Examining How Current Higher Education Outdoor Experiential Education Program Structure Impacts Inclusion of African American Students

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OUTDOOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

EXAMINING HOW CURRENT HIGHER EDUCATION OUTDOOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM STRUCTURE IMPACTS INCLUSION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

By

Albert M. Mitugo

An Applied Dissertation submitted to
Department of Education Policy and Leadership
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Spring 2022
Dissertation Approval

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This dissertation submitted by Albert Mituyo has been read and approved by the following faculty members of the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development at Southern Methodist University. The final copy has been examined by the Dissertation Committee and the signatures which appear here verify the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given the final approval with reference to content, form and mechanical accuracy.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, John and Joyce Mitugo, my wife Wangechi, my daughter Wanjiru, my son Mitugo and to all the students I have spent many days and nights with, enjoying the outdoor classroom over the years.
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Ubuntu- *I am what I am because of who we all are*

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Abstract

Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) in higher education is a common and important method of student learning and engagement in the curricular and co-curricular arenas. Because of its importance, many institutions have an OEE program, usually housed in campus recreation for co-curricular student engagement or in academic units for credit-bearing OEE undertakings. The importance of OEE in higher education is widely documented for its impact on college students’ change in environmental attitudes, interpersonal development, resilience, risk management, self-efficacy, self-esteem, sense of belonging, and transition in college.

Little has been studied about African American students’ engagement in higher education OEE programming and how OEE program structures may impact their inclusion in engagement. This study sought to pay attention to that gap in knowledge. The research question for this study was: How does the current higher education OEE structure impact African American students’ inclusion in programming? Using data from three higher education institutions located in the South-Central region of the United States, I sought to answer the research question. This study integrated Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) and a conceptual framework that was developed by the researcher. CRT highlights the importance of looking closely at and attempting to understand the socio-cultural factors that shape how we and others perceive, experience, and respond to dominant structures.

In late summer and early fall of 2021, nine interviews were conducted (three from each institution) with full-time professional staff who were directly involved with OEE programming or campus recreation. In addition to the interviews, documents from the three institutions related to OEE, campus recreation, and other institutional documents were analyzed.

Many of the findings in this study were consistent with the theoretical framework used and the conceptual framework developed. Specifically, the study found that African American students’ inclusion in higher education OEE programming seemed to be negatively affected by the current program structures like hiring, recruitment, marketing and curriculum and that racial history played a significant role in the current OEE program structure. Practice recommendations include professional development in diversity, equity, and inclusion for professional staff, targeted marketing, and recruitment for student participants, as well as intentional social justice-based programming.
Table of Contents

Dissertation Approval ............................................................. ii
Dedication ............................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements ............................................................... iv
Abstract ................................................................................ v
Table of Contents ................................................................. vi

I. Introduction ........................................................................... 1

Problem of Practice .............................................................. 2
Purpose of the Study and Research Question ......................... 3
Key Definitions ....................................................................... 4
Theoretical and Conceptual Model ........................................ 8
Interest in Research Study ..................................................... 10
Summary ................................................................................ 11

II. Literature Review ............................................................. 12

Historical perspective .......................................................... 12
History of African Americans in Education ......................... 13
History of OEE in Higher Education .................................... 16
Systemic and Economic Barriers ......................................... 17
Importance of OEE ............................................................. 18
Social and Environmental Justice ........................................ 20
III. Methods ........................................................................................................23
   Epistemology and Positionality .................................................................24
   Research Sites and Participant Profiles ..............................................26
   Nimbus University (NU) ...........................................................................26
      Nimbus University Participants ........................................................27
   Cumulus University (CU) .........................................................................27
      Cumulus University Participants .........................................................28
   Stratus University (SU) ..........................................................................29
      Stratus University Participants ........................................................29
   Data Collection .........................................................................................30
      Interview Questions ...........................................................................30
      Interviews ..........................................................................................30
      Interview Format ................................................................................31
      Pilot Interview ....................................................................................32
      Documents ........................................................................................33
   Data Analysis ..........................................................................................34
      Potential Limitations of Study Design ..............................................35
      Improving Data Quality .....................................................................35
   Conclusion ...............................................................................................36

IV. Findings ......................................................................................................38
   OEE Programming ...................................................................................39
   Importance of OEE ...............................................................................39
   Institutional Support ...............................................................................41
   African American Student Inclusion ....................................................43
Structural Barriers to Inclusion .................................45

History ........................................................................45

Recruitment .............................................................48

Marketing Strategies ..............................................52

Stereotyping ............................................................54

Tokenism .................................................................55

Conclusion .....................................................................55

V. Implications and Recommendations ........................57

Summary of Study ....................................................57

Discussion ..............................................................59

Revising the Conceptual Framework .......................60

Alignment of Mission Statement and Practice .............61

Importance of OEE in Higher Education ....................62

Racial Diversity in OEE Programming .......................63

Impact of Current OEE Program Structure ................63

Structural Racism .....................................................64

Institutional Racism ..................................................65

Socioeconomic Status ..............................................65

Marketing and Recruitment ......................................66

Lack of Role Models .................................................67

Lack of Sense of Belonging ......................................68

Curriculum ............................................................69

Stereotyping ............................................................71

Tokenism .................................................................71
Recommendations............................................................72

Recommendations for Practice ........................................72

Intentional Programming ..........................................74

Social Justice-Focused Curriculum/Programming. .......75

Collaboration..................................................................76

Be Vulnerable as OEE Practitioners. .........................76

Professional Development for OEE Practitioners.......77

Create Role Models ......................................................77

Getting Involved in Local K-12 Schools. ....................78

Celebrate Small Victories...............................................78

Recommendations for Future Research.........................79

Conclusion .........................................................................80

Appendix A-F 82

References 92

List of Tables

Table 1 Summary of Recommendations for Practice ......................................................... 72
Introduction

The population of African Americans in the United States (U.S.) is about 44 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), and in 2019, postsecondary undergraduate enrollment of African American students was at 2.2 million (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2020). These statistics show that African Americans are a sizeable population both nationally and within higher education and should, therefore, be able to inclusively participate in all levels and types of curricular and co-curricular educational activities (including out-of-class experiential education). This type of learning in non-traditional classroom settings in the form of team or group activities, icebreakers, low ROPES (Repetitive Obstacle Performance Evaluation System) and high ROPES challenge courses is mainly experience-based, meaning that it is done by doing, also referred to as Experiential Education (EE) which can either be curricular or co-curricular.

Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE)¹ is a form of learning used by many individuals and establishments across the U.S., including in many outdoor education-based institutions like the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), Outward Bound (OB), Boy Scouts of America, and Girls Scouts of America (Finney, 2014; Forgan & Jones, 2002; Mills, 2014; Rose & Paisley, 2012). OEE emerged in higher education institutions as early as 1909 with the founding of the Dartmouth Outing Club (Daniels, 1938) but spread in the 1970s after the inaugural conference on outdoor pursuits in higher education which was held at Appalachian State University in 1974 (Smathers, 1974), and since then, many academic programs (e.g. at

¹ Other terms commonly used are Outdoor Adventure Education, Wilderness Education, Outdoor Education and Outdoor Pursuits.
Humboldt State University-Arcata, CA and Westminster College, UT) have granted degrees in OEE, outdoor recreation, outdoor leadership and environmental conservation (Bell et al., 2017). OEE is also delivered as a co-curricular activity through outdoor adventure or outdoor pursuits programs as is the case at Southern Methodist University and Texas A&M University, College Station (Stirling & Kerr, 2015).

**Problem of Practice**

Lack of racial diversity (especially with respect to African Americans) in OEE in the U.S. has been a consistent problem of practice (Finney, 2014; Ghimire et al., 2016; Gress & Hall, 2017; Warren, 2019) and there is a sizeable body of literature speaking to the lack of racial diversity in OEE in general (Finney, 2014; Mills, 2014) in kindergarten through 12th-grade institutions (K-12) (Kalbert, 2018) and in some post-secondary institutions like the National Outdoor Leadership and Outward Bound outdoor schools (Gress & Hall, 2017). However, a gap exists in the literature around the lack of African American student participation specifically in higher education OEE programming. For this study, the term African American is not synonymous with Black because individuals of African origin associated with voluntary migration to the U.S. are also referred to as Blacks (Agyemang et al., 2005). In this study, I limited myself to involuntary migrants who are tied to the history of their descendants being brought to the U.S. as slaves or against their will. Specifically, not much has been found that empirically evaluates the extent of this gap on a wide scale in higher education. A few dissertations have focused on the status of social-justice integration in higher education OEE (e.g. Frazer, 2009; Larson, 2010); these studies perceived benefits and barriers of higher education OEE for African Americans in the state of Mississippi that found that African Americans are socially and culturally underrepresented in OEE (Davis, 2018). Additionally, they
considered the importance and barriers of OEE programming at a historically black college and university (HBCU), which showed the association of Whiteness with OEE programming as a barrier to OEE participation (Smith, 2018). In the field of general campus recreation programming, the need for more inclusive environments was identified (Hoang et al., 2016; Kaltenbaugh et al., 2014). I argue that because there is a lack of African American inclusion in OEE in general, there likely is a lack of their inclusion in higher education OEE programming.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

This qualitative study interrogated African American students’ inclusion in higher education OEE programming by answering the following research question: How does the current OEE program structure in higher education impact the level of African American students’ inclusion in higher education OEE programing? The concept of structure can be looked at as a relationship between parts of a unit. A building as a structure can be seen as the relationship between the foundation, the wall and the ceiling, just like the human body structure is the relationship between tissues, bones, and organs (Ahmady et al., 2016). For an organization, the structure is the relationship between operating processes, methods, systems, and people and how they do things (Monavarian et al., 2007).

I define the structure (Hammond, 2004) as hiring, hierarchy, interview protocols for new student employees or participants, curriculum design and terminology, program leadership demographics, cost of participation, programming activities, and best practices.

Addressing this research question helps contribute to the body of empirical knowledge through broadening of literature available to OEE educators about how current higher education OEE structure may influence African American students’ inclusion in programming. It will help policymakers, institutional leaders, and other educators create higher education OEE structures
that provide supportive environments that promote African American students’ inclusion in OEE programming.

Studying African American student inclusion in higher education OEE is important for two reasons. First, the mental and physical benefits associated with OEE as a classroom or lab for human beings (Andre et al., 2017), regardless of race and ethnicity, contribute to individual development and well-being in terms of good self-concept, improved self-actualization, motivation, improved self-efficacy and improved physical health (Forgan & Jones, 2002). Looking through this lens, access to and inclusion in OEE is a social justice issue. If a certain demographic of students lack access to an opportunity that they all should have (Kikuchi, 2004), then this may indicate social injustice. Secondly, studying racial diversity in OEE, in general, is important because conserving and preserving (through awareness) outdoor and green spaces where these experiences take place is critical as outdoor classrooms (Warren, 2005). With the rapidly changing demographics in the country, the current White majority may become a minority by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), so there is need to continue addressing the lack of inclusion of African Americans (and other minorities) in higher education OEE, since OEE spaces have historically been White (Finney, 2014; Gress & Hall, 2017). Warren et al. (2014) argued that if minorities are not exposed to and involved in OEE, then, as their numbers increase, their interest in protecting and preserving these outdoor classrooms and spaces will be diminished. Therefore, in addition to being a social injustice issue, African Americans’ lack of access to outdoor spaces also becomes an environmental injustice. The research question and purpose of this study helped identify and focus on this gap in the literature.

**Key Definitions**

To establish an understanding of common terms used within the field of OEE and those relevant for the present study, this section outlines key definitions. The concept of structure can
be looked at as a relationship between parts of a unit. A building as a structure can be seen as the relationship between the foundation, the wall and the ceiling just like the human body structure is the relationship between tissues, bones, and organs (Ahmady et al., 2016). For an organization, the structure is the relationship between operating processes, methods, systems, and people and how they do things (Monavarian et al., 2007). OEE program structure is defined as as hiring, hierarchy, interview protocols for new student employees or participants, curriculum design and terminology, program leadership demographics, cost of participation, programming activities, and best practices (Hammond, 2004). Organizational structure and culture intersect to influence how processes and systems work and how personalities drive perceptions and interpretations of leadership roles (Shivers-Blackwell, 2006).

For the target population in study, I define African American students as involuntary migrants who are tied to the history of their descendants being brought to the U.S. as slaves or against their will (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

Higher education OEE encompasses a range of activities that include challenge obstacle courses, outdoor trips, and indoor climbing facilities. The use of challenge obstacle courses started as far back as 1941 in the military and by the British Outward Bound School (Wagstaff, 2015) but did not get to the Colorado Outward Bound School until the 1960s. For challenge courses, there are two main program designs: challenge by choice design and inviting optimum participation design. The challenge by choice design simply invites participants to engage in what they are comfortable trying without feeling any pressure e.g., walking in a straight line. The inviting optimum participation design tends to provide more opportunities and more choice for experience (e.g. taking part in a trust fall) and participants are more likely to be involved in low ROPES and group efficiency activities as opposed to the challenge by choice design (Haras et al., 2006). Challenge courses are used in recreational and educational spaces, therapeutically and
developmentally, as well as in hospitals, corporate training centers and camps (Rohnke et al., 2003) because of their benefits to the mind and physique (Parrish et al., 2005).

The Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT) is a professional trade organization founded in 1993 that writes the standards for construction and manages these standards (Gillis & Speelman, 2008). High ROPES challenge courses are usually made of poles and ropes that are set 25-30 feet above the ground and are intended to challenge teams to figure out different combinations of objectives at that height (Steinfeld, 1997). Harnesses and carabiners are used to attach individuals to the ropes for safety purposes. Low ROPES challenge courses are usually laid out on the ground or three to four feet off the ground and are also designed to present challenges that teams figure out and overcome together (Steinfeld, 1997).

**OEE Programming**

In many higher education institutions, low and high ROPES challenge courses are on campus grounds. High ROPES courses involve safety systems like those used in rock climbing. A person on the ground (called the belayer) manages a participant’s rope which is run through a top anchor point attached to a cable above the participant. Others are static systems where the participant belay themselves as they move from one challenge point to another, often not coming back to the ground level until all challenge points in the circuit are finished (Ryan, 2005). An example of a challenge can be trying to maintain balance while passing something to a team member who is also at a height of up to 30 feet above ground or simply trying to move from one challenge point to another while maintaining balance without falling off (in the event of falling off, the belay safety system kicks in).

High ROPES courses provide opportunities for individual risk-taking and personal growth, as well as to confront fears like those of heights (Dent, 2006). Low ROPES challenge courses are set up on the ground or three to four feet off the ground. They are either set outdoors
or indoors and are also designed to present challenges that teams figure out and overcome together (Steinfeld, 1997). Such challenges might include trust falls, being guided around an obstacle by teammates while blindfolded, games and puzzles to figure out patterns or answers, and encouraging participants to share to encourage common experiences. Group initiatives like icebreakers, figuring out team birthdays without speaking, also entail these challenges (Hara, et al., 2006). The activities for low ROPES challenge courses mainly target group interaction skills and team building (Anderson, 1995).

Typically, a reflection session after each activity and a wrap-up debrief at the end of the whole experience to gauge what individuals learned from the experiences are included (Priest & Naismith, 1993). When EE deliberately occurs in the outdoors—for example in open spaces, parks, wilderness areas, rivers, mountains, deserts, lakes, or national forests using human-powered activities (Quay, 2013)——it is termed Outdoor Experiential Education.

Indoor climbing walls are becoming a common feature in many higher education institutions’ campus recreation departments (Andre et al., 2017). The indoor climbing facilities are generally managed by the OEE programs within those departments. Students use the climbing wall for physical and psychological challenges, team building, to create a sense of belonging, social connections, and intrapersonal skills. The climbing facilities are also used as a direct connection to academics when OEE programs collaborate with academic wellness and applied physiology departments on campus (Andre et al., 2017).

Most common OEE experiences involve hiking, fishing, canoeing, camping, or backpacking while site seeing, enjoying, and appreciating nature. For hiking, one needs a good pair of boots with ankle support because walking is the main mode of transportation. A hike can be as short as half an hour or can be a multi-day affair. Multi-day hikes mostly involve camping which means one has to bring along supplies like shelters, sleeping bags, cooking sets, food,
stoves, water, and extra clothing (for different environmental conditions) packed in a backpack, so the term “backpacking” simply means multi-day hiking with camping supplies for pitching camp each day (Goldenberg & Martin, 2007). During such multi-day undertakings, participants first learn how to live comfortably in unfamiliar or unaccustomed environments. Typically, experiences, challenges, reflections are shared during structured discussions at the end of each hiking day by a campfire after dinner and are facilitated by the leaders of the group. In most instances, ground transportation is the way participants get to places (e.g., national forests, wilderness areas, or national parks) where one can do these activities. Many colleges first-year orientation programs for incoming students are based on these multi-day experiences (Oravecz, 2002).

**Theoretical and Conceptual Model**

In this study, I integrated Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) and a conceptual framework that I developed. CRT highlights the importance of looking closely at and attempting to understand the socio-cultural factors that shape how we and others perceive, experience, and respond to structural racism. The theory has been growing and thriving in-depth and breadth from a narrow perspective by a group of academic lawyers into a broad base of literature used across a variety of disciplines like sociology, political science, history, anthropology, and education. CRT approaches race as central to American law and policy and posits that “economics, history, context, group and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious” are connected to racism and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 3). CRT owes its existence to earlier movements like critical legal studies and radical feminism (Menkel-Meadow, 1988). CRT intersects well with my conceptual framework which addresses higher education OEE program structure (driven by higher education history and policy) and African
American inclusion; in OEE, CRT may be tied to “economics, history, context, feelings, the unconscious, and self-interest” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 3). Other theories related to race in higher education include Cultural Ecological Theory (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) which focuses on voluntary and involuntary immigrants; Racial Formation Theory (Winant, 1986) of social and cultural initiatives; and Bourdieu’s theory on class and class struggle (Bourdieu, 1987). I chose to use CRT because it builds on many of the aforementioned theories as well as considers lived experiences of racial or ethnic groups (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2005). As noted earlier, social justice is one of the lenses through which I am framing this study, including my research question.

The conceptual framework that I developed is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1- Conceptual Framework
As the conceptual framework above shows, OEE structure (Ahmady et al., 2016; Hammond, 2004; Monavarian et al., 2007) in higher education in terms of its curriculum, hierarchy, language, instructor or OEE professional, racial representation, cost of participation, culture, marketing, and the type of participants targeted (Rose & Paisley, 2012) may contribute to how African American students participate in higher education OEE which may in turn influence the current structure of U.S. higher education OEE. African American racial history in the U.S. from slavery, to Jim Crow laws and segregation, to the Civil Rights Movement, to the collective memory of African American students (Finney, 2014) may influence the higher education OEE structure, which in turn may contribute to how inclusion in higher education OEE by this demographic is affected. African American students’ interest (or lack of) in OEE programming could be informed by African American racial history in the U.S. and the OEE structure mentioned above that includes identity, psychological factors, cost, and culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The theoretical model and the conceptual models were operationalized through semi-structured interview questions I asked during the data collection phase.

**Interest in Research Study**

My interest in the topic of minority access to wild spaces and the wilderness classroom in the United States started picking up when I noticed that the numbers of minoritized populations in the National Outdoor Leadership School where I was working were not representative of the country’s overall population. I have been involved in OEE for over 25 years. Five of those years were in international locations while the rest are in the United States. Before getting into higher education OEE, I worked as a senior field instructor with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). NOLS is a renowned experiential wilderness education school that specializes
in leadership training using the outdoor classroom. NOLS is based out of Wyoming but has many branches around the world.

Later when I started working in higher education OEE, I continued to see that the minority student representation in OEE programming was still flawed and even worse for African American students. When I attended outdoor education-based national conferences like the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE) or Association of Experiential Education (AEE), I encountered only a handful of minoritized population OEE professionals. Because of these experiences, I wanted to undertake a research study such as this one in the hope that it would lead to understanding some of the forces that are at play that resulted in my observations as an OEE professional.

Summary

This introduction focused on the gap in the literature, the purpose of the study, key definitions, OEE programming, theoretical and conceptual models, and how my personal interest intersects with this study. The rest of the study is laid out in chapters two, three, four, and five as follows: literature review, where I delve into the literature related to general history of African Americans in higher education and the outdoors; a brief history of higher education OEE; benefits of OEE to students in education; social justice in OEE; and lack of African American inclusion in OEE in general. The literature review is followed by a theoretical framework and conceptual model where I discuss the Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) that I used to frame this study. In chapter three, I discuss how data was collected and the methods I used in the study. Chapter four covers findings, while chapter five focuses on discussion and recommendations for both practice and future research.
Literature Review

Introduction

In the literature review, I examine research associated with the historical perspective of OEE in general, the history of African Americans in higher education, the history of OEE in higher education, barriers to OEE for African Americans, the importance of OEE in higher education, and social and environmental justice.

Historical perspective

Through published research, I explore how current higher education OEE structure is related to African American student inclusion in programming. To accomplish this, I explore the history of African Americans and their relationship to the outdoors because literature points to a connection between historical occurrences and current social memory (Fentress & Wickham, 1992). African Americans have had a long history with the outdoors that runs back many generations since they landed on American soil as slaves. When slaves came from Africa, they had a tight connection with the outdoors as a source of medicine (Blum, 2002). The outdoors served as a play space, spiritual space, source of building materials, and a place to hold important meetings and deliberations (Finney, 2014). After Africans were shipped to America as slaves and sold off to work for White landowners, the forests and the outdoor spaces they loved and drew from soon became dreaded places where they were worked under the whip all day long (Johnson & Bowker, 2004). These green spaces became places of fear when slave owners started to lynch slaves on the very trees where they had sought shade and comfort in the heat of the day. Rivers and other bodies of water became traumatic locations because that is where many in their community had met injury or death (Finney, 2014).
Finney (2014) explained how negative history about events that happened in the outdoors during slavery and the Jim Crow Era have been passed from generation to generation to cause multi-generational trauma. She also explained how a dominant environmental narrative about the wilderness and outdoor activities, which is almost always from a White perspective, may have contributed to the disparities we see today in terms of African American engagement in OEE. The Jim Crow Era consisted of laws and statutes mainly in the south that legalized racial segregation after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states could not stop segregation and promoted the separate but equal concept (Lewis & Lewis, 2009). The era started in 1877, not long after the 13th Amendment was ratified, and ended in 1968, lasting about 100 years (Chafe et al., 2011). During the era, African Americans were marginalized through denial of opportunities for education, jobs, and voting (Lewis & Lewis, 2009) and exclusion to places like national parks (Finney, 2014). The historical perspective covered in this section lays the foundation of how much of this history affected the education of African Americans.

**History of African Americans in Education**

After the U.S. Civil War, of the four million freed slaves, only 28 of them had a bachelor’s degree earned from an American college (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). The first Morrill Act of 1862, led to the creation of land-grant colleges and the first African American land-grant institution, Alcorn College in Mississippi (Avery, 2009). However, the second Morrill Act of 1890 which introduced equitable funds for African American land-grant institutions boosted the population of African Americans in higher education (Brazzell, 1996). Many public HBCUs² which were institutions established before 1964 to primarily educate African Americans, tended

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² Black in HBCU referenced African Americans as defined in this study.
to be of poorer quality due to lack of ample funding, unlike their historically White institutional (HWI) counterparts. Public land-grant HBCUs mainly served as vocational and agricultural training institutions, and some scholars posit that their existence was but a means to prevent African Americans from attending White land-grant institutions and as a way to get federal funding for these HWIs (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Regardless, by 1900, HBCUs had produced 3,400 African American graduates (Anderson, 2010). Many religious groups raised money to start private HBCUs between 1865 and 1890. The establishment of private institutions like Fisk University, Morehouse College, Hampton University, Howard University, and Spelman College happened during this period and still survive today. The administrators in these private HBCUs were only Whites through the 1940s who controlled the curricula, making sure western ideologies remained the emphasis (Drewry & Doermann, 2012; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

In the 1930s, journalists who wrote about higher education rarely gave any notice to African Americans in their magazines, whether through mention in writing or photographs (Thelin, 2019). Universities, especially in the South, behaved similarly; for example, the University of Louisiana only mentioned African Americans in their 1936 catalog when referencing the “Farm and Demonstration Work” where African American workers helped with university’s agricultural demonstration services as local agents (Thelin, 2019, p. 232). In this period of the 1930s, the estimated number of African Americans enrolled as undergraduates nationally ranged between 1,500 and 2,000, and by 1945, a White student aged 18-24 was about four times more likely to enroll in college than an African American of the same age (Thelin, 2019). In White institutions in the North, where African American students could enroll, they could not live on campus and if they did, they had to be in racially segregated dormitories (Thelin, 2019). Sports between institutions in the North and those in the South prevented African American students in northern institutions from competing with the southern schools because
Jim Crow remained in place. By the same token, because African American students were prohibited to join White student Greek systems, they created their fraternities and sororities (Thelin, 2019) where they felt a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). In 1944, HBCUs made up three percent of higher education in the nation but produced over 95 percent of African Americans who graduated. Legislation enacted during the Civil Rights Era significantly impacted access and graduation rates of African American students and by 1992, HBCUs only produced 27 percent of all African American graduates (Allen & Jewell, 1995).

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the GI Bill, was passed to help qualifying veterans after the end of the Second World War pay for their higher education or training programs. While the GI Bill helped many veterans cross their poverty barriers into prosperity, it ended up helping more White veterans because it excluded many African American veterans (Katznelson, 2005). Many barriers existed for African Americans to enter the military because of the kind of recruitment tests administered, and since the separate but equal ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court was still in effect, the only hope for the GI Bill for the African American veteran remained in HBCUs and vocational training, but these institutions were deficient in many ways compared to White institutions (Katznelson, 2005). They had less funding, inferior building structures, were smaller in size, had less qualified faculty, and were generally under the control of White administrators who had maintained segregation in the past (Boland & Gasman, 2014).

One of the results of the Civil Rights Movement was the dismantling of the separate but equal doctrine through the *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court case of 1954. This ruling allowed African Americans to attend White schools leading to many new policies being enacted to try and level the field for African American access to higher education; nevertheless, over time, policy making progress is not in tandem with access and success for African
Americans in higher education due to structural barriers (Harper et al., 2009). As a reprieve, affirmative action (consideration of race) in the higher education admission process enacted in 1965 improved African American admissions, especially in top-tier universities (Arcidiacono, 2005).

Nationally, there are 104 operational HBCUs and nine of them are found in the South-Central United States, where I chose my research sites. The total population of African Americans in higher education in the South-Central region stands at about 318,000 compared to about 2.2 million nationally (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2020). The literature continues to reveal the difficult structural history of African Americans and how it has manifested itself in higher education in general.

**History of OEE in Higher Education**

OEE emerged in higher education institutions in the 1970s after the inaugural conference on outdoor pursuits in higher education was held at Appalachian State University in 1974 (Smathers, 1974). However, two institutions (Dartmouth and Prescott) had already pioneered in the field of OEE before the 1970s.

OEE in higher education is offered by many institutions as a co-curricular activity, but in some institutions, it is offered as an academic degree program (Bell et al., 2017). In the co-curricular form, OEE can be offered either through low and high ROPES challenge courses or as an out-of-campus wilderness experience. As a co-curricular offering, OEE is used for incoming student orientation to ease the transition into college life. This was pioneered by Dartmouth College in 1935 and Prescott College in 1968 for continuing student development, residential life training programs, and general student learning through an experiential adventure to encourage retention and developing meaningful peer relationships (Gass, 1999).
For academic programming, OEE provides an alternative path to a career in public land management, in higher education as OEE program coordinators and directors and in other conservation and serviced-based organizations locally and abroad. In the institutions that offer academic OEE programming support, recruitment into these programs remains strong because they are enrollment drivers (Bell et al., 2017). Where academic OEE programming is offered, many successful programs in higher education show collaboration at a national and international level with common characteristics in pedagogy, leadership, advocacy, and management (Potter et al., 2012).

**Systemic and Economic Barriers**

In her book *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Finney (2014) provided an overview of how collective and individual memory have become factors that have discouraged African Americans from participating in outdoor wilderness activities. Negative history about events that happened in the outdoors during slavery and the Jim Crow era have been passed from generation to generation. She also highlighted the dominant environmental narrative about the wilderness and outdoor activities that are almost always from a White person's perspective and added that positive contributions by African Americans to conservation are consistently and deliberately left out in these narratives. Finney (2014) noted the false sense of access to outdoor spaces that African Americans have been given because of barriers (e.g., permits, cost, distance) that were put in place to discourage venturing there and how nature has historically been used to separate African American neighborhoods from White neighborhoods. Finney (2014) also noted how the impact of media (books, magazines, photography, films, television, paintings, sculptures, and documentaries) through a dominant narrative has continued to exclude African Americans from the natural environment.
This embedded Whiteness in OEE structure is further brought to light at the OEE instructor, professional, or faculty level through White-centered pedagogy, a factor that continues to maintain the status quo of having less racially diverse participants in OEE (Rose & Paisley, 2012) and this likely also extends to higher education OEE. A major constraint associated with lack of outdoor recreation and OEE participation among African Americans, in general, is socioeconomic status (Bustam et al., 2011). In 2014, according to the Pew Research Center (2014), African American families made on average nearly $28,000 less than White families and were twice as likely to be poor. This wage gap creates an economic barrier for African Americans related to their outdoor recreation participation because OEE experiences are expensive by nature (The Pew Research Center, 2014). As an example, a good mountain bike costs upwards of $2000. Lack of or low racial diversity (especially African Americans) in OEE in the U.S. has been a consistent problem of practice. A sizeable body of literature speaks to this lack of racial diversity in the general population (Camacho, 1998; Finney, 2014; Solop & Hagen, 2003; Stewart, 2006; Taylor, 1989). A lack of diversity is also evident in K-12 OEE where social justice and racial diversity are addressed (Kalbert, 2018) and in some post-secondary institutions like the National Outdoor Leadership School (Gress & Hall, 2017).

**Importance of OEE**

The importance of OEE programming in K-12 is documented in terms of emotional and psychological benefits (Aaron & Witt, 2011) that include an increase of confidence, social skills, self-esteem, and better attitudes towards the environment (Parrish et al., 2005). Benefits of OEE to college students have been widely documented and include both global and athletic self-esteem (Paquette et al., 2014), which speaks to OEE programming providing more benefits than athletics programs in higher education because of global self-esteem. OEE programming
experiences improve resiliency in students. Resilience is a coping process brought about by exposure to challenging, adversity, or stress, and OEE programming exposes students to “opportunities of controlled challenges” that become builders of resilience (Kelly, 2019, p. 265). In OEE multiday programming, students usually delve into unfamiliar settings which serve as experiential education classrooms. This setting provides an opportunity for students to experience a disconnection familiarity and later, a reintroduction to their familiar surroundings when they return from the experience, which becomes a form of rite of passage for them (Bell, 2003). Bell compared Gennep’s three-stage anthropology Rite of Passage (ROP) model (which is common to many indigenous peoples around the world) to the Contemporary Adventure Model (CAM) used by many outdoor adventure programs to bring about change in participants. This psychological change process is a benefit for students in higher education that African Americans may be missing out on if they are not able to participate in OEE programming.

Outdoor orientation programs positively impact student development through meaningful peer relationships, increased student-faculty interaction, increasing academic interest, preparing students for college academics, and helping students transition into a college environment (Gass et al., 2003). The benefit of social support and community building became evident through the use of the Campus-Focused Social Provisions Scale (CF-SPS) to investigate the extent of social support based on different types of pre-orientation experiences (wilderness, community service, preseason athletics, and no participation). Evidence showed that social support and community building occurred through wilderness orientation programs (Austin et al., 2010). The beneficial connections between wilderness orientation programs and the development of self-efficacy in first-year college students have also been explored (Mittelstaedt & Jones, 2009), and the research indicated that these programs increased self-efficacy and confidence. For continuing students, literature suggests that students “benefit from outdoor orientation programs through intellectual,
identity, and interpersonal development” (Gass, 1999, p. 377). In addition, OEE programming helps students navigate college stress (Kanters et al., 2002) and improve life effectiveness skills (Flood et al., 2009).

In OEE programming, the risk is often a factor that must be considered in detail. The experience of risk is associated with a degree of fear which OEE participants must deal with for learning and development to take place. This makes OEE a tool for confronting fear and uncertainty (Ward & Hobbs, 2006). Established OEE programs in higher education have shown the opportunity to reach out to minoritized populations on campus and in the local communities to help change and improve environmental attitudes (Marchand & Sanford, 2017).

Higher education campus recreational centers through their programming in OEE, intramural and sports clubs, recreation center operations, or fitness and aquatics have resulted in improved engagement and persistence and a sense of belonging for students that utilize the facilities (Zizzi et al., 2004). OEE experiences also specifically benefit resident assistants in their work in residential buildings in higher education institutions (Cook, 1980; Gass, 1999).

Social and Environmental Justice

Warren et al. (2014) explored available information related to social justice and diversity in the outdoors and broadly looked at diversity in four main categories: gender, race and ethnicity, ability, and other social identities (socioeconomics, sexual orientation, and age). They also explored environmental justice with social justice because they are interconnected. Environmental injustice is embedded in history through indigenous people's displacement from ancestral lands; their home environments were taken away from them by force. The authors also explain how the term environmental racism came to be used and how it gave birth to environmental justice. Warren et al. (2014) used several approaches for social (in)justice in the
outdoors. She used contact theory to explain dominant meanings and interest in OEE (White, able-bodied, upper class, heterosexual male), which led to a hidden curriculum that speaks to attributes of the dominant meanings and interests. She also utilized adventure therapy approaches used by practitioners who understand social justice in the neighborhoods in which they work by bringing the therapy approach to the outdoors and fostering an educational approach through multiculturalism in OEE.

Social justice in OEE, a relatively new approach, based upon social justice work done in other areas of American culture, addresses the structural systemic barriers that affect racialized minorities in higher education (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), and asks if racism plays a part in African American OEE programming. As we look at the current picture and what the future holds, it becomes important to reflect on the trends and issues surrounding OEE programming in higher education which include outdoor programming considerations, like professionalizing the leaders and revamping the curricula; having multicultural approaches to OEE programming; and public land access, like permitting issues (Bobilya et al., 2010). These trends will only get more heightened as baby boomers retire, the country continues to become more racially diverse, and outdoor adventure programmers are seen as contributors to health and outdoor experiential education of the nation and in higher education. Diversity in OEE continues to be an issue when it comes to gender, race and ethnicity, ability, and other social identities (socioeconomics, sexual orientation, and age). Warren et al. (2014) suggested that environmental justice and social justice are linked through historical events related to slavery and displacement of indigenous peoples from spaces they called home (Warren et al., 2014). By leveling the field of social and environmental justice, we can create new structures that encourage African American inclusion in higher education OEE programming.
From the literature, a negative historical relationship of African Americans and the outdoors is evident in general, and in OEE in particular this relationship may inform the current, observed African American student inclusion in OEE in higher education. We can conclude that economic reasons (such as socioeconomic status) play a part in accessing OEE benefits (Ghimire et al., 2014) for K-12 in general and college students in particular. Further, literature shows why access to OEE programming as social and environmental justice is a valid approach towards understanding how African Americans OEE programming may be influenced by the current higher education OEE program structure. The literature contains gaps, such as a focus on the specific work done in higher education OEE programming and how African American students participate within those programs. In this study, I focused on how the higher education OEE structure affects inclusion of African American students in program offerings. This focus was driven by the literature that was reviewed in this chapter.
Methods

Methodological Approach

In this study, I explored the role of the OEE program structure on African American students’ inclusion in programming at three institutions located in the South-Central region of the United States as perceived by the individuals whom I interviewed. At each institution, I conducted interviews with three full-time staff members—two were OEE program staff professionals and one was a director of the campus recreation department or an individual in charge of campus recreation programming. Using coding methods through NVivo software, I analyzed the content of transcripts created using Rev transcription software from the initial video interviews and documents. I then used NVivo coding software to identify recurring themes (see Appendix E) related to the inclusion of African American students in OEE program offerings and to determine if any significant patterns of thought, opinion, or language were noticeable.

In the research methodology section, I will cover the methodological approach, data collection and analysis, and potential limitations of the study design and the cases identified for this study. I have chosen a qualitative tradition and approach to research for this study because when studying complex topics, system-oriented, not well understood, or sensitive, this is the best approach to use (Holley & Harris, 2019). This study is an investigation that focused on the issue of higher education OEE inclusion of African American students in co-curricular outdoor adventure programs (Stake, 1995) and involved an in-depth study of this issue.

Purposive sampling is defined as deliberate choice dependent on predetermined qualities (knowledge, experience) of the participants (Tongco, 2007) and snowball sampling which is commonly used in qualitative research, especially when the subject matter is sensitive or private (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Dynamic quality snowball sampling allows exploration of
knowledge and power relations within and between those who share knowledge (Noy, 2008): “Since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which most can be learned” (Merriam, 2002, p. 140). In this study, purposely looking for individuals who I knew possessed OEE knowledge and experience and asking them if they knew of anyone else I could interview (snowball sampling) helped strengthen the rigor and dependability of the data I collected. I also purposely chose institutions that cut across the board of U.S. higher education by choosing a small public institution, a medium sized private institution and a large public institution as my research sites. The choice of the research sites was also informed by their accessibility to me, because originally, before the Covid 19 pandemic hit, I planned to travel to the sites to interview the participants.

The research question for this study explores a social and racial issue that is interpersonal where the condition being studied is not easily isolated from the environment it is in (Yin, 2003). This study is also an exploratory, qualitative, holistic, multi-case study that required depth of analysis and used documents and interviews as the basis of data collection because case studies are best when we aim to answer “how” and “why” research questions (Yin, 2003). The research question for this study was a “how” question and interview methods match well with the research question I sought to answer. Case studies are their research design method, and I chose the method because this approach is used to generate an in-depth, multifaceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context, such as my research question. Interviews are helpful when we cannot observe individual behaviors and decisions directly, and when we aim to understand the past such as how current higher education OEE structure could impact African American student inclusion (Tisdell, 2016).

Epistemology and Positionality
When we make assertions to people, it is often necessary to qualify why we believe that assertion to be true, and usually, evidence is needed when we make propositions of knowledge, which is why we consider epistemology (Fumerton, 2009) and the assumptions we make while undertaking research. My epistemological approach in this study is social constructivism which suggests that meaning comes from our engagement, as researchers, with participants and it is found in the interactions between the researcher and the participants. Knowledge is formed in context and is located in social, historical, and cultural contexts (Chamberlain, 2015).

I have also paid attention to the process which led me to the outcome instead of the other way around. Positionality is important in research because “your autobiography and identity—life experiences, knowledge, training, emotions, values, attitudes, beliefs, gender, ethnicity and so forth— influence and affect how you navigate through the enterprise and approach other important elements, such as the relationship between you and your participants and the analysis of your data. Who you are (or are becoming) determines to a large extent what and how you research” (Saldana et al., 2007 p. 21).

In addition to my 14 year-long professional career in higher education OEE, I am the primary research instrument, and I am aware of the perspectives and biases that I hold that might affect the data that I collect and render unobservable even when present. I am a member of the Association for Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE), just like most of the OEE professionals whom I interviewed, and I am familiar with some of them. Though this may pose a potential bias threat, I established credibility and authenticity through consistent interviewing practices (Lincoln, 1995). I am also aware of the fact that I am a Black male from a voluntary immigrant background, who will see the world from this perspective (Denzin et al., 2006). My familiarity with the language, norms, and challenges in higher education OEE helped me to interpret responses easily during analysis and draw meaningful conclusions.
Research Sites and Participant Profiles

With the approval of the SMU Human Subjects Committee Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix D), I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine participants for this qualitative study: three from each of the study sites. There are various views on the ideal number of participants needed for qualitative case study research to reach saturation ranging from 5 to 25 (Creswell, 2015) or just 6 (Morse, 2000). Past debate over correct participant number, the concept of saturation, raises questions for researchers who claim that a “conclusion” to qualitative research is not always definitive because data is often closed out prematurely and/or the continual emergence of new data (Mason, 2010) is in existence: “Numerous factors are said to be important, including “the quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful information obtained from each participant, the use of shadowed data, and the qualitative method and study designed used” (Morse, 2000, p. 1). In addition, the deductive and inductive approaches of qualitative research, the role of saturation, is made sense of regardless of the difference from case to case. The themes derived are the foundational piece in analysis, and these themes are based on the context of interviews involving several participants (Saunders et al., 2018). For this study, the level of OEE program knowledge among the participants I selected allowed me to collect sufficient data (approaching saturation) using three participants from each institution, making a total of nine interviews.

When interviewing the participants, I defined structure as hiring processes, hierarchy, interview protocols for hiring new student employees or participants, curriculum design and terminology, program leadership demographics, cost of participation in OEE programming, advertisement of activities and best practices.

Nimbus University (NU)
Nimbus University is a large four-year public research institution located in the South-Central region of the United States. It is a competitive institution with a graduation rate of 82 percent with a strong mission geared towards providing the highest quality undergraduate and graduate programs with an African American (or Black) student population of about three percent. The OEE program at NU offers outdoor trips, indoor climbing wall programming, and an outdoor equipment rental center. The program is managed by two full-time professionals, a graduate assistant, and up to 50 student employees. The OEE program at NU was initiated in 1985 and became part of campus recreation. Today it serves students, faculty, staff, and local community members through the indoor climbing facility, trips program, and outdoor gear rental.

**Nimbus University Participants**

**Jerrod.** Jerrod is a mid-level administrator of the OEE program and serves as its director. He oversees the trips program, the indoor climbing facility, and the outdoor gear rental center. He has directed this program since 2013 but has worked in the program since 2000 and has served in leadership roles in the Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE).

**Dolores.** Dolores is an alumnus of NU who worked at the OEE program as a student employee for two years during her undergraduate degree. After graduation, she moved to a different city, got a job where she worked for a while before a coordinator job position opened at NU’s OEE program which she applied for and received. She has been the coordinator there for the last two years as a mid-level administrator.

**Bolton.** Bolton is an upper-level administrator who serves as the associate director of programs at the campus recreation department level. The OEE program director reports to Bolton, who has worked at NU for more than ten years and has been promoted multiple times.

**Cumulus University (CU)**
Cumulus University is a medium-sized private research university located in the South-Central region of the United States. It has a 77 percent graduation rate, and its mission focuses on worldwide leadership and service through academic excellence with six percent African American (or Black) students in its population. The OEE program at CU includes an indoor climbing facility, the trips program outdoor gear rental shop, a rental bike program, a first-year orientation program, and a lake facility. The OEE program is managed by three full-time professionals, a graduate assistant, and about 40 student employees. CU’s OEE program was established in 1999 after the new recreation center was built, making it part of campus recreation.

**Cumulus University Participants**

**Griffin.** Griffin is one of the mid-level administrators at CU’s OEE program. His association with the OEE program at CU began in 2010 when he was employed as a student worker in the indoor climbing facility. After a while at the climbing facility, he started getting involved with the trips program, the challenge course, and water activities in the lake facility as a student worker. In 2014, he joined the full-time professional staff and has now overseen the lake and indoor climbing facilities for the last seven years.

**Tommy.** Tommy is a mid-level administrator and serves as the associate director of the OEE program and facilities at CU’s campus recreation department. He has been in program administration for the last 13 years at the institution. Before joining CU, he was a summer camp director for some time. Griffin reports to Tommy’s position within the hierarchical structure of campus recreation at CU. Tommy has been in higher education, either as a graduate assistant or full-time employee in the field of OEE for 13 years and has many of the certifications required or desired by CU in climbing, paddle sports, wilderness medicine, and challenge sports facilitation.
**Rafiki.** Rafiki is an upper-level administrator and serves as the director of the campus recreation department at CU. She comes from a background of summer camps and Repetitive Obstacle Performance Evaluation Systems (ROPES) course work and has been at the institution for more than 20 years, leading campus recreation. Tommy and Griffin report to her.

**Stratus University (SU)**

Stratus University is a small public university that is part of a public university system located in the South-Central region of the United States. It has a 60.3 percent graduation rate, and its mission focuses on education, discovery, and achievement. The institution has 19 percent African American (or Black) students in its population. The OEE program at SU includes an indoor climbing facility, the trips program outdoor gear rental shop, a rental bike program, a high ropes course program, and a bike trail. The OEE program is managed by two full-time professionals, a graduate assistant, and about 30 student employees. SU’s OEE program was established in 2003 after the new recreation center was built, making it part of campus recreation.

**Stratus University Participants**

**Julio.** Julio is a mid-level administrator in campus recreation and is in charge of programming in the department. He has experience of 13 years in higher education student programming and has been at Stratus University for over four years. He is also in charge of assessment at the department level.

**Joseph.** Joseph is also a mid-level administrator at SU and runs the OEE program there. He attended SU and as a student worked in the OEE program till he graduated. After graduating, got a job with a guiding company. When a coordinator position in the OEE program opened, he applied for it and got the job. He has now been at SU as a full-time professional for a little over
five years and as the lead administrator (Assistant Director) in the OEE program for over half a year.

**Chanise.** Chanise is an upper-level administrator and serves as the director of the campus recreation department at SU. She comes from a sports kinesiology background which is how she got into campus recreation. She enjoys hiking, running, and backpacking and has been at SU for about two years. Julio and Joseph are her direct reports.

**Data Collection**

**Interview Questions**

Turner’s (2010) recommendations for constructing effective research questions guided the study: a) Questions should be as neutral as possible, (b) wording should be open-ended, (c) questions should be asked one at a time (no double-barreled questions), (d) researchers should encourage responses with occasional nods, (e) questions should be worded clearly, (f) researchers should provide a transition between major topics, and (g) researchers should be careful when asking “why” questions.

I reviewed my interview questions for clarity, open-endedness, neutrality and transitions to align with McNamara (2009) as cited by Turner (2010) when doing qualitative interviewing (Brayda & Boyce, 2014).

**Interviews**

Interviews are used as a qualitative research method and data is collected using a conversation between a researcher and participant(s) (Savenye & Robinson, 1996). Interviews provide an opportunity for the researcher to focus on “cultural, every day, and situated aspects of human thinking, learning, acting, and ways of understanding ourselves as persons” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 12). Interviews bring out attributes of a culture from an insider’s perspective by exhibiting how or why a participant responds to an environment or situation
(Savenye & Robinson, 1996), and meaning is derived from the social context in which it occurs. Reflection is part and parcel of the interview. Simply put, stories are a way of knowing (Seidman, 2006).

Interviewing acquaintances has more advantages than disadvantages because interviewers and participants who had a relationship before the interview have the benefit of accessing data that would not have been available using the traditional interview methods (Garton & Copland, 2010). However, Garton & Copeland (2010) highlighted the importance of the interviewer and participant creating new identities during the interview process to avoid influencing the production and interpretation of data. During the interview process for my study, I was acutely aware of my acquaintance with some of the participants and how this could influence the production and interpretation of the interviews, and because of this, I was conscientious in my reflexivity (Primeau, 2003). I made sure that I created a new relationship between interviewer and participant with well-marked boundaries before the interview process started.

**Interview Format**

Mid-level OEE professional staff and their supervisors (upper-level campus recreation administrators) at the three institutions outlined earlier participated in the study through semi-structured interviews (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Techniques for conducting interviews occur on a wide range. Highly structured interviews focus on rigid scripts and a pre-determined set of questions. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews may have a set of guiding questions, but topics might be explored in a non-structured but probing manner (Savenye & Robinson, 1996). For this study, I used a semi-structured interview format because I wanted to ask participants identical questions but also wanted to allow participants to contribute as much information as they wanted and provide me with an opportunity to ask probing follow-up questions (Turner, 2010). During each interview, I explained the purpose of the interview and addressed
confidentiality and anonymity but was also aware that McNamara (2009) observed that promising absolute confidentiality is problematic because, in some circumstances, courts may get access to information used in studies.

I contacted the participants and requested their participation in an interview regarding African American student inclusion in OEE programming (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Initial contact occurred using a recruitment email (see Appendix A). Later, I confirmed the interview time and sent an email confirmation for the meeting and a Zoom link to the meeting. The recorded interviews lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. The recording did not begin until after I obtained verbal informed consent and permission to video and audio record. The interviews were based on semi-structured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) as I followed the outline in the interview protocol (see Appendix C) which was guided by the conceptual framework I created and Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) related to African American student inclusion in OEE Programming in higher education.

A total of nine individuals participated in this research study. They were OEE mid-level administrators and campus recreation upper-level administrators. I obtained consent from each participant by loudly reading out the consent script (see Appendix B). The consenting process occurred at the beginning of the interview as part of the interview protocol before recording started. I noted the date and time consent was obtained on the interview protocol and asked for explicit permission to video and audio record the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016) using the English language. I assigned aliases to the interview transcripts and the participants’ actual names, academic rank, and any other identifying information were not included in the transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

**Pilot Interview**
I field-tested the interview questions to determine usability and acceptability (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). Pilot tests are important because they check for flaws, weaknesses, and other limitations which can be corrected before the study interviews can be conducted (Majid et al., 2017). The test pilot participant had a similar background to those I interviewed for the study (Turner, 2010) and this helped me to refine how I phrased and sequenced the interview questions. For example, before the pilot interview, the grand tour question was narrowly tailored towards racial diversity and felt rigid because it did not give the interview participant a wide base to share about their experience in higher education OEE. After revising it, the interview participants found it easy to delve into the overview of the OEE experience and student impact. Pilot interviews with a participant whose experiences are from the same region and an institutions similar to the interview participants helped frame the interviews in ways that were consistent.

**Documents**

From the selected institutions, I analyzed the institution’s mission and value statements as well as strategic plans, organizational charts, campus recreation department/program mission statements, relevant webpages, social media (Facebook and Instagram), annual reports, other institutional data available publicly, and program annual reports. These sources provided insight into the structure, characteristics, and identity of each program. These documents, when analyzed as data, provided useful thematic context that emerged during the coding phase. Using more than one source of data offered a view of the programs’ structure and its effect on African American inclusion in OEE programming from multiple perspectives and helped with data and theory triangulation (Patton, 1987).

In this section, I explain how I analyzed the data to make meaning. I made sure that I organized and secured all the data by storing it in my institution’s box cloud and one drive
storage which is only accessed through a duo factor login (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Since the
data from interviews was in written text, coding was the best approach to analyzing the data
(Tisdell, 2016b). I wrote memos as I read through the interviews summarizing meanings of
sentences and paragraphs in keywords (Creswell & Poth, 2016) which helped me see emergent
ideas.

Data Analysis

To facilitate the analytical process of coding, I used Computer Assisted Qualitative Data
Analysis Software (CAQDAS), called, NVivo (Lewins & Silver, 2009). I used NVivo to upload
document files of interview transcripts from Rev transcription software and organized them by
the institution. I uploaded documents for analysis and categorized them based on mission
statements and strategic plans, reports, web pages which included social media. I then read the
text intimately to become familiar with the content and to develop initial themes and
observations (Holley and Harris, 2019), helping me to grasp a sense of which interview questions
yielded responses aligned to the research question. In this, I considered how a participant’s role
or tenure within the OEE program or campus recreation influenced their level of familiarity with
the question topic and/or ability to speak to historical context and other factors influencing
African American students’ inclusion in OEE programming.

During the coding phase, I assigned codes to specific pieces of documents and text.
The keywords became codes that emerged into themes (Holley & Harris, 2019). I then developed
and assessed my interpretations by relating categories, themes, and families (Creswell & Poth,
2016) to the CRT theoretical framework (Kivunja, 2018). Codes were developed (precoding) by
generating a list of common words from all the interview transcripts, followed by using words
and short sentences (phrases) as codes (Miles, 2020). Through the cyclic process of first-cycle
coding and second-cycle coding and so forth, emerging ideas were identified, leading to themes
(Creswell & Poth, 2016) and quotes that emerged from the data. Finally, I used Miro software to represent, organize, and visualize the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016), as shown by Appendix F.

Potential Limitations of Study Design

Qualitative studies tend to have difficulties in replicating findings and there is a potential for this in my study since it is of qualitative design. The possibility exists of observations being selectively reported due to researcher bias (Milner, 2007). Qualitative studies are also time-consuming and labor-intensive. One is also not able to verify the results and it’s difficult to investigate causality (deMarrais & Lapan, 2003). Documents can be difficult to retrieve (though for this study, this was not an issue), can have a bias if not collected exhaustively, can be deliberately made unavailable, and can reflect unknown bias on the part of the author (Yin, 2003). Interviews also have some limitations; the responses may be biased, there may be poor recall or inaccuracies, and interviewees may say what they think the researcher wants to hear. Poorly constructed questions can also lead to bias (Yin, 2003).

Improving Data Quality

To avoid the pitfalls of qualitative method limitations, I had to consider ways to improve the quality of the data that I collected. The data had to have credibility and authenticity, it had to be dependable, and had to show reflexivity. For credibility and authenticity, consistent interviewing practices and participant validation had to be achieved by making sure all interview participants were asked the same semi-structured questions consistently while making sure that their responses were not controlled but rather guided (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007).

For dependability, I documented my positionality and biases as a researcher. I also established dependability by demonstrating that “the operations of the study, such as the data collection procedures, can be repeated with the same results” (Yin, 2003, p. 34) through my interview protocol. Considering my personal experiences in OEE as a professional by putting
aside my own beliefs about the research question I was seeking to answer (Carpenter, 2007), I was able to make this study more dependable. While this objectivity could not completely remove my personal experiences within OEE, I was aware of my assumptions throughout my research, making it less possible for those assumptions to play in the study (Carpenter, 2007).

For confirmability, I used triangulation to control bias and validate positions (Mathison, 1988) through multiple methods and data sources (Patton, 2002). In this study, I used documents and interview data. I also looked for confirmability “by establishing operational measures for the concepts being studied” (Yin, 2003, p. 34) and ensured credibility by establishing a “causal relationship whereby certain conditions are shown to lead to other conditions, as distinguished from spurious relationships” (Yin, 2003, p. 34).

Reflexivity involves the realization of an honest examination of the values and interests of the researcher that may impinge upon research work (Primeau, 2003), and I was acutely aware of this throughout the study (Chan et al., 2013). Peer debriefing and analytic triangulation also helped with any potential research bias that I may have had (Nguyen, 2008). I wrote memos that helped me reflect on the participant's attitude, feelings, and body language during the interview process that may not have been reflected in the interview transcripts (Smith et al., 1999) which helped me note hidden contexts.

Conclusion

In this qualitative approach study, I addressed the research question of how the current structure of higher education OEE programming may impact African American student inclusion in programming. This study addressed the gap in the literature regarding African American student inclusion in higher education OEE programming. The study is an exploratory, qualitative, holistic, multi-case study that required depth of analysis through document analysis and semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2003). Interviews come in handy when we cannot observe
individual behaviors and decisions directly and when we aim to understand the past such as how current higher education OEE structure impacts African American inclusion (Tisdell, 2016). I argued that the results of my research will be able to provide a clearer picture of how the current higher education OEE structure intersects with the extent of African American inclusion in program offerings.
Findings

The purpose of this study was to learn how the current higher education Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) program structure (relationship between operating processes, methods, systems, and people) impacted African American student inclusion in programming. For this study, the term African American is not synonymous with Black because individuals of African origin associated with voluntary migration to the U.S. are also referred to as Blacks (Agyemang et al., 2005). In this study, I limited myself to involuntary migrants who have a history of their descendants coming to the U.S. as slaves or against their will. To achieve the purpose of this study, an analysis of 40 documents (organizational charts, annual reports, memos, social media posts and mission statements) was carried out to examine OEE structure as represented by programmatic, departmental, and institutional overview at three higher education institutions that were selected. In addition, three full-time mid-level and upper-level administrators associated with OEE programming at each institution were interviewed leading to a total of nine interviews. During the interviews, participants were asked to share their career path and experience in their positions as well as describe their understanding of the history of the OEE program at their institution and higher education OEE programming in general. They also shared about how they recruited student staff and participants, their efforts in addition to the institution’s efforts in pushing for racial diversity in OEE programming, and what their thoughts were concerning African American student inclusion in OEE programming.

The research question developed for this study was: How does OEE structure in higher education impact the level of African American students’ inclusion in higher education OEE programming? Several themes emerged, from my analysis of data, related to OEE structure and African American student inclusion: (a) OEE programming is important and beneficial to students in higher education, (b) inclusion of racially diverse populations in higher education
OEE programming is low but improving, (c) African American student inclusion in higher education OEE programming is very low owing to structural barriers that hinder inclusion. These themes are further expounded on and scaffolded based on Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework and the conceptual model chosen for this study.

**OEE Programming**

The mission statements from the three institutions included language that encouraged and included diversity, serving the needs of an increasingly diverse world, and portrayed willingness to serve all students. CU emphasized the service of a pluralistic society, NU stived to serve of all racial, ethnic, and geographic groups and SU sought to serve an inclusive community.

The campus recreation mission and vision statements for the three institutions also included language that emphasized racially diverse programming and the promotion of wellness.

**Importance of OEE**

The importance of OEE programming facilities in higher education was highlighted often during the interviews and the institutions invested quite heavily to provide programming for students. Bolton from NU put it this way. “[…OEE] was a factor in designing this facility. Throughout the years, we used to have one full-time staff member in the OEE program. Then at some point, a second staff member was added and then a graduate assistant was added. We're building satellite facilities [and a] bouldering wall has been one of the features that was intentionally put in as something we thought was necessary.” Bolton continued to say, “we've been able to support all of this as an institution and value that it really does give students access to experiences and equipment and all of the things that [they] have never done before, that they just want to pursue more in college. And so, we recognize that as a benefit to our students and really support it.”
The importance and benefits of OEE to students were alluded to by all interview participants but some like Dolores and Rafiki directly mentioned the benefits and importance. Dolores added that:

I was an education major, and a lot of what I learned in that process was that experiential education is definitely, I think, the better way to learn things. It's ingrained in people's heads a lot more because they actually got to get hands-on with something, as opposed to just learning about the theory.

Rafiki agreed by outlining how designed challenges in OEE programming led to unforgettable learning opportunities, “[There] are others I think that view OEE as a truly learning environment, you know? Where students can learn that it's not just throw a backpack on, put your stuff in it and let's go... the pack has to fit and then it could weigh 30 or 40 or 50 pounds, as long as it sits right and it's not pulling you forward or back, all the different things.” Rafiki connected the experiences with activities and how they shaped students, “It's so funny, I think about the ROPES courses [and the students] they may be bawling and squalling and screaming and standing on top of the pole, and their knees are shaking and they’re crying [and saying] they want to come down. And they jump and they miss the trapeze and they're suspended, and we let them down, and they're petrified the whole time.” She added, “But you go to their Facebook or Instagram page, and you tell me what's posted on [there]? It's this experience that I got outside of my comfort zone, and I tried something new, and even though I failed, I had fun.”

The experiences that students get exposed to during OEE programming help them cement relationships after going through something together. Tommy said, “But the way that especially backpacking trips work, [this expedition], this thing that [students] all going through together and sharing, is awesome to see the conversations happen, to see the relationships come out of it”. In agreement with Tommy Rafiki’s observed, “[The] thing that spoke to me…was in the first
three months we had the climbing facility open, over 10% of our students came and tried it at least once. I mean, 14,000 different people climbed the rock wall in three months. With this realization, Rafiki thought to herself, "Okay, this can't be a part-time thing. This has got to be a full-time thing and they [students] are going to want to climb more than just this rock wall. So, in general, that's why I do what I do is because when people let down their guard, it's the real person that shows and that's where transformation happens. I believe. Because it's safe to ask the questions and it's safe to give an honest answer."

OEE programming in higher education evolved as institutions observed how students’ interest in this type of programming increased. Jerrod opined, “Students were doing OEE stuff on their own and the university said, oh, there are students who are interested in this.” He posed the question, “How can we provide even a richer experience through professional leadership and guidance for risk management purposes that align with the university as a whole?” Griffin noted that institutions like to benchmark with each other and OEE programming was no exception:

[And] then I think with the popularity of things like [rock]climbing starting to grow as well, more and more institutions started to want to have those types of features on campus. So, [hopefully, it’s] going to keep growing and continue to see bigger and better inclusion.

**Institutional Support**

The interviews revealed that institutional support for racial-diversity programming was evident in two of the three institutions (SU and CU) while it was not as evident at NU. Analyzed documents including annual reports, organizational charts, reported institutional data and posted media supported the interview findings. Chanise from SU stated:

I think that our university has done a really good job of supporting outdoor adventure.

For the size of our school, we actually have a pretty large program with a challenge
course, a bike trail, an outdoor adventure center, where we do gear rental and run all of our trips out of, and we have also a climbing wall.

Bolton from NU felt that the level of institutional support towards racial diversity in OEE programming could be improved. He said, “[Again], I know our program [and] is well regarded within the division, but I don't know that we have the same level of partnership and support in place that we do, with some of our academic partners.” Rafiki from CU said, “Our department has a strategic plan, and our division has one […] but one of the major things that Cumulus in general, and student life in particular, want is good racial representation.” She added, “It's not going to do anybody any good to have a very... for everybody to look like me [White], act like me, talk like me, think like me. That just doesn't help anybody grow. So, we've been pretty intentional on our students, because we have about a 38%... diversity on campus, as a whole.”

Bolton also felt that institutional support for racially diverse programming was not as successful because “there could be resources that we're not aware of, that we're not taking full advantage of.” Bolton felt that OEE administrators may not be in sync with the rest of student affairs when he added, “And that could be something we need to do a better job of exploring… if you look around a little bit, there are people here [in the institution] already doing some things or that have some expertise that could make things better.” It was apparent that different units of the institutions did not have the same vision regarding racially diverse programming, let alone OEE programming as was evident from Julio’s response: “I would say for racial diversity that we have good intentions and good hopes. I don't know if I would say that it's quite clear what our plan of action is.” He shared that he sensed what was being said was not being actualized when he said, “I don't know if we've laid things out to actually say these are the things that we are doing [and] I think it's expected and there's always “good feeling” talks about [we] should have diverse programs or we have a diverse campus, we should offer programming and we should be civil,
but I don't know if there are directives coming down from anywhere. We don't have a plan for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) at our university.”

Dolores felt that in the past year, some attention to racial diversity across the institution and its programs was improving due to student activism. She said, “I think a lot of it too was spurred right around that time when George Floyd was killed and when that was a big part of the media and things like that too. So, I think that was the take-off point.”

**African American Student Inclusion**

Inclusion of African American students specifically in OEE programming was a concern for participants from two institutions interviewed for this study. Dolores from NU said, “So I think we're struggling [with African American students]. [It's] something that we need to be intentional about, trying to focus more on programming for getting different minority groups back into climbing or back into the other outdoor activities.” Given the racial diversity percentage of African Americans at her institution that stood at about three percent, she said, “It's definitely not where it should be if that makes sense. Participation for African Americans ... [I think] right now numbers are very much lower than they should be. I [constantly] am trying to think of different strategies on how to improve those numbers and how to make people feel more welcome because I definitely think with our program specifically, we try to take the next step, but we can only go so far with what we know so far.” She acknowledged that professional staff in the OEE program are not always equipped with ideas on how to change this discrepancy.

Jerrod from NU also noted that participation in OEE programming by African American students as employees is very low if not absent: “We hired a young man who identified as African American, maybe it was four years ago when the student came to work for us, that was the first African American who ever worked for our program (and he was a great employee) since its inception in 1985.” African American student participation also remained very low as
Jerrod continued to share, citing what he has been observing over time: “I think the proof is in the pudding, [...] do you see African American students climbing? If you don't, then we've got work to do, right? Because I see people from Middle Eastern countries climbing up there, I see people of Latinx background climbing, I see people who are gay and are out climbing, I see women, I see Asian populations from a variety of countries, I see all of those up there.” He emphasized and added, “And I can point and say, look, see this is an inviting environment for those people, at least inviting enough for them to be there and want to be there, but I can't say that about the African American community.”

Low rates of inclusion of African American students in OEE was further highlighted by Dolores when she shared, “Yeah, I think clearly that it's [African American student participation] something that OEE practitioners have brought up and we've talked about how to look why African American students don't participate significantly in OEE activities.” Dolores added, “It seems like every association or member organization I'm a part of, like whatever meetings they're having, whatever conferences they're doing, there are multiple sessions on it [African American student OEE programming]. So as a whole, it seems like the industry is recognizing that participation [for African Americans] is low, and trying to figure out why that is, what would be causing that, and maybe some strategies for increasing that.” Tommy from CU contributed:

I [actually...] think statistically, it's not as popular for someone who's not White [to be] in this field because they have not done it before and do not have some idea.

Bolton agreed by bringing in an annual assessment on participation in programming referencing the three percent African American student population on camps: “Overall, we do some assessment work each year to look at who's participating in our program, and how that mirrors the campus population. Our campus is not as diverse as some others.” Chanise from SU offered a
different opinion regarding African American inclusion in OEE at her institution which has a 19 percent African American student population. She said, “Yeah. I think for us, we are pretty happy that in our OEE program, our inclusion mirrors the demographics of our student body. We're happy with that, but we also realize that, when it specifically comes to African Americans, there are a lot more barriers that they may face in getting involved in the outdoors from a historical context and from even just access issues that they may have had growing up and things like that. And so, we are aware of those things, and we do want to help overcome those hurdles.”

**Structural Barriers to Inclusion**

**History**

History as a barrier to African American student inclusion in OEE programming was a major theme emerging from the interviews. All the interview participants acknowledged history as a structural barrier in one way or another and were driven by structural racism, institutional racism, and socioeconomic status.

**Structural Racism.** Six out of the nine administrators interviewed mentioned that they were conscious of embedded structural racism in the way the U.S., as a country runs and how that impacts African American students’ inclusion in OEE programming. Jerrod supported this awareness by saying, “So, imagine […] Italian communities, Irish communities, German communities engaging in racism and in lynching of African American men in this country in the late 1800s to early 1900s, so that they would not be looked at as the “other”, instead, they would then be looked at as one of the White people.” He added to this notion, “So, I know that that’s the level that we're trying to overcome. When it comes to what happened in the hinterlands, in the rural communities, in the wild spaces, in the outdoor spaces […] and] that is traumatic to me, and I wasn't even one of the ones that was harmed, right?” Jerrod emotionally intimated, “How much more traumatic must it be for the African American people in my life who have stories to
tell about uncle so-and-so who had something terrible happen to him, who was lynched by White men and women?” Jerrod, about historical trauma associated with slavery, said, “I think there's some cultural trauma associated with racism. And I'll be honest with you... there’s a historian who] wrote a book called Lynching to Belong. And it was about the use of racial hatred by immigrant communities in this county in order to claim their Whiteness.”

Rafiki, talking about her personal experiences over time, added to the structural racism consciousness by contributing that, “[...and] I'm old enough to remember some of this, but for a long time, African American people did not go swimming very much because it was at a country club, or it was at some place that had an exclusion to them.” Tommy continued with the theme of structural racism and how deeply structural it is by adding that, “It just means that there are a lot of things that are just baked into the cake. The structural barriers to participation are in there and it doesn't mean we have to destroy or take down everything, but it just means we have to be patient and just be purposeful.”

**Institutional Racism.** Institutional racism, especially in higher education was a shared sentiment among the interview participants. Addressing the question on campus racial climate, Bolton offered,

I think campus climate is probably decent, but I think there are some recent things going ...
[about] statues are a thing on campus right now and, some different views about that and some concerns about tradition and what that looked like.” He alluded to the opposing forces between tradition among alumni and current students when he said, “[...in] trying to navigate how you balance tradition and sort of the former students [alumni] that were here at a certain time and their opinion of what it is, and the current students and how you take care of them.
Addressing the issue of racial diversity at his institution which has only three percent African American students, Jerrod strengthened the institutional racism theme by contributing the following: “I wish that I saw that same African American diversity when I walked across campus. So, I, unfortunately, think that my prospects of fixing the problem in [OEE programming] are also linked to Nimbus fixing the problem on campus of African American attendance on campus.” In fact, he added, “When you look at our university, that's also the one area that we continue to falter in [...] given the larger population on campus and nationally.”

Rafiki had the same sentiments about institutional racism when she said, “How do we make African American students feel comfortable being in the outdoors, and participating in our programs, and being at the climbing facility? How do we make that happen when they don't feel comfortable being on our campus at all, right?” She continued, “this past summer in orientation camp, we told that story [of historical institutional racism] and said that some of the founders [of this institution] owned slaves. So, what can we do? We can't right every wrong, but we are going to make steps to right the wrongs and we're going to go forward.”

**Socioeconomic Status.** Participants in the study from all three institutions acknowledged the role of economics in OEE programming. The cost of outdoor gear and programming acted as a barrier to African American students' inclusion in OEE programming. Addressing low socioeconomic status among certain student populations at her institution, Dolores responded, “part of it [barrier to OEE inclusion] goes back to the financial aspect of our students, I think too, some more than others, it just depends on different racial background experiences and things like that.”

Acknowledging the existence of low socioeconomic status among some African Americans, Rafiki offered her opinion, “You had to pay money or whatever. So, generations did not learn how to swim, so there became this innate fear that was passed from generation to
generation, or a tragedy occurred, [and they thought...] I’m never going to that lake again.”
Tommy connects inner-city inhabitants and lower socioeconomic status responded, “[…in the US population], but socioeconomics is a huge thing. If you're in the inner city and you're poor, you're not thinking about going camping. Why would I do that?” Regarding the expectation that OEE programs should bring in some revenue, Jerrod from NU intimated, “sometimes our program is expected to cover all of its costs, right? To recoup all of its costs through the generation of revenue. But how am I going to convince a group of people who normally don't recreate in this way to pay me a bunch of money to do something they don't normally do? That's a very tall mountain to climb.”

Recruitment

The recruitment of student employees and participants in OEE programming was based on prior experience and the presence of role models. In the current OEE structure, those who have experience and see role models within OEE programming are overwhelmingly White. The lack of these two attributes among African American students acted as a barrier to inclusion in programming.

Lack of Basic Experience. Many higher education OEE program administrators got into OEE programming through work as student employees in a campus outdoor program and later as graduate assistants before becoming full-time employees and administrators. In order to be employed as a student, some outdoor experience is expected. Dolores stated:

So, I was a student employee [in the OEE program] for about two years, and then I graduated from school, moved to a different city, worked at a job for about five months, and then my current position became available. Most student employees are not racially diverse as was seen from analyzed documents, often showing an all-White staff.
Joseph agreed with Dolores on the issue of getting into OEE programming through employment as a student: “My first time in OEE was at this program as a student worker and then I left the program because I graduated. I worked at a Kayak tour company, and then I heard the coordinator position at this university was opening so I applied, and I got it.” In terms of lack of experience as a barrier to inclusion of African Americans in OEE programming, the challenge of identifying where to start to make things right because of how cyclic the problem of OEE participation for African American students is, Jerrod said, “The trick is how do I get a population of people who would identify as African American to come work there when they don't climb there and they don't have the experience there, and I can't get one without the other, but I can't get the other without the one in a way.”

Exposure to outdoor recreation and OEE at a younger age before college provided the experience necessary to get into OEE programming as a student employee or as a participant. This was shared by participants from all three institutions who were interviewed. Tommy shared, “[But] those kids had something with their families where they were exposed to it [OEE] and were excited. They did Boy or Girl Scouts.” He shared the experience of one girl in one of the camping and backpacking trips that he had led: “One girl was like, we just kind of used to go camping and I liked climbing. [Anyway] so, I think exposure early in life affects exposure or affects willingness to try new things [like OEE] in college too.” Tommy’s statement reflects how systemic racial exclusion of African American students in OEE programming becomes perpetuated. He offered, “Student employees are, themselves, a great source of new student employees because they refer their fellow students who usually look like them for employment.” He added:

And [I think] about some students who just frequent our programs enough, and as our student staff gets to know them, they do the recruiting for us, meaning […] someone
comes to the lake two or three times a week and they're paddling and they're like, "Hey, you're here all the time. Would you be interested in working here?"

Griffin from NU had similar sentiments when he said, “I guess in terms of our student staff and what they're coming in with, there's often quite a bit of a background in that activity to get the role that they're in. And then kind of that trickle-down effect, those [White students] are the people that are going to be on staff.”

**Lack of Role Models.** Role models are important because they serve as examples that influence others. They were mentioned multiple times by interview participants from all three institutions. The lack of African American role models at the student worker, the student participant, and at the professional staff levels contributed greatly to the lack of inclusion in OEE programming by African American students. Referring to student worker role models, Tommy shared, “People want to see other people like them doing the things that they are thinking about so that they'll be more assured that they fit in with the group and will be accepted.” Explaining why it is important for African American students to have role models among student employees, Tommy continued, “So, I think by having a goal of having a diverse student staff, it does allow others to see that as a doorway to get in there. If I don't see other people that I relate to, or that I feel familiar with doing the thing that I'm interested in doing, then I may be less likely to participate in that.”

A lack of racial diversity of professional staff at the campus recreation department level in the institutions under this study was evident. All the participants while responding to the question about racial diversity at the department level agreed that it was subpar. Chanise put it in these words:
[At] the department level, [we] do not have a lot of diversity when it comes to ethnicity and race. And our professional staff, when it comes to ethnicity and race, does not mirror our student population like that.

Racial diversity among professional staff in OEE programming is largely lacking at the three institutions and in higher education OEE programming in general. Jerrod said, “Like when you go to the Association for Outdoor Recreation and Education (AORE) conferences, there's a lot of White dudes and White ladies wearing fleeces and flannel shirts, and soon we need to have far more people of color in those places, in those spaces.” He added, “I think, to really show that we've [achieved racial diversity], that's how we'll kind of know that we've arrived [is] when we have that happening more.” Tommy posed this question, “And how many black leaders are in this field [of OEE programming] in universities? How many do you know? Did you put up a hand? One? Yeah.” Acknowledging that I was one of the very few racially diverse professionals in the field of OEE, he continued, “So, it's awesome. It's amazing. But I'm glad you're doing this interview because it's important. If our students see Albert at [an outdoor conference] or whatever, and they're like, "Oh, this is awesome. I could do that." Whatever few African Americans are in this right now, they need role models to think this is a great field to go into or it's important or I can do this too.”

Institutionally the interview participants admitted that racial diversity among faculty and staff was low, meaning that role models for African Americans were structurally low across the board. In her response, Chanise acknowledged that students had been decrying the lack of role models, but the institution was slow to make changes:

From a culture perspective, just looking at our faculty and staff, there is a recognition that we would like to have more racial diversity. [...]And so, just a recognition that
students have told us this and it's like, okay, how can we actually accomplish it because we know that it's something that is a high priority and that we want to [achieve]?

Jerrod’s concern was how his student staff looked: “One thing I've tried to think about and focus on lately is what our [student] staff looks like as well. And my thought is, you want to be around people who are like you or who you identify with. And so, when there were women up there climbing together, other women came by and said, ‘Oh, look, this space is for us too, I see this, I see myself in this population, I'm going to try that. What if we did the same thing with people who identify as African American?’”

**Marketing Strategies**

Interview participants from all three institutions felt that the methods used to market OEE programming and student employee positions did not lead to an increase in African American student involvement. Marketing material documents and social media advertisement posts lacked appeal for African American students, as was confirmed by Bolton, “I think as we try to make our programs more diverse, we just can't assume that more marketing or more, things like that, or an extra social media tweet is going to get us there.” Marketing was geared towards those students that were already familiar with OEE programming and they tended to be less racially diverse as analyzed documents showed. Dolores in her response to the question about marketing and recruitment offered, “I mean, we do a lot of it [marketing], I think to people [students] who already know climbing like, "oh, you have a climbing wall. Great!” She continued, “I think sometimes it's a personal invitation that is needed, [it] goes a lot further than if you build it [climbing wall], will they come? I think it's just telling the story, because when someone tells their story, I'm much more likely to say, ‘Okay, if they can do it, I can do it.’ Or at least I can try. So, I think that's one of the things we haven't been very good at.”
The use of student employees to promote OEE programming was a common method across the three institutions’ OEE programs. Jerrod said, “With trips specifically, we have some promotional tables that we do on campus once a week or so, where we have student workers that will work a shift where they have a table with different kinds of gear displayed, our sign, and then they'll pass out free stuff like stickers and t-shirts.” Online marketing strategies were also common in the three institutions studied as Griffin shared, “We have an online student employment system that we can post our job and students apply through it. And we just look through their resumes on that [system]. And sometimes, occasionally, it's probably about a quarter of our staff, if I had to just throw a number out there that are kind of just from that [source].”

**Lack of Sense of Belonging.** Because of the way marketing is done, the participants in this study felt that there are few or no African American student employees or participants that can provide a sense of belonging to future African American student employees and participants, and this was confirmed by the analyzed documents that included social media posts, OEE program websites and program organizational charts. Julio shared, “It's hard to kind of think about [it…] I'm not an African American student, and never have been, but I think to some degree, lacking in invites, and not seeing the people [students] that look like them participating in something.” Chanise in her response about barriers that impact African American student inclusion in OEE added, “If I don't see people like me there. I don't see other people that I want to be around in that space [already], it would be a lot easier if they were already there.” She shared an example of how students cherish a sense of belonging, “we have recently found out that there are African American student organizations that are actually doing their dance practice in our student union building instead of [in] the recreation building.”
Rafiki acknowledged the importance of a sense of belonging through her efforts as an administrator at the campus recreation department level: “I’ve had a goal of trying to get our staff to be relatively representative of the larger student population, because I think, from my own experiences when I go to a place when I see people that look like me, I feel like I belong, right? I think, ‘Okay, yeah. This seems like a scene I can mesh with. I blend in.’”

**Curriculum.** The current OEE curriculum structure at the institutions included in this study played a role in determining which students would feel included in programming. Analyzed documents (organizational charts, social media posts, student employee recruitment material) showed a lack of social justice approach in the activities used for programming. In agreement with the documents, Chanise had this to share:

Instead of just offering our normal menu of trips and then people sign up for them, we've talked about [how] we could offer a trip that is specifically for a student organization for African American students. We are going to increase their interest [and], we're going to have to do some intentional programming to make that happen.

In acknowledging the current deficiency in the OEE curriculum at the three institutions, Rafiki added, “Offering organization-specific curriculum customized for African American students will help have their peer network on that trip or on the challenge course or whatever it is, and they can experience it together.”

**Stereotyping**

Stereotyping as a social construction was a common theme that arose across the institutions when participants were asked about African American student inclusion in OEE programming. Documents such as website photos, social media posts and organizational charts were devoid of African American students. While speaking about his observation of the lack of African American students in OEE programming, Jerrod offered, “A good friend of mine at this
institution who is African American, [who] I talk to all the time about him coming on an outdoor
trip with us.” Jerrod continued, “his response is like [..] I'm African American and the last place
I'm going to be is with a bunch of White guys in the woods." Tommy from CU contributed to
stereotyping by saying, “I hear it enough that it's like a majority [...they would] tell me that
African American people don't do that [OEE]. So, my people aren't interested in that kind of
thing, [if that makes sense].” He added, “So, maybe that is partially because of the historic way
that things have been.” Referencing historical environments, Julio’s contribution was, “I would
say probably their upbringing from before they get here. OEE, in general, is not something that
African American students are really into, are excited about.” In addition, Jerrod warned about
the perpetuation of the stereotype:

So, if that African American student stereotype gets said or perpetuated, it can hurt too
for those students who want to go to try those things. Right now, I think we just have one
African American student staff who's working at our [rock wall]. The most we've had out
of the 45 student employees are two.

**Tokenism**

Social media posts and other media on institutional websites seemed to affirm what
Jerrod said, “And if I look at your advertisement and I see Black faces and Brown faces next to
White faces, and it all looks great, and having this kumbaya moment, but then when I come to
your facility there's a bunch of White kids climbing only, that's the proof, right? I need other
people of color being engaged in OEE.”

**Conclusion**

Analysis of data from the interviews and documents revealed three themes: OEE
programming is important and beneficial to students in higher education and institutions invest
heavily in this type of programming because such programming enhances student experiences
while in college and contributes to their retention and success. Secondly, racial diversity in OEE programming in higher education is low but improving very slowly, and thirdly, African American student inclusion in higher education OEE programming is very low or lacking. The data from the interviews showed that this is because of structural barriers that discourage inclusion of racially diverse student populations, especially African Americans. These barriers included (a) history which was based on structural and institutional racism; (b) marketing; (c) recruitment which led to lack of role models at OEE participant, student employee, and professional staff levels, lack of a sense of belonging, stereotyping, and tokenism; (d) curriculum; and (e) socio-economic status.
Implications and Recommendations

This study sought to find out how the current higher education OEE program structure (i.e., the relationship between operating processes, methods, systems, and people) impacted African American student inclusion in programming. For this study, the term African American was not synonymous with Black because individuals of African origin associated with voluntary migration to the U.S. are also referred to as Blacks (Agyemang et al., 2005). In this study, I limited myself to involuntary migrants who have a history of their descendants coming to the U.S. as slaves or against their will (involuntary migrants).

In this study, through my analysis of documents (organizational charts, program offerings, mission statements, annual reports, social media and institutional websites) and interviews emerged themes helped provide an overall understanding of how the current OEE program structure as defined by Hammond (2004) and Monavarian et al. (2007) impacted African American students’ engagement in higher education OEE programming. The themes point to the importance and benefits of OEE programming for all students in higher education, the low but slowly improving inclusion of racially-diverse populations in higher education OEE programming, and the very low or lacking African American student inclusion in higher education OEE programming on account of structural barriers that hinder their inclusion.

Summary of Study

To achieve the purpose of this study, I selected three higher education institutions in the South-Central region of the United States to draw participants to interview and analyze documents from. I selected one medium sized private institution, one small public institution and one large public institution in an attempt to represent common higher education institutions in
the region. I also selected these institutions for their easy access from my location, because I had planned to visit the sites and do the interviews in person, before the Covid 19 pandemic hit.

I used a conceptual framework that I developed for this study that integrated racial history, institutional availability, OEE program structure, cost, and student interest as possible factors that contributed to the lack of participation by African American students in OEE programming. A deep dive into OEE structure was undertaken in this study and after data analysis, evidence showed that OEE structure was closely tied to racial history, institutional availability, and student interest.

I also used a theoretical framework that integrated Critical Race Theory (CRT) in higher education brought forward by Ladson-Billings & Tate (2006) focusing on some of its tenets: permanence of racism, the social construct of race, and the idea of interest convergence.

In the period between July and September of 2021, I conducted nine Zoom-based semi-structured interviews and analyzed 40 documents to explore how the OEE structure at the three institutions I selected impacted African American students’ programming. Participants were identified and recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. During the time of this study, they were working as full-time employees in campus recreation. They included upper-level administrators (directors or associate directors of campus recreation departments) and mid-level administrators (directors/assistant directors or coordinators of OEE programs).

After approval and obtaining consent to interview, I asked questions that were guided by my conceptual and theoretical models related to the participants’ OEE programming experience, recruiting methods, marketing, campus recreation mission statements, institutional support, racially diverse programming, and African American OEE programming patterns. I analyzed the content of transcripts created using Rev transcription software from the initial Zoom video interviews and documents. I then used NVivo coding software to identify recurring themes
related to the inclusion of African American students in OEE program offerings and to determine significant patterns of thought, opinion, or language.

**Discussion**

In this section, I outline how different elements of OEE structure impact African American student participation in programming based on my data analysis. According to my conceptual model, African American racial history is seen as a factor that impacts inclusion in OEE programming by African American students. OEE program cost, institutional availability, and student interest are also factors. My CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) theoretical framework considered the racial history and expounds on structural and institutional racism through its tenets.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study focused on the role of OEE program structure in African American students’ inclusion in programming but only explored three institutions in a state in the South-Central region of the United States. The participants in the study were limited to full-time mid-level and upper-level campus recreation professional staff (program administrators and department directors). Students associated with OEE programs in this study were not involved as research subjects. I did not interview students because as a delimitation, the focus of this study was on the OEE program structure which is mainly maintained by administrators (Ahmady et al., 2016). In addition, this study focused only on one geographical region which might have unique characteristics related to OEE programming that might not be found in other regions of the U.S.

My original plan when choosing the research sites’ accessibility was because I wanted to be able to travel to the sites and interview the participants in person. Ultimately, this did not happen because of the Covid 19 pandemic, and I ended up doing the interviews virtually, and
while this worked really well, I would still have wanted to do the interviews in person to be able to observe more body language from the participants.

A visit to the research sites would also have accorded me with an opportunity to collect my own documents through photographs and visual physical observation of the research sites which would have further strengthened evidence from the extra documents I would have analyzed.

**Revising the Conceptual Framework**

Looking back at the conceptual framework that I developed, I had separated the current OEE program structure with African American racial history, institutional availability, and cost. After analyzing my data, I now argue that African American racial history is the overarching consideration that has determined current higher education OEE structure (recruitment, marketing, curriculum, stereotyping, and staffing) and its impact on African American student inclusion in OEE programming. The revised conceptual framework that I developed after this consideration is shown in Figure 2.
Alignment of Mission Statement and Practice

In terms of alignment with institutional missions and goals, documents (mission statements, value statements, media and other institutional data) and the interview participants’ data analyzed both revealed a common theme that alignment is lacking when it comes to racial inclusion in OEE programs, which are part of campus recreation which is in turn embedded in student affairs. Literature suggests that this misalignment is common in higher education because intent does not always translate into practice (Thomas, 2020). In chapter four, data showed how
the three institutions in this study committed to racial diversity in their mission statements at the campus recreation department level:

Regarding commitment to racially diverse programming the data collected seem to suggest that the commitment at two of the institutions was not evident and when it specifically came to African American student OEE programming, all three institutions lacked the alignment with the mission statements.

**Importance of OEE in Higher Education**

This study, in the literature review section, showed the importance of OEE in higher education through its impact on college students’ self-esteem (Paquette et al., 2014), resilience (Kelly, 2019), transition in college (Gass et al., 2003), interpersonal development (Gass, 2009), self-efficacy (Mittelstaedt & Jones, 2009), risk management (Ward & Hobbs, 2006), change in environmental attitudes (Marchand & Sanford, 2017), and sense of belonging (Zizzi et al., 2004). The findings from this study align with what the literature says about the importance and benefits of OEE. The data suggested that institutions invest heavily in OEE programming because it is important. Bolton from NU shared, “We've been able to support all of this as an institution and value that it really does give students access to experiences and equipment and all of the things that [they] have never done before, that they just want to pursue more in college. And so, we recognize that as a benefit to our students and really support it.” From my findings, the disconnect is evident when the numbers of racially minoritized students that are engaged in OEE programming are dismally low and almost nonexistent for African American students as Jerrod had said, “I think the proof is in the pudding, [...] do you see African American students climbing? If you don't, then we've got work to do, right?” Jerrod was suggesting that if more intentional programming for African American students could be achieved, then their inclusion in OEE programming would be easier. He emphasized and added, “and I can point and say, look,
see this is an inviting environment for those people, at least inviting enough for them to be there
and want to be there, but I can't say that about the African American community.”

**Racial Diversity in OEE Programming**

The findings in this study add to the body of literature on the general lack of racial
diversity in OEE programming (Warren et al., 2014). I had argued that since there is already a
lack of racial diversity in OEE and recreation, the same lack of OEE inclusion in higher
education OEE programming might be evident. My findings seemed to confirm this argument
through Rafiki from CU who said, “Our department has a strategic plan, and our division has one
[…] but] one of the major things that Cumulus in general, and student life in particular, want is
good racial representation.” She added, “it's not going to do anybody any good to have a very...
for everybody to look like me [White], act like me, talk like me, think like me. That just doesn't
help anybody grow.” In the OEE programs at the three institutions, full-time staff lack any racial
diversity, and at the campus recreation department level, racial diversity does not mirror student
demographics. Tommy pointed to this lack of racial diversity when he asked, “and how many
black leaders are in this field [of OEE programming] in universities? How many do you know,
Albert? Did you put up a hand? One? Yeah.” Acknowledging that I was one of the very few
racially diverse professionals in the field of OEE, he continued, “so, it's awesome. It's amazing.
But I'm glad you're doing this interview because it's important. If our students see Albert at [an
outdoor conference] or whatever, and they're like, "Oh, this is awesome. I could do that.
Whatever few African Americans are in this right now, they need role models to think this is a
great field to go into or it's important or I can do this too.”

**Impact of Current OEE Program Structure**

The current OEE structure is based upon the history of the United States (U.S.) as a
country with its history of slavery where African Americans through collective generational and
individual memories of trauma associated with the outdoors have played a part in discouraging outdoor recreation (Finney, 2014). Literature also points to a connection between historical occurrences and current social memory (Fentress & Wickham, 1992). The history of how higher education was established and maintained in the U.S. also plays a big role through institutional racism (Harper et al., 2009). Higher education in the U.S. was made possible by those who had the means to support the establishment of various kinds of institutions. These people were either businessmen, in the legislature at the federal or state level, or came from powerful families with means (Thelin, 2019). Success in business in those days meant the use of cheap labor, which almost always came from slaves (Thelin, 2019), who were regarded as property. Many societal structures and dominant narratives were based on White peoples’ perspectives (Finney, 2014) and this included higher education (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). The data from analyzed documents and interviews build on the literature regarding the history and seem to connect the current OEE program structure and African American student inclusion. Based on my findings, African American students face structural barriers that hinder them from participating in OEE programming because of the current structure of OEE programs at the three institutions.

**Structural Racism**

In this study, I have consistently argued that the lack of inclusion of African American students in OEE programming is supported by CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). After my analysis, the findings support my argument through the tenet of permanence of racism in CRT which posits that racism is so deeply ingrained in American society through the hierarchical structures that control all political, economic, social, and educational domains. In higher education, this permanence of racism is further supported by a broad range of literature (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Drewry & Doermann, 2012; Harper et al., 2009; Thelin, 2019). One interview participant summed up the permanence of racism in higher education OEE programming when
he said, “It just means that there are a lot of things that are just baked into the cake. The structural barriers to inclusion [in OEE] are in there and it doesn't mean we have to destroy or take down everything, but it just means we have to be patient and just be purposeful.”

**Institutional Racism**

The common belief that schools are neutral spaces that treat everyone justly has been refuted by close examination of retention and graduation rates as well as curricula (including programming) because much continue to be structured around mainstream White middle-class values that placed African Americans at a lower cadre (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). The general lack of sensitivity to other perspectives in higher education puts minoritized populations at a disadvantage in an education system crafted by those who provide the dominant narrative (Harper et al., 2009). This body of literature was supported by the data I analyzed when interview participants shared their views on African American inclusion in OEE programming. How do we make African American students feel comfortable being in the outdoors, and participating in our programs, and being at the climbing facility? One way to make this happen would be to acknowledge that the current way of programming does not appeal to African Americans and to start to find ways of reaching out to them and asking how programming should look through their perspectives. How do we make that happen when they don't feel comfortable being on our campus at all? This looks like it is a much bigger structural issue than just in OEE programming as literature has pointed out (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015) and so, this calls for all hands on deck across the institution when dealing with inclusion issues (Thomas, 2020). Another participant, Bolton added, “I think campus climate is probably decent, but I think there are some recent things going …[about] statues are a thing on campus right now and, some different views about that and some concerns about tradition and what that looked like.”

**Socioeconomic Status**
Socioeconomic status is related to racial demographics. People from lower socioeconomic status tend to be minoritized populations which include African Americans and Latinos (Bustam et al., 2011). Since literature already points to the fact that a major constraint associated with lack of outdoor recreation and OEE inclusion among African Americans, in general, is socioeconomic status, I argued in chapter two of this study that the same scenario might happen in higher education OEE programming. The findings in this study identify socioeconomic status as a constraint for African American student participation. As indicated by Rafiki’s opinion, “You had to pay money or whatever. So, generations did not learn how to swim, so there became this innate fear that was passed from generation to generation, or a tragedy occurred, [and they thought...] I’m never going to that lake again.” Tommy connects inner-city inhabitants and lower socioeconomic status when he remarked, “[….in the US population], but socioeconomics is a huge thing. If you're in the inner city and you're poor, you're not thinking about going camping. Why would I do that?” More literature points to the negative effect of low socio-economic status on access to good education, success during college, graduation rates and job placement (Declercq & Verboven, 2015). So access to many college offerings, including OEE programming is tied to socio-economic status.

Outdoor recreation gear is generally expensive and people from low socioeconomic status have to choose between buying recreation gear (or renting it) and putting food on the table. So, many students coming from this background would not grow up with opportunities to recreate in the outdoors, and when they get to college and find out that there is an OEE program, they do not associate the program with folks who are like them.

*Marketing and Recruitment*
For success in any venture, strategic marketing and recruitment of staff is an important factor as my findings seemed to suggest. In my original conceptual model, I had already considered marketing and recruitment as barriers to African American student inclusion in OEE. This study’s findings support the model and connect recruitment to history (structural racism and institutional racism) (Dowd & Bensimon; Thelin, 2019), leading to marketing methods that did not consider racial diversity. The documents analyzed in this study suggested that websites and media posts for marketing overwhelming depicted the dominant population (White students) on campus. One participant alluded to this barrier when he said, “I think as we try to make our programs more diverse, we just can't assume that more marketing or more, things like that, or an extra social media tweet is going to get us there.” The structural flaw in marketing and recruitment has led to a cyclical feedback loop that hinders African American students’ participation in OEE programming by discouraging the creation of role models. This structural flaw is not just in OEE as literature has indicated. It is in the U.S. higher education in general (Thomas, 2020).

**Lack of Role Models**

Role models are important in encouraging racially diverse and minoritized populations in higher education’s retention, success, thriving, and graduation (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015?). By the same token, role models in higher education OEE programming are as important in encouraging more participation by African American students. My findings build on literature highlighting the lack of role models in higher education in general (staff and faculty) as shown by Dowd & Bensimon (2015) and in OEE in general (Warren et al., 2014). As was contributed by Dolores in her interview, “people want to see other people like them doing the things that they are thinking about so that they’ll be more assured that they fit in with the group and will be accepted.” Furthering the theme of lack of role models, Tommy said, “so, I think by having a
goal of having a diverse student staff, it does allow others to see that as a doorway to get in there. If I don't see other people that I relate to, or that I feel familiar with doing the thing that I'm interested in doing, then I may be less likely to participate in that.” These contributions by interview participants expound on the importance of role models in OEE programming.

Role models beyond the OEE program, at the campus recreation department, and student affairs division levels are such an integral part of belonging in any higher education programming. My findings suggest that this lack of role models in OEE programming contributes to the lack of African American student involvement as was pointed out by Chanise during the interview:

[At] the department level, [we] do not have a lot of diversity when it comes to ethnicity and race. And our professional staff, when it comes to ethnicity and race, does not mirror our student population like that.

Outdoor programming considerations, like professionalizing the leaders and revamping the curricula, having multicultural approaches to OEE programming; and public land access, like permitting issues (Bobilya et al., 2010) need to be considered.

**Lack of Sense of Belonging**

Lack of a sense of belonging in higher education contributes to negative outcomes for students like stopping out, dropping out, and lack of on-time graduation, especially for Minoritized student populations (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). The findings in this study support this literature while addressing the gap in literature specific to higher education OEE programming. A sense of belonging is important in any group undertaking and higher education is no different especially when successful student outcomes are the desired goal (Strayhorn, 2018). Strayhorn (2018) posits that a sense of belonging varies based on someone’s social identities like race, gender, and sexual orientation and that having a sense of belonging is critical
to student success. The findings in this study support the literature on a sense of belonging and how the lack of it has contributed to dismal participation in OEE programming by African American students. Rafiki acknowledged the importance of a sense of belonging through her efforts as an administrator at the campus recreation department level: “I’ve had a goal of trying to get our staff to be relatively representative of the larger student population, because I think, from my own experiences when I go to a place when I see people that look like me, I feel like I belong, right? I think, "Okay, yeah. This seems like a scene I can mesh with. I blend.” Rafiki’s sentiments align with findings about the connection between sense of belonging and racial identity by Strayhorn (2018).

**Curriculum**

CRT views the school curriculum as an artifact of Whiteness that did not consider African American perspectives during its development but instead silenced and erased these perspectives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). In addition, current instructional strategies, and assessment in higher education also seem to favor White perspectives that often lead to the notion that African American students are deficient (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). In OEE, White-centered pedagogy plays as a factor that continues to maintain the status quo of having less racially diverse participants (Rose & Paisley, 2012). Literature also informs us that the OEE curriculum in general is a hidden curriculum that speaks to attributes of the dominant narratives, meanings, and interests (Warren, 2014). In this study, I have argued that in higher education OEE programming, curriculum as part of program structure is a barrier to African American students’ participation. The findings of this study build on this literature by pointing out that the current offerings in OEE programming may not be attractive to African American students simply because they are not developed from a diverse perspective. In confirming this lack of a diverse perspective while developing OEE programs, Chanise had this to share:
Instead of just offering our normal menu of trips and then people sign up for them, we've talked about [how] we could offer a trip that is specifically for a student organization for African American students. We are going to increase their interest [and], we're going to have to do some intentional programming to make that happen.

The idea of considering other perspectives while developing the OEE curriculum is quite evident from the findings of this study.

**Stereotyping**

Creating a dominant narrative about who belongs in the outdoors as a space for enjoyment, who should recreate in national parks and national forests, and maintaining this narrative is evident in outdoor experiential education literature (Warren et al., 2014). The impact of media (books, magazines, photography, films, television, paintings, sculptures, and documentaries) through this dominant narrative has continued to exclude African Americans from the natural environment (Finney, 2014), and has led to the absence of African Americans in outdoor spaces in general. Because of this, socially constructed stereotypes sprouted and fueled a new narrative of how much African Americans detest OEE. Findings in this study support the literature on dominant narratives and how they shape outcomes as was stated by Jerrod who claimed during the interview about an African American’s perspective that, “A good friend of mine at this institution who is African American, [who] I talk to all the time about him coming on an outdoor trip with us.” Jerrod continued, “His response is like [..] I'm African American and the last place I'm going to be is with a bunch of White guys in the woods.”

Tommy from CU agreed with the stereotyping narrative by saying, “I hear it enough that it's like a majority [...] they would] tell me that African American people don't do that [OEE]. So, my people aren't interested in that kind of thing, [if that makes sense].” He added, “so, maybe that is partial because of the historic way that things have been.”
Through these narratives, it seemed that most of the interview participants (who were all White) believed that African American students did not like what OEE programs offered while the few African Americans who were open enough to share their thoughts and feelings about OEE programming confirmed the dominant narrative that they did not feel comfortable being in the outdoor classroom in their skin.

**Tokenism**

Tokenism is viewed as an effort to make only a symbolic effort to achieve a particular goal related to human diversity (Yoder, 1991). Tokenism in higher education is rooted in the fact that originally, higher education was meant and structured for the White middle-class male (Thelin, 2019), and it was not until the civil rights movement kicked in those considerations for equitable opportunities based on race in higher education were highlighted (Harper et al., 2009). Due to all the efforts made towards leveling the racial field in higher education and the pressure institutions feel in looking right with diversity, institutions have resulted in portraying racial diversity in media even when this racial diversity is not representative of the whole institution (Thomas, 2020). Findings from this study build on this tokenism literature as was found in documents analyzed and as stated by Jerrod during the interview: “And if I look at your advertisement and I see Black faces, and Brown faces next to White faces, and it all looks great, and having this kumbaya moment, but then when I come to your facility there's a bunch of White kids climbing only, that's the proof, right? I need other people of color being engaged in OEE.” These findings suggest that tokenism is something that OEE programs sometimes find themselves practicing while trying to racially diversify their programming. Documents that I analyzed such as websites, some marketing materials and photos posted in social media confirmed this tokenism that was being referred to.
Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

This study provides insight into African American students’ inclusion in higher education OEE programming and how the current OEE program structure in the three study sites impacts these students’ involvement. The findings reflect a common inclination by the interview participants for OEE programs to effectively address and reflect the changing racial demographics in U.S. higher education. OEE programs also need to create organizational cultures that embrace and support social and environmental justice with the following strategies, shown in Table 1 as summary of recommendations for practice, followed by a narrative of these recommendations.

Table 1

Summary of Recommendations for Practice

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<td><strong>Intentional Programming</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Justice Focused Curriculum/Programming</strong></td>
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The acknowledgment of the history of land ownership in the U.S. the establishment of National Park and the National Forest systems and their effect on current higher education OEE programming should be part of the curriculum.

| Collaboration | Seeking collaborations in other areas of student affairs to help get the benefits of OEE out to the African American student groups and hopefully lead to more inclusion in OEE. Many institutions have special programming budgets and OEE practitioners could explore these funding sources and programs for African American students for free or at a very subsidized level. |
| Professional Development for OEE Practitioners | Engaging OEE professionals in diversity equity and inclusion based professional development initiatives help them create inclusive curricula and programming approaches that are inclusive for African American students. |
| Create Role Models | Create and build role models- allyship work that identifies racially diverse groups that }
| **Get involved in Local K 12 Schools** | Create partnerships with local K-12 schools with sizeable African American student populations and invite them to campus to see OEE offerings and encourage them to partner with OEE programming. This could include inviting middle and high school students to attend campus OEE offerings like indoor rock climbing, high and low ROPES courses or being part Earth Day celebrations. |
| **Celebrate Small Victories** | Acknowledging and engaging the African American student who visits the bouldering wall once in a while, as well as the other one who came to rent a tent from the rental center. Monitoring and documenting those African American students that engage in OEE for representative parity. |

**Intentional Programming**
Traditional programming in higher education OEE is structured based on dominant meanings and interest in OEE (White, able-bodied, upper class, heterosexual male), which led to a hidden curriculum that speaks to attributes of the dominant meanings and interests (Warren et al., 2014). To move the OEE interest and inclusion needle among African American students, one interview participant said, “We're going to have to do some intentional programming.” This intentional programming should be sensitive to the language associated with current OEE terminology like “primitive campgrounds” while marketing to African American students because no African American student would want to go primitive camping after their descendants had been referred to as primitive for generations. These campgrounds could be referred to as “at large” or “unsupported” campgrounds while also acknowledging that at some point in American history, African Americans could not visit national parks because it was illegal to do so for them.

**Social Justice-Focused Curriculum/Programming**

While none of us can go back in history and fix the wrongs that occurred, we do have the choice to engage in the change process that considers social and environmental justice as we offer to program in higher education OEE. This programming will include offerings that have diverse approaches and perspectives while remaining inclusive. The acknowledgment of the history of land ownership in the U.S. the establishment of National Park and the National Forest systems and their effect on current higher education OEE programming should be part of the curriculum. This might include visiting a native American site, acknowledging that the programming is happening on a certain tribal land or simply learning about the history of the areas that programming is taking place, and educating participants about the fact that originally these lands belonged tribes that were forcibly taken away and resettled in reservations that still exist today. All these can be achieved during the van ride to the destination or during pre-trip
meetings as part of trip preparation. Intentionality of social justice can also be achieved by acknowledging that a flexible curriculum that meets the target populations where they are, is needed.

**Collaboration**

Along with intentional programming, collaboration with other areas of student affairs like clubs, fraternities, and sororities that focus on African American students can be an avenue for engaging African American students in OEE programming. One African American student in a fraternity told one of the interview participants, "If you want to talk to the others, I can get you an in." So, going out of the way from campus recreation where OEE programs are housed and seeking these collaborations in other areas of student affairs can help get the benefits of OEE out to the African American student groups and hopefully lead to more inclusion in OEE. Many institutions have special programming budgets and OEE practitioners could explore these funding sources and programs for African American students for free or at a very subsidized level. Using these funds to invite outside African American speakers like those involved in Outdoor Afro, Joy Trip Project or Hood Naturalist, who are involved in the OEE field to give talks and give presentations could also help.

**Be Vulnerable as OEE Practitioners**

The willingness and the ability to critically self-examine current beliefs and belief systems, biases, and blind spots as well as bringing the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings OEE practitioners (most are White middle class) have to the open should be a positive sign of vulnerability that will hopefully encourage more engagement with African American students in OEE programming. One interviewee spoke about vulnerability this way, "Look, I realize I'm the whitest guy on the planet coming to you with this idea, but I promise you I'm coming because I want you in the space that I manage, I want people that look like you talking to them. I want
people that look like you to feel comfortable in the space I manage. And I know that one way to do that is to have good people that are working there that look like you”.

When OEE professionals exhibit vulnerability, they create an opportunity for those they are being vulnerable to, to be vulnerable and open as well. An example of this vulnerability is when OEE practitioners acknowledge that they have to move away from the White savior syndrome (Roberts, 2021) to the “willing to learn and be taught” level and avoid overstepping their position as collaborators.

**Professional Development for OEE Practitioners**

Findings in this study indicated that the OEE practitioners interviewed were willing to learn more about new social and environmental justice approaches to OEE programming. Engaging these professionals in diversity equity and inclusion based professional development initiatives is a worthwhile recommendation, because this would help them create inclusive curricula and programming approaches. Recently, there has been a push for the racial diversity agenda during OEE-based conferences like the AORE and AEE. Making it possible for OEE practitioners to attend such conferences would be beneficial. Ultimately, OEE professionals have the choice of how they treat others, how they educate themselves, and how they use their courage to open up themselves to seeing the unspoken things that perpetuate the status quo in higher education OEE (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015).

**Create Role Models**

From the findings of this study and other sources cited in the literature review, current higher education OEE programming at all levels (OEE professional staff, OEE student staff, and OEE student participants) is devoid of racially diverse role models. Some progress has been made with some racial minorities as was shared by one interview participant, “So, there's other examples of how this has worked before. And now we have Latinos on staff, we have Asians on
staff. I know this is true with the LGBTQ community. I have outwardly gay and out students who wear their pride badge with honor, and I know that other people in that group look at them and go, ‘Oh my God, this is a place of comfort. I can be here safely.’”

So, to start creating and building role models, allyship work has to kick in that identifies racially diverse groups that advocate for African American OEE inclusion and engagement like Outdoor Afro, Joy Trip Project, Black Folks Camp Too, Unlikely Hikers and Full Circle (the first All Black team attempting Mount Everest, the highest peak on earth, in May 2022).

**Getting Involved in Local K-12 Schools**

The findings in this study have indicated that few African American students join college with any OEE exposure or experience and therefore they have no interest in getting involved in OEE programming simply because that is unfamiliar ground to them. Creating partnerships with local K-12 schools with sizeable African American student populations and inviting them to campus to see OEE offerings and encouraging them to partner with OEE programming for them could spark the interest in OEE engagement when these students attend college. This could include inviting middle and high school students to attend campus OEE offerings like indoor rock climbing, high and low ROPES courses, taking part in outdoor orientation workshops like handling a camp stove, pack packing, pitching a tent or being part Earth Day celebrations.

**Celebrate Small Victories**

“I think it's the little efforts, little victories for racial diversity in our field that count,” shared an interview participant. Celebrating small victories in the work of engaging more African American students in OEE programming should be worthwhile for OEE practitioners. Acknowledging and engaging that one African American student who visits the bouldering wall once in a while, as well as the other one who came to rent a tent from the rental center, means
that the racial diversity work in higher education OEE is progressing. Monitoring and documenting those African American students that engage in OEE for representative parity.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Literature specific to higher education OEE programming for African American students is lacking in general. This study only scratched the surface by looking at the current OEE structure by interviewing OEE full-time professionals and upper-level administrators in campus recreation departments. For future research, an iteration of this study on the current OEE structure and its impact on African American students can be carried out by interviewing OEE student employees in general, other racial demographics who serve as student employees or as participants in OEE programming, or African American students involved in campus recreation.

For further future research, sites can be based on similar institution size (small, mid-sized, or large), diverse locations in the U.S. (across north, south, east, or west), or similar type of institution (public or private) to find out how African American students participate in OEE programming. The recommendations for practice suggested in this study could also be operationalized using social and environmental justice approaches into a research study that will help to show if, implemented recommendations, improved the number of African American students who participate in OEE programming.

Other avenues of future research are a focus on this study’s findings and their comparison with other research findings related to African American students’ access, sense of belonging, success, graduation, and job placement in higher education. A lot of research related to OEE is based on a perspective derived from the dominant narrative which is White middle class and fails to acknowledge what might be an African American perspective of OEE. Future research could focus on African American perspective of positive and beneficial OEE engagement and compare that with what we have been exposed to as the current OEE definition.
Conclusion

This study was conducted under the premise that higher education Outdoor Experiential Education programming needs to enhance and develop its focus on social and environmental justice, as well as reinvigorate attention to the socio-cultural context of experiential and constructivist pedagogies that are in its existence. Therefore, the specific purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which the current higher education OEE program structure impacts African American students’ participation in programming.

Findings suggested that lack of engagement in OEE programming by African American students was driven by OEE program structural history in the three institutions studied. The data also indicated that history has driven other factors like curriculum, recruitment, marketing, role models, and sense of belonging to further impede OEE programming for African American students.

OEE practitioners in the study reported a notably lower frequency of programming practices that address social dynamics of privilege and disadvantage, that actively engage African American students. They also noted the lack of drawing parallels between issues of social justice and ecological justice. Overall, the findings in this study resonate with the current state of the OEE field regarding social justice, as described by Warren, et al. (2014), who indicated that while OEE, in general, is paying attention to social justice, there is still significant room for improvement. This room for improvement, as this study has indicated is very large in higher education OEE programming for African American students.

Therefore, consideration of Critical Race Theory to include an increased focus on social and environmental justice, as well as continuing education and professional development for OEE practitioners regarding structural racism in higher education OEE is warranted. Without
these considerations, inclusion of African American students in OEE programming will remain a tall mountain to climb.
Appendix A

Interview invitation email:

Dear Outdoor Program Professional/ Recreation Sports Department head,

I am a Southern Methodist University (SMU) doctoral student in Higher Education Policy and Leadership and my research study goal is to investigate how current Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) structure influences the level of African American students’ participation in higher education OEE programing.

I would like to schedule an interview with you to understand more regarding African American student participation in higher education OEE programming in either late summer or early fall 2021. The interview will be held via Zoom and will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interview will be recorded so that the audio file may be transcribed for data analysis purposes and will be destroyed right after. I will assign you an alias and will not disclose your name, academic rank, department, institution, and any other identifying information.

If you are interested in participating, please let me know some potential dates and times for the interview. I will follow up to confirm the interview and will send a link for the interview via Zoom.

Sincerely,

Albert Mitugo
SMU Doctoral Student, Higher Education Leadership and Policy
amitugo@smu.edu
214 768 482
Appendix B

Consent Script

Interviews on Racial Diversity in Higher Education Outdoor Experiential Education Programming

Informed Consent

This whole paragraph was read aloud before interviews started.

I am conducting a research study to learn more about how Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) program structure (hiring, hierarchy, interview protocols for new student workers or participants, curriculum design and terminology, program leadership demographics, cost of participation, programming activities, best practices etc.) influences the level of African American students’ inclusion in higher education OEE programming. For the purposes of this study, African American students are defined as descendants of involuntary migrants (those who have a history of their relatives coming to the U.S as slaves or against their will).

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to take part and then change your mind, you can withdraw for any reason. There are no penalties if you withdraw, decline to participate, or skip any parts of the study. If you agree to participate, we will complete a 30 to 45 minute interview that will be recorded. The interview will be recorded so that only the audio file may be transcribed for data analysis purposes. The video file will be deleted or destroyed. I will assign you an alias and will not disclose your name, academic rank, department, institution, and any other identifying information. There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study. Your answers will help higher education policymakers, institution leaders, and other educators
create OEE structure that provide supportive environments that promote African American students’ participation in OEE programming. Would you like to participate in this research study?

Response: _____ Yes _____ No Date and Time: _____________________________
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

OEE Program Staff and campus recreation professional staff interviews on African American student participation in Higher Education. OEE programming. For the purposes of this study, African Americans are defined as descendants of involuntary migrants (who have a history of their descendants coming to the U.S as slaves or against their will).

Interview questions for Higher Education OEE professional staff.

Grand Tour Question

1. Outdoor Experiential Education Programs (Outdoor Programs) in Higher Education are instrumental in providing students with positively impactful and long-lasting experiences. Please share with me a quick overview of your experience working in the outdoor education industry.

Main Interview Questions

2. How do you recruit student staff in OEE program at your institution?

3. How do you recruit participants? How would you describe the history of OEE in Higher Education?

- What qualifications and experiences are needed for the positions of student staff in the OEE program?

- How have recruitment methods changed over the time you have been with the OEE program?
• What are your personal thoughts about racial diversity in Higher Education OEE in general?

4. Tell me about your thoughts regarding OEE in Higher Education and African American students’ participation in programming.

• In your opinion, what affects participation of African American Students in Higher Education OEE?

5. What challenges do you think exist for African American students’ participation in higher education OEE programming?

• Why do you think these challenges exist?

• What are your thoughts about role models in Higher Education OEE programming?

6. What advances do you know about that have been made to change participation numbers of African American students in higher education OEE programming in your department?

• How have those advances impacted OEE programming?

7. What are the current industry standards used for higher education OEE programming?

• How do you think these industry standards affect the participation of African American students in OEE programing?

• Which barriers do you think contribute to the way African American students engage in Higher Education OEE participation?

Concluding questions
8. What would you like to share with other outdoor program leaders about African American students’ access to OEE participation?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Interview questions for the Campus Recreation professional

Grand Tour Question

1. Outdoor Experiential Education Programs (Outdoor Programs) in Higher Education are instrumental in providing students with positively impactful and long-lasting experiences. In your experience, how has the institution supported such high impact programming initiatives.

Main Interview Questions

2. Tell me about racial diversity in Campus Recreational programming.

   • How would you say that OEE programming is viewed by other departments in student affairs?

3. Tell me about racial diversity work in relation to the current department strategic plan if there is one.

   • How is racial diversity work implemented in different programming areas within Campus Recreation department?

4. What institutional support systems are in place to encourage racial diversity programming at the department level

   • Can you please share your thoughts about professional staff racial diversity within Campus Recreation department?
• Are there any efforts that specifically encourage African American students’ programming at the department level?

5. Which racial diversity initiatives have been introduced or implemented at the Division of Student Affairs level?

• How have these initiatives impacted the Campus Recreation Department?

• How would you describe the current campus racial climate at your institution?

6. Tell me about programming areas within the department that are most racially diverse.

• Which programming areas in the department are least diverse? Why?

• Please tell me about specific interventions geared towards African American student participation programming within Campus Recreation department.

Concluding questions

7. What would you like to share with other Campus Recreation leaders about African American students’ access to OEE participation?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share
Appendix D

Institutional IRB Approval letter

To: Albert Mitugp
From: IRB Committee
Subject: 21-081 Racial Diversity in Higher Education Outdoor Experiential Education Programming
Date: 07/20/2021

The protocol 21-081 Racial Diversity in Higher Education Outdoor Experiential Education Programming has been verified by the SMU IRB on 07/20/2021 as Exempt according to the following categories under 45 CFR 46.104.d:

- (2) Tests, Surveys, Interviews

You may begin your research immediately. When this project is complete, please return to Mentor and terminate the protocol in the system.

The following files were reviewed and approved with this submission:
- Recruitment Materials 07/02/2021 21-081 Recruitment.docx
- Data Collection Instruments 07/02/2021 21-081 Interview.docx
- Approved Consent Form 07/20/2021 21-081 Mitugp_Consent script.docx

Amendments
Most proposed changes to the protocol must be submitted to the IRB prior to implementation. Guidance about the types of changes to Exempt protocols that require IRB approval may be found in the Research Handbook. Please note that some changes to the protocol might affect its Exempt status.

Expiration
This protocol can remain open for a maximum of 5 years, at which point it will be administratively closed. This protocol will expire on 07/20/2026. If you wish to continue the research after the expiration date, you must create a new protocol at that time.

Thank you,
IRB Committee

Office of Research
ResearchCompliance@smu.edu
214-768-2033 | smu.edu/research
Exemption Notification
Appendix E

NVivo software codes
Appendix F

Code mapping and theming
References


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