Obtaining a degree in higher education is less common for a black individual in comparison to a white individual in America. The research project analyzes the black experience in higher education. The Black population has always ranked at the lowest among rates of college graduation compared to other racial groups. The campus of Sonoma State University (SSU) in particular is known for many things but having a thriving Black student community is not one of them. It is common for students of African decent to be admitted to the university but very few actually graduate. By interviewing previous students, current ones, and alumni, I plan to discover the reasons as to why students are not remaining on campus to earn degrees. The purpose of this project is to analyze the trends in the retention and graduate rate of Black students in higher education. The project will mainly focus on the black college experience at predominately white institutions such as SSU. The research will examine what academic and social factors influence the retention and graduation rate of black students in college. My hypothesis is that black students are facing academic, social, and cultural challenges on predominately white campuses. These challenges are discouraging students to remain in higher education due to social exclusion and lack of support.

I conducted fourteen qualitative interviews with black men and black women at SSU. The use of surveys and interviews enabled the sample population to express their perspective on the research topic. Participants provided a greater insight into the modern day college experience for
black students. The design of the interview questions addressed aspects academic, social, racial, and gendered experiences. The interviews ranged from 25-40 minutes and were auto recorded. I transcribed the interviews and the data was coded in order to find differences and commonality among participant responses. Subjects were asked to provide factual information during the entire interview but there is never an absolute uniform truth when it comes to the human experience.

In order to be a participant in an interview individuals had to be a current or previous member of the SSU community. It was required for student participants to be of African decent because the research called for the black perspective on educational experiences. The objective of my research was to discover the underlying factors of low retention and graduation rates among black students at SSU. My sample criteria relates to this objective because it contains participants who culturally identify with the study.

As previously stated, the interview data was coded into themes. One of the first themes I noticed after gathering my data was agency. Within the context of my research topic, agency addresses the determination and morality of the black interviewee. The role of their agency developed from different sources and was displayed at different times. There were four interviewee’s who were current students and graduate’s of SSU. The men appeared to have a stronger sense of self due to experiences at Sonoma. For some, their agency has developed over time. Throughout four interviews, agency was noted as a theme contributing to the retention and graduation of black males at SSU.

Another theme that was found throughout the interviews was campus involvement and leadership. Support from organizations at SSU was essential to the success of students. In order
for students to remain and graduate from school, they must have the proper resources and encouragement to do so. Two males discussed their experiences with being involved on campus. Overall these organizations were there to help them and other students cope with environmental challenges at the university. Despite various acts of discrimination or exclusion on campus, Black Scholars United and the only black male fraternity on campus were mentioned as two very supportive organizations for Black men on campus. A correlation was found between student agency and the students ability to engage with campus organizations and activities. Students who were not active or did not find a supportive community were less likely to remain at SSU. All of the students who were interviewed were involved in at least one campus organization.

The interviewees discussed their thoughts about the lack of support from campus officials. Rather than depending on the faculty and administrators to establish change, students have managed to support one another over the years. Even though the concepts of agency and campus involvement were strong with men, this may not be true for all Black students. In working to discover the academic and social aspects which contribute to the retention and graduation rate of black students at SSU, it is important to analyze the perspective of women as well. The two themes of agency and campus involvement depict how the men have managed to survive and succeed. If more black men became involved on campus, there would be an increase in visibility and cultural influence. Retaining black students does not simply mean enrolling more students, there must be an increase in cultural resources, visibility, and influence on campus.

The experiences of Black women at SSU led to the theme of environment. Black women discussed encountering racial injustice more often than men. The challenges that women
discussed ranged from issues that occurred on campus and off campus within the local community. Their experiences illustrated the racially vicious climate of SSU and even Sonoma County.

Black male participants also mentioned instances where Black women were blatantly discriminated against or disrespected on the bases of their race. The women created a strong bond and network due to being outcasted within the SSU environment and Sonoma County. These relationships were one factor which enabled students to continue their education without losing motivation. All of the women discussed the importance of agency in order to remain at Sonoma State University. Black women did not allow the racially hostile environment to take away their pride and access to a higher education. Black male participants along with Black women displayed strong agency and leadership on campus despite their hardships. In the face of racism, participants maintained self control and awareness. Rather than allowing threats and discrimination to force them out of the university, these women remained on campus to earn their degree. Similarly to Black men, women explained the importance of having Black organizations on campus. Making the decision to remain at a university and live in a city that is filled with racism takes courage as Black student and as a Black person. All of the students stressed the importance of their education. Even though Sonoma’s environment had not welcomed students of color, the participants did not allow hatred and racism to defeat them.

Based on my findings, students seemed to engage in resources that were within their reach or visible. The black population is small but present none the less. All of the interviewees were involved on campus in more ways than one. Most of all, the participants wanted the campus to simply have empathy for the black experience. Agency and involvement can only go
so far. According to the participants, officials and students need to meet them half way. Campus unity and cohesiveness must be a campus wide effort. Retaining significant numbers of black students will be extremely difficult if campus officials do not contribute to the change in campus climate. The campus officials in alliance with underrepresented students on campus can make a difference. For a campus like SSU, reevaluating those in positions of power may not be such a bad idea. Most of those who are in power on campus have been regulating the university for generations.

All in all the Black student population has created their own experience within Sonoma state. These students have depended on one another as family in order to persevere at SSU. Even though the Black population is small, they have worked together to stand up against injustice. By working to sustain their clubs and organizations they have created their own opportunities and avenues to reach the goal of obtaining a degree on campus. All of the participants were involved in Black campus clubs and organizations which illustrates the importance of these groups. Due to the lack of support from campus officials, sustaining these organizations over the years has and will continue to be difficult. Does campus involvement determine if a student will remain at SSU or not? What organizations are needed in order to attract more black students? How can the administration help? What polices should be implemented to end racial discrimination? These are some of the questions that administrators and campus officials should be addressing. If Black organizations are the only social groups that enable students to feel welcome, the campus should work to sustain those clubs at any cost. There should be an increased effort from administration to actively recruit black students to attend SSU. Historically the university has strategically recruited from affluent southern californian communities. If SSU expects to have a thriving black population they will need to focus on recruiting from neighboring areas such as the Bay Area.
Appendix 1

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Appendix 2

Interview Guide 1

The Experience - An Analysis on the Retention and Graduation Rate Among Black Students at Sonoma State University

Introduction/Demographic

1. What is your racial/ethnic background?
2. Are you a first generation college student? If not, what is your parent’s educational background?
3. What is mother’s occupation?
4. What is your father’s occupation?
5. What is or was your field of study at Sonoma State University?
6. What year are you right now?
7. What year did you enter SSU? (FTF or transfer student)
8. How many years have you been/ were a part of the SSU community?

Undergraduate Experiences (Academic and Social)

9. Can you please describe your ideal college experience (socially and academically)?
10. Was SSU your first choice in undergraduate education?
11. Has SSU met your ideal expectations as undergraduate? Why or why not?
12. How would you describe SSU’s campus climate (demographics, diversity, social aspects)?
13. Do you feel that the campus welcomes individuals from your racial background? Why or why not? Can you provide an example?
14. Has your racial background had a positive and/or negative influence on your college experience? Can you provide an example?
15. Has your gender influenced your experiences on campus? If so, please describe a situation.
16. What aspects of the university make you feel most accepted on campus? (if any)
17. What aspects of the university make you feel excluded on campus? (if any)

18. Please describe a typical classroom environment at SSU from your experience (content, discussion, racial demographics.)

19. Are you satisfied with the ethnic course content and availability on campus? Why or why not?

20. Have you been involved with any clubs/orgs or extra curricular activities on campus? Can you describe your experiences while being apart of these activities?

21. Have you ever experienced or witnessed any forms of mistreatment or discrimination based on your racial background? Please explain, if any. (on or off campus)

22. Have you experienced any form of discrimination or cultural intolerance from faculty or staff?

23. Have you experienced any form of discrimination or cultural intolerance from students?

24. How have you handled issues of discrimination on campus?

25. Do you feel that the campus has created a comfortable environment for students to address issues of mistreatment and discrimination based on their racial background? Why or why not? Can you provide an example?

26. During your time at SSU how has the campus addressed issues of discrimination and cultural intolerance? Can you elaborate on the event(s)?

27. If you were to experience an act of discrimination or injustice where would you seek support or who would you talk to?

**Closing Questions**

28. What factors of the campus have enabled you to stay on campus as a student? (Students who graduated or have remained on campus.)

29. Would you recommend other students of diverse backgrounds to come to SSU for higher education? Why or why not?

30. What has your experience at SSU taught you? (Social structure, aspects of privilege, etc.?)

31. Do you think that the campus climate of SSU can change? If so, what needs to be done and who needs to take initiative in this change?