



THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN COUNSELOR EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Brittany N. Glover,¹ SUN Yu²

¹PhD, NCC, LCMHCA, Assistant Professor, Counseling & School Psychology Department. San Diego State University

²Assistant Professor, Department of Counselor Education, Sam Houston State University

Abstract

Despite counselor education's longstanding commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, Black doctoral students continue to report experiences that challenge their sense of belonging, support, and inclusion within predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black doctoral students enrolled in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs and to examine their perceptions of institutional efforts to create inclusive learning communities. Guided by Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) and Critical Phenomenology, this qualitative study centered the voices of twelve Black doctoral students through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed four primary themes: (a) Representation is Meaningful and Matters, (b) White Faculty Not Providing Safe and Supportive Spaces, (c) Disingenuous and Performative Programs, and (d) Black Students Need Community, Mentorship, and Culturally Responsive Support. Participants described the importance of meaningful representation, culturally responsive mentorship, and authentic institutional commitments to diversity beyond recruitment efforts. Findings suggest that counselor education programs must move beyond performative diversity initiatives and intentionally cultivate environments that support the academic, professional, and personal success of Black doctoral students. Implications for counselor education programs include increasing representation, strengthening faculty accountability, fostering culturally responsive mentoring relationships, and creating systematic mechanisms for centering Black student voices in program evaluation and decision-making. As counselor education programs continue striving toward inclusive excellence, the perspectives of Black doctoral students provide critical insight into how institutions can translate diversity commitments into meaningful action.

Keywords

Black Doctoral Students; Counselor Education; Predominantly White Institutions; Inclusive Learning Communities; Diversity and Inclusion; Higher Education; Student Belonging

Introduction

Institutions of higher education have increasingly prioritized diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging as essential components of student success and institutional excellence. As doctoral programs continue to diversify, there has been growing attention to the experiences of historically marginalized student populations, particularly Black doctoral students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Although enrollment among Black doctoral students has increased over time, many continue to encounter systemic barriers that negatively influence their academic experiences, sense of belonging, and persistence in graduate education (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021).

Research consistently demonstrates that Black doctoral students often navigate educational environments characterized by racial isolation, tokenism, racial microaggressions, and limited access to culturally responsive mentorship and support (Baker & Moore, 2015; Harwood et al., 2012; Shavers & Moore, 2014). These experiences are particularly salient within PWIs, where institutional structures and practices have historically centered White cultural norms and values (Gusa, 2010). Consequently, Black doctoral students frequently report challenges related

to identity negotiation, belonging, and the emotional labor required to navigate environments that may not fully recognize or affirm their lived experiences (Zeligman et al., 2015).

Within counselor education, diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice are foundational professional values. Counselor education programs are tasked with preparing future counselor educators, supervisors, researchers, and practitioners who can effectively serve diverse populations while advocating for equity and systemic change (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Ratts et al., 2016). Furthermore, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) has long emphasized the importance of recruiting, retaining, and supporting students from diverse backgrounds while fostering inclusive learning environments. Although these commitments are embedded within professional standards and program expectations, emerging research suggests that Black doctoral students in counselor education programs continue to experience inequities that challenge their academic success and professional development (Henfield et al., 2013; Zeligman et al., 2015).

Existing literature has documented numerous challenges faced by Black doctoral students, including experiences of racism, marginalization, inadequate mentorship, and exclusion from academic and professional networks (Baker & Moore, 2015; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). However, much of the existing scholarship has focused on identifying barriers rather than centering Black doctoral students as experts of their own experiences and sources of knowledge regarding institutional change. Understanding how Black doctoral students perceive support, inclusion, and belonging within counselor education programs may provide valuable insight into how institutions can create more equitable and affirming learning communities.

Centering student voices is particularly important given growing calls for higher education institutions to move beyond performative diversity initiatives toward meaningful and sustainable change. While counselor education programs frequently articulate commitments to diversity and inclusion, less is known about how Black doctoral students experience these efforts in practice and what specific supports they perceive as most meaningful. By examining the lived experiences of Black doctoral students, counselor education programs may gain a deeper understanding of the institutional practices that foster belonging, support persistence, and contribute to student success.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black doctoral students enrolled in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs at predominantly White institutions. Specifically, this study sought to center the voices of Black doctoral students and examine their perceptions of support, inclusion, representation, and belonging within their programs. By amplifying participant perspectives, this study offers recommendations for counselor education programs seeking to cultivate inclusive learning communities that move beyond symbolic commitments to diversity and toward meaningful institutional action. The study was guided by the following research question: How do Black doctoral students enrolled in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs at predominantly White institutions make meaning of their experiences of support, inclusion, representation, and belonging within their doctoral programs?

Literature Review

Black Doctoral Students at Predominantly White Institutions

Despite increases in doctoral enrollment among historically marginalized populations, Black doctoral students continue to face significant barriers within higher education, particularly at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Research consistently demonstrates that Black doctoral students experience racial isolation, tokenism, racial microaggressions, and exclusion from academic and social networks at disproportionately higher rates than their White peers (Harwood et al., 2012; Shavers & Moore, 2014). These experiences often contribute to feelings of alienation, decreased sense of belonging, and challenges navigating institutional environments that have historically centered White cultural norms and values (Gusa, 2010).

For many Black doctoral students, race remains a salient aspect of their educational experiences. Scholars have documented how Black students frequently encounter assumptions regarding their academic competence, legitimacy, and qualifications within doctoral programs (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2013). Additionally, Black doctoral students often report serving as unofficial representatives of their race within classrooms and academic spaces, resulting in increased emotional labor and pressure to educate peers and faculty regarding issues of diversity and social justice (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

The cumulative effects of these experiences have been associated with racial battle fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and decreased persistence among Black graduate students (Smith et al., 2007). Although many Black doctoral students demonstrate resilience and persistence despite systemic barriers, scholars have argued that institutions should not rely on student resilience alone but instead address the structural inequities that contribute to these experiences (Gildersleeve et al., 2011).

Black Doctoral Students in Counselor Education

Within counselor education, diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice are considered foundational professional values (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Ratts et al., 2016). Counselor education programs are expected to prepare future counselors, supervisors, and counselor educators who can effectively work with diverse populations while promoting equity and advocacy. Additionally, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) has historically emphasized the importance of recruiting, retaining, and supporting students from diverse backgrounds through intentional and systematic practices.

Despite these commitments, Black doctoral students in counselor education programs continue to report experiences that mirror those found throughout higher education. Research has documented experiences of racism, microaggressions, isolation, tokenism, and insufficient faculty support among Black doctoral students enrolled in counselor education programs (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2013). Black women have reported navigating the intersecting effects of racism and sexism within counselor education spaces, while Black men frequently describe experiences of heightened scrutiny, marginalization, and limited mentorship opportunities (Shavers & Moore, 2014).

Faculty relationships appear particularly important in shaping doctoral student experiences. Positive mentoring relationships have been associated with increased persistence, academic self-efficacy, professional identity development, and overall student satisfaction (Borders et al., 2014). Conversely, a lack of culturally responsive mentorship may contribute to feelings of isolation and disconnection among Black doctoral students (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2013). Research further suggests that representation among faculty matters, as students often report feeling more supported and validated when they encounter faculty members who share similar cultural backgrounds and lived experiences (Zeligman et al., 2015).

Inclusive Learning Communities and Student Support

Creating inclusive learning communities has emerged as a critical priority across higher education institutions. Inclusive learning communities are characterized by environments in which students experience belonging, validation, support, representation, and opportunities for meaningful engagement (Museus et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). Research suggests that students who perceive their academic environments as inclusive and supportive are more likely to persist academically, engage with their institutions, and experience positive educational outcomes (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 2012).

For Black doctoral students, inclusive learning communities extend beyond representation alone and require intentional institutional efforts that address systemic inequities and foster culturally responsive support systems (Gusa, 2010; Museus et al., 2011). Such efforts may include culturally responsive mentorship, affinity spaces, transparent communication, equitable policies, and mechanisms for incorporating student feedback into program decision-making (Baker & Moore, 2015). However, scholars have noted that many diversity initiatives remain symbolic or performative in nature, focusing primarily on recruitment rather than retention, belonging, and long-term student success (Ahmed, 2012; Harper, 2012).

Although previous research has identified barriers experienced by Black doctoral students and highlighted the importance of inclusive educational environments, limited scholarship has centered Black doctoral students as experts regarding the support they need from counselor education programs. Understanding how Black doctoral students perceive inclusion, representation, support, and belonging may provide valuable insight into how counselor education programs can create more equitable learning communities. Therefore, this study sought to center the voices of Black doctoral students enrolled in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs at predominantly White institutions and explore their perceptions of institutional support and inclusion.

Theoretical Framework

Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit)

Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) served as the theoretical framework for this study. Emerging from Critical Race Theory (CRT), BlackCrit was developed in response to scholars' concerns that CRT, while valuable for examining race, racism, and power, does not fully address anti-Blackness or center the unique experiences of Black individuals (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Whereas CRT broadly examines systemic racism and challenges dominant narratives that perpetuate racial inequities (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), BlackCrit specifically focuses on how anti-Blackness functions within social institutions and shapes the lived experiences of Black people (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

BlackCrit positions anti-Blackness as a foundational component of social, historical, and institutional structures rather than an isolated form of prejudice (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Wilderson, 2010). The framework further emphasizes the importance of centering Black voices, experiences, and knowledge while critically examining the systems and practices that contribute to Black marginalization. In educational settings, BlackCrit has been used to illuminate how institutional policies, practices, and cultural norms may perpetuate inequities despite stated commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

BlackCrit was particularly appropriate for this study because it provided a framework for examining the experiences of Black doctoral students beyond traditional discussions of diversity and representation. Rather than solely exploring whether participants experienced racism, this framework allowed for a deeper examination of how anti-Blackness may influence perceptions of support, belonging, mentorship, inclusion, and institutional commitment within counselor education programs. Consistent with the principles of BlackCrit, this study sought to center the voices of Black doctoral students and position their lived experiences as valuable sources of knowledge for understanding how counselor education programs can create more inclusive learning communities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing Critical Phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of Black doctoral students enrolled in counselor education programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences and how those experiences shape their perceptions of the world around them (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). A critical phenomenological approach was selected because it extends traditional phenomenology by examining how social, cultural, and institutional structures influence lived experiences, particularly among historically marginalized populations (Guenther, 2020). Consistent with the study's BlackCrit framework, Critical Phenomenology provided an avenue for centering participant voices while examining how institutional practices and environments shaped participants' experiences within counselor education programs.

Participants and Sampling

Participants consisted of 12 Black doctoral students and recent graduates enrolled in or recently graduated from CACREP-accredited counselor education programs located at predominantly White institutions throughout the United States. Eligibility criteria required participants to (a) self-identify as Black or African American, (b) be enrolled in or have recently graduated from a counselor education doctoral program, (c) attend a CACREP-accredited program, and (d) have completed at least one year of doctoral coursework. Purposeful criterion sampling was utilized to recruit participants who could provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Recruitment occurred through professional counseling networks, counselor education organizations, and social media platforms.

The participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1 (N = 12). All participants self-identified as Black or African American and were enrolled in or had recently graduated from CACREP-accredited counselor education doctoral programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The sample consisted primarily of women (66.7%), with men representing 33.3% of participants. Most participants were current doctoral students (58.3%), while the remaining participants were recent graduates (41.7%). Participants represented counselor education programs across multiple regions of the United States, providing diverse perspectives regarding their experiences of support, inclusion, and belonging within doctoral education.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (N=12)

Characteristic	n
Gender Identity	
Women	8
Men	4
Program Status	
Current Doctoral Student	7
Recent Graduate	5
Institution Type	
Predominantly White Institution (PWI)	12
Program Accreditation	
CACREP Accredited	12

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews conducted via Zoom. Semi-structured interviewing allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words while providing flexibility to explore emerging topics in greater depth (Seidman, 2019). Interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Interview questions focused on participants' experiences within their counselor education programs, perceptions of inclusion and support, interactions with faculty and peers, and

recommendations for improving the experiences of Black doctoral students. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach designed to explore how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography and is particularly appropriate for examining complex and personally meaningful experiences among specific populations. Consistent with the goals of this study, IPA allowed for an in-depth exploration of how Black doctoral students interpreted and assigned meaning to their experiences within counselor education programs at predominantly White institutions.

Following the procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009), data analysis began with repeated readings of each interview transcript to facilitate immersion in the data. Initial notes were documented to capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations. Emergent themes were then identified within each transcript and subsequently examined across participants to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in experiences. Throughout the analytic process, the researcher engaged in the double hermeneutic inherent in IPA, whereby participants attempted to make sense of their experiences while the researcher interpreted participants' meaning-making processes (Smith et al., 2009). Themes were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected participant narratives and the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. This process resulted in four overarching themes representing the collective lived experiences of Black doctoral students in counselor education programs.

Research Team

To enhance trustworthiness and reduce potential researcher bias, the study included a research team consisting of the primary researcher and one doctoral student pursuing a doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision. This was particularly important because the primary researcher served in a dual role as both the researcher and a member of the population being studied. The additional research team member identified as a Native American male and had experience reviewing transcripts, analyzing participant statements, identifying patterns in words and phrases, and applying phenomenological approaches to qualitative research. The intentional inclusion of a research team member who did not share the same racial identity as participants provided an additional analytic perspective, strengthened the credibility of the analysis, and supported efforts to reduce researcher bias.

The primary researcher developed the interview protocol, conducted the interviews, analyzed the data, and created the initial codebook. The doctoral student research team member participated in peer debriefing by reviewing the primary researcher's coding, interrogating interpretations of the transcripts, and providing feedback on emerging themes. The research team member also assisted in identifying potential biases, assumptions, or emotional responses that may have influenced the primary researcher's interpretation of the data. This collaborative process supported reflexivity, strengthened the analytic process, and contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of this study, including reflexivity, investigator triangulation, member checking, bracketing, and maintaining an audit trail. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; therefore, attention to researcher positionality and bias is critical (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The primary researcher identified as a Black doctoral student enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counselor education program and engaged in ongoing reflexive journaling throughout the study. Reflexive journaling was used to document personal thoughts, assumptions, biases, emotional reactions, and positionality during both data collection and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Additionally, analytic memoing was utilized to record emerging insights, patterns, and interpretations throughout the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Investigator triangulation was employed through collaboration with a doctoral student research team member who reviewed transcripts, coding decisions, and emerging themes. This process provided an additional analytic perspective and enhanced the credibility of the findings by challenging assumptions and ensuring consistency in data interpretation (Campbell et al., 2020). To further strengthen trustworthiness, the research team member did not share the same racial identity as the participants, providing an additional layer of reflexivity during analysis.

Member checking was also utilized to enhance credibility. Participants were provided opportunities to review interview transcripts and interpretations of their responses to ensure accuracy and validity of the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Participants were invited to clarify, revise, or expand upon their responses when necessary.

Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, the researcher engaged in bracketing throughout the study to identify and acknowledge preconceptions, assumptions, and prior experiences that could influence interpretation of the data (Vagle, 2018). Finally, an audit trail documenting data collection procedures, coding decisions, analytic

memos, and theme development was maintained to promote transparency and dependability throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black doctoral students enrolled in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and to examine their perceptions of support, inclusion, representation, and belonging within their programs. Analysis of the interview data resulted in four primary themes: (a) Representation is Meaningful and Matters, (b) White Faculty Not Providing Safe and Supportive Spaces, (c) Disingenuous and Performative Programs, and (d) Black Students Need Community, Mentorship, and Culturally Responsive Support. Collectively, these themes illustrate how Black doctoral students experienced counselor education programs and provide insight into the institutional conditions necessary for creating inclusive learning communities. Four themes and associated subthemes emerged from the data analysis and are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Participant Quotes

Theme	Subtheme(s)	Representative Quote
Representation is Meaningful and Matters	Representation Matters; Find My People	“Representation matters. So, even just by their presence, I knew I had options in terms of who to turn to.” – Shay
White Faculty Not Providing Safe and Supportive Spaces	Lack of Safety; Inability to Be Authentic; White Fragility	“I definitely did not feel safe with certain professors by myself.” – Sasha
Disingenuous and Performative Programs	Diversity Without Action; Recruitment Over Retention	“It’s not that they can support us or create an inclusive environment. They don’t want to.” – Jas
Black Students Need Community, Mentorship, and Culturally Responsive Support	Community; Mentorship; Resilience	“Being able to build community with my NBCC family has been a blessing.” – Camille

Representation is Meaningful and Matters

Representation emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent themes across participant interviews. All participants discussed the importance of seeing themselves reflected among faculty, mentors, and peers. Participants emphasized that representation extended beyond numerical diversity and contributed to feelings of safety, belonging, validation, and support.

As Shay explained, “Representation matters. So, even just by their (Black faculty) presence, I knew I had options in terms of who to turn to.” Similarly, Halo described how having other Black doctoral students in her cohort transformed her educational experience:

“I think having other Black people along the journey with me was very comforting. I could say within myself I felt a lot more confident to speak up about certain things, a lot more confident to confront and challenge because I knew in certain regards I would be supported by Black peers.”

Halo contrasted this experience with her master's program where she was the only Black student and often felt “extremely unsafe” in academic spaces. These narratives suggest that representation provided participants with a sense of security that encouraged authentic participation and engagement.

Participants also emphasized the importance of Black faculty representation. Ty described the hiring of a Black male faculty member as a “corrective experience,” explaining:

“Having a Black male faculty has been helpful when it comes to research and scholarship. Learning how to find my voice without honestly sounding White or code switching has been helpful. As well as getting connected with other Black faculty on campus and opportunities with other Black men. That has been helpful with navigating the counselor world and academia.”

Similarly, Javon shared:

“The Black women faculty definitely are folks that I’m leaning into almost every day and learn from. My experience wouldn’t be the same without them. They are the ones who advocate for me both inside and outside of the department.”

Chris echoed these sentiments, stating:

“One of the things that helped me with my own retention was seeing and having and working with faculty of color. I felt like I could relate to them and confide in them or share with them things that I’m navigating and that would be validated and understood.”

Closely connected to representation was participants’ desire to “find my people.” Participants repeatedly discussed intentionally seeking relationships with Black peers and faculty because these connections provided support, understanding, and belonging. Brandon explained, “A lot of times as Black students we have to find our own support and we do that by finding our people.” Sasha similarly described these relationships as spaces where Black students could acknowledge one another’s experiences and provide mutual support, explaining, “I see what’s happening and I’m willing to help you and support you in any way that I can.”

Collectively, participants viewed representation as a foundational component of inclusive learning communities. Representation fostered mentorship, validation, connection, and advocacy, all of which participants identified as critical to their persistence and success within counselor education programs.

White Faculty Not Providing Safe and Supportive Spaces

The second theme reflected participants’ perceptions that White faculty often failed to create safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments. Eleven of the twelve participants described experiences with White faculty members that contributed to feelings of isolation, discomfort, marginalization, or lack of support.

Taylor summarized her experience by stating:

“It’s been really hard. There was not a lot of connection with professors, primarily those that were not Black. There was also no sense of community or safety from the professors.”

Similarly, Camille shared:

“Going through the program has been an adjustment and has been pretty difficult. I was consistently trying to adjust to this idea of asking for help in an unsafe space.”

Participants frequently described questioning faculty intentions and feeling uncertain about how they were perceived. Shay explained:

“I had to consistently question intent. When I walked away and that interaction felt icky, or whatever you said just didn’t sit right, the fact is they gave me racist vibes.”

Sasha echoed this sentiment:

“Overall, it’s been taxing for the last two and a half years, to the point where I didn’t feel safe and didn’t feel comfortable talking to professors. I definitely did not feel safe with certain professors by myself.”

Participants also described feeling unable to show up authentically within their programs. Many reported modifying their behavior, communication, and emotional expression in order to avoid negative stereotypes associated with Blackness. Chris explained:

“I have reflected on where my perfectionism and imposter syndrome is coming in. There is this belief that I have to work ten times harder just to break even and then still question if that is enough. It’s exhausting. I want White faculty to see me in the same light they see them.”

Brandon similarly described the pressure to carefully monitor how he interacted with faculty:

“Being a Black person, I personally have to present a specific way as I approach faculty so I don’t come off too overbearing or angry. I feel like I have to shift my tone a bit for them to fully absorb what I’m trying to say.”

For Black male participants, concerns regarding racial stereotypes were particularly salient. Kerv shared:

“Being a Black male who is muscular and confident in his identity has made people uncomfortable, particularly White women. I’m always mindful of how I navigate myself because I’m always in an environment where I’m the Black male.”

Participants further described experiences consistent with White fragility, particularly when discussions of race and racism emerged within counselor education spaces. Sasha noted:

“Everything has been reframed, so we don’t want to talk about racial trauma, let’s talk about multiculturalism and things that are more soothing and appropriate to Whites.”

Brandon similarly stated:

“We have professors who run away from the conversation when we are supposed to be culturally competent.”

Participants also described instances in which White faculty failed to address racially insensitive comments made by students. JaQuavius recalled an incident in which a White student publicly challenged him in class and the White professor “just allowed it to happen.” Likewise, Brandon described a classroom interaction in which a White peer became combative following feedback and the professor failed to intervene.

These experiences collectively undermined participants’ perceptions of inclusion and belonging. As Ty noted, “I am confident that the reason why me and the other Black people stay in my program has nothing to do with the program and their retention efforts.” Rather, participants described persisting despite institutional barriers, not because of institutional support.

Disingenuous and Performative Programs

The third theme reflected participants’ perceptions that many counselor education programs engaged in diversity efforts that appeared performative rather than substantive. Although participants acknowledged that counselor education programs often publicly emphasized diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, many questioned whether these commitments translated into meaningful institutional action. Participants frequently described a disconnect between program rhetoric and their lived experiences as Black doctoral students.

Several participants believed that diversity initiatives primarily focused on recruitment rather than retention and support. Camille described many institutional efforts as “surface level,” explaining:

“I think a lot of institutions recruit diverse students because it looks good, but I don’t know that they always think through what happens after those students arrive.”

Similarly, Shay emphasized that good intentions alone were insufficient:

“There’s a difference between saying diversity matters and actually doing the work to make students feel supported, valued, and included once they get here.”

Participants repeatedly expressed frustration that counselor education programs often celebrated diversity rhetorically while failing to address concerns raised by Black students. Jas offered one of the strongest critiques of institutional diversity efforts, stating:

“It’s not that they can support us or create an inclusive environment. They don’t want to. They don’t want to hear our voices, they don’t want to be uncomfortable, and they don’t want to make the necessary changes.”

For Jas, the issue was not a lack of knowledge regarding how to support Black students but rather a lack of institutional willingness to engage in the difficult work necessary to create meaningful change.

Participants also discussed concerns regarding faculty representation and curriculum. Ty noted that multicultural and social justice topics often felt compartmentalized rather than integrated throughout the curriculum:

“We’ll talk about diversity in one class or one assignment, but then everything else goes back to the same perspectives and same voices.”

Others questioned how programs could claim to prioritize diversity while maintaining overwhelmingly White faculty populations. Participants consistently described Black faculty as critical to their success while simultaneously expressing concern regarding the lack of intentional efforts to recruit and retain Black counselor educators.

Halo further described what she perceived as inconsistent commitments to recruiting Black students, suggesting that diversity efforts sometimes appeared quota-driven rather than rooted in long-term equity goals. Participants expressed concerns that institutions often highlighted diversity statistics without evaluating whether Black students actually experienced belonging and support after enrollment.

Across interviews, participants described diversity initiatives as symbolic when they lacked accountability, follow-through, and responsiveness to student concerns. While participants appreciated efforts to increase diversity, they emphasized that inclusive learning communities require more than recruitment initiatives or public statements. Rather, participants called for sustained institutional action that centers student experiences, addresses systemic inequities, and creates meaningful opportunities for Black students to influence program culture and decision-making.

Black Students Need Community, Mentorship, and Culturally Responsive Support

The final theme highlighted participants' perceptions that Black doctoral students possess unique needs that must be intentionally addressed by counselor education programs. Although participants acknowledged that all doctoral students face challenges, they emphasized that Black students often navigate additional racialized experiences that require culturally responsive forms of support. Community, mentorship, representation, and safe learning environments emerged as critical components of participant success.

Community was one of the most frequently discussed needs. Participants consistently described the importance of building relationships with other Black doctoral students, Black faculty, and professional networks. Many referenced organizations such as the National Board for Certified Counselors Minority Fellowship Program (NBCC MFP), Black Women in Counselor Education affinity groups, and professional organizations for Black counselor educators.

Camille described the impact of finding community outside of her institution:

"Being able to build community with my NBCC family has been a blessing. It's one of the few spaces where I feel fully understood."

Similarly, Javon shared:

"Those Black women spaces have been everything. It's a place where we can share ideas, support one another, and not have to explain our experiences."

Participants repeatedly described community as a protective factor that helped them navigate feelings of isolation, racial stress, and academic challenges.

Mentorship also emerged as a critical need. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of having mentors who could provide guidance related to doctoral education, academia, research, and professional development. Importantly, participants noted that effective mentorship extended beyond academic advising and often included advocacy, emotional support, and sponsorship.

Jas reflected on the role her dissertation chair played in her success:

"I honestly don't know if I would have finished without my chair. She advocated for me, supported me, and reminded me of my worth when I was questioning whether I belonged."

Likewise, Ty discussed the importance of mentorship from Black faculty:

"There are certain conversations I can have with Black faculty that I simply can't have with others. They understand things without me having to explain every detail."

Participants described these mentoring relationships as instrumental in helping them navigate both doctoral education and the broader academic environment.

Safe and affirming learning environments also emerged as essential. Participants emphasized the need for spaces where they could engage authentically without fear of judgment, retaliation, or racial stereotyping. For many participants, psychological safety was directly connected to their willingness to participate in class discussions, seek support from faculty, and pursue leadership opportunities within their programs.

Despite the barriers they encountered, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience. The phrase "push through" appeared repeatedly throughout interviews as participants described their determination to complete their degrees. Ty connected resilience to a broader historical legacy, explaining:

"Resilience is in our DNA. We come from people who survived things much harder than doctoral programs."

Similarly, JaQuavius reflected:

“I don’t think the university has done anything to specifically address or retain Black diverse students. Despite everything we go through, we are always going to rise above and get that shit by any means necessary.”

While participants took pride in their resilience, they were careful to emphasize that resilience should not be mistaken for institutional effectiveness. Participants repeatedly noted that their persistence often occurred despite systemic barriers rather than because of institutional support. As a result, they called for counselor education programs to move beyond expecting Black students to simply endure adversity and instead create environments where they can thrive.

Collectively, participants identified community, mentorship, representation, and culturally responsive support as essential components of inclusive learning communities. These findings suggest that fostering Black doctoral student success requires intentional institutional efforts that prioritize belonging, advocacy, and authentic support throughout the doctoral experience.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black doctoral students enrolled in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and to examine their perceptions of support, inclusion, representation, and belonging within their programs. Findings revealed that participants viewed representation, community, mentorship, and culturally responsive support as essential components of their success, while simultaneously identifying significant challenges related to unsafe learning environments, performative diversity efforts, and a lack of institutional accountability. Collectively, these findings suggest that creating inclusive learning communities requires more than recruiting diverse students; it requires intentional efforts to foster environments in which Black doctoral students feel supported, valued, and empowered to thrive.

A central finding of this study was the importance of representation. Consistent with previous research, participants described Black faculty and peers as critical sources of support, validation, mentorship, and belonging (Baker & Moore, 2015; Henfield et al., 2013; Zeligman et al., 2015). Participants consistently reported that representation influenced their willingness to engage in classroom discussions, seek support, and persist through challenges. These findings support existing scholarship suggesting that representation serves as more than a symbolic marker of diversity; rather, consistent with participant narratives, representation functioned as a mechanism through which students accessed mentorship, advocacy, culturally affirming relationships, and a stronger sense of belonging (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). For many participants, the ability to “find my people” reduced feelings of isolation and strengthened their sense of belonging within their programs.

Findings also revealed that many participants experienced counselor education environments as psychologically unsafe due to interactions with White faculty members. Participants described questioning faculty intentions, monitoring their behavior to avoid racial stereotypes, and navigating environments in which discussions of race and racism were frequently minimized or avoided. These findings align with previous literature documenting racial microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, and the emotional labor often experienced by Black students within predominantly White academic environments (Harwood et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2007). Through a BlackCrit lens, these experiences may be understood as manifestations of anti-Blackness embedded within institutional structures and interpersonal interactions (Dumas & Ross, 2016). While counselor education programs frequently emphasize multiculturalism and social justice, participants’ narratives suggest that these commitments are not always reflected in the day-to-day experiences of Black doctoral students.

Another significant finding was participants’ perception that many diversity initiatives were performative rather than transformative. Although participants acknowledged institutional efforts to recruit diverse students, many questioned whether programs were equally committed to retaining, supporting, and listening to Black students once enrolled. These findings mirror broader critiques within higher education literature suggesting that diversity efforts often prioritize representation and visibility while neglecting systemic change and accountability (Ahmed, 2012; Harper, 2012). Participants repeatedly described a disconnect between institutional rhetoric and institutional action, highlighting the importance of moving beyond symbolic commitments toward meaningful institutional transformation. From a BlackCrit perspective, these findings illuminate how institutions may simultaneously espouse commitments to diversity while maintaining structures and practices that fail to address the needs and experiences of Black students (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

Participants also identified community, mentorship, and culturally responsive support as essential components of doctoral student success. Consistent with prior research, participants described mentoring relationships as critical to professional identity development, persistence, and academic success (Borders et al., 2014). However, participants emphasized that effective mentorship extends beyond traditional academic advising and includes advocacy, sponsorship, validation, and emotional support. Likewise, participants described affinity

groups, professional organizations, and relationships with Black faculty and peers as important sources of community that helped buffer the effects of isolation and marginalization. These findings suggest that institutions seeking to create inclusive learning communities should move beyond deficit-oriented approaches and intentionally cultivate structures that support Black students academically, professionally, and personally.

Implications for Counselor Education Programs

The findings of this study have important implications for counselor education programs. First, programs should prioritize the recruitment, retention, and promotion of Black faculty members. Although representation alone cannot eliminate inequities, participants consistently described Black faculty as critical sources of mentorship, advocacy, and support. Second, counselor education programs should establish formal mentoring structures that intentionally connect Black doctoral students with faculty, alumni, and professional networks. Such structures may help reduce isolation, increase professional socialization, and provide access to opportunities that support academic and career success.

Third, programs should regularly assess the experiences of Black doctoral students through climate surveys, focus groups, and other feedback mechanisms to ensure that student voices inform program development and decision-making. Finally, counselor education programs should move beyond diversity statements and isolated multicultural initiatives by embedding equity, inclusion, and accountability throughout curriculum, policy, supervision, faculty development, and program evaluation efforts.

Although this study was conducted under the 2016 CACREP Standards, the findings remain highly relevant to the 2024 CACREP Standards. The revised standards continue to emphasize equitable recruitment, retention, support, and the creation of learning environments that foster student success and belonging. As counselor education programs implement the 2024 standards, the voices of Black doctoral students offer critical insight into how institutions can move beyond compliance and toward meaningful, student-centered practices that promote equity, inclusion, and authentic support.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The sample consisted of twelve Black doctoral students and recent graduates enrolled in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs at predominantly White institutions, which may limit transferability to other academic disciplines, institutional types, or educational contexts. Additionally, participants self-selected into the study and may have been more likely to participate due to particularly positive or negative experiences. As with all qualitative research, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all Black doctoral students but rather to provide rich descriptions and insights into participants' lived experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should continue exploring the experiences of Black doctoral students across counselor education programs and other helping professions. Additional studies examining the experiences of Black doctoral students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) may provide important comparative perspectives. Researchers may also consider examining the effectiveness of mentorship programs, affinity groups, and institutional initiatives designed to support Black doctoral student success. Longitudinal studies exploring how doctoral experiences influence career trajectories, faculty development, persistence in academia, and transitions into counselor educator roles may further contribute to the literature.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that Black doctoral students continue to navigate environments in which they often experience isolation, racialized stress, and inadequate institutional support despite counselor education's stated commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. At the same time, participants offered a clear vision for creating more inclusive learning communities. Inclusive learning communities are not created through diversity statements alone. Rather, they are cultivated through meaningful representation, culturally responsive mentorship, authentic engagement with student voices, and institutional accountability.

The participants in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience; however, their stories also challenge counselor education programs to reconsider how success is measured. Success should not be defined solely by whether Black doctoral students persist despite barriers. Instead, success should be reflected in the extent to which programs create environments where Black doctoral students feel seen, valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. Centering Black doctoral student voices is not simply a matter of diversity; it is an essential step toward building counselor education programs that embody the inclusive learning communities they aspire to create.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.
- American Counseling Association. (2014). *ACA code of ethics*. Author.
- Baker, C. A., & Moore, J. L., III. (2015). Experiences of underrepresented doctoral students in counselor education. *Journal of Multicultural Education*, 9(2), 68–84. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-11-2014-0036>
- Borders, L. D., Wester, K. L., Fickling, M. J., & Adamson, N. A. (2014). Research training in counselor education: A national survey. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 53(2), 115–128. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2014.00051.x>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2017). 2017 standards. <http://www.cacrep.org/for-programs/2016-caprep-standards/>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2018). CACREP Annual report 2018. <http://www.cacrep.org/about-cacrep/publications/cacrep-annual-reports/>
- Crenshaw, K. (1995). Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement. *The New Press*.
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
- Dumas, M. J., & Ross, K. M. (2016). “Be real Black for me”: Imagining BlackCrit in education. *Urban Education*, 51(4), 415–442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916628611>
- Gildersleeve, R. E., Croom, N. N., & Vasquez, P. L. (2011). “Am I going crazy?!” A critical race analysis of doctoral education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(1), 93–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2011.539472>
- Guenther, L. (2020). *Critical phenomenology*. Routledge.
- Gusa, D. L. (2010). White institutional presence: The impact of whiteness on campus climate. *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(4), 464–489. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.80.4.p5j483825u110002>
- Harper, S. R. (2012). Race without racism: How higher education researchers minimize racist institutional norms. *The Review of Higher Education*, 36(1), 9–29. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0047>
- Harwood, S. A., Hunt, M. B., Mendenhall, R., & Lewis, J. A. (2012). Racial microaggressions in the residence halls of a predominantly White university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5(3), 159–173. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028956>
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. Guilford Press.
- Henfield, M. S., Owens, D., & Witherspoon, S. (2013). African American students in counselor education programs: Perceptions of their experiences. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 52(1), 40–53. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2013.00028.x>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage.
- Museus, S. D., Yi, V., & Saelua, N. (2011). The impact of culturally engaging campus environments on sense of belonging. *The Review of Higher Education*, 34(4), 565–600. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2011.0017>
- National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2021). *Current term enrollment estimates*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R. (2016). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 44(1), 28–48. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12035>
- Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2019). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Sage.
- Seidman, I. (2019). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Shavers, M. C., & Moore, J. L., III. (2014). The double-edged sword: Experiences of Black doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 83(3), 412–426.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage.
- Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2007). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black men. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 76(4), 551–578.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students’ sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.
- Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.

- Vagle, M. D. (2018). *Crafting phenomenological research* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Wilderson, F. B., III. (2010). *Red, white & Black: Cinema and the structure of U.S. antagonisms*. Duke University Press.
- Zeligman, M., Prescod, D. J., & Greene, J. H. (2015). Journey toward becoming a counselor education doctoral student: Perspectives of women of color. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 84(1), 66–79. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.84.1.0066>