Narratives of (Dis)Engagement:
Exploring Black/African-American Undergraduate Students' Experiences with Libraries*

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Academic libraries are increasingly devoting resources to programs, initiatives, and services related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), as well as including EDI as fundamental or core organizational values.[1] Despite our profession's espoused values, there is a dearth of literature that highlights the experiences and voices of students of color, including Black and African-American students. The higher education literature is rich in its exploration of the experiences of Black and African-American students, providing evidence of persistent racial achievement gaps in American higher education. While libraries often boast about our community outreach programs on diversity and inclusion, we lack an understanding of the library experiences of students of color, which has implications for identifying their needs and expectations. This may be due to our profession's overwhelming whiteness,[2] as well as its historical reticence to discuss race.[3] Rather than confronting the implications of race and racism in libraries, the profession has mostly focused on diversity and multiculturalism, which Christine Pawley argues reinforces a general sentiment of "treating everyone nicely."[4] Pawley believes this sentiment allows LIS practitioners, educators, and scholars to feel good, rather than deal with issues of power and privilege centered on whiteness that are evident in institutional spaces like libraries.

In this paper, we introduce a qualitative research study that explores the pre-college and college library experiences of Black and African-American undergraduate students enrolled at a predominantly White institution (PWI), as well as sharing preliminary findings of the study. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences, needs, and expectations of this student population. Given that our profession is predominately White, Black and African-American students will often encounter library staff who do not visibly reflect their identities. This may be especially salient given that library services are often predicated on voluntary, help-seeking behavior, which requires a fairly high level of comfort. If our profession is serious about demonstrating its value to our institutions, we must also take seriously our contribution to the racial achievement gap. We cannot adequately understand our complicity in this gap without speaking with students of color about their (dis) engagement with libraries both before and during college. This study intends to recast the narrative related to students of color by bringing their voices, identities, and lived experiences to the fore.

Literature Review
Racial Achievement Gaps

The scholarship of academic librarianship has mostly ignored the evidence of a persistent racial achievement gap in higher education, even in discussions about the profession's role in student success and diversity-related initiatives. This invisibility is not inconsequential. Estela Mara Bensimon argues that to narrow and close racial

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achievement gaps, institutions must make the "invisible visible" and the "undiscussable discussable."[5] In other words, to genuinely understand libraries' role(s) in student success, we must also interrogate practices, cultures, and spaces that may serve as barriers to success, particularly for students whose identities have traditionally been marginalized in American higher education. We cannot truly interrogate those practices, culture, and spaces if we do not acknowledge or attempt to understand the problem.

Despite steady increases in college enrollment for Black and African-American students between 1976 and 2011,[6] a recent National Student Clearinghouse Research Center report indicated that among students who began at four-year institutions in fall 2010, Black and African-American students had the lowest six-year degree completion rates.[7] Only 38% of Black and African-American students completed their four-year degree in six years, compared to 46% of Latinx students, 62% of White students, and 63% of Asian-American students. In addition, Black and African-American students who enroll at PWIs are less likely to graduate in six years compared to their peers at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).[8] This research "found that black students who attend HBCUs are between 6 percent and 16 percent more likely to graduate within six years than those who attend predominantly white institutions."[9] This finding suggests that Black and African-American students likely face institutional and cultural barriers to success at PWIs, including microaggressions, and hidden racism. However, only 9% of Black and African-American students were enrolled in HBCUs in 2015, meaning that the overwhelming majority of Black and African-American college students in the United States are enrolling in PWIs.[10]

Importance of Engagement

In addition to factors such as unmet financial need and family obligations, differences in engagement among underserved student populations contributes to persistent achievement gaps. Shaun R. Harper and Stephen John Quaye define engagement as "participation in effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes."[11] George Kuh and his colleagues highlight "two critical features" of student engagement. The first is "the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities," and the second is "how the institution deploys its resources… that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes, such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation."[12] For students of color enrolled at PWIs, their perception of the latter may influence the former. Specifically, the ways in which students of color perceive their institution's campus racial culture, or "the collective patterns of tacit values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that evolve from an institution's history and are manifest in its mission, traditions, language, interactions, artifacts, physical structures, and other symbols,"[13] may influence their feelings of belonging and their comfort engaging with programs and services intended to help students to succeed academically. This is significant because existing research indicates that Black and African-American students' engagement with formal campus activities leads to higher levels of satisfaction and positive academic outcomes.[14]

Engagement and Academic Libraries

Academic libraries provide resources, spaces, services, and expertise intended to support students' engagement with educationally purposeful activities and the overall academic success of students at their institutions. However, relatively little is known about the ways in which students of color engage with academic libraries as college students. A handful of studies have used proprietary and locally developed surveys to examine Black and African-American students' experiences with libraries at PWIs.[15] Collectively, the findings of these studies indicate that Black and African-American students are more likely to use library resources[16] and typically use libraries to access library resources and to study.[17] However, Black and African-American students are less likely to use

research techniques commonly used by scholars, such as following citation trails or browsing the stacks.[18] There have been contrary findings related to asking librarians or library staff for help[19] and the perceived welcomeness of library spaces.[20]

Only one qualitative study related to Black and African-American students' experiences with and perceptions of academic libraries was found. Patricia Fields Katopol examined the experiences of Black graduate students in an education program at a PWI to understand their "feelings and behavior surrounding information activities and also addresses the perceived effect of race on information activities."[21] Through semi-structured interviews Katapol learned that these students perceived that the library did not have access to scholarship by Black scholars, that librarians "had no knowledge of their racially-related research interests,"[22] that these students turned to their peers for help rather than professors or librarians, and that White students had access to more information by virtue of the topics that they were researching and/or better relationships with faculty. We could not locate any qualitative studies exploring Black/African-American undergraduate students' experiences with academic libraries.

Survey research provides an important foundation for understanding the ways in which Black and African-American students use academic libraries, but the findings do not provide much insight into how Black and African-American students experience libraries. Survey research does not provide the researcher with the opportunity to probe participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings more deeply with follow-up questions, nor does it typically provide participants the opportunity to provide detailed elaboration of their responses to questions. Harper and Quaye argue that institutions must move from negligence to intentionality if they are going to make progress in creating equitable engagement experiences for diverse student populations. In terms of negligence, Harper and Quaye state that "simply providing services for students is not sufficient enough to enrich their educational experiences."[23] Based on the dearth of scholarship, we argue that academic libraries, in general, are at this stage of negligence related to serving Black and African-American students, despite good intentions. Intentionality requires us to know "who our students are, understanding their prior knowledge and experiences, the types of educational contexts from which they have come, and what they view as necessary for enabling engagement."[24] The study introduced in this paper intends to help move our profession from negligence to intentionality in terms of serving Black and African-American students enrolled at PWIs.

Research Study

In this qualitative research study, we explore the pre-college and college library experiences of Black and African-American students enrolled at a predominantly White institute (PWI). This PWI is a large research university located in the Midwest. Through this research, we intend to address the following research questions:

- How do Black and African-American students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwest describe their experiences with libraries and library staff, both before and during college?
- What role or purpose do Black and African-American students at this PWI assign to the libraries and library staff on their campus?
- Do prior experiences with libraries seem to inform college library usage for Black and African-American students at one PWI?

After receiving approval from the institutional review board (IRB), we conducted semi-structured interviews lasting no more than 60 minutes with 15 students who identify as Black and/or African-American.[*] Each

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The recruitment email stated that we were interested in interviewing "10 to 15 Black and/or African-American undergraduate students (including international, biracial, and multiracial students who identify as Black and/or African-American) who are currently enrolled full-time (at least 12 credit hours)" at the research site.

student received a $15 gift card for participation. Students were recruited primarily using personal relationships with colleagues in the institution's diversity and inclusion office. In addition, participants were asked to share information about our study, when comfortable doing so, with friends and peers who might be interested in participating. With consent from the participant, each interview was audio-recorded and sent to a professional transcription service to facilitate data analysis. The authors collaboratively coded several transcripts together in Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis tool. After collaborative coding, both authors individually coded each transcript and checked for consistency in coding. In general, the authors were consistent in applying codes to the transcripts and discrepancies were discussed through email and in regular check-in meetings. At the time of writing, the data collection was complete and eight transcripts had been coded.

An important limitation to this study is that one of the researchers is a White woman, which may have affected the students' responses to the interview questions for the interviews in which she participated. This researcher had no established relationship with these students prior to the interviews, so they may not have felt as comfortable discussing issues of race with her as they would have with an interviewer of color or someone with whom they had already established a trusting relationship. The other researcher is a Black woman. In our analysis, we are exploring the differences in the participants' responses based on the race of the interviewer.

Profile of Participants

A profile for each participant is provided in Table 1. The majority of the participants are second- and third-year students with majors in the social sciences. Many of the participants reported having concentrations and minors in addition to their major(s). The participants reported being involved on campus in various scholarship programs and major-related student associations, and many indicated that they held leadership positions in campus organizations. While our participants reported broad campus involvement, many of them were also active in identity-related student organizations, including the Black Student Association, African Youth League,

TABLE 1 Participant Profiles			
Pseudonym	**Year**	**Major**	**Gender**
Camaron	Third	Biology	Male
Chloe	Second	Film Production	Female
Darius	Third	Neuroscience	Male
Destiny	Third	Sociology, Public Affairs	Female
Diamond	Second	Public Policy	Female
Elijah	Third	Electrical & Computer Engineering	Male
Imani	Third	Political Science	Female
Isis	Second	Marketing	Female
Jada	First	Operations Management	Female
Jasmine	Third	Public Health	Female
Jaylen	Third	Material Science, Pre-Med	Male
Malik	First	International Business	Male
Sekhmet	Fourth	Forensic Biology	Female
Tahuti	Second	Architecture/City and Regional Planning	Male
Trinity	Second	Political Science	Female

Black Mental Health Coalition, and an organization celebrating Black women with natural hair (Natural and Prosperous). Three of our participants were library student employees, with two working at the main library and one working at a departmental library. Many of the participants expressed enthusiasm and appreciation for this study, as they reported that it often feels like others do not care about their experiences, that their experiences are irrelevant and ultimately remain invisible.

Preliminary Findings
Perceptions of Libraries and Library Staff
Early in the interview, the students were asked what words come to mind when they hear the word library. In general, students spoke about what they might to expect to find in a library (e.g. computers, laptops, printers, books, and study rooms) and what kinds of activities they might expect to do in a library (e.g. studying, reading, relaxation, learning new things, and getting stuff done). Students also described the characteristics they associate with the library as a place, using adjectives like quiet and silent.

Notably, these students did not typically include librarians or library staff when they were asked what came to mind. We asked students to picture a librarian in their head and to describe that person to us. Many spoke about personality characteristics, using adjectives like collected, interactive, offish, helpful, calm, quiet, and happy. Although only a few students explicitly assigned a gender to their imagined librarian without being prompted, many shared characteristics that are traditionally considered to be feminine (e.g. bun, kitten heels, skirt). Even fewer students explicitly assigned a race to their imagined librarian without being prompted. When asked, typically at the end of the interview, most students shared that the librarian they pictured was White. This was especially true for the students who grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods. Students who grew up in more diverse neighborhoods and regularly interacted with library staff of color often did not assign a race to librarians and occasionally imagined a librarian who was Black or African-American.

Students' Library Histories
All of the students reported using libraries, including both public and school libraries, prior to enrolling in college. A common theme in the students' stories was the role that family members played in introducing them to their public libraries. Many students reported that their parents would take them to the public library to check out books or to participate in reading programs. Some of the students described their parents as avid readers, but frequently the students perceived that their parents wanted them to get into reading. Diamond shared, "Yeah, [my father] wanted me to get books for myself. Like, he was trying to basically encourage me and motivate me to read, starting from a really young age." She went on to explain that her father was from Ethiopia and did not finish his formal schooling. Statements like this are related to the "Proving Process,"[25] in which the parents knew that their children will likely "feel pressure to prove their academic capabilities" due to negative racial stereotypes.[26]

Many of the students who had siblings reported that going to library to pick out books to read was something that they often did together, occasionally without their parents. Many students shared that they were big readers when they were children and eagerly participated in reading programs. However, a couple of the participants with siblings spoke about how they would create their own reading competitions at home. Jada shared, "We would be like, 'Oh, I have this book to read. I bet you can't finish this one before me.' And it would be totally different books, different pages and everything. But we just had, like, competition." Although some students reported that they continued to use their public libraries for leisure reading purposes, including when they were at home from college on break, for many of them the nature of their public library use changed as they got older.

They started to use the libraries more for their schoolwork (e.g. research assignments, studying) or to prepare for standardized tests (e.g. ACT and SAT). In other words, the nature of their library use, in general, shifted from recreational to productive.

Although most students reported having some experiences with their high school libraries, primarily to search for sources for research assignments, students rarely reported having experience with academic libraries prior to enrolling in college. One exception was Destiny, whose mother was completing a college degree and often brought Destiny and her siblings along to the library. The students in this study mostly used their university's libraries to study and to do school work. Many noted that they liked how quiet the libraries were, a quality that other campus spaces did not offer, as well as the comfortable seating options. In addition, students frequently mentioned that they liked the camaraderie of being around other students who were also trying to be productive, even if they did not come to the library together or even knew each other. Occasionally students mentioned that they checked out textbooks from their libraries.

When asked, students did not report experiences with explicit racism or discrimination in libraries throughout their lives; however, many reported experiencing microaggressions while using libraries, suggesting that libraries, including academic libraries, might not be the racially neutral spaces that the findings of previous survey research suggested.[27] Imani shared an experience with the completion of a reading program at a public library. Imani reflected,

> *One time when we went to the library to like collect our rewards…librarian behind the desk was like abrupt and like short with us. There was [White] kids ahead of us in line, that she's was like, 'Oh yeah. Good job for reading. Here's your [prize].' But when me and my sister got to the front of the line, there was none of that. She kinda just was like, 'Uh, okay. You did what needs to be done. Here's your prize.' I was just kind of put off like, 'What is this?' I loved reading. I always did that. I did the club every summer. I know one summer in particular, I wasn't like a big fan of it, so I didn't go back to that…After that, my mom took us to different branches to get us away from that or just to like show us like, "Oh yeah, this other librarian, like everyone's not the same.*

A common microaggression, which students also experienced in other spaces, was the perception that other students did not want to share a table or work space with the Black and African-American students. Darius shared, "It's like a joke among my friends. It's like if we ever sit at a table and like our table will be like the last one to get filled in the room, you know what I mean?"

Interactions with Librarians and Library Staff

One striking theme that emerged was the lack of interaction with librarians and library staff in college, despite the fact that students had interacted with librarians and library staff in their school and public libraries, as well as reporting frequent usage of their university's libraries. In addition, there was a lack of awareness about their subject librarians and the role(s) of the librarian in the collegiate academic experience. Jaylen responded, "I mean, you telling me that there's a department librarian, that's news [to me]. I never expected them to do a lot for me except check out books." Even one of the library student employees was not sure about the role(s) of librarians at the university. Destiny answered, "I was just thinking maybe like logistical things, like figuring out barcodes for books, or the order of the books, or like where a book goes in a shelf. And all the data entry. That could be my supervisor's job. So, yeah, I don't know. [laughter]" Many students asked the interviewers follow-up questions, wanting more information about the subject librarians and the

support that they could provide students.[*] This suggests a lack of awareness rather than a lack of interest in working with librarians.

The preliminary findings suggest two potential reasons for this lack of awareness. First, the university libraries likely need to find better methods of communicating services and expertise to this particular student population, as well as undergraduate students more broadly. Second, the nature of students' interactions with librarians prior to enrolling in college may not have prepared them for understanding the possible role(s) of academic librarians, despite having developed relationships with public and school librarians and staff, some of which lasted through the present. Most students seemed to associate librarians with reader's advisory, checking out books, and answering basic questions. In addition, many of the relationships students developed in their K-12 experience were with elementary and middle school librarians, not high school librarians. Many of the students reported learning about the research process from their teachers, even if they were learning about it in a library space.

Perceived Importance of Race

Another significant theme that emerged was the difference in the nature of students' pre-college interactions with librarians based on race.[†] Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the students who reported living in predominantly White neighborhoods reported interacting with White librarians, and students who reported living in diverse neighborhoods more frequently interacted with librarians of color. Based on the descriptions provided in the students' interviews, the nature of the interactions based on racial (dis)similarity seemed qualitatively different.[‡]

Some of the adjectives students used to describe the librarians of color with whom they had interacted were "caring," "engaging," "acknowledging," and "fun." The students perceived that these librarians cared about them, because they were proactive in engaging the students. Imani shared, "The few experiences I had with Black staff librarians has always been phenomenal. I feel like the Black staff at libraries like to see Black students are reading and learning and trying to gain and acquire knowledge, so they are encouraging, and just like, "Do you need help with anything?," or "Anything you're looking for?," [or] "So good to see you in here, please come back again." Isis shared a similar sentiment, "They're like, 'Hey, Isis. How's school? How's everything going? You know, your mural's still doing well. It's out there…Any new books you're interested in or we got a new collection.'" Students indicated that these librarians often initiated interactions with students, showing a genuine interested in engaging them in library services and activities.

Most students who interacted primarily with White librarians reported neutral overall interactions. For the most part, students had to initiate these interactions, meaning that these librarians were mostly reacting to a question or a need rather than proactively reaching out to these students to provide reader's advisory or promote library programming. Imani reported having several helpful interactions with her high school librarian who was White, but her experiences at the public library were a little different. "I remember when I was looking for books and needing help, sometimes they weren't helpful. I remember often going back to my mom like, "The librarian says she can't do this, this, or other." And my mom would take it into her own hands, and she would lead me to

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[*] *For those that did ask, the interviewers typically showed students how to find their subject librarian and their contact information during the interview or after the interview had ended.*

[†] *We have opted to use the term "librarian" to speak about both librarians and library staff in this section. It is often difficult for patrons to distinguish between librarians and other library staff roles, especially given variation in staffing from library to library.*

[‡] *In most of the interviews, the interviewers did not begin asking questions related explicitly to the potential connections between race and interactions with librarian until the end of the interview.*

the shelf and like help me find what I was looking for." Based on his experiences, Jaylen shared, "It's not like I don't want to be around them [White librarians], but I feel like they don't really have an interest in helping me, so I don't really have an interest in seeking them out." This was in stark contrast to his ongoing relationship with his school librarians, who were librarians of color.

Implications of the Preliminary Findings

The findings reported in this paper are preliminary, and we expect that they will evolve as we complete the initial round of transcript coding and conduct more in-depth analyses of these emergent themes. Despite that, we believe that even these preliminary findings have significant implications for our profession. First, the lack of engagement with academic librarians and library staff may provide evidence of the negligence identified by Harper and Quaye, at least at the study's research site. Simply offering services is not enough to engage Black and African-American students and more must be done to understand this student population, as well as their needs and expectations related to academic library usage and expertise. In addition, the preliminary findings may indicate the existence of implicit bias among White librarians. Implicit bias is the "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner."[28] While implicit bias does not make one a bad person, there are negative consequences when those potential biases are not explored or interrogated. In this case, several students perceived that the White librarians were not enthusiastic about engaging with them, which we believe may also have implications for the pipeline into the profession. If many Black and African-American students are not being proactively engaged by White librarians, then these students will not necessarily view the library profession as one in which they belong. In addition, the lack of awareness about the role(s) of academic librarians, as well as their invisibility in the students' library experiences, also does not promote librarianship as a potential career path to this student population. Finally, the findings suggest that the profession may want to think about the pipeline into the profession as beginning from a young age, as many of the experiences that shaped these students' perceptions of librarians began when they were children visiting their school and public libraries.

Endnotes

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