

## Background

In the last decade, there has been an increase in African American & Black-identifying students attending higher education institutions (Bouchrika, 2022). Higher education represents a culmination of access to opportunities, advancement, and entrance into a higher social class (Hope et al., 2021). However, when compared to Whites, Latinos, and Asian-American students, there are still disparities in academic performance and graduation rates among African American and Black-identifying students. The question then becomes, what are the experiences of African American & Black-identifying students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) that may be contributing to disparities in indicators of academic achievement? A potential factor implicated in African American & Black-identifying students' academic performance may be *race-related stressors*.

Race-related stressors are transactions, between individuals or groups, within an environment that has emerged from dynamics of racism, specifically threatening the well-being of individuals within a community (Harrell, 2000, p. 45). Navigating PWIs as a student of color presents unique challenges (Smith et al., 2007). Academically, in a classroom setting, the lack of representation among faculty and peers at PWIs has been shown to negatively affect African Americans' self-esteem, academic performance, and sense of belongingness (Nadal et al., 2014). Another contributor to race-related stress may be negative interactions. Harrell (2000) suggests that African American & Black-identifying individuals are at an increased risk of negative interactions in school settings. Previous literature on the topic of academic success has found that among African American and Latinx students there is a higher prevalence of lower academic achievements, increased rates of repeating a grade, heightened dropout rates, and lower educational aspirations/belongingness (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Though these are multidimensional and complex intersectionalities, the origin point is potentially negative interactions/socialization at school. One potential cause of the negative interactions may be resulting from negative stereotypes that often subjugate minority students to false narratives concerning an inability for high academic achievement.

Thus, African American and Black-identifying college students often contend with race-related stressors such as negative racial stereotypes alongside being a numerical minority (Hope et al., 2021). Previous literature emphatically states that African American & Black-identifying individuals experience disproportionately higher unprecedented rates of discrimination compared to other ethnic-racial minority groups in education (Hope et al., 2020). Importantly, the racial composition of an institution has the power to significantly impact educational achievement (Cokely et al., 2003). Furthermore, the educational system often uses White westernized cultural lenses, curriculums, and pedagogies to ensure White supremacy and domination. For African American & Black-identifying students, Irving (2002) identified that cultural mistrust in an academic setting leads students of color to dissociate from the given material, leading to higher levels of disengagement with academic responsibilities. As a result, it can be inferred that academic performance is especially hindered by racialized mistrust.

McGee (2016) expressed that race-related stressors for African American & Black-identifying students in academia may lead to an increased desire to succeed. Specifically, in the fields of science, technology, and engineering. African American students have been

documented to succeed and persist, despite race-related stress by overworking to disprove or counteract inaccurate and negative racial stereotypes (McGee, 2016). However, other observations indicate that these positive correlations are insufficient. In stark contrast, Nadal et al., (2014) found that for African American and Black-identifying students, there is uniqueness in navigating the intricate complexities of social, academic, and cultural climates between peers and faculty at PWIs. This cognitive realization places increased stress on African American & Black-identifying students to succeed academically, make meaningful bonds, and disprove negative stereotypes (Hope et. al, 2021). Psychologically, heightened perceptions of race-related stress may exceed one's cognitive abilities to cope with stress. Thus, resulting in academic-stress performance inhibitors such as feelings of paranoia, helplessness, and discrimination (Utsey et al., 2002). The process of having to disprove negative stereotypes about one's ethnic-racial group is isolating, thereby cognitively demanding attention and stress-coping responses. Furthermore, damaging one's ability to feel comfortable within their academic environment (Hope et al., 2021). Griffith et al. (2019) concluded that African American students face a multitude of race-related stressors daily, which psychologically demand much to counteract. Simultaneously, the cognitive demands necessary for achieving educational attainment can be impeded even before learning has begun. Unfortunately, for many African Americans, race-related stress has become a daily stressor, as it occurs in many commonplace interactions (Mays et al., 2007).

## **Research Aims**

Considering the previous research, the present study has two aims. First, the study aims to elucidate the mechanisms by which race-related stress impacts academic achievement among African American and Black-identifying students at PWIs. Second, the study will examine protective factors that may buffer against the negative consequences of race-related stress on academic achievement. This research seeks to produce results that may allow explaining the current stream of mixed findings. For the last decade, both negative and positive associations regarding the relationship between race-related stress and academic performance among Black college students at PWIs have been found. Furthermore, the majority of studies on race-related stress have been conducted at large public research universities. In choosing to analyze this question at a small private elite PWI in New England, there is yet an opportunity to expand our understanding of the relationship between race-related stress and academic performance among African American & Black-identifying students. It is time for institutions, professors, and student bodies to hear about the experiences of the "other", in the hopes that respect and plasticity are implemented within the broader community. This proposal calls into question the following: 1.) What are the ways in which African Americans & Black-identifying students experience race-related stress at a PWI? 2.) Are experiences of race-related stress shaping the experiences of African American & Black-identifying students? 3.) What types of resources do African American & Black-identifying students draw on to cope with race-related stress?

## **Method**

The sample for this study will be African American & Black-identifying undergraduate students attending Wesleyan University. Ages will range from 18-22 years old, with class years ranging from freshman to senior year. This age group has been selected because they are characterized as emerging adults, marked by higher education, financial independence, and major life decisions (Syed & Mitchell, 2013).

We will begin by recruiting participants through the following listservs: First-Generation Low-Income (FGLI) Advisory Board, the Resource Center, and the Student-Athletes of Color Council (SACLC). These partnerships will assist in a volunteer effort in this two-part quantitative and qualitative study. Upon consent, participants will complete the quantitative component, which will be a 10-15 minute survey. After the collection of this data, a purposive sampling method for the qualitative data will be implemented. More specifically, a sub-sample of about 20-25 undergraduate students who completed the quantitative survey will be invited to complete a follow-up semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews allow investigators to ask follow-up probing questions. The recorded qualitative interviews are expected to last 30-60 minutes to further measure the diverse aspects that they face daily, regarding race-related stress and self-reports of academic achievement. This method allows for a wide range of perspectives beyond what a survey or quantitative data alone may allow. During the conduction of these semi-structured interviews, we will navigate difficult topics that require confidentiality and compassion. To create a nuanced and rigorous study, we have chosen to be flexible when posing questions and capture diverse dimensions of discrimination and race-related stressors. Each recording will then be transcribed and thoroughly edited to remove all personal identifiers. A thematic analysis method will be used to code these transcriptions, specifically for responses that are related to race-related stress and relative theories.

### **Anticipated Impact**

Education is a quest for knowledge that can never be taken away from an individual. However, educational institutions are truly perpetuating a disservice to African American & Black-identifying students. PWIs have established a culture of complacency and desensitization toward education and equal opportunity which ignites racial division and biases. Ultimately, research can inspire the Department of Education to empower teachers, professors, and administrators to encourage and educate worldly intersectional students. This study strives to bridge the gap and provide insights from the minority student perspectives that can be used to inform policies and practices aimed at reducing racial inequality in educational outcomes.