perspectives as well as how safe students feel to discuss social issues in the classroom setting. Their own perspectives about multiracial individuals and interracial families must be examined to address prejudice that shapes their interactions with students. Participants communicated a need for faculty training focused on establishing an inclusive classroom setting for students of color and multiracial students. Faculty members must be equipped with skills to facilitate open discussion and negotiate confrontation with sensitivity to cultural differences. Participants also desire professors that do not assume the racial identity and experiences of students based on appearance. Professors must take steps to increase their awareness, knowledge, and understanding of individuals from culturally

different backgrounds. They must also learn how to create opportunities for students of color and multiracial students to contribute to class that in a way that is not isolating.

Courses that highlight the issues and contributions of people of color and multiracial persons emerged as significant factors to identity development for several participants of this study. Although participants recognized that some majors more naturally lend to open discussion about issues related to social differences, they suggested that these issues be incorporated into curriculum seamlessly. Gibbs (1991) suggestions for “mainstreaming” biracial content into social work curriculum can be applied in almost any field.

Schools of social work need to strengthen their course offerings in the area of minority mental health, integrate this information into the regular curriculum, sponsor colloquia on these topics, and provide field work opportunities for students to gain experience in skills in working with diverse clients in multicultural settings. More specifically, the social work curriculum should “mainstream” content on biracial and bicultural families and children in the human development, policy, practice, and research courses by including relevant readings, films, student panel discussions, and guest lecturers. (p. 589)

Multiracial students desire opportunities to learn about the historical and contemporary contributions of their heritage in all academic subjects— allowing them to make connections to their roots and reflect on their own identity. Further, scholarship that addresses human diversity and includes the contributions of diverse peoples helps all



members of an educational community to gain perspective and appreciation for a multicultural society.

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#### FURTHER RESEARCH

Sands and Schuh (2004) emphasized the importance of future research on the experiences of multiracial students, “Not only is this a rapidly growing population in the United States, it is a population that will not disappear as racial groups become more fluid and interracial relationships become more prolific. Because of the potential magnitude, biracial and multiracial student academic experiences would be an important area for research initiatives” (p. 360). This study aimed to explore the strategies that multiracial college women use to navigate predominately white institutions. The discovery of successes and challenges faced by participants have implications for administrators, staff and faculty of predominately white institutions as recorded in the previous section. Addressed here are the implications concerning methodology and further research.

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#### METHODS

Selecting participants for the current study proved to be a challenge. Participants met three basic criteria: they are the child of parents from more than one federally-designated racial or ethnic category, they are women, and they have graduated from of a predominately white institution. The primary investigator identified and contacted five women within personal association who met the criteria to inquire whether they would be interested in participating in the study. In snowball effect, the researcher obtained three

additional participants, then experienced a six month delay in acquiring participants after expiring attempts from the five associates. Flyers were provided to selected city departments as well as local colleges and universities in vicinity of the researcher's residence; however this effort produced no response.

The researcher then began to search the institution of her doctoral program—identified and contacted two colleagues who agreed to participate in the study. Another woman was interviewed as a referral from this third batch of interviews. Meanwhile, to locate further subjects, the researcher contacted personal associates (this time monoracial) by email asking them to forward an attached flyer and invitation letter to their associates who might meet the qualifications of the study. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, they were directly instructed to have interested individuals contact me directly, rather than providing me names and contact information of persons who they thought met the criteria. Six additional interviews were scheduled as a result of this effort.

The investigator had predetermined with the dissertation advisory committee that twenty subjects would be an ambitious goal to reach saturation for the purposes of data collection. Still trying to achieve this, the researcher continued to request referrals from participants at the end of interviews, although overlap of information was becoming evident. Three women contacted me as a result of this third attempt to obtain informants; however only two followed up and actually completed interviews. After numerous attempts to reconnect with the third woman, the researcher concluded the search for participants. Nineteen women in all were interviewed for the purposes of this study. Due

to technical difficulty, the experiences of only eighteen women were captured by audio-tape to provide transcripts for analysis.

Above description makes clear the laborious task of obtaining informants for a study in which the subjects are not easily identifiable. Finding participants was problematic for the current study because the boundaries of the study which limited sample by sex, institution and academic status. The researcher's access to individuals was also limited by personal circles. Still, identifying multiracial women who are willing to discuss their experiences remains tricky for researchers because they are always physically recognizable nor do they always identify themselves as a person of mixed heritage to others.

The process of collecting data was also an issue for this study that is noteworthy of this section. Once qualified participants were obtained, the matter of recollection was difficult for some participants. The current study sampled college graduates so that participants could reflect on their undergraduate experiences and provide more thoughtful and articulate responses to the research questions than if they were still living the experience. Participants had to go from one month to ten years back in memory to describe their college experiences. Overall, the participants were open and thoughtful with their responses.

Finally, the process of trial and error and learning by doing impacted the data collection. A review of the audio-recordings and transcripts revealed improved flow and quality of conversations with interviewees over the course of the study. Conversely, informants played a role in the flow and ease of interviews. Conversations with participants who described themselves as advocates of social issues or who were self-

assured of their identity choice had much to say regarding identity development and experiences as a multiracial individual. Ease of conversation was less prevalent in interviews with individuals who had not thought about the questions prior to our meeting or who were less confident with their identity choice or still exploring their identity. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in mutually-agreed upon locations, generally a participant's home or office. In the case of some interviews environmental distractions disrupted the natural flow of conversation and thoughts for both interviewer and informant.

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#### FURTHER RESEARCH

With relatively little empirical study on the multiracial college students, there is much to explore. The limitations and findings of this study can serve up ideas for further study on this topic:

- This study was limited to the interviews of eighteen multiracial college women. Additional study should take a look at the experiences, identity development and strategies of multiracial college men.
- Although gender issues arose in conversations with the women of this study, it was not the focus of the research. Further study into gender issues and difference among multiracial individuals should be explored.
- The success strategies of multiracial women are highlighted in this study. Researchers should investigate multiracial individuals who could not navigate the system— examining retention issues of multiracial students

- Twelve participants of this study came from military backgrounds. Future study should further examine this significant pre-college factor.  
Additional pre-college factors significant to identity development— such family, community, and K-12 educational experiences found in this study— warrant study as well.
- A longitudinal project that journeys with multiracial students through the duration of their undergraduate career would provide insight to a developing identity, which might look different than a conclusive summary of identity development provided by the participants of this study.
- The differences and similarities within multiracial groups of shared heritage (i.e. only black-Japanese combinations) should be explored.
- Future study should take a look at the multiple identity development of students. Multiracial women like other students are developing cultural, ethnic, sexual, spiritual, etc. identities that merge with their racial identity.
- Study regarding the attitudes of university personnel toward multiracial students should be conducted.
- Programs and services designed to address the unique needs of multiracial students should be examined by researchers to determine types of programs and best practices. Additional studies should consider effectiveness of these services measured by multiracial students.

## CONCLUSION

As marked perhaps most recently by the inauguration of President Barak Obama, the United States is becoming a more diverse and accepting society. Still as reflected in the voices of the participants of this study, our nation's colleges and universities have strides to make in establishing an environment that is inclusive of multiracial students. Still operating on a monoracial system, institutions of higher education are not only experiencing a significant growth in multiracial student numbers, but also voice, creating a dilemma. With new challenges bring with it new opportunities to fulfill the documented missions of our universities to "promote respect for and understanding of cultural diversity in all aspects of society... strive for a culturally diverse student body, faculty, and staff reflecting the multicultural nature of the state and the nation."

As a result of this research, the discovery of successes and challenges faced by multiracial individuals has uncovered the strategies that multiracial college women use to navigate predominantly white institutions. A number of variables including upbringing, experience, personality, and identity shaped how these individuals approached social situations in the highly homogenous and monoracial setting at college. Participants took on the roles of pacifist, non-conformist, and activist to successfully negotiate college environments and social scenarios. This finding is unique to this study and extends strategies to resolve the "other status" beyond border-crossings discovered in previous research.

The finding of this research also address questions regarding the multiracial experience and racial identity development among this group; and align with previous research. Campus culture, peer groups, and traditional challenges for students of color (first-generation issues, the only, etc.) are sources of challenge for multiracial students;

while peers groups (namely student organizations), academic courses, and individual faculty and staff members served as sources for support.

The findings of this study have practical implications that can be applied to better meet the needs of multiracial students. Recommendations for administrators, staff and faculty are provided. Additionally, the stories of these women can also directly provide examples of ways to help students find fit and overcome challenges that university settings present.

Based on the finding the researcher has developed the following propositions:

- Family plays a major role in the racial identity development of multiracial. Parental views regarding race, ethnicity and culture; and the classification of their multiracial child largely shape how these individuals see themselves. For example, multiracial children whose parents downplay race tend to view race as a nonissue.
- Other childhood factors such as extended family and community affirm or challenge how multiracial view their place in the racial scheme and significantly impact their perception of self as a racial being. With regard to race, both positive and negative experiences with family and community have lasting effect on their identity.
- Childhood experiences shape the racial identity of multiracial children that are affirmed and challenged, but are not likely changed by college factors and experiences.

- Multiracial individuals who appear white are likely to be sensitive to the challenges their monoracial and multiracial peers of color face even if they do face the same challenges themselves.
- College courses and programs that are racially or culturally relevant provide a way for students to connect with their heritage and gain cultural knowledge that significantly impacts their identity development.
- Faculty and staff members who are open, accepting and supportive are likely to have a positive influence on the identity development of multiracial students.
- Multiracial students benefit most from college environments that are not without challenges, yet are open, accepting and supportive of multiracial identity options.
- Multiracial students contribute to the diversity of universities in unique ways that are different than monoracial students. Additionally, multiracial student experiences are more different than they are the same.




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**APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

## Informed Consent Form

IRB# 2007-1-200 EP

**Identification of Project:**

Strategies Multiracial College Women Use to Navigate Monoracial Systems: Predominately White Institutions (PWI).

**Purpose of the Research:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies that multiracial college women use to navigate predominately white institutions. You must be 19 years of age or older to participate. You are invited to participate in this study because you are multiracial (the child of parents from more than one federally-designated racial or ethnic category), a woman, and have graduated from a PWI.

**Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require approximately two and a half hours of your time. You will participate in an approximately 90-minute interview with the principal researcher regarding your multiracial experience, your undergraduate collegiate experience, and racial identity development. The interview will be audio taped with your permission, and conducted at a mutually agreed upon site that is convenient for you. If necessary, the researcher will contact you at a later date for a follow-up interview to clarify and extend data. The follow-up interview will be no longer than 60 minutes. A transcription of the interview will be sent to you for your review. This serves an opportunity to verify your comments in the transcription and make corrections.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

Interview questions regarding your multiracial experience, undergraduate collegiate experience, and racial identity development may bring up sensitive topics. You can refuse to answer questions that you find uncomfortable and can withdraw participation from the study at anytime. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, you may seek psychological treatment that is available to you, at your own expense, on a sliding fee scale at the UNL Psychological Consultation Center, telephone (402) 472-2351.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating. The results of this study may help administrators, faculty, staff, and students understand the unique experiences and challenges multiracial college women face and the strategies they use to overcome them in PWIs. In addition, the research may help to address questions regarding the multiracial experience and racial identity development in order to better meet the needs of this student population.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the primary investigator's office and will only be seen by the primary and secondary investigators during the study and for three years after the study is complete. The interview audio tapes will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Your name will not be used, rather the audio tape will be labeled with a pseudonym. The audio tapes will be erased after the data analysis and report are reviewed by an external auditor. The information obtained in this study

will be used in a dissertation and may be published in educational journals or presented at professional meetings, but the data will be reported using pseudonyms.

***Compensation:***

There will be no compensation for participating in this research.

***Opportunity to Ask Questions:***

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. You may call the primary investigator, (757) 826-6097, and secondary investigator, (402) 472-0974. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigator or to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965.

***Freedom to Withdraw:***

You are free to decide to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

***Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:***

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Initial if you agree to be audio taped during the interview.

***Signature of Participant:***

\_\_\_\_\_ *Signature of Research Participant* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date*

***Name and phone number of investigator(s)***

Primary Investigator  
Minisa Chapman-Huls, MEd  
(757) 826-6097

Secondary Investigator  
Marilyn Grady, PhD  
(402) 472-0974





## APPENDIX B: EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear Name:

I am a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducting a qualitative study entitled “Strategies Multiracial College Women Use to Navigate Monoracial Systems: Predominately White Institutions” as part of the requirements to achieve the degree, Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Educational Studies- Educational Leadership and Higher Education. I believe the results of this study will help administrators, faculty, staff, and students understand the unique challenges multiracial college women face at predominately white institutions and the strategies they use to overcome them. Additionally, I hope that the research will help address questions regarding the multiracial experience and racial identity development in order to better meet the needs of this student population.

I understand that you identify as an individual who meets the criteria for this study. The data collection consists of a 90 minute interview that will be scheduled at a time and location convenient for you. The interview will be audio-taped with your permission, and will address issues regarding your multiracial experience, your undergraduate collegiate experience, and racial identity development. A follow-up interview may be necessary to clarify or extend information learned through interviews. Follow-up interviews will take no longer than 60 minutes. A transcription of the interview will be sent to you. This will serve as an opportunity for you to verify your comments in the transcription and make any changes. Your identity will be kept confidential.

Participation is completely voluntary. However, if you are willing to participate in the study by sharing your multiracial experiences, please contact me at (757) 826-6097 or [minisa@huskeralum.com](mailto:minisa@huskeralum.com) to schedule an interview date. I would also be happy to answer any questions you might have about my research.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Minisa Chapman-Huls  
Primary Investigator/Graduate Assistant

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### STRATEGIES MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS USE TO NAVIGATE MONORACIAL SYSTEMS: PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

#### Interview Protocol

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Interview End Time: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Demographic Information

Race/Ethnicity of Mother: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity of Father: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Introduction:**

Thank you so much for visiting with me today. I am very interested in hearing about your racial identity development and about your undergraduate experiences as a multiracial/multiracial student. Please feel free to share anything that you feel is important in understanding this topic.

Do you give your permission to audio tape this interview?

This conversation will be audio-tape recorded and transcribed. I will then ask you to review the transcriptions for accuracy to make sure they reflect exactly what you mean in this study. A follow-up interview may be necessary to clarify or extend information.

Do you have any questions about this interview or about this study?

Are you ready to begin?

(Turn on audio tape)

STRATEGIES MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS USE TO NAVIGATE  
MONORACIAL SYSTEMS: PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Interview Protocol

**Research Question: What is the multiracial woman's self-assigned racial identity?**

*Interview Question (IQ):* Describe your racial identity.

*IQ:* Describe your ethnic identity.

*Probe (P):* How do you distinguish this from your racial identity?

*IQ:* How would you mark your identity on a standardized form?

*P:* How do you respond when only one racial designation is permitted? (i.e. "Please mark one")

*IQ:* How do you identify with each part of your ethnic or racial background?

*IQ:* How have others responded to your racial identity choice?

STRATEGIES MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS USE TO NAVIGATE  
MONORACIAL SYSTEMS: PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Interview Protocol

**Research Question: What life experiences have aided in the formation of the  
multiracial woman's racial identity?**

*IQ:* Describe the racial make-up of the community that you grew up in.

*IQ:* Describe the racial make-up of your high school.

*IQ:* How would you describe the overall racial climate or culture of this community?

*IQ:* In general, how did the people in these communities treat you and your family?

*P:* How did you and your family "fit in"?

*IQ:* With regard to your family's racial background, what challenges did you and your family face? How did you overcome them?

*IQ:* How did you "find your way" in these communities?

*P:* Who or what resources helped you to be successful in this community?

*IQ:* What childhood experiences were significant to your racial identity?

*IQ:* How would you compare who you were in high school with who you are now?

*P:* What, if anything, do you attribute to the difference in who you were then and who you are now?

STRATEGIES MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS USE TO NAVIGATE  
MONORACIAL SYSTEMS: PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Interview Protocol

**Research Questions: What is unique about the multiracial college woman's experience?**

*IQ:* Where did you go to receive your bachelor's degree? What was your major?

*IQ:* Why did you choose this college/university?

*IQ:* Describe the racial make-up of this college/university.

*IQ:* How would you describe the overall racial climate or culture of this college/university?

*IQ:* With regard to your racial background, what challenges did you face during your college/university experience? How did you overcome them?

*IQ:* How did you feel like you "fit in" among other students on campus?

*P:* Was "sticking out" at the college/university an issue for you?

*P:* With whom or in what situations did you feel like you "belonged" on campus?

*IQ:* Where did you live during your undergraduate career? Describe your living experiences in relation to your racial background.

*IQ:* Describe your academic experiences in relation to your racial background.

*IQ:* Describe your extracurricular experiences in relation to your racial background.

*IQ:* Describe your social experiences in relation to your racial background.

*IQ:* What, if any, advantages did you experience with regard to your racial background?

*IQ:* What experiences did you have that were unlike the experiences of your monoracial peers?

*IQ:* How did you “find your way” in this college/university community?

*P:* Who or what resources helped you to be successful in this community?

STRATEGIES MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS USE TO NAVIGATE  
MONORACIAL SYSTEMS: PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Interview Protocol

**Research Questions: How has the college experience contributed to the  
development of the multiracial woman's racial identity?**

*IQ:* Describe the factors or experiences that were most significant to the development of your racial identity during your undergraduate experience.

*P:* What campus individuals, activities or resources were most instrumental to your identity development?

*IQ:* What resources should be available to multiracial students?

*IQ:* What recommendations would you give to faculty to enable them support an ideal campus environment for multiracial students?

*IQ:* What recommendations would you give to administrators and student affairs staff to enable them to support an ideal campus environment for multiracial students?

*IQ:* What recommendations would you give to monoracial students to enable them support an ideal campus environment for multiracial students?

*IQ:* Based on your experiences, what advice would you give another multiracial individual to help him or her "find the way" at a PWI?

*IQ:* How has being multiracial influenced who you are today?

*IQ:* Is there anything that we missed that you think people should know?

STRATEGIES MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS USE TO NAVIGATE  
MONORACIAL SYSTEMS: PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Interview Protocol

**(Turn off audio tape)**

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me today. I may need to contact you again regarding a follow-up interview. Do I need to update your contact information?

Please feel free to contact me meanwhile if you have any questions or concern.

Once the interviews are transcribed, I will send you a copy to verify your comments and allow you an opportunity to make any changes.

**Collecting more interviews:**

Do you know of anyone else who would like to share their experiences with me? (If yes, hand participant recruitment flyers) Please invite any individual within your personal contacts who meet the criteria of the study to contact me.