

Racial Stressors and the Black College Experience at Predominately
White Institutions

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Abstract

African American students attending predominately white institutions (PWIs) face a different climate than their white counterparts. This is due to their unique experiences shaped by the multifaceted issues of racism that often go unnoticed by the broader campus. Racism produces race-related stress, which has been linked with psychological and health issues, such as low self-esteem, concentration issues, anxiety, and depression. Noting the complex context in which Black students exist at PWIs, racial-stressors and their effects, this thesis explores what happens to Black students after experiencing a high-profile racial incident. Using the University of Missouri as a focal point, it aims to understand the experiences of Black students and how major racial events affect their academic goals. It also examines the roles campus protests play in alleviating or exacerbating racial-stressors and the feeling of being “unwelcomed” at institutions.

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African American students attending predominately white institutions (PWIs) face a different climate than their white counterparts. This is due to their unique experiences shaped by the multifaceted issues of racism that often go unnoticed by the broader campus. Racism produces race-related stress, which I define as any stress that stems from a racial event or incident. Race-related stress has been linked with psychological and health issues, such as self-esteem, concentration issues, anxiety, and depression (Reynolds, Sneva, Beechler, 2010).

Noting the complex context in which Black students exist at PWIs, racial-stressors and their effects, what happens to Black students after experiencing a high-profile racial incident (i.e. the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri)? This project explores the experiences of black students at the University of Missouri. It aims to understand their experiences as Black students and how major racial events affect their academic goals. In the wake of a high-profile race-based event, does their college experience deteriorate if they feel they are not supported by their university? Also, as students become more involved in protests, does the stress related to explicit racism inhibit their ability to perform academically and increase the feeling of being “unwelcomed”?

The activities of Black students will be correlated with the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which began with the 2013 non-guilty verdict of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, and skyrocketed in 2014 after the death of Michael Brown. These events are key factors that contributed to the rise of the BLM movement, and became triggers of race-based stress. This paper argues that if Black students already face an unfavorable racial climate at their institution, then the rising awareness of racial events will exacerbate their stress level, thus threatening their mental health and handicapping their academic abilities.

An increased stress level in an academic setting can manifest itself in several ways, including declining in academic performance, social withdrawal, and impaired mental and physical wellness. There is standing scholarly research and literature that thoroughly discuss and define race-related stress and its effect on Black students in higher education. What has yet to be discussed is how the high-profile racial events that shaped the “Black Lives Matter” movement have directly affected Black students nationwide, especially those attending PWIs. How, if it all, does the explosion of protests within the past two years affect Black students in various capacities, including their sense of security on college campuses?

Although this thesis will draw from national data and resources, the primary focus is on the flagship college the University of Missouri, commonly known as MU. There are several reasons MU was chosen for this project. The first reason is its status as a Flagship university, and its location in the Midwest. Since three-fourths of Black students in the United States attend flagship universities, it is the perfect location to analyze the Black student experience. Also, its proximity to the city of Ferguson (two hours from the university) is key to the events that began to unfold on campus in the fall semester of 2014. The most obvious reason for studying MU is because of the national attention it received after their Black students’ activism went viral, which resulted in MU becoming the epicenter of multifaceted grievances of students of color in higher education. Student activists were successful in pressuring the university’s president and the chancellor, both whom stood accused of neglecting needs of students of color, to resign from their positions in November 2015. There is a wealth of information to be gained by deconstructing the events at MU, which can be used to further investigate the effects of race-based stress/stressors on students of color at PWIs, and the mental toll of activism.

The first section of the paper concentrates on race-related stress overall, its effects on Black college students, and an overview of the Black student experience. It goes on to establish a timeline of recent events that have contributed to what is known as the Black Lives Matter movement. Afterwards, the paper address how these events continue to affect Black college students, with an emphasis on those at MU. Finally, this thesis will discuss in detail the events that unfolded at MU beginning in the fall semester of 2014, and how Black students are responding to the constant exposure of race-related stress.

Racism can occur on three levels: *individual*, referring to face-to-face interactions; *institutional*, in which an institution's policies, traditions, and practices are based on biased or racist ideology; and *cultural*, which refers to a worldview that considers one culture and belief superior (Utsey, Chae, Brown, Kelly, 2002). In a higher education setting, especially at PWIs, Black students are exposed to all three levels simultaneously on a daily basis, creating a "hostile environment" for students of color. Students of color often report feelings of isolation, anxiety over academic abilities, and difficulty adjusting to campus life, all of which can negatively affect their academic success (Reynolds, Sneva, Beechler, 2010).

It is difficult to illustrate the existence of race-related stress and their effects for several reasons. Racism itself, unless expressed blatantly, can be hard prove and it often remains invisible to those who are not negatively affected by it. Just like society, technology, and any other concept, racism has evolved over time. Contrary to popular belief, the election of the first African American president, Barack Obama, has not pushed the United States into a "post-racial" society. Rather, it pushed the nation into a state of denial. The truth is, racism does not need to be explicit in order to be effective. Any structure, institution or system can be absent of explicit racism and still remain completely racialized (Gusa, 2010). Colleges and universities are

more integrated than ever before, and this has inaccurately led to the assumption that students of color no longer face barriers due to race. Thus, while colleges and universities may address the importance of cultural and ethnic diversity, they tend not to understand the importance of a healthy racial climate and retention programs geared to assist students of color.

Another issue with race-related stress is finding the direct link from the stressor to its effects. In studies, Black students were able to identify race-related encounters as a perceived stressor, but the direct link to which aspect of their lives it affected (academic, social, interpersonal) remained unclear (Neville, 2004). This is partially due to a narrow focus on the simplified characteristics of racism in literature and studies. Scholar Robert T Carter argues that the failure to clearly understand the “emotional, psychological, and to some extent, physical effects of racism on its target” remains a major factor in perpetuating racism. In an effort to solve this problem, we must focus on specific aspects of racism and a person’s individual way of coping (Carter, 2004).

The final issue concerning race-related stress is that its presence often is not acknowledged. Even with the standing research addressing race-related stress and the psychological state of Black students, these issues are often overlooked by the broader society. Black students struggle with feelings of inadequacy due to stereotypical images portrayed about them by both faculty and students alike. With Black faculty as little as 1% at some PWIs, faculty are not always culturally sensitive, nor do they recognize the “colder” campus atmosphere Black students experience. This holds particularly true for Black students in the field of science, who encounter faculty and administrators who foster the belief that Black students lack the intellectual capacity to master the field (*JBHE*, 2015). A Black student attending a Midwest PWI often spoke of her frustration concerning her (science) major. She said that while working in

group projects, other students would second-guess her answers. Even when she was the only one with the correct solution, her answers were not taken into consideration. Instances like these make students insecure about their academic abilities and cause them to withdraw from class participation. However, from the instructor's viewpoint it may look as if the student is unable to understand the material, or is purely uninterested in the subject. The student's withdrawal becomes linked to the stereotype of Black students being unwilling to try, rather than the complex reality that Black students face in and outside the classroom.

Remarks made by student and faculty questioning a Black student's academic ability is the perfect example of a microaggression, which can occur at PWIs. Microaggressions are defined as verbal and nonverbal messages aimed at a person of a marginalized group (Sue, 2010). Just like institutional racism, microaggressions do not have to be intentional and its offensiveness can go unnoticed by the person sending the message. Microaggressions in a PWI setting often look like: a teacher calling on the only Black student in class to give the "African American perspective," Black students rarely being chosen by other students for group projects, or students refusing to share a pathway when a student of color is passing. Another common example is a person of color being viewed as a credit to his/her race and hearing comments like, "you speak very well" are often offered as a compliment. Even if it is not the intent, these comments reject the thoughts, feelings, and reality of people of color. Microaggressions may seem subtle, but their everyday occurrence is enough to cause Black students to feel unwelcomed and inadequate at an institution.

Since microaggressions are only noted by their targets, the burden of proof falls upon them as well. Not only does the student have to determine if he or she is overreacting, but he or she also has to decide if it is worth addressing. If so, will there be consequences for bringing up

the issue? In an effort to avoid tension altogether, students may instead decide to avoid certain classes, certain groups of individuals, or inserting opinions in class (Caplan, Ford, 2014). Thus, microaggressions can stunt academic growth and promote social isolation. One scholar argues: “The cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence” (Pierce, 1970).

Black students also encounter institutional racism at PWIs. Institutional racism, in its most basic sense, can be defined as formal policies and procedures that reinforce the characteristics of racism (stereotyping, prejudice, negligence, etc.). At universities, institutional racism is embedded throughout college recruitment and admissions procedures, academic counseling, and scholarship and classroom environments (Laird, 2007). Institutional racism does not have to be intentional; in fact, universities can acknowledge the importance of diversity while simultaneously reinforcing discriminatory practices and traditions (Hamer, Lang, 2015). In other words, institutional racism is less about personal acts of racism and more about biased language, traditions, cultural practices, and perceptions of knowledge that allow the institution to remain racialized (Gusa, 2010).

For instance, a Midwest PWI was evaluated by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in 2002, which recommended that the university increase the numbers of minorities both among faculty and students. In response to the report, the university implemented several programs to boost student retention and restructured recruitment efforts, which in turn significantly raised the enrollment number of minority students. With the initiative of strengthening diversity relations and hiring diverse faculty, the university assigned “diversity point” people to each college. The purpose of a diversity point person was to “assist the associate provost for diversity in developing, implementing, and assessing diversity strategies across the university” (Self Study

report to HLC, 2012). For their specific colleges they also organize, coordinate, and implement detailed diversity strategies, serve on search committees, assist in recruiting faculty and students, and advise multicultural students (Self Study report to HLC, 2012). What was not mentioned in the University's 2012 "Self-Study" report to the HLC, is that shortly after the Diversity Point Person position was created, it lost the authority to "sign off" on faculty search committees. Meaning, the diversity point person was not required to be a part of the hiring process, nor were there measures taken to ensure that "specific diversity strategies" were truly implemented. The creation of the Diversity Point Person suggested that the university was taking great strides towards diversity when in reality nothing was being done.

This is a perfect example of reinforcing bias and racial hierarchy through institutional practice, and it is problematic for three main reasons: (1) it perpetuates the myth that the low number of Black faculty and staff is due to the lack of qualified candidates, and not the flawed tactics of the search committee; (2) the increased number of Black students has a very limited number of Black faculty to relate to, or even confide in for support; and (3) it becomes even more difficult to expose institutional racism because if a thorough, "unbiased" and respected committee such as the HLC is unable to detect the embellishment of a university's commitment to diversity and reports a false perception, then what evidence can be introduced that is "credible" enough (in the eyes of the public) to refute that claim? It is imperative that institutions are intentional in hiring a diverse faculty (teaching and research positions) and staff (administration and planning position), since the presence of both have a positive effect on students.

In the most recent study conducted in 2007 by *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBCE)* reports that nationwide, African Americans only make up 4% of full-time

faculty at colleges and universities (excluding HBCUs which would raise the average to 5%). On average, 80% of college and university faculty members are White. When there is a scarce number of Black faculty at a university, the results are twofold: (1) Black students may not be as confident in the classroom, and have difficulty fostering a strong faculty-student relationship, which can impede their academic success; and (2) the small number of Black faculty at these universities can be overextended to assist with the needs of Black Students. So there are negative repercussions for both the students and current faculty members.

Research shows that a positive faculty-student relationship is crucial to Black students' success. Students depend on faculty for mentoring, protection, counseling, and confirmation, all of which can influence their view of their college experience and academic abilities. This holds truer for Black students, who tend to be more dependent on faculty for guidance, support and recognition. Therefore, the absence of such relationships can leave Black students at a disadvantage and may also help explain the low retention rate (Tuitt, 2012). Black students express feeling more confident with Black faculty, believing they do not hold stereotypical views and may come from a similar background. Since there is such high demand for a positive faculty-student relationship and not enough faculty to fulfill that need, it is common for Black faculty to hold several responsibilities outside the realm of teaching, such as advising student organizations, and serving as mentors and academic advisors, and informal counselors since the majority of Black students do not use counseling services provided by the university.

In a college setting, Black students, along with Native Americans and Latino students, do not seek counseling because of lack of racially/ culturally similar or sensitive counselors (Harbour, 2009). Universities understand that *all* students experience high stress levels and have difficulties adjusting to college life. Therefore, college counseling centers are designed to deal

with “acculturation, anxiety, depression, interpersonal issues, substance abuse, and eating disorders” (Harbour, 2009). However, Black students believe that university counseling services will merely reflect the same hostility they experience on campus, and thus will refuse treatment even if it is needed (Harbour, 2009). Black students instead turn to peers and Black faculty and staff as an alternative support system.

A 2009, the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* published the research study, “Reexamining the Relationships Between Racial Identity, Cultural Mistrust, Help-Seeking Attitudes, and Preference for a Black Counselor” by Shannon Chavez- Korell, Nancy J, Cunningham, and Darryl L. Townes. The authors argue,

When four decades of research and psychological literature suggest that Black clients generally prefer Black counselors, it creates a public health dilemma when Black people are underrepresented in the mental health profession and overrepresented in populations that have mental health care disparities (Chavez- Korell, Cunningham, Townes, 2009).

African Americans prefer Black counselors due to the mistrust of White counselors who often hold racial biases and commonly misdiagnose people of color (Harbour, 2009). This mistrust also applies to the medical healthcare system, because of the history of negligent health services and discriminatory and unethical research practices on African American patients.

Although African Americans prefer Black counselors, statistics shows that it is nearly impossible to be seen by one. African Americans only make up 1.9% of American Psychological Association doctoral-level psychologists, 1.6% of psychiatrists, and 3.8% of those in counseling services (Harbour, 2009). This significantly decreases the likelihood of African Americans seeking mental health treatment *willingly*. Instead, unlike White clients who typically receive mental health treatment under preferred conditions, Black clients are likely to receive treatment under emergency, coerced and mandated circumstances (Chavez- Korell, Cunningham, Townes, 2009).

In recent years, studies of suicidal behavior among emerging adults have begun to recognize cultural factors, such as acculturation and discrimination, in suicide attempts (Gomez, Miranda, Polanco, 2011). While African Americans' suicide rate are one of the lowest by racial group, it has spiked significantly over the past few decades; tripling between the years of 1985 to 2002. Of which, A staggering 84 percent were Black males (Chappell, 2006). Since 2002, the rate has slightly declined and remains around five per every 100,000 individuals annually (suicidology.org). Among African Americans, adolescence and young adults between the ages 15-24 are the most likely to attempt or commit suicide, as it is the third leading cause of death among Black youth (Chappell, 2006). Historically, suicides among African Americans have been ignored due to the belief that Blacks could not suffer from depression and were a, “psychologically unsophisticated race that was naturally high spirited and unburdened with a sense of responsibility” (nih.gov). Even members of the Black community opted to believe that suicide was a “white thing,” something that did not happen to Black people. However, with the rising awareness of mental health, and the effects of depression and anxiety, suicide is changing from a silence phenomenon.

Another factor that complicates African Americans' unwillingness to seek mental health treatment is the stigma of mental illness. Although counseling sessions are not solely for individuals diagnosed with a mental illness, it still carries the stigma. Mental illness remains a field that is widely misunderstood and discriminated against across all demographics. Individuals diagnosed with mental illness are labeled as dangerous and incompetent and have difficulty finding decent employment and housing. They are more likely to be socially isolated, and criminalized for their behavior by being sent through the legal system instead of a mental health system (Rubinshteyn, 2015). Individuals with a mental illness are often blamed for their

condition, viewed as a result of the individual's life choices. This stigma, which produces discriminatory acts against those with mental illness, prevents individuals from seeking mental health treatment no matter how minor or severe their disorder may be (Rubinshteyn, 2015).

For African Americans, the mental illness stigma intersects with racial discrimination. Research shows that on top of the mistrust of medical and mental healthcare, African Americans suffer from a lack of available treatment and mental health awareness. They also receive inconsistent health care due to their sporadic hospital visits. This mostly occurs in emergency rooms by multiple providers, without the benefit of having one stable health care provider invested in their long-term wellbeing (Rubinshteyn, 2015).

Another crucial component of the Black college experience at PWIs is experience of Black student athletes. There remains a longstanding debate concerning the exploitation of Black student athletes. Black students are the majority of the two sports that generate revenue, making up 57 percent in football and 64 percent in basketball. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) makes an annual revenue of nearly a billion dollars, and student-athletes generate millions of dollars for their university (athleticscholarship.net). Institutions have become more concerned with visibility and revenue than the academic success of student-athletes. Many student-athletes are advised to major in disciplines of little value such as “general studies” or “recreational life,” and 30 out of 50 flagship universities have a lower graduation rate for their Black student-athletes than their general Black student body (Rheenen, 2010). To be clear, this does not mean that Black student-athletes lack academic skill, but research suggests that they are not advised or counseled in a manner that stresses the importance of academic excellence.

The experiences of Black student athletes are complex in the sense that their status does not necessarily protect them from racial stigma and discrimination inside and outside academic settings. They must balance rigorous athletic schedules, academic course loads, and social life, a difficult task for all student-athletes. For Black athletes at PWIs, this task is further complicated by racial-stressors encountered by Black students in general, such as discrimination, negative stereotypes, and social isolation (Rahsaan, 2008). This stress is heightened for Black student-athletes who receive constant critique from their coaches and White peers who view them from a stereotypical mindset.

The underlying current of racism at PWIs makes it difficult for students of color to adjust to their campus and navigate their college careers. These difficulties are made evident by the graduation rate of Black students. *JBHE* released an article covering the statistics of 2015 Black graduation rate. *JBHE* found that the nationwide graduation rate of Black undergraduate students in 2015 was 42 percent, 20 percent lower than the graduation rate of their white counterparts. Although this percentage seems significantly low, it was a 3 percent increase from the past few years. The periodical also reported that the vast majority of the nation's highest-ranked universities showed an increase in their Black student graduation rate, with dozens of universities well above 65 percent. However, graduation rates were not as high for flagship state universities, where three-fourth of Black students were enrolled in the US, whose overall average is 42 percent.

On one hand, there has been an increase in the national Black graduation rate, but 42 percent is still significantly low. The graduation gap between White and Black students is due to a number of reasons. The cost of tuition, location, lack of college preparation, and poor racial climates on campus are all determining factors. As *JBHE* notes, universities with positive racial

climates and retention programs are sure to have a higher graduation rate for Black students than those that do not. It is dangerous to conclude that since the graduation rate of Black students is rising, they no longer face unique barriers.

In order to combat the low retention and declining acceptance rate of Black students, racism in all of its forms must be acknowledged and combated. Although colleges and universities claim to understand the importance of increasing the ethnic diversity of both students and faculty, the lack of policies and programs (diversity/cultural sensitivity training for employees, for example) to help ensure, calls into question their commitment to an inclusive student body. Neglecting to address and respond to the unique factors that contribute to the low retention rate of Black students illustrates the problematic ideologies of a post-racial society, which deemphasizes race in an effort to promote equality. It ignores the structural barriers implemented in secondary and postsecondary education that inhibit students of color from achieving academic success. This is made evident in the recent attacks on affirmative action in higher education.

The U.S Supreme Courts has recently ruled in favor of restricting the use, and even prohibiting, race-conscious guidelines in public university admission procedures (DEI Advisory Group, 2016). In 2012, the *Fisher vs. The University of Texas* ruling called into question the constitutionality of race-based admissions policies employed by the University of Texas. Abby Fisher, the plaintiff in the case, claims she was denied admissions into the University of Texas on the count of her being White. The case was revisited again [*Fisher II*] in 2015, during which the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia made damaging comments on Black students. Justice Scalia, a firm critic of race-based policies, stated that Affirmative action policies send Black students to universities that are too academically demanding, suggesting instead that Black

students may fare better by enrolling in “slower-track” colleges (DEI Advisory Group, 2016; Savage, 2016). He went on to say that he would vote to overturn any previous ruling that promotes racial preference in and outside the realms of education. Justice Scalia incorrectly concludes Black students are not academically capable or deserving to compete at top universities.

There are several factors that go into the admissions process, and yet, race is the criteria always challenged. The same scrutiny is not applied to gender-based policies when schools intentionally seek out and recruit female applicants. The impartiality of favoring relatives of university alumni, also known as “legacies,” is also overlooked, although it widely excludes students of color. Yet, Justice Scalia and those in favor of doing away with race-based policies stand on the ironic argument that such policies uphold discrimination and inequality. To students of color, it sends the message that they are unwelcomed at their choice university. It furthers the myth that Black students are given a “free pass” into institutions of higher education while White students must “earn” their place. The high number of Black student-athletes reinforces the belief that Black students are admitted for their “talents” and not their academic records (DEI Advisory Group, 2016). The anti-race-based policy stance insists that if Black students *truly* deserved their space at high competing universities, then the removal of race-based policies would not negatively affect them. Instead, critics believe that its removal will “weed out” anyone who lacks academic competency, leaving only those who are academically fit regardless of race. The argument that race should not be considered in admission procedures tends to perceive race as an irrelevant social construct with no merit, without acknowledging the institutional biases intact by the educational system to uphold the current racial hierarchy. It endorses the post-racial rhetoric that intelligence and hard work, not race, are the only relevant attributes in higher education.

President Obama's two terms as the ultimate proof that the nation has transcended into a post-racial society (a society free from racial prejudice and discrimination), while simultaneously reinforcing White supremacy. President Obama's election has legitimized attacks on programs, laws and policies set in place to protect and serve marginalized communities and people of color. Despite his election, city administrators can poison an entire Black community without consequence, police officers can murder unarmed citizens on video without repercussions, and states can neglect the needs of their urban public schools until they are forced to close. This is made evident by the presumed presidential nominee by the Republican Party, Donald Trump. Trump has promised to "Make America great again," an uncanny resemblance to Nixon's rhetoric of "Law and Order." How is Trump able to successfully run a racist, homophobic, sexist and irrational campaign with no political credentials or experience? African and African American Studies Professor Shawn Alexander explains,

[Donald Trump] is a demagogue feeding off the climate of the country. His political ascent has been propelled by the rabble – the birther movement, anti-Obama and Tea Party rhetoric, xenophobia and a host of other sordid impulses in our political culture. Our institutions, particularly the Republican Party, appear too passive to demand anything better (historynewsnetwork.org).

Political parties and voters are willing to accept Trump's program in an effort to maintain racial hierarchy and power.

Universities and colleges are a reflection of their broader society, so it is no surprise that the outside conditions have a direct effect on students, even if the two seem unrelated. This is particularly true for African Americans who have used campuses as a space of protest. This was true in the 1960s and 1970s, when Black students protested for the creation of Black studies classes and programs, the increase of Black faculty and staff, and the right to fair treatment on

campus. It is important to note that Black student activism and protest is not a new phenomenon that began with the BLM movement. Instead it is a key strategy that has been employed by Black students and it has reflected their sense of belonging to a broader African American community.

In an article published by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, historian Angus Johnston argued that the shifting demographics of college students, which began in 1965, is pertinent to both the decline of student activism and its reemergence in the past few years. The average college student today, Johnston explains, is no longer a “traditional student” who is single, living on campus, enrolled full-time and without children. That only represents one out of every six undergraduate students. Instead, nearly two-fifths of undergrad students are over the age of 25 and over one-fourth are parents (40 percent of which are students of color). Students are more diverse than ever before, and they face more complex issues while obtaining a degree. With the rising rates of tuition and loan increases, living expenses, and the difficulty obtaining employment, students have been more concerned with their finances than the college students of previous generations.

The shifting demographics and the extreme financial burden that accompanies pursuing a degree are likely reasons for the decline of student activism. Another key factor, Johnston argued, is the criminalization of protests. School administrators today are more likely to call in authorities on protestors which can and has led to mass arrests, physical violence, and serious disciplinary charges. Historically, it is not uncommon for student “agitators” to even be monitored by local authorities. The fear of repercussions was successful in crushing the spirit of organizing, at least for a while. Racism has emerged as the noticeable subject of student protests. In the fall of 2014, protest resurfaced in higher education after the shooting of unarmed teenager

Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson. However, Brown's death was the final piece to a storm that had been brewing since 2012.

On February 26, 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by self-proclaimed neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman. Martin was on his way home from a 7-Eleven gas station when Zimmerman pursued him. Zimmerman insisted that Martin looked "suspicious" and thought he may have been connected to a string of robberies in the neighborhood. After an altercation, Zimmerman shot and killed Martin and later claimed it was on the grounds of self-defense despite the fact that Martin was unarmed. Social media played a crucial role in bringing attention to the murder, and as the news swept across the nation, the Black community quickly united under the hashtag #IamTrayvonMartin. Black men and women photographed themselves in hoodies in honor of Martin. Even celebrities joined in the fight against injustice, two of the most notable examples being the Miami Heat basketball team photographed in hoodies, and the September 2013 cover of *Essence Magazine* picturing NBA player Dwyane Wade and his two sons in an issue titled "We Are Trayvon."

What was just as disturbing as the murder of the unarmed teen was the acquittal of Zimmerman on all charges on July 13, 2013. That night, protests occurred in various cities nationwide. Black parents expressed their grief, claiming that the justice system's failure to convict proved that Black children's lives hold no value in the eyes of the court. Scholars, journalists, reporters, and lawyers who claimed that the case had nothing to do with race only fueled the fire of frustrated African Americans who deal with the repercussions of a racial justice system daily. Activists began fighting for stricter gun laws and the revamping of Stand Your Ground laws that exist in various states. In the state of Florida, the law permits the use of deadly force against an assailant who is believed to be an imminent threat, even if there is a safe avenue

of retreat (washingtonpost.com). Initially, this law was used to justify Zimmerman's actions, and explain why police did not immediately seek to prosecute him (Zimmerman remained free for 44 days after the shooting.) While Zimmerman's lawyers chose not to use Stand Your Ground as a defense strategy, it still heavily influenced the jury's decision to acquit Zimmerman on all charges. In response to Martin's death and Zimmerman's acquittal, grassroots activist organizations like the Dream Defenders and the Black Youth Project formed programs for Black youth to combat issues like mass incarceration, criminalization, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Before the Black community could come to terms with the acquittal of Zimmerman, and determine what that meant for Black youth, especially Black males, another shock hit in the summer of 2014.

On August 9, 2014, unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. After Brown was shot, his body remained exactly where he fell for at least four hours (New York Times, 2014). Neither authorities nor medics on the scene attempted to hide the site of Brown's bloody lifeless body. As neighbors gathered around the scene in disgust, the disregard for Brown's body was taken as a sign of blatant disrespect. Ferguson committeewoman Patricia Bynes said, "It was very disrespectful to the community and the people who live there. It also sent the message from law enforcement that 'we can do this to you any day, any time, in broad daylight, and there's nothing you can do about it.'" As if the sight of Brown's body was not disturbing enough, local news sources quickly interviewed Brown's friend and witness to the shooting. This witness adamantly claimed that Brown's hands were raised saying, "don't shoot, don't shoot" right before he was shot at least six times by Officer Wilson. News of the shooting went viral on Twitter, Facebook, and news outlets such as

CNN. Overnight, the small city of Ferguson, a place unfamiliar to people outside St. Louis, became the nation's focus.

Ferguson erupted in both riots and peaceful protesting. Citizens, activists, pastors, and even gang members took to the streets with signs reading "hands up, don't shoot" to express their discontent with the abuse of authority and police brutality. Ferguson authorities responded with excessive force, militarizing police and releasing tear and smoke bombs along with making countless arrests. Hundreds of people from nearby metropolitan cities, and even from outside the state of Missouri, flocked to Ferguson to join the protest. Demonstrations took place all over the nation, especially in the Midwest, in honor of Brown and the broader issue of police brutality against the Black community. Many onlookers assumed that the fires would soon die out and the small city would be back to "business as usual" after a couple of weeks. However, protests and demonstrations occurred daily from August 9, until after Officer Wilson was cleared of all charges on November 24, 2014 by a prosecutor who seemed more than hesitant to charge Wilson in the first place.

How did Ferguson spark enough outrage to send several cities into a state of "racial unrest?" Surely police brutality is not a new issue, especially to the African American community. Killing Black unarmed civilians with no consequence seemed to be the "newest trend" that was finally catching the nation's attention. Maybe it was too soon after the 2013 acquittal of Zimmerman, who shot and killed Trayvon Martin in 2012. It may have been too soon after the death of teenager Jordan Davis, who was killed by Michael Dunn in November of 2012 because his music was "too loud." Or maybe because Ferguson represented the broader issue concerning the quality of life of African Americans, its constraints, how it is lived, and how it is perceived.

Taking a deeper look into Ferguson, the issues were larger than Michael Brown and police brutality. Brown's death became a means to bring numerous issues into public discourse. When Ferguson experienced an influx of African Americans residents in the 1990, it transformed from a suburban town to an isolated, low-income city. Despite the fact that Ferguson's small population of 21,000 is majority Black (67 percent), it remains centered around a white power structure (McCarthy, 2014). Ferguson residents complain of police harassment, lack of employment, poor housing and education, and a biased justice system (Sneed, 2014). The small St. Louis metropolitan city remains systematically segregated, and in March 2015, the Justice Department released a 100-page report that deemed the Ferguson Police Department (FPD) and the municipal court system's practices unconstitutional (justice.gov, 2015). The report stated that the FPD disproportionately detained and arrested African Americans. It also pointed out that the municipal court systems are more concerned with revenue than public safety (justice.gov, 2015). For these reasons, and others, Ferguson resonated with so many African Americans across the U.S. The racial disparities displayed in Ferguson may be more extreme than in other cities, but it is nowhere near unique.

After the death of Mike Brown, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, created by Black activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, went viral. The slogan soon reached beyond social media and became the rallying cry of a movement to bring about change. Although the BLM movement was initially fueled by gun violence and police brutality. The hashtag itself was created in a direct response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, it stressed the importance of all Black lives, despite their appearance, sexual orientation, economic status, religion, etc. in a fight against all channels of inequality.

College campuses were not immune to the wave of protests that grew in the late summer of 2014. Black students at institutions of higher learning in Kansas, Missouri, Texas, Oklahoma, and several other states, began holding protests and demonstrations as early as the first day of classes that lasted well throughout the school year. Many were organized through Black Student Unions/Associations. For Black students at MU, only two hours away from Ferguson, the death of Mike Brown was the beginning of a tumultuous, game-changing year. Recapping the history of African Americans at MU, including their community life, contributions to the university, the Black experience, and student activism and protests will help shed light on the current state of MU. Doing so also stresses two points: The contemporary experience of Black students and context of racism at MU is a glimpse into] longstanding issues at both the university and in Columbia, where it is located; and the current activism displayed by Black students was built upon the foundation laid by previous generations of Black activists at MU.

Missouri was still a slave state when MU was founded in 1839. In fact, some founders of the university were strong advocates for slavery. Although the first Black student was not admitted to the university until 1950, African Americans were involved with the university as early as 1841 as slave laborers, and later as free workmen after emancipation. Columbia slave owners often temporarily leased their slaves to the university for service work. Even the first president of the university, John Hiram Lanthrop, had a slave to carry out both domestic chores and university work (Cook, 1966).

After emancipation, it was common for newly freed African Americans to continue working for their former owners. In Columbia, Black men held a range of jobs, including working on farms, and as blacksmiths and butchers, while Black women stayed in domestic work. University jobs were sought after in the Black community since they were the most

lucrative (Cook, 1996). Therefore, those employed by the university became the backbone of Columbia's Black community by supporting Black-owned businesses and churches.

Owning property remained key to economic mobility, and African Americans who could afford the means quickly bought land and began their own businesses (Cook, 1996). African Americans developed a strong sense of community, and their economic mobility posed a threat to the White population. Violence was used as a tactic to impede the progress and economic mobility of the Black community. The most notable example of this was the brutal murder of James T. Scott. Scott worked as a janitor for the university in the 1920s, and his duties included burning the bodies of dead cats and dogs used in science projects. He was considered a part of the "upper class" in the Black community and was wealthy enough to buy a new car, a rare accomplishment in both the Black and White community (Huber, 1991). Scott was wrongly accused of rape and hung by a vigilante mob, which allegedly included MU students, at Steward Road Bridge in 1923 (Huber, 1991). The accusation of rape against Scott was a scapegoat for the White community's real issue: he embodied Black success. Scott's death was a warning to all African Americans in Columbia to "stay in their place." Despite this, Blacks still competed to jobs at the university, despite the fact that they were not allowed to teach or train at the school (Cook, 1996).

The historical Black college Lincoln University, in the state capital of Jefferson City, was founded by soldiers of the 62nd and 65th colored infantries in 1866 (lincolnu.edu). Lincoln was granted university status in 1921 to serve as an equivalent of MU for Black students pursuing higher education. However, Lincoln, like other African American land-grant institutions at that time, did not offer college-level work (Cook, 1996). Black students were not appeased with the

university and still sought access to White institutions. From 1935 to 1950, about 70 Black students applied to and were denied by the University of Missouri (Cook, 1996). Even Black students with superior academic record could not override the prejudice of Missouri segregationists.

1935 also marked the year that Lincoln graduate Lloyd Gaines applied to MU's law school. Gaines was denied admission and encouraged by the university to apply to Lincoln where the state would pay for his tuition. Gaines worked with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and their lawyer Charles Houston, who was focused on ending segregation in the field of education (Baker, 2015). Instead of granting Gaines admission, the Taylor Bill was passed in 1939 to provide funding of \$200,000 for Lincoln to offer education equal to MU. This, however, did not deter Gaines or other Black applicants from seeking admissions. Unfortunately, Gaines went missing in 1939 and was never seen again. Despite every attempt on behalf of the NAACP to keep the case open, it was dismissed by the court in 1940. Even though Gaines was not around to witness the first Black student at MU in 1950, his case was significant in providing the legal strategy employed by the NAACP to fight national segregation in education.

After a tremendously long battle, the first Black students were finally admitted into MU after a circuit court judge's ruling in 1950, which stated that the denial of qualified Black applicants was a violation of both the Missouri and the United States constitutions. Even so, Black students were only allowed admission if they were studying subjects not offered at Lincoln University. This stipulation was eradicated after the Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka ruling that outlawed segregation in the field of education in 1954. The first few years of

desegregation at MU only saw about 20 to 30 Black students per academic year. These students often felt alienated with no black teachers (the first professor did not come until the 1960s) and barely any Black peers, they found comfort in the kindness of Black university workers (janitors, cooks, etc.). Black students leaned on each other for support.

Black students and activism seemed to go hand in hand at MU. As the Civil Rights Movement evolved, “sit-ins” became a popular strategy nationwide to contest segregation. In 1959, students coordinated a sit-in at the Tiger Inn restaurant near campus. The Congress of Racial Equality, more commonly known as CORE, was denied recognition as a MU chapter and instead organized through the city of Columbia. CORE focused on racial restrictions and biased dorm applications. At the time, students were required to mark their race when applying for a dormitory room, and Black students were rarely roomed with White students. MU also provided a list of off campus housing, much of which was owned by racist landlords who would not rent to African Americans. This aided in keeping the enrollment of Black students low at the university, since living off campus was a cheaper yet nearly impossible option for Black students who could not afford to live in highly priced dormitories. CORE continued to fight this issue until the “race question” was taken off the dorm application. Although MU would not terminate its agreement with racist off-campus landlords, the university did change aspects of dormitory housing, such as allowing students under 21 to live off campus if they chose (Cook, 1996).

By the 1960s, student demographics were changing, and slowly but surely the number of Black students increased at the university. However, students, administrators, and teachers at MU seemed unwilling to adapt with their student body. Black students were still isolated and did not fit in with the mainstream culture or school traditions. Not only were they culturally

alienated, but they remained the targets of racist acts, especially during homecoming when white fraternities would mock slavery or find a black student to beat or harass for entertainment (Cook, 1996). One of the biggest problems was the increasing number of Black students unprepared for college material. During the fight for desegregation, and even in the early years following *Brown v. Board*, it was the “best and the brightest” Black students who were pushed forward to integrate MU, many whom already held a bachelor’s degree. These students were not hindered by the classroom material, but rather by the lack of support from administrators and professors. But the outlawing of segregation exposed the weakness in public school education as more and more Black students went off to college unprepared for the material. On top of grappling with the curriculum, these students received little to no support from administration or professors. As a result, although the university’s student body was becoming more racially diverse, there were no policies or programs implemented to assist Black students financially, culturally, or academically. Instead, it was Black students themselves who created “self-help groups” and served as the liaison between students and the college administration (Cook, 1996).

Students felt the university was responsible for ensuring the equality of Black students and staff, and in 1968 the Legion of Black Collegians (LBC) was created with a list of concrete demands to the university (lbc.missouri.edu). Through protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, and building “take overs” Black students at both PWIs and HBCUs demanded equality, an increase in Black faculty, and the creation of Black studies curriculum. The LBC stood upon the foundation of previous MU student activists, in their militant tactics, and released their first list of 11 demands to the university:

1. Increase the number of black faculty
2. Implement a black studies program

3. Open a black culture center
4. Sponsor an annual black week
5. Dedicate a campus building to a slain black leader
6. Periodically promote black service employees and staff members
7. Implement tutoring sessions for incoming black freshmen
8. Actively recruit black students
9. Set aside scholarships for black students
10. Create an office for LBC
11. Increase the number of black cheerleaders and pom pom girls proportionate to Black athletes on the football and basketball teams (Cook, 1996)

The LBC served as the Black student government and instantly became the students' strongest voice. Members were successful in pressuring the university to make several substantial changes including: the creation of the Black Culture House in 1971, a Black Studies program, the intentional recruitment of Black students (students even volunteered to recruit from St. Louis and Kansas City), and a tutoring program for incoming freshmen. The LBC also fought on behalf of the Black faculty and staff. The first Black faculty member was hired in 1969, and the LBC advocated for more black faculty, as well as fair pay and hours for janitors, and cooks (Cook, 1996). These changes are the direct result of LBC's work and student's dedication to improve the Black experience at MU. From the beginning however, the LBC dealt with accusations of being a "separatist organization" (Cook, 1996). This claim became the basis for delaying or denying their demands and funding. However, the LBC remained intact and continues to represent MU's Black student population today.

Today, African Americans make up 7 percent of MU's 35,000 student body population, and MU is intentional in recruitment efforts of prospective Black Students. In addition to a Multicultural Center, MU still houses the Gaines/ Oldham Black Culture Center (BCC) with the purpose of increasing inclusiveness at the university for students, faculty, and the Mid Missouri community (gobcc.missouri.edu). The LBC still serves as a Black student government,

functioning as an umbrella organization that oversees 23 Black student organizations including the National Pan Hellenic Council (NPHC). Although the LBC is similar to Black Student Unions/Associations (BSU/A) seen at other PWIs, it is unique in the terms of functioning as a government that receives an impressive amount of monetary allocation from the university in comparison to others institutions. The resources and student organizations dedicated to Black students at MU are impressive, to say the least. Many Black students utilize the BCC as a safe haven to socialize, organize, and study. The LBC voices student grievances and actively charges their university to take diversity, and the well being of Black students, seriously. There is also a strong presence of African American Greek organizations, also referred to as “The Divine Nine.”

The BCC, prominent Greek life, and a one-of-a kind Black student government may suggest that MU generates a positive racial climate and has evolved from its hostile racial past, when in fact Black students claim it is the exact opposite. Black students complain of feeling invisible, being ostracized, and encountering acts of blatant racism in class and on campus. An article by Beth McMurtrie published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2016 provides insights to the current experiences of Black students at MU. In the article, one student spoke of the noticeable social segregation, while another spoke on the “snap judgements” her professors and peers often make based on her race. A professor once instructed a Black student to sit in the back of the class, claiming that the size of her afro was obstructing other students’ sight. It is also common for Black students to be called racial slurs by their White peers.

The BCC has been vandalized twice within the past five years. In 2010, the front lawn of the BCC was littered with cotton balls by two White students making the reference to slaves “picking cotton.” These students were later charged with littering, despite the fact that students and faculty alike viewed the event as an act of hatred that was quickly swept under a rug

(Heavin, 2010). In November 2015, following a protest march held on campus, the BCC was vandalized once again. The word “Black” was spray painted over, so the sign just read “Culture Center.” That same night near the BCC, someone yelled “Black motherfuckers you’re not welcomed here” at a Black female student (maneater.com). To Black students, it was as if their peers sought to “erase” their presence from their university, and now their safe space was no longer safe. MU police searched for the vandal(s) but were unable to produce any suspects. Administration did issue a statement saying that MU campus police would continue to protect the students that gathered there, and such acts would not be tolerated. Once again, a most crucial detail was missing from the statement: The vandals were aiming to intimidate Black students.

In response to the death of Mike Brown, Black MU students and community members created the activist group MU for Mike Brown to spread awareness and prevention of police brutality. The group also hosted a silent march, as well as a town hall meeting in conjunction with LBC that stressed the importance of voting and knowledge of civil rights. With so many students coming from Ferguson, or a city with similar characteristics, they understood the issues underlying the Ferguson riots. In an interview with KOMU-TV about the town hall meeting, senior DeShaunya Ware stated, "This is not just a black problem, this is not just a Ferguson problem or a St. Louis problem. This is a problem happening everywhere around the world, around the country. This is a human problem, this is a civil right problem" (www.komu.com).

Simultaneously, social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook became engulfed with the topic of social injustice and police brutality. People from all occupations, supporting both sides, joined in on the conversation: students, teachers, protestors, lawyers, celebrities and even politicians. Many MU students participated in the nationwide trending topic #iftheygunnedmedown, bringing attention to the media’s tendency to find the most unflattering

and often misleading images to portray Black victims (perhaps to suggest that they are not victims at all). At the same time, thousands rushed to the defense of Officer Wilson. By the end of August, the Facebook group “I support Darren Wilson” gained over 70,000 likes, and today it has nearly 90,000. The ‘Support Darren Wilson’ GoFundMe online fundraising account received over \$500,000 dollars in donations. After tremendous amounts of pressure, criticism, and threats of boycotting the website on the grounds that the account is “reward money for a lynching,” the company refused to deactivate the account (blackenterprise.org). GoFundMe addressed the matters through a blog post issuing that while the Ferguson events were “awful,” the Darren Wilson support account did not violate their terms and policies and therefore had the right to exist (gofundme.com).

Yik Yak, a social media application where anyone can post comments anonymously, became a popular tool utilized to hurl racist insults and threaten Black students. Yik Yak displays comments which can be viewed within a 5 mile radius. In December 2014, Kansas State University’s Black Student Union hosted a “die-in” at the student union in which participants wore all black and laid on the floor for four minutes (symbolizing the four hours that Brown’s lifeless body laid in the street). In response to the demonstrations, students nearby quickly took to Yik Yak to convey their feelings. Yik Yak users standing nearby made comments like, “Low-key want to put on my gorilla suit and protest with the black people in the union,” and “Where’s the KKK when you need them.” At the University of Kansas, similar sentiments were shared on Yik Yak in response to peaceful demonstrations, comparing Black students to monkeys and other animals.

By the 2015-2016 academic school year, MU’s Black activism evolved from focusing mainly on police brutality to addressing negligent school administrators and campus conditions.

In September 2015, student government president Payton Head was called racial slurs by White men in a pickup truck (*CHE*, 2016). Head took to social media to vent his frustration with MU's tolerance of a hostile racial climate. It took a full six days for the university chancellor, R. Bowen Loftin, to issue a statement that did not mention race and passively implied that "discrimination" would not be tolerated (*COHE*, 2016). On the first of October, protestors held their second "Racism Lives Here" campaign (cnn.com). In an effort to further voice their concerns, frustrated protestors blocked the car of the university's president, Tim Wolfe, during a homecoming parade on October 10. During the demonstration, Wolfe proceeded to "tap" a protestor with his car, after which police authorities forcefully moved protestors from the street (cnn.com). Enraged by Wolfe's refusal to address their concerns and apologize for the incident, student activists formed Concerned Student 1950 and released a list of demands on October 20th. Even still, there was an overwhelming silence from the university's administration until a swastika made of feces was smeared on a residential dorm wall. Wolfe finally met with Concerned Student 1950 privately, yet still refused to address their demands.

On November 2, 2015, MU graduate student Jonathan Butler declared a hunger strike that he vowed to continue until Tim Wolfe stepped down from his position as university president. Butler, a student activist from Omaha, Nebraska, argued that Wolfe took no action to ensure the safety of Black students at MU and does not promote an inclusive climate (*COHE*, 2016). Butler's protest immediately caught national attention, and MU students began to mobilize in support. On November 8th, Black football players announced their refusal to play another game until Wolfe resigned; they were supported by the athletic department coach Gary Pinkell and their White teammates.

The football team's refusal to play until Wolfe's resignation instantly sparked outrage. Former MU linebacker, Luke Lambert, who is White, stated in a Facebook post that the players' actions were "a pure lack of responsibility and ungratefulness." He went on to say that their commitment to football should not be impeded by, "something you should frankly have no business being a part of during the season." Lambert ended by stating that playing football is a "privilege" and questioned players' right to "collect the monthly scholarship check" and "earn the free degree" during their time of "standing down" (Crawford, 2016). Lambert's statement was crucial because it echoed the sentiment of White individuals, administrators, and institutions who, when it benefits them, view Black athletes as a separate entity from the Black community.

Black student-athletes are a part of the Black student body, and their voice and experiences cannot be ignored or belittled. The belief that the campus protest was "none of their business" implied that they had been "bought" (by scholarships) to play football, not to think critically, have a voice, or make *their own* decisions. It denied their agency and flattened their identity to that of only an athlete, ignoring their status as a full-time student and African American. It sent a message that their well-being and experiences at the university is of no significance. The reality is that the grievances of their fellow Black peers were not lost on them; they were not strangers to discrimination and systemic oppression. They themselves utilized their power to take a stand on issues that affected them, and they were no longer willing to be the "face" of the university without voice. Their efforts were another game changer for protests, and Black faculty and staff and other non-Black allies joined the fight, as well. On November 9, Wolfe was pressured to resign, followed by the resignation of the university's chancellor. Wolfe's resignation was a victory for the protestors, yet it unleashed a new wave of backlash against Black students.

On November 10, one day after Wolfe's resignation, tensions reached an all-time high at MU as threats were posted on Yik Yak. The first message read, "I'm going to stand my ground tomorrow and shoot every black person I see," shortly followed by the second, "Some of you are alright. Don't go to campus tomorrow" and finally, "We're waiting for you at the parking lots. We will kill you." (washingtonpost.com). The next day, MU police apprehended 19-year-old Hunter Park, who they believed was responsible for the death threats, and charged him with "making a terroristic threat." However, before Hunter's arrest, the anonymous series of threatening messages sent students into a state of panic. Since Yik Yak is anonymous, there was no way to check the validity of the threats immediately. As students waited anxiously to hear back from authorities, many vowed not to go to class the next day. That same night, a White professor sent an email to his students advising them not to come to class if they did not feel safe, but informed them that he would still administer an exam. The professor also stated in the email, "If you give into bullies, they win. The only way bullies are defeated is by standing up to them. If we cancel the exam, they win; if we go through with it, they lose." He argued that since the university did not close campus and there was no evidence of an actual threat, his class would continue and those who were absent could take the exam at a later date (washingtonpost.com).

The professor may have had good intentions with his email, but it was problematic for several reasons. The first was his effort to reduce death threats to "bullying." Gun violence against the Black community, and particularly in their own state of Missouri, had set the Black Lives Matter movement into full motion. There were over fifty school shootings in 2015 alone, with at least twenty occurring at universities and colleges (time.com). On June 17, 2015, nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina were massacred by 21-year-old White supremacist Dylan Roof. Nine innocent people were killed

by an admitted racist in a “post-racial” society. Now a year after Michael Brown’s death, five months after the Charleston massacre, and dozens of school shootings later, Black students at MU receive gun threats and their feelings of not being safe were trivialized. What was lacking from the professor’s email and more so from the administration’s handling of the issue, was public support for Black students. Local Authorities and campus police did act quickly, but the university’s administration downplayed the fact that the death threats specifically targeted Black students.

In the heat of the moment, many Black students vowed not to go to class until after the threat was identified and an arrest made. However, Park’s death threats did little to sway critics’ opinion of Black student activists, and Black students remained on high alert. Due to social media, reports of racist acts on MU’s campus began to spiral out of control; it seemed like every second another MU student was posting another racially charged encounter. Although there were several events reported that turned out to be factual (i.e. white passengers yelling “nigger” at Black students, White parents calling to complain about “spoiled” activists, Black students being targeted on social media, etc.), there were also few rumors that were unsubstantiated. These unsubstantiated rumors became the basis for skeptics to wholly deny Black students’ realities.

One reason why racism remains intact is due to broader society’s unwillingness to acknowledge its presence. Black students at MU argued that White students refused to accept the fact that racism is alive and well on *their* campus. Many spectators on and off campus were quick to comment that the activists were “overreacting,” that students “need to get over it,” or that they were “making things up” in order to receive attention. An article by Tessa Stuart posted

in *Rolling Stone* does highlighted the most “bizarre conservative theories.” New Jersey Governor Chris Christie blamed the MU protests on President Obama, saying, “I think part of this is a product of the president's own unwillingness and inability to bring people together.” Presidential candidate Donald Trump described the MU protestors as “disgraceful” and “disgusting,” stating in an interview: “I think the two people who resigned are weak, ineffective people... When they resigned, they set something in motion that's going to be a disaster for the next long period of time.” Neurosurgeon and former Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson chimed in, claiming that administrators were being too tolerant of “infantile behavior,” and that a continuation of such would move the nation toward “anarchy” (Stuart, 2015).

Surprisingly, or what may not be surprising at all, is that these three examples of “bizarre conservative theories” were not seen as bizarre to the vast majority of society, including those in the MU community. Terminology such as “spoiled” and “brats” have become the rhetoric surrounding student activism. Black students are painted as immature children who just “want” more than they are deserve. Once again, Affirmative action is commonly brought up as something students of color should be “grateful” for at the university. In October 2015, when the report of a swastika drawn in feces appeared in one of the resident halls, spectators were quick to call the report a hoax, claiming it was something fabricated to start an “unnecessary race-war” on campus. Conservative websites like the Federalist released articles doubting the incident ever occurred, asking, “Did two university administrators resign over protests that were sparked by a hoax?” Although another article later released on the Federalist had to admit the incident was indeed real, after receiving pictures of the swastika, the question remains: why deny the claim in the first place? And the fact that the swastika is named the lone event that led to an “unnecessary race-war” is problematic in itself.

It is perplexing that so many are confused about the activists' grievances, acting as if the students were unorganized and childish in their efforts. These accusations dismissed Black students to say the least, and should have no merit, considering student activists thoroughly expressed their frustration with the university on countless occasions. They also organized themselves in ways unseen on college campus since the 1970s. Claims that students "don't know what they want" were invalid, since they issued a very precise list of demands in October of 2015:

1. **We demand** that University of Missouri System President, Tim Wolfe, writes a hand-written apology to Concerned Student 1-9-5-0 demonstrators and holds a press conference in the MU Student Center reading the letter. In the letter and at the press conference, Tim Wolfe must acknowledge his white privilege, recognize that systems of oppression exists, and provide a verbal commitment to fulfilling Concerned Student 1-9-5-0 demands. We want Tim Wolfe to admit his gross negligence, allowing his driver to hit one of the demonstrators, consenting to the physical violence of bystanders, and lastly refusing to intervene when Columbia Police Department used excessive force with demonstrators.
2. **We demand** the immediate removal of Tim Wolfe as UM system president. After his removal, a new amendment to the UM system policies must be established to have all future UM system president and Chancellor positions be selected by a collective of students, staff, and faculty of diverse backgrounds.
3. **We demand** that the University of Missouri meets the Legion of Black Collegians' demands that were presented in the 1969 for the betterment of the black community.
4. **We demand** that the University of Missouri creates and enforces comprehensive racial awareness and inclusion curriculum throughout all campus departments and units, mandatory for all students, faculty, staff and administration. This curriculum must be vetted, maintained, and overseen by a board comprised of students, staff and faculty of color.
5. **We demand** that by the academic year 2017-18, the University of Missouri increases the percentage of black faculty and staff members campus-wide by 10 percent.
6. **We demand** that the University of Missouri composes a strategic 10-year plan on May, 1 2016 that will increase retention rates for marginalized students, sustain diversity curriculum and training, and promote a more safe and inclusive campus.
7. **We demand** that the University of Missouri increases funding and resources for the University of Missouri Counseling Center for the purpose of hiring additional mental health

professionals, particularly those of color, boosting mental health outreach and programming across campus, increasing campus-wide awareness and visibility of the counseling center, and reducing lengthy wait times for prospective clients.

8. **We demand** that the University of Missouri increases funding, resources and personnel for the social justice centers on campus for the purpose of hiring additional professionals, particularly those of color, boosting outreach and programming across campus and increasing campus-wide awareness and visibility. (blackliberationcollective.org)

The fact that Black student's grievances, experiences, and realities were so easily dismissed speaks to the broader context of the unwillingness to acknowledge modern-day racism and its consequences. It reinforces Black students' concerns with feeling invisible. It places the "burden of proof" on the oppressed and causes them to second guess their reaction for fear of repercussions. The efforts to downplay the necessity of this list of demands feeds the belief that black students simply want a "free pass." However, dissecting this list shows that this was not something conjured overnight, or thrown together in haste. These activists brought up *real* issues affecting *real* students. These issues extend beyond a feces swastika, precede the death of Michael Brown, expand beyond the actions of the MU President, and most importantly, promote inclusivity for *all* students of color at the University of Missouri. The list even reiterated the demands set and presented to the university by the LBC 47 years prior. The list of demands was not perfect, but deserved serious engagement, as it highlights the challenges of Black students that are continuously ignored: lack of Black faculty and staff, lack of funding for mental health concerns, the need for diversity training, the absence of programs to increase retention rates, and the removal (or improvement) of negligent administrators. These challenges were directly linked to the stress levels of Black college students and their ability to perform academically. In fact, this list was so relevant (especially demands 3-8) that it instantly became a model for other Black students at universities across the nation.

The website blackliberationcollective.org provides a collective lists of the demands of Black students of over 85 universities ranging from the University of Missouri and University of Kansas to Ivy League schools Yale and Harvard, and everywhere between. There were commonalities and broad themes addressed by various universities across the nation, stressing that issues amplified in the MU protests were not unique to their university. MU was simply a role model for Black students aiming to fight and succeed.

Protests aim to remedy an issue. In the case of MU, protests were spurred by a multitude of issues stemming from systemic oppression. History shows the changes protests can produce at universities including eradicating or altering school policies, implementing programs/ departments, removing and or gaining administrators. It is this hope that *something* will be gained that drives protestors and activists to act collectively. Doug McAdam, author of *Political Process and Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, refers to this as Cognitive Liberation. Simply put, Cognitive Liberation refers to when a group holds the same understanding of grievances, and believes they can fight to resolve them successfully. This was evident in the case of MU students, who were united under the same grievances. Even though the protestors did not involve the majority of the university's 35,000 students, they were still able to successfully implement change. This demonstrated that although Black students are a minority in numbers at PWIs, they have the power to fight and win. While the goals of the protests are important another question remains: What effect did protests held at these institutions have on Black students? Did they exacerbate their stress levels and increase their feeling of being "unwelcomed" at their university? In other words, did the presence of protesting intensify the very issues they set out to rectify?

When protests erupt on campus, Black students may suffer mentally and academically. Not only are the components of protesting physically exhausting, the instantaneous world of social media leave activists constantly vulnerable to harassment. Between meeting to organize the next move, existing as a support system for other students and balancing classes, student activism is no easy task. Still, they aim to balance life as a full-time student and full-time activist. Another article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Corinne Ruff speaks on the costs of student activism. In the article, one student activist shared his experience of being overwhelmed by the activities on MU's campus. He recalled always being tired, often staying up until 3 am in meetings with the group Concerned Student 1950. His dedication to activism caused him to fall behind in class, forcing him to ask instructors for extensions. When he did have the time to catch up on course work, he was too consumed by the movement to focus and comprehend the classroom materials. He became exhausted by a continuous tirade against his activism on social media, and he completely disengaged from the internet. His relationship with his girlfriend unraveled, and bonds with friends and family members were strained due to his heavy involvement in student activism. He claimed that his fellow activists were close to their breaking point as well, and many looked "sick" and exhausted. Black activists in and out of colleges across the nation spoke of similar symptoms. A 25 year old Black female activist from Columbus, Ohio said she experienced trouble sleeping, fought anxiety and feelings of hopelessness. For her and her fellow activists, these issues deepened after a tragic event in February 2016.

Marshawn McCarrel was a well-known 23-year-old BLM activist and poet from Columbus, Ohio. In 2011, he founded the youth mentoring organization Pursuing Our Dreams, in which he and others met monthly to feed the homeless. After the death of Mike Brown, he

participated in demonstrations in Ferguson and was compelled to join the Ohio Student Association, one of the most active BLM activist groups, and lead support rallies for victims of police brutality (washingtonpost.com). Those who knew him said he was “wildly funny” and charismatic, and that he was always uplifting other activists struggling with the mental toll of being on the front line (nydailynews.com). On February 3, he stepped onto the red carpet as he was recognized by the 2016 NAACP Image Awards and awarded as “Hometown Champion” for his positive influence and endless activism. By that next week, he was gone. On February 8, 2016, McCarrel shot and killed himself on the steps of the Ohio Statehouse. His last Facebook status posted a few hours before his death read, “My demons won today. I’m sorry” (nydailynews.com).

His family, friends, and fellow activists questioned how could someone so inspiring, so charismatic, so determined to make a change, end his own life. It was not known if McCarrel suffered from any mental illness, but his family believed that he was depressed by the weight of his activism. Jonathan Butler, the MU student whose hunger strike helped lead to the resignation of the school system’s president, weighed in on the situation saying,

In the movement you’re just constantly engaging in Black death, seeing the communal impact. You’re being faced with the reality that I’m more likely to be killed by the police; that I’m being discriminated against. You start to see all of the micro-aggressions...So many people glamorize the visibility that comes with being in these spotlights, and they’re not seeing the pressures.” (washingtonpost.com).

These pressures that Butler discusses are ever present in the life of Black activists, and were also present for the activist in the 1960s. What is beginning to change is the language used to address it. If research shows that Blacks are more susceptible to depression and anxiety because of the realities of racism, then a constant focus on this is almost guaranteed to take a detrimental toll on an individual’s mental health. Activism is necessary to evoke change, but the

process may exacerbate the toxic effects of racism. It is important to note that student activists do not view activism as a choice. They hold themselves responsible to do what they can to eradicate racism for their generation and for those that follow. So the question is not whether Black students should protest, but *how* can they protest and sustain their mental health and academic excellence? The same question applies for the larger Black student body in general.

Fatigue and mental exhaustion were not limited to the small minority of those involved in the protests. It is important to note that the broader society does not distinguish between Black activists and the larger Black student body. All Black students were depicted as agitators and all Black students became targets of death threats. An article in Essence from November 2015 captured the experience of a Black student at MU who was not involved in the protests or demonstrations. As a senior at the university, she spoke of the tension that began to build after the creation of MU for Mike Brown in 2014, and her first encounter with blatant racism in which a White man called her and a group of friends “niggers” on the football field. Referring to the death threats posted on Yik Yak, she admitted that her outlook on both campus and her white peers changed dramatically. She stated,

Do you really feel this way about me? Do you really want me here? I’ve been a little standoffish lately with my White peers. Recently, I was crossing the street to attend a class, and there was a White male standing across the street. He looked at me dead in my face and spit on the ground. It’s hard to stay focused and motivated when you’re attending an institution where your peers also attend that aren’t very welcoming or don’t want you here (essence.com).

So while she was not a student activist, her status as an African American made her a target of racial harassment, which dramatically affected her views of her peers and university.

Research shows that racial stressors heavily affect Black students at predominantly white institutions. These stressors are exacerbated when racial incidents occur and generate a hostile

campus climate. The presence of protests, while necessary, becomes another stressor for Black students. This is not only because of the challenge of balancing activism and school work for those who are politically involved, but also because of the volatile reactions to the protests themselves. It is true that student protestors are on the front line of these attacks, but the backlash and hostile racial climates affect all Black students. Black students have a unique experience to begin with; they grapple with the same obstacles of their White peers in combination with the specific challenges exclusive to students of color. It is clear that high-profile racial events, like the death of Mike Brown and the Charleston Massacre, becomes another racial stressor for Black students. With a racially charged presidential election, the return of old fashioned racism, the possible removal of race-based policies in admissions, the BLM movement rapidly gaining momentum and the backlash growing just as fast, conditions for Black students at PWI's may worsen before they get better. How do we alleviate the burden placed on Black students that stem from these racial stressors? Is it solely the university's responsibility to relieve this load and ensure a healthy and inclusive climate for all students? Is such thing even possible?

The first step to alleviating race-related stress is acknowledging its existence, but doing so in a manner that does not further isolate or stigmatize Black students. When Black students are struggling, it is imperative for them to find a healthy way to cope. Since most students do not utilize campus counseling centers, they meet and lean on other Black students for support. There is nothing wrong with this method; in fact, it essential in activism. These sessions allow activists to talk through their experiences collectively, and they also serve as "think tanks" to generate new ideas. However, this should not be the only coping mechanism, especially for those who struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts, many of whom do not disclose the severity of

their distress to friends and family. That is why students should be encouraged to seek counseling regardless if they believe they need it or not. There has been a conscious effort in scholarly literature and popular culture in the Black community to help remove the stigma of mental illness.

Equally important, medical and mental health care should be restructured to include Black professionals in the fields, and incorporate culturally competent practices. Institutions must work to create counseling services that reflect the demographics of their student body. Of course, such changes cannot happen overnight. Students must continue to take the initiative of learning and spreading awareness of the importance of mental health. If they are able to correctly identify the symptoms they or their peers may be experiencing, they are more likely to figure out healthy ways of coping. They also may be more willing to seek counseling for themselves or a peer, even though the counseling services are not perfect. Trying it is better than doing nothing.

As far as the university is concerned, an immediate solution to aid Black students is to recognize that racial stressors can negatively affect their academic success. When the racial stressors affect the academic work of Black students, the university should address the issues, and stop the process of academic punishment. These stressors, not the lack of effort to try, may be the reason why Black students are disengaging and falling out of good academic standing. When students fall behind, they become subject to losing scholarships, being placed on academic probation, or ultimately being dismissed from the university. These are unwarranted punishments for students who are struggling with the complex challenges that are attached to college life. At the University of Kansas, Jennifer Hamer, Chair of the American Studies Department, created a faculty mentoring program for at-risk students in the College of Liberal

Arts and Sciences (CLAS). The idea came about after faculty of CLAS aimed to address the concerns highlighted through student protests in the 2015-2016 academic school year (kansan.com). Dr. Hamer proposed that this program would promote a healthy faculty-student relationship and provide better access to university services. The Dean of CLAS, Carl Lejuez stated:

Our students are extremely motivated and talented, but there are many reasons why they may struggle. One of the top reasons is that a large majority of our students hold a job in addition to their studies. For others it's the absence of someone they can turn to who understands the pressures and challenges of the college experience. Given all these factors, the program just seemed like an obvious response we could make immediately to help students thrive in the College and at KU. (kansan.com)

To prove their dedication to aiding students and improving the retention rate, CLAS decided to retain all students who, due of their academic standing, would have been dismissed “from a campus that publicly acknowledged that it did not provide an equitable learning environment for all of its students” (DEI Advisory Group, 2016). Another benefit of this program is that it is not exclusive to students of color, but encompasses all students who have difficulty managing their academic load due to external and internal factors.

Although addressing racial stressors and implementing programs of assistance are essential, it would be counterproductive to focus on the symptoms and neglect the root issue: racism. The end goal is not for Black students or the larger Black community to remain disproportionately effected by psychological issues; the goal is to improve their mental health overall. This can only be done by dismantling the structural racism that produces racial stressors. I agree with Robin D. G. Kelley who in his article, “Black Study Black Struggle,” cautioned against viewing the Black experience through the lens of trauma. Doing so can strip

African Americans of agency and depict them as victims. He quotes playwright Naomi Wallace to reinforce his argument,

Mainstream America is less threatened by the ‘trauma’ theory because it doesn’t place economic justice at its core and takes the focus out of the realm of justice and into psychology; out of the streets, communities, into the singular experience (even if experienced in common) of the individual (bostonreview.net).

If the solution stops at encouraging Black students to seek counseling, it does nothing to destroy the channels of inequalities that produce the stress in the first place. Instead, it will fixate on the psychological make-up of African Americans, severing it from the broader context of social and economic injustice and suggesting that the issue resides with Black students rather than structural and systemic oppression. In other words, the improvement of campus counseling services is a step in the right direction, but it should not absolve the university’s responsibility of removing traditions and policies that allow an unequal learning environment.

Lastly, the university must take the grievances of Black students seriously. The reason why MU resonated with Black students across the nation is because they recognized the same grievances on their campus. The list of demands presented by Black students at their perspective university revealed the broader context of the Black experience. Although some aspects were unique, the majority of lists cited the same demands: increase of black faculty and staff, diversity training, and increased retention of marginalized students. These have remained long-standing issues since Black students first began to integrate PWIs. The last thing any university wants is to become the next “MU.” That is why, immediately after Wolfe’s resignation, university newspapers across the nation began to release articles on how their university differed from the University of Missouri. Universities went the extra mile to highlight their diversity initiatives and their “healthy” racial climates. While many noted that their Black students may encounter

some of the same issue as those at MU, they stressed that the difference lay within the willingness of their administration to listen to their Black student body. Whether or not these newspapers were embellishing their university's commitment to diversity is beside the point. What is important is that universities efforts to "showcase" their dedication to Black students prove that they recognize the power these students hold through collective activism. Other institutions should take notes from a university that learned too late about the consequences of ignoring the needs of their students.

MU has created opportunities for administrators to engage with their students of color. At this point, Black students crave more than rhetoric and empty promises of equality. As student activists work to hold their university to higher standards, administrators must meet them. This is only possible when Black students are no longer regarded as "absurd" or "childish" in their efforts to change the unfavorable circumstances in which they receive their education. Understanding the grievances that underline students' list of demands is one of many steps that must be taken in order to ensure a healthy experience for Black students at Predominantly White Institutions.

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