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**WOMEN OF COLOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

Melissa Minaya

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services & Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration  
at  
Rowan University  
June 14, 2020

Thesis Chair: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D

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## Acknowledgements

Sankofa is an African word that symbolizes the ability to learn from the past, and take the necessary to move forward. My interest in this topic is mainly due to my past experiences as a woman of color. Therefore, it is important to me to acknowledge the experiences and the people that have led me to this moment.

My family and friends, thank you for always supporting me and encouraging me to move forward and to not give up. To my household, although many of you do not understand what it is that I am studying, thank you for being proud of me and constantly reminding me of how important education is. Para mi familia, aunque aveces no entienda lo que estaba estudiando, mucha gracias por estar orgullosos de mí y por recordarme constantemente lo importante que es la educación. To my loved ones/village, thank you for the constant check ins, taking an interest in my research, and simply being a resource at all times. It takes a village!

To my Rowan family, thank you for welcoming me with open arms. You all made learning fun for me again. MaryBeth Walpole, thank you for being a mentor, pushing me to be better and not allowing any mediocre work. You were truly a pleasure. Dr. McCombs, thank you for stepping in with compassion and grace; it did not go unnoticed and I appreciated it. To the rest of my professors, thank you for passion, it kept me going! To the women of color that participated in this study, you are strong, resilient, and beautiful; thank you for being vulnerable with me! SJICR, simply thank you for the last two years! Again, it takes a village and you are all part of that village!

## **Abstract**

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WOMEN OF COLOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
2019-2020  
MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D  
Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration

The purpose of this study is to capture the essence of the stories of women of color at Rowan University. Additionally, the study would capture how women of color in their junior or senior year feel about institutional support. The combination of both the essence in their story, in other words, the importance behind their experiences, and their perception of institutional support will lead to recommendations to Rowan University.

In order to capture the essence of the women of color that participated in this study, I held individual open-ended interviews with each participant. The overall goal was to get three participants from each of the following racial/ethnic group: African American/Black, Asian American, American Indian/Native American, and Hispanic/Latinx. However, the study does not cover the stories of women who identify as American Indian/Native American because there was no response from this racial group. The findings depict that all the women experienced similar struggles at Rowan University despite their racial background. It also highlights that there is a lack of diverse representation and this impacts how the students perceive support. All in all, the study ends with some recommendations based on the stories that the women of color shared.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Higher education institutions have both become more diverse and shifted their focus. Higher education's history is rooted in oppression. The main purpose of higher education was to prepare White men for the ministry (Goodchild, n.d.). Over time there were many who tried to hold on to this identity through the addition of new policies (Goodchild, n.d.). For instance, institutions asking for photos with applications to keep Jews out, or not accepting women because it would be too distracting for the men, and creating separate spaces for Black students (Goodchild, n.d.).

As time went by, institutions started moving away from just accepting White men and teaching about the ministry (Goodchild, n.d.). Lawsuits forced some postsecondary institutions to accept students of color, and provide them with equal resources (Goodchild, n.d.). Additionally, the creation of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) also helped with the demographic shift in higher education (Goodchild, n.d.). Policies that impacted admissions decisions also helped shape the way institutions went about admitting students and the type of students they admitted (Goodchild, n.d.). Lastly, government policies like the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, and the G.I. Bill aided with the affordability of college and also created access for a different group of students (Goodchild, n.d.). Overall, outside influences like churches and non-profit organizations, government policies, and major current events have impacted the demographic shift in higher education throughout the years (Goodchild, n.d.).

Today, women are the majority in postsecondary institutions and there has been an increase in the number of students of color in higher education (National Center for Educational Statistical, 2019) (NCES). The focus of my study is the intersection between race and gender.

### **Women in Higher Education**

The progression of women in higher education has bypassed that of men, according to the reports from NCES (2019). Additionally, NCES reports that women are entering higher education institutions at higher rates. In 1960, only 38% of women enrolled in college within a year of high school graduation, compared to 54% of the men (NCES, 2009). At this time in history, the United States was sending troops to Vietnam, there were increased talks regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it was prime time for the Civil Rights movement (PBS, 2005). Therefore, it is safe to infer that the gap in enrollment was partially due to women who were staying home to take care of the household and/or families as the men enrolled in college or participated in the wars. Additionally, during the Vietnam War, the enrollment of college men rose as this prevented them from being drafted (Card & Lemieux, 2001). As the draft phased out so did the enrollment for these men (Card & Lemieux, 2001). Women became the majority in higher education by 1983 and women continue to outnumber men in higher education (NCES, 2019).

In 2017, the overall enrollment for female students within a year of graduating from high school was 72% and for males it was 61% (NCES, 2019). In ten years (from

2007 to 2017), the percentage of male students enrolled in higher education institutions has dropped by five percentage points while those of female students continue to rise.

Furthermore, not only are women enrolling in higher education institutions at higher rates, they are also graduating at higher rates (NCES, 2019). Women have an overall higher 6-year graduation rate (63%) than men (57%) for those who entered college during the Fall of 2011 (NCES, 2019). In other words, more first time female students were able to successfully complete a bachelor's degree from the same institution than their male counterparts (NCES, 2019). This is the case for both public institutions (62% of women vs. 57% of men) and private non-profit (69% vs. 63% of male students) (NCES, 2019). For comparison reasons and to depict that this has been the case for the last decade, at public institutions more women (56.4%) than men (50.1%) earned a degree from the Fall of 2001 cohort (NCES, 2009). The same pattern was present in the private non-profit institutions with women graduating at higher rates (66% vs. 60.9% of men) (NCES, 2009). Overall, since higher education moved away from its colonial practices, women have been entering, succeeding, and outshining their male counterparts.

### **Students of Color in Higher Education**

Higher education has also experienced an enrollment gap when it comes to the race of the student population (AASU, 2019). White students and Asian students have been the majority of the students enrolling in higher education immediately after high school (NCES, 2019). It is important to note that Asian students, although not underrepresented in higher education, are still a minority group. In 2007, these two groups had the highest percent of students enrolling in college, with 70% of White

students and 85% of Asian students enrolling within a year of high school graduation (NCES, 2019). However, the number of minority students, including Asian students, has been on the rise, and it is predicted that minority students will be the new majority of students in the near future (AASCU, 2019; Wellman, 2017). In 2007, the enrollment rate from high school of Black (57%) and Hispanic (61%) students enrolling in college was much lower than those of White (70%) and Asian (85%) students (NCES, 2019). In most recent studies provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) this is still the same, however the gap is starting to become smaller for some groups. In 2017, the number of Asian students immediately enrolling in college continue to be the highest at 87%, followed by White students (69%), and *closely* followed by Hispanic students (67%), and lastly Black students (58%) (NCES, 2019). All in all, minority students are currently enrolling in postsecondary education at higher rates, creating a demographic shift (AASCU, 2019).

### **Rowan University**

Rowan University is a public four-year, research driven, and predominantly White institution (PWI) in South Jersey. Unlike the majority of higher education institutions, Rowan University's student population is composed of more male students than female students with a ratio of 52:48 (College Tuition Compare, 2019). At the undergraduate level, there are 54.4% male students and 45.6% female students (College Tuition Compare, 2019). As stated in previous sections, this is unique because for at least a decade now there has been a pattern of women enrolling in college at a higher rate for both public and private non-profit institutions (NCES, 2019). Although men are the majority at Rowan University, women are still graduating at a higher rate. Men represent

55% of the undergraduate population at Rowan and women represent 45% (College Navigator, n.d.). However based on 6-year graduation rate, in other words those who entered during Fall 2012, 76% of women received degrees in comparison to 68% of men (College Navigator, n.d.). Again, the graduation rates depict that women are succeeding at higher rates than men even when they are the minority.

White students enrolled at Rowan exceeded any other race or ethnicity in the 2018-2019 academic year (College Tuition Compare, 2019). According to the College Navigator (n.d.), at the undergraduate level, there are a total of 66% White students at Rowan. This is followed by 11% Hispanic/Latino students, 10% Black/African American students, and 5% Asian students, and they report 0% of American Indian/Native American (College Navigator, n.d.). It is important to note that 0% does not mean that there are not any American Indian on campus, instead it means that the number is very low. This data also illustrates a 55% point gap between White students and the next closest group, Hispanic students. It is evident that Rowan has a large racial gap, and that is what makes it a PWI.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The focus of this study is the intersection between race and gender. Therefore, at the undergraduate level at Rowan, the percentage of men and women vary depending on the race (College Tuition Compare, 2019). Within the Black students population, 52% are Black women and 48% are Black men; there is a closer gap with the Hispanic population (50% women and 50% men) (College Tuition Compare, 2019). There are fewer Asian female students (43%) than male students (57%) (College Tuition Compare, 2019).

Lastly, for the American Indian student population there are 52% women and 47% men (College Tuition Compare, 2019). For the most part, the percentage of women enrolled at Rowan in these racial groups are greater or equal to their male counterparts with the exception of the Asian students.

Despite the fact that there are more men than women at Rowan University, the data above illustrates that there are *more* women of color than men of color at Rowan University, again with the exception of Asian students (College Tuition Compare, 2019). Research shows that although the numbers are increasing, there is typically a lack of institutional accountability and resources for women of color in higher education to reach their full potential (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Espinosa, 2011; Johnson, Ong, Ko, Smith, & Hodari, 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011; Sabatez, 2007; Zamani, 2003).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to capture the essence of the experiences of women of color at Rowan University. Additionally, the study captures how women of color in their junior or senior year view institutional support. The combination of both the essence in their story, in other words, the importance behind their experiences, and their perception of institutional support will lead me to provide recommendations to Rowan University.

### **Significance of the Problem/Study**

Research on women of color at predominantly White institutions is important because it provides a narrative that is often untold (Vaccaro, 2017). The intersectionality

of identities created barriers and unique circumstances for these women when enrolling in higher education (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). This, along with lack of institutional accountability shown by the lack of support or resources, leads to reports of lack of academic motivation and institutional support, and fewer degrees in fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) from women of color (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Espinosa, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011). Overall, it is time for higher education institutions to catch up with the increase in numbers of women of color pursuing and earning postsecondary degrees.

Additionally, there is a need for this study. As I was conducting my literature review (Chapter II), it was evident to me that there were not many studies describing the experiences of students who are women of color (as an umbrella term). There is research on faculty of color but little solely focused on students. This message is clear on my Chapter II, as the reader will notice that some of the articles are older and by the breakdown of the chapter.

### **Research Questions**

This study answers the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of women of color at Rowan University? (Including academic and social and challenges and satisfaction)
2. What support do women of color feel Rowan University offers them in order to help them be successful?
3. What support do women of color wish they had at Rowan University?

## **Assumptions**

My assumption for this study is that even though the women in this study are from different racial/ethnic backgrounds (African American, Latina, Asian American, or American Indian) they will present similar experiences at Rowan University. I assume that there will be similarities in their experiences not only because they are all women, but also because they belong to a marginalized group. Therefore, I believe that the essence of their stories will be rooted in how salient race is in their experience at Rowan University.

## **Operational Definitions**

1. Rowan University – A 4 year, public, research-focus higher education institution that consist of majority White students, also known as a predominantly White institution (PWI).
2. Women of Color- This is an umbrella term used to describe women of different, non-White ethnicities.
3. Female and Women- The terms indicate two different things as female is alluding to the person's sex and women is referring to their gender. However, I think is important to note that in this study, I use the two interchangeably.
4. Minority students- This is referring to students are non-White.
5. African American/Black students- To keep consistent with prior research, I will be using Black and African American interchangeably.
6. Latina/Hispanic students- To keep consistent with prior research, I will be using Latina and Hispanic interchangeably.



7. Junior students- Students that are in their third academic year.
8. Senior students- Students that are completing their last academic year.

### **Overview of the Study**

Chapter II is a literature review composed of scholarly articles on women of color. This chapter starts with articles that depict the experiences of women of color as a whole in post secondary institutions. It then provides a breakdown on women of color in different aspects. As the chapter continues, there are categories of women of color in the STEM field, in community colleges, and then more specifically, African American women, Latina women, Asian women, and American Indian/Native American women. This funnel style of writing (starting broad and ending more specifically) in the literature review makes it clear that women of color in post secondary institutions share a similar feeling of burden, unwelcomeness, and doubt. Overall, the literature review concludes that there is a problem that is worth researching.

Chapter III provides the method of data collection. This chapter outlines the research questions, the design of the study, the strategy for data collection, the population and the sample size, instrumentation of the study, the procedure of gathering data, and lastly, data analysis.

Chapter IV homes the findings of the study. Through snippets of the participant's interviews, this chapter represents the essence of the study.

Chapter V is the last chapter and it provides the summary, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations of the study based on the findings of the study.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to present research conducted by multiple authors about the experiences of women of color in higher education. Through analyzing these articles, I noticed that there were similar experiences expressed in the articles by women of color. Women of color have multiple marginalized identities that impact their journey in higher education and I would like to shine a light on that through this literature review. As a woman of color who attended predominantly White institutions, I am personally very passionate about this topic and about exploring ways to help this population of students be successful while minimizing their burdens. Almost all of the authors in this literature review conducted qualitative research.

#### **Women of Color**

Women of color in higher education demonstrate a higher level of resilience than their classmates because they have to overcome additional barriers due to their identity (Kim & O'Brien, 2018; Landry, 2002; Morales, 2008; Vaccaro, 2017). Women of color have to deal with both racism and sexism on college campuses, where White and male students do not deal with either of these obstacles (Landry, 2002; Kim & O'Brien, 2018). Women of color have to deal with educational barriers like being the only ones in their classes, and, therefore, being singled out and expected to be the voice for all students of color (Landry, 2002; Kim & O'Brien, 2018). These experiences, in addition to having their academic abilities questioned by peers and faculty and having financial concerns about the affordability of college, can lead to a lack of educational confidence for women

of color (Landry 2002; Kim & O'Brien, 2018; Vaccaro, 2017). In addition, these women's experiences do not correlate with institutions' messages of inclusivity and equity (Morales, 2008). Instead, the institutions suppress the experiences of women of color by not acknowledging that their experiences are valid and claiming they do not see color and that they provide services for all (Morales, 2008). Different services need to be provided for women of color to cater to their unique struggles (Kim & O'Brien, 2018; Landry, 2002; Morales, 2008; Vaccaro, 2017).

For instance, on top of having normal college students' struggles like having to manage classes, navigate college for the first time, and balance social and academic life, women of color also have to deal with added social pressure (Landry, 2002; Morales 2008). In households, women are expected to be the head of the household and care for their families, therefore; their academic aspirations are normally questioned by the dominant male figures in their lives (Morales, 2008). Overall, there are an array of problems that women of color have to deal with, including racism and stereotypes because they are of color, and then the gender roles that come with being a woman and all of this sets them apart from the average student (Kim & O'Brien, 2018; Landry, 2002; Morales, 2008; Vaccaro, 2017).

### **Women of Color in Community Colleges**

Although the number of students enrolling in community colleges is declining (Juszkiewicz, 2017), community colleges are still an option for women of color to obtain a degree (Laden & Turner, 1995; Rose, Sellars-Mulhern, Jones, Trinidad, Pierre-Louis, & Okomba, 2014). The women of color attending community colleges are those that have

obstacles preventing them from attending four-year institutions (Laden & Turner, 1995; Rose et al., 2014). For instance, community colleges allow Hispanic women to attend college and manage long working hours (Laden & Turner, 1995). The cost of college for these women is a concern that often prevents them from attending their first choice institution and this is not a surprise as women and students of color report concerns about the affordability of college at higher rates (HERI, 2016; Juskiewicz, 2017; Laden & Turner, 1995). Additionally, other women of color including Asian, Black, and Native Americans report having to navigate the pressure of gender roles like managing the home and academics and the flexibility of community colleges allows them to do both (Laden & Turner, 1995). This shows that women of color in higher educational settings (whether community college or not) are met with the same social pressures. However, the women of color attending community colleges do not spend as much time socializing and connecting with peers as they are often moving from one task to the next (Rose et al., 2014). This means that in addition to their struggles, whether involving finances, language barriers, or gender roles, women of color are also independently going through this process. Women of color at community colleges report a high level of self-authorship and independence (Rose et al. 2014). Although women encounter all these challenges, they are graduating from community colleges at higher rates than men (Juskiewicz, 2017).

### **Women of Color in STEM**

Both women and students of color are entering college at higher rates (Landry, 2002), however the presence of women of color in some areas, specifically, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) are very minimal (Johnson et al.,

2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011). The world is relying more on these fields and more opportunities are being created, however, in a 10-year period less than 5% of the students who earned physics degrees were women of color and in 2006 women of color made up 12% of all conferred STEM degrees (Espinosa, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017). This is not due to a lack of interest; instead, it is because the institutions do not have the proper resources and supports for women of color and purposely have courses designed to weed out students (Espinosa, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011). The combination of lack of support and representation in the field coupled with classes intended to make students drop out result in women of color being the students that do not make the cut (Espinosa, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011). Therefore, graduation rates clearly depict that there is a problem and institutions need to further explore this problem instead of putting the pressure and responsibility on women of color (Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011).

In addition to a lack of institutional support that results in women of color feeling lonely, they also have to deal with oppression by faculty and their peers (Espinosa, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011). It is no surprise that there are fewer women in STEM overall, however, there is a gap even in degrees earned by women of color and White women (Espinosa, 2011). In 2006, White women earned STEM degrees at double the rate of women of color (25% in comparison to 12%) (Espinosa, 2011). The reason for this is that women of color faced struggles due to their minority identities. Women of color reported having to deal with microaggressions in the classroom (Johnson et al., 2017; Reyes, 2011). Their validity and place in the classroom are normally questioned due to their gender and also their race (Johnson et al., 2017;

Reyes, 2011). Professors do not help women of color feel as if they belong because they tend to care more about the science than the students; this is without acknowledgement that this group of students have additional pressures (Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011). All of these experiences lead to what is known as stereotype threat, which means women of color start internalizing and believing the microaggressions (Johnson et al., 2017). The thought that I do not belong here or I cannot succeed are stereotype threats women of color experience in addition to the rigorous coursework, which hinders this group of students' success in the STEM fields as they isolate themselves and no longer feel motivated (Johnson et al., 2017; Reyes, 2011).

Lastly, in addition to women of color dealing with issues relating to their race/ethnicity, they are also subject to issues regarding their gender. Women of color who transferred from community colleges to four-year institutions in pursuit of a STEM degree reported struggling with not feeling like they belonged and with coursework, and then also having the pressure of going home and having to take care of their families and work (Reyes, 2011). It seems like women of color are stretched very thin in order to fulfill the demands of their multiple identities. Due to this reason, spaces and people that support women of color and their unique stories are important on college campuses (Espinosa, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011). Women of color who had a positive perception of their college environment were actively engaged and involved, and who were able to build relationships with their academic peers reported higher levels of persistence in the STEM fields (Espinosa, 2011). Additionally, mentorship, especially from people that mirror women of color, is a tool that helps this group of students be successful (Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes,

2011). Therefore, strategies need to be implemented in order to produce more women of color graduates in the STEM fields.

### **African American Women**

African Americans have a long history of being denied educational access (Zamani, 2003). Women also have been denied education due to their gender therefore; students with both identities tend to go unnoticed in the higher education settings today (Zamani, 2003). This section specifically speaks of the research on African American women, and because they fit under the umbrella term of women of color, some of the struggles are similar. African American women report a strong connection with their dual identities of race and gender when self-identifying (Jackson, 19998) Due to this dual-identity, African American women's reality differs from their White women peers (Jackson, 1998; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Zamani, 2003). Research shows that there is a wage gap between educated African American women and White women (Zamani, 2003). This goes to show that although gender is, in fact, a marginalized identity, when coupled with another marginalized identity, such as race, more systematic oppression occurs. The barriers are systematic and also present themselves in academic settings (Jackson, 1998; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Zamani, 2003).

African American women experience micro aggressions and societal pressures, which negatively impacts their overall college experience (Jackson, 1998; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Zamani, 2003). African American women report being more aware of their race, and more conscious of their behavior than their White peers (Jackson, 1998; Leath & Chavous, 2018). Additionally, Black women are expected to be the voice of

their people in predominantly White spaces, even more than Black males are (Jackson, 1998; Zamani, 2003). Additionally, Black women at predominantly White institutions report being labeled as a sell out by their community members at home and also being unable to fit within their campus community (Jackson, 1998). Overall, Black women experience pressure at school and also in their community, forcing them to carry this baggage and also navigate academics, which their White or male peers do not have to deal with (Jackson, 1998; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Zamani, 2003).

Lastly, there appears to be a difference in the way Black women feel depending on the institutional type. Black women at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) feel more included, welcomed, and have a closer connection to campus than those at predominantly White institutions (Jackson, 1998; Zamani, 2003). At PWIs, Black women are the minority and feel academically less motivated and experience higher levels of discrimination due to their identities (Jackson, 1998; Zamani, 2003). It can be inferred that Black women feel more comfortable at HBCUs because racially they are not the minorities; however, women at PWIs and women's colleges seem to be more in touch with issues surrounding their gender (Jackson, 1998). HBCUs and women's colleges need to be applauded because they produced successful African Americans and women (Zamani, 2003). However, HBCUs and PWIs can learn from each other (Jackson, 1998). PWIs can learn how to create environments in which Black women feel included and motivated so they can help decrease the feeling of having to be hyper aware of their interactions due to their race (Jackson, 1998; Zamani, 2003). On the other hand, HBCUs can take notes on how PWIs and women's colleges develop students' gender identity as women since the students from these institutions seem to be more in touch with their



identity as women and how that impacts them in the world outside of their campus communities (Jackson, 1998). Overall, Black women face struggles that neither Black men nor White women can relate to (Jackson, 1998; Zamani, 2003).

### **Latinas**

Latinas are another group of students who fall under the umbrella of women of color that also, due to their multiple identities, have barriers that impact their journey in higher education (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007). The number of Hispanics entering higher education is increasing, however there is not a positive correlation with the number of Hispanics graduating (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007). Instead, a pattern exists in which Hispanics come in, drop out, and get replaced by new ones and the cyclical pattern continues (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). Latinas have specific barriers due to their marginalized ethnic identity; they typically come from homes where their parents did not attend college and/or there is a language barrier (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007). Due to this reason, they play an essential role in their family dynamics and this impacts their college choice (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Sabatez, 2007). Latinas tend to choose an institution closer to home or one that their family has attended as it keeps them connected to their family (Perez & McDonough, 2008). Therefore, family expectations and the stress of being caretakers and heads of households for Latina women is an attribute that impacts their college experiences (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Sabatez, 2007).

Latinas also experience discrimination on college campuses, their ability to be academically competitive gets questioned often, and they lack the proper resources

(Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007). Similarly to African American women, Latinas have to deal with microaggressions both from peers and faculty (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007). Some microaggressions include professors ignoring the comments that Latinas make in class because they think they are academically inferior (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007). In my personal experience, my White male professor asked me if I cheated on my exam due to my high score. Therefore, these behaviors, whether intentional or not, decreases the motivation of Latina students (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007). Additionally, Latinas are at a disadvantage because they often lack parental advice as a resource (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007). Because their parents did not attend college, or speak English, or are immigrants, they cannot help Latina students with the college process and this is a resource that many other students have (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Sabatez, 2007). There is a lack of resources coming from home and then a lack of representation of Latina faculty and staff on four-year college campuses (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Sabatez, 2007).

### **Asian Americans/ Pacific Islanders**

**Model minority myth.** The term Asian American emerged from the 1960s, during the Civil Rights Movement as a way to recognize their struggles as a minority group (Hune, 2002). The term Asian American, similarly to Latinx folks, groups the different ethnicities under the umbrella term as one large heterogeneous collection (Hune, 2002). However the danger in this, similar to the danger of the model minority myth, is that it causes the individual ethnicities and their set of struggles to be ignored or overlooked (Hune, 2002; Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011).

The model minority myth also excludes the struggles of different groups by assuming that all Asian students are a success story (Escueta & O'Brien, 1991; Hune, 2002; Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). The term assumes that Asian students' success is unparalleled to those of other minority groups (Museus & Kiang, 2009; Wing, 2007). The term also emerged in the 1960s when the country's focus was to end discrimination that mainly impacted African Americans (Wing, 2007). Prior to this time period, Asian people had negative view in the United States (Wing, 2007). The success stories of Asian Americans in academia is what shifted the perspective of Asian Americans in the United States (Wing, 2007).

**Impact on students.** On the other hand, many feel like the model minority myth prohibits learning about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) and creates misinterpretation of their reality (Museus & Kiang, 2009; Wing, 2007). On a national scale, the model minority myth is used by Affirmative Action opposers, especially White coalition groups, to vocalize their discomfort on what they believe are foreigners despite the many generations of Asian people that have lived in this country (Wing, 2007). This belief separates the Asian students and the White students (Wing, 2007). On the other hand, Asian students also do not fit in with students of color because some feel that their struggles are not the same or that Asians are the better minority due to this model minority myth (Wing, 2007). Overall, this binary race system of Black and White, that is constantly portrayed forces groups like Asian students and Latinx students into one of the two categories or into another category, either way making their experiences invisible (Wing, 2007).

In higher education, AAPI students have been a rapidly growing population (Escueta & O'Brien, 1991; Hune, 2002; Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Wing, 2007). The model minority myth has impacted them in different ways. In some scenarios, AAPI students are not eligible for scholarships and aid because they are not considered a minority group (Museus & Kiang, 2009). On more current events, like the case of Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard University, Asian American students feel like they are being discriminated against due to their stellar academic records (Anderson, 2019). These two examples show two different ways that students overall feel impacted by this myth.

**Impact on women.** Women overall are entering college at higher rates than men (NCES, 2019), and this is also true for AAPI women (Escueta & O'Brien, 1991; Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). Therefore, when studying whether the model minority myth impacted Asian Pacific American (APA) women the same way, the authors found that race was not the only factor playing a role in their higher education experiences (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). The APA women encountered negative experiences regarding race and gender (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). Family influences played a role in their academic experiences (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). Some of them were pressured by their families to be the model students and obtain good grades or pursue a specific undesirable degree like medicine (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). This is also relevant to the men, however, on top of familial pressure on academics, the women also had to make sure that they were doing enough for their family (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). They expressed the need to succeed in school but also make sure their family did not fall apart (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). Additionally, the

women had different experiences in the classroom (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). They expressed feeling invisible and having their ideas and interest questioned in the classroom (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). At times there is a language barrier or a mistake due to English as a second language and this made them feel more inferior and targeted (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011). Overall, the women have to deal with the model minority myth and additional gender and social pressures (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011).

### **American Indian/ Native Americans**

American Indians or Native Americans are another population of students that exist in higher education but there is little research on their experiences (Castogno, 2006; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). The lack of research ignores the experiences of these women and fuels stereotypes on their identity and their educational experiences (Castogno, 2006; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Therefore, the stories of these women are needed in order to disrupt the narrative that higher education is inclusive to all and to help institutions gain cultural humility.

Native American women experienced hostile racial environments when they enter higher education (Castogno, 2006; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). They experience racism through verbal assault and harassment by peers, staff, and faculty members (Castogno, 2006; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). In a study conducted in Midwestern University, Native American women expressed being stereotyped when they did not fit the typical portrayal shown on American television of what a Native American looks like (Castogno, 2006). Therefore, the women in the study came across assumptions that their families

were casino owners or alcoholics (due to the location of the institution) or the expectations they would display their culture by wearing feathers, or the color turquoise, or the association of long hair with being a Native (Castogno, 2006). The women also expressed racist encounters in the classroom from faculty members even though they labeled all these acts as simply ignorance (Castogno, 2006). Naming racism in higher education, predominantly White settings, can be difficult because that is not the picture painted in higher education as institutions present themselves as inclusive (Castogno, 2006).

Native women used cultural integrity to challenge stereotypes (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). For tribal women, the identity of womanhood carries many responsibilities that define their role in their tribes (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). However, European standards about gender roles created a shift in their cultures and also opened the door for many stereotypes dictated toward the Native American woman (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Native American women are typically subject to more stereotypes than men (Castogno, 2006; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). However, in this study women from two different Native tribes used their familial cultural capital and community cultural wealth to channel Native resilience when they dealt with forms of discrimination and/or racism in higher education settings (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Tribal Native American women view education as cultural wealth and not an individual achievement therefore, this idea motivated many of the women to graduate for their families, communities, and overall culture (Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Additionally, support from faculty and staff who were educated on Native and tribal knowledge and culture also allowed these women to succeed in higher education (Waterman & Lindley,

2013). Higher education needs to create spaces for these marginalized women to share their stories and feel included (Castogno, 2006; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). This starts with an understanding of their needs, becoming more educated about their cultures, and providing space for them to be visible in what seems like a binary system of race (Castogno, 2006; Waterman & Lindley, 2013).

### **Conclusion & Implications for Higher Education**

Throughout all the readings, it is clear that women of color face barriers that men of color and White women do not face. Our American history has kept both minorities and women from attending higher education institutions (Zamani, 2003). However, today, women of color are attending college at higher rates but institutions still lack support, facilities, and representation for these students (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Espinosa, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom, 2011; Reyes, 2011; Sabatez, 2007; Waterman & Lindley, 2013; Zamani, 2003). One thing that was clear in all the articles is that women's centers that speak to issues of women with multiple identities are needed, mentorships and having faculty and staff that represent the students are also important. Overall, higher education institutions need to stop putting the responsibility on women of color to become acclimated to their campus and start taking ownership of the role they play and the responsibility they have for all students' success and in this case, women of color (Malcom & Malcom, 2011).

As I continue to conduct this research, I would like to explore the experiences of women of color at predominantly White institutions, in this case Rowan University. I would like to use this information to provide a platform for their experiences and also

provide Rowan with resources, as I believe problems need to be presented with solutions. It is also clear that more research is needed on women of color as the individual ethnical/racial research shows that these women have similar experiences. Overall, my hope is to help women of color feel like they belong, even when they are the minorities.



## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

In this section, I will provide my research questions, the plans for my methodological design, data collection, and analysis. An understanding on how my research was conducted will provide readers with validation of my study.

#### **Context of the Study**

As I mentioned above, I attended predominantly White institutions and my experiences were very similar to the experiences described throughout my literature review. My coping mechanisms included code switching and integration with the larger community and this is what ultimately led me to graduation. Again, now that I have the chance to produce research, I will focus on the experiences of women of color at Rowan University, a predominantly White institution. Through my work with my assistantship as the Graduate Coordinator for the Women's Center, I have been granted the opportunity to hear some of the experiences of women of color on campus and I am looking forward to continuing this work.

#### **Research Question**

Throughout this research, I will be exploring the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of women of color at Rowan University? (Including academic and social and challenges and satisfaction)
2. What support do women of color feel Rowan University offers them in order to help them be successful?

3. What support do women of color wish they had at Rowan University?

### **Methodological Approach & Design**

In order to listen and understand the experiences of women of color at a PWI, I collected qualitative data. This type of data is nonnumeric and allows for participants to think and share their individual and unique experiences (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). This is important because I plan to conduct a phenomenological study. This type of design allows me to capture the essence of the experiences of women of color (McMillan, 2016). In my study, women of color are an umbrella term for a group of individuals who identify as women and non-White. Therefore, my participants include a group of all women but from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their differences are important because they are what would allow me to highlight the phenomenon within their experiences (McMillan, 2016). However, the importance of this research is to collect the commonality among all of the women's experiences due to the intersectionality of their gender and race and this is what makes this a phenomenological study (McMillan, 2016).

### **Data Collection**

In order to capture this phenomenon, I am pairing my design with interviews as my form of data collection. The one on one setting that an interview provides allows me to focus on each participant's unique experience and capture the essence of her experience (McMillan, 2016). Again, providing the participants with individual time to verbally describe their experiences as women of color at this predominantly White institution is my goal. Therefore, I believe interviews are more appropriate than focus groups, for instance, because it gives the participants the opportunity to use their own

words and not be influenced by other members (McMillan, 2016). Overall, collecting data through the form of interviews allows the women in the study to describe their experience in-depth and this will outline the essence in their lived experiences at Rowan University (Simon & Goes, 2011).

Additionally, there are different types of interviews, and I am conducting semi-structured interviews (McMillan, 2016). I will have pre-established questions or themes that I will like to use as guides through my conversations with the participants but truly, my objective is to allow the participants to openly talk. These questions can be found in Appendix A. This flexibility and openness is what is known as a semi-structured interview format (McMillan, 2016). All participants are not the same therefore, a semi-structure format allows to have questions to guide the participants that are more timid or quiet, or allows me to sit back and listen to those that are more active (McMillan, 2016).

**Participants.** Lastly, I cannot conduct this research without participants. As I have already shared, my objective is the experiences of women of color. Therefore, my participants must self identify as women and of an ethnic or racial background that is non-White. This sample group is inclusive of students in their junior and senior years because at this point they are close to graduation and have made it past the critical first year. Tinto speaks of the importance of involvement and student attachment in order for students to be retained by an institution (Tinto, 1988). At this point, juniors and seniors have overcome that phase and have had more experiences with the campus climate than freshmen and sophomores by definition. Therefore, they are able to provide and discuss deeply their experiences at Rowan University.

In order to gain participants, I emailed the presidents of the cultural organizations on campus to work with the leadership of these organizations, in order to gain involvement of participants. Rowan University also has all Divine Nine organizations on campus, which are historically Black Greek organizations, and a number of cultural Greek organizations. Therefore, I also emailed all of the presidents of the sororities and explain and invited them to participate in my research. The contact information for the e-board of these organizations can be found through Proflink, a university's webpage. Additionally, I invited women through my workspaces. I currently work in the Office of Social Justice, Inclusion, and Conflict Resolution, where I facilitate the women of color collective. Through this program, I have already built relationships with a specific group of women of color on campus so I extended an invitation to juniors and seniors in that space. I am also interning with the ASCEND office on campus and this office has a lot of interaction with students of color on campus. My hope was that the different avenues would provide me with a diverse group of students.

**Sampling.** Overall, when conducting qualitative research, a purposeful sample is important; that is a sample of participants that provide rich data (McMillan, 2016). This is why my participants must meet the criteria of being a woman of color in her junior or senior year at Rowan University. This is what is known as criterion sampling, where participants are selected based on specific traits (McMillan, 2016). Lastly, as for deciding my sample size, I used a general rule thumb when I started conducting the research because I do not want to my sample size to be too small where my research is not credible but also want to be realistic (McMillan, 2016). Therefore, I aimed for two to three women from each racial/ethnic group in their junior and senior year. This led to a

sample size of eight to twelve women of color. This sample size allowed me collect the essence of their experiences and capture the commonality in their perspective (McMillan, 2016). In order to conduct interviews and analysis the data, I made sure IRB clearance was secured, and consent obtained in order to ensure the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects (McMillan, 2016).

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument used to investigate the research questions was individual semi-structured interviews. Again, throughout this process, I provided participants with a set of guiding questions that allowed them to openly share their lived experiences. The questions can be found in Appendix A. The questions follow a funnel pattern, where the start of as general questions and then become more specific and direct. Additionally, the questions were pre tested prior to conducting the actual study. In other words, I conducted interviews with a similar sample group: all women who attend Rowan University that are in the junior and senior year. This validates my study and also provides any edits to the questions. Again, this study went through IRB approval to protect the integrity of the study and to ensure no harm is done to the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

After completing the interviews, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews from each participant, including word for word what was said. I then used a thematic approach to code the data into themes including similar words or patterns in experiences (McMillian, 2016). These themes allowed for more clarity when identifying the commonalities that I sought to gain from this research. Additionally, I think it is

important to use quotes from participants in order to highlight the patterns in the data (McMillian, 2016). Therefore, when putting the data into categories of themes, I made sure to also highlight the appropriate quotes from the participants. All in all, transcription and thematic coding will allowed me to gain a better understanding of the data collected.

### **Conclusion & Limitations**

Overall, my objective is to capture the essence of the experiences of women of color at Rowan University. A limitation with this study is that when conducting qualitative research one must come in with minimal information on the subject (McMillian, 2016). As I have repeatedly stated, I identify as a woman of color who also attended predominantly White institutions and experienced unique barriers associated with this identity. Therefore, in order to minimize research bias, I have to remove my personal experiences and focus on the participants' when conducting this research. I kept a journal throughout my interview phase in order to keep my feelings and personal thoughts separate from the actual research being conducted. Additionally, when thinking about my sample group, I am only looking at those who are in their junior and senior years. This does not allow for those outside of that population to express themselves and their perspectives. Another limitation that a previous researcher mentioned in her study, and I think is important to mention is that by looking at women of color as a whole this research does not look at the experiences that come with specific ethnic and racial groups (Vaccaro, 2019). Again, I am conducting a phenomenological study. By conducting this type of study, I am actually not interested in the differences or the specific experiences of each ethnic/racial groups; I am however interested in showing the phenomenon behind

their perspectives (McMillan, 2016). Lastly, this study and my future recommendations are limited to Rowan University since this is an in house study that only includes current enrolled students. All in all, I plan to follow the best practices when conducting this research.

## **Chapter IV**

## **Findings**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to capture the essence of the experiences of women of color at Rowan University. Additionally, the study captured how women of color in their junior or senior year viewed institutional support. The combination of both the essence in their story, in other words, the importance behind their experiences, and their perception of institutional support led me to provide recommendations to Rowan University.

### **Profile of the Population**

The study was intended to capture the experiences of women of color in their junior or senior year at Rowan University. Therefore, the participants of this study identified both as woman and a person of color belonging to the following racial/ethnic groups: Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian-American, or American Indian/Native Americans. There were three juniors and six seniors. There were three women for each racial/ethnic group except for American Indian/Native Americans. Unfortunately, there were no responses from women who identified as American Indian/Native Americans in their junior or senior year. This was a limitation of the study. Overall, there were a total of nine women.

Additionally, all the women that participated in this study were student leaders on campus. Six out of nine of the participants were Resident Assistants (RAs) on campus. Five out of nine belong to a greek organization. Overall, all of the students were involved in extracurricular activities outside of their school work including club presidents, facility managers, and interns within offices on campus.



## **Research Questions**

This study answered the following questions: \

1. What are the experiences of women of color at Rowan University? (Including academic and social and challenges and satisfaction)
2. What support do women of color feel Rowan University offers them in order to help them be successful?
3. What support do women of color wish they had at Rowan University?

## **Data Presentation**

Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis of the transcriptions, I was able to collect the essence behind the experiences of the women of color that were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews allowed for consistency in the questions that were asked in Appendix A, while also allowing room for follow up, and clarifying questions. The thematic approach of the analysis provided a way to organize the honest, open, and raw experiences of this group of women.

### **Finding #1: Navigating Being The Only One**

All of the participants found themselves being the only person of color in one or several of the spaces that they occupied. They described being the only person of color in the classroom for instance, or the only woman, and in some instances the only woman of color. One participant states that, as a result, she has experienced feelings of isolation, dealt with the imposter syndrome, and in return felt the need to overwork in order to not be overlooked.

When the participants made the decision to attend Rowan, having to navigate White spaces as a woman of color was not one of the factors that they thought about.

The most common attribute among the participants that made them choose to attend Rowan University was location. “Alright this is like a safe distance like I'm not super far from home, only like 30 minutes, but I'm far enough where she's [her mother] like I really don't feel like taking the ride to see her so that's why we are here,” says one participant. Another participant has a very similar tune, “I decided to attend Rowan because it was far enough from home but close enough that I can still go home.” Overall, a good enough distance that allowed them to be away from home and family but still reach out to them when needed was a common attribute for the participants when deciding to attend Rowan. Additionally some of the other common attributes were the following: financial aid (scholarships, in-state tuition vs. out of state tuition, and being admitted through EOF), desirable academic program, and campus size (although, the campus has experienced rapid growth from the time the participants were freshman to now). At the time, location, how to pay for college, campus size, and whether the institution offered their program or not was what was pressing on their minds not the fact that while at Rowan they would need to learn how to navigate being the only woman of color in certain places.

**“You are like a unicorn in a farm so like granted ‘Woah a unicorn’ but like this unicorn got feelings too.”** Many of the participants described what it felt like to be the only women of color in the room and the challenges that came with this. One explained, “It was frustrating being I guess not the center of attention, but like that person that they (her white peers) [saw as] ‘oh you are different’ and like I’m not that different ya ... I’m just Hispanic.” Another student described her experience, “Sometimes there's not many colored people in Rowan’s classrooms and especially in the psych classrooms

that I'm in ... I'm one of the only brown girls so I want to see more people of my color in those classes.” Moreover, another participant compared her experience to highschool and says, “I think I've always at Rowan, which never happened to me in high school, I was never like the only non-white person in the room when I was in high school.” Lastly a student summed up her response to what it is like being a woman of color in the classroom by saying, “Is like you are like a unicorn in a farm so like granted ‘Woah a unicorn’ but this unicorn got feelings too.” There was a consistent feeling among the participants that they were treated or looked at differently because they belong to an underrepresented group, and as if they did not know this already, their classmates made them feel like they were different.

The participants experienced challenges and microaggressions that came from both their peers and professors. From their peers, the participants often heard what they described as ignorant statements that in other words are known as microaggressions. A Black student described a negative interaction with a peer, as she met up with one of the only other Black women in the back of the classroom to give her a piece of gum, “... and then this guy, White guy, because you know most of the classes are majority White males, he's like “oh blah blah [sound of mimicking] because we were talking and I'm like what did you say?” And he's like “what ya doing back here making a drug deal?” These comments were truly unnecessary and can possibly impact the participant's behavior in the classroom moving forward.

Professors, whether unconscious or not, also participated in behavior that would make the students feel alienated. One of the participants, a Hispanic student, explained how her White male professor never called on her to participate in class discussions. Her

class was composed of predominantly White males as well. Therefore, she eventually stopped trying to participate in class discussions and decided to prove herself through exams. She said, “ So I couldn't show him my knowledge in front of the class but I could show him on the test, I could show you on the essay cuz[because] you know if you grade it wrong, I can definitely go over you [over your head] to find out what's wrong.”

Although her determination to still succeed in a class environment that did not acknowledge her should be applauded, the student should never have to reach these circumstances to feel included in the classroom. Additionally an Asian American student stated that a professor will constantly mistake her with the only other Brown student in the class and mispronounced her name. Although she chose to joke about it by saying things like “Is fine, I look like that Brown girl I know,” and said that it does not bother her, simple things like name recognition should be expected. It seemed like both students and professors were careless about how these things impact women of color.

**Survival: “I’m used to it by now” & code switching.** An underlying theme that presented itself as the women shared their stories was that they often brushed off or overlooked these microaggressions by dismissing it because as they stated “I am used to it by now” or “It does not happen as much as it did freshman year.” One of the participants said, “It's been interesting because I come from a majority White town or [one] which is not like you know, the most accepting to Black people so you get used to like people just staring at you or having slight remarks, oh you know the little ‘let me touch your hair’ or ‘oh my gosh is that yours? It was just short yesterday.’ So, like growing up with that I'm used to it and then like being here is more like so it's just a different area of it.” Additionally, when I asked them about the challenges that they have

experienced due to being a woman of color at Rowan, some would say, they have not experienced any challenges. However, when I broke down the question by asking specifically about their experiences in the classroom or leadership roles that they held on campus, this is when I received a more elaborative response including some of the examples stated above. I believe the women were not comfortable labeling their experiences with words that had negative connotations like challenges, or microaggressions, or simply a racist act. Therefore, these experiences were often emotionally suppressed and/or they simply changed their behavior and resulted in code switching as a form of survival.

As stated above, the participants changed their behaviors when they were in majority White spaces. For instance, the Black student that was questioned about making a drug deal by one of her classmates then said to me, “We both looked nice too, like you know, I usually don’t dress like a bum [to class].” This was her way of expressing her confusion, as if to say, how can someone accuse me of being a drug dealer when I make it a point to dress up to class to avoid these stereotypical assumptions, that are also microaggressions. Additionally, a Latina student was in agreement as she mentioned that she was also more aware of her clothing because she did not want to feed into the stereotype that Latinas are hyper sexualized. These women took it upon themselves to try to do everything in the power to avoid being miscategorized, even when they are not the problem. Lastly, this same Latina student shared that in her on campus job there was a janitor who was also Hispanic and therefore, she communicated with him in Spanish. However, when her White supervisor came around she automatically stopped speaking in her native tongue and started communicating with him in English. She explained, “I’m

like why do I do that? It's one of those things that I'm mad at myself [for] but it just happens." The reality was that these women were being preventive by changing their behavior to avoid any further call out or isolation from the majority, whether they noticed it or not.

Another survival technique, in addition to prevention, was code switching. Many of the women were aware that they code switched in their day to day lives at Rowan. One student, an RA, explained how even having majority White residents had an impact on her that resulted in code switching. She says, "I feel like I definitely do see myself, not only in the RA role but like in general like code switching a lot and that's something that I want to work on." Additionally, an Asian American student shared that she had completely changed the way of speaking, even though she was aware that she spoke like everyone back at home. She said, "I'm used to talking in a more appropriate way now but it was a little difficult code switching in the beginning like my freshman year. It was hard to talk the way I always talked because people would be like why is she trying to act like she is Black when she is not?" Lastly, a Latina student emphasized the difficulty of constantly having to switch from her language at home (Spanish) to English to what she called being professional. "Everyday of my life [I code switched] even with my friends. Code switching from my language when I'm home can be hard sometimes ... it has gotten way better since freshman year." As early as freshman year, these women made the conclusion that in order to be accepted or understood by their peers at Rowan they had to change their way of speaking. Although many expressed their discomfort with this, they also equated this way of speaking to be more professional. This is not surprising as society often tells us that the Anglo way is the most desirable.

## **Finding #2: Mirror Mirror On the Wall ... Who is that?**

There was a bridge between the participants' identity and the rest of the university, the two do not mirror each other. When asked to discuss their support system, all the participants instantly named people, departments and offices, and programs composed of people of color. They all immediately named those that resemble them and it was not until asked "so would you say your support system is diverse?" that the participants named one non-color person or department that supported them. On the other hand, participants simply stated that their support system were mainly people of color. This was all while also stating that the university lacks people of color and this was what created a disconnect on how supportive they felt.

**Students: "But I feel like I wish there were people like me."** As stated in Finding #1, the participants felt like a unicorn in their classes because they were often the only women of color. One student said, "I want to see more people of my color in those classes just to make it feel more like welcomed for other students and not just like one set group of students." Another student spoke about the lack of diversity even within her ethnic group, she identifies as Pacific Islander and stated, "I know that there's a large Indian population ... but I feel like I wish there were more people like me so I could be like 'hey you can relate to this.'" Overall, the students had a hard time connecting because there were not students that looked like them.

**Professors: "Give me more color or women, either."** It was clear that the participants witnessed a lack of diversity in professors both by gender and race. Many of them stated the lack of representation of women, people of color, and overall women of color in the classroom. For some the shocking realization that they have not had women

of color as professors came when I asked them about their classroom experiences. An Asian American student said, “I hadn't even realized it until right now which is kind of mind-boggling. I don't interact with a lot of women of color in terms of professional [settings] like I've never, I've never had a professor as a woman of color.” A Latina student said, “I've never really put too much thought into it and it never really bothered me. But I know it could have an effect on what happens when I'm out in the real world and no one shared their experiences with me of navigating working with people that aren't just like you.” These women were very much aware that a lack of professors that identified with them had a deeper implication than just representation.

Additionally, a Black student explained the lack of sensitivity that her White male professor depicted in her lab when it came to her natural hair, “My hair is literally this short unless I have braids so I just put my goggles over it. And they are like are you going to put your hair back? And I'm like well I can't so I don't know what to say. But there's a better way to put it and you choose not too.” Additionally a lack of representation in professors trickled down to the curriculum that they were teaching. The student said, “ I had this music class where all we listened to was old White guys and I'm just like ma'm dime like tell me please, not even Beyonce, nothing.” Overall, students expressed their desire for professors that look like them. The lack thereof impacted their experiences in the classrooms and out the classrooms. Representation matters.

**Administration:** “**They are all white.**” “Not only professors but people in leadership positions like Deans of the colleges should be people of color too,” said one of the students. The women described a system at Rowan University where there was a lack of representation from top to bottom, administration to students. When asked about how



they can feel more supported, the most common answer was having people that represented them in all areas. Mental health and counseling, for instance, was a common topic throughout the conversations with the participants. One Latina student said, “Yeah so we have counselors which is great but like I mean I think we have like one counselor of color. So [imagine] that like having your family [is] going through like the immigration system, how do you even talk about that to another person that has like no idea what that even means.” Another student said, “Especially with all the suicides that happened last semester like it's just hard to listen to someone just talk that doesn't look like you, you have nothing [in common], you can't relate to them or [hear them] talk about we [are] doing everything we can [and I am] not saying that they are not. It's just harder to listen to them.” An Asian American student said, “All the higher ups like the Dean and the assistant Dean are all women but they are like White women and the Wellness Center [is the] same. The lack of representation automatically created a separation for these students even during difficult times. Lastly this student' statement is worth thinking about, she said, “We are already in a PWI. We are just going to keep looking and being a PWI? What about diversity?”

### **Finding #3: Anything Else You Would Like Me to Do?**

Not only did these women have to deal with the academic pressure that came with their identities as students in a PWI, they also had to overcome societal gender roles and being a person of color. For all these women it seemed like it was engraved in them that college was the instant next step. They all gave answers such as “in my household at least it seems like that's just the next step,” or “I thought that was the next step that I had to take,” or “college was never a choice in my family because everyone in my family goes

to college.” However, attending college did not make the rest of the familial and societal expectation disappear instead it just added to their load.

**Academic pressure: “I gotta work 15 times harder than the regular student just to prove a point or to prove I'm right.”** Being a woman of color in a predominantly White institution made these women feel a lot of pressure. Many of them saw themselves as role models to younger siblings or simply to those that shared their same identity. One student said, “they expect us women to just be average so being higher education we can be like role models or set the standard for like other people.” However, being a role model or the representation for their gender and race came with added pressure. The woman explained, one student said, “like when I do speak it has to be perfect like I can't mess up or if I get the question wrong it [feels] like it's double wrong ... I feel like I have more pressure to be perfect because it's like I'm not supposed to be here so if I'm here I have to be the best. Definitely it's a lot of pressure cuz like before I say something, like granted people say things without thinking first, but when I'm in a classroom I definitely [have to] think before I speak.” Another student said, “[it] is like you are representing a whole bunch of people in one like if that makes sense, [it] is like you have like a lot of pressure because now you're forced to act a certain way cuz you don't want to make them [to] feel like oh [you are] the stereotypical person.” There was an underlying feeling amongst these women of color that they were lucky to have a seat in a higher educational setting and because of that they had to be perfect. This was internalized due to the actions of others and because they were often the only women of color. A student explained, “... so sometimes I mean not so much now but I know my freshman and sophomore year sometimes people would make comments about how lucky

I was, and how fortunate I was. Then, I found myself being like “yeah I am lucky and fortunate” but that doesn't dismiss the fact that I worked so hard and I think that like I sometimes I would hear those comments and be like oh they are right, I am lucky.” In academia, the women felt like they had to work harder than everyone else.

**Familial expectations: “It’s like a lot.”** The women of color in this study had to deal with the academic pressure that was imposed on them, and they also were forced to face the familial and societal expectations. All the women expressed that their families played an important role in their life, mostly as support systems. Although these were their loved ones, they also described the amount of pressure that came from their family. One of the students said she experienced a lot of pressure because she came from a house of college graduates therefore, her academic performance was constantly compared to that of her sibling and not finishing her degree was not an option. These women were expected to be successful in their academics and also accomplish the expectations of their family and culture.

The women were expected to do it all; be academically successful while still pursuing the traditional gender roles of many cultures. One student went home every weekend possible to care for her grandmother, even though she was a full time student and an RA on campus. She explained that her grandmother believed in male-dominant gender roles therefore, she asked her to do many things that she did not ask her brother to do. She said, “All she expects from him is to get a girlfriend and that’s it and she expects me to clean the house, cook for her, give her medications and take care of her and everything.” Another student had a very similar experience where she felt like more was asked of her than her brother. In addition, she said that although she felt like there was

more of a shift in her culture for women to be academically successful, there was still an expectation for them to fulfill traditional gender roles. She then said the following about the pressure added by her parents, “How can I do all this stuff that you made me do and now you want me to turn around and marry someone? It's just so much, I just feel like there is too much pressure sometimes.” It seems like women of color are expected to do it all and do it well.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, navigating being the only woman of color, the lack of representation, and continuous expectations demanded of these women were the three major findings in this study. The women were open and vulnerable throughout the study. They shared experiences in the classroom that stuck with them throughout their tenure at Rowan University. This included how often they felt the need to code switch or recalling the times professors would say things that made them feel isolated. On the other hand, the women of color in this study also mentioned positive things about their experiences and being women of color. Most of the positives about being a woman of color included being understanding, more culturally aware, and empathic due to the fact that they are women of color with unique experiences. Another positive of their overall Rowan experiences were the relationships that they built with their support systems (EOF, SJICR, their sororities and clubs) and the opportunities they received like being able to serve as a resident assistant. All in all, their experiences were real and valid and even, unfortunate that they were still occurring in what some would call an advanced society. Women of color to deal with struggles due to both their race and their gender. These women did it gracefully, very much like the unicorns.

## **Chapter V**

### **Summary & Recommendations**

## Summary of the Study

This research focused on the experiences of women of color at a predominately White institution, Rowan University. The study was conducted at the main campus of Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. This qualitative phenomenological study captured the essence behind nine women of color and their experiences at this institution. There were three women from each of the following racial/ethnic groups: African American, Asian American, and Latinx/a. Additionally amongst this group, there were three juniors and six seniors. The overall purpose of this study was to gather the experiences of these diverse women and their perception of institutional support, in order to better support other women of color at Rowan University.

The approach of this study was one on one interviews with each participant. The participants were invited to participate via email to university cultural clubs and organizations. The stories of the women were captured through a semi-structure, open-ended questions design that led to honest, raw, and vulnerable responses. The findings were grouped into three thematic categories that were titled, "Navigating Being The Only One, Mirror Mirror On the Wall... Who is that? and Anything else you would like me to do?" The first finding discussed the participants' experience with being the only person of color/woman of color in White spaces and how they adjusted to the circumstances. The second finding explained the fact that there is a lack of diversity among their peers, professors, and overall administration. This created a separation between their perceived support system and the reality of those at Rowan University. Finally, the last finding highlighted the enormous amount of pressure that women of color dealt with due to their identities. They dealt with the pressures of succeeding in academia as well as familial

expectations to carry out traditional gender roles. All in all, these findings led to answers to the research questions and recommendations for the institution and research moving forward.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of women of color at Rowan University? (Including academic and social and challenges and satisfaction)

The experiences of the participants were heavily impacted by their identities. Due to the fact that they were both a woman and a person of color, they dealt with inequalities due to their gender and race. These are experiences that White and male students do not deal with (Landry, 2002; Kim & O'Brien, 2018). Additionally, being the minority in the classroom led to being singled out and expected to represent all students of color; this adds a layer of educational barrier to their experiences (Landru, 2002; Kim & O'Brien, 2018). The women in this study were often the only person of color or the only women of color in their classrooms. This created stress for them as they felt the need to always be right and work tirelessly to be recognized for their work and their race or gender. Additionally, internally the women were aware that professors and peers saw them as collective or a representation of their group. Therefore, this created internalized pressure to always be right not only for themselves but for the next person/woman of color.

Women of color also deal with oppression from faculty and their peers (Esponosa, 2011; Johnson et al., 2017; Malcom & Malcom; 2011; Reyes, 2011). In this study, this proved to be true. The women described instances where classmates made comments relating to drug deals or people of color securing jobs due their race and not because they were qualified. Additionally, they also struggled with professors confusing them with the

only other woman of color in the room, not inviting them to participate in class discussions, or making insensitive comments about women in STEM or textured hair. These are some of the microaggressions that women report dealing with (Johnson et al., 2017; Reyes, 2011).

Although in this particular study, it was interesting that the majority of the women were not able to recognize or label the behaviors from their peers and professors as microaggressions. Instead they dismissed it, laughed it off, or engaged in code switching a preventative measure. The experiences of women of color can lead to stereotype threat (Johnson et al., 2017). Women of color start internalizing these stereotypes and microaggressions (Johnson et al., 2017). One of the women in the study described this experience. She found herself going back and forth between the idea of being lucky (which is what was repeatedly said to her) and the fact that she worked hard to accomplish all the things that she had, such as successfully finishing her courses in three years in order to advance to a medical program. Moreover, the women were aware of instances where they code-switched or stopped speaking their native language around White supervisors. They expressed this as automatic behavior that they wanted to stop but have not been able to even as juniors and seniors.

Research Question 2: What support do women of color feel Rowan University offers them in order to help them be successful?

The institutional messages of inclusivity and equity often do not correlate with the experiences described by women of color (Morales, 2008). One of the participants said, “They say that they support us but I only see Black people. I haven’t seen a White person in a position of power [saying] this is what’s wrong.” Furthermore, the women in this



study described their support systems being composed of people of color. Offices on campus such as EOF that is made up of people of color or the Office of Social Justice that openly supports their identity both as a woman and person of color, were some of the on campus support that the women described. They also mentioned their friends who are also women of color or people of color. It was clear that these women felt most supported by those that shared their identity. With that being said, the lack of diversity within their faculty members and administrators led to them not always feeling the institutional support as their idea of support is not what is presented institutional-wide.

Again, the women were able to recognize certain offices on campus as supportive. They also mentioned offices that they were able to build relationships with through employment/internship opportunities as supportive. These offices such as the Wellness Center, Career Advancement, and Residential Life, gave them an opportunity for professional development therefore, these did not go unnoticed. Lastly, the participants also named student organizations including sororities or academic and cultural clubs as support systems at Rowan. Through their work and relationships with these offices, departments, and organizations, the women of color in this study felt institutional support.

Research Question 3: What types of support do women of color wish they had at Rowan University?

Being that women of color have to deal with both day to day student responsibilities such as managing classes and balancing an academic and social life, and also the additional added societal pressures, different services need to be provided to care for the uniqueness in their experiences (Kim & O'Brien, 2018; Landry, 2002; Morales,

2008; Vaccaro, 2017). For the most part, the women desired support that does not require reinventing the wheels. They wanted representation, in order to feel supported in the classroom and in overall services such as counseling. Mental health was a concern that presented itself multiple times throughout the study. The participants wanted to interact with counselors of colors who might better understand their lived experiences. In addition to this, they described wanting spaces where they could openly share and talk about their experiences with other people of color or women of color. Lastly, they wanted to feel included at campus-wide programs and class curriculums. Small things like adding musicians or authors of color to a curriculum would help them feel more included. If programs like RAH, the institutional late night program, included music or food of diverse backgrounds this would also make a difference. Therefore, support for these women was about representation and simply looking at what the institution already had and making it inclusive for all. Overall, inclusion is not only the student's responsibility, it is an institutional responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, nine women of color shared their experiences in this study. Unfortunately, there were no Native American respondents. The goal was to collect the essence behind the experiences of women of color at a PWI, Rowan University in this case. Through the experiences of the nine women, it was clear that their experiences included inequalities in the classroom both by peers and faculty. They felt isolated and simultaneously felt like they were put on the spotlight when the conversation focused on diversity topics. Due to this and other examples in the findings of their lived experiences, the participants desired more representation of administrators, faculty, and students.

Although there was a lack of representation, the women of this study, who are juniors and seniors, found support systems within the institution that helped them stay grounded. All in all, this study highlighted the problems that women of color at Rowan University faced and also provided suggestions for future actions.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings, and the lived experiences of the women of color in this study, the following represent the recommendations for future practice at Rowan University:

1. Representation Matters: Rowan University should take initiative to hire people of color, especially women of color as both faculty and administrators.
2. Diversity & Sensitivity Training: Rowan University should provide diversity and sensitivity training to all faculty (tenure or not tenure) and staff members.

Additionally, these trainings should also be given to students at orientation and before they register for classes to ensure that this is not just a checkbox.

3. Inclusivity: The wheels do not have to be reinvented. The institution should look at diversifying their class syllabi and campus wide programs. Include the student organizations in the planning stages of programming, ask for their feedback, and co-sponsor with them. They are already doing the work and students know what they need to feel included!
4. Mental Health Professionals: Mental health professionals of color are needed and this needs immediate attention. The students are facing struggles that are unique to their identity and need people that they feel comfortable with to support them.

### **Recommendation for Further Research**

Based on the findings, and the lived experiences of the women of color in this study, the following represent the recommendations for further research:

1. Native American Students: This study did not include the voice of Native American students because there were no respondents. However they are also women of color nonetheless. Therefore, research is needed on their experiences and how supported they feel.
2. Women of Color: Throughout this study, there were mentions of internalized behavior. Therefore, research on self-perception adopted by these women due to their barriers would be fascinating.
3. Comparison: Although this research only focused on women of color, it will be interesting to explore the experiences of men of color at a predominately White Institution and draw a comparison between the two. Are institutions not providing adequate service to women of color or is it students of color in general? Does gender play a role in the way they perceive support?

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions Sample**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Why did you go to college?
3. Why did you decide to attend Rowan University?
4. Tell me about your support system both at Rowan and in general?
5. How has being a woman of color impacted your experiences at Rowan University?
6. What are some of the benefits of being of woman of color?
7. What are some challenges that you have faced at Rowan as a woman of color?
8. What is it like in the classroom as a woman of color?
9. As a woman of color, what resources does Rowan offer you to help you succeed?
10. What additional resources would help improve your experience at Rowan?
11. What does being a woman in higher education meant to you?
12. What does being a person of color in higher education mean to you?