

**SHOW US WE MATTER: Black college women nursing students' experiences of
mattering on a majority-Black campus**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
May 2, 2026

Keywords: Black college women, mattering
Black feminist thought

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a growing body of education literature that looks more critically at institutions and institutional practices that perpetuate the marginalization of various groups. Specifically, work centering Black women and using Black feminist perspectives to understand Black women's standpoint and experiences has been a highly valuable developing area with deep roots in Black feminist activism. There is much still to be gained by examining various institutional contexts from Black feminist perspectives that draw on the unique positioning and strengths of Black women to gain insights into how interlocking systems of power and domination operate in everyday settings (Collins, 2022).

In this study, I examine a unique context in which many Black women study, and yet little research has been conducted: a private, nonprofit institution in a large US metro area that serves primarily Black women nursing students. I utilized Sista circle methodology in this study to hold safe, validating spaces for Black women nursing students to share their experiences within the institution and the messages they received regarding how they mattered – or didn't matter – to the institution. Throughout the study I looked critically at how the institution, not the students, is responsible for the experiences and messages it sends to students, the implications of those messages, and what the institution can and should do to better support Black women students. As a Black woman myself, I have experienced a lack of institutional mattering in many higher education and societal settings throughout my life. Framed by Black Feminist Thought, Black Feminist Epistemology, Black college women's success frameworks, and mattering, I center Black women and Black women's perspectives throughout this study to better understand Black women's lived experiences around mattering in a specific higher education context.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure Statement

I used AI during this dissertation in several ways, and I chose not to use AI in other ways. For my literature review, I did not use AI to find sources and instead located sources manually and intentionally, keeping in mind my centering of Black scholars and Black women scholars. I did use AI after I had collected my sources to assist me in identifying which sources of those I had already selected were relevant to the particular claim I was writing about, assisting in the organization and citations of my sources throughout the literature review.

I also used AI to assist in editing my writing after I had written my initial drafts to improve my cohesiveness, tone, word choice, grammar, and punctuation. After I drafted a section that I wanted to strengthen, I would put that section into an AI program and give specific prompts to improve what I was struggling with in the section. When AI produced a suggestion, I would carefully read through the suggestion and merge it with my original draft to improve the quality of my writing.

Lastly, I chose not to use AI for the analysis of my Sista Circle data from participants. Though I considered the usefulness of AI in analyzing data, I felt uncertain that AI would maintain the commitments of Black feminist thought and my particular perspective I wanted to maintain throughout the analysis process. I also felt that my commitment to participant privacy prevented me from sharing their words with AI systems that we don't quite yet understand.

Digital Accessibility Disclosure Statement

In the preparation of this dissertation, the following digital accessibility tools were used to ensure this document complies with federal requirements: Microsoft Word Accessibility Checker. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has made a good faith effort to comply with digital accessibility requirements in publishing, wherein the nature of the content does not significantly change in order to do so. Furthermore, all content has been reviewed and revised to meet these requirements prior to final publication.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

How *I* Came to do *This* Dissertation

This dissertation centers Black women and our experiences of mattering – or more often, not mattering – in higher education institutions. It looks critically at the institutions themselves to interrogate their role in creating environments in which Black women are made to feel like they don't matter. While some doctoral students start out knowing they want to center race and gender in their work, that was certainly not the case for me. In fact, I started this dissertation completely differently, even wrote my first three chapters without an emphasis on critical issues surrounding race and gender. But as I started to write and was forced to make decisions about theories, methods, paradigms, I started to take baby steps in a new, more critical direction, one I wasn't too familiar with but that was drawing me towards it. I finished my original first draft and my advisor realized I was going somewhere he couldn't help with. It seemed I had come to some sort of crossroads: retreat back to “traditional” educational psychology work, what I have studied at the graduate level for over five years, or embark on this other path, not knowing exactly where it would take me. Despite the unknown, I knew I had found something more meaningful to me and there was no turning back. And after a committee overhaul, extensive readings, journaling, a complete rewrite, and lots of reflection, here we are: take two.

I will start by explaining why it was so difficult for me for so long to see things through the lens of race and racism. I grew up in the small town of Siloam Springs, Arkansas where I remember vividly that my brother, my sister, and I were the only Black students in the entire school district for some time. I am mixed: my dad is Black, and my mom is white. After around age nine, my parents divorced and we grew up living with my dad; however, with my dad's Jamaican American family mostly in Florida, we grew up only around my mom's white family

in Arkansas. I asked my dad recently what he remembers of the demographics of our town of about 10,000. His reply: “The 2000 census said there were 50 Black people in Siloam Springs, I remember that. I also remember wondering where the other 46 were.” (P. Ross, personal communication, April 15, 2025). Growing up, we were the only Black people in our community, our school, our church, and even our family. We were the only Black people I ever interacted with for a long time.

Needless to say, I grew up with no Black community and no real sense of what being Black meant. My experiences with Blackness centered around being othered, around standing out in the crowd - and not in a good way. With no Black community to turn to, being othered felt like being welcomed nowhere. There was only one visible community, and I wanted to belong to it just like everyone else. Having grown up surrounded by white people, I genuinely believed I was “just like them,” misread as different only because of how I looked. I felt I was being placed into a category I didn’t belong in - a category I didn’t even know much about. For a long time, I believed my race had nothing to do with who I was, what I thought, or how I moved through the world. But others noticed, asked questions, made comments, pointed it out in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. My race clearly mattered to them; I just didn’t want it to matter. I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want to be different. I didn’t want to be othered.

As a result, I learned to largely ignore or even reject my racial identity. In a town with virtually no other Black people, this tactic was surprisingly effective - at least on the surface. But I continued to accumulate experiences that I couldn’t quite name - moments of discomfort, confusion, exclusion. My strategy to fit in by not acknowledging my racial identity made it difficult to make much sense of these experiences. I was left to just ignore and try to forget the experiences that didn’t fit in with a worldview that erased my racial identity. I didn’t see it at the

time, but looking back I can see how starting at a young age I was receiving messages that my lived experiences, my challenges, my isolation, and my suffering didn't matter. It was better to keep quiet, invisible, experiences erased, in an effort to fit in and not cause trouble, and that's what I did.

My experiences attending a predominantly white institution in the deep south shocked me and made it impossible to continue to ignore my race. Within my freshman year, someone carved "I hate you niggers" into the door of the dorm suite I shared with three other Black women - an offense the police didn't find worth reporting and that prompted a white male acquaintance to suggest we just "roll with the punches" and let it go. The messages were getting clearer: you and your experiences don't matter here. My roommates and I started an organization where we talked about racism in the dorms, and hearing what other folks had to say about race and racism made it very clear to me that racism was alive and well and went beyond ignorance. I was forced to confront my old narrative that said that my racial identity didn't impact my life - it did. But I was still struggling to figure out what that meant to me. I was Black, yes, but also a mixed, "light-skinned" woman who had grown up with no other Black people in a rural and deeply conservative community. I tried some of the Black student groups around campus, but I felt like an outsider there too; I didn't know the music, the movies, the lingo, that everyone seemed to bond over, and was even called a "house nigger" by my own Black female suitemate for my lighter skin color and the way I talked (see HistorySoulja, 2009). In the segregated south of Alabama, it felt like I had to pick one or the other; but I wasn't welcome with white people and didn't feel I fit in with Black people. I was trying to acknowledge my racialized experiences but was still struggling to make sense of my own identity and what it meant for me to be a Black woman.

As I graduated undergrad and moved away from the south to New York City to teach, I again tried to forget and move on from all the racialized experiences I had in Alabama. Living and working in a place as diverse as NYC, I didn't feel like I stuck out in every crowd because no one did. It ironically made it a little bit easier to slide back into my comfortable perspective that ignored race. I started my master's degree and felt glad I was studying in a place as diverse and progressive as NYC, that I was expanding my worldview and learning the "right" way to teach. I graduated from my master's satisfied and reinvigorated to continue applying what I learned in my teaching. It wouldn't be until a few years later that I would realize I completed my master's without learning about qualitative methods, critical perspectives of educational psychology, or the ways in which race, gender, and class affect education or the study of it. This vast omission I believe subtly supported my continuation to ignore these issues both in my professional and personal life.

After five years in NYC, the COVID-19 pandemic happened which caused a temporary-turned-permanent move back to Alabama for me. Eventually I decided I wanted to keep furthering my education and applied to a PhD program at Auburn, the very school I had experienced yet perhaps forgotten about my struggles around race and class as an undergrad. As I went through my program looking for something more, I felt I was learning largely the same content as my master's. I didn't know what else there was out there, but I felt I wasn't developing new ideas, I wasn't pushing my thinking, I wasn't getting exposed to new things. I was largely hearing the same names, theories, and concepts I had already heard of, but this time with a tinge of jaded apathy. Reading, analyzing, and participating in quantitative studies started to make me feel a widening disconnect between academia and the "real world", or at least *my* real world. It wasn't until I was exposed to qualitative and critical work that I started to see

something different. While I was initially skeptical, eventually I started to open up to the possibility that research could look and feel different. Rather than reducing complex stories to Likert scales and checkboxes, qualitative research invited depth, context, and complexity. It honored the messiness of lived experience rather than trying to control for it.

Meanwhile, living back in Alabama refreshed my memory of the constant pervasive presence of racism and gendered racism that was back and a part of my daily life. I quit my job due to repeated instances of gendered racism in the workplace, and as I got closer to the dissertation phase of my PhD, I started to notice familiar patterns of being ignored, stereotyped, dismissed, and forgotten by the institution and faculty. Upon discovering my interest in qualitative and critical work, I asked my advisor if I could take another course in that area, to which he responded: “What would be your argument for this? Sell it to me. If that's an argument you can make, it can be something I consider.” I let it go. I didn't take the course. I told myself to stick to the plan, to choose my battles, to just get through it. But looking back, I see myself in that moment trying to take a more active role in shaping my education, trying to pursue something that mattered to me and being questioned, challenged, and discouraged. I see another instance of me being silenced and being told my interests and goals don't matter.

At the same time, I was trying and failing to get additional members of my dissertation committee. As a working student who lived an hour away from campus, I hadn't had a chance to work with many professors outside of the classroom. I was just cold-emailing professors in the department, first ones that had some overlap in my interest in qualitative work and then any professors at all. At one point I did receive an email from one person I asked, with the subject “Commuter” and the response “I guess I'm on your committee unless I'm told otherwise”. More messages: you are a commuter, you are an inconvenience, you don't matter.

Throughout this time, I fell into a depression that I came to understand was largely due to a feeling that regardless of how hard I worked and how much I proved my worth – I still didn't matter and no one was in my corner but me. At this point, I had reflected on my own experiences enough to realize I wanted to focus on Black students' experiences in higher education. I was still looking for more members of my committee and reached out to another faculty member who got back to me quickly and agreed to meet with me. I was excited to have another potential committee member and drove the hour to campus, hoping to show with my physical presence that I was a serious student. While the professor seemed genuine in her interest chatting with me, she quickly questioned my interest in Black students. "Why Black students? I've worked with Black students before and what I've realized is they are just like other students". I didn't know how to respond but I tried my best, and after over two hours of grilling about my interest, my ideas, my methodological choices, I could no longer hold back the emotion and broke down in this stranger's office. I was unable to process or express what I was experiencing. I thanked her for her time and drove home. But again, upon reflection I have come to see this as yet another instance of being told that our experiences as Black students don't matter and aren't worth focusing on.

Despite not knowing exactly who would serve on my committee, I continued writing my draft and hoped things would work out for me in the end. As I started extensive readings in drafting my literature review and methods chapters, I slowly began to realize that I wanted to do explicitly critical work, work that didn't just build on dominant narratives about educational psychology but centered counter-narratives, that told the infrequently-told stories of Black women in academia, struggling to make it in a environments not made for them, that made the invisible visible. These critical readings and studies deeply moved me - they told me I was not

less-than, I was not crazy, I was not alone, and that I mattered. I felt both touched and disheartened that I had not encountered this work sooner. Regardless, I felt clear that this was the academic work I wanted to contribute to and have not looked back. And so, that is how I got to write this dissertation, not through an abstract interest but through repeated lived trauma I struggled to understand but could no longer ignore. Through the healing that critical work from other Black women scholars has offered me, I find myself compelled to participate in this work despite the vulnerability that it requires. This is work both new to me and not-so-new to me, work in which my story and the stories of other Black women matter.

Black Women in College

There is wide agreement that Black women in college environments are understudied and often ignored (e.g., Commodore et al., 2018; Patton & Croom, 2016). Despite considerable attention spent studying Black students in higher education, Black women's experiences are often lumped in with experiences of Black men, rendering the unique intersection of race and gender invisible. Similarly, work centered on gender has its historical roots in the experiences of white women, leaving Black women's experiences decentered, largely untold, and unaccounted for.

When Black women in college are (infrequently) examined as a unique group, a dominant and troubling narrative emerges: that despite their intersecting marginalized identities, Black college women are doing fine. For example, in his 2008 article titled "Race, Gender and Progress: Are Black American Women the New Model Minority?" Kaba builds off the problematic historical stereotype of Asian Americans as a model minority, succeeding despite their marginalized identities, to suggest that perhaps Black American women are also increasingly occupying a similar role. This narrative tends to be supported by Black women's

relatively high achievement by traditional metrics such as retention, persistence, grades, and graduation. This apparent success leads higher education administrators and academics alike to focus on other “higher need” groups like Black men, groups in which further investment may result in measurable gains for institutional metrics.

I, too, at first glance may seem to be an example of this dominant narrative. I am a Black woman who grew up in a working-class family where neither of my parents completed a bachelor’s degree. And yet, I have obtained two bachelor’s degrees, a master’s, two graduate certificates, and am now completing my PhD. Am I a “model minority”, thriving despite systemic discrimination and obstacles? Or is there more to my college and life experiences than surviving to graduation?

I could challenge this dominant narrative of Black women as the new “model minority” by asking any number of questions. Black women students are “succeeding” compared to whom? Who bears the burden for ensuring Black women’s “success”? What are the contexts in which Black women are “succeeding” (or not succeeding)? Do we care only about outcomes and not experiences? And just how are we defining “success” anyway?

Obviously, this dominant narrative is flawed on multiple fronts. But the larger problem with this narrative seems to be that it is an answer to the wrong question; the question not of how we can support Black women in college, but rather “Do we (academia) need to bother worrying about Black college women at all?”

Especially considering their intersecting marginalized identities, what Patricia Hill Collins (2022) refers to as the matrix of domination of race, gender, and class, we should understand that these identities result in a unique set of struggles for Black college women. Given this truth, and the fact that we should care about all humans’ experiences, we must put the

previous question to bed; yes, we do need to care about Black women in college. We then can focus our attention on understanding Black college women's experiences and the ways in which *institutions* are responsible for supporting them.

So what exactly are Black women experiencing in college? Without explorations centering this population, we struggle to make sense of Black college women's experiences. We're left with stereotypes such as the strong independent Black woman or "Black girl magic" to understand Black women's "success" in college. Our (Black women's) struggles are quickly minimized as they can't be "that bad" if they are able to attain success by our (academia's) metrics. While on the surface these stereotypes can appear positive and may be intended to celebrate the strength and resilience of Black women, they often serve to perpetuate the chronic lack of understanding of Black women's experiences, lack of dedicated resources Black college women receive, and ultimately the invisibility of Black college women in academic discourse.

On success, we need to look at the success of Black women more holistically. What does it mean for a Black woman to succeed in college? Does it just mean she gets good grades, persists, and graduates? Or are we missing a large part of the story? What is the cost of this so-called success? What indicators of success do we choose to value and what do we choose to ignore? As many frameworks for understanding student experience center on dominant populations, the narratives of Black women struggle to be understood using existing frameworks not created for our unique experiences in higher education. In the following section, I outline several perspectives I have found useful in understanding, interpreting, and communicating the experiences of Black women.

Intersectionality and the Matrix of Domination

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988, 1991) introduced the concept of intersectionality to critique the limitations of antidiscrimination law, which tends to address racism and sexism as separate and mutually exclusive forms of oppression. Her work illuminated how Black women's experiences are often rendered invisible when legal and political systems fail to account for the ways multiple forms of marginalization intersect. Intersectionality offers a critical analytic for understanding how Black women experience oppression not as discrete or additive forces, but as interlocking systems that shape distinct realities.

Patricia Hill Collins (2022) has also greatly contributed to intersectional thought through her articulation of the matrix of domination, a framework that maps how systems of race, gender, class, and other forms of oppression are structurally organized and maintained. While intersectionality names the specific ways different oppressions – such as racism, sexism, and heteronormativity – intersect in people's lived experiences, the matrix of domination focuses on how these interlocking oppressions are systemically structured. Collins argues that oppression is enacted across four interrelated domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. These domains operate within institutions such as schools, housing, employment, and government, revealing how injustice is not random or individualized but embedded in the very organization of social life.

Both Crenshaw and Collins emphasize that the oppression Black women face cannot be understood through an additive lens that simply combines racism and sexism. Instead, they argue that the convergence of multiple systems of domination produces qualitatively distinct forms of marginalization – experiences that are not merely compounded but structurally and culturally unique to those living at these intersections.

Black Feminist Thought

Given Black women's intersecting identities and distinct sociocultural locations, scholars committed to centering their experiences emphasize the importance of frameworks that emerge from Black women's lives. Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought (BFT) offers such a framework – one that positions Black women's experiences as not only valid but foundational sources of knowledge.

Collins critiques dominant knowledge validation processes in the U.S. as reflecting the interests and epistemic authority of elite white men. In response, she articulates a Black feminist epistemology grounded in standards that align with Black women's ways of knowing. This epistemology includes four key contours: lived experience as a criterion of meaning, dialogue as a method for assessing knowledge claims, an ethic of caring, and an ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2022). These tenets challenge the privileging of detached objectivity and instead affirm relational, embodied, and justice-oriented ways of knowing.

Importantly, Collins underscores that Black feminist epistemology is not simply an alternative – it is a disruption. She writes “The existence of a self-defined Black women's standpoint using Black feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth” (p. 344). In this way, BFT offers both an epistemological intervention and a political act, resisting dominant ways of knowing that have historically excluded and distorted Black women's realities.

Black College Women's Success Framework

While higher education literature abounds with models aimed at explaining college student success, few frameworks explicitly center the lived experiences and knowledge of Black women students. Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo set out to create a conceptual model of Black

women college student success (2018). Their model begins with the diverse experiences and characteristics Black college women bring with them to college as well as the influence of the model minority myth. During college, identity development, non-cognitive skills development, values and commitments, and external assets all interact in a context of constant challenges to influence achievement and ultimately what they describe as holistic success. With their model, they stress that “achievement is a necessary condition for holistic success, although by no means the only condition” (p. 81). Their emphasis on holistic success assumes that Black women choose to attend college as a means of improving their lives. “Black women collegians seek to mature in their identity and to clarify their values as one way of becoming productive, contributing citizens of society” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 84). It is through this lens that they examine holistic success.

Belonging and Mattering

Belonging has become a widely cited construct in higher education research, often used to describe students’ sense of connection, inclusion, and acceptance within academic environments. For Black students, however, the concept of belonging can feel both insufficient and misaligned. Scholars have critiqued how belonging is frequently framed through institutional norms that center whiteness, positioning students of color as outsiders who must “fit in” rather than questioning the conditions that render them peripheral (Strayhorn, 2012; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). In this framing, the burden often falls on students to assimilate, rather than on institutions to transform. Scholars have also critiqued the concept of belonging for its connection to possession, questioning not only who belongs but to whom the school belongs (e.g. Freidus, 2020; Kuttner, 2023). Mattering, by contrast, shifts the lens. Rather than focusing on whether one is accepted, mattering asks whether one is seen, valued, and fundamentally acknowledged as

significant (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). For Black college women who often occupy multiple marginalized social locations, the question is not merely “Do I belong here?” but “Do I matter here?” Mattering speaks to the layered experiences of visibility and erasure, signaling the ways Black women may be hyper-visible in terms of representation yet invisible in terms of institutional care, recognition, and response.

Context

On February 14, 2025 – just weeks after the second-term inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump – the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights issued a Dear Colleague letter to the nation’s educational institutions (Trainor, 2025). The letter asserted that “in recent years, American educational institutions have discriminated against students on the basis of race, including white and Asian students” (p. 1), and further claimed that schools had “toxically indoctrinated students with the false premise that the United States is built upon ‘systemic and structural racism’... smuggling racial stereotypes and explicit race-consciousness into everyday training, programming, and discipline” (p. 2). It declared that “nebulous concepts like racial balancing and diversity are not compelling interests” (p. 2), and concluded with a threat to withdraw federal funding from noncompliant institutions, punctuated by: “Thank you in advance for your commitment to providing our Nation’s students with an educational environment that is free of race, color, or national origin discrimination” (p. 4).

Despite the shocking rhetoric of this letter, these attitudes are not new. The invocation of "colorblindness" to suppress discussions of systemic racism has deep roots in American educational policy. Following the civil rights movement, conservative legal and political actors increasingly framed race-conscious policies as unconstitutional, promoting a "colorblind" ideology that ostensibly treated all individuals “equally” while ignoring structural inequities.

Annamma et al. (2017) critique the use of “colorblind” language not only for its problematic connection to ableism, but for suggesting that this is a passive process. They recommend the term “color-evasive” to show the active and often intentional role that institutions, leaders, and organizations play in evading the realities of discrimination and racism.

This political approach of color-evasiveness facilitated the rollback of affirmative action and desegregation efforts, effectively preserving racial hierarchies under the guise of neutrality. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration's "A Nation at Risk" report shifted the focus of educational reform from equity to excellence, emphasizing standardized testing and accountability measures that often-disadvantaged students of color. More recently, the proliferation of state laws banning the teaching of critical race theory and related concepts has led to widespread censorship in classrooms, with educators facing restrictions on discussing topics like slavery and civil rights. These historical patterns illustrate a persistent resistance to confronting racial injustice in education, reinforcing the marginalization of Black students and their experiences. But as Patricia Hill Collins (2022) quotes Kimberlé Crenshaw: “it is fairly obvious that treating different things the same can generate as much inequality as treating the same things differently” (p. 285).

In addition to pursuing my PhD, I also work at the institution where this study takes place. The idea for this work emerged before the election of Donald Trump, during a time when the university was forming committees to address diversity issues and I was a member of one such committee. Initially, I saw this research as a complement to the work of the diversity and inclusion committee. However, the recent Dear Colleague letter (Trainor, 2025) has effectively halted that collaboration and led to the near dissolution of the committees themselves. While I was granted permission to pursue this study, it came with a condition: anonymity. The institution

is unlikely to engage with this work, either publicly or privately, and any insights generated may never be allowed to influence its policies or practices.

Despite and because of this institutional silencing, this work is more critical than ever and reaches beyond the confines of any single campus. The historical marginalization, exclusion, and invisibility of Black college women continues, and color-evasive approaches only serve to uphold entrenched systems of racism, sexism, and gendered racism. By centering Black women in this study, I aim to directly confront our erasure and insist on our presence in academic discourse.

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to create space for Black women in a college nursing program to share their experiences of mattering – or not mattering – within their institutional environments. This study is both significant and distinct in several ways. First, it centers the experiences of Black women, whose voices have long been marginalized or flattened in higher education research. Second, it takes place within a rarely examined context: a private, nonprofit, majority-Black institution in the U.S. South, offering a counter-narrative to dominant research focused on predominantly white institutions. Third, by focusing on nursing – a feminized helping profession – this study engages with the cultural and historical weight of potential controlling images as theorized in Black Feminist Thought, prompting critical questions about how care, labor, and racialized gender expectations shape Black women’s educational journeys.

Research Questions

The research questions of the current study are:

1. What experiences do Black college women nursing students in a private, nonprofit institution on a majority-Black campus in the US south find salient and what *institutional* patterns do we see in these experiences?
2. What can we understand from these women's experiences about *institutional practices* that communicate students' mattering – or not mattering – to the institution?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction - BFT and the Present Study

This chapter is grounded in the epistemological commitments of Black feminist thought (BFT), articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (2022), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1988). For me, Black feminist thought has offered a language for experiences I have long struggled to articulate – experiences shaped by the simultaneous pressures of racism, sexism, classism, and other interlocking systems. BFT is not just theoretical; it is personal, political, and healing. It is the foundation from which I engage questions of mattering and success in higher education throughout this work.

In her book, Collins (2022) asserts that dominant Eurocentric research practices rooted in Enlightenment ideals of objectivity and universality have historically marginalized, distorted, or erased the knowledge and experiences of Black women. These traditions often privilege abstraction over lived experience and generalizability over specificity. In doing so, they reproduce a narrow vision of what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose voices are deemed worthy of attention. My approach resists these norms. Rather than seeking neutrality, I embrace a standpoint that is accountable to Black women. This requires both a critique of dominant epistemologies and a commitment to making space for ways of knowing that emerge from Black women's lives.

These frameworks inform the theoretical grounding of this dissertation and the methodological stance I bring to the literature review. I do not approach this chapter as a neutral synthesis of “what we know,” but as a critical exploration of what has been valued and what becomes possible when Black women are centered. Rather than a critique of individual authors, I provide a structural critique of the dominant frameworks that have shaped higher education

research. At the same time, I hold space for recognition and gratitude – especially for Black women scholars who have worked hard to center Black women’s lives within academic institutions. I hope to honor that legacy and build upon it to deepen our collective understanding of Black women’s experiences in college environments.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought (Collins, 2022) is an intellectual and political tradition that centers the knowledge and experiences of Black women. It asserts that Black women occupy a unique standpoint within interlocking systems of oppression including race, gender, class, and other structures of domination. Rather than viewing this position from a deficit perspective, Black feminist thought holds it as a powerful and necessary lens for understanding broader social dynamics.

A core tenet of Black feminist thought is its commitment to intersectionality (Collins, 2022). Intersectionality, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988), highlights the ways in which race, gender, class, and other characteristics are not discrete variables but are inextricably linked. Intersectionality challenges frameworks that attempt to understand Black women’s experiences additively by putting together insights from studies of Black men and white women. These approaches often fail to capture the unique positioning of Black women, rendering their unique experiences and perspectives invisible.

Black feminist thought rejects essentialism, which assumes Black women have one singular, monolithic experience (Collins, 2022). Instead, BFT recognizes how race, gender, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity intersect in complex ways to create unique perspectives and experiences. At the same time, Black feminist thought also acknowledges shared experiences of marginalization. As Collins (2022) writes, “All African American women

face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely derogates women of African descent” (p. 33). This framing does not erase difference, but it recognizes the enduring weight of structural violence that shapes the lives of Black women in the United States.

History of Marginalization

Collins (2022) states Black women’s historical marginalization in the United States is rooted in the entanglement of racism, sexism, and classism that has rendered their humanity persistently devalued. During slavery, Black women were commodified as both laborers and reproducers, simultaneously worked to death and forced to bear children who would themselves be enslaved. Their bodies were subject to violence and surveillance, positioned outside the bounds of white womanhood, femininity, and legal personhood. After emancipation, Black women were funneled into exploitative roles as domestic workers, caregivers, and agricultural laborers. These occupations extended the role of servitude while continuing to deny them access to economic mobility, bodily autonomy, or institutional recognition. Their contributions were dismissed, even as they organized families, communities, and resistance movements under conditions of immense constraint.

Collins (2022) further explains that across historical eras, dominant institutions like education, healthcare, law, and media have maintained this marginalization through problematic ideologies and practices. Controlling images have functioned to justify the continued marginalization of Black women, casting them as hypersexual, angry, self-sacrificing, or invulnerable – never fully human. These images work to contain Black women’s complexity and to dismiss their needs, desires, and critiques.

Controlling images and Self-definition

Central to Collins's (2022) theorization of structural oppression is the concept of controlling images – stereotypical representations designed to make Black women's subjugation appear justified. According to Collins, these images are ideological tools that shape how Black women are perceived by others and how they come to see themselves. They function within the matrix of domination to uphold intersecting systems of racism, sexism, and classism. Each image serves a specific political function, reinforcing dominant social arrangements by distorting Black womanhood:

The mammy image portrays Black women as loyal, self-sacrificing caregivers whose purpose is to serve white families. Rooted in slavery and domestic labor, the mammy is constructed as desexualized, nurturing, and content in her subordination. Her role is to comfort and support others, often at the expense of her own well-being. In contemporary settings, this image resurfaces when Black women are expected to provide emotional labor in classrooms, offices, and homes without reciprocation or recognition.

The matriarch is often framed as the inverse of the mammy: dominant, emasculating, and blamed for the perceived failures of Black families. She is pathologized as too strong, too independent, and the source of familial breakdown. This controlling image emerged most prominently in the Moynihan Report (1965), which framed the Black family as a problem due to the "dominant" role of Black women. In educational settings, this stereotype can manifest in deficit narratives that view Black girls and women as "too assertive" or "angry," ignoring the conditions that necessitate their strength.

The Jezebel stereotype hypersexualizes Black women, casting them as promiscuous and morally loose. This image has roots in slavery, where it was used to justify the sexual

exploitation of Black women. Today, it continues to inform how Black women's sexuality is surveilled and judged. This can often lead to victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence or excessive discipline for perceived dress code violations in schools and colleges.

The welfare mother or welfare queen represents a fear about Black women's reproductive autonomy. She is imagined as hyper-fertile, irresponsible, and dependent on the state. This image reinforces punitive welfare policies and stigmatizes Black motherhood. In higher education, it can translate into assumptions about Black women students' economic dependency or reproductive choices. Black women can be frequently framed as burdens rather than contributors.

The Black lady is a more "respectable" figure who is seen as hardworking, professional, and successful, but also cold, unfeminine, and emotionally detached. She is often positioned as the acceptable Black woman in white-dominated spaces, so long as she does not challenge the status quo. This image rewards individual achievement while erasing structural barriers and discouraging collective action. Black women faculty and students may be pressured to embody this role to be deemed competent, often at great psychological cost.

Each of these controlling images works to limit the range of Black womanhood deemed acceptable within dominant culture. They shape how Black women are perceived and responded to in social institutions and they often demand that Black women perform respectability politics to avoid punishment. Yet even as these images persist, Black feminist thought insists on the possibility of self-definition – the act of naming oneself outside of these imposed categories (Collins, 2022). In a world that continually attempts to misrepresent Black women, claiming the right to define oneself becomes imperative.

Hypervisibility and invisibility

The experiences of Black women in higher education are often marked by a tension between hypervisibility and invisibility (Porter, 2022). Hypervisibility refers to being constantly seen in ways that are distorted, stereotyped, or surveilled – such as being cast as the “strong Black woman”, the campus leader, or the cultural representative. These forms of visibility are not affirming and can serve to extract labor, silence complexity, and reinforce dominant narratives. In contrast, invisibility manifests when Black women’s contributions, needs, or struggles are ignored or erased. As Patricia Hill Collins (2022) illustrates through her analysis of controlling images and epistemic exclusion, Black women are made hypervisible in ways that justify their oppression and invisible in spaces where their full humanity could be acknowledged. This dual positioning constrains how Black women are able to exist and matter within academic spaces.

Outsider within

The concept of the "outsider within," as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2022), captures the complex position Black women often occupy within institutions not built for their inclusion. Originally emerging from the experiences of Black women domestic workers in white households, the "outsider within" describes how proximity to dominant groups grants unique insight into the workings of power while never fully granting access or belonging. Within academic and professional spaces, Black women may be present and even relied upon, yet still excluded from decision-making. This position enables a critical consciousness: the ability to see both from within and beyond the dominant structures. Rather than a deficit, Collins frames the outsider within as a site of potential resistance and knowledge

production that challenges dominant paradigms and affirms the complex ways Black women come to know the world.

Eurocentric Knowledge Validation

Eurocentric knowledge validation processes privilege ways of knowing that emerge from Western, white, male, and elite epistemologies, often framing them as objective, universal, and superior (Collins, 2022). These processes are grounded in ideals of rationality and detachment, where knowledge is considered valid only when it is verifiable and “neutral”. This paradigm assumes that truth is singular and discoverable through standardized methods that prioritize quantification and generalizability. As a result, epistemologies rooted in lived experience are often dismissed as anecdotal, biased, or unscientific. In privileging a narrow definition of rigor, Eurocentric standards function to marginalize other ways of knowing.

Collins (2022) argues that this has profound implications for Black women, whose knowledge traditions often emerge from collective memory, oral history, and lived experience. However, within academic institutions such epistemologies are rarely recognized as legitimate unless translated into Eurocentric frameworks. This dynamic creates a situation in which Black women must fit into structures not built for them. Citation practices, publication standards, and research methods all operate as gatekeeping mechanisms that determine whose work is deemed credible and whose is overlooked. Black feminist scholars have resisted this marginalization by asserting the validity of situated, reflexive, and justice-oriented inquiry. To challenge Eurocentric validation processes is not merely to critique academic norms but to reimagine what counts as truth, who gets to produce it, and for whom knowledge is made.

Black Feminist Epistemology

Collins (2022) outlines a distinct Black feminist epistemology, grounded in four key principles. This epistemology challenges Eurocentric, positivist epistemologies that prioritize so-called “objective” or “universal” truths and instead insists that situated knowledge – rooted in daily life, emotion, spirituality, and collective memory – is both legitimate and liberatory. The four principles of Black feminist epistemology are as follows:

1. Lived experience as a criterion of meaning: Knowledge is generated through the everyday realities of Black women’s lives.
2. Use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims: Knowledge is evaluated collectively, through conversation and shared understanding.
3. Ethic of caring: Emotions, empathy, and expressiveness are valued in the production of knowledge.
4. Ethic of personal accountability: Researchers are responsible for the knowledge they produce and how it is used in the world.

By centering lived experience, dialogue, caring, and accountability, Black feminist epistemology disrupts dominant hierarchies of knowledge and recenters the values and knowledge Black women (Collins, 2022). This stance not only legitimizes Black women’s ways of knowing but also offers a reimagining of what it means to know, to research, and to be in relation with others. Understanding Black women’s college experiences through a Black feminist epistemological lens reveals the limits of dominant research narratives that treat students as objects of study rather than as knowledge holders. Instead, it calls for an inquiry that honors their ways of knowing and values their narratives as theory.

Black Women in College

Commodore et al. (2018) discuss the history of Black women in U.S. higher education as one that has been shaped by the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class. These intersecting identities have influenced not only Black women's access to college but also the types of educational opportunities deemed acceptable for them. Prior to the end of slavery, access to secondary or higher education was rare for Black people, and even more limited for Black women, who faced dual exclusion from both white educational institutions and patriarchal norms within their own communities. The founding of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) after the Civil War expanded educational access for Black students, but many of these institutions were initially designed with Black men in mind. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s contributed to broader access for Black women at both HBCUs and predominantly white institutions (PWIs), but that access did not always come with the social support or affirming environments needed for full development. Understanding the experiences of Black college women today requires attention to this layered history and the ways institutional contexts continue to carry the legacies of race, gender, and class exclusions. The next sections explore these variations to illuminate how place, culture, and institutional history intersect with identity to shape Black women's experiences in college.

Black Women in PWIs

Black women attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) often find themselves navigating paradoxical spaces that are both empowering and repressive – what some scholars have called “crooked rooms” (Harris-Perry, 2011). The analogy of the "crooked room" has been used to describe how Black women in PWIs are forced to "shift or conform in order to be recognized by others as valid" within environments that are inherently misaligned to their

experiences, much like trying to stand up straight in an already crooked room (Apugo, 2019, p. 57).

These institutions frequently present themselves as inclusive while reinforcing systemic and institutional barriers that render Black women outsiders within (Collins, 2022). A prevailing sense of isolation and lack of belonging is well-documented: Robinson, Esquibel, and Rich (2013) describe how Black women report profound feelings of alienation, while Winkle-Wagner (2009) notes that many also feel disconnected from their home communities, having changed too much to fully return. Forced acculturation pressures Black women to conform to dominant cultural norms, often at the expense of their authenticity (Gilford & Reynolds, 2011). Within these contexts, stereotypes and gendered racism – such as being labeled loud, argumentative, or stubborn (Apugo, 2019; Koonce, 2012) – compound the emotional and psychological toll of college life. This toll is intensified by racial and gendered microaggressions (Burton et al., 2024; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Lewis et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2016), a lack of Black women mentors and faculty (Gooden et al., 2020; Shahid et al., 2018), and racialized hostility (Phelps-Ward et al., 2017), including resentment tied to affirmative action policies (Lewis et al., 2000). Even among their peers, some Black women report competition and a lack of solidarity (Porter & Dean, 2015), revealing the internalization of scarcity in support structures.

To survive, Black women often employ coping strategies such as code-switching and hypervigilance – adaptive yet psychologically taxing responses (e.g., Apugo, 2017; Hannon et al., 2016). Others draw on “Africultural coping”, cultivating self-worth and healing through cultural rootedness (Shahid et al., 2018). Many Black college women lean on racial socialization, ethnic identity, and networks of support – including informal sister circles – to resist erasure and affirm their sense of self (Leath et al., 2022; Causey et al., 2022; Porter & Dean, 2015). Phrases

like “Black girl magic” can function as everyday forms of resistance against the burdens of institutional neglect (Apugo, 2019).

Black Women in HBCUs

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) hold a unique and pivotal place in the landscape of U.S. higher education, particularly within the context of Black women's experiences. Established to provide educational access to African Americans who were historically excluded from predominantly White institutions (PWIs) due to slavery and racial segregation, HBCUs have long been lauded for their distinctive mission and culturally affirming environments, providing a culture specific pedagogy and placing Black culture at the forefront (e.g., Kennedy, 2012; Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2019; Patton, 2016). HBCUs are particularly effective at fostering positive racial identity development, offering a greater sense of community among Black students, and enriching students' cultural awareness and self-confidence (e.g., Patton et al., 2020; Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2019; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). Scholars often highlight HBCUs for their nurturing environments and familial atmosphere. They provide a built-in support system from African American peers, faculty, and administrators. (e.g., Gasman et al., 2010; Njoku et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). Black women, in particular, find value in the support and trust of administrators and faculty who genuinely care about their well-being, success, and overall identity development (Porter & Dean, 2015).

Despite the supportive mission, HBCUs are not monolithic and can present their own challenges, particularly for Black women. Patriarchal norms and male-dominated leadership structures persist at many HBCUs, shaping campus dynamics and sometimes limiting Black women's access to power and influence. While Black women often outnumber Black men on HBCU campuses, their voices can be relegated to the margins within social and academic

frameworks (Kennedy, 2012). Historically, and in contemporary contexts, the male-dominated American value system is present within HBCUs (Bonner, 2001; Gasman et al., 2010). Black women at HBCUs may feel dominated in the classroom and extracurricular activities, less likely to engage with faculty, and may choose academic majors that fit gender stereotypes (Bonner, 2001). HBCUs have also often instilled a hidden curriculum rooted in Black respectability politics, ideal standards of African American behavior enacted in efforts to combat racist stereotypes and promote racial uplift (Njoku et al., 2017; Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2019). This has led to the enforcement of heteronormativity and stringent gender roles, which can displace and penalize those who do not adhere to these norms. These politics of respectability can further constrain self-expression and reify gendered hierarchies. Commodore et al. (2018) sum these challenges up by saying that Black women in HBCUs “on a holistic level...continue to struggle with the same issues facing them in PWIs and American society at large” (p. 90).

“Forgotten institutions”

Commodore et al. (2018) refer to two-year community colleges and private, for-profit institutions as “forgotten institutions” (p. 55), highlighting how little research exists on Black women in these spaces despite their disproportionate representation (Arbeit & Horn, 2017) and questionable cost-to-benefit ratios (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2014; Lang & Weinstein, 2013). Kelly et al. (2017) echo this concern, explicitly calling for future research to attend to the experiences of Black women in these under-studied institutional contexts – settings that enroll a significant share of the nation’s Black college students. Building on this call, Wilson et al. (2023) suggest that closer examination of the full range of minority-serving institutions (MSIs), including those often overlooked, may offer critical insights into how institutional structures can be reimaged to better support Black women’s educational success.

Gender, Race, and Nursing

This study examines Black women's experiences in a nursing education program, but their experiences cannot be fully understood without a critical look at how the field of nursing interacts with the intersecting identities of gender and race. According to Cacouault-Bitaud (2001), feminization of professions refers to a demographic and cultural shift in which an occupation that was previously male-dominated becomes significantly composed of women – a process often accompanied by decreased pay, diminished status, and structural devaluation of that field. Cacouault-Bitaud suggests that the feminization of helping professions such as education, nursing, social work, and child care reflects long standing societal assumptions that associate care, nurture, and emotional labor with women's "natural" dispositions. These roles have historically been shaped by gendered expectations that women are inherently suited for service, patience, and self-sacrifice – traits that have been used to justify both the moral valorization and the economic devaluation of such labor. As these professions became numerically dominated by women over time, they were also stripped of prestige, even as they remained essential to the functioning of schools, hospitals, and social systems.

Nursing has undergone a pronounced process of feminization. Once a male-dominated, militaristic profession, nursing evolved into a field perceived as an extension of women's domestic responsibilities. As Shannon et al. (2019) note, this transition positioned nurses as caregivers rather than clinicians, reinforcing hierarchies within healthcare that privileged male physicians while narrowing the professional scope of predominantly female nursing staff. Despite increased formal training and credentialing, the profession continues to carry the burden of being seen as emotionally intuitive rather than intellectually rigorous – an association that contributes to persistent wage disparities, occupational burnout, and limited leadership advancement.

Within this already gendered profession, Black women have also been uniquely burdened by racialized expectations connected to the controlling image of the mammy. Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2022) helps reveal how the mammy controlling image – depicting Black women as loyal, nurturing, selfless caretakers – likely continues to shape perceptions of Black women in healthcare roles. The mammy image may operate as an institutional rationale that justifies the exploitation of Black women’s physical and emotional labor. Under this controlling image, Black women nurses may be presumed to be naturally suited for care work, expected to provide unreciprocated empathy and endure exploitative conditions without complaint. Though acknowledging the lack of research into Black women’s experiences in nursing, Dunkley (2024) found that Black women remain underrepresented in nursing leadership and often feel disregarded by physicians, “citing that their opinions are not sought after as readily as their White colleagues” (p. E2). Thus, nursing can be seen as a site of both feminization and racialization, reinforcing systems that both depend on and devalue the labor of Black women. Examining Black women students’ nursing education experiences provides a unique entry point for examining how broader systems of gendered and racialized expectations are reproduced within the everyday lives of Black women students.

Black Women’s Success in College

Black women’s “success” in college is often framed through dominant paradigms that rely on narrow, outcome-based metrics such as graduation rates, degree attainment, or persistence (Commodore et al., 2018). Increasingly, Black women have been cast as a “model minority” within higher education discourse – a myth that celebrates their perceived resilience and achievement while obscuring the structural conditions that shape their educational journeys (Apugo, 2019; Commodore et al., 2018). Kaba (2008) is widely critiqued in his application of

the problematic model minority concept to Black women in the US. According to Kaba, “the concept of the ‘model minority’ in the USA is explained as groups that were at one time marginalized, educationally, economically and socially, but eventually rose up despite their many obstacles to become prosperous, admired and even emulated” (2008, p. 310). Kaba begins his argument by claiming that Asian Americans have long been model minorities in the US “because a very high proportion of them were at one time very poor and at the margins of society, but managed to pull themselves up” (p. 310), an argument that has been rejected by many scholars (Asher, 2007; Lew, 2007; Wong & Halgin, 2006). Kaba (2008) further argued that the concept of model minority can be extended to include Black women, as despite them being “the subgroup to have suffered the most in the history of not only the USA, but the entire Western Hemisphere or the New World...Black American women are among the most productive members of the American society” (p. 331). He stands by this claim despite acknowledging that Black women in the US still lag behind other groups in economic and social indicators.

Black women are often perceived as being successful in college relative to Black men, and indeed on average Black women do outperform Black men on some traditional college success metrics. But outperforming Black men, another marginalized group, does not mean Black women are not themselves marginalized. Black women’s six-year graduation rate from four-year institutions has just recently reached 50% compared to 65% for all students and 67% for all women (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). While Black women earn nearly 65% of bachelor’s degrees awarded to Black students, they earned only 6.3% of all bachelor’s degrees awarded in 2023 (NCES, 2024). The model minority myth seems to suggest that Black college women will succeed automatically and independently, regardless of structural

barriers or individual differences. But is it reasonable to interpret all Black women's experiences as success stories merely because they rank above some other groups, on average, in limited, outcome-based measures?

Additionally, the hyperfocus on traditional metrics like retention and graduation frequently overlooks the racialized, gendered, and economic barriers Black women face, as well as the incredible costs – emotional, psychological, financial – of attaining “success” in predominantly white, classed, and patriarchal institutions (Haynes, 2019; Kelly et al., 2017; Phelps-Ward et al., 2018; Porter, 2022). Commodore et al. (2018) challenge this reductive framing, noting that success must be contextualized within the unique experiences of Black women, who continue to face socially constructed assumptions of homogeneity, isolation, limited mentoring access, and significant psychological and financial stressors. Although Black women are enrolling in college at increasing rates, these gains are not matched by institutional conditions that foster holistic well-being (Commodore et al., 2018). Traditional models of student success like those of Tinto (1975, 1993) and Astin (2014) often fail to account for the intersecting oppressions that shape Black women's educational journeys, focusing instead on the need for assimilation and individual adjustment.

Black women themselves articulate success beyond mere survival, emphasizing personal growth, community connection, and resilience. We seek environments where we can truly thrive and matter, embracing our authentic identities without constant negotiation or censorship (Porter, 2022; Kelly et al., 2017; Leath et al., 2022). Institutions that effectively prepare Black women for college often share common approaches, such as having high academic expectations, fostering a clear sense of mission and history, providing positive role models, creating a caring and supportive environment, offering opportunities for leadership and self-discovery, cultivating a

supportive and high-achieving peer culture, and connecting students to their communities (Commodore et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). There is a need for frameworks that account for the unique intersectional identities of Black women and the systemic oppressions we encounter, as well as an expansion of dominant definitions of success to align more with Black women's own articulations of success. Commodore et al. (2018) set out to develop their conceptual model of Black woman college student success that is rooted in the lived experiences of Black woman college students. Though they ultimately suggest that institutions must shift responsibility from the individual Black woman and towards the institutions themselves to actively dismantle oppressive structures and ensure inclusive environments, Commodore et al. chose to develop a student-centric model of student success. "Our rationale for developing a student-centric model rather than an institutional model is that we believe it will be of most use to students immediately. Our model assumes an unfortunate and detrimental lack of institutional support, but the model does not condone it." (2018, p. 66).

A Conceptual Model of Black Woman College Student Success

Commodore et al.'s (2018) conceptual model of Black woman college student success explicitly rejects the tendency to treat Black college women as a monolithic group. Instead, it centers the diverse pre-college experiences, identities, and characteristics that Black women bring with them into higher education. These factors include socioeconomic status, K-12 education, first-generation status, transfer student status, family support or lack thereof, geographic upbringing, sexual orientation, religious influence, ethnic variation, mental health status, clarity of goals, among countless other within-group differences.

Another key feature of the model is its engagement with the model minority myth as a homogenizing phenomenon that affects perceptions of Black women. At its core, the model

minority myth assumes that Black women in college can overcome structural oppression through sheer willpower and individual effort. Commodore et al. (2018) argue that this assumption imposes undue psychological and emotional burdens on Black women, both from external expectations and internalized pressure. These burdens can obscure the need for institutional support and misrepresent the complexity of their college experiences. “Failure to act against the model minority myth can create a situation where the Black woman consciously or subconsciously feels pressure to perform as a type of ‘superwoman’ (Porter & Dean, 2015)” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 74). The authors emphasize the importance of early recognition and processing of these pressures: “The earlier Black women in college learn to recognize and psychologically and emotionally process this burden, the better prepared they will be to navigate its challenges whenever and however they manifest” (p. 68).

In the During College section of the model are a variety of other interacting factors. The model recognizes identity development as an ongoing process shaped by the intersections of race, gender, and other salient social positions. This development is not isolated but occurs within a broader network of external assets – including mentorship, social networks, and culturally affirming institutional structures – that support Black women’s growth and persistence. Equally important are students’ internal values and commitments, such as their sense of purpose, spiritual grounding, and dedication to community uplift, which often anchor their educational journeys. The model also emphasizes the development of non-cognitive skills like resilience, self-advocacy, and leadership, which are critical for navigating complex institutional landscapes. Crucially, all of these components unfold within a context of constant challenges: systemic inequities, stereotypes, and chronic under-resourcing form the backdrop against which Black women strive for success. Rather than viewing these students through a deficit lens, Commodore

et al.'s model highlights both the structural obstacles they face and the strengths they bring in responding to them.

Commodore et al.'s (2018) model draws a meaningful distinction between achievement and holistic success, situating them at different phases of the college experience. Achievement is framed as part of the “during college” phase, encompassing academic performance, leadership, and campus involvement, while holistic success is positioned in the “after college” phase as a culminating outcome. While related, these concepts are not interchangeable – achievement contributes to holistic success, but the latter is defined more expansively. Holistic success, according to the authors, signifies maturity, purpose, and a well-rounded sense of identity rooted in students’ own definitions of what it means to thrive. It reflects not only institutional benchmarks but also Black women’s personal, communal, and civic goals. Although the model acknowledges its limitations – such as its student-centric focus, its assumption of uninterrupted matriculation, and its inability to capture all forms of human variation – it represents an important contribution to student success frameworks. By centering Black women’s lived experiences, values, and self-defined goals, the model challenges dominant narratives and offers a more justice-oriented, intersectional approach to understanding what it means to succeed in higher education.

Reexamining Sense of Belonging

In discussions on college student success, sense of belonging has become a popular target of initiatives to improve student outcomes. Sense of belonging has been defined by Goodenow (1993) as students “sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others” (p. 25). Early psychological models, such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943), positioned belonging

as a fundamental human motivation – but did so through a universalist lens that failed to account for the structural conditions shaping who is recognized as belonging in the first place.

The recent focus on student belonging was spurred by dominant models of student engagement, retention, and success that centered white, middle-class students. For example, Vincent Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model for student retention highlighted the importance of social integration and emphasized assimilation into the dominant campus culture as a necessary condition for success, reinforcing an individualist and decontextualized understanding of belonging.

As the field began to consider students of color, belonging was often framed through a deficit perspective: students were seen as lacking connection, lacking fit, and needing to “find” belonging in institutions that rarely examined their own exclusionary practices. One reason for this persistent framing is that much of the literature continues to draw from psychology, treating belonging as a primarily internal or emotional state. But belonging is more than a psychological phenomenon – it is a social, cultural, and political process, shaped by structures of power and histories of exclusion. Paul Kuttner (2023) pushes this conversation forward, arguing for a more expansive conceptualization of belonging as agentic, intersectional, systemic, political, place-based, and a right. His work invites researchers to consider not only how students feel, but how systems function and for whom.

Within research on Black students, scholars like Strayhorn (2012) and Gray et al. (2018) have foregrounded racialized dynamics of belonging in both higher education and K-12 settings. However, these studies often lack sustained attention to gender and may miss the unique positions of hypervisibility and invisibility that Black women students find themselves. Studies that do center Black women college students frequently emphasize their sense of resilience or

strategies for creating belonging, but rarely interrogate the institutional conditions that make such strategies necessary. As Ajjawi, Gravett, and O’Shea (2025) observe, prevailing discourses place the responsibility for “achieving” belonging squarely on students, obscuring the ways institutions withhold recognition, resources, and relational care.

From a Black feminist perspective, this framing raises important questions: Who is expected to change in order to “belong”? What does it cost to “belong” within dominant structures? And what do we risk reproducing when we treat belonging as something students must earn, rather than a condition institutions are accountable to create? Moreover, the dominant framing of belonging as a possession – as something students “have” or “lack” – echoes longer histories of dispossession and exclusion. In capitalist societies, place is often entangled with ideas of property and ownership. As Freidus (2020) shows, debates about who belongs in a school cannot be separated from questions about who the school belongs to. Drawing on Cheryl Harris’s (1993) concept of whiteness as property, Freidus illustrates how school zoning battles reveal the racialized dimensions of belonging as a form of possession. Similarly, Souto-Manning (2024) argues that definitions of belonging in early childhood education connect whiteness with the right to exclude, reproducing the norms of assimilation and exclusion.

With this study, I intentionally diverge from dominant belonging discourses. Rather than asking whether Black women nursing students “feel” they belong, I turn to a more justice-oriented concept of mattering. Where belonging often centers institutional norms and emotional fit, mattering asks deeper questions about value, recognition, and relational accountability. Who matters, to whom, and on what terms? Given these critiques, I turn next to mattering – not as a substitute for belonging, but as a more aligned framework for engaging Black women’s realities in educational spaces.

Mattering

I first encountered the construct of mattering while working on a literature review focused on college students' sense of belonging. Though I wasn't looking for it, occasionally an article or book would mention mattering either in addition to or in lieu of belonging. I remember seeing the word "mattering" for the first time and being intrigued. I hadn't realized or even questioned it, but belonging had never been a word I used to describe my own experiences as a Black woman in higher education. Mattering, on the other hand, immediately resonated. I could recall numerous moments, across different spaces and relationships, where I felt distinctly that I did not matter. That language, that feeling, was familiar. Later, as I began reworking my dissertation to engage more critically with academic discourse, I found myself returning to mattering. I began to dig, not just into the literature, but also into my own lived experiences and how they aligned with what this construct might offer as a site of inquiry for Black women in higher education.

Mattering is often framed as a component of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), but it also stands on its own as a concept worthy of deeper critical interrogation. The concept of mattering has roots in sociology and psychology, where it was defined by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) as the perception that others depend on us, are concerned with us, and care about what happens to us. In the development of their mattering survey, Rosenberg and McCullough established three dimensions: (1) the feeling that others pay attention to you (attention), (2) the belief that others care about you and what you do (importance), and (3) the perception that others need you (dependence). Schlossberg (1989) later contributed additional dimensions of mattering: (4) the feeling that other people will be proud of our accomplishments or saddened by our failures (ego-extension) and (5) the feeling that our efforts were appreciated (appreciation). Defined in these ways, mattering has been linked to mental and physical well-being, self-concept

and identity, motivation, and engagement (e.g., Demir et al., 2011; Matera et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2019).

In higher education literature, mattering research has often focused on students' perceptions of faculty support, peer networks, and campus inclusion. Many of these studies, like those on belonging, have tended to frame mattering as something that institutions can cultivate through student-centered initiatives and interpersonal connections. While important, these approaches can neglect the structural, cultural, and political dimensions of mattering – particularly for students who occupy multiple marginalized identities.

Mattering has been examined for Black students as more than a psychological feeling but a sociopolitical phenomenon shaped by structures of anti-Blackness that actively deny significance. Carey et al. (2022) focused on mattering in Black boys to highlight how in educational spaces, this manifests not just in neglect but in mechanisms of anti-mattering: hyper-surveillance, exclusion, and conditional recognition that communicate Black students are problems to be managed rather than people to be nurtured. They offer a conceptual framework of marginal, partial, and comprehensive mattering as a lens to interpret how Black boys navigate visibility that is often weaponized rather than affirming.

Marginal mattering reflects a recognition steeped in fear or disdain; partial mattering rewards selective talents while reinforcing systemic norms; and comprehensive mattering demands a radical reimagining of institutional practices to affirm Black students' full humanity and worth beyond utility. This framework helps illuminate how mattering is deeply entangled with racialized power and belonging. While Carey et al.'s framework offers an entry point for examining the mattering of Black boys, an intersectional lens reminds us that Black women navigate distinct and overlapping forms of oppression. This necessitates a shift in focus, re-

centering Black college women as the primary lens through which we explore the complexities of mattering in what follows.

For Black college women, the question of mattering is not simply about being seen or supported in interpersonal relationships but about being institutionally recognized in environments shaped by both racial and gendered exclusion. Black college women are routinely rendered invisible, their voices silenced, and their contributions overlooked (Porter & Byrd, 2021; Zamani, 2003). Society confines Black women to a limited set of dehumanizing stereotypes, including the "mammy", "jezebel" and "Black lady" (Collins, 2022). More recent tropes, like "new model minority" and misinterpretations of "#BlackGirlMagic," celebrate Black women's achievements superficially while dismissing their labor and complexity (Patton & Haynes, 2018).

These tropes deny Black women's full humanity and create a precarious position where their work is misinterpreted as miraculous rather than a result of immense effort against systemic barriers (Patton & Haynes, 2018; Porter & Byrd, 2021). Porter (2022) pairs Love's (2019) framing of "survival" with Collins's (2022) "outsider-within" status to conceptualize what it means to belong for Black women who have survived higher education contexts like PWIs where they have been granted entry but have not truly mattered. Porter found that Black college women described their experiences of marginality and isolation as exhausting and painful and that Black women's experiences and narratives must matter to those who create institutional policy, develop programs, or teach courses, rather than just being conflated with successful matriculation and integration.

Yet research explicitly focused on Black women's sense of mattering in higher education remains limited. Without extensive work from institutions to understand and invest in Black

women's mattering, the burden of mattering, like belonging, is too often placed on the students themselves. Black women students must find communities they matter to, assert their value to institutions, and continue to adapt to systems not built for them. A Black feminist lens invites a reframing of mattering as a structural condition that institutions must be accountable for. Rather than asking whether Black women feel they matter, this perspective shifts the focus to how institutions make visible (or invisible) their presence, contributions, and needs. This shift is particularly important given the persistent invisibility Black women face in higher education, where they are often hyper-visible as stereotypes or diversity tokens, and yet absent in leadership, curricula, and research.

Reframing mattering through Black Feminist Thought connects directly to Black women's own articulations of success. For many, success is not defined solely by academic achievement, degrees earned, or upward mobility, but by being recognized, affirmed, and cared for in systems that have historically disregarded their humanity. It is about being seen as more than a student or a statistic but as someone whose experiences, knowledge, and full self are valued. In this sense, mattering is not just a mechanism to increase student success; it is central to how Black women understand what it means to thrive.

Positioning the Present Study

This chapter has outlined the core concepts of Black feminist thought and epistemology, highlighted the epistemic exclusions that shape dominant research traditions, and engaged critically with how Black women's college experiences – particularly around success, belonging, and mattering – have been conceptualized in the literature. I have intentionally drawn from the work of Black women scholars who have insisted that our lived experiences and knowledge matter. Their work has made mine possible.

Still, as this review has shown, significant gaps remain – particularly around how Black college women experience and make sense of mattering in institutional contexts where they are often rendered both hypervisible and invisible. While many prior studies rooted in Black feminist thought have illuminated key aspects of Black women’s educational journeys, few have explicitly focused on mattering as a critical, structural, and lived concept in unique institutional spaces.

This study takes up that opening. It centers Black college women’s own understandings, experiences, and conversations of mattering at a majority-Black, private non-profit university in the U.S. South – a context that can be included in Commodore et al.’s (2018) term “forgotten institutions” as one in which research is even more limited. In doing so, this study builds upon and expands current understandings of Black women student success, mattering, and voice.

By foregrounding Black women college students’ lived experiences and honoring their epistemologies, this study rejects deficit models and recenters inquiry around relationality and recognition. It approaches mattering not as a psychological outcome but as a political and institutional question: who gets to matter, under what conditions, and who must be accountable? The methodological choices in the following chapter reflect this commitment to epistemic justice and Black feminist inquiry. They are designed to support a research process that is not extractive, but co-constructed, reflexive, and attuned to the complexity of Black women’s lives.

Chapter 3: Methods

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to give space for Black women nursing students at a private, non-profit institution on a majority-Black campus to share their experiences and how those experiences relate to institutional practices of student mattering – or not mattering – through the lens of Black Feminist Thought. This study adds to the small but growing body of literature that centers Black women’s lived experiences and knowledge as valid and vital. As the majority of studies on Black college women’s experiences have been conducted in large, 4-year PWIs, this study also contributes to the diversity of institutional settings represented in the literature to better represent the diverse settings in which many Black college women study.

Research Questions

The research questions of the current study are:

1. What experiences do Black college women nursing students in a private, nonprofit institution on a majority-Black campus in the US south find salient and what *institutional* patterns do we see in these experiences?
2. What can we understand from these women’s experiences about *institutional practices* that communicate students’ mattering – or not mattering – to the institution?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (2022), which offers both a theoretical orientation and an epistemological foundation for centering the lived experiences and ways of knowing of Black women. BFT positions Black women’s everyday lives as valid and necessary sites of knowledge production, challenging

dominant Eurocentric research paradigms that have historically excluded or distorted their realities. In particular, BFT and Black Feminist Epistemology inform my methodological choices by emphasizing lived experience as a criterion of meaning, dialogue as a process for assessing knowledge claims, an ethic of care, and personal accountability. These principles shape how I designed this study, how I engage with participants, and how I analyze data. Rather than treating participants as objects of study, BFT compels me to approach them as co-constructors of meaning.

Commodore et al.'s (2018) model of Black woman college student success informs this study's conceptual orientation by challenging narrow, outcome-based definitions of success and centering the lived experiences, identities, and values of Black women. The model aligns with this study's critical paradigm and Black feminist grounding by rejecting monolithic representations, interrogating the model minority myth, and emphasizing within-group variation. Its attention to resilience, identity development, and community uplift provides a conceptual backdrop for understanding how participants may define what it means to thrive and matter in college. Though this study focuses on mattering rather than success, the model supports an expansive approach that values complexity, context, and Black women's self-defined experiences in higher education. Commodore et al. make the practical decision to create a student-centered model; however, they acknowledge that this is a limitation in the model as institutions are largely responsible for creating the environments that are not particularly conducive to Black college women's success. This study takes a more institutional approach, using an understanding of Black college women's experiences to critique institutional cultures, attitudes, norms, and practices that contribute to these experiences.

Sista Circle Methodology

Building on the foundation of Black Feminist Thought, Sista Circle Methodology (Johnson, 2015) offers a culturally congruent and community-rooted mode of inquiry that reflects the epistemological commitments of BFT. Both frameworks prioritize collective dialogue, relational care, and situated knowledge, rejecting detached objectivity in favor of methods that honor Black women's lived experiences and meaning-making processes. Several recent studies have implemented Sista circle methodology (SCM) to understand the unique experiences of Black women (e.g. Brown et al., 2023; Lee & Thomas, 2024; Poe et al., 2025; Stackhouse & Shannon-Baker, 2025). According to Johnson (2015),

Sista circles are group discussions or conversations among Black women arranged by a researcher to examine a specific set of topics and/or experiences. The major goal of Sista circles is to gain an understanding of a specific issue, topic, or phenomena impacting Black women from the perspective of Black women themselves. Unlike focus groups, Sista circles are not simply for obtaining the stories of the participants. Rather, it is a method to support and empower participants as well. (p. 45-46).

Johnson (2015) outlines three distinguishing features of SCM. First, communication dynamics reflect culturally specific verbal and non-verbal expressions among Black women, fostering authentic interaction and mutual understanding through familiar speech patterns, gestures, and informal settings. Second, the centrality of empowerment positions Sista circles as supportive spaces that celebrate and amplify Black women's lived knowledge, facilitating personal and collective power through shared experiences. Third, the researcher as participant element departs from traditional focus groups by emphasizing reciprocity; the researcher engages in dialogue,

shares relevant personal experiences, and contributes to the collective meaning-making process, grounded in Black feminist epistemology.

Sista circles are not simply data collection tools; they are liberatory spaces where Black women can gather, reflect, and speak freely outside of the surveillance and constraints of dominant institutional norms. This methodology aligns with BFT's emphasis on dialogue and self-definition, allowing participants to engage in storytelling and sense-making in ways that affirm their full humanity. Within this study, Sista circles function as both a methodological and political act, creating space for counter-narratives, communal wisdom, and the co-construction of knowledge that resists erasure and insists on mattering.

Researcher Positionality

I am a Black cisgender woman from a working-class family and a first-generation college graduate. I also identify as a nontraditional student as I have worked full time throughout my bachelor's, master's, and PhD experiences. My multiple intersecting identities have resulted in challenges to my own feelings of mattering in my institutions and beyond. These identities and challenges are not unique to me and are often shared by many Black women in college. I am also an educator and taught students for many years who have historically been shut out of college environments. I believe that my experiences, and the experiences of students like me, must be shared, acknowledged, valued, and acted upon to make universities more inclusive and supportive to all students.

I am currently employed by the university from which data was gathered for this study. I work as a learning analyst who assists administration in making data-driven decisions to support student learning and "success". The analysis I conduct in my position is largely quantitative, and I am constantly running up against the limitations of what we can understand about students'

experiences based on traditional data collection methods like surveys, grades, persistence, and graduation rates. This position has pushed me to seek a deeper and more aligned method of inquiry in which the lived experiences of students can shape the transformation of inadequate institutional practices.

Participants/Setting

The participants in this study are nursing students pursuing their Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree from a metropolitan campus in the southeastern United States. The university will be referred to by the pseudonym Parkline University. Parkline is a small, private institution that is non-residential and career focused. While Parkline is currently a non-profit institution, it was founded in the 1960s as a for-profit university and operated as such for decades. Parkline accepts over 90% of applicants, according to U.S.News; however, the university website reveals that only about 20% of students who start make it to graduation. Parkline offers a variety of degrees, but they are most well-known for their nursing programs.

The BSN program at Parkline aims to prepare students to take the National Council Licensure Examination – Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN) and become licensed as a Registered Nurse (RN). Though students can take their general education courses online, Parkline BSN students take their nursing courses on campus and have in-person clinical placements as part of their training and preparation.

The demographics of the BSN program at Parkline show a majority-Black (70%) and majority-woman (85%) student body. In 2023-2024, over 100 Parkline BSN students sat for the NCLEX-RN. While 100% of White test-takers successfully passed their NCLEX-RN on their first attempt, only about 80% of Black test-takers passed. This gap in pass rates between Black

and White students at Parkline reflects a well-established national gap in NCLEX-RN first-time pass rates for Black and White students (Mitchell, 2016).

First, I obtained IRB approval in August of 2025 (See Appendix A). Upon receiving IRB approval, I recruited participants via an email sent out to all Parkline BSN students who were scheduled to graduate in Fall 2025, identified as Black or African American and identified as a woman. I offered them a payment via Venmo or Cashapp of \$40 for their participation in one virtual Sista circle lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. As students participated, I also asked if they would spread the word about the study and refer other students to reach out to me if they would like to participate. One student did reach out to me that identified as Black and nonbinary rather than Black and woman. While I did not anticipate this, many modern interpretations of feminism are inclusive of nonbinary individuals. I talked with this student about how they felt about participating in “Sista circles” and they indicated to me that they felt more comfortable in circles and friendships with women than men. I also asked their potential Sista circle partner how she felt about participating in a Sista circle with a person who identified as nonbinary, and she expressed that she was comfortable with this. Upon beginning this Sista circle it was clear that the two were close friends and very comfortable around each other, so I was confident that the spirit of the Sista circle as a supportive space of validation and solidarity remained intact. After finding five participants graduating in Fall 2025, I later sent recruitment emails to students graduating in Spring 2026 and Summer of 2026 to obtain more participants. One student graduating in Summer of 2026 participated. There was a total of six participants that participated in the Sista circles and all six are represented in the data.

Data Collection Methods

I used brief, pre-interview touch points, small-group Sista Circles, and my reflexive research journal as data sources for this study. I intended to conduct optional post-analysis member reflections and all participants at the end of their Sista circles expressed interest in continuing to participate further, but when I reached out to them a few months after the Sista circles, I did not get responses from participants. This may have been due to the busy end-of-semester timeline in which I attempted to contact participants about an optional opportunity to participate as students prepared for exit exams and their certification exams.

Pre-interview touch points

As students demonstrated their interest in participating in the study, I set up a brief (five to 15 minute) individual phone call with each of them to introduce myself and explain the nature of the study. The primary purpose of the pre-interview touch points was to inform potential participants of the details of the study and introduce myself so they could better decide whether they wanted to participate in the Sista Circles. I was also able to learn a bit about the participants' journeys so that I could think about topics to bring up in the Sista circle conversations that may be relevant to their experiences. In these touch points, I was able to answer any questions or concerns participants had regarding participation or compensation and begin to develop trust and rapport. Prior to the touchpoints, I sent participants the study information letter (See Appendix B). I disclosed my affiliation with the university as a staff member, but also made it clear that I was interested in hearing about their experiences as Black women students as I have had to face my own challenges as a Black woman college student. I let them know that my intention was not to protect Parkline or make Parkline look good, but to

listen to their lived experiences, good or bad, and interrogate how Parkline's policies, practices, actions, and inactions contribute to their experiences. I assured them that both they and Parkline would remain anonymous throughout the research and writing. During the touchpoints, I was also able to gauge whether the participants had friends in the program that could potentially form as their pair for the Sista circles to come. In total, I conducted seven pre-interview touch points which resulted in six Parkline students that agreed to participate in the Sista circles.

Sista Circles

I organized, facilitated, and participated in three virtual Sista circles consisting of three participants each, including myself. In total, six Parkline students participated in the Sista circles. Though Sista circles have been conducted in face-to-face environments in many previous studies (e.g., Johnson, 2015; Lacy, 2017; Poe et al., 2025; Wilson, 2018), others have successfully conducted Sista circles virtually (e.g., Lee & Thomas, 2024; Morado, 2023; Stackhouse, 2022). I chose to conduct my Sista circles virtually (via the Zoom platform) for several reasons. Johnson (2015) suggests that Sista circles should be informal in nature and in comfortable locations for participants. I did not want to conduct the Sista circles in the non-neutral spaces of the institution's campus, and I felt participants might be more comfortable and less inconvenienced if they participated from their homes or a space of their choice. Black women, myself included, also often use online spaces effectively to connect with other Black women and build community (Robinson et al., 2022), supporting the appropriateness of online platforms in conducting Sista circles. I also found it more natural (less intrusive) to record virtual Sista circles than to have multiple cameras and audio recording devices present to ensure capturing all voices and non-verbal communication of in-person Sista circles. I chose to have smaller, three-person Sista

circles as I have found it easier to participate meaningfully in online groups of two or three participants rather than larger groups.

Though the Sista circles are designed to be informal and allow the conversation to unfold naturally, I also developed a guide of questions to help facilitate the conversation and ensure topics that align with the purpose of my study and the research questions were explored and discussed (See Appendix C). I initiated discussions by opening up about my own experiences as a Black college woman to put into practice from the beginning the crucial concept of researcher as participant (Johnson, 2015). Questions on my Sista circle guide included openers such as “What has your experience at Parkline been so far?”, “What are some salient experiences you have had throughout your experience at Parkline, good or bad?”, and “How do you feel about the way that Parkline treats you as Black women college students?”. Other questions included “Do you feel Parkline cares about your well-being?”, “Do you feel like you matter at Parkline?”, “What are some things you wish Parkline would do to support you?” and “Why don’t you think Parkline does more of those things to support you?”. Throughout the conversation, I listened, facilitated the conversation, and continued to share my own experiences in college as a Black woman.

Reflexive Research Journal

Throughout the study, I maintained a reflexive research journal as both a methodological tool and a space for critical self-examination. Consistent with Black feminist epistemology, I approached the journal as a record of my evolving positionality, emotional responses, and insights generated through engagement with participants (Collins, 2022). After each pre-interview touch point and Sista Circle, I wrote analytic memos to document patterns, questions,

and tensions I was noticing. The journal also captured my reflections on the dynamics of facilitation, moments of connection or disconnection, and the ways my own experiences as a Black woman shaped my interpretations. My reflexive journal provided a space to interrogate assumptions, recognize potential biases, and remain accountable to the critical aims of the study. These entries informed both preliminary analysis and later stages of theme development by helping me surface and critically assess my own investments in particular narratives or interpretations.

Data Analysis

I conducted the Sista circles via Zoom and video and audio recorded them, also having Zoom generate an automatic transcript of each of the three Sista circles. As Zoom transcription is imperfect, I used the Zoom transcripts as a starting point and corrected the Zoom transcripts by watching the video Zoom recordings and manually correcting any errors or discrepancies. While correcting transcripts, I was also highlighting quotes from participants that jumped out to me as significant and interesting. Once I finished correcting the transcripts, I read through the transcripts again and continued to highlight salient quotes. After each Sista circle, I asked participants to choose a pseudonym to go by in the study to protect their identities. I changed real participant names in the transcripts to the participant-selected pseudonyms, changed the institution's name to the pseudonym Parkline University, and removed any identifiable data from the transcripts such as other student names, instructor names, local hospital names, etc.

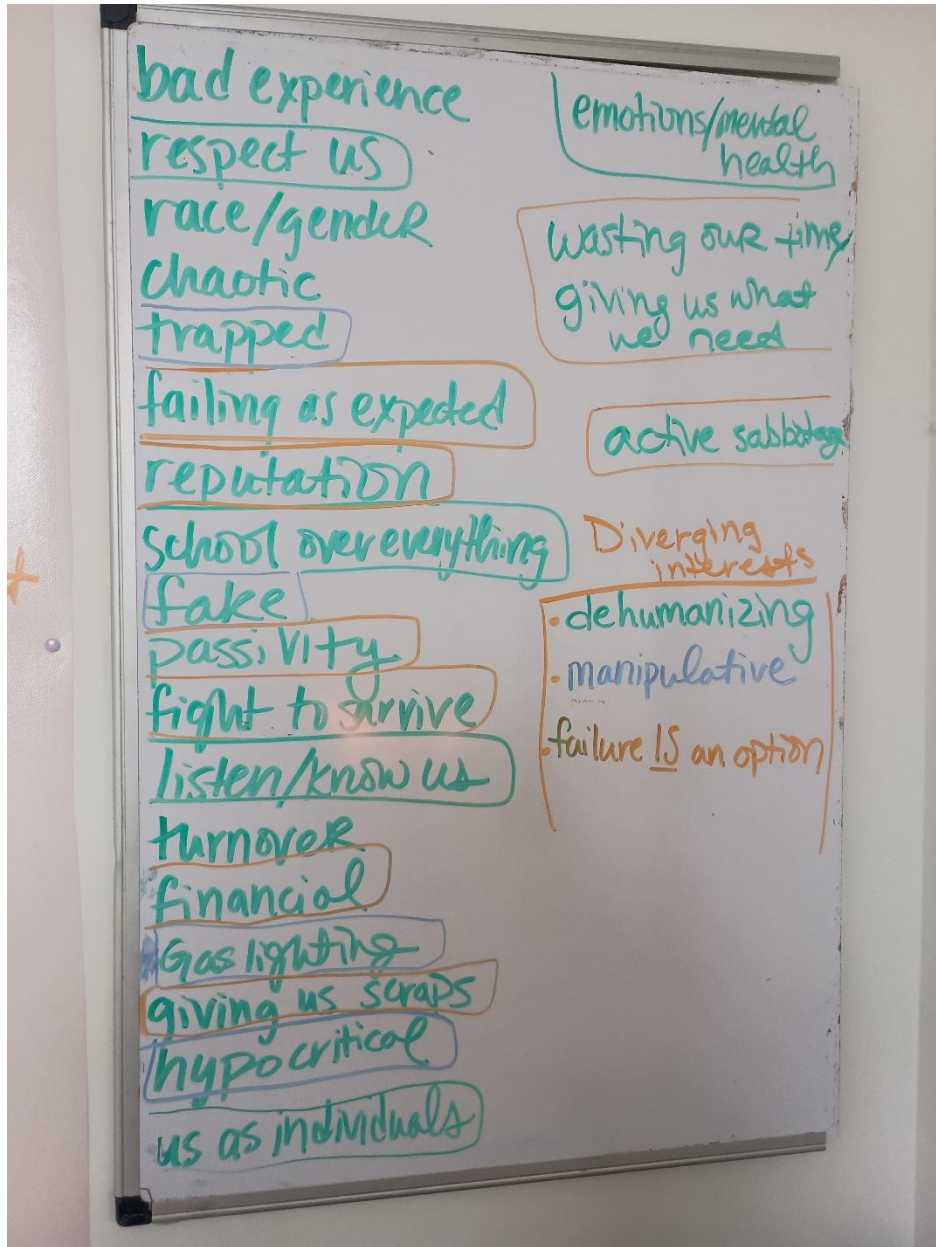
I then bought six colors of index cards, one for each participant. I wrote each salient quote on an index card matching the color I assigned to the participant. I ended with over 170 index cards. Writing these index cards helped familiarize myself with the data and the individual participants. The colors helped me visually differentiate the participants so I could create a

participant profile in my head that helped me remember who said what. I read through these index cards multiple times to continue to familiarize myself with my participants quotes. I even brought these index cards with me to a research-in-progress conference presentation in which I had attendees read some participant quotes aloud.

As I began more systematically analyzing my data into themes, I sat down on the floor with my stack of index cards and a pad of sticky notes with a pen. I started to come up with working themes which I wrote on the sticky notes and put on the floor with a pile of index cards stacked on top of the sticky notes. I kept doing this until all the index cards were placed in a “theme” by a sticky note. If I didn’t have a theme for an index card, I created one. Once I finished my first pass of themes, I reread each index card in each theme and decided if I wanted it to stay there or move to a different theme. I also decided to combine any like themes or separate into smaller themes. See figure 1 below.

Figure 2

Grouping subthemes from participant quotes into larger themes

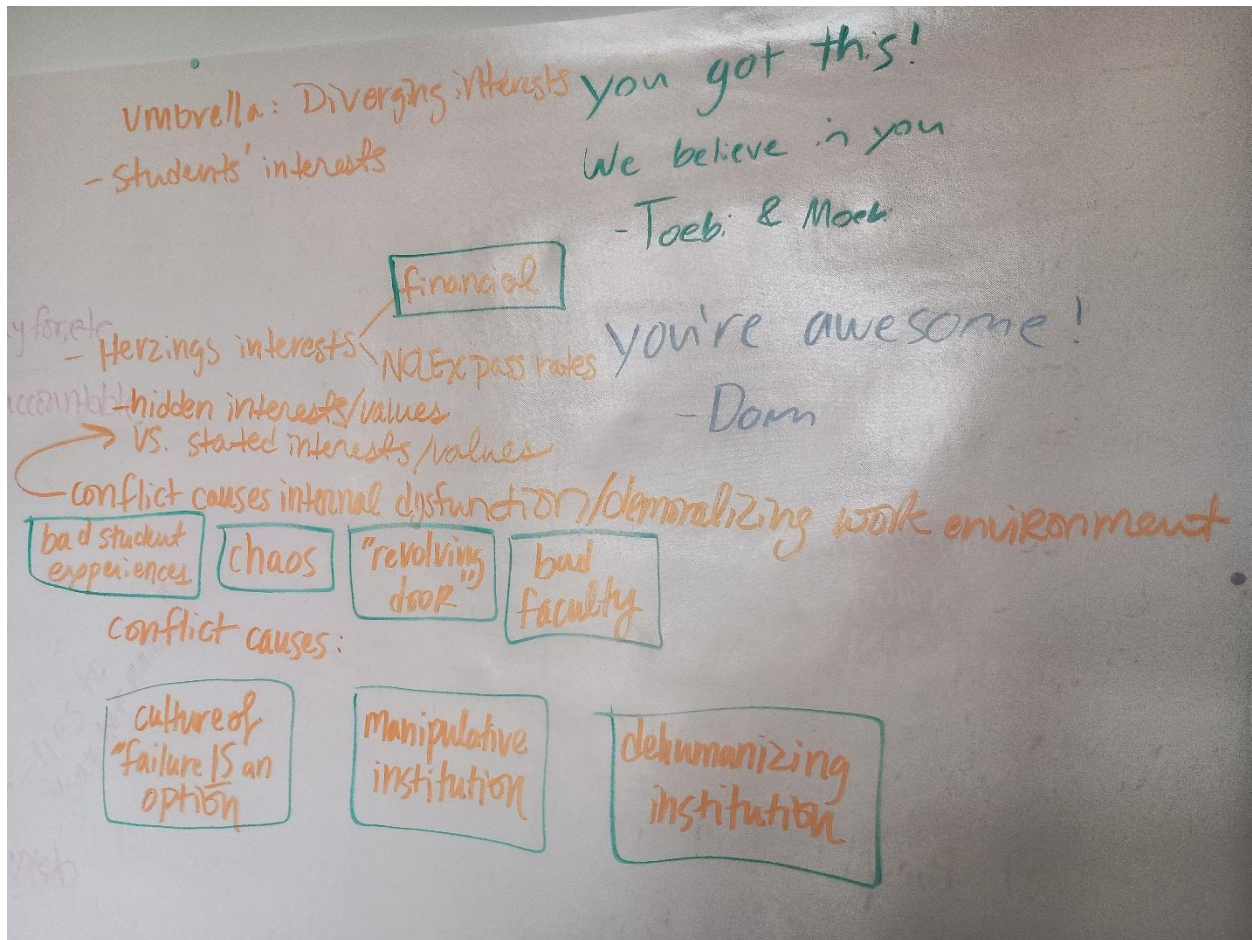


I initially came up with four broader themes; however, I wasn't sure how to organize these broad themes and subthemes. I discussed them with a friend who is also a Black women educator and together we processed some of the ideas and conflicts I was having. Through our conversation and journaling, I discovered an overarching thread across all comments and was

able to then identify the larger themes connected to that thread and the subthemes that belonged within the themes, organizing my thoughts on large posterboard. See figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Exploring the relationships within the themes and subthemes from participant quotes



Once the organization of my overarching thread, major themes, and subthemes was clearer, I digitized my work with the index cards to organize participant quotes under each of the subthemes within a Word document that I could easily reference while writing my analysis. I ordered the quotes according to the flow of the claims I planned to make and did a final read-through to move any things around that might fit better elsewhere. Once I was satisfied with the order of the participant quotes, I began to narrate the connections between the different quotes to

tie the subthemes with the major themes and ultimately support the overarching thread that I claim binds everything together.

“Validity” and Black Feminist Epistemology

Collin’s (2022) critiques what she calls Eurocentric knowledge validation by framing it in the context of U.S. power relations, claiming that “because this enterprise is controlled by elite White men, knowledge validation processes reflect this group’s interests” (p. 321). She describes this Eurocentric knowledge validation process as dominated by positivist methodological approaches and provides four requirements typical of these approaches: distancing the researcher from the object of study, absence of emotions from the research process, ethics and values as inappropriate in the research process, and adversarial debates as the preferred method of ascertaining truth. Collins highlights that these requirements are largely inconsistent with Black women’s ways of knowing, and that historical conditions and collective experiences of Black women “when shared and passed on become the collective wisdom of a Black women’s standpoint” (p. 325). Collins says that “many Black women have had access to another epistemology that encompasses standards for assessing truth that are widely accepted among African-American women”, what she calls Black Feminist Epistemology (BFE). In my study, I reject Eurocentric knowledge validation practices that have long dominated discussions of validity and quality research and instead embrace Black Feminist Epistemology as an appropriate method to generating credible knowledge by and about Black women. I use Collins’ four tenets of BFE to articulate the credibility of the knowledge generated by this study.

First, BFE claims lived experience as a criterion of meaning. The lived experiences of myself and the other six Black women students in this study stand on their own as meaningful, valuable, and true. Collins distinguishes between knowledge and wisdom, with lived experiences

as the crucial component of wisdom that knowledge lacks. She writes “Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protections that White skin, maleness, and wealth confer” (p. 326) and that “knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (p. 327). As such, “for most African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences” (p. 327).

Second, BFE stresses the value of the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. Collins writes “for Black women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” and that “connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process” (2022, pp. 330-331). In this study, Sista circles were utilized in the data collection to support this emphasis on dialogue within the community as a means to work towards new and insightful knowledge claims, with participants constantly contributing as well as listening to and responding to the contributions of each other to make meaning. Insights rarely came from a single individual but were a collaborative effort by all participants within the circle.

Third, BFE centers an ethics of caring in Black women’s ways of knowing. Unlike in Eurocentric knowledge validation, in BFE “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (Collins, 2022, p. 334). Collins highlights these as three interrelated components of the ethics of caring. In this study, participants were encouraged both by me and the other participant in their Sista circle to open up and speak freely about their unique individual experiences rather than asked to generalize about group ideas or experiences.

The Sista circle was a place where emotions were openly discussed and as much a part of the discussion as anything else – emotions were a part of the story, enhancing rather than detracting from the validity of experiences. Lastly, the Sista circles were a space for empathy as participants were listening to and connecting with each other’s experiences, feeling each other’s pain and frustrations, and explicitly expressing empathy for each other both verbally and nonverbally. The components of an ethics of caring were central to the ways in which participants, including myself, interacted and shared experiences within the Sista circles.

Fourth, BFE emphasizes an ethic of personal accountability, meaning that “people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims” (Collins, 2022, p. 336). According to Collins, “African-Americans consider it essential for individuals to have definite positions on issues and assume full responsibility for arguing their validity” (2022, p. 337). In this way, “all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal” (p. 337). In this study, nothing was neutral. My experiences as a Black woman gave me a specific standpoint from which I designed and implemented the study, and I went into the Sista circles prioritizing the experiences of the students, not protecting the institution. I believe my role as a researcher in this study is to have a clear answer to the question “whose side am I on?” rather than attempting to remain neutral and collect the “facts”. Working for the institution I am critiquing has been difficult and I have had to make choices about what role I am playing that come down to my personal morals and ethics. I have journaled about these choices and have gained clarity in where I stand – that I am conducting this study not to protect the often-protected institutions that have caused harm but to stand with Black women to shed light on the realities of our experiences and the role that institutions play in creating harmful situations.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter draws from the stories and experiences shared by Black women students about their time in a BSN program at a private, non-profit university. Six students participated in three Sista Circles, each lasting approximately 70 minutes. Of the six, five identified as Black women and one as Black and nonbinary. Five participants were in their final semester, set to graduate in Fall 2025, while one planned to graduate in Summer 2026.

The first two Sista Circles included participants who were close friends and had spent considerable time together studying and processing their experiences before participating in this study. This was coincidental but helped create a comfortable atmosphere in which participants were openly sharing their experiences and thoughts with each other and me. The third Sista Circle brought together one student from the Fall 2025 cohort and another from the Summer 2026 cohort. Though they had not met before, they quickly recognized shared experiences with instructors and the program and created space for each other with openness and support throughout the conversation.

Participants selected their own pseudonyms, which I used throughout this chapter. Some participants selected second names or initials, and I may refer to them either by their full pseudonym or by their first pseudonym only. The institution is referred to by the pseudonym *Parkline University*, which I chose. I also refer to the university as Parkline throughout the discussion for brevity. Data sources included transcripts from the three Sista Circles and entries from my reflexive journal, which I maintained throughout the entire study, from design through analysis and discussion. This ongoing reflection supported my interpretation of participants' experiences and helped keep my analysis rooted in the theoretical frameworks guiding this work:

Black feminist thought, Black feminist epistemology, Black college women's student success, and mattering.

I began analysis by transcribing all three Sista Circles, using Zoom-generated transcripts as a starting point, and carefully correcting them while rewatching the recordings. I highlighted key participant quotes and transferred them onto color-coded index cards, which allowed me to sit with the data in a more tactile way. From there, I grouped cards into themes and sorted those themes into broader categories. As I organized the data, I also identified an overarching thread that connects all the themes and subthemes.

Throughout the process, I engaged concepts from my theoretical frameworks to guide my sensemaking. From Black feminist thought, I centered the matrix of domination and how it structures oppression across intersecting identities. I also attended to controlling images, the positioning of Black women as "outsiders within," and the dynamics of hypervisibility and invisibility in their narratives. Commodore et al.'s 2018 framework on Black college women's student success helped me resist narrow definitions of achievement and stay grounded in a holistic understanding of success that recognizes the diversity of Black women's experiences before and during college and critiques the myth of the model minority. Finally, I used mattering as a critical lens throughout both the Sista Circles and analysis, seeking new articulations of what it means for Black women to matter and the messages they receive on their own mattering.

In the analysis that follows, I make the conscious choice to look at mattering from an institutional rather than an individual perspective. In Commodore et al.'s conceptual model of Black woman college student success (2018), they explicitly make the decision to create a student-centric rather than institutional model as they "believe it will be of most use to students immediately." They go on to say, "our model assumes an unfortunate and detrimental lack of

institutional support, but the model does not condone it.” (p. 66). Despite this practical choice, they also highlight the need for work centering Black women that holds institutions rather than individual students accountable for Black women student success. They dedicate an entire chapter of their book to “Institutional Responsibility for Student Success” (p. 84) and in their final future directions chapter they say “Black women should continue to work to deconstruct the systems of oppression that are forced upon them. However, Black women should not be expected to shoulder this burden on their own. Colleges must also deconstruct the structures that normalize these barriers and challenges.” (p. 112). They call for future research that “assess[es] the gamut of issues related to institutional responsibility.” (p. 109). I answer their call by choosing to interpret the comments of the participants in this study through the lens of what the institution, not the students, could have and should have done differently to facilitate Black women student success beyond survival.

Overview of Findings

Through my analysis of the Sista circle conversations, I have concluded that the many experiences and institutional practices shared by the Black women student participants together send them a clear message: we do not matter here. I identified three major themes within student comments that serve as mechanisms the institution uses to communicate this message: patterns of manipulation, patterns of dehumanization, and the promotion of a culture I call “failure IS an option”. Before I discuss these themes in depth, however, I would like to outline an overarching thread that I identified that helps to explain why these patterns of institutional behavior may continue to operate despite the harm they cause Black women students.

Why is this happening?

As I read and re-read participants' quotes, grouping them into themes, I encountered a few clusters that didn't neatly fit. In addition to the themes that I have identified above, students also repeatedly described their experiences as wholly negative, chaotic, disorganized, and unsupportive. They spoke of a revolving door of faculty, staff, and peers. At first, I struggled with how to categorize these comments within the other clusters I had identified, but then I zoomed out and began to think of them and the previous themes all together. I asked myself: Why do I think students are consistently having these experiences? What's happening at the institutional level that makes these negative experiences not just possible but predictable?

I brought these questions into conversation with a close friend and former coworker - another Black woman educator with whom I often reflect with about the racialized dynamics of higher education. As we talked, a shared realization began to surface: these experiences together have such a strong and predictable pattern that they all seem to be connected by something broader. The more I sat with the data, spoke about my thoughts, and journaled about the connections, the clearer it became that I believe many of the issues students raised could be traced back to a fundamental disconnect between what Parkline values as an institution and what its students value and need.

In *Black Feminist Thought* (2022), Patricia Hill Collins talks about a matrix of domination as the mechanisms through which Black women are systemically oppressed by their multiple intersecting identities of race, gender, and class in U.S. society. Collins describes the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power as interlocking systems of oppression that uphold the rule of the dominant group. I assert that this matrix of domination

is operating on its multiple domains to ensure that Parkline's interests, not the students' interests, are prioritized.

This brought me back to one of the first questions I asked in the Sista Circles: *Why did you choose to attend Parkline?* That question drew some of the most consistent responses across participants. They all described Parkline as a seemingly faster, more accessible route to becoming a registered nurse, sold to them as quicker and more flexible than other programs. It struck me that Parkline may be exploiting this value. The institution markets itself as a quick path to RN licensure, drawing in students who may not have the time, resources, or access to vet other options. But once students are enrolled, they find a different reality not necessarily aligned with the promises made.

Participants' expectations were clear: they came to Parkline with the specific goal to graduate, pass the NCLEX-RN, and begin their careers. Yet, when I asked students whether they felt they mattered to Parkline, all six clearly said no. In my conversation with Avery and Kensley, I ask a follow-up question that they both had no hesitation answering:

Audrey: *So, I think both of you kind of expressed this general feeling of not mattering to the institution, or the institution not really taking care of you. What is your interpretation of what - basically, if you don't feel like you matter, what do you think matters to Parkline?*

Avery B: *Money.*

Kensley: *Right.*

Avery B: *Money.*

Kensley C: *They're fully aware of how much one course costs. And so, to them, you retaking that course is just an extra semester of money. And so, a lot of times - I feel like that's why a lot of times they're not going the extra mile to make sure certain things are understood.*

Parkline brands itself as a “university of opportunity.” Its website promises students won’t feel like “just a number” and promotes slogans about individualized support. But the students I spoke with felt the opposite. From my perspective and based on the numerous experiences and insights of the students I spoke with, Parkline seems to operate with two sets of values: stated values and hidden values. Its stated values mirror those of its students: access, opportunity, success. But its hidden values reveal different priorities: revenue and NCLEX pass rates.

To be clear, Parkline, like all nursing programs, must meet the standards set by state boards of nursing to maintain accreditation. One of those standards is the NCLEX-RN pass rate, the certification exam students take after graduation to become registered nurses, with a requirement that at least 80% of Parkline graduates who take the NCLEX-RN must pass. Institutions that fall below this threshold risk probation or loss of accreditation. On the surface, this requirement makes sense. But when I considered it more deeply and within the context of Parkline, I began to see how this metric could shape institutional behavior in harmful ways. The NCLEX pass rate only reflects the students who make it to graduation and sit for the exam, not those who start the program. This creates an incentive to admit most students to increase revenue while “weeding out” students perceived as less likely to pass, narrowing the pipeline to NCLEX testing to maintain compliance.

The top priority of increasing revenue was highly palpable to the students I spoke with. Parkline originated as a for-profit institution and operated as such for several decades. Although it transitioned to non-profit status around 10 years ago, I have long questioned the motives behind this transition and if this transition serves to benefit the students of the institution or the institution itself. The Century Foundation published a report in 2015 that outlined something

they call the “Covert For-Profit”, a technically nonprofit higher education institution that covertly operates as a for-profit institution. The report outlines how transitioning from for-profit to nonprofit can benefit the institution by relaxing certain regulations and providing tax advantages while not necessarily benefiting the students. Based on my experiences both working at Parkline and speaking to these Parkline students, I feel it is likely that Parkline is one such institution. (<https://tcf.org/content/report/covert-for-profit/>)

My claim is this: at the heart of the negative institutional climate at Parkline is the misalignment between the interests of its students and Parkline’s true institutional priorities. I argue that the major themes in participants’ narratives – patterns of manipulation, dehumanization, and a culture of “failure IS an option” – are all expressions of this disconnect between what Black women students come to Parkline for and what Parkline is ultimately structured to deliver. What matters to Parkline is revenue and NCLEX pass rates, not the experiences, wellbeing, and success, academic and holistic, of its predominately Black women students.

Looking at this disconnect from the perspective of Black feminist thought, the matrix of domination is operating on multiple levels. The structural domain of power within the matrix of domination ignores the interlocking systems of oppression of race and gender that students bring with them, creating the illusion of fairness and equal treatment while producing a “camouflaged racism” (Collins, 2022, p. 354) that does not provide students with what they need to be successful. The disciplinary domain of power creates bureaucratic processes like multiple rounds of high-stakes testing that seek to “best regulat[e]” Black women “once they are inside” (p. 355). The manipulation tactics work within the hegemonic domain of power to keep hidden values hidden and the dehumanization to justify the subpar treatment of its students, while the “failure

IS an option” culture emphasizes the lack of consideration Parkline has toward student success. In the following section, I will go into detail about these three themes and the subthemes within them that are supported by participant quotes. I claim that these themes all clearly communicate to Parkline’s students that they do not matter to the institution.

Messages We DON’T Matter

Patterns of Manipulation

The first major theme that I identified through careful reading, reflection, and analysis of participant conversations was a pervasive sense of institutional manipulation. Students spoke of feeling misled by the university, pointing to a range of practices and behaviors that conveyed deceit and betrayal. Connecting to the overarching theme of misalignment between students’ interests and Parkline’s true interests, I believe the manipulative behavior from the institution seeks to obscure Parkline’s true interests while appearing to promote that Parkline has students’ best interest in mind. Within this broader theme of manipulation, I identified four interrelated subthemes: *tricking and trapping*, *fakery*, *hypocrisy*, and *gaslighting*.

Tricked and Trapped

A number of participants described feeling deceived or misled by the institution, initially drawn in by warmth and support, only to later encounter treatment and conditions that contradicted those early experiences. This subtheme, Tricked and Trapped, captures how participants came to view the institution’s practices as not only misleading but entrapping – locking them into a system that did not serve them well and offered few viable alternatives.

Sasha described her initial optimism about the program as shaped by welcoming and attentive outreach:

Sasha Smith: *I feel like that it's very, like... two-faced, like. They're very nice to you when we start. I feel like the most support was actually in the very beginning, when the counselor called and was like 'Hi, welcome to Parkline! What's your name? Where are you from?' trying to be very personal. And then it's like, as soon as I got into the program, it's like, they switched, and it's like, they don't even know - I don't even think they know my name, and I've been there for 3 years.*

She elaborated on the emotional shift that followed:

Sasha Smith: *So it's like, I guess in the beginning, I had really, really nice, rose-colored, shaded sunglasses. Right, and then now, it's like, both lenses are cracked. Everything's tilted, like, just trying to make it.*

Sasha's metaphor of "cracked lenses" reflects a disillusionment not just with the institution but with her own perception of it. Her early experience, shaped by performative care, obscured a deeper set of institutional practices that left her feeling invisible and unsupported. Importantly, she clarifies that this shift was not just an internal realization but was precipitated by a tangible change in how she was treated. Sasha's metaphor of cracked, tilted lenses bears a stark resemblance to Harris-Perry's notion of the "crooked room" wherein Black women must contort themselves to endure in environments that are not made to support their success.

Later, Sasha described why she stayed, despite feeling misled:

Sasha Smith: *I feel like a lot of people left. I would have left myself, too, but we were too far. Um, But it's like, we were sold, like, this really nice program in the beginning, and I feel like that's why a lot of us majority of us signed up, and it's like, we are not getting what we "bought" (airquotes)*

In this quote, Sasha reinforces the sense that she signed up for one thing and received something entirely different. She also reveals that by the time she recognized the reality of her experience, she felt too far invested to leave.

Mateo offered a complementary perspective, highlighting how the institution routinely admitted students it was not equipped or perhaps not willing to support:

Mateo: *So, you're trapping people in who you honestly should have told them, like, hey. maybe you need to get your skills up in XYZ kind of way, and then come back to the drawing board.*

In this quote, Mateo explicitly uses the word “trapping” to describe the institution’s actions, suggesting that admitting someone who isn’t set up to succeed is inherently deceptive. They argue it would be more honest for the institution to communicate from the outset if a student isn’t adequately prepared for the program.

Other participants reflected on red flags they noticed early on but only recognized as warning signs in hindsight. Mateo remarked:

Mateo: *And, you know, I guess I should have known that, like, a school that was this easy to get into, they would have some things like this, but you know, this school is more rigorous than schools that are considered to be top-ranking.*

Mateo suggests that the program’s ease of entry itself should have been a warning sign. In hindsight, they now understand Parkline as a program that is easy to get into but unusually difficult to succeed in. This reflects yet another disconnect between students’ initial experiences marked by accessibility and encouragement and the realities they encounter as they move through the program, where rigor is heightened without corresponding support. In this way, students enter with expectations shaped by openness, only to confront a far more demanding environment than they were led to anticipate.

Capri also shared that, even early on, she had reservations about the school, admitting it felt “too good to be true.”

Capri: I understand that when something is too good to be true, that something's wrong with it. I'm not gonna lie, [the school was] too good to be true, so I started doing some investigation. So, anything - questions that I had, I asked [the recruiter], and she's like, 'oh, well no this and no that', like how I said, they like to sugarcoat it. 'Well, yeah, no, we got problems like every other school got problems, da-da-da', but once you went here, like, 'okay, yeah, we got you in here, you're a number. Thank you. Next. Next victim'.

Though she voiced her concerns early on and took steps to investigate by asking questions and seeking clarity, Capri recalls receiving sugar-coated responses that obscured the program's reality. Her experience reflects a familiar pattern: being reassured just enough to feel comfortable enrolling, only to later feel trapped once fully inside the institution. Capri's phrasing “next victim” sharpens the critique, implying that the institution not only fails to care but cycles through students in ways that feel exploitative. Her metaphor underscores the systemic nature of the harm: she's not describing an isolated experience but a pattern.

Several participants also articulated why leaving wasn't a real option. Kensley described the institutional barriers to transferring:

Kensley C: Now, I'm stuck here dealing with whatever you guys throw at me, because you know that if I transfer to another school, I'm gonna have to start all the way over. So, that's why a lot of us, we just stay here, we fight through it, and we get by with the bare minimum.

Avery extended this, naming sunk costs as a trap of their own:

Avery B: But then you think, okay, I done invested so much time and money. It's like, I have no choice. I'm too close to the finish line. I couldn't imagine leaving it. And then, you know, with

nursing schools - yeah, with certain nursing schools, certain programs, I mean, certain courses don't transfer. So it's like, okay, I took all these classes and leave, now I'm starting all over from square one.

Both Kensley and Avery shared that, despite wanting to leave Parkline, doing so no longer feels like a viable option. The time, money, and energy they've already invested make starting over seem impossible. As a result, they feel compelled to stay, resigned to enduring whatever treatment the institution imposes.

Fake

Participants frequently described Parkline as fake—an institution whose words and performances masked contradictory actions. In this context, I use *fake* to refer to instances where institutional claims of care, support, or student-centeredness were undermined by practices that suggested otherwise. The institution's performative displays of support functioned, in participants' accounts, as a deliberate manipulation tactic.

Early in the Sista circle, Mateo introduced a vivid metaphor that encapsulated this sentiment:

Mateo: *Let's just say – that Parkline is a Nigerian prince. I am fully thankful for all of the opportunities that I have been allowed at Parkline and I don't want to sound like everything was just a total disaster... but the program is not what it says it is. There were a lot of just loops and bounds that we had to jump through that I know for a fact we wouldn't have had to jump through at other institutions. And it's like - I think the thing that's the most frustrating is that the school, like, preaches, or has this mindset of: 'we give chances to those who other institutions wouldn't have given a chance'*

By invoking the metaphor of a “Nigerian prince,” Mateo casts the institution as a scam – something that appears generous and promising on the surface but is ultimately deceptive. Their reflection also highlights how Parkline claims a moral high ground (“we give chances”) while placing students in precarious and unsupported situations.

Mateo later expanded this critique:

***Mateo:** Yeah, the school is not accessible at all, like they say they are. And then you know they don't care, and they - I like to say that, like, the people in charge are stunt queens, like, everything that they do is for a show. 'oh, we're getting you this resource, we're getting you this', and it's looking like, oh, that's really good! And then you realize that it doesn't work out like it's supposed to, or it doesn't actually do anything.*

Here, Mateo introduces another metaphor of “stunt queens” to emphasize how institutional leaders engage in performative gestures that are ultimately hollow. They point out that although those in charge *claim* to be helping, their actions often fail to support students in any meaningful or tangible way.

This perception of fakeness, of care as a performance, was echoed by other students as well. Esther shared:

***Esther Victoria:** You ask for the opinions, you have the town hall meetings, and you don't do anything. So - but then you want us to show up to them.*

Esther’s comment highlights the contradiction between inviting student input and refusing to act on it.

Kensley described a similar pattern:

Kensley C: *Right, but in every meeting that they have, every town hall, 'we're here to help you, all you have to do is reach out.' I've reached out. I've sent emails to you, this person, that person. No reply.*

Kensley's experience reinforces the idea that the institution's promises of support are not only empty but create a frustrating loop; students are told help is available, but when they seek it, they are met with silence.

Later in my conversation with Esther and Mateo, Esther shared another familiar institutional script:

Esther Victoria: *Yeah, it's what they say, 'it's a process'. They love to say that. 'We gotta do it little by little, it's a process. You - you guys might not see it,' they like to say that too. 'Your cohort might not see it, it might be the other people behind you that might get the' - I'm like, okay*

Mateo: *Then you learn that they don't see it either.*

Here, both Esther and Mateo recall a familiar refrain they hear whenever they voice concerns at Parkline: that improvement is a "process" and simply takes time. However, through their own experiences and the stories they've gathered from cohorts that followed, they've come to view this language of "progress" as a stalling tactic. To them, it functions less as a sign of genuine change and more as a way to buy time and maintain the appearance of responsiveness, even when no real action is being taken.

Capri offered a succinct assessment:

Capri: *I'm just gonna say what it is, they don't care. They can sit up there and act like they do, but they don't.*

Her words cut through the performance of care to name what many participants expressed: the perception that institutional leaders act concerned without ever demonstrating meaningful follow-through.

Finally, Mateo and Esther draw on the words of Maya Angelou to articulate their feelings about Parkline—offering a poignant reflection that captures their disillusionment and clarity:

***Mateo:** One of my favorite quotes is by the great, late Maya Angelou: ‘When people show you who they are, believe them.’*

***Esther Victoria:** Believe it, uh huh!*

***Mateo:** This school - this school has shown us and shown us and shown us, and I believe ‘em.*

In citing Maya Angelou, Mateo and Esther draw on a shared cultural and epistemological resource to frame their experience. The quote underscores their belief that Parkline’s words and actions are misaligned and that they choose to trust what they have seen, not what they have been told.

Hypocritical

Another expression of institutional manipulation described by participants was hypocrisy: a pattern where Parkline held students to high expectations while failing to meet those same standards themselves. Participants consistently noted that faculty and administrators demanded accountability, timeliness, and grace from students but were unwilling to offer those same behaviors in return.

Kensley and Avery articulated this tension in a shared reflection:

***Kensley C:** That's what I mean by they dropped the ball, like, like you said, last minute.*

Everything is so last minute, but when we're last minute, or something is running behind -

***Avery B:** There's no grace.*

***Kensley C:** None at all, but they expect so much grace when they're last minute and unorganized. And that's why I feel like we're being set up for failure.*

Their exchange underscores a sense of institutional inconsistency. Students experience rigid accountability for their own delays, while institutional disorganization is normalized or excused. The phrase “set up for failure” signals not just frustration but a recognition of structural injustice: that the rules of engagement are not the same for students and for those in power.

Kensley continued by naming a specific expectation: mutual accountability.

***Kensley C:** And you can tell by some of the things that the teachers say, even some of the things that I've heard the chair say, it's like, they want us to be held accountable, and I'm fully capable of holding myself accountable. But also, I - if you want to hold me accountable, I want to hold you accountable.*

Here, Kensley expresses a desire for reciprocal responsibility. She doesn't resist being held to a standard; rather, she names the hypocrisy of one-way accountability.

Avery reinforced this idea later in the conversation:

***Avery B:** [I want Parkline to know] that this is not us, specific, this is a universal experience. All of us feel this way. We want more from them, we just want them to understand, as people who have been in school, they went through it, we're going through it, we just want grace. Because we give them grace when they mess up, when they're not doing 100% what they're supposed to be doing. I feel like they need to be finding some leniency within that. Like, it has to be a balance. Like, it can't be, 'oh, we're strict, strict, strict, but we might mess up, but we want you guys to perform at this level.' You know, it's just - it's a slap in the face. It's a slap in the face, wholeheartedly.*

Avery's statement makes visible the emotional toll of this asymmetry. Her language "a slap in the face" expresses not just disappointment, but a sense of violation. Her appeal is not for special treatment, but for a balance between expectations and support. Her critique highlights how institutional hypocrisy is not neutral but deeply harmful.

Gaslighting

The final form of manipulation described by participants was gaslighting: a psychological tactic through which students were made to question their own perceptions, experiences, and even realities. Participants used this term explicitly to describe how Parkline administrators and faculty dismissed or distorted student concerns, often by insisting that harmful practices were normal or acceptable. These interactions left students feeling not only unsupported but invalidated.

Mateo shared an example involving a classmate who had broken down after a particularly difficult semester:

***Mateo:** I have one classmate, and I will never forget her boo-hoo crying the day that we took a final, where she just survived the whole semester. And, like, we look back and the teacher that we had for that course did not teach, and you tell the school, and they're just like, 'oh, but what did you do?' And it's like, 'sought tutoring, studied, looked at resources.' Y'all tested us on things on some of these final exams that were not even covered in a single semester. And gaslit us because some people don't know better. You gaslit us into thinking, like 'Oh, well, it's you falling short. You were given what you needed.'*

***Esther Victoria:** And that was a lie.*

Mateo's use of the term "gaslit" names a specific manipulation tactic in which the institution deflects blame onto students, denying the reality that teaching was insufficient and assessments

misaligned. Esther immediately affirmed Mateo's interpretation by calling the narratives of Parkline a "lie". Their exchange shows not only shared frustration but shared clarity and an insistence on naming deception for what it is.

Later in the same circle, Mateo expanded on this theme:

Mateo: We have the craziest exam weights for, like, finals and stuff, and then all of the teachers are just like, 'oh, it's perfectly normal, it's perfectly fine.' I asked one lady, I said, 'oh, so other institutions that you've taught at have this same policy?' 'Uh uh uh well, no.' And it's like, they're all, like, trying to, like, preach and convince you and gaslight you into thinking that what they're doing is okay. But, you know, coming from me and Esther's background - we've gone to other schools. We know that this is not okay. We know that this is not normal. Now, some of these other people think that this is normal because this is all they know as far as a collegiate experience. But we know that what we went through is not okay.

Mateo points out that institutional claims of normalcy are contradicted by faculty's own admissions and by his and Esther's prior experiences at other institutions. Their commentary underscores that gaslighting works most effectively on students who lack other institutional comparisons. For those with broader educational histories, the dissonance is clearer, and the manipulation is more apparent.

Through this subtheme, participants illuminated how institutional gaslighting deepens the emotional and psychological toll of being in a system that already feels isolating and disempowering. It's not just that the support isn't there but that students are told it *is*, and that any failure must be their own. In a context where Parkline publicly claims to center students, this reversal of responsibility becomes a particularly harmful form of institutional betrayal.

Patterns of Dehumanization

Another major theme I identified from conversations with participants was dehumanization. The ways students described being treated by Parkline reflected more than just isolated moments of disrespect but pointed to a broader institutional disposition that failed to recognize their full humanity. In the pursuit of its own priorities, the institution not only deprioritizes students' needs but also uses dehumanizing practices to normalize that neglect. Within this broader theme, I identified six subthemes: *invisibility*, *treatment as "less-than,"* *unheard voices*, *us as unique individuals*, *school over everything*, and *emotions/mental health*.

Invisibility

I was able to identify the first subtheme, *invisibility*, clearly when participants were asked whether they felt they mattered to Parkline. The answer was unanimous: *no*. Sasha describes this feeling below:

Sasha Smith: *Woo! I feel like at Parkline I don't matter. Like, I feel like this - there's no set thing in place where it feels like I'm accounted for in terms of, like. Even, like, respect, or, like, accountability or reaching out, I feel like Parkline lacks all of that.*

Here, Sasha explains that her sense of not mattering is rooted in the absence of institutional structures that acknowledge or account for her presence.

Capri expands this sentiment to include other students:

Capri: *Again, like Sasha said, I don't feel like no one, no one matters. It's - I hate to keep going back, it's just like a number, that's all you are. Like, there is - it makes you feel like you're isolated.*

Capri connects the feeling of not mattering to a deeper experience of being reduced to "just a number", a clear expression of dehumanization marked by isolation and erasure.

Sasha further describes how this invisibility shows up not only in moments of need but also in the lack of recognition for student success:

Sasha Smith: I feel like, also, like, with Parkline, like, there's no, like. I guess that feeling of not mattering is a lot for the students, because there's no, like, recognition. Like, there's no awards for wins, or, like, celebration, like, I feel like that causes, like the - I guess, essence of people feeling like a number.

She builds on this in the following quote, situating the absence of recognition at a pivotal moment in the student experience:

Sasha Smith: We are at the end of our program. We have this huge achievement, like, 3, 4 months away. And yet, it's like, we haven't even got an email saying, 'congrats, you're a senior!' Or, like, like, nothing,

Sasha's comments emphasize that invisibility is not just about being ignored when something goes wrong but also about being unacknowledged when things go right. The lack of institutional recognition, even as students near graduation, reinforces the sense of being reduced to a number rather than seen as full human beings.

Capri connects this invisibility directly to the concept of dehumanization:

Capri: In a nutshell, that experience is like, you know, that you're more than just a student, that you are a person, like, in the whole. You're not just, okay, this, like Sasha said, you're just - you're a number, you're a person, you're a human going through life experiences,

In another Sista Circle, Kensley echoes this same sentiment:

Kensley C: I want to be seen as more than just a seat filled.

And in yet another Sista Circle, Mateo pushes this dehumanization even further by naming how they believe Parkline sees students:

Mateo: Candidly, we matter as much as the check clears.

Mateo: When they see us, they see dollar signs.

Here, Mateo offers a sharp critique: rather than being seen as “a human going through life experiences,” as Capri describes, students are viewed through the lens of financial value.

Invisibility, then, is not a passive oversight but an active refusal to see students beyond their utility to the institution.

Seen as “less-than”

Another subtheme within dehumanization was students being treated as “*less-than*.” Participants described interactions and institutional practices that positioned them as inferior, undeserving of respect, and fundamentally unequal to faculty and staff.

Capri describes one such moment, recounting her frustration with a Parkline staff member who yelled at her and her classmates during class:

Capri: We're all grown here in this room, so talk to others like you're talking to adults, not children. You don't have to yell. I yell at my kids; I don't yell at an adult. So don't do that.

Here, Capri names the disrespect embedded in being spoken to as if she were a child rather than an adult peer. Her frustration is not simply about tone, but about being denied dignity and equality in a professional learning environment.

In a different Sista Circle, Mateo describes another experience that made them feel explicitly positioned as less-than:

Mateo: I've heard, like, other staff members say, 'We don't want to use the same restroom as students.' Like, little things like that, it's egregious, like, it's classist, it's egregious, like, what do you mean? Like, we all do the same thing when we go to the bathroom.

Mateo's response highlights how even seemingly "small" actions communicate powerful messages about worth and hierarchy. Being denied access to the same facilities signals that students are viewed as fundamentally different and inferior, despite sharing the same physical space.

As a student employee, Mateo offers additional insight into how differential treatment between staff and students is embedded into everyday institutional practices:

Mateo: Even, like, there's a whole bunch of things that I have seen. So, in addition to being a student there, I'm a student employee. I've worked the work-study program affiliated with Parkline pretty much the entire time I've been in the program. And so I've seen a lot of things that are just egregious that they do. Like, I've seen little things that they've done that could be better, like, I've seen the staff get [nice catered barbecue] for a staff luncheon and then turn around and get the students [cheap sandwiches]. You know, and it's little stuff like that, and it's like, you know, I've seen them, like, order staff, like, new computers, new this, new that. But we have to pay for going over 200 pages [on the printer].

Through these examples, Mateo illustrates how institutional priorities are materially communicated through food, resources, and access. These disparities reinforce the message that staff are valued and invested in, while students are expected to make do with less.

Mateo goes on to describe another moment where institutional rules were enforced unevenly:

Mateo: The staff members are so - it's like, even stuff like 'No eating in the classrooms, we just had the carpets cleaned' And it's like, well, you have carpet. Of course you have to get the carpets cleaned regularly. People walk all over carpets, and it has to be clean. But then we'll go look at faculty members eat in one of the classrooms you just told us we couldn't eat in.

Here, Mateo points to how rules are selectively applied, assuming that students should restrict their behavior while faculty are exempt. This differential enforcement reinforces the idea that students are less deserving of comfort, flexibility, and trust despite paying to be in these spaces.

Mateo further explains how these policies ignore students' basic human needs:

***Mateo:** And it's like, we're in class all day, you don't want us to snack. In order for us to get to campus at 10 AM, some of us drive an hour, hour and a half. And you're going across the worst traffic, because you have to go across 8 AM traffic. You know, I left my - I leave my house at 8:30 on Wednesday mornings for the 10 o'clock class to get there just before 10. Do I have time to, like - so you want me to get up, and like, again. I'm not trying to find little things to pick at, but it's something little like that, like, I can't even have my coffee in the classroom.*

Mateo clearly articulates how these rules disregard the lived realities of students' bodies, time, and labor. The denial of something as basic as food or coffee without providing realistic alternatives signals an institutional failure to recognize students as full humans with needs beyond academic performance.

In a separate Sista Circle, Avery connects this experience of being treated as less-than to broader patterns within healthcare and nursing:

***Avery B:** and I feel like that's another reason why it's a nursing shortage, because they're burning the nurses out, they're burning them out. Even when people get into the field, they're burnt out, they're not - they're not overstaffed, they're not hiring how they're supposed to, you know, like, it's just things - I feel like, just in general in healthcare need to be changed. Because we're helping people, but who's helping us? So to know that you can be in a field that pours into so many other people, and they give you the bare minimum. It's like, wow, like. Wow. I don't know, it just made me look at life just different.*

Avery situates her experience within a larger system that demands care, labor, and sacrifice from nurses while offering minimal support in return. Being asked to “pour into” others while receiving “the bare minimum” reinforces feelings of disposability and devaluation.

Sasha succinctly captures this shared experience of being treated as less-than:

Sasha Smith: I wish they knew how much, like, what they do and say affects us, and that, like, we're human, and we're people, and we're not just, like, Student A, student B, student C, type thing.

Together, these accounts illustrate how dehumanization at Parkline operates not only through invisibility, but also through practices that position students as lesser and less deserving of respect, comfort, and care despite the labor, time, and emotional energy they bring into the institution.

Ignored

Another subtheme under the broader theme of dehumanization is the experience of being *ignored*. Across Sista Circles, students repeatedly described moments when they needed help, spoke up, or self-advocated only to be met with silence or dismissal. This lack of institutional response sent a clear message: their voices, needs, and concerns didn't matter.

Capri reflects on how students who began to struggle academically often found themselves unsupported:

Capri: They wasn't getting what they thought they was paying for, because when their grades started to slip, like I said, there's no one to help you, like, no one's reaching out, like, 'hey, what's going on?'

Her statement underscores a sense of abandonment; even when students are vulnerable or in academic distress, they are not checked on or offered help.

In a different Sista Circle, Avery describes how her cohort has long attempted to raise concerns, only to see minimal change:

Avery B: I mean, we've been trying to get things changed since the beginning. Like, I could say, I feel like just now they're trying to kind of implement something different, but it's like, at this point, I'm about to be graduating in December. I mean, what good does that [do me]?

Although she acknowledges that the institution may *now* be trying to implement changes, the timing renders those changes meaningless to her. Her final question, “What good does that do me?”, reflects a sense of institutional delay that fails to serve the very students who raised the alarm.

Esther shares a particularly stark example of being ignored by an advisor, despite repeated outreach:

Esther Victoria: So I had been emailing him the whole time. Different days, no response. Finally, it gets closer to the end of the semester, the start, the first beginning of fall. [And he says] ‘Oh, yeah, they denied it.’ Okay, what am I supposed to do now? So I'm like, okay, what – okay, like, so what does this mean? [And he says] ‘Well, they're probably gonna lock you out’

Esther was proactive, reaching out multiple times to prevent an issue with her financial aid. But the advisor did not respond until it was too late, leaving her uncertain, unsupported, and at risk of being locked out.

Kensley echoes a similar frustration after being ignored by a faculty member who responded to another student in the same cohort:

Kensley C: So it's just like, nobody hears us. We're, like, even now, I reached out to [the faculty member], she didn't write me back. Then I hear that she wrote my friend, like, somebody else

back in my cohort. I'm just like, we're writing you about the same thing. why can't you respond? And so this the whole experience is very stressful. Very stressful.

Kensley names the emotional toll of this experience of feeling unheard while watching others be responded to. Her question, “*why can't you respond?*”, reflects the painful uncertainty of being ignored without explanation.

Sasha adds an on-campus example that highlights how even in physical proximity to staff, she remained unseen and unsupported:

***Sasha Smith:** There was one time where I was on campus at Parkline, which I feel like is a huge problem. I was on the phone, and I'm waiting to talk to an advisor, and there's no one at the front desk to even talk to. I'm waiting for - on the phone for an advisor, and the person is sitting on the couch and having me on hold, on campus. So it's like, you can be on campus and still have no one else to talk to. That's how removed it is. Like it's past an online situation, it's like, I'm in person, I'm on campus, and yet I still can't talk to anyone.*

Sasha's experience shows that even when she is present physically, she wasn't able to be heard.

Mateo provides insight into how this absence of care is also a result of structural gaps in leadership:

***Mateo:** Pretty much the entire time we had - were in the program, we didn't have a nursing chair, no nursing leadership that we could go to, no one to hold these instructors accountable. And whenever the lady who was the director of the [region] was on campus, she didn't want to be bothered with students, so she would hide. She only came out to retrieve her DoorDash order.*

Mateo draws a direct connection between the lack of leadership and the lack of accountability.

The image of a regional director “hiding” from students, emerging only for food deliveries, vividly conveys the avoidance and disregard students felt.

Capri reinforces this sense of superficial presence without meaningful engagement:

Capri: Because we see them a lot on campus, but that's it. Y'all not - y'all just showing up. Y'all just trying to be a face. It's that y'all not really - y'all present, but y'all not really there.

Here, Capri distinguishes between physical presence and genuine relational or institutional presence. Staff may be *visible*, but they are not *engaged*, available, or responsive to students.

This prolonged sense of being ignored has taken a toll. Sasha reflects on how it's changed her willingness to even reach out:

Sasha Smith: It's like, I don't even want to reach out anymore, because I know it's not going to get fixed.

For Sasha, silence has led to resignation. Why speak up if no one is listening?

Kensley further explains the emotional impact of self-advocacy that goes unacknowledged and the ways that her frustration has been misread:

Kensley C: And then when you get frustrated because you've advocated for yourself so long and gone unheard, and then they're saying you're aggressive, or - I'm not aggressive, I'm not rude, I'm just irritated because I have reached out multiple times. I've been left with no response. Left hanging, and left told, basically to figure it out.

Kensley's comments reveal how students are not only ignored but also punished for expressing justified frustration. Being labeled "aggressive" becomes yet another form of silencing.

A few participants articulated the weight of these experiences by contrasting them with the Sista Circles themselves—spaces where they finally felt heard. Sasha says:

Sasha Smith: like, even like this, how we're having a conversation about our experiences, or, like, what can we do, I guess, differently? I feel like has never been a part of Parkline, ever. Like, at no point has no one asked, first of all, what's your name? None of that.

Avery conveys a similar sentiment:

Avery B: Thank you for taking the time to ask, and I've never had anybody.

Kensley C: Right.

Avery B: care enough to even know. So, thank you for even taking the time to hear us out.

These expressions of gratitude are powerful because they reveal just how rare it is for these students to feel seen and heard by their institution. After years of being ignored, the act of simply listening becomes a radical contrast.

Together, these narratives expose a consistent pattern: when students at Parkline speak up, whether about academic challenges or basic concerns, they are too often met with silence, delay, or dismissal. This silencing reinforces the broader pattern of dehumanization, leaving students to navigate a system that refuses to acknowledge their voices, their needs, or their humanity.

Us as Unique Individuals

Another subtheme within dehumanization was the failure to recognize students as *unique individuals* with distinct needs, learning styles, and backgrounds. Mateo articulates this clearly in their critique of how instruction is delivered at Parkline:

Mateo: We all need different things to get us there. And when you're teaching 30 plus people using just one method - let's say it does help 20. You still have 10 people who're struggling at your mercy because you are only deciding to approach it one way, and teaching is not one-dimensional.

Here, Mateo emphasizes that relying on a single teaching method inevitably leaves some students behind. The phrase “*struggling at your mercy*” captures the power imbalance between instructor and student, where students must adapt to a rigid system that refuses to adapt to them.

This lack of flexibility, he argues, reflects a disregard for the diversity of learners in the classroom.

Mateo later describes a conversation with a faculty member that further illuminates this dynamic:

Mateo: A teacher asked us, 'What is the best way I can get this information across to you guys so that you actually learn?' And a student responded, 'well, we do well with actual lectures, you know, you guys just do reviews for content, but nobody actually lectures.' And, you know, we don't have the experience to just go through the text. None of us are medical field - have been in the medical field before to just understand exactly the concept that we're supposed to get out of this. And the teacher says 'Well, the reverse learning is statistically proven to do XYZ' And it's like, well, look at who they targeted and tested for that method. You know, in nursing, we teach about culturally competent care. But nursing professors should understand culturally competent teaching

In this exchange, Mateo highlights the disconnect between the students' needs and the instructor's response. Although the instructor asks for input, they ultimately defer to abstract "statistical" evidence rather than listening to the students in front of them. Mateo challenges the relevance of those statistics by asking, "*Look at who they targeted and tested for that method.*" Their critique extends the call for *culturally competent care* into a parallel call for *culturally competent teaching* with an understanding that effective pedagogy must be responsive to students' cultural and experiential contexts.

Mateo concludes with a reflection on the broader implications of one-size-fits-all teaching:

Mateo: And so, I wish that they also would just realize that, hey, first of all, you might be looking at statistics that doesn't necessarily serve a large part of your population, for one. For two: we're all different. All of us need something a little bit different. The most effective ways of teaching, and I'm sure you can vouch for this as a high school teacher, is you approach it in different ways.

Again, Mateo underscores the need for educators at Parkline to see their students as individuals, not as a homogeneous group to be taught in a single mode. They point out that the students at Parkline may not reflect the populations used in dominant educational research and call for teaching practices that are flexible, varied, and rooted in an understanding of who the students *actually are*.

This subtheme connects closely to others under dehumanization. In failing to recognize students' uniqueness, Parkline further enacts a system that prioritizes its own efficiency and preferences over the lived realities of its students.

School over everything

Another subtheme within the broader theme of dehumanization is the way Parkline demands that students prioritize school over every other aspect of their lives. Several participants described how the institution fails to recognize them as whole people with families, jobs, personal goals, and responsibilities outside the classroom. Instead, students are expected to structure their lives entirely around the program with little flexibility or support.

Mateo highlights the disconnect between Parkline's messaging and its actual demands: *Mateo: They told us in the beginning, like, 'oh, you know, this program is for working adults, you can work and get through this program.' Everybody I know with a job has had to either quit, severely reduced their hours, or they've had to drop off out the program if they just really were*

the sole providers in their family. Because this program - it's almost worse than some traditional programs.

Mateo challenges the claim that Parkline is designed for working adults, arguing that the reality of the program forces many students to quit their jobs or drop out entirely.

Capri offers her own account of trying to balance work and nursing school:

Capri: *There's so many jobs that I literally - I think I went through, like, 4 or 5 jobs during this experience, because it didn't fit nursing school. And I understand, and I get that to an extent, but y'all don't make it to where it does fit everyday life, because people are still living. Especially in this day and age, we have to work. Ain't nobody out here living off of mommy and daddy money. We have to work so make it fit us.*

Both Capri and Mateo, in different Sista Circles, make clear that work *doesn't* fit into the program's design and that Parkline makes little effort to accommodate students' real-life obligations. Capri's insistence that "*we have to work, so make it fit us*" is a demand for basic recognition of students' economic realities.

Capri also describes how a last-minute scheduling change created avoidable hardship:

Capri: *There was some time in the beginning where we – [at] the last minute, they switched up a - what was it? They switched up a lab, and they told us at the last minute, and I'm like, people got jobs! You can't just tell your job, 'hey, hey, hey, Wednesday I ain't gonna be there, you know, even though we already done discuss my - we already done discussed my, schedule'*

These last-minute decisions show a disregard for the planning and coordination students must do outside of school. Capri's comment calls out how Parkline ignores this reality in its day-to-day operations.

Mateo extends the conversation beyond jobs, describing how life itself is constantly competing with the demands of the program:

Mateo: And then there's the ones like Esther and I, who - we can make it through this program, but we have life going on. We're paying for this program out of pocket. You know, I have sick relatives and crazy siblings, and Esther has a family. And the last thing we need when we're already dealing with that is to fight a new hurdle that is constantly being thrown in the way while we're in school.

Here, Mateo identifies the compounding effect of institutional barriers: students are already managing complex personal lives, and the program adds new challenges without care or consideration. School becomes unrealistically demanding and *antagonistic* to survival.

Capri captures this indifference in how the institution responds to students' struggles:

Capri: They don't care, because if you come to them with a problem, [they'll be] like, 'oh, well, this is nursing school, get over it, you're gonna have to find a way to deal with it.'

The phrase “*get over it*” reflects a deeply dehumanizing logic that assumes students' hardships are irrelevant, and that their only role is to endure.

Sasha describes the toll this takes on other areas of her life:

Sasha Smith: Hmm, I feel like with Parkline, like, the focus is so on academic success, like Capri said, like, if you don't make it by .5 [points], like, you're not gonna pass, like, so I guess for me, I guess in the program my mental health has gone way to the wayside. All my other successes, health, or working out, or living life, has just gone way to the wayside, and I've been just focusing on getting through the program

For Sasha, the hyper-focus on grades and performance has come at the expense of her mental health, well-being, and life outside of school. Her words speak to the erasure of other parts of herself that have occurred under the institutional pressure.

Kensley shares a particularly painful example of being forced to choose between her education and her child:

Kensley C: *I agree. Holistically, I - My mental health has been terrible, like I said, I have 3 kids. This - I've always been one to try to make it to all school events. Last year, last May, my son's birthday is May 15th. It was his class - his end of the school class year, his end of the school party, and his birthday, I've never missed. But I had a clinical makeup day that was thrown on me last minute because of how unorganized they are, and it was mandatory that I attend. And I had previously, the week before, went to his sister's end of the school year party, and I had to turn around and look at my son and say, I can't make it to your birthday or end of the school year party because I have to go to this makeup clinical that they threw on us last minute. And my heart was broken. And just - not just my heart is broken, his heart is broken, because he's 7, and he's not thinking about, 'oh, she's doing this so we can have a better life', or this, that. He's looking at, 'well, you went to my sister's, and you're not coming to mine'. That's just the one of many times that this school has thrown something on us last minute and expected us to be there. And I'm just like, when you go back to, like, the whole picture of things. It is mentally draining.*

Avery B: *And exhausting, and just - just devastating, all in one.*

Kensley's story is a powerful example of how the institution's disorganization and its demand for constant availability leads to deep personal harm. Her heartbreak, and her son's, are the consequences of a school culture that refuses to accommodate the lives of its students.

Avery further reflects on what it has meant to sacrifice so much:

Avery B: Like, I feel like I put my life on hold for 3 years.

She explains what this has looked like in practice:

Avery B: Like, I haven't, like, as people will be talking about, 'oh, what you doing for Halloween?' I can't even think about any holidays, even Thanksgiving with that coming up, our exam is two weeks after that. Thanksgiving I'm gonna be with my family, but already let them know I will not be 100% present, because I have to put up into this. And that's been that case since the last 3 years. And I get it, this is what I signed up for, I want to do this, but it's like, at what cost? At what cost?

Avery's final question "at what cost?" sums up this subtheme clearly. Students want to succeed. They are committed to their goals. But when institutions ignore their full humanity and demand school over everything else, the cost of achieving those goals becomes painfully high.

Emotions/Mental health

The final subtheme within the broader theme of dehumanization is the repeated emotional and psychological toll that the program has taken on students and the institution's lack of care or attention to their mental health. Across Sista Circles, students described a range of mental health struggles, from anxiety and depression to burnout and emotional exhaustion. These were not isolated moments but ongoing conditions shaped by the structure, culture, and demands of the program.

Esther offers a succinct but powerful reflection on the emotional weight of her experience:

Esther Victoria: It's been a lot mentally, it has been a roller coaster.

She later describes how the financial burden of the program pushed her to a breaking point:

Esther Victoria: *So I just cried out to God. I was like, 'God, you gonna have to help me. I don't know where I'm about to get this money from. But I can't do - mentally, I cannot do this. I cannot sit out' And then [Parkline was] talking about, 'oh, yeah, you come back later, and then - ' [and I was like] 'No.'* So I just prayed to God. I would say, *God, help me, because I was losing it, okay? And that ain't the first time I lost it. It's been a lot with the school.*

Esther's words point to the psychological harm students endure in navigating a system that feels both unresponsive and unsustainable.

Capri also describes the depth of her mental health struggles, noting how the pressure of the program affects not only her but her children as well:

Capri: *I was so depressed, yes, still being depressed. Because I'm like, man, all this work that I have to do, and I can't take a break. Like, my kids are suffering because they - we can't do normal things, and I can't, like, okay, this is the last, and I got so much stuff I gotta do.*

Here, Capri connects her depression to a lack of rest, relentless academic demands, and the painful recognition that her children are also being affected.

Avery offers a broader reflection on how the program has changed her:

Avery B: *I feel like I'm not the same person when I started nursing school, like, I don't really laugh as much. And it's not because I'm not happy, it's just - I can't think about nothing but getting this done. Like, that's the only thing that's on my mind is getting this done.*

She then recounts a particularly difficult break from school that was anything but restful:

Avery B: *Oh yeah, I was very depressed the whole Christmas break. All I thought about was the next - all I could think about was the next semester and making sure that I was as prepared as I could be, and not leaving the fate in my professor's hands. That's all I could think about. Like,*

from the day I got my results until the next semester, until the final of that next semester, that's all I could think about.

Avery's experience illustrates how deeply the pressure to succeed can invade students' lives, even during holidays and supposed moments of rest. Her depression was prolonged and linked directly to the structure and stress of the program.

Mateo speaks to how the program has exacerbated anxiety, imposter syndrome, and sleep deprivation:

***Mateo:** The academic side has caused me to have really bad imposter syndrome, you know, lots of lost nights of sleep, really bad anxiety. Like, I pop - I pop anxiety pills like they're candy nowadays, like, and, you know, when I see my psychiatrist, my psychiatrist is like, 'we might have to even go up on your dose even more, like, you still show signs of uncontrolled anxiety', and...you know, at this last appointment, I said that I think that I would like to, you know, come down on the medication, because I realized that, like, the anxiety is more so related to school.*

Mateo makes a clear connection between their mental health symptoms and the conditions of the program. The institution is not just ignoring student wellness but actively contributing to students' psychological harm.

They go on to describe how this anxiety has affected their confidence and performance:

***Mateo:** And it's demoralizing. It - it really does - it takes a lot out of you. It makes you depressed, it makes you anxious, like, and even now, like, some of those practice questions were affecting the way that I even, like, walk into a clinical setting now, because we have so many of those practice questions on stuff that we've never even talked about in the entire program, and it's like - I started to ask myself again recently, I'm like, 'oh my gosh, like, am I actually ready to*

graduate and be a professional nurse?’ Like, or, you know, ‘am I actually going to make it when I get out into the field?’

Mateo’s comment reflects how institutional practices that fail to prepare or support students not only undermine academic success but also erode students’ sense of self and professional readiness.

Avery shares with Kensley the emotional impact of failing a course and the pressure to immediately start over:

***Kensley C:** And then I can't imagine having to literally fail a class, have, like, a week and a half to prepare to take the class over again, knowing that you're probably going back into the same exact situation. I can't imagine how stressful that is.*

***Avery B:** So, it was hard. It was - it was just emotionally challenging trying to stay motivated and feel confident in what I was doing with just what happened 2 weeks ago, you know what I mean? It wasn't really time to heal. I had to kind of go through the motions and then pick up where I left off at.*

Avery names what’s often denied in institutional timelines: “*time to heal.*” The expectation to recover immediately and resume coursework reflects a lack of care for students’ emotional needs.

Capri names this lack of care directly:

***Capri:** But when you get into nursing school, and they know how stressful it is, they do not, like, prioritize your mental health. They're not trying to say, ‘okay, we see that you're stressing out. We understand that.’ Like I said, I understand, like, academically, your grades do matter. I get it, you know, it's a certain way, you can't just have Fs all throughout not knowing what you're doing because you're dealing with somebody's life. But y'all not prioritizing our mental health as*

students. Like, y'all see that it's stressful, y'all know it's stressful, you got, like, we got paperwork due now, we got so much work that we gotta get in by Fri- on Sunday, and I know a lot of people are just, like, trying to do what they can. And it's like, y'all not prioritizing that.

She goes on to describe what it feels like to navigate these challenges without institutional care:

Capri: They're just suffering alone in silence. So, it's like, we - you don't - your feelings don't matter, you're not - you're emotionally exhausted. And it's just that you - they don't care. They - at the end of the day, this is how the feeling is: they don't care. They don't come ask you questions, they don't come talk to you personally,

Capri's language makes visible the dehumanization embedded in institutional neglect. Her comments point to a culture where emotional distress is overlooked and normalized.

Together, these reflections paint a powerful and painful picture: students are carrying the emotional weight of the program largely on their own. Participants show how institutional neglect of emotional and mental health is central to the experience of being dehumanized by the institution that demands so much and gives so little in return.

Culture of “Failure IS an option”

The third major theme that I identified from the Sista Circle conversations is what I've named a culture of “failure IS an option.” By this, I mean that participants' comments suggest that Parkline has created an institutional environment in which student failure is normalized and unproblematic. While Parkline publicly promotes student success as a core value, participants' stories suggest otherwise. This again ties back to the overarching theme that Parkline's true values do not prioritize student success and that Parkline can achieve its institutional goals despite or even via mass student failure. Within this major theme, I have identified the following subthemes: *passivity towards failure, not given what we need, high-stakes education, putting us*

in survival mode, active sabotage, making us find our own supports, and lack of concern post-graduation.

Passivity in the Face of Student Failure

The first subtheme, passivity in the face of student failure, is reflected in participant comments describing how Parkline does little to actively support students' success. As a result, failure becomes a routine outcome rather than a red flag for institutional change.

For example, Mateo and Avery both raise concerns about students not receiving the support they need to succeed:

***Mateo:** So, we have people in our class who cannot read. For real. Or some that can read but cannot comprehend. Which is why, you know, I did bring up the point of - it was almost better for you to just make your requirements a little bit more strict to get in, so that we're not trying to jump over every hurdle you randomly throw in a path along the way.*

While this comment could also speak to the subtheme of “tricked and trapped” under manipulation tactics, they highlight a deeper institutional passivity: Parkline admits students without the structures in place to support their success.

Avery echoes this concern:

***Avery B:** But it's like, 'prepare for this', and we haven't got the tools to be prepared for it. So it's like, to me, that's like setting people up for failure, especially some people aren't good test takers, some people are different type of learners, it's just, I don't feel like they really - they just - I don't feel like they really dive deep into that part of it. I think it's very surface level, if you ask me.*

Avery emphasizes that without the appropriate tools or responsiveness to different student needs, students are *set up to fail*.

Mateo furthers this critique by connecting it directly to Parkline's messaging:

Mateo: *Others who needed just a little bit more support, and they could have been successful. And that goes into, if the school really wanted to be this whole program of, oh, well, you know, 'you're possible at Parkline University', they would provide that extra support.*

By referencing the slogan "you're possible at Parkline University," Mateo underscores the contradiction between the institution's public image and its lack of follow-through in practice.

Students across Sista circles also described high withdrawal rates in their cohorts as evidence of the institution's passive stance toward failure:

Avery B: *So it's like, we're learning different content, but getting tested on something that we haven't seen before, or a different type of platform that we're not prepared to execute and be successful. So, like she said, when I started, I mean, literally half of my cohort is gone.*

Kensley C: *My first semester was an eye-opener of my experience. My first semester, we were in the middle of a semester and then from then on, it was like a snowball effect of things going wrong. To the point, my first semester, only probably, like, 6 people from my cohort continued to the next class.*

Audrey Ross: *Oh, wow. So, out of how many people?*

Kensley C: *22, I wanna say?*

Mateo: *I mean, we started off in a cohort of 50. And I counted the other day, of the people who originally started with us, there are only 11 of us left.*

These staggering attrition numbers illustrate just how common failure and withdrawal are at Parkline—and yet, there's little indication that the institution sees this as cause for concern.

Sasha also reflects on how outcomes are treated with emotional and institutional detachment:

Sasha Smith: the focus is - I know grades are important, obviously, we're in nursing school. But it's like, that's all the focus. It's either you passed or you didn't, and if you did. You continue, if you don't, then you're forgotten.

She continues:

Sasha Smith: That's kind of, like, the vibe at Parkline, like, they don't really - from what I've experienced, they don't really care about, like, what you're going through. It's more like you're a number. And if you make it, you make it, and if you don't, you don't.

Sasha describes a system in which student wellbeing is irrelevant to institutional concern. Her phrase “*if you make it, you make it, and if you don't, you don't*” echoes the larger theme: failure is simply part of the design.

Capri reinforces this point, sharing her experience with the withdrawal process:

Capri: But Parkline's like, you go to withdraw, they'll be like, 'oh, okay, here you go, withdraw.'
That's it.

Her comment reveals the ease with which Parkline allows students to leave, with no evident attempt at retention, support, or intervention.

Finally, Avery offers a striking personal reflection on how deeply normalized failure has become:

Avery B: So, it's just - I feel like, to me personally, it's just - that's why I'm just ready to be done. Like, I can't even, like, you know how, like, some people go to nursing school, they're able to make content and just feel - I don't even feel comfortable doing that, because it's like, you never

know, you're here one day, you're gone the next. You can't even - you know? It's like, you have to really be done-done to know, like, okay, now I can talk about it, now I can tell people.

Here, Avery reflects on the emotional weight of uncertainty. She doesn't even feel safe publicly claiming the identity of a nursing student because failure feels so likely.

Together, these reflections reveal how deeply embedded the culture of failure is at Parkline. Students are not only unsupported but often expected to fail, with little institutional urgency to intervene. This passivity reflects a system that is comfortable with high attrition, indifferent to student outcomes, and structurally aligned with priorities other than student success.

Not given what we need

Another subtheme that I identified within the larger theme of a culture of “*failure IS an option*” was the sense that Parkline offers students only scraps instead of what they actually need to succeed, sometimes wasting students’ time or distracting with unhelpful things instead. Participants described receiving the bare minimum in terms of resources, instruction, and academic support while still being expected to perform at a high level. The mismatch between the institution’s expectations and what it provides speaks to institutional neglect and disregard for students’ time, money, and potential.

Avery names this directly:

Avery B: *It's like, they give us the bare minimum.*

Esther builds on this idea, emphasizing that if Parkline truly cared about students and their learning, it would invest in the tools and conditions required for success:

Esther Victoria: *Like, it's certain things that they do, and I'm like, you can't care about the students, you can't care about us learning certain things if you're not providing certain things that we need.*

Several students pointed to the nursing labs as a concrete example of not receiving what they need. Capri shares:

Capri: *And we have labs, and when we - it's annoying when you go into a lab and you don't have the proper equipment, you don't have the right equipment, but we gotta talk it out, like, 'oh, well, you can't open this because we only got one.' Like, how the heck am I learning then?*

Esther echoes this frustration in a separate Sista Circle:

Esther Victoria: *The lab work stuff, you got one bag of blood you gotta share with 30 students. What are we doing? We pay a thousand and some dollars up this time around, they telling me I gotta pay \$2,000 and some a month. So what are we doing, okay? If all the students gotta pay, and they paying stuff, I don't care if they're not paying out of pocket, they still paying the school. Why we got one bag of blood for lab to share? We can't even [use] it, we gotta verbalize it.*

Both Capri and Esther highlight the absurdity of trying to learn essential hands-on skills without actual access to materials. Esther raises a critical question, highlighting the contradiction between the lack of resources and the high tuition students are paying.

Esther also calls out the outdated equipment:

Esther Victoria: *And we got the first HP computer to do our test on. Yeah, we got the first HP laptop, okay?*

Mateo: *Right.*

Esther Victoria: *They're not trying to upgrade at all.*

Here, Esther's comment underscores a larger frustration with the institution's refusal to invest in improvements.

Mateo brings cost back into the conversation:

***Mateo:** The school is crazy expensive, and you would think for a school so expensive that, you know, we would have decent faculty that works with students, we would have supplies for labs. But that's not the case.*

Mateo also recounts a conversation with a faculty member who seemed unaware or unconcerned about the cost students are paying:

***Mateo:** I actually had a teacher look me in the face and say, 'well, if you got to do XYZ, that would cost thousands of dollars'. And I said, 'oh, so you mean one of our tuition for one semester?' [And they're like] 'wait, how much does this school cost'? And it's like, please do your research before you come for somebody!*

This moment reveals a disconnect not just between students and the institution, but also between students and instructors who appear to absorb the broader message that students are undeserving of meaningful investment.

Sasha offers another example of being denied access to basic resources, even when following protocol:

***Sasha Smith:** We were on campus, and we wanted to stay till 5pm which is when the campus closed, and - which was, like, the protocol, I guess. And the dean was, like, very rudely getting me and a couple of other students out of the building, like, literally, like, forcing us out of the building, and she locked the door on us. That was the first instance where I was like, so angry with the school, because I'm paying, and it's like, I can't even use the printer.*

Sasha's anger and frustration stems from being denied what she has *paid for*, and the disrespect she feels from not being able to use the resources she feels she should be entitled to use.

In addition to not receiving what they need, students described the frustration of being offered *unhelpful* gestures in place of real support. Avery explains:

Avery B: *And to piggyback off what she's saying, like, that's exactly how it feels. That's why I'm saying, like, they think giving us Mexican food is like, 'oh, like, great', like, no, like it's not - that's not what we want. We want y'all to, like she said, give us platforms where it's like ... things that's gonna prepare us for the NCLEX, things that's gonna prepare us for state, like, those things. Instead of that, they think the little, small, minute things, like giving us little t-shirts one time out of - once out of two semesters, is gonna mean something, and it doesn't. It's not enough.*

Kensley affirms this and connects it directly to mattering:

Kensley C: *When I think of mattering, they can honestly keep the little food they bring.*

Avery: *Right*

Kensley C: *Show me I matter by setting me up to be able to have what I need to pass the test.*

Kensley continues:

Kensley C: *But when I think about mattering, I'm thinking about - you're seeing that the class as a whole isn't understanding this situation, or this subject, then you would know to lean in on that subject. Instead, you show us that we don't matter, because when we get in class, we're doing a group project, like a group assignment on a case study that has nothing to do with what we're, you know, nothing to do with what we're going over.*

In these comments, both students name the institution's failure to respond to academic needs with appropriate academic support. Food and t-shirts are symbolic gestures that replace real intervention, reinforcing the idea that students' time and success are not priorities.

Capri adds another example of her time being wasted:

Capri: This is lab, but we're up here watching TV. I can do this at home, like, that's how I'm feeling because I'm not hands-on. You want to talk about EKGs? Okay, where's the EKG at?

Her comment reflects the disconnect between the active learning students *expect* and need from a lab and the passive, unhelpful videos they *receive*.

Esther critiques the institution's focus on repeated testing, arguing that it takes away from actual preparation:

Esther Victoria: We already proved we know what we know. What we doing? What we need to - we got in, we took a test to get in, what we need to take a test to get out for? They need to do away with that. We already got to take the NCLEX anyway. So, it don't make any sense. And then, on top of that, the stuff that they give us, it's just really crazy, because it's taking away your time to study.

For Esther, the problem is not the workload but that the workload is misaligned with the goal. The things students are required to do *don't help them succeed* and instead consume the time they could use to actually prepare.

Across these stories, students describe an institution that does not invest in their success and often wastes their time with empty gestures, outdated tools, and irrelevant assignments. These practices reinforce the broader culture of "*failure IS an option*" by signaling that student outcomes are not worth meaningful institutional effort.

High-Stakes Education

Related to the lack of support and resources, several students described experiencing a *high-stakes educational environment* in which a large portion of their grades rests on a single,

heavily weighted exam. This practice contributes significantly to the culture of “*failure IS an option,*” as even high-performing students throughout the semester can fail due to a single test.

Avery explains how this has impacted her and her peers:

Avery B: *But I feel like even some people who do take the time, I feel like the grading scale, they just changed a lot of stuff. Like, now it's like, the [final] is, like, 45% of your grade, so you can have an A in a class, not do so good on that, and then basically, what you worked for the whole semester means nothing.*

Avery emphasizes that students can maintain high performance all semester long, but still fail due to one heavily weighted test.

In a separate Sista Circle, Esther and Mateo express the same frustration:

Esther Victoria: *You can have all A's, all A's, and then you get to that last [final].*

Mateo: *Mmmhmm*

Esther Victoria: *And it's worth 45% of your grade? and you don't do well on it, you're screwed. That's it for you.*

Mateo: *And it's demoralizing.*

Mateo later reiterates this sentiment:

Mateo: *I mean, like, again, one exam at this school will literally erase all of your work for the rest of the semester.*

Together, these students describe a grading structure that is not only unforgiving but “*demoralizing*”. When one exam can “erase all of your work for the rest of the semester,” it creates an environment of constant pressure, anxiety, and fear that does not foster learning or growth. Instead, this structure reflects a systemic indifference to student success, reinforcing the broader pattern that failure at Parkline is not only possible, but highly likely by design.

Fight/Survival Mode

Another common subtheme within the larger theme of a culture of “*failure IS an option*” is the experience of being placed and stuck in “fight mode” or survival mode by the program. Participants described environments and expectations that made them feel as though they were constantly battling to stay afloat, rather than being supported to learn, grow, and succeed.

Mateo articulates this feeling powerfully:

***Mateo:** It's almost like I would wish - with some of the things that have happened, I wish I would have been denied from Parkline altogether, rather than to get in and it constantly feel like I'm fighting for my life*

Mateo's comment makes clear how intense and relentless this environment has felt, so much so that the struggle of getting in and remaining enrolled felt more punishing than not being admitted at all.

Mateo also makes several related comments that contrast their experience with what peers in other nursing programs have told them:

***Mateo:** When you're in nursing school, you get to know other people in other nursing programs. And most of them that I've talked to say the program is hard to get into, but once we're in, we're fine. And that has not been our case. That has not been our case*

***Mateo:** There were a lot of just loops and bounds that we had to jump through that I know for a fact we wouldn't have had to jump through at other institutions.*

***Mateo:** Personally I just hated having to jump through the hoops, you know, to get there when I know that it's laid out for other people.*

These comments paint a picture of constant barriers and unnecessary obstacles that Mateo feels are not universal across nursing programs but that are unique to Parkline. Instead of creating a

learning environment where success is supported, the institution continually places students in a position of struggle.

Avery echoes this sentiment, describing the learning environment as hostile:

Avery B: *It's just subpar, subpar. I really, like - that's just what I feel like it boils down to. We just don't have the support that we need. And I feel like we deserve it. We're going into a field where we're gonna be taking care of people. We shouldn't have to feel like we're fighting for our life every day to just pass a class that we're paying to take.*

Avery ties the emotional toll of fight mode to a broader injustice, especially given their future profession in caring for others. The fact that they feel they must “fight for our life every day” underscores how unsupportive the environment feels, and that they are paying for this struggle is a particularly hurtful injustice.

Capri also mentions the injustice of paying for unfair treatment:

Capri: *So I was angry with that, but now I feel like now I'm paying, and y'all still playing in my face, so I'm paying you to play with me. I'm paying you to play with my education*

Esther describes her personal approach to navigating this fight:

Esther Victoria: *I mean, if they put you in that fight mode, they put you in that fight mode. And you gotta, you know, you gotta do what you need to do. But me, myself, personally I fight for every grade I get. And when I say I fight, I fight. I study hard, I get resources, I ask Mateo, 'hey, Mateo, do you understand this? Because I don't understand this.'*

Esther’s use of “fight” reflects an environment where support is so scarce that students must construct their own networks of labor and assistance simply to stay afloat.

Avery elaborates on how this survival orientation *sets students up for failure*:

Avery B: Now we have busy work, clinical, and the final, and we have to score 900 and above to get our degree. So it's kind of like - it puts us in a hard, hard place, because people are working full-time, people have families, everything is like - life still goes on, life still happens, so it's like, I don't know, I feel like it kind of sets you up for failure, low-key, like... you have to really be strong

She continues, offering a broader reflection on what constant fighting does to students:

Avery B: That's my feeling about education. Because it's so easy to give up and quit, it's like, I don't know, it's like - people don't really feel like, okay, well, some people - some people are not built strong. And I feel like just because you're not built strong doesn't mean that you don't deserve to further your education, you know what I mean? Like, you shouldn't have to feel like you're fighting every day. And some people don't have the fight in them, or they don't have the fight to do, because they have so many other things to prioritize. So it's like, if I'm fighting for other things, which is rent, the economy, children, maintaining relationships, maintaining family. And then I gotta fight to get my education, it's like, dude where does the fight end? When does the fighting end, and when does it become easy learnable experience where you're able to be 100% great?

In this poignant reflection, Avery highlights not just the *fight* of the program itself, but the interplay between academic pressures and the everyday battles students are already navigating. Her question “*Where does the fight end?*” captures the emotional exhaustion of perpetual struggle and the injustice of expecting students to do it alone.

Esther also points to the consequences of survival mode on student behavior and learning:

Esther Victoria: *But some of the other students that haven't been in, like, a college classroom or whatever, they just trying to - they like, 'look, okay, my mom and dad are depending on me. I told my cousins I was in nursing school, so I gotta get this by any means necessary.' So they're doing whatever to get to point A to Z, put it like that.*

Later in the same conversation, Esther and Mateo describe what survival mode often means for actual learning:

Mateo: *You know, and then they wonder why, oh, you know, people graduate from this program, and then they're not able to pass the NCLEX, and the reason why is that you put us in survival mode to the point to where we just want to get to the next semester.*

Esther Victoria: *Yeah, so some people don't ever learn what they need to learn.*

Mateo: *Yeah, and sometimes the learning goes out the window.*

Here, they link survival mode to a loss of meaningful learning, suggesting that the constant fight to survive the semester leaves little room for actual understanding or preparation for professional practice.

Avery also describes how this environment shapes interpersonal dynamics:

Avery B: *I think the problem with my cohort is, like - it's like everybody tries to do individual, and it's like, I feel like if we're all pursuing the same dream, we should all be able to come together and work together to obtain that goal. But I feel like it's more like a competition*

For Avery, survival mode breeds competition rather than collaboration, transforming what could be a shared journey into an isolating struggle.

Mateo offers a final reflection on the consequences of survival mode for student achievement:

Mateo: *you know, it would be nice to have had the opportunity to graduate with honors and do all - and, you know, do the things and feel accomplished in that way, but the program really wasn't conducive to that, and it - if I'm just being honest, a lot of the people who made A's through this program, they definitely did not get it the honest way, because this program is not conducive to that.*

In this comment, Mateo suggests that the institutional environment pushes students into fight mode, making *honest* success feel out of reach.

In the following exchange, me (Audrey), Kensley, and Avery discuss the psychological consequences of being in an environment that pushes and keeps us in fight mode:

Audrey: *I have that same thing, Kensley, that you're talking about. Like 'I'm not gonna let them win, they're trying to push me out, they're trying to ignore me, well, I'm not gonna be ignored, and I'm gonna show them da-da-da-da-da.' And that's great, and that's beautiful. But it also causes me a lot of pain because I stay in that situation.*

Kensley C: *I agree. And I have felt that side of it, too. It's like, I'm staying, but at what cost? What - how much trauma am I accumulating?*

Audrey: *And we gotta see that, you know, these are beautiful characteristics, and they make us very resilient people. But!*

Kensley C: *Sometimes they cause a lot of trauma.*

Avery B: *That doesn't mean we're not suffering at the cost.*

In these overlapping reflections, I and other participants acknowledge both our resilience and the deep costs of surviving in a system that keeps us in constant fight mode. The very traits that help us persist also expose us to trauma, pain, and emotional exhaustion. The result is an educational environment where survival, rather than flourishing, becomes the central struggle.

Active Sabotage

While some of the themes described earlier reflect structural passivity or neglect, several participants also described moments that felt like active sabotage: behavior from instructors, staff, or the institution that students experienced as actively working against their success rather than supporting it. These comments suggest that the culture at Parkline does not merely tolerate failure but that it may, at times, actively undermine students' efforts.

When I asked Sasha whether she felt supported by the institution, her response was stark:

Sasha Smith: *I feel like it's against us more than support.*

Her perception captures the sense of resistance and opposition students experienced, rather than encouragement or guidance.

Kensley provides a powerful example of what this felt like in practice with a specific instructor:

Kensley C: *Like, last semester, it was imperative to me to pass that class because [the instructor] thought that I wouldn't pass the class. She tried to do everything to get me not to pass the class. And so, I was real - I was real stuck on: I have to pass. I'm gonna pass. Just so she can't put me in that category that she tried to put me in. And so now my mindset is, I'm gonna finish school, I have to finish school just so I'm not in that category of the ones who start and don't make it.*

Here, Kensley describes the instructor's actions as not just unsupportive, but as actively working to prevent her success. Her determination to pass despite those behaviors illustrates both her resilience and the emotional labor required to counteract that sabotage.

Esther expresses confusion about why institutional behavior appears so *misaligned* with student success:

Esther Victoria: *So I'm not understanding the concept of them, you know, doing what they doing to us when we need to make them look good. I don't understand that concept of, we need to make you look good, so what are you doing? Why are you trying so hard to fight against that? And why are you trying so hard to make students not pass?*

Esther's comment points to an apparent contradiction in institutional logic. If Parkline must meet external standards (e.g., NCLEX pass rates) in order to survive and maintain accreditation, then it should *want* students to pass. She presses against what she sees as a disconnect between stated goals and observed behavior.

She elaborates this point further:

Esther Victoria: *But I'm like, y'all act like y'all don't want us to pass, but y'all have been threatened already with y'all things to be shut down to get your license taken. So I'm not understanding how y'all are trying to do all of this. That's not gonna help your numbers. And if your numbers go down even more, that's gonna mess with your school.*

Esther here demonstrates a keen understanding of the stakes: she knows that Parkline *should* want high NCLEX pass rates in order to maintain licensure and accreditation, which makes the perceived obstruction all the more puzzling.

Mateo also highlights conflicting messaging around high-stakes exams and learning:

Mateo: *Studies - there are published studies showing that these high-stakes exams don't adequately prepare students for licensure post-school. And then - so we're already battling that and jumping over that hurdle, and then you put rigorous assignments in our way*

Mateo suggests that Parkline continues to lean on practices that research shows are not the most effective at preparing students, adding layers of difficulty rather than removing barriers.

They continue:

Mateo: Like, we get to our last semester and y'all are still trying to weed us out.

This statement explicitly characterizes the experience as one of being weeded out, again suggesting not just negligence, but something that feels intentional.

Mateo theorizes about why this might be occurring within the logic of institutional priorities:

Mateo: Again, that's why I feel like it is on purpose. Like, it is on purpose. We've - you know, at first, when I first got told by a staff member, 'I'm actually not supposed to teach. I'm supposed to just conduct reviews', I thought that that faculty member was lying to me, because I had never heard anything like that. And then they love to put, 'oh, well, they say for adult learning, you have to find a way to relate it to their experience'. I'm like. Obviously, that's not the case. Something's not working. Most of your classes don't learn. And then you're like, 'oh, well, you know, not everybody is meant to learn'. So they don't do it, they don't do it because they know that they might just accidentally help more people.

Mateo's analysis centers on the idea that the institution *chooses not to provide certain forms of meaningful support* not because of ignorance, but because of an implicit, systemic decision to maintain a certain distribution of outcomes. Their phrasing "*because they know that they might just accidentally help more people*" suggests that Mateo feels that investing in deeper support, pedagogy, or adaptation is actively and intentionally avoided by the institution.

Capri interprets this dynamic through a broader lens of competition and sabotage:

Capri: They don't want to teach you how to get anything. They don't - when they see you trying to come up, they're going to try to sabotage you, and stuff like that, make you feel bad or worse than what you are. It's just that I - like I said, my mind go left field, because I done seen it too many times.

She continues by connecting this pattern to experiences in the healthcare field:

Capri: and I hate seeing it in the healthcare field, because I've experienced this more times than once. It's like - it's like a dog-eat-dog world. Like, it's like crabs in a barrel. I'm not about to see you - I'm not gonna hire you for my position. I'mma hire you just enough. I'm gonna bring you just enough to feed you a little bit, like, I don't want to see you doing better than me. I want to see you doing good, but just not better than me.

Capri uses the “*crabs in a barrel*” metaphor to describe both her experience at Parkline and the culture she perceives in parts of the healthcare field: a dynamic where people pull each other down, consciously or unconsciously, rather than lift each other up. Her interpretation frames active sabotage as part of a broader pattern of competitive, hierarchical behavior.

Together, these comments depict an environment in which students interpret certain institutional actions not simply as neglect or institutional deficiencies but as active obstruction to their success. Whether through specific instructors, rigid practices, or broader strategic incentives, these students perceive that the institution is, at times, working *against* them. This perception further reinforces the experience that failure is not just a possibility at Parkline but that it is, at times, built into the very logic of how the institution operates.

Making Us Find Our Own Supports

Student participants also described how the lack of institutional support from Parkline forced them to seek out their own supports in order to persist in the program. These comments highlight how students had to compensate for gaps in instruction, emotional support, and academic guidance, often at great personal cost.

Kensley describes the energy and initiative she had to expend simply to learn the course material in the absence of effective teaching:

Kensley C: *So on top of the 4 hours I just spent lecture, I gotta drive an hour and 30 minutes home, probably more because I'm gonna hit this traffic. I gotta stay up, go find where I can learn this lesson at, on top of all the homework. You know, and I'm not complaining because this is what I signed up to do, but it would be very helpful if we could get somebody in that knew how to teach the class.*

Because she does not feel that the instruction itself is sufficient, Kensley must recreate and supplement the educational experience on her own time, after long days of travel and lecture. Her comment captures the additional labor students must perform simply to *access* the education they are paying for.

Other students described how they relied on emotional support from family or loved ones to get through psychologically demanding stretches. Sasha shares how crucial her mother's presence was:

Sasha Smith: *I agree. I feel like, for me, like, it was, like, even now, though - but, like, in the beginning, like, couple semesters, it was very, very difficult, because I was - I'm in [this city] alone, and it got to a point where, like, I had to have my mom fly here every other weekend just to visit me, just to get through the program, because it's just so tricky.*

For Sasha, academic survival was bound up with personal support; without the presence and encouragement of her mother, she suggests she might not have made it through the early difficult moments.

Mateo reflects on the community they and other students built among themselves:

Mateo: *I'll say the only way that I made it through is having a village that really held me down, you know? I am so thankful for the people that I've met, and like - again, that's why I say, like, I*

really do care about all of the people in my cohort, because, you know, some I talk to more than others, but we have all really held each other down.

Their comment points to the formation of peer support networks that filled the void left by institutional structures. Mateo's "village" becomes both a source of resilience and an indicator of what the institution fails to provide.

Capri echoes this sentiment, naming the people who kept her enrolled:

Capri: So, if it wasn't for my family and a lot of people at the - my classmates at Parkline, yeah, I'd have left. So it's - that's where my support comes from. It's not Parkline itself, no.

Capri's statement is especially powerful: the support that kept her in the program did not come from the institution but from her *own family and classmates*. In other words, Parkline did not function as a source of educational support; students had to generate that support themselves.

In Sasha, Mateo, and Capri's comments, we see a pattern: students did not feel adequately supported by Parkline and thus had to take the initiative, both academically and emotionally, to find the resources, community, and encouragement necessary to continue. This self-provision of support further underscores how the institution's neglect situates learning as an individual survival project rather than a collaboratively supported educational journey.

Lack of Concern Toward Success After Graduation

Another key subtheme that I identified in students' comments about a culture where "failure IS an option" at Parkline surrounds a more holistic vision of student success, specifically, what happens after graduation. Several students expressed concern that, even if they successfully completed the program, Parkline did little to position them for success in the job market or to help them secure placements in specialties or hospitals of their choosing.

Mateo explicitly critiques Parkline's messaging around employability:

Mateo: *And it was like, they just didn't care, and then, you know, they try to tell us, 'oh, well, students are employable', and it's like - but the part that y'all don't mention is how much of us are employable in areas we actually wanted to be.*

Mateo emphasizes that employability alone is not sufficient but that it is also important that students can access the specialties or placements they were passionate about when they began nursing school. According to Mateo, Parkline is not supporting that deeper form of success.

Avery shares a personal example of having to compromise on her own goals:

Avery B: *Because I'm like, well, you know, even for me, for practicum, I wanted to do the ER, I wanted to do NICU, if possible, because those are the units that I want to work in, that's what I strive to be in. But I'm settling for rehab*

Her words reflect a feeling of having to compromise because the school did not advocate for her career aspirations.

Mateo comments further on the lack of hospital partnerships, which they see as a crucial reason why students are left with fewer desirable opportunities post-graduation:

Mateo: *If they wanted to show us that they valued us, most schools have partnerships with these hospitals, you know, like, [the state school] is partnered with [a specific hospital]. So guess what? You see a lot of [those] students in the externship program, and then you see a lot of them then go on to be nurse residents in the departments of their choosing. Whereas we're sort of left to get whatever we can get.*

In this comparison with other programs, Mateo points out a systemic disadvantage that Parkline students face in securing preferred placements and positions.

Avery reinforces this idea by pointing to a lack of advocacy and effort on Parkline's part:

Avery B: *Because I'm just like, dude, y'all have to talk to these hospitals. Y'all have to get personal, like, y'all think just sending an email is gonna be enough. Sometimes you have to show up, show your face, you know what I mean? Like, they don't know us from a can of paint, you know what I mean?*

This quote critiques the passive approach Parkline takes in forming relationships with potential employers, suggesting that deeper engagement is needed to truly support students' professional outcomes.

Mateo adds that Parkline students may also lack access to faculty who can make strategic introductions or professional connections:

Mateo: *But what they don't say is that at these other schools, you're more likely to have a professor who knows your department manager. Or a professor who can get you this inner, you know, people who - they can connect you with people to get the senior practicum in the area you want at a premier hospital.*

This lack of social capital or insider access becomes a disadvantage that limits Parkline students' entry into competitive nursing roles or residencies.

Esther highlights a final, and particularly damaging, issue: the negative reputation of Parkline itself in the job market:

Esther Victoria: *Or even Mateo, as well, you remember this? A lot of times, we get discriminated against. Not us - our school. Yeah. Like, when it comes to applying sometimes, or if it comes to, you know, you doing certain things, a lot of times they'll look at, 'oh, this Parkline student, we don't want them', type situation.*

This sense of stigma attached to the Parkline name adds a final layer of frustration. Students are not only under-supported during the program, but they also leave carrying a degree from an institution that may disadvantage them in hiring.

Together, these comments illustrate that Parkline’s investment in students during their time at Parkline extends to their time after graduation – if they make it that far. The lack of partnerships, strategic mentorship, and post-grad advocacy all reinforce the perception that Parkline is more concerned with weeding students out than seeing them through to long-term success in the field.

Race and Gender: Explicit Comments by Students

Though the entirety of my analysis is grounded in Black feminist thought and epistemology, and I contend that students’ intersecting identities as Black women nursing students shape all aspects of their experience, I felt it was important to highlight a section of findings in which students *explicitly* spoke about race, gender, or both. These comments offer insight into how students perceive the role of their identities in their treatment at Parkline and the systemic conditions they navigate.

The responses from participants varied, both across and within individuals. When first asked whether she felt her race or gender played a role in her experience at Parkline, Esther initially responded:

Esther Victoria: I, myself, I really haven't had the chance to really notice. I haven't really had a chance to experience, like, any racism or against, you know, color or gender, I haven't. And maybe I just haven't paid attention to it because I'm so focused on trying to pass my stuff.

When I interjected to label that dynamic as being in “survival mode,” Esther agreed and elaborated:

Esther Victoria: Especially if they're throwing other stuff in the loop. Like, they're throwing, 'oh, you gotta get your financial aid in', 'oh, you gotta hurry up', 'there's 45% of your grade', you know, you're not thinking about seeing other stuff other than, 'oh, I gotta pass'. 'Oh, I gotta pass this, I gotta get through, I can't keep paying, I can't pay extra money to take the class over', you know? You're not really seeing stuff, you know? You're more focused on, let me get through it.

Esther's framing suggests that the intense demands of the program and financial strain can obscure her awareness of possible racial or gendered dynamics, not necessarily because they don't exist, but because there is so little bandwidth left to process them.

When Esther asked Mateo what they thought about the role race and/or gender plays in their experiences at Parkline, Mateo offered a contrasting view:

Mateo: The things that they do are racial. And how they get us is that it is generalized, so what happens is, the people who are white in our program, and we have two in our class, two of - two of 25 people are white, and the rest of us are some type of color. They're just collateral damage, is how that's seen, like, they do these things for the majority of us, and then the rest are collateral damage. Like, that's really what it is. It's like, oh, well, you know, it's kind of like a certain political figure says, like, some casualties is worth the greater good.

Mateo asserts with clarity that the institutional behavior at Parkline is racial in nature but concealed through generalization. In their analysis, harm is done to the majority - students of color - and any white students who experience similar challenges are merely "collateral damage."

In a different Sista circle, Avery initially dismissed race as a factor when I asked about it:

Avery B: I mean, I think that don't even have anything to do with it, because there's a lot of Black people that go to our school. That's the thing, right? It's mainly, mainly Black people that

go to our school. So I don't even think it's necessarily a race thing, I just think they just dropping the ball.

However, as she continued speaking, Avery's stance began to shift:

Avery B: *It's a slap in the face, 100%, not gonna lie. Like I said, I don't think it has anything to do with race, because the school is predominantly Black, but - maybe that's the problem. Maybe it is because the predominantly Black, we're getting subpar, you know, support. I mean, who's to say? I don't know, but it's just not making sense to me.*

Here, Avery's uncertainty gives way to an uncomfortable recognition: *maybe* the race of the student body is precisely *why* they're receiving substandard treatment.

Esther later reflects on campus demographics and regional racial associations with Parkline:

Esther Victoria: *A lot of [Parkline's] campuses are like that. It's certain ones, when you get to where the main campus is, it's like a lot of white, you know? Because that's where the, I mean - it's a lot of white people, it's a lot of white population there at that, in that area, per se. So, that's why you get more, you know, white students, or students that's not minority at those campuses, but yeah, I even heard somebody say, 'oh, yeah, you know, you mentioned Parkline University, oh, that's a - oh, that's that Black school'. [And I'm like] 'What?'*

Her comments indicate an awareness of Parkline's racialized reputation at her particular campus and a potential link between predominantly Black campuses and the subpar treatment participants described.

In a later exchange, I shared my own internal struggle reckoning with systemic racism:

Audrey Ross: *And that's something I've - I'm working to, to deal with, because it's - for me, it's very painful to accept that darkness, right? In, in society. But - it's there.*

Mateo responded:

***Mateo:** It was hard for me to do so as well, but, you know, like I said, the major part of my first degree was in music, classical music to be exact. And that's where I first saw it, and it was like, once I sort of saw these things, it couldn't be unseen, and I sort of realized that, like, no matter how much I didn't want that to be the reality, it's the reality. And again, like, I don't think that anything happened on an individual, racist basis to most, but it was more systemic, and it was more strategic, and they had to do it broader, so it doesn't look like that, you know? But there are certain campuses where there are more people of color than others.*

Mateo emphasizes the strategic, systemic nature of the racism they observe, contrasting it with individual acts and asserting that institutions often design harm to appear race-neutral.

In a Sista circle with Sasha and Capri, both shared experiences that reflect what could be understood as gendered racism, specifically among Black women. Sasha noted:

***Sasha Smith:** I feel like there's a set mold for us, in terms of being Black women and nurses. And I feel like when you don't fit into that, they're very rude.*

She shared a story about a preceptor:

***Sasha Smith:** So somebody next to me was doing [something with an automatic stapler], and it went cha-ching, like that, and I jumped up. Because I'd never heard of that sound before, so I jumped up like this, and the preceptor [a Black woman] goes, 'oh, you're not from here, you're not Black' because I jumped up, and she's referring - she's referring to, like, a gunshot sound. I jumped up because I'm not used to that. So it's like, when she said that, it's like, 'Not you too'.*

This moment left Sasha feeling stereotyped by someone she expected would understand her—the hurt intensified by the preceptor being a fellow Black woman.

She shared another instance of a Black woman leader speaking to her and other students:

Sasha Smith: *I feel like - I don't know. For me it's like, we're all Black women, and I think she thinks she can elbow and talk to us a certain way. Because I don't feel like she would talk [like that] when the higher-ups come.*

Here, Sasha suggests that a Black woman staff member speaks more harshly or dismissively to students like her, behavior she believes would not occur in front of white superiors.

Capri echoed this dynamic:

Capri: *And I just see this, especially when it's Black, and I hate it, because when it's Black women, I love Black people, but when it comes to us as Black women, it's like we always catty, and I've seen that throughout the whole nursing field. They're always catty. They don't want to teach you how to get anything. They don't - when they see you trying to come up, they're going to try to sabotage you, and stuff like that, make you feel bad or worse than what you are. It's just that I - like I said, my mind go left field, because I done seen it too many times. They don't like you because of whatever reason it is, or maybe because you're just another Black woman. I don't even know. Because, like she said, I don't see them talking - I don't see her talking to no white counterparts like that. But another Black woman that look like you, that's how you speak to them, and that's not - no. No. We're all in this together, no matter what position you hold.*

Capri's account emphasizes internalized oppression – how Black women in power may enact harm against other Black women rather than uplift them. Her statement, “we’re all in this together,” expresses a vision for solidarity that she feels is lacking.

In a separate Sista circle, I (Audrey) raised the issue of compensation in helping professions, and Avery offers a reflection:

Audrey: *...in these helping professions where society doesn't necessarily compensate teachers and nurses -*

Avery B: As what they should be. Right. And I think it has something to do with it being predominantly a female field as well. That's a conversation for another day. I definitely feel like that that's a part of the reason,

Here, Avery connects the undervaluing of professions like nursing and teaching to their gendered history, implicitly naming *structural sexism* as part of the issue.

In sum, while students varied in how directly they identified race and gender as shaping their experiences at Parkline, many spoke to a reality in which their identities as Black women or students of color intersected with broader systems of neglect, marginalization, and inequity. Some initially viewed their struggles as race-neutral institutional failures, while others named systemic racism and gendered dynamics as central forces driving the lack of support and hostile conditions they encountered. Taken together, these explicit reflections underscore the need to continue to examine Parkline's failures not only as educational shortcomings, but as entangled with the racialized and gendered landscape in which Black women pursue professional education.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Summary

In this study, I utilized the lenses of Black Feminist Thought and Black Feminist Epistemology to center the lived experiences of six Black students nearing the end of a BSN program at a private, non-profit university in the US South. From their experiences, I examined how the institution contributed to Black women's feelings of mattering. I identified that throughout their time in the program, the institution constantly sent students clear messages that their needs, their experiences, their feelings, and their humanity do not matter. I identified that the institution communicates this lack of mattering through patterns of manipulation, dehumanization, and the fostering of a culture that accepts widespread student failure as a normal and acceptable outcome. More than individualized instances of racism and sexism, students' identities as Black women contributed to systemic and institutionalized forms of racism and sexism that exploit, devalue, and abandon Black women college students to fight for their education on their own in systems not built for their success. I also identified that these patterns of manipulation, dehumanization, and acceptance of student failure all operate within the multiple domains of a matrix of domination through a prioritization of Parkline's institutional interests of revenue and maintaining NCLEX pass rate compliance over the students' interests to succeed through and beyond graduation.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will outline how the findings of this study connect to prior literature and advance scholarship that centers Black women. I will also present a list of demands to the institution based on the voices of the participants in this study, and I will provide my suggestions for future research that could build off these findings. Lastly, I will discuss how the process of this study has changed me both personally and academically.

Connection to Prior Literature/Advancing Scholarship

There exists little prior research that explicitly examines Black women college students and their experiences of mattering in diverse institutional settings. Much research that does center Black college women's experiences does so in the context of PWIs. Research in PWIs is still highly needed and frequently highlights instances of targeted, individualized racism, sexism, and gendered racism wherein Black women often experience stereotyping, microaggressions, exclusion, and invisibility in spaces not made for us. As my own experiences in college have been at a PWI, I am more familiar than I wish to be with the damage that these spaces have caused and the difficulties in surviving, let alone thriving, in PWIs.

This study, however, did not take place in a PWI. Rather, I spoke to Black women college students in an institution that Commodore et al. (2018) would refer to as a “forgotten institution” in which Black women are overrepresented and yet in which little research has been conducted. The institution I examined is private, with a student body comprised of primarily Black women. Though the institution is currently nonprofit, it was founded and operated as a for-profit institution for decades. Because many Black women attend these “forgotten institutions”, it is important to engage in research that develops our understanding of what exactly this large portion of Black college women are experiencing.

Porter, in her 2022 article, studies and discusses Black women college students' sense of mattering at PWIs, highlighting the exhaustion and pain that feelings of marginality and isolation cause in these environments. There are similarities in the findings of my study and those of Porter's, namely that in both environments, participants describe deep emotional and psychological consequences to dedicating all one's energy on surviving unsupportive environments rather than thriving in environments meant to lift us up. Porter also talks about an

institutional perpetuation of unworthiness in Black college women at PWIs that aligns with Parkline students feeling “less-than” and having to fight to be seen as deserving of being there. She writes about Black college women at PWIs being “surrounded by people who don’t love on us”, which has parallels to the Parkline students in this study feeling that they are not seen in their times of struggle nor in their times of success – no one at Parkline is rooting for them.

There are also nuances in the context of the “forgotten institution” that make Black women college student experiences different than in the context of the PWI. I find that at Parkline, the messages to Black women college students are more systemic and institutionalized rather than interpersonal and individualized. Whereas in PWIs, Black women college students may feel singled out and treated differently than their white peers, Parkline operates to treat all its students, that *happen to be* primarily Black and woman, as not fully human. In the Sista circles I conducted, many of the participants initially expressed that they felt that Parkline’s actions were not influenced by race or gender because they saw the treatment they received as not different from the few white students attending Parkline, though Avery later wonders if it is perhaps not a coincidence that Parkline is majority-Black women and provides “subpar” services. Mateo captures this difference eloquently by pointing out that “the things that they do are racial. And how they get us is that it is generalized...they do these things for the majority of us, and then the rest [the few white students] are collateral damage”. I agree with Mateo.

In reflecting on participants experiences and my own experiences being a Black woman college student in a PWI, I certainly felt there were differences in the mechanisms at play in the different contexts, though I also felt that through different pathways often the same outcomes were reached. For example, in my experience attending a PWI as an undergrad, I constantly felt excluded from other students and the campus community. I didn’t have many friends or

classmates I could join study groups with, and I felt largely on my own. While I may have felt this way because I did not feel accepted or welcomed by my white counterparts, Parkline students I spoke with also expressed feeling isolated and lacking community and support but for different reasons. The constant exodus of students through failing, withdrawing, and finances has created a disjointed cohort and the institution made no efforts to provide spaces for them to connect with each other. Students also reported having spent the majority of their time in survival mode which has made it difficult for them to connect with their peers, even creating an at-times hostile and competitive environment amongst themselves and stifling collaboration.

This research advances scholarship by shedding more light on the specific structural mechanisms Black women college students must navigate and overcome in these environments that are not made for their success. While PWIs are often created for *white* student success and serve as crooked rooms for Black women, certain “forgotten institutions” in which many Black women attend college may not be created for *any* student success, and target and trap Black women at much higher rates than their white counterparts through manipulative recruitment tactics. Black women at PWIs may experience more interpersonal, individualized instances of racism and sexism but be in closer proximity to higher quality teaching, services, and resources, whereas Black women at some types of “forgotten institutions” may be treated “equally” within the institution but nevertheless unjustly by having very limited access to these potential benefits.

In Carey et al.’s 2022 work on mattering in Black boys, they outline a framework for mattering that consists of marginal, partial, and comprehensive mattering, as well as certain antimattering institutional practices that actively work against students’ sense of mattering. Though not centering Black college women, Carey et al.’s work is of interest in that it centers race in examining the concept of mattering for Black students and provides a detailed framework

as a starting place to explore Black women's experiences. In conducting this study centering Black women college students, I saw both parallels in the ways Black women experienced mattering and differences from Carey et al.'s framework on Black boys. In the framework, they refer to partial mattering as mattering in which some aspects or talents of the individual are valued but they do not matter as full humans. A strong example of this partial mattering can be seen in student athletics, where Black boys are often seen as valuable in the context of sports but useless in their academic prowess and along other dimensions of their humanity. While highly problematic, partial mattering did provide some protections and advantages for the Black boys in Carey et al.'s study who may have received extra support, even if only during the sports season, and a certain amount of selective attention and praise from teachers and administrators around sports.

When thinking about partial mattering with the Black women participants at Parkline, I found that they were mostly valued by the institution for their ability to provide revenue in ways unconnected to their particular individual talents. Kensley described wanting to feel like more than a "seat filled", a physical body that could really be any body at all. She later describes that Parkline knows how much a semester costs, so they are ok with students failing and having to repeat courses. Mateo similarly describes students as "matter[ing] as much as the check clears". Students that dropped out still provided a semester or two of tuition to Parkline, and actually failing students and causing them to repeat courses could be seen as a win for Parkline who obtains additional revenue for retaken courses if the student persists. Partial mattering for these students was less about their specific talents and more about existing at all. The value to the institution then comes in the quantity of students, in recruiting enough generic bodies to be exploited for however much can be extracted – the prize not coming from any one person but

from the sum of the exploitation of many. As Parkline also has to maintain NCLEX pass rates, it is advantageous to them to “weed out” those that are unlikely to do well on their own, extracting a few semesters of tuition from them and continuing to extract more from those that can manage to “fight to survive” longer.

In exploring this, I reflected on my own experiences entering, remaining in, persisting through, and even continuing to seek out institutional spaces that I have learned are not meant for me. I have more recently come to see my own exploitation not by being offered tangible rewards from institutions but through my own value system as a resilient Black woman. As Kensley and I reflected, our determination sometimes causes us to stay in situations that harm us, begging the question “how much trauma am I accumulating?” to prove to others who “don’t love on us”, and perhaps to ourselves, that we deserve to be here? Black college women then can be particularly vulnerable for the exact traits that make us so incredible: our determination, pride, resilience, and ability – or perhaps our necessity – to survive against all odds.

In the next section, I present recommendations to Parkline, and all institutions with Black women students, in the form of a list of demands titled “SHOW US WE MATTER”. I decided to create this list of demands to honor the long history that Black feminist work has surrounding organizing and political activism, as well as spoken word and poetry that give Black women’s perspectives both power and voice with a clarity and simplicity that resonates with many. I have based this list of demands on the lived experiences, stories, and frustrations of the six Black women students I spoke with, as well as my own experiences as a Black women student myself constantly navigating spaces that tell me we don’t matter.

SHOW US WE MATTER

Show us we matter by seeing us as humans, not dollar signs.

Show us we matter by knowing our names, letting us eat food, and talking to us like adults.

Show us we matter by letting us use the spaces and resources we pay for; by giving us more than the bare minimum.

Show us we matter by assuming we deserve to be here, not making us prove it to you again and again.

Show us we matter by listening to us when we tell you what we need, not calling us aggressive when we advocate for ourselves.

Show us we matter by standing with us, not against us; by lifting us up, not holding us down.

Show us we matter by celebrating our wins and reaching out to us during our times of struggle.

Show us we matter by not forcing us to fight for our lives in classes we are paying to take.

Show us we matter by providing support for ALL of us to be successful, not setting us up for failure.

Show us we matter by acknowledging and valuing our efforts, not weighting exams so that one bad day erases all our work for an entire semester.

Show us we matter by having consistent, competent, and available leadership that protects us and holds instructors and institutional staff accountable.

Show us we matter by taking responsibility for the environment you create, not gaslighting us into thinking we are always to blame.

Show us we matter by recognizing we are mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends as well as students.

Show us we matter by acknowledging we have to work to live and supporting us in doing so.

Show us we matter by prioritizing our mental health; by seeing our struggles and giving us time to heal.

Show us we matter by giving us grace for being humans.

Don't tell us we matter, *show* us.

Limitations

I approach this limitations section firmly grounded in Black Feminist Epistemology that challenges Eurocentric knowledge validation processes. While Eurocentric knowledge validation processes may stress the importance of things like achieving the “truth” or saturation through high participant numbers in qualitative work, I claim that the lived experiences of the participants in the study and the rich dialogue and empathy shared in the Sista circles is enough to make this study relevant, important, and compelling. I can, however, discuss some practical limitations of the implementation of this specific study that could generate additional discussion and inspire future research.

One practical limitation of the study is that I interacted with each participant primarily at one point in time as each student participated in one Sista Circle. While we had rich, empowering, and insightful discussions during those Sista Circles, it would be interesting to be able to meet with participants on multiple occasions, perhaps having time to think of and ask

follow-up questions to some of the comments they made and delve into topics even deeper. I also had relatively small Sista Circles consisting of just me and two student participants. I chose this size so each participant would be actively involved in the virtual (Zoom) Sista Circle as I have found it easier to participate fully in virtual groups of smaller size. However, given the importance of dialogue in Black Feminist Epistemology, having larger Sista Circle groups and perhaps in person groups could have further stimulated dialogue and generated more ideas amongst the participants.

Another practical limitation involves the absence of member or participant reflections. I did intend to include participant reflections on my preliminary analysis of the Sista Circle conversations and sent my analysis to the participants inviting them to reflect, but I did not receive responses back from the participants. This may have been due to the end-of-semester time in which I sent this invitation as participants may have had many other competing priorities. I would have loved to have heard participants reactions and conversations regarding the themes, subthemes, and overarching thread that I identified through their stories at Parkline.

Lastly, I wanted to highlight the diversity of participants and the many intersecting identities they brought to the Sista Circles that due to time we weren't able to delve into. While this study focused on their intersecting identities as Black and woman, Black women are not a monolith and bring with them identities related to class, sexuality, work status, motherhood, caregiver, geography, and numerous other facets that shape their unique standpoints and experiences. Exploring these identities more explicitly would surely lead to more conversations and insights.

Future Research

The findings from this study point to several important directions for future research. First, comparative studies across nursing programs – particularly between predominantly Black institutions, PWIs, and HBCUs – could help illuminate whether the conditions described here are specific to Parkline or reflective of broader patterns within nursing education in different contexts. Such work could further explore how institutional type, funding model, and student demographics shape experiences of mattering, support, and failure for Black women students.

Given participants' concerns about post-graduation outcomes, future research might also adopt a longitudinal approach, following Black women nursing students beyond graduation to examine licensure outcomes, job placement, specialty access, and long-term career satisfaction. This work could provide insight into how educational environments that normalize failure or neglect student wellbeing affect professional and personal trajectories over time.

Several participants described significant mental health consequences tied to high-stakes, low-support educational structures. Future studies could center the mental and emotional impacts of nursing education on Black women specifically, examining how institutional practices contribute to burnout, anxiety, and disengagement, as well as what forms of institutional care and accountability might mitigate these harms.

Additional research is also needed on culturally responsive and culturally competent teaching within nursing education. Participants' critiques of one-size-fits-all pedagogy suggest a need to examine how teaching practices, assessment structures, and faculty preparation either affirm or marginalize Black women learners.

Finally, future inquiry might more deeply explore the racialized and gendered dynamics within predominantly Black educational spaces, including intragroup tensions, internalized

oppression, and gendered racism among Black women in positions of authority. Such research could complicate dominant narratives that assume racial representation alone ensures equity and instead foreground how power, hierarchy, and institutional incentives operate even within Black-majority contexts.

Together, these directions point toward a broader research agenda that centers Black women's lived experiences, challenges deficit-oriented framings of student failure, and interrogates the institutional conditions that shape who is supported, who survives, and who is allowed to succeed.

My Journey through Dissertating

Lastly, I want to share about the complex journey I have experienced personally, emotionally, and academically throughout this dissertation process. After finishing my coursework and as I began the dissertation phase of my PhD, I was very unclear of my identity as an academic and a researcher. I felt fairly jaded about the value of academia, educational research, and the impact it could have on the lives of people outside of the “ivory tower” as I felt much of the more “traditional” educational psychology research I had been exposed to had little to do with me and my world.

As I began trying to plan and prepare for the dissertation phase, I became very discouraged and fell into a depression that I didn't quite understand at the time. Therapy helped me to see that this depression was largely influenced by my experiences of isolation, exclusion, unfair stereotyping, and lack of support within my institution. I felt I had put so much into my journey to get as far as I had, I had proven to myself and – I thought – to others that I was a “good student” worthy of investing in, only to be abandoned when I needed support the most. This experience was both painful and eye-opening as I have long explained away other difficult

experiences throughout my life as being about something else, not about how my intersecting identities as a Black woman impact the ways I am perceived and the interactions I have with others. I had to come to terms with the reality that these identities do matter and paint how I navigate the world.

In discovering the work of Black feminism, I was given the gift of understanding experiences even back into my childhood where I had no help or Black community to help me understand what was happening to me. I cried many times throughout this process as I journalled and wrote of my past experiences and the hurt they have caused me – never fully able to process them before without the language and understanding of others’ experiences like mine. I began to understand the deep unmet need I have always had of being around other Black people and Black women and realizing I am not alone in the struggles I have experienced throughout my life. Since this discovery, I have made a conscious and persistent effort to connect with other Black people and Black women by joining Black women writing groups, groups for Black PhD students, and reaching out through those groups to form connections and lift each other up. This experience has been as painful as it has been healing as I have both come to painful realizations but also found avenues of understanding, community, support, and love.

Given the powerful emotional healing I have discovered throughout this journey and in encountering the academic work of other Black women scholars, I have also reimagined what it means for me to be a part of academia. I have come to see that there are avenues to pursue that I was not aware of before – that there are bodies of work from incredible Black women before me that can serve to give power, voice, agency, understanding, and encouragement to Black women both inside and outside of academia. Because of the profound impact their work has had on me, I have gained clarity that this is the type of academic work I would like to contribute to.

Reading the words of my participants as I have over and over again throughout the transcription and analysis process of this work has been painful at times as I feel much of their pain throughout their experiences. It has also been soul-feeding as we listened to and validated each other together, engaging in supportive Sista circles that make us feel we are not alone and that we are worthy of being heard.

In many instances throughout this study, I have felt somewhat conflicted about how to write about the institution discussed in this study, an institution that I currently work for. I have wondered if I am somehow being disloyal or betraying my employer by writing this work. Sara Ahmed writes in her 2012 book about institutions that may display symbolic commitments to diversity that do not benefit minoritized individuals. Of the role of diversity workers, she writes:

[D]iversity workers acquire a critical orientation to institutions in the process of coming up against them. They become conscious of “the brick wall,” as that which keeps its place even when an official commitment to diversity has been given. Only the practical labor of “coming up against” the institution allows this wall to become apparent. To those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear—the institution is lived and experienced as being open, committed, and diverse. (p. 174)

While that intrusive thought of disloyalty to my employer has repeatedly appeared, I have chosen to “come up against” the institution and shed light on the “brick wall” that protects institutional complacency and negligence. I choose to stand with Black women first, regardless of the consequences, and I will not water down their – our – experiences to protect institutions that often do not protect us. Though difficult, I am deeply grateful for the clarity that this process has given me about my own values and commitments. I will take these commitments with me wherever I go throughout my career as an educator, navigating the world as a Black woman, and

as I become a mother to our first child, Dominic, that will soon be born as I conclude this dissertation.

Conclusion

This dissertation has illuminated the lived experiences of Black women nursing students at Parkline University through the lens of Black feminist thought, revealing a complex and often painful narrative of survival, resistance, and resilience within an institution that claims to support student success. Across the themes uncovered, from institutional manipulation and dehumanization to the pervasive culture of “failure IS an option”, students shared stories that challenge the university’s public image and highlight a deep disconnect between stated and enacted values.

Students’ testimonies painted a portrait of a program in which success feels conditional, support is often performative, and the burden to thrive falls disproportionately on the shoulders of those who are already marginalized. Participants described being misled into the program, trapped by financial and academic investments, and routinely placed in environments that were demoralizing, hostile, or indifferent to their needs. Their narratives expose a recurring pattern: Parkline’s structures and policies often operate in ways that normalize failure, obscure responsibility, and displace accountability onto students themselves.

Crucially, these findings also reveal the emotional, mental, and physical costs of navigating such an environment - not only on the ability of students to learn and succeed but on their well-being and self-worth. The resilience and resourcefulness of these women, while admirable, should not be prerequisites for survival in higher education. This study calls on

institutions, not students, to be held accountable for the policies, patterns, and environments they create to ensure that all students, including Black women students, can achieve holistic success.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on Black women's experiences in professional education by centering their voices and epistemologies. It calls for urgent reflection and reform at institutional levels to confront and dismantle systemic practices that perpetuate inequity and harm. As we envision the future of nursing education, it is essential that we move beyond rhetoric and performative inclusion and instead build programs that are truly rooted in care, justice, and the transformative possibilities of equitable learning environments.

The participants in this study and all Black women college students deserve more than survival – we deserve to thrive. This research is a call to action to ensure that the next generation of Black women students are not left to fight alone.

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Appendix A

Auburn University IRB Exempt Determination



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

August 14, 2025

Carey Andrzejewski

345 W Samford Ave. Room 3324

Auburn Univ, AL 36849 334-844-3012

cea0011@auburn.edu

Dear Carey Andrzejewski:

On 8/14/2025, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Protocol Information	Submission Details
Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Black college nursing students' experiences of mattering at a private, majority-Black campus
Investigator:	Carey Andrzejewski
IRB ID:	STUDY00000730
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	N/A
Grant ID:	None
IND, IDE or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • citiCompletionCertificate_6145364_69801593.pdf, Category: Training Document; • citiCompletionCertificate_AROSS.pdf, Category: Training Document; • HRP-503a - AROSS - Exempt Protocol.pdf, Category: IRB Protocol; • HRP-504a - AROSS - Non-AU Site Permission to Conduct Research 7-23-25.pdf, Category: External IRB Correspondence; • HRP-581 - TEMPLATE - Information Letter.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Member Reflection Protocol.docx, Category: Script; • Pre-Interview Touchpoint Protocol.docx, Category: Script; • Recruitment Email .pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Sista Circle Protocol.docx, Category: Script;

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. This determination is valid through 8/14/2028. The IRB has implemented a three-year determination period for Exempt submissions to better manage the active research portfolio.

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In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in HRP-103

- INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a modification in the Endeavor system.

Sincerely,

IRB Administration

540 Devall Drive Auburn, AL 36849

irbadmin@auburn.edu

(334) 844-5966

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Version Date: July 31, 2023

Appendix B

Participant Information Letter

INFORMATION LETTER

Title of research study: Black college nursing students' experiences of mattering on a private, majority-Black campus

Investigator: Dr. Carey Andrzejewski, Dr. Hannah Baggett, Audrey Ross

You are invited to participate in a research study to explore how Black women nursing students define and experience mattering at their institution. This research seeks to center the voices of Black women, whose experiences have often been overlooked in higher education research. Findings from this study may help educators, administrators, and researchers better understand how to create institutional environments where Black women are valued and supported. The study is being conducted by Audrey Ross, Doctoral Candidate, under the direction of Dr. Carey Andrzejewski and Hannah Baggett in the Auburn University Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a Black woman who is currently enrolled in the Bachelor's of Science in Nursing at Herzing University's Atlanta campus.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual Sista Circle via Zoom with 1-2 other Black women nursing students. These are small, semi-structured group conversations that allow participants to share their stories and reflect on their experiences of mattering on campus. The session will be audio- and video-recorded for transcription and analysis. You will also be invited to review a brief summary of findings later in the study to offer feedback, but this step is optional. Your total time commitment will be approximately 65–120 minutes.

Are there any risks or discomforts? The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. You may experience mild emotional discomfort when discussing personal experiences related to mattering or marginalization. There is also a small risk of loss of confidentiality because the study takes place in a group setting. These risks will be reduced by reminding participants of confidentiality expectations, using pseudonyms, and securely storing all data.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? If you participate in this study, you may find value in having a supportive space to share your experiences with other Black women nursing students. The benefit to researchers and the broader community is to better understand how institutions can affirm the value and significance of Black women students. We/I cannot promise you that you will receive any or all of the benefits described.

Will you receive compensation for participating? To thank you for your time you will be offered \$40 in the form of a gift card or CashApp/Venmo payment.

Are there any costs? If you decide to participate, there are no costs you will have to pay. Auburn University has not provided for any payment if you are harmed as a result of participating in this study.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University, the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology, or Herzing University.

Any data obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous after data collection. We will protect your privacy and the data you provide by using pseudonyms in any final works to protect your identity, both for you and for your institution. Participants in the Sista Circles will be asked to keep any information or experiences discussed confidential and not share what they have heard outside of the circle. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting.

If you have questions about this study, please ask them now or contact Audrey Ross at auross@herzing.edu or principal investigator Dr. Carey Andrzejewski at cea0011@auburn.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334) 844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO. THIS LETTER IS YOURS TO KEEP.

Appendix C

Sista Circle Protocol

Purpose

Sista Circles are small, semi-structured group conversations designed to center the voices and experiences of Black women nursing students. They provide a culturally grounded, supportive space for participants to share their stories, affirm one another, and contribute to knowledge production about mattering in higher education. The researcher is also a participant in Sista Circle methodology and will share her experiences as well as a Black woman college student.

Format

- Platform: Zoom (password-protected)
- Facilitator: Researcher (principal investigator)
- Group Size: 2-4 participants per circle
- Duration: 60-90 minutes
- Recording: Audio and video recorded for transcription and analysis (with participant consent)

Procedures

1. Pre-Session Preparation

- Confirm the Zoom link and email it to participants at least 24 hours in advance.
- Prepare discussion guide questions aligned with the study's research aims.
- Test audio, video, and recording tools.
- Set up a private and distraction-free environment.

2. Session Opening (10 minutes)

- Welcome: Greet participants and thank them for joining.
- Grounding: Begin with a brief introduction to the purpose of the session and the importance of their voices in the study.
- Consent Check: Confirm participants' verbal consent to record the session.
- Confidentiality Agreement: Review confidentiality expectations
- Obtain verbal affirmation from all participants.
- Community Guidelines: Invite participants to add or affirm community agreements
- Compensation after conversation

3. Participant Introductions (5 minutes)

- Ask participants to briefly introduce themselves (e.g., name, year in the program)

4. Main Discussion (40–60 minutes)

Facilitator will guide the conversation using a semi-structured approach, asking open-ended questions such as:

- Do you both know each other? Brief introductions
- Just curious about your background before Herzing – where did you grow up? Who did you grow up with? Did you go to school anywhere before? Did you work before/do you work now? Have you always wanted to be a nurse? Did you ever try anything else out?
- What brought you to Herzing? What brought you to nursing? Why did you decide to get a BSN? What decisions came first?
- What has your experience at Herzing been like so far?
- Let's start with the first semester at Herzing, what was that like for you? How did you feel about your decision to come to Herzing after the first semester?
- Did things get easier the next semester? Harder? What happened?
- What were you experiencing emotionally throughout your journey?
- Did you have a support system that helped you through your journey? What helped you? What hindered you?
- What are some of the biggest struggles you've experienced throughout your journey?
- When you've been struggling, do you feel Herzing has helped you? In what ways? What support would you have liked to see from Herzing?
- When you have been successful, do you feel that Herzing has celebrated you? In what ways? What would you have liked to see from Herzing?
- Do you feel like Herzing has made decisions that negatively impacted you? Why do you think those decisions were made?
- Have there been any changes or decisions Herzing made that positively impacted you? Why do you think Herzing made those changes?
- What are some salient experiences you have had throughout your experience at Herzing, good or bad?
- Do you ever think about what it means to be a Black woman in college? Does your race or gender ever come up in your experiences?
- How do you feel about the way that Herzing treats you as Black women college students?
- Do you feel Herzing cares about your well-being? What makes you feel like that?
- Do you feel like you matter at Herzing?
- What are some things you wish Herzing would do to support you?
- Why don't you think Herzing does more of those things to support you?
- When you think about mattering on campus, what does that mean to you?
- Can you share a time when you felt like you truly mattered here?
- Are there moments when you felt invisible or overlooked? What was that like?
- What helps you feel supported and valued in this program?
- What do you wish faculty, staff, or administrators understood about your experience?

The facilitator will:

- Encourage participants to share and respond to one another.
- Share my own experiences in college as a Black woman myself.
- Allow for natural conversation while ensuring all voices are heard.
- Take brief reflexive notes (without distracting from facilitation).

5. Closing (10–15 minutes)

- Reflection Round: Invite each participant to share a closing thought, takeaway, or feeling from the conversation.
- Next Steps: Explain the optional member reflection process.

- Compensation Reminder: Inform participants about when and how they will receive their \$40 compensation.
- Appreciation: Thank participants for their time, insight, and willingness to share.

Post-Session Procedures

- End the recording and save it directly to AU Box (encrypted and password-protected).
- Write a brief reflexive memo summarizing key insights and observations.
- Send compensation to participants within 24-48 hours.
- Follow up with participants about the optional member reflection session.