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Conceptualizing Anti-Blackness at a Hispanic-Serving Research University

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Abstract

This study examined the experiences of Black students attending a Hispanic-Serving Research University (HSRU). Utilizing a mixed-methods Black Student Belonging Survey, the research team sought to understand how Black students across Afro-diasporic communities, including students who self-identify as Black, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Indigenous, West African, and others, described their encounters within an HSRU. Findings from this study revealed that the percentages of students at the HSRU under study who stated that they encountered challenges related to their Black identities at the target university was not equally distributed among various ethnic and multiheritage groups within the Afro-diaspora, $\chi^2(2, n = 319), p < 0.01$. Thus, it appears that challenges at the university related to Black identities vary by background. This is an important finding because it reveals that studies that flatten the Black identity of student respondents may be missing significant variations in experience. Moreover, analysis of qualitative results using an anti-Blackness framework sheds light on the pervasive experiences of anti-Black encounters across the university. These findings include anti-Black aggressions, politics of belonging, and bearing the weight of representation as the most frequent challenges experienced within the HSRU. Recommendations based on these findings call for participatory action research with students, enhanced upstander interventions, and continued work to humanize and broaden practices in higher education that promote servingness.

Keywords: anti-blackness; anti-black aggressions; Black students; belonging; Hispanic-Serving Institution; Hispanic-Serving Research Institution; Hispanic-Serving Research University; servingness; higher education institutions; Afro-Latinidad; afro-indigeneity; West African students

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1. Introduction

To qualify as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), an institution must be an accredited degree-granting college or university with enrollment of at least 25% full-time equivalent undergraduates who self-identify as Hispanic. As of 2023–2024, there were 615 Hispanic-Serving Institutions across the United States enrolling 67.3% Hispanic, 43.6% Asian, 31.3% Native American and Pacific Islander, 27% other (includes unknown and multi-heritage), 22.7% Black, 20.3% American Indian and Alaska Native, and 18.7% White

undergraduate students (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities 2023). Given the federal demographic enrollment requirements for Hispanic students to achieve and maintain HSI designations, as well as the relatively diverse racial and ethnic student bodies enrolling, HSIs can be understood as racialized organizations (Garcia 2019). As such, the concept of servingness becomes complex within these racialized institutions. For student success, servingness is the goal, where institutional missions value student-centeredness and where appropriate resources extend to Hispanic and to all students. However, many analysts criticize most HSIs as “Hispanic-enrolling rather than serving” (Garcia 2019; Vargas and Villa-Palomino 2019).

Research suggests that HSIs have not adequately determined how to best enact servingness, not only for Hispanic students but particularly when it comes to serving Black students within these institutions (Garcia and Cuellar 2023; Pirtle et al. 2024). Analyses of Black students’ lived experiences at HSIs, particularly those from intersectional racial, ethnic, and multi-heritage lenses across the African diaspora, remain limited (Pirtle et al. 2024; Stanislaus et al. 2024; Vega et al. 2022; Zerai 2025). Broader experiences of Black students at HSIs highlight a persistent lack of inclusion (Abrica et al. 2019; Brooms 2022; Lu and Newton 2019; Pirtle et al. 2024; Vega 2019). Embedding servingness becomes even more complicated within a subset of HSIs recognized as research-intensive HSIs, more commonly referred to as HSRUs (Alliance of Hispanic Serving Research Universities n.d.). Using Ray’s (2019) theory of racialized organizations, Jones et al. (2024) argue that HSIs that carry research prestige statuses as RIs¹ are rooted in white institutional norms and racialized power dynamics, ultimately impacting their servingness culture. As such, understanding how Black students experience the most “prestigious” of HSIs as defined by their research status provides an essential lens for interventions to support student success more broadly through safety, belonging, and identity affirmation.

Given the larger research on Black students’ encounters with anti-Blackness within HSIs, we sought to understand what was happening at the intersections of these experiences as an attempt to unflatten monolithic findings and assumptions of Black student trends within an HSRU. In 2025, our research team, comprising administrators, practitioners, and faculty, conducted a mixed-methods Black Student Belonging Project (BSBP) to better understand how Black students experienced their HSRU. Specifically, we sought to explore Black student experiences through questions including but not limited to how Black students self-identify across the diaspora, what their experiences have been within the university, whether they engage in “traditional” student activities and university-wide traditions and/or Black Culture Center (BCC) activities and traditions, how they describe safe and unsafe places, and whether they would recommend the university to other Black identifying peers.

Building on previous research findings of anti-Blackness within HSIs (Abrica et al. 2019; Brooms 2022; Pirtle et al. 2024; Vega et al. 2022), our results both support previous research and provide further explanation concerning ways in which students encounter challenges related to their Black identity at an HSRU. Additionally, we investigated how Black students across Afro-diasporic communities, including students who self-identify as Black, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Indigenous, West African, and other Black diasporic identities, describe challenges experienced within the university relative to their Black identities. This paper highlights how identities are constructed and the value of exploring identities at intersections, followed by an examination of the literature focused on HSI servingness and Black students. Following this, we contextualize anti-Blackness within higher education institutions (HEIs) as our framework before discussing the survey and presenting findings. In the context of HSIs and servingness for Black students, this paper highlights how Black identities are constructed and the value of exploring identities at the intersections. We seek to make a meaningful contribution to the field by elevating the complexity

of Afro-diasporic intra-group dynamics, challenging one-dimensional racialized student success metrics, and expanding the dialog for creating a more authentic and inclusive servingness framework, particularly when an HSI sits at the intersection of research prestige.

2. Review of Literature

Identity and belonging are central components of the collegiate experience, as this is often a pivotal time when individuals engage in processes of meaning-making for themselves and the world around them (Stewart 2014). Because U.S. HEIs serve as a primary context for socialization, understanding racialized identity development and senses of belonging is crucial for examining how Black students construct meaning and community within these environments to optimize support for student success. Foundational theories such as Phinney's (1989) ethnic identity development, Cross et al.'s (1991) model of psychological Nigrescence, and Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality help us to understand how identity is constructed and negotiated within racialized environments, such as HEIs. In this section of the paper, we highlight frameworks that help us to understand Black collegiate student identity formation and salience through the lens of racialized, ethnic, and intersectional approaches. Next, we define HSIs as racialized environments and their "servingness" responsibilities, followed by a synthesis of literature discussing the experiences of Black students within HSIs.

2.1. Black Racialized, Ethnic, and Intersectional Identity Development

The processes of racialized and ethnic identity development, particularly for Black students, can equip HEI practitioners with proactive opportunities to support holistic student success within diverse campus cultures. Cross and colleagues' (1991) model of Nigrescence is a foundational theory widely used for understanding Black students' racial identity development. Nigrescence has evolved from a five-stage model to one with four stages: (1) pre-encounter, (2) encounter, (3) immersion–emersion, and (4) internalization (Cross et al. 1991). Movement through these four stages reveals the process by which Black identity transforms from low racial salience to affirmed high racial salience. Within a higher education setting, this framework helps us to understand how Black students define themselves and their experiences (both affirming and challenging). Phinney (1989) proposed a similar model to describe ethnic identity through three stages: (1) diffusion–foreclosure, (2) moratorium, and (3) identity achievement, which has been primarily used to understand development at the high school and collegiate levels. These three stages explain how individuals progress from a lack of awareness of their ethnic identity to actively exploring it and ultimately embracing their culture as distinct (Phinney 1989). Collectively, these models emphasize identity development as a dynamic process. Understanding how to integrate racial and ethnic models of development for belonging and student success provides educators with an opportunity to foster environments that are sensitive to and responsive to racial, ethnic, and heritage-affirming approaches for supporting inclusive learning and co-curricular offerings.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) adds an additional critical lens for understanding Black student identity and belonging within HEIs. Crenshaw (1991) argues that individuals experience multiple and overlapping systems of oppression and privilege shaped by our social identities. As such, intersectionality helps us to "unflatten" Blackness as an identity by exploring how the convergence of multiple social identities can impact how these students navigate HEI spaces (Patton 2016; Stewart 2008, 2014). Moreover, when intersectionality is applied, HEI administrators can better understand how campus climates impact Black students differently at the intersections of gender, ethnic heritage, sexuality, and class and illuminate how HEI structures may both privilege and marginalize

communities within the Black student population, thus creating varied experiences (Baber 2012; Chavous 2000; Harper and Hurtado 2007; Stewart 2008; Zerai 2025).

Collectively, these models for racial (Cross et al. 1991) and ethnic (Phinney 1989) identity development, as well as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), provide a framework for exploring how Black students may experience their time in higher education (Taylor 2019). As a socializing space, HEIs become a complex environment where the construction and development of racial identity salience is built on a constant negotiation of encounters and norming, both positive and negative. Therefore, understanding how Black students negotiate identity and belonging, including how they self-identify within a diasporic context of Blackness, requires attention to the experiences at the intersections of race and other social identities while also considering the specific institutional and geo-cultural context of institutional settings where these students are engaged.

2.2. Hispanic-Serving Institutions and “Servingness”

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are defined as accredited, degree-granting higher education institutions with enrollment of at least twenty-five percent of the undergraduate full-time equivalent (FTE) students who self-identify as Hispanic. There are no additional criteria for faculty, administration, or organizational “serving” requirements (Vargas and Villa-Palomino 2019). Given this, Garcia (2016) argues that defining servingness within HSIs has been challenging. Therefore, as HSIs continue to enroll large percentages of Hispanic students in addition to Black, Asian American, and multiheritage students, HSI environments become a critical space for studying campus racial climate, given the demographically diverse students that these institutions are responsible for serving. Garcia (2019) also claims that because servingness can be defined autonomously by the institution, it creates a complex dynamic for mutual definitions, as HSIs are organizationally and demographically diverse within and across the U.S. HEI landscape. This concept becomes even more complex when considering HSIs with designations such as research-intensive. Drawing from Ray’s (2019) theory of racialized organizations, Jones et al. (2024) argue that HSRUs with research prestige statuses remain rooted in white institutional norms and racialized power dynamics, ultimately impacting their servingness culture.

Despite challenges for creating a mutual definition, Garcia et al. (2019) have designed a multidimensional framework for assessing servingness at HSIs. This model identifies indicators of serving to include academic outcomes, labor market outcomes, identity development (i.e., academic self-concept, leadership, critical consciousness, and graduate school aspirations), and students’ experiences of belonging (p. 3). Because HSIs carry an organizational legacy as former predominantly white institutions (PWIs), these institutions must confront the ways Whiteness norms still pervade their organizational culture (Petrov and Garcia 2021; Hall et al. 2021; Muñoz et al. 2025; Zerai 2025). As such, while these institutions have been designated as HSIs, the concept and practice of serving students, particularly Black enrolled students, remains an area that needs work. We define servingness for this study as the intentional and holistic centering of inclusive support indicators for Black students beyond academic markers of success, such as retention, matriculation, graduation, and grade point average metrics. Servingness encompasses asset-focused interventions and includes but is not limited to accessible resources, affirming physical and virtual spaces, inclusive curriculum, safety (at the institutional and interpersonal level), mentorship, research confidence, leadership and professional development, as well as supportive pathways to career placement or graduate school matriculation.

2.3. Black Student Experiences in HSI

Vega et al. (2022) criticized the serving component of HSIs, arguing that servingness is a racialized practice that systematically excludes Black students. Other scholars have also begun to call for increased attention to Black student experiences at these institutions, emphasizing the presence of anti-Blackness. Drawing on several theories (Dumas and Ross 2016; Garcia 2018; Ray 2019), Pirtle and colleagues (2024) conceptualize anti-Black institutional embeddedness within these institutions as both implicit and explicit relational dynamics resulting in a disregard for Black students at institutional, organizational, and interpersonal levels. Examples of anti-Black experiences within HSIs include Black students describing their experiences as the minority of the minority (Taylor 2019). More recent studies focused on Black students' experiences at HSI's include an exploration of Black students' identity formation at HSIs (Brown 2025), Black student success and inclusion (Gaines 2024; Pirtle et al. 2024; Vega 2022), Black male student persistence (Abrica et al. 2019; Brooms 2022; Watson 2024), and have examined how racially affirming curricula can support Black students (Lacy 2025). Findings from these studies have centered on the lack of opportunities for identity growth and value formation experienced by Black students at HSIs (Brown 2025), the need for pedagogical and andragogical interventions that center Blackness (Gaines 2024; Lacy 2025), and the persistent lack of inclusion and servingness for Black students (Abrica et al. 2019; Brooms 2022; Lu and Newton 2019; Pirtle et al. 2024; Vega 2019). With the exception of gendered studies, much of this research paints Black student experiences as a relatively homogenous group and has yet to robustly account for the ways diverse ethnic heritage within Black communities can impact Black student experiences.

The limited research from this standpoint includes Pirtle et al.'s (2024) study, which noted the foreign and immigrant status of multiheritage and Afro-Latinx students but presented findings as overarching experiences among Black students. Within their findings, they note an Afro-Latinx student sharing feelings of exclusion with her peers. In a more recent study, Vega et al. (2022) call attention to the ways Afro-Latinx identities are rendered invisible and call on HSIs to expand definitions of Latinidad to include Black servingness. Beyond Afro-Latinx experiences, Stanislaus et al. (2024) recently explored second-generation Afro-Caribbean female experiences within an HSI, with findings highlighting experiences of stereotyping as well as hyper-invisibility and visibility. Literature focused on Black students' experiences at HSRUs is an emerging field with findings continuing to point to racially charged encounters through an intersectional microaggression survey (Zerai 2025) and isolation as the "only one" when exploring experiences within a STEM summer research institute (Peele-Eady and Reid Smith 2023).

2.4. Contributions to the Field

While the literature on servingness at HSIs for Black students offers valuable insights, a gap remains in understanding how servingness is perceived by Black students at the intersections of multiple identities within the Afro-diaspora. Scholars (Garcia and Cuellar 2023; Petrov and Garcia 2021; Stanislaus et al. 2024; Zerai 2025) have begun calling on researchers to continue examining the experiences of minoritized groups from an intersectional lens to create stronger serving frameworks that support all students. We seek to answer this call by providing a more comprehensive approach to examining Black student interactions within an HSRU, utilizing an institutional Black Student Belonging Survey.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a more nuanced understanding of both the distinct intra-group and collective experiences of Black students within the diaspora.² The process of disaggregating data findings in this way offers HEI faculty and practitioners opportunities to construct more intentional approaches for creating a truly inclusive and supportive servingness model to support student success more broadly through

safety, belonging, and identity affirmation. The following section outlines anti-Blackness as our framework for contextualizing this study.

3. Theoretical Framework: Anti-Blackness in U.S. HEIs

Anti-Blackness is an interdisciplinary concept, providing a framework for understanding systemic Black suffering, violence, and dehumanization (Dumas 2016). Through this theoretical framing, we explore anti-Blackness within the specific context of U.S. HEIs, providing a historical overview followed by more recent examples of how anti-Blackness has been described through the experiences of Black collegiate students.

The emergence of U.S. higher education institutions reveals a profound reliance and systematic degradation of Black people as necessary for sustaining the earliest U.S. colonial order in early colonial colleges (Dancy et al. 2018; Wilder 2013). This profound reliance and systematic degradation have been conceptualized as anti-Blackness and have continued to be a pervasive experience within U.S. HEIs. During the colonial era, enslaved Black people were responsible for laboring roles such as building the institutions, and serving as personal attendants, cooks, and cleaners (Dancy et al. 2018), yet were not regarded as human (Grier-Reed et al. 2021). As such, this extraction of labor without recognizing the laborer as human became the earliest sites of anti-Blackness and its reproduction in educational spaces. Following the development of colonial colleges and the post-Civil War era, the Jim Crow era ushered in a new wave of anti-Black violence towards Black people as they were denied human rights and experienced violence and exclusionary policies related to educational attainment (Grier-Reed et al. 2021; Kendi 2025). At this time, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were being founded, and while meant to educate and uplift Black people, they were also sites in which anti-Blackness was met in the curriculum, social expectations, and funding allocations (Kendi 2025). After the successful passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, Black students began to gain more access to higher education institutions, including predominantly white institutions (PWIs). However, many Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) who were fortunate enough to be admitted were met with tokenization as well as the experience of violence in the classrooms, housing, and other spaces of campus engagement (Grier-Reed et al. 2021).

Unfortunately, anti-Blackness has continued to permeate HEIs into the 21st century. Today, anti-Blackness in U.S. HEI studies includes the institutionalization of Black suffering (Dancy et al. 2018) through practices such as racial microaggressions, tokenization, psychological torments leading to imposter feelings, unequal labor distributions, curriculums that lacks Black contributions, defunding of Black student success work, and the framing of racialized acts towards Black people as unrelated or separate from the legacy of the university system by placing the primary focus on the individual(s) involved (Dancy et al. 2018; Patton 2016; Lewis et al. 2012; Pirtle et al. 2024). While racial microaggressions are commonly included in descriptions of anti-Blackness in HEIs, scholars also suggest utilizing “anti-Black aggressions” as a more appropriate framing of this experience. Anti-Black aggressions are defined as “intentional and unintentional acts of racial discrimination, bias, and exclusion that are aimed at Black people and are manifested through interpersonal interactions, gestures, speech, and spatially” (as cited in Hines 2024, p. 217). Brooms (2022) also extends anti-Blackness in HEIs to include actions of “personal assault on the person, character, identity, self-image, psyche, spirit, safety, and worth of individual Black peoples” (p. 685). Furthermore, Jashnani (2025) adds that there are multifaceted impacts of anti-Black violence in the collegiate setting. Encounters of peer aggression, exclusion, humiliation, institutional devaluation, as well as environmental and representational violence, can perpetuate emotional and psychological harms, economic dispossessions, and institutional maintenance of white dominance.

Anti-Blackness includes the culmination of interpersonal racialized moments within a broader systemic devaluation of the Black body rooted in chattel slavery, colonization, and systems upholding white supremacy (Dumas and Ross 2016). While anti-Blackness has largely been explored in higher education literature through the experiences of Black students at PWIs, it is important to note that anti-Blackness is not simply a Black/white experience. Rather, HEIs as systems that uphold white supremacy can breed anti-Blackness carried out through non-white bodies (Dancy et al. 2018). This notion of anti-Blackness performed by non-white bodies also extends beyond PWI systems and can be experienced in other minority serving institutions, such as HSIs. Pirtle and their colleagues (2024) argue that anti-Blackness can manifest in HSIs through “mismatched cultural scripts, uneven resource allocation, lack of representation, and group exclusion, even at institutions that claim to support racially minoritized students through centering diversity” (p. 338). These examples are part of their broader conceptualization of anti-Black institutional embeddedness, which includes both implicit and explicit relational dynamics resulting in a disregard for Black students at the institutional, organizational, and interpersonal levels of HEIs. Synthesizing the research centered on anti-Blackness in HEIs, we draw on Pirtle and their colleagues’ (2024) definition of anti-Black institutional embeddedness and anti-Black aggressions (Hines 2024), including the examples presented by the scholars noted above as evidence of anti-Black violence at the three levels.

Although our findings support recent scholarship highlighting how anti-Blackness shows up within Black students’ experiences at HSIs (Abrica et al. 2019; Brooms 2022; Lu and Newton 2019; Vega 2019, 2022; Pirtle et al. 2024), it also makes a meaningful contribution to the field by expanding our understanding of Black student experiences through the intersections of Blackness. We push beyond scholarship focusing on Blackness as a one-dimensional student identity to include other Afro-diasporic identities and their experiences within an HSRU. In doing so, our research explores how Anti-Blackness can be differently experienced within Black communities and challenges monolithic myths of collegiate Black student identity and their experiences.

4. Methods

The BSBP Survey was conducted in the spring of 2025 at an HSRU in the southwest, to be referred to as Southwest Research University (SWRU). The survey instrument was developed using Zeraí’s (2025) Intersectional Microaggressions (IMA) survey, López et al. (2017) conception of “street race,” and interdepartmental needs of the Black Cultural Center (BCC). Given the makeup of the multi-disciplinary research team (administrator, practitioner, librarian, and discipline faculty), the survey provided insight into climate and belonging, while also serving as a program evaluation for the BCC and other co-curricular/student resource offerings. In addition to demographic questions, our survey asked Black students to self-describe their Black identity within the Afro-diaspora (i.e., African, Black, or African American, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Indigenous); how they perceived servingness at SWRU (with open-ended questions to describe positive and negative experiences); and to report their familiarity with university-wide co-curricular, BCC, and Black community at-large engagement. They were also asked how they perceived servingness at SWRU (with open-ended questions to describe positive and negative experiences), as well as whether they would recommend the university to their Black peers. Two additional open-ended questions were asked to determine ways the BCC could better support students, and the survey provided an opportunity for them to share any additional experiences related to their experiences as a Black student attending SWRU.

In the Fall of 2024, we piloted prospective survey questions amongst undergraduate and graduate BCC student staff before revising the instrument and submitting it to SWRU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon receiving IRB approval, the survey was

emailed via Qualtrics to every student at SWRU who self-identified as Black ($n = 1277$) and was enrolled for the Spring 2025 semester. It should be noted that this number exceeds the official counts of Black students reported to IPEDS by SWRU. According to the Office of Institutional Analytics, SWRU enrolled only 615 Black students in the spring semester of 2025 (494 undergraduates and 121 graduate students). Additionally, we recognized that identity is a fluid process of development (Cross et al. 1991; Phinney 1989), and as HEI practitioners, we were aware that not all students updated their racial identity in the university's student portal as they continued to build identity salience throughout their time at SWRU. So as not to exclude Black students who may have been missed through official university data sets, we offered a QR code to complete the survey at the front desk and on each of the doors within the BCC. This link was advertised through the BCC's social media accounts. Ultimately, the survey yielded 346 responses over one month (for an acceptable response rate of 27%). A total of 252 students completed the survey through their email link. The remaining surveys were completed using the QR code accessed by physically visiting the BCC. Cross-tabulations were conducted to explore the relationships between Afro-diasporic identities and levels of positive/challenging experiences, chi-square tests, and a logistic regression analysis were used to examine the statistical significance of these associations. All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for MAC v. 31.0 (SPSS Analysis 2025).

4.1. Sample Characteristics

Responses were well distributed across undergraduate and master's degree-seeking students in the BSBP Survey. Given the low percentage of Black students seeking doctoral degrees at SWRU, there was a good representation of doctoral students. Focusing our analysis data set on our target population, we created frequencies for student classification in Table 1 below ($n = 319$). As noted above, we invited the total population of all students identifying as Black to complete the survey. Table 1 also provides student classifications of everyone invited to complete the survey. First-year students were overrepresented among respondents, and seniors were underrepresented. All other groups had similar percentages among those invited and among actual respondents. Given the size and representativeness of respondents to the population of Black students, our findings draw inferences about this population.

Table 1. Student classification of those invited and surveyed in Black Student Belonging Project.

Student Classification	Analysis File		Invited *
	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage
First Year (less than 30 credit hours)	66	20.7	8
Sophomore (more than 30 credit hours, but less than 60 credit hours)	57	17.9	22
Junior (more than 60 credit hours, but less than 90 credit hours)	56	17.6	20
Senior (more than 90 credit hours)	62	19.4	31
Master's Degree Seeking Student	46	14.4	11
Doctoral and Professional Degree Seeking Student	3	0.9	8
Total	319	100.0	100.0

* "Invited" reflects the percentage of Black students at SWRU occupying each classification. A total of 1,277 students were invited to complete the survey, for a response rate of 27%.

Self-reported variations in Black identities of respondents in the analysis file follow in Table 2 ($n = 319$). Note that all individuals who selected "Multiheritage/Ethnic" for their 1 identity were Black and/or African and another identity. So, we kept the "Multiheritage/Ethnic" variable intact and only recoded relevant write-in responses if they could not be recoded into Afro-Latinx, Afro-European, or Afro-Caribbean.

Table 2. Frequency table of respondents' self-described Black identity.

Description of Black Identity	Frequency	Percentage
Black	115	36.1
Afro-Latinx (and related identities)	55	17.2
Afro-Indigenous	10	3.1
Afro-European, e.g., Black and White, and related multiheritage identities	45	14.1
North, East, or Central African	20	6.3
West African	46	14.4
Other Multiheritage/Ethnic	23	7.2
Afro-Caribbean (and related identities)	5	1.6
Total	319	100.0

Note: See Appendix A for all write-in identities captured by the value labels above.

In terms of *students invited* to complete the survey, 46% were identified as Black only in the university database, 29% were defined as Black and Hispanic, 21% were identified as multiethnic (or “multiheritage” in our parlance), and 3% were ‘non-residents’. These were the only sub-groups of Black students in that database. It is interesting that over 20% of survey respondents identified with various African heritages. However, if they are second-generation Nigerian Americans, for example, they would show up as only Black in the university database.

Table 3. Respondents' gender and gender identity.

Gender and Gender Identity	Frequency	Percent
Woman/Cisgender Female	191	59.9
Man/Cisgender Male and Transgender Male/Man	107	33.5
Non-Binary/Non-Conforming/Gender Queer	16	5.0
I would Rather Not Share	3	0.9
Total of Those Who Responded	317	99.4
Did Not Respond	2	0.6
Total	319	319.0

Note: Some responded in an open-ended question, indicating “man,” and these were recoded to man/cismale. There were only 4 who indicated trans man, so they were also recoded to a new all-inclusive category (man/cis male and trans male).

Respondents shared their gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation (see Table 3). The majority were women (60%) and heterosexual (53%), and 44–47% indicated that they are a part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) community (Table 4).

Table 4. Respondents' sexual orientation.

Sexual Orientation	Frequency	Percent
Asexual *	24	8
Bisexual	44	14
Gay	10	3
Heterosexual/ “Straight” **	170	53
Lesbian	15	5
Pansexual	18	6
Queer	10	3
Questioning	9	3
Prefer Not to Say/Unlabeled	19	6

* includes biromantic and asexual. ** includes abstinent heterosexual.

Respondents ranged from 18 to 70 years old, and the modal age range was eighteen to twenty-one (55%), followed by those who were between twenty-two and twenty-five (16.1%). One hundred and sixty-one students reported the number of hours they work per week. Of those, 46% reported working 20 h or less. Overall, only 5.6% of students work 10 h or fewer a week. The majority of those responding reported working over 20 h per week (64%), 33% reported working 30 h or more a week, and 14.3% reported working 40 h or more a week.

4.2. SWRU's HSI Status

Eleven respondents did not complete questions in the survey about SWRU's HSI Status. Eighty-one percent of the 308 students who completed this set of questions reported they were aware that SWRU was an HSI. Nearly seventy-five percent (74.4%) responded affirmatively that they believed that SWRU, as an HSI, has a responsibility to serve Black students. However, less than seven percent (6.8%) reported not being sure; a little over fifteen percent (15.3%) indicated that SWRU "maybe" had the responsibility; and less than four percent (3.6%) indicated the SWRU was not responsible for serving Black students. These responses stand in contrast to respondents' perspectives on SWRU's support, as an HSI, for Black students.

Only 31% (96) of respondents indicated that they felt that SWRU, as an HSI, currently supports them as a Black student. Thirty percent (93) selected maybe, and twenty-two percent (68) selected no. More than doubling the number of those who indicated that they were unsure about SWRU's mission and its relevance to support of Black students, 17% (51) of respondents indicated they were unsure whether SWRU supported them as a Black student.

4.3. Challenges and Positive Experiences Related to Identity as a Black Student at SWRU

Similarly to the questions about SWRU as an HSI, eleven respondents did not answer the question about challenges encountered, and twenty-one did not answer the question about positive experiences. For students who did respond, they have faced both challenges and positive experiences related to their identity as Black students at SWRU. A little under half, 45% (139) of students affirmed that they had not faced any challenges related to their identity as a Black student, and 62% (186) of responding students affirmed that they had positive experiences related to their identity as Black students (Table 5 and Table 6). This is an interesting state of affairs, one in which students can encounter both challenges related to their identity as a Black student at SWRU and, at the same time, mark positive experiences related to their identity as a Black student. Any analysis must recognize the complexities of both finding spaces of Black joy in the midst of a broader university environment that may be experienced as anti-Black. The open-ended responses in part 5.4 below provide further details about protected Black spaces at SWRU.

We were curious about whether challenges and positive experiences were independent of respondents' various identities. We first re-coded both dependent variables.

Table 5. Students' challenges related to their Black identity at SWRU.

Challenges Encountered	Frequency	Percent
Yes	102	33.1
Maybe	67	21.8
No	139	45.1
Total	308	100

Note: the survey question was "Have you encountered challenges related to your identity as a Black student at [SWRU]?"

Table 6. Students' positive experiences related to their Black identity at SWRU.

Positive Experiences	Frequency	Percent
Yes	186	62.4
Maybe	52	17.4
No	60	20.2
Total	298	100

Note: the survey question was "Have you encountered positive experiences related to your identity as a Black student at [SWRU]?"

5. Results

5.1. Racial Challenges among SWRU Students

Cross-tabulation tables examining variations among Black identity groups and reports of challenges can be found below. For these subsequent analyses, "Yes" and "Maybe" are recoded as "Yes" for both positive experiences and challenges.

As shown in Table 7, by and large, 44% (139) of students indicated that they do not experience challenges at SWRU related to their Black identity. Interestingly, the groups with the highest percentages of students who report encountering challenges at SWRU related to their Black identity are Afro-Caribbean, North and Central African, and multi-heritage. Seventy percent of Afro-Indigenous students indicated that they do not experience challenges at SWRU related to their Black identity. The majority of students indicated that they experience challenges at SWRU related to their Black identity (56%). It appears that our four largest groups, Black, Afro-Latinx, and Afro-European (e.g., Black and White), and West African, reported similar percentages of students experiencing challenges related to Black identity, ranging from 56 to 62%.

Table 7. Racial challenges among SWRU students with various Black identities.

Description of Black Identity	Challenges (Percentage)		Total Number
	No	Yes	
Black	44.3	55.7	115
Afro-Latinx (and related identities)	41.1	58.9	56
Afro-Indigenous	70.0	30.0	10
Afro-European, e.g., Black and White dual heritage and related identities	43.5	56.5	46
Central and North African	25.0	75.0	<10
East African	68.8	31.3	16
West African	39.1	60.9	46
Multih heritage and related identities not identified above	38.1	61.9	21
Afro-Caribbean	0.0	100.0	<10
Total	43.6	56.4	319

See Appendix A for all write-in identities captured by the Black identities noted above.

As reported before, the majority of students completing the survey have had positive experiences at SWRU related to their Black identity, as shown in Table 8 (58%). West African students are the highest percentage (72%) who have had positive experiences related to their Black identity at SWRU, and though a small group, only 50% of Afro-Indigenous students have had positive experiences at SWRU related to their Black identity. Unlike the response to the question about challenges, there is some variation among our largest groups. While similar percentages of Black and Afro-European students have had positive experiences at SWRU related to their Black identity (59% and 57%, respectively), only 50% of Afro-Latinx students have had positive experiences at SWRU related to their Black identity, which is lower than the mean. Similarly, only 50% of Afro-Indigenous and Central and North African students report positive experiences at SWRU related to their Black identity. Afro-Caribbean students' reports of positive experiences are just above the mean at 60%. Multiheritage students not noted above reported positive experiences at SWRU at just below the mean (57%).

Table 8. Positive experiences encountered at SWRU related to Black identity.

Description of Black Identity	Positive Experiences (Percentage)		Total Number
	No	Yes	
Black	40.9	59.1	115
Afro-Latinx (and related identities)	50.0	50.0	56
Afro-Indigenous	50.0	50.0	10
Afro-European, e.g., Black and White dual heritage and related identities	43.5	56.5	46
Central and North African	50.0	50.0	<10
East African	43.8	56.3	16
West African	28.3	71.7	46
Multiheritage and related identities not identified above	42.9	57.1	21
Afro-Caribbean	40.0	60.0	<10
Total	41.7	58.3	319

See Appendix A. for all write-in identities captured by the Black identities noted above.

5.2. Refining Our Analysis of Race and Challenges Related to Black Identity

After reflecting on the results noted above, and on the ways in which race was captured, we decided to further refine race and ethnicity within the African diaspora and to look deeper at differences between groups with regard to the percentage that reported experiencing challenges. We were able to create an Afro-Asian category from six responses within various multiheritage groups and given their low number yet similarity in numbers of challenges with East Africans, we placed them in the same category. We recoded two additional responses to the Afro-European and Afro-Latinx categories in a new variable that groups all respondents into six identities. Given the smaller number of responses from Afro-Asians, Afro-Caribbeans, and other groups not noted, and similarities in their experiences with challenges related to Blackness at SWRU, we combined them and created a new label, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Six descriptions of Blackness and challenges related to identity at SWRU.

Description of Black Identity	Challenges (Percentage)		Total Number
	No	Yes	
Afro-Indigenous and East African	69.2	30.8	26
Black	44.3	55.7	115
Afro-Latinx (and related identities)	42.1	57.9	57
Afro-European, e.g., Black and White multiheritage and related identities	43.5	56.5	46
West African	39.1	60.9	46

Afro-Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Central, and North African, other multiheritage groups	27.6	72.4	29
Total	43.6	56.4	319

See Appendix A for all write-in identities captured by the Black identities noted above.

In Table 9, it is evident that we have three groups that respond in distinctive ways to the question about challenges at SWRU related to their Black identity. The group with the highest percentages of affirmative responses is Afro-Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Other Multi-heritage groups, and East and North Africans. Among them, 72% indicated that they have had challenges related to their Blackness at SWRU. The second distinctive group is the smallest group numerically, Afro-Indigenous and East Africans. Among this group, only 31% affirmed that they have experienced challenges related to their Blackness at SWRU. Finally, there is a large middle group inclusive of Black, Afro-Latinx, and West African students, ranging from 56% to 61%, who have experienced challenges at SWRU related to their Blackness.

We created a new variable to capture the three groups. This is depicted in Table 10. The lowest percentage group falls below the mean of 56.4%, and the medium group (57.2%) is just above the mean, while the highest group (72.4%) is well above the mean with regard to the percentages reporting experiencing challenges related to their Black identity at SWRU. Next, we ran a bivariate logistic regression analysis to examine whether these differences are statistically significant.

Table 10. Reports of challenges at SWRU related to respondents' Black identity.

Frequency of Reports of Challenges Encountered at SWRU Related to Respondent's Black Identity	Challenges (Percentage)		Total (Number)
	No	Yes	
Lowest percentages reporting challenges	69.2	30.8	26
Medium-level percentages reporting challenges	42.8	57.2	264
Highest percentages reporting challenges	27.6	72.4	29
Total	43.6	56.4	319

Note: Black identities grouped by frequency of affirmations of challenges.

5.3. Logistic Regression Results

Table 11 shows the results from a bivariate logistic regression analysis that was performed to investigate the relationship among various groups of Black students with various self-described ethnic identities and the likelihood of reporting challenges related to their Black identity. The lowest challenge groups include Afro-Indigenous and East African groups. They were the omitted variable. The medium challenges groups included students who identified as Black with no modifiers, those who are Afro-Latinx and related identities, those who are Afro-European or related identities, and those who are West African. These four groups represent the plurality of Black students at SWRU. Finally, the groups that were in the "highest challenges" category were Afro-Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Central African, and other groups not specified under any of the already noted ethnicities.

Table 11. Logistic regression analysis of challenges at SWRU related to respondents' Black identity, with identities grouped by frequency of affirmations of challenges.

Independent Variable	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Highest percentages reporting challenges	1.776	0.594	0.003	5.906
Medium-level percentages reporting challenges	1.101	0.443	0.013	3.007
Constant	−0.811	0.425	0.056	0.444
Model $X^2 = 10.192$, $p = 0.006$				

Cox and Nell $R^2 = 0.031$ Nafelkerke $R^2 = 0.042$ $n = 319$

Note: The dependent variable in this analysis is challenges at SWRU related to respondents' Black identity, coded so that 0 = no challenges and 1 = challenges. The Afro-Indigenous and East African groups are the omitted variable; they reported the lowest percentages of challenges. This report of results is guided by a template provided by The University of Utah (n.d.). Source: Data from the 2025 Black Student Belonging Project Survey.

The model was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 10.192$, $p < 0.01$), explaining between 31% (Cox and Nell R^2) and 42% (Nafelkerke R^2) of the variance in challenges and correctly classifying 60% of cases. In the model, highest percentages reporting challenges ($B = 1.776$, $p = 0.003$) and medium-level percentages reporting challenges ($B = 1.101$, $p = 0.013$) were both statistically significant, indicating that Afro-Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Central African, and other groups not specified under any of the already noted ethnicities were 5.9 times as likely to report challenges relative to Afro-Indigenous and East African groups. And students who self-identified as Black with no modifiers, those who are Afro-Latinx and related identities, those who are Afro-European or related identities, and those who are West African were 3.0 times as likely to report challenges related to their Black identity relative to Afro-Indigenous and East African groups, as shown by $\text{Exp}(B)$.

5.4. Qualitative Analytic Approach

Our analysis of the responses to an open-ended question about challenges encountered at SWRU related to respondents' Black identities sheds light on students' experiences with anti-Blackness at SWRU. Whereas the majority of respondents ($n = 180$ or 56%) out of 319 affirmed that they faced challenges at SWRU related to their Black identity, 125 (70%) responded to the open-ended question about these challenges. In a thematic analysis of all responses to the question, "Please describe any challenges you have encountered (consider including a description of what happened, where it happened, and how it made you feel)," one of our team members coded the responses and identified thirteen themes (see Appendix B for the full list). In our analysis, we focused on the individuals who answered the question, and since three respondents did not answer the question, our analysis is limited to 122 responses. There were also a few respondents who indicated that they did not feel comfortable elaborating on their challenges in the university related to their Black identity. One explanation may be the reality that, for many, they may be the only Black student in their cohort, or even the only Black student in their major or college. The twelve remaining themes were grouped into five categories, revealing a number of intersecting themes among these various categories. Given the intersecting themes, we condensed the categories to three, focusing on anti-Blackness.

In our larger project, we expanded each of the themes. But for these analyses, we focus on descriptions of anti-Blackness, including examples of anti-Black aggressions, tokenization, curriculum that lacks Black contributions, exclusion and isolation, humiliation, feelings of unbelonging, lack of representation and safety, as well as institutional devaluation. Anti-Blackness is a broad concept that encompasses microaggressions, which are negative comments, slights, and other actions toward targeted groups that are often unconscious on the part of the perpetrator (thus, micro; however, micro does not at all describe the impact of such actions on targets). However, anti-Blackness goes well beyond microaggressions and anti-Black racism. Anti-Blackness has been conceptualized in the humanities for many decades before we began to apply those conceptualizations in the social sciences. Warren et al. (2024) pointed to the work of Toni Morrison to guide educational researchers towards the basic understanding that anti-Blackness is when Blackness

and humanity are juxtaposed. They noted that “Anti-Blackness, [encompasses] the social forces, logics, and systems that insist upon the impossibility of Black humanity” (citing Jung and Vargas 2021; Wilderson 2010, 2020). Among the 125 open-ended responses, 122 respondents answered the question with specific examples of challenges at SWRU related to their Black identity, which can be described by what we understand as anti-Blackness across various interaction levels (i.e., interpersonal, organizational, institutional) (Pirtle et al. 2024). Anti-Blackness was found to be a pervasive experience with respondents providing numerous examples, especially among our groups reporting the highest percentages of challenges at the university related to their Black identities (to include Afro-Asian, Afro-Caribbean, and other racial groups), as well as among groups reporting medium-level challenges (to include Black, Afro-Latinx, Afro-European, and West African groups). We provide examples of these challenges in our thematic analysis that follows.

5.5. Qualitative Themes

5.5.1. Category 1: The Everyday Experiences of Anti-Black Aggressions

While scholars have conceptualized aggressions through various terms such as microaggressions (Pierce 1974) and racial microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007), we use the term anti-Black aggressions (Hines 2024) to describe the experiences shared by Black student respondents. Hines and Wilmot (2018) sought to recenter Blackness in the conversation of micro and macro racial aggressions, and describe anti-Black aggressions as, “intentional and unintentional acts of racial discrimination, bias, and exclusion that are aimed at Black people and are manifested through interpersonal interactions, gestures, speech, and spatially” (as cited in Hines 2024, p. 217). Their model proposes that anti-Black aggressions operate across various levels and include anti-Black microaggressions, anti-Black institutionalized racism, and anti-Black macroaggressions (as cited in Hines 2024, p. 217). The respondents provided thirty-one examples of challenges they faced at the university related to their Black identity that were coded as anti-Black aggressions. There were an additional five examples of each of anti-Black aggression coded under the “on university campuses,” and the “in the classroom themes,” and every example of bullying and physical intimidation ($n = 10$) offers examples that we elevate to generalized anti-Blackness. We describe and analyze those below, grouped into various subthemes.

Students’ descriptions of anti-Black aggressions included the pervasive use of the “N-word” and “name-calling” primarily by athletic staff, including coaches; professors and guest speakers in the classroom; in social settings, by teammates; and non-Black peers’ unapologetic use of the “N-word” (name-calling) was reported by several respondents. Within the classroom, students shared, “Professor used N-word multiple times, I made a complaint, she mentioned that ‘someone must have been very offended by the [word]’ and looked directly at me.” While another student stated, “I had to speak up about the situation, and my professor did not acknowledge the situation until the next day, after I emailed him about the guest speaker using the N-word in class.” The use of the “N-word” by coaches and teammates in the athletic department was noted by several respondents, with one student recalling, “My coach saying the N-word while lecturing the team about social media.” Pervasive use within athletics also included the following two examples: “My coach saying the N-word made me feel uncomfortable,” and a student who indicated, “Boys on my team saying N-word during practice makes me upset and uncomfortable.”

Unfortunately, there were other reports of the unapologetic use of the “N-word” by peers in class and socially. Some of these responses include, “Being the only Black woman in multiple classes, hearing the N-word used freely by non-Black students,” and “I’ve had many instances of Hispanic students using the N-word freely, then singling me out with explanations as to why they said it.” Another student reported, “My old white friend whispered the N-word with ‘er’ in my ear for no reason and tried calling me the N-word

multiple times.” Students also reported that use of the “N-word” extended to their experiences with university-affiliated fraternal organizations, with one student stating, “SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity]³ members calling me and friends the N-word multiple times.” The charter of the SAE fraternity at SWRU was revoked in 2013 over hazing, unauthorized parties, and other issues (Da 2015). A new, active chapter of SAE was established in the fall of 2021, and it appears that students are still expressing concerns. This aligns with SWRU’s climate survey results from 2023, where Black students listed fraternities and sororities as one of the top five places where they felt unsafe on campus (Zerai 2023).

Spatially, anti-Black aggressions operated on the campus as Black student respondents described experiences of having only one or very few Black faculty, including their own experiences of being the only one or one of a very few students (in a course, lab, department, or college). One student expressed, “I’ve only had one Black woman professor, and that was from my [American Sign Language] class.” If climate concerns are unaddressed, students can also be subject to witnessing the mistreatment of faculty who share their characteristics, which at times contributes to a vicarious experience. Examples of this include student responses such as, “Not being able to have any Black professors in my core classes; would like to see more diversity.” As well as descriptions of being the only Black student in class, teams, and groups.

The survey responses also included several examples of disparate treatment and exclusion in classrooms and with faculty. One respondent noted: “I believe that some professors don’t take you that seriously here when it comes to help in the class as a Black student compared to my other white counterparts.” Another student added, “My challenges are being a STEM student. You do not get a welcoming smile and do not feel welcomed when asking for help. I feel like I’m being judged off of looks.” While others described faculty making assumptions about their academic ability, including,

“I often have the level of my graduate studies questioned, with a generalization made that I am a master’s student. Though I value all levels of education, I don’t appreciate people assuming my level of education. It’s like they can’t even fathom I am a current doctoral candidate.”

Finally, some respondents reported feeling disrespected, bullied, and physically intimidated by faculty, staff, and non-Black peers. These reports included stereotyping Black students as the same person, mispronouncing names, and peers of other races seeking a “pass” for saying racist things. An example follows,

“The challenges I face pertain to being treated (1) with any other “typical” racism expected of people who harbor anti-Black beliefs and (2) like a zoo exhibit by some people because I am Black and middle class. While I recognize the privilege of that situation, many people I have met at [SWRU] treat me like I am uppity because their understanding of Blackness is based on stereotypical media representations that often do not include positive representations of Black people—regardless of their class and education status.”

Another student reported feeling exploited for their race when the team applied for and was awarded a grant because the respondent was on the team. They expressed, “my identity was exploited to apply for diversity-based grants that I had little to no part in it. At the time, I ‘took one for the team’ but in retrospect, I feel used. I helped the department make money but received no credit or appreciation.” Other students reported bullying and physical intimidation where a person used their physical presence or actions to make them feel threatened, scared, or intimidated without physical contact. “I was verbally abused by another student who was racist and violent. It happened throughout a span of us getting to know each other, and throughout the time, I slowly developed anxiety, stress,

and my disorder worsened.” Another student reported, “I have been stalked and harassed by a master’s student (female Latina identity) in the xxx program that I supervised and supported in [our lab]”.

The findings within the collective theme, *The Everyday Experiences of Anti-Black Aggressions*, highlight the various ways in which anti-Black violence manifests through daily experiences at the interpersonal level through Black students’ interactions with non-Black peers and organizationally through aggressions in the university classrooms, departments, fraternal organizations, and athletic spaces. Additionally, these experiences also highlight the way anti-Black aggressions are perpetuated at an institutional level, where some of the actors named in these challenges are SWRU staff and faculty who are charged with promoting the mission of the university. Unfortunately, these findings reveal the way servingness has not yet been actualized for some Black students who described racialized slurs, isolation, stereotypes/assumptions, disrespect, bullying, and physical intimidation as part of their daily challenges while attending SWRU.

5.5.2. Category 2: The Politics of Belonging

As noted in the demographic descriptors of this study, Black student respondents had several intersectional identities (i.e., heritage, gender, and sexuality), creating unique intra-group experiences of the university. Respondents described challenges associated with these intersectional identities, including hyper-visible/invisible Black culture, and tensions in feelings of belonging and connection across the campus. Survey respondents provided fifty-one examples related to these topics as challenges faced, and one additional example coded as assumptions.

Strayhorn (2019) defines belonging in HEIs as “students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering of feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 24). Positive feelings of belonging are linked to student success and the likelihood of students persisting in their academic pursuits (Strayhorn 2019). Building on these concepts, we define belonging and building connection as statements that indicate an affinity for a place or situation or a lack thereof; and statements that indicate the process of fostering relationships and creating a sense of belonging among individuals who share common interests, goals, or values. Several respondents disclosed challenges in this area, sharing a lack of engagement, representation, and connection with their peers. One student stated, “I don’t feel welcome on campus, so I never participate in any activities,” while another shared they experienced a “lack of sense of belonging within courses.” Although SWRU is considered an HSRU, one student challenged its diversity, stating, “[SWRU]not really being a “diverse” campus when it comes to the inclusion of Black students. It feels like they solely rely directly on the BCC to do events that will include Black students.” For several who shared challenges to making friends in class and across the campus broadly, students who did describe positive experiences of belonging, noted that it was the BCC or other Black racialized spaces, such as *Africana Studies*, where belonging was affirmed. This was evident through statements such as, “I also had trouble finding other Black friends during my freshman year before I knew about all that the BCC has to offer.” Although the BCC served as a space of belonging, for one student, they shared time constraints as a challenge to accessing community, stating, “there is not enough time to connect with community or other Black and ethnic graduates.”

While findings around belonging and connection at large revealed a lack of inclusion outside of the BCC, these experiences became compounded when respondents shared how intersectional identities created additional challenges with faculty and peer interactions. Consistent with scholars’ (Petrov and Garcia 2021; Garcia and Cuellar 2023;

Stanislaus et al. 2024) calls to examine Black students' intersectional identities at HSI, respondents self-reported how their intersectional identities impacted their experiences. A doctoral student shared, "As a biracial, LGBTQ+ PhD student, I faced unique stressors, microaggressions, and repeated invalidations. Peers often insulted me, whether they realized it or not, and overreacted to my opinions, despite being asked to share them. [...] Since finishing my coursework, I've seen these incidents decrease, but the damage done during those early years has been lasting." Other students noted encounters with colorism, responding with "I'm so white passing [...]" I told a friend I'm Jamaican, and his eyes got wide," and "I am Black when it is helpful for the other person, or I am white depending on how they want to see it. The group structures in these courses often failed to accommodate the complexity of our lived experiences." The intersections of gender and Black identities were also noted by several respondents, particularly Black women. "I was walking on campus, and somebody shouted out the window 'HEY LIZZO.'" As a fat Black woman, this didn't make me feel great," said one student. Additional responses included statements such as, "Being sexualized as a 'light-skin' Black girl, I feel left out," "as a Black woman in STEM, I constantly feel out of place," and "Being the only Black woman in multiple classes."

Interestingly, while there were sixteen Black affinity student organizations, including historically Black fraternities and sororities at the SWRU, one student shared challenges to visibility for Black men. This student reported, "Not enough heterosexual visible Black male leadership outside of Frats." These responses reveal students' awareness of being hyper-visible yet culturally invisible. We describe culture as the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group. Examples below illuminate the ways respondents perceived Black culture as being hyper-visible, yet invisible in terms of cultural expressions misunderstood or negatively perceived. Students described, "Department faculty and staff complimenting my hair and trying to touch it. It made me feel like an exotic pet, i.e., not good. Like I wasn't really seen as part of the team," and another stated, "Feels like our resources and cultural belongings stick out like a sore thumb. I come from a predominantly Black area, so it feels like we... our culture is treated like a zoo exhibit." Other responses illustrate this tension, including students describing how their personal expression of Blackness as a student on campus was perceived as culturally mismatched by faculty and peers. "I feel like instructors, as well as other students, have certain expectations revolving around the way I would act or talk," shared one student.

The findings within the collective theme, The Politics of Belonging, underscore the ways in which Black students describe their experiences of challenges in the classrooms, with peers, and in the larger university setting. While several of these statements overlap with how we have described anti-Black aggressions in the previous theme, we present these student responses as a separate theme to illustrate how navigating campus as a Black student and experiencing anti-Black aggressions converge to create challenges for spatial and interpersonal belonging within the institution, particularly when Blackness is met at the intersections of other identities. Conceptualizing servingness as an HSRU must then contend with how to mitigate and repair the politics of belonging for Black students (which include recognizing the intersections of Black student identity, i.e., gender, academic level) as these students describe a split experience of lack of belonging at the institution, yet affirming experiences with the BCC.

5.5.3. Category 3: Bearing the Weight of Representation

We describe representation as the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or social group. For these students, representation consisted of being the only Black student in the class, team, or campus space. While we share

respondents' challenges that focus on representation across the campus, we do so with examples that highlight the weight of carrying representation as an underrepresented group, including the feelings associated with this and instances where self-advocacy was employed as a means of protecting themselves within an anti-Black campus culture. Some of these responses include statements such as, "being asked certain things or my input as the only Black person of color (POC) in class," "being called out during talks regarding Black people," and "existing as the only Black person in a class when talking about racial issues, people look to me to educate." Similarly to the graduate student who noted challenges to belonging and connection, another graduate student expressed, "I also find myself to be the only Black graduate student in almost every class I take."

One respondent shared their experiences of being the only one in social spaces, "I'm the only Black person in many of my friend groups, and that leaves me feeling out of place among them at times. It's a tension I hold, understanding that Black folk are a minority here, while acknowledging my discomfort alone at times." Several respondents described situations where they had to self-advocate and problem-solve for themselves and others on campus. These experiences ranged from encounters with the Equal Opportunity Office, the Dean of Students, financial aid, and the classroom. Examples include the following responses: "I had to transfer to a different research group because my advisor was prejudice[d] against my race and gender. Had to go to the [Equal Opportunity Office] and get a case on it," and "I have encountered multiple issues in and out of my classes. I've been physically assaulted on campus. No one listened when I brought up my concerns." One student described both their and another Black peer's challenges with financial aid, reporting,

"I tried to apply for independent status on FAFSA⁴, but it took almost a year to try and receive the status. The financial aid office kept giving me the wrong paperwork, asking for even more, even when I already turned in the paperwork they asked for [...]. They claimed it's because they must take the independent status very seriously. My friend, who is also a Black woman, had similar experiences. However, when my boyfriend (a white straight man) applied for the same status [...]. He was able to get approved within a month or so."

Although the first thematic section displayed the pervasive use of the "N-word" throughout several students' responses, we bring the example back into this section to highlight the ways that one student had to navigate self-advocacy during that experience. Specifically, the student shared, "a guest speaker told a story about working with a client who used the 'N-word.'" When she told that story, she said it with the hard "er." "I had to speak up about the situation, and my professor did not acknowledge the situation until the next day, after I email[ed] him." Another respondent shared their experiences of self-advocacy while on a branch campus of the university. "[I] have experienced being targeted and microaggressions and open discrimination, not being heard and told I'm the one who needs to change, or ignored when I brought to higher-ups." Unfortunately, these feelings of not being heard were also echoed by other respondents. One student indicated,

"I was being stalked and was trying to get [the university] to help since it was a student on campus. [...] I went to the Dean of Students, and they basically just gave me paperwork that agreed neither one of us could speak to each other, instead of investigating [...]. I even told them how this person was trying to sexually exploit me from different numbers and accounts, and they told me that it had to do with Title IX, that I had to be careful because they are mandated reporters, and it's a much longer process to continue if it were a Title IX case."

Another student reported, "I've experienced social stratification and microaggressions from other students. When this discriminatory behavior was brought to the

university staff, nothing was done about it and myself and other students were basically told to take the high road.”

For many student respondents, these types of interactions led to additional triggered feelings. We describe triggered feelings as strong, often negative, emotional, or physical reactions to a stimulus that reminds an individual of a past trauma or difficult experience. While trigger-based distress, when racialized, can be considered a microaggression (Bonilla-Silva 2021), we pull these feelings out separately so as to focus on the emotional reactions of encountering anti-Blackness. In contrast, the findings of anti-Black aggressions in the first thematic area explain the specific interactions that were experienced. Notably, since many of the experiences have already been described, this section provides context for the quotes while presenting examples of triggered emotions that are separate from the fully quoted interactions.

In response to the scenario of a student being exploited to secure a diversity-based grant, the student shared, “I took one for the team, but in retrospect, I feel used.” For the student respondent who discussed how professors and peers do not acknowledge them in the classroom, they added, “It’s pretty disheartening when this happens, especially since I feel intimidated by collaborative work to begin with. It discourages me from my academic performance and makes me feel rather isolated.” And while multiple students described their coach’s use of the “N-word”, one of them expressed, “[that it] makes me upset and uncomfortable.”

“Disappointing” was the term used to describe one respondent’s lack of engagement with Black faculty at the institution. For many respondents, isolation, discomfort, and feeling out of place were how they described their challenges as a Black student at the university. Students provided statements such as, “I constantly feel out of place,” “feeling racially isolated at times,” and “feeling out of place.” Additionally, comments also included, “feeling alone as there [are] very few people of color I see in a class every semester,” and “feeling like I have to over accommodate for other’s comfortability.”

Responses within the final theme, “Bearing the Weight of Representation,” demonstrate students’ keen awareness of their racial identity and isolation within SWRU. They described several resulting challenges, including disappointment, isolation, and difficulties with self-advocacy in campus departments designed to provide resources for students (i.e., Equal Opportunity Office, the Dean of Students, and financial aid). Consequently, the impact of being the only one, while also experiencing negative interactions, creates an additional burden or labor for Black students. This results in a signaling and devaluing of Black students within the institution, and evidence of an undeserving environment, particularly when considering responses that include interactions involving agents of the institution, such as coaches, faculty, and staff, or resource departments.

Collectively, these three thematic areas shed light on the experiences of anti-Black aggressions and the resulting challenges for belonging and representation while studying at an HSRU. The responses in this study illuminate that Black students’ experiences of anti-Blackness at SWRU are not isolated to particular areas of the institution but are, unfortunately, embedded across daily interactions at the interpersonal and organizational levels of the institution.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

The BSBP survey results indicate that while Black students at large describe experiences of anti-Blackness within SWRU, Black students experience these challenges differently related to their Afro-diasporic identities. While these findings contribute to the emerging field of Black student experiences at HSRUs, confirming the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness, they also align with broader patterns of documented research within HSIs (Abrica et al. 2019; Brooms 2022; Lu and Newton 2019; Vega 2019; 2022; Pirtle et al. 2024;

Zerai 2025). Respondents overwhelmingly described anti-Blackness in the form of anti-Black aggressions, politics of belonging, and bearing the weight of representation, often as the only or one of a few Black students in their racialized encounters. Unfortunately, many of these challenging experiences while attending an HSRU occurred during everyday activities, such as attending class, accessing resources, participating in athletics, and socializing with peers. While some may argue that evidence of anti-Black aggressions at the peer-to-peer level may not be an indicator of broader institutional anti-Black violence, we caution against this. Peer-to-peer demonstrations of anti-Black aggressions, such as the frequent unapologetic use of the “N-word”, should not be treated as isolated acts but should warrant further examination of larger institutional norming logics (including lack of institutional response when it is reported) that might signal these repeated behaviors are allowable.

Despite being minority-serving, these findings further reinforce that HSIs, especially with research prestige, continue to embed cultural norms of Whiteness, ultimately rendering HSIs as racialized organizations (Ray 2019) that must continue to be challenged in order to enact truly inclusive servingness. We defined servingness for this study as the intentional and holistic centering of inclusive support indicators for Black students beyond academic markers of success, such as retention, matriculation, graduation, and grade point average metrics. Our findings indicate that defining and promoting servingness, as an HSRU, will require SWRU to confront the current climate experienced by Black students.

Because Black student data is often flattened in higher education when reporting metrics, this survey design served as an opportunity for us to explore how students experience SWRU across and within the Afro-diaspora. For many at this HEI, this was the first time Black students had agency to self-define themselves at various intersections of their identity, allowing us to better understand the varied realities for Black students within the HSRU. As such, this survey instrument in and of itself served as a restorative approach to “unflattening” Blackness within the SWRU. Moreover, much of the research exploring Black students within HSIs has been explored through qualitative approaches (Brown 2025; Gaines 2024; Pirtle et al. 2024; Vega 2022). Employing a quantitative approach allowed us to engage with a larger, representative sample of the Black student community — ultimately illuminating who has been on the margins — and, for some, invisibilized — in the current servingness practice (or lack of). Zerai (2025) describes this phenomenon as “secondary marginalization” and calls for inclusive, restorative, and decolonizing practices to address this within HEIs (p. 67). As such, we provide recommendations for opportunities to disrupt, elevate, and serve, ultimately seeking to restore the complex legacies of harms experienced by Black students within HSIs through research engagement and accountability.

6.1. Recommendation One: Student Participatory Action Research and Accountability

Although students did not formally note within the survey that this was their first time being affirmed through their Afro-diasporic identities in an institutionalized survey, they shared it in conversational settings during the timeframe the survey was open and after, when presenting preliminary results at the BCC. Providing students with as much agency to self-define themselves serves as an intervention to un-invisibilize students within racial and ethnic groups. Because U.S. HEIs serve as a primary context for socialization, understanding racialized identity development and senses of belonging is crucial for examining how Black students construct meaning and community within these environments to optimize support for student success (Taylor 2019; Zerai 2025). This is particularly helpful given the student respondents’ comments on hypervisibility and invisibility within SWRU.

Furthermore, we argue that student-participatory action research and accountability should include opportunities to engage in methods where Black students can contribute as knowledge producers in their success. Zerai (2025) emphasizes that research practices should be “culturally responsive and sustaining” (p. 76). It is important to note that we do not seek to further harm Black students by adding additional labor on them as responsible for repairing the harm, but rather intentionally build intersectional research teams that inclusively include agency of those whom we wish to serve authentically.

Finally, student-centered research and accountability must include reporting back to the communities engaged. The extraction of data from Black bodies for research publications, presentations, programs, etc., without post-conversations with the communities involved, perpetuates anti-Black notions, even amongst researchers within the Black community. Engaging in accountability via the presentation of findings and implications, especially within an HSRU, with Black students serves two purposes: (1) it fosters trust and (2) models research production for students through inclusive and responsive approaches, as these students are building their own research identities within an HSRU. Moreover, it allows students to engage with staff, faculty, and administrators in re-imagining what our HEIs can be.

6.2. Recommendation Two: Expanding Upstander Intervention Opportunities

There were many students who shared examples of microaggressions experienced in settings where others could have been present (i.e., classrooms, within athletics, and amongst peers). While we did not ask if these experiences had been officially reported to appropriate university channels, the frequency of experiences in and of themselves led us to consider the need for expanded cultural sensitivity and upstander intervention work across HSIs that center anti-racist and restorative justice approaches. Zerai (2025) describes upstanders as “individuals who are active bystanders and who are ready and prepared to interrupt microaggressions” (64). We recommend expanding cultural sensitivity and upstander intervention opportunities beyond new student/staff/faculty orientations and annual trainings to be embedded across all aspects of university life, thereby building a culture of inclusion, support, safety, and ultimately, anti-racism. As part of this expansion, we propose that reporting platforms be made more student-accessible throughout the university, ultimately meeting students where they are (i.e., within centrally located and high-traffic student areas). This includes strategic marketing in such a way that HEIs build a friendly and normative culture of reporting for restorative responses rather than punitive intimidation.

6.3. Recommendation Three: Institutional Reflexivity to Build a Humanizing “Servingness” Approach

In an era where anti-DEI legislation and anticipatory compliance have begun to reshape organizational structures, although not necessarily their racialized culture, we call for continued intentional work to decolonize higher education (Garcia 2023; Zerai 2025). The U.S. Department of Education has recently ended discretionary grant funding to Minority-Serving Institutions, including HSIs (U.S. Department of Education 2025). As the political construct of “HSI” continues to be challenged, HEI administrators of 2026 and beyond are positioned at a critical nexus where they can engage in institutional reflexivity, determining who they really want to be, irrespective of a designation, as students continue to enroll in these institutions. This serves as a time to reconstruct missions to include liberatory and humanizing approaches to servingness, not solely as a vision or mission statement, but embedded within the strategic planning and practices of all parts of the institution through asset-based modeling of inclusivity. This includes recognizing the cultural wealth that students walk into the university with (Yosso 2005), and the ways

counterspaces such as the BCC and other identity affirming spaces (Yosso and Benauides Lopez 2011) can provide expert knowledge for developing a servingness model with other experts positioned across the institution who are community conscious, grounded in affirming the people (and all of their identities), action oriented, and sensitive to the geopolitical history of the place in which the institution resides. This institutional reflexivity for serving includes continued assessment and benchmarking, including metrics that capture intersectional student basic needs and wellbeing, to understand who we are serving and how we support students who are rendered invisible beyond data collection. In doing so, we move from a transactional serving to a transformational serving, in which we learn with our students. Only then can we truly begin to humanize the experiences of all students, moving towards a co-constructed model that challenges our current racialized structures.

7. Conclusions

The BSBP research project sought to explore how Black students experienced an HSRU, while capturing how Black students self-identify within the diaspora and across other social categories, how they describe their experiences at an HSI, including where they engage in SWRU student activities and resource departments, including the BCC. Given the breadth of this research project, this paper focuses on understanding one component, examining the relationship between how Black students self-identify within the diaspora and the challenges they face related to their Black identity at SWRU. Our findings revealed that Black students described encountering anti-Blackness across the university, primarily through encounters of anti-Black aggressions, politics of belonging related to their identity, culture, and building community, as well as bearing the weight of representation as the minority of the minority within an HSRU. While these were described experiences across the Black student population, our survey findings indicated that identity-related challenges differ among various Afro-diasporic identities. This disaggregated analysis underscores why the Black student experience cannot be treated as a monolithic one and reveals how aggregating data can overlook important intragroup experiences of navigating anti-Blackness and informing culturally congruent interventions. Collectively, these findings suggest that the accumulated experiences of anti-Black aggressions at both the interpersonal and organizational levels create an anti-Black environment at the institution, one in which anti-Black aggressions are also carried out by agents of the system and contribute to the undermining of Black student belonging. As such, anti-Blackness at SWRU is produced through a culmination of repetitive aggressions towards the Black student population.

Given these findings, we call on HSRUs to center community-centered strategies to better support servingness for Black student communities. In order to do so, we urge HSRUs to create participatory action research teams that include students, expand how we offer upstander interventions, and co-construct servingness frameworks through institutional reflexivity and the humanizing of populations that are often overlooked or deemed statistically insignificant in our data sets. This call for a more clearly defined servingness framework, especially as it pertains to serving Black students within HSRUs, is critical to addressing anti-Blackness. The inclusion of intentional support for Black students should not be considered in conflict with a “Hispanic-serving” mission, but rather a more inclusive, equitable, and interconnected approach to expanding belonging, access, and resources to all students in which the university is responsible for serving. Furthermore, we recommend that future research continue to interrogate definitions of Blackness and identity salience, while also expanding our understandings of what counts as data and Black ways of knowing. In doing so, we can continue to strengthen interventions to combat anti-Blackness tailored specifically to the unique ways it manifests across HSRUs.

Additionally, we recommend that future studies expand to include other racialized and ethnic participation within the same institution while also considering the comparative analysis of Black students at different HSRUs across U.S. HEIs.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

BCC	Black Culture Center
BSBP	Black Student Belonging Project
FAFSA	Free Application for Federal Student Aid
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HSI	Hispanic-Serving Institution
HSRU	Hispanic-Serving Research University
LD	Linear Dichroism
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Other Sexual Minorities
PWI	Predominantly White Institution
SWRU	Southwest Research University

Appendix A

Table A1. Frequency table of respondents' self-described Black identity

Description of Black Identity	Percentage
Black	36.1
Afro-Latinx (and related identities) *	17.2
Afro-Indigenous **	<5
Afro-European/Black and White dual heritage and related identities ***	14.1
North and Central African	<5

East African	5.0
West African	14.4
Other Multiheritage ****	7.2
Afro-Caribbean (and related identities) *****	<5
Total	100

* Afro-Latinx (and other Black and Hispanic Multiheritage identities indicated with the following write-in identities), $n = 55$): African American and Hispanic, African American, Spanish and Dominican, African American, White, Hispanic, African American/ Hispanic, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Mexican and Indigenous, Afro-Mexican and Indigenous, Black and Hispanic, Black and Mexican, Black, Hispanic, Black, Latina, Unknown, Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Black/White /Puerto Rican, Black/White/Puerto Rican, Half Mexican, Hispanic and Black, Hispanic Mom (Primarily Raised) and Black Dad (Partial Custody), Jamaican Costa Rican/Mexican, Mixed With Spaniard, White, Mexican, African American, On My Birth Cert It says Filipino and Black, Spanish, Black, White, Black, Latina.

** Afro-Indigenous indicated with the following write-in identities) ($n = 10$): African American/ Native American, (Note that Afro-Mexican and Indigenous were recoded to Afro-Latinx.). *** Afro-European/Black and White dual heritage and related identities indicated with the following write-in identities) ($n = 45$): African American and Italian, African American and White, African American, Italian, many more, African American/White, AND WHITE, Black/Caucasian, Black/White, Black/White, Black/ Swedish-American, Black/White, Black/White (Biracial), Black/White (Polish Jewish), Black and White, Black and White, Black and White; Identify as Black, Black and White, Black and White, Black and White, Black and white biracial, Black\ White, German, Polish, Black American, Half Black Half White, Half East African Half White American, I am Black and White, Jamaican and white, Mixed (Black and White), White/Black. **** Other dual heritage identities indicated with the following write-in identities) ($n = 23$): Note that 9 did not indicated their multiheritage/ethnic identities, Afro-Asian, Asian, Caucasian, African, Black and Native Hawaiian, Black and Kenyan/East African, Black, Native, and Filipino, Black, White and Native American, Blasian (African American and Korean), ChicanX, Malawian American, Mexican, Mixed, Mulatto, West African and Black. ***** Afro-Caribbean and other similar multiheritage identities indicated with the following write-in identities) ($n = 5$): Afro-Caribbean, Caribbean American, Haitian and Jamaican, Jamaican Costa Rican/Mexican.

Appendix B

Qualitative Themes for Research Question:

1. Did not respond: Statements that do not answer the question posed.
2. Microaggressions: Indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group.
3. Identities: Social categorizations like race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Identities were coded for the respondent and the individuals they described in their responses.
4. Culture: The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.
5. On University Campuses: Incidents occurring on [SWRU] campuses, e.g., Rio Rancho.
6. In the Classroom: Incidents occurring in the classroom
 - a. Representation: The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group.
 - b. Belonging and Building Community: Statements that indicate an affinity for a place or situation or a lack thereof; and statements that indicate the process of

fostering relationships and creating a sense of belonging among individuals who share common interests, goals, or values.

7. Assumptions: Statements made by survey respondents, professors, or peers of a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.
8. Spaces: Statements that mention specific spaces on campus, e.g., AASS/the Fro; or non-Black spaces.
9. Financial Strain: Statements on the difficulty individuals face in meeting their basic needs and financial obligations due to a lack of resources or inadequate income, including scholarships and grants.
10. Bullying and physical intimidation: Statements that describe a form of aggression where a person uses their physical presence or actions to make someone feel threatened, scared, or intimidated, even without physical contact.
11. Triggered Feelings: Statements that describe a strong, often negative, emotional or physical reaction to a stimulus that reminds an individual of a past trauma or difficult experience.
12. Self-Advocacy and Reflection: Students advocating and problem-solving for themselves and others
13. Glass ceiling: An unofficially acknowledged social barrier to advancement in a profession, especially affecting women and people of color.

Notes

- ¹ According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, “Research 1” or “R1 grouping is intended to capture institutions where there is a very high amount of research occurring, measured by the number of research/scholarship doctorates awarded and the amount of spending on research and development (American Council on Education 2025).
- ² We recognize that as we seek to make this contribution to the HSI field, scholars are also doing the same as it pertains to Asian diasporic identities within Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions; thus, expanding our understandings of racialized identities and experiences within a variety of minority serving institutional designations.
- ³ Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) is a North American social fraternity founded in 1856 at the University of Alabama. It is the only national social fraternity founded in the Antebellum South and has a mission to promote high standards of friendship, scholarship, and service. The fraternity values brotherhood, leadership, and “True Gentleman” principles.
- ⁴ FAFSA—Free Application for Federal Student Aid—a form used to apply for federal, state, and college financial aid.

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