Spare the Rod: African American Students' Experience of Postsecondary Student Conduct Processes

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Abstract

Although African Americans enroll at postsecondary institutions at similar rates as other ethnic groups, consistently, they lag in degree completion. This has led to lower wages and fewer employment opportunities, among African Americans. Consequently, the literature is full of studies attempting to increase Black student degree attainment. This includes their perception of campus climates, academic preparedness, and sense of belonging. However, other opportunities to promote and encourage African American scholastic success, such as the disciplinary process, are understudied. To address this gap, I utilized a phenomenological qualitative study to examine the way African Americans perceived the impact of the discipline process on their academic experience. Using campus ecology theory (Banning, 1978) as the theoretical lens, I identified three main themes from the participant's responses, including (1) African American students' perceptions of their encounters with conduct personnel, (2) value of disciplinary sanctions, and (3) their experience with discipline policies and how it shaped and transformed the way these students interacted with their campus environment. The findings suggest that student participation in the discipline process can significantly influence the academic environment experienced by African American students. This includes the development of relationships with staff and adapting the campus environment to fit student needs. These findings affirm the impact of out the classroom experiences can have on scholastic achievement. This study adds to the insufficient number of studies examining postsecondary disciplinary processes. The results suggest the importance of an individualized approach to addressing student behavior and the categorization of institutional policies when managing misconduct. Further, the findings indicate that additional study is needed to understand additional factors influencing students, such as developing skills after participation in the conduct process.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Completing a postsecondary degree can have numerous positive advantages in many aspects of a person's life. For example, college graduates earn higher incomes, take part in community engagement activities (e.g., voting) (Starks, 2017), are less prone to criminal behavior, remain steadily employed, and experience longer life expectancies than non-graduates (Cabrera et al., 1999). It is believed that, without a baccalaureate degree, social and economic advancement is difficult, if not impossible (Starks, 2017). However, despite the societal and individual benefits of achieving this milestone, a review of available national data revealed that African Americans are less likely to graduate from four-year institutions (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018), in 2015, only one in every five (21%) African American students enrolled in higher education institutions graduated in four years, while nearly half (46%) of Whites obtained a bachelor's degree during this same period. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) reported that 39% of Blacks, 66% of Whites, 69% of Asians, and 49% of Hispanics received postsecondary alumnae status in 2017. The NSCRC (2017) concluded, "Black students represent the only group that is more likely to stop out or discontinue" (p. 4.) the completion of a bachelor's degree. Harmfully, these gaps have exacerbated racial stereotypes of African Americans being unemployable or uneducated (Starks, 2017).

Consequently, the literature is replete with studies centering on conceivable explanations for lower degree completion rates among African American college students. Thus far, researchers have predominantly focused on academic preparedness (e.g., Debb et al., 2018; Flores et al., 2017), ability to integrate (e.g., Banks & Dohy, 2019; Guiffrida, 2003), campus

climates (e.g., Harper, 2012; Wei et al., 2011), differential treatment (e.g., Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003), and sense of belonging (e.g., Hausmann et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2011) as probable causes of low graduation rates among Black students. However, other influences may exist within postsecondary settings. For instance, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) concluded that African Americans were more likely to succeed scholastically when relationships independent of the classroom were developed with faculty and staff. Similarly, Banks and Dohy (2019) argued that environmental factors such as access to institutional resources (e.g., tutoring and counseling) and connections to administrators (e.g., mentorship and academic support) may promote African American scholastic success. Though often overlooked, Banks and Dohy pointed to these outside the classroom interactions as potential educational motivators. Since disciplinary processes are designed to help students acclimate to institutional norms and serve as an outline for campus behavior, considering these experiences is vital.

Alas, the impact of the discipline process on scholastic accomplishment is understudied. As echoed by Glick and Haug (2020), Schuck (2017), and Starcke and Porter (2019), there is a glaring lack of empirical research on this subject. Among the handful of researchers who examined the impact of participation in the conduct process, Howell (2005) noted that some interactions with conduct personnel positively shaped and modified future student behavior. In another analysis, Kompalla and McCarthy (2001) determined that active sanctions such as reflection papers and community service opportunities were more likely to encourage student learning. Contemporarily, Janosik and Stimpson (2017) identified institutional settings and students' overall experience with the misconduct process as significant influencers on behavioral outcomes.

The scantness of knowledge about the influence of higher education disciplinary

processes on scholastic achievement is surprising. This starkly contrasts with K-12 American education research, where studies have regularly documented the effect of discipline processes (e.g., Calderhead, 2017; Slate et al., 2016; Starke & Porter, 2019). In K-12 education, African American gaps in scholastic achievement and increased levels of educational disengagement have explicitly been linked to contact with discipline processes (Gregory et al., 2010). Examining African Americans' perception of the postsecondary disciplinary process on their academic experience may increase Black students' degree completion rates. Further, exploring the process would inform policymakers and practitioners in order to develop and implement measures to improve academic experiences.

Statement of the Problem

Although the number of baccalaureate degrees conferred to African Americans has increased by 63% between the 2000/2001 and 2015/2016 academic years (NCES, 2019), overall, Black student degree completion rates are consistently the lowest among all racial groups (United States Census Bureau, 2014). According to Starks (2017), this has harmfully resulted in limited opportunities for African Americans to obtain stable employment at competitive wages. Ewell (2009) suggested that with increasing external calls for postsecondary accountability and pressure for higher education to demonstrate its effectiveness, identifying all opportunities to promote African American academic success is critical.

While addressing misconduct and safeguarding campus communities is critically interwoven into the postsecondary educational experience (Dannells, 1997), researchers (King, 2012; Starcke & Porter, 2019; Stimpson & Janosik, 2011) have noted that the literature surrounding postsecondary discipline processes is lacking. While a small number of studies have examined student perception of fairness (King, 2012; Mullane, 1999), the effect of disciplinary

sanctions (Kompalla & McCarthy, 2001), and student learning after involvement in the disciplinary process (Howell, 2005; Stimpson & Janosik, 2015), there is limited research about the impact of participation in postsecondary discipline processes on scholastic achievement. By illuminating African American students' experience with the discipline process, this qualitative analysis adds to the current research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine how African American college students perceived their interaction with the disciplinary process and how this contact impacted their academic experience in the postsecondary environment. Guided by the campus ecology theoretical framework (Banning, 1978), this study focused on African American students' interactions with conduct personnel, the discipline process, policies, and activities. More specifically, building on the works of Howell (2005), Janosik and Stimpson (2017), and Kompalla and McCarthy (2001), I explored whether African American student perception of organisms, settings, and activities influenced their educational experiences. Although these studies previously identified discipline personnel and dispensed sanctions as potential factors guiding student behavior, they did not examine whether contact with the discipline process shaped academic experience. Moreover, the previous studies did not consider differences in the way African Americans navigate postsecondary institutions. Understanding the impact of these possible influencers is vital to filling the current gap in research and increasing the academic success of African Americans.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American students who participated in the student conduct process at a 4-year public research university describe their experience with student conduct practitioners?

2. How do African American students who participated in the student conduct process at a 4-year public research university describe its influence on their academic experience?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I applied campus ecology (Banning, 1978) as a theoretical framework. As defined by Banning, this theory examines

> the relationship between the student and the campus environment. Campus ecology incorporates the influence of environments on students and students on environments. The focus of concern is not solely on student characteristics or environmental characteristics but on the transactional relationship between students and their environment (p. 5).

Campus ecology encourages postsecondary administrators to consider how their work may alter or aid student development (Banning & Bryner, 2001). Further, this theoretical framework directs postsecondary institutional staff to re-develop and change environments to support students based on student needs (Banning & Bryner, 2001).

Because colleges and universities are unique communities, students may experience differing academic outcomes based on interactions with varying entities of their campus setting. Campus ecology was the best-suited theoretical framework to help understand students'

relationships with their environment and whether this connection shaped their academic experience. Incorporating components such as organisms (students, faculty, staff), settings (curriculums, co-curriculum, social functions), and activities (learning and personal development), campus ecology focuses on how one's relationship with their environment can benefit or dissuade an individual's development (Banning, 2008). For this study, *organisms* were defined as students and conduct personnel, *settings* described the disciplinary process, and *activities* explained sanctions or outcomes (e.g., reflection paper, community service hours). Applying campus ecology as a theoretical framework permitted a comprehensive examination of the way relationships and interactions with postsecondary organisms, settings, and activities were perceived by African Americans to have impacted their academic achievement.

Positionality

My curiosity about African Americans lived experiences after participation in the postsecondary misconduct process is directly tied to my role as a disciplinary administrator. As a practitioner in higher education for over 14 years, I have engaged numerous students in robust conversations regarding policy violations and practical decision-making skills. Further, I believe the discipline process can positively affect a student's academic journey, and I consider the work we do in our office to be one of the most critical jobs on a college campus.

Unlike other university departments, we do not turn away students. From the most troubled student to the academically excelling individual, we are responsible for encouraging and pushing them to accomplish their academic goals. I take pride in the support we provide and the educational nature of the discipline process. Because I view the work of student conduct practitioners to be essential, I am biased in my beliefs regarding the positive impact we have on scholastic achievement. Acknowledging my viewpoints provides credibility and ensures the

trustworthiness of the results as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2008).

Methodology

This analysis commenced at a large four-year public institution in the southern region of the United States, South University (SU). A qualitative approach was applied to analyze and capture the essence of each participant's interaction (Alase, 2017). As Grbich (2013) explained a qualitative analysis:

> provides detailed information and can progress knowledge in a variety of areas, can help assess the impact of policies on a population, can give insight into individual people's experiences can help evaluate service provision, and it can enable the exploration of little-known behaviors, attitudes, and values (p. 3).

Because interactions are defined by connections with others (Greig & Taylor, 1999), a qualitative approach allowed me to examine a "human problem" through participants' voices (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Moreover, engaging in a phenomenological framework allowed me the opportunity to focus on the "lived" experience of participants (Merriam, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who interacted with SU's disciplinary process within the last year. Participants in this study included currently enrolled African American students previously found responsible for at least one policy violation from the university's code of conduct. Additionally, they received sanctions but remained enrolled after their case concluded or, if suspended by the conduct office, returned to the institution to complete their degree. A total of seven participants were interviewed virtually. To ensure accuracy, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), data saturation occurred when no additional information or understanding could be gathered from participants' responses. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the utilization

of the Microsoft Teams platform provided a safe setting for us to interact.

Significance of the Study

While Black students enroll at postsecondary institutions at similar rates to other ethnicities, their completion is consistently the lowest among all racial groups (NSCRC, 2017; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015). Previous studies have suggested that positive campus climates, encouraging relationships, and student engagement are integral to African American academic success (Dotson, 2020; Harper, 2009; Palmer et al., 2011). However, additional unexplored elements of the college experience may also aid in degree completion.

A 30-year analysis of K-12 disciplinary outcomes has consistently documented negative consequences for African Americans after participation in a K-12 misconduct program (Fenning & Rose, 2007), however research in understanding this phenomenon at the postsecondary level is lacking. Instead, the literature is filled with examinations of student learning and legal tenants of the conduct process. Researchers have long pointed to the lack of empirical data concerning outcomes after participation in postsecondary disciplinary processes (Dannells, 1997; Howell, 2005; King, 2012; Starcke & Porter, 2019). My analysis added to the lacking number of studies available and will help researchers understand the practical value of the conduct process on academic achievement. Because African Americans navigate postsecondary environments differently than other racial groups, it is critical for practitioners to understand how participation in the discipline process impacts African American students' academic achievement.

Definition of Terms

African American. For this study, African American and Black are used interchangeably to describe this racial group of students.

Exclusionary discipline. Conduct outcomes that remove a student from the classroom, such as suspension or expulsion (Fenning & Rose, 2007).

Discipline personnel. The postsecondary administrator who is responsible for administering the institution's discipline process. For this study, conduct officer and disciplinary administrator are used interchangeably.

Sanctions. Educational outcomes allow students to reflect on their behavior while helping improve their decision-making abilities (Wilson, 1996).

Student affairs. Higher education department or division promotes student learning and development outside the classroom (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, n.d.).

Student code of conduct. A meaningful contract between faculty, administrators, students, and their families, which catalogs prohibited and accepted student behavior (Footer, 1996). An institution's code of conduct "prescribes certain student behavior and the behavior of members of the university community during the disciplinary process" (Footer, 1996). While embracing the institutional mission and goals, the code informs and advises students (Footer, 1996).

Student conduct incident. Reported violations of posted honor codes or established institutional values and missions (Glick & Haug, 2020).

Summary

College completion positively impacts individuals; however, compared to other ethnic groups, African American degree completion rates are consistently the lowest (NSCRC, 2017; NCES, 2018). Therefore, exploring all possible solutions to increase Black student degree attainment is essential. Although earlier studies have examined probable causes (e.g., perceptions

of campus climate, academic preparedness, sense of belonging), other influencers, such as the student conduct process, are understudied. Previously, interactions with postsecondary personnel have been identified as positive contributors to student behavior (Janosik & Stimpson, 2017) and may have an appreciable effect on academic achievement. While Stimpson and Janosik confirmed that the perception of an affirmative campus environment and positive interactions with conduct personnel positively influenced student learning, they did not consider the different ways African Americans navigate postsecondary institutions.

In the following chapters, I provided a summary of the available literature regarding postsecondary discipline processes, the methodology of this study, and details regarding participants and discovered themes. In the concluding chapter, I summarize the results, discuss my findings, and provide recommendations for policy and research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the founding of postsecondary education in the United States, colleges and universities have instituted policies and practices to influence student performance (Glick & Haug, 2020) and ensure stability (Howell, 2005). Addressing student behavior is critically intertwined with students' educational experiences and serves a critical role in the development of college students (Dannells, 1997). However, as researchers (King, 2012; Starcke & Porter, 2019; Stimpson & Janosik, 2011) have noted, the literature surrounding the influence of the disciplinary process on postsecondary academic experience is lacking.

In the first section, I summarized the history and foundation of the discipline process beginning with the colonial era. Next, I highlighted changes in the handling of student behavior, beginning with the American Revolution thru the Post Civil War. In the third section, I reviewed the rise of the student affairs profession and its subsequent influence on postsecondary disciplinary systems. The fourth section described and emphasized the modern-day student conduct processes. Then I critically examined the few relevant published studies within the context of higher education discipline processes. Challenges facing African American students within postsecondary settings were discussed next. Finally, I substantiated the use of Banning's (1978) campus ecological framework for this study.

The Colonial Era

Grappling with student behavior has long been a part of American higher education (Dannells, 1997; Dotson, 2020). Since the establishment of Harvard in 1636, various incarnations of postsecondary personnel have addressed issues such as student activism, violations of institutional policy, and alcohol and drug abuse (Dungy & Gordon, 2010; Zerulik,

2012). Beginning with the first nine colonial colleges, American higher education was developed in the image of Cambridge and Oxford University (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Mirroring the European educational system, these foundational institutions exclusively prepared men to become religious and civic leaders within the community (Dannells, 1997; Glick & Haug, 2020). Most pupils were aged 14-17 (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). According to Zerulik (2012), establishing religiously based postsecondary education was meant to ensure the continuance of the puritan way of life.

During this time, postsecondary curricula solely focused on student's social and moral development (Hirt, 2006), and institutions had a staunch religious predisposition (Dannells, 1997; Zerulik, 2012). Education and religion were inseparable, contrasting viewpoints not centered on morality were discouraged (Dannells, 1997), and collegiate life was strictly regulated (Dungy & Gordon, 2010; Rudolph, 1962). The rules controlling student behavior were extensive and heavily regulated by higher education administrators (Vine, 1976). Guided by *in-loco-parentis* (in place of the parent), university presidents and faculty were the sole overseers of student behavior (Howell, 2005). Dungy and Gordon (2010) noted that these individuals were considered the only personnel uniquely qualified to control "the social, moral, and intellectual aspects of a student's life" (Dungy & Gordon, 2010, p. 68). In this role, these administrators exercised their authority to make decisions for students they felt aided in their personal growth (Hirt, 2006).

When students violated institutional policy, they were swiftly and, at times, harshly held accountable through corporal punishment, public confessions, ridicule, academic expulsion, and other punitive measures (Dannells & Lowery, 2004). Critically, the discipline process was informal and lacked consistent record-keeping and oversight (Glick & Haug, 2020). Zerulik

(2012) described the conduct process during this time as an opportunity for colleges and universities to achieve moral submission. Glick and Haug (2020) pointed out that institutions did not allow students to exercise their voice in defense or be directly involved with the disciplinary process before rendering a decision. Generally, higher education was considered self-regulating and independent from external oversight (Travelstead, 1987).

The American Revolution thru Post-Civil War Period

Between the mid-1700s and early 1800s, America's Revolutionary War altered college campuses and environments, causing "organized [student] conflict with the administration" (Dungy & Gordon, 2010, p. 68). Postsecondary needs began to increase and become more complex. Although religious principles remained foundational, student viewpoints expanded beyond colleges and universities' moral and spiritual teachings (Zerulik, 2012). As students' developmental demands and expectations changed, the next shift in higher education proceeded with the Civil War and Reconstruction (Glick & Haug, 2020) when American postsecondary education began a period of rapid development (Zerulik, 2012).

With more American colleges and universities being established, Congress passed the Morrill Act of 1862. This legislation expanded collegiate access across the United States and laid the foundation for higher education at the public's expense (Dungy & Gordon, 2010). Subsequently, schools were diversified into "liberal arts colleges, land-grant institutions, women's colleges, technical institutions, and research universities" (p. 69). As a result, American opinion shifted to embrace higher education as a public good for all (Hirt, 2006), and the acceptance of authoritarian rules in educational settings was weakened (Dannells, 1997). This was coupled with students' increasingly destructive and violent behavioral outbursts (Rudolph, 1962). Consequently, faculty discharged their roles in enforcing institutional policies and

embraced systematic changes to address student behavior (Dannells, 1997). This again marked a

period of transformation for colleges and universities (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

The Rise of Student Affairs

After World War II, student enrollment increased, and their educational demands shifted.

Although moral development remained the central focus, postsecondary administrators began

emphasizing student learning (Dannells, 1997). Colleges and universities commenced a more

humanistic and student-focused approach to collegiate life. This led to the mainstreaming of

institutional codes of conduct (Dotson, 2020; Hoekema, 1994), the creation of extracurricular

groups (e.g., fraternities and student clubs), and the development of outside of the classroom

activities (e.g., intercollegiate sports) to support the changing needs of students (Dannells, 1997).

With the increased acceptance of a more academic curriculum, addressing student behavior in

the 20th century ushered in new challenges for higher education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

According to Dungy and Gordon (2010), monitoring student behavior and the welfare of

students is paramount to the profession of student affairs. With a focus on educating the whole

student and connecting academic curriculum to experiences independent of academics, student

affairs departments aim to develop individuals into well-rounded citizens. Crucially, student

affairs administrators concentrate on helping students build cognitive and interpersonal skills

outside the classroom (Stimpson & Janosik, 2011).

Deans of Men and Deans of Women

After Reconstruction, students continued pushing back against the inclusion of

spirituality and classical curriculum within their academic activities and alleged injustices by the

administration (Glick & Haug, 2020; Rudolph, 1962). Hirt (2006) emphasized students

demanded more academic freedom and expanded rights, often leading to civil unrest on

campuses and clashes with administrators. Amid this turmoil, colleges and universities conceded that additional services were required to support students outside the classroom. According to Dannells (1997), postsecondary institutions began recognizing the need for rehabilitation through discipline processes rather than the less popular punitive outcomes. Dannells described this shift as a more personal and developmental approach by colleges and universities. To address student needs, institutions developed roles known as deans of men and deans of women to handle campus behaviors (Glick & Haug, 2020; MacKinnon & Associates, 2004). These new roles addressed student concerns outside the classroom and were the first to integrate a student-centered approach to managing behavioral misconduct (Dannells, 1997).

Instead of punitive measures, deans of men and women incorporated educational approaches into the disciplinary process and approached student behavior with a remedial focus (Dungy & Gordon, 2010). According to Glick and Haug (2020), this critical transformation helped establish a more "formalized" (p. 7) administrative and operational disciplinary process. With this change, deans of men and women became foundational to the modern-day development of the student affairs profession (Dungy & Gordon, 2010). Moreover, this also induced changes in faculty and student relationships. No longer in charge of discipline, faculty began to cultivate more academically focused relationships with students. Indisputably, campus life began expanding beyond the classroom experience.

The Student Personnel Movement

The next shift in postsecondary discipline processes came in the 1930s when the American Council on Education (ACE) began compiling data centering on existing institutional practices intended to assist students in becoming well-rounded individuals in and outside the classroom setting (Glick & Haug, 2020). In 1937, an ACE sub-committee developed the *Student*

Personnel Point of View (SPPV), which encouraged postsecondary institutions to embrace an

individualized approach to behavioral misconduct (Dannells,1990; Glick & Haug, 2020). Since

its inception, the SPPV has been influential in shifting the focus of disciplinary processes to the

development of the whole student (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators,

1987). Because it was the first institutionally supported analysis of its kind focused on improving

the student experience, Dungy and Gordon (2010) have credited the SPPV with the

"reconceptualization of student affairs" (p. 74). Although *in-loco-parentis* was still embraced,

the SPPV helped guide postsecondary administrators in the development of undergraduates

(Glick & Haug, 2020). The SPPV provided the first step in corrective conversations and direct

student involvement in disciplinary matters. These methods helped usher in a time of

"individualized and preventative" care for students (Dannells, 1997, p. 8).

Ascension of The Modern Postsecondary Discipline Process

The third and most influential shift in postsecondary discipline processes came during the

Civil Rights Era. As previously summarized, before the 1960s, *in-loco-parentis* guided

administrators in addressing student misconduct. However, increasingly students became more

dissatisfied with authority and demanded to be heard when involved in misconduct incidents

(Baldizan, 1998). With student unrest mounting, confidence and acceptance in this two-hundred-

year-old doctrine began to diminish.

In 1961, *Dixon v. Alabama Board of Education* endowed undergraduates with new

privileges while requiring postsecondary institutions to act in a more prescribed manner when

addressing campus behavior (Glick & Haug, 2020). Although the judiciary was previously

reluctant to intervene in disciplinary outcomes or methods expended by postsecondary

institutions (Travelstead, 1987), *Dixon v. Alabama* (1961) set a new precedent. Firmly, the court

asserted that students could not arbitrarily lose their "right to a state-supported education" (Baldizan, 1998, p. 29). Students retain their right to due process when an institution issues disciplinary action under the 14th Amendment. As described by Stimpson and Janosik (2015), colleges and universities must: (a) formally provide notice to a student (which includes a summary of the evidence), (b) allow students an opportunity to respond to the alleged charges, and (c) provide notification of the outcome to students with an explanation of findings of responsibility.

Consequently, the court rejected and denounced ridicule or corporal punishment as the proper way to manage student behavior. Further, *Dixon v. Alabama* compelled higher education to address undergraduate discipline issues more specifically. Unequivocally, the handling of postsecondary misconduct processes was permanently altered, and *in-loco-parentis* was ended (Glick & Haug, 2020).

Focused Student Conduct Departments

With *in-loco-parentis* dismantled, colleges and universities shifted away from deans of men and women to dedicated offices with trained personnel. According to Wilson (1996), these new departments helped prioritize and centralize the institutional collection of student misbehavior incidents. Unlike other higher education areas, Student discipline departments solely exist to support and manage an institution's mission and values. These offices also enforce campus safety policies and ensure educational mandates from local, federal, and state officials are followed. Dungy and Gordon (2020) identified the work of student conduct offices as fundamental to a student's academic success and development.

Institutional Codes of Conduct

Established standards (e.g., disciplinary codes of conduct) help ensure the advancement of an institution's educational mission (King, 2012). Uniquely codes of conduct reflect a university's values and mission, guide student behavior (Glick & Haug, 2020), and operate as a contract between students and administration (Dannells, 1997). As Mawdsley (2004) described, institutional codes protect student freedoms, avoid harmful behaviors, and foster community. Further, they aid students in conforming to expected campus norms (Schuck, 2017). Disciplinary codes assist colleges and universities in maintaining their guiding principles (Wilson, 1996); and uniquely encourage self-control and interpersonal development (Travelstead, 1987; Waryold & Lancaster, 2008). When student performance and behavior conflict with institutional standards, corrective measures (e.g., probation, warnings, or suspensions) are guided by institutional codes of conduct. Critically, Waryold and Lancaster (2008) emphasized the importance of holding students accountable for violations, asserting that it encourages student development and safeguards institutional interest.

Philosophy of the Disciplinary Process

At its core, conduct meetings serve as an opportunity for university administrators to uncover whether misbehavior can be modified by increased institutional support (e.g., mentorship, counseling, or academic advising) (Brown-McClure & Cocks, 2020). Independent of the classroom, addressing behavioral misconduct is fundamental to a student's academic success and development (Dungy & Gordon, 2020). While also supporting students, the discipline process is intentionally devised "to be informative, educational, developmental, and thought-provoking" (Glick & Haug, 2020, p. 10). The discipline process encourages behavioral accountability, individual responsibility, and respect toward others (King, 2012). Critically,

Glick and Haug (2020) emphasized that discipline processes help students foster meaningful relationships with their institution.

Designed to encourage moral and personal growth, the discipline process uses one-on-one problem-solving discourse (Dotson, 2020; Hoekema, 1994) as an opportune time to connect, aid, and positively influence students (King, 2012). According to Brown-McClure and Cocks (2020), this individualized approach also impacts academic success and redefines an individual's college experience. Overall, the philosophy of the disciplinary process is to promote positive interactions with postsecondary staff and to halt negative student behaviors (Shuck, 2017). As Brown-McClure and Cocks stressed, because students come to campuses with broad-ranging life and academic experiences, messages from students involved in the discipline process can shape a learner's general viewpoint. This is central because behavior and student learning can impact the campus community (Stimpson & Janosik, 2011).

Purpose of the Disciplinary Process

According to Howell (2005), the disciplinary process intends to: "promote and protect an academic community where learning is valued and encouraged, and to promote citizenship education and moral and ethical development for those who are involved in the judicial process" (p. 374). The discipline process begins with communication of a policy violation to students, then moves to a formal meeting with university personnel or a designated board. The conduct process then concludes with the completion of sanctions (e.g., reflection paper). These assigned outcomes foster student learning, reinforce the discipline meeting, and support scholastic success.

The discipline process exists to "discover the truth and provide education and remediation" (Footer, 1994, p. 4). Contrary to the punitive nature of the criminal justice system,

modern processes are designed to be purely educational (Glick & Haug, 2020). The discipline

process helps instill student confidence in the campus environment by reprimanding students for

behaviors that can have calamitous effects on campus safety and student welfare. Simply stated,

the disciplinary process fulfills critical functions not addressed by other campus departments

(Wilson, 1996). Uniquely, conduct systems encourage self-control, interpersonal development,

and self-understanding (Travelstead, 1987; Waryold & Lancaster, 2008). MacKinnon and

Associates (2004) argued that this is accomplished thru preventative methods (e.g., sanctions)

established by conduct administrators.

Conduct Personnel

As previously described after *Dixon v. Alabama* (1961), trained conduct personnel

replaced university deans of men and women in addressing student misconduct. Critically, these

administrators tackle many behaviors or violations of the student code of conduct (e.g., academic

cheating, violations of law, and disruptions on or off campus). Practicing compassion and

patience, conduct personnel take a developmental and educational approach inclusive of all to

addressing student behavior (Schuck, 2017). Further, these administrators support students

regardless of GPA, major, or identity group and focus on intent vs. impact of the behavior.

Interactions with students are purposeful and aim to support students while encouraging

behavioral changes.

Conduct personnel help create and maintain meaningful environments conducive to

individual development (Baldizan, 1998) and try to influence students positively (King, 2012).

Because disciplinary meetings often expose individuals confronting issues such as racial

conflicts, sexual violence, and drug and alcohol abuse (Howell, 2005; Walker, 2008), King

(2012) emphasized that administrators can only curb negative behaviors by first addressing the

developmental needs of students. As a result, Waryold and Lancaster (2008) pointed out that "student conduct administration professionals are in a strategic position as they grapple with how to respond to the ills of society while at the same time convincing students that these ills may be overcome" (p. 6).

Believing that learning also happens beyond the traditional academic classroom, conduct personnel focus on developing transferable abilities when addressing behavioral misconduct (Lancaster & Waryold, 2008). To de-escalate negative behaviors through edifying interactions, practitioners concentrate on personal growth as the key to student success (Baldizian, 1998). As described by Hurst (1987),

> instead of seeing themselves as regulators and managers of students' lives in the absence
> of parents, student affairs professionals began to define themselves as educators with a
> responsibility to help students acquire the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to
> take full advantage of the college environment (p. 6).

Fundamentally, conduct personnel attempt to forge constructive relationships with students during the disciplinary process (Brown-McClure & Cocks, 2020).

Higher Education Context

Colleges and universities are critically woven into American education's economic, social, and cultural fabric (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Postsecondary institutions in the United States train young adults for leadership roles (Thelin & Gasman, 2010) and help ensure an equitable society (Duranczyk et al., 2004). Although postsecondary discipline approaches and methods have changed over time, regardless of institution type, disciplinary personnel provide students with "opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed" (Brown-McClure & Cocks, 2020, p. 23). Lowery (2011) maintained that for the educational mission of the discipline process to be

achieved, conduct processes must positively influence student behavior. Completely, colleges and universities have been transformed from a privileged endeavor for a select group (e.g., training clergy) to an open-access activity for all (Thelin & Gasman, 2010).

Educational Value of Postsecondary Discipline Processes

The effectiveness of postsecondary judicial processes and outcomes is understudied (Dannells & Lowery, 2004). Understanding postsecondary environments and systems are required to increase scholastic success (Stimpson & Janosik, 2011). In 1999, Mullane examined the relationship between perceived fairness, educational value, and the moral development of undergraduates in adjudged cases. Applying a mixed-methods design, Mullane surveyed 39 participants using the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (a standardized test that measures moral development). The DIT presented fictional ethical dilemmas and asked students to rate possible solutions in the order of importance they believed should occur (Mullane, 1999). Results revealed a connection between students' moral maturity and their discernment of fairness or educational value of the conduct process. Students who exhibited high moral development were likely to view the disciplinary process as fair and educational. Mullane concluded that moral development was a significant influencer of behavior, while the amount of learning observed centered on student interactions with discipline personnel.

Consistent with campus ecology theory which asserted that relationships between "organisms and their environment" matter (Banning & Hughes, 1986, p. 17), Mullane's (1999) findings echoed the ability of student affairs professionals to foster personal growth positively. Unfortunately, Mullane did not explore whether the complexities of moral development and student learning differed based on cultural origin, nor did her analysis provide specificity as to what students felt they learned, a critique levied by Howell (2005) and Karp and Sacks (2013).

Crucially, Mullane inspired multiple studies on student perceptions of the conduct process.

Expanding on Mullane (1999), Howell's (2005) analysis examined student learning and expected future behaviors after involvement in the disciplinary process. Across three postsecondary campuses, Howell surveyed ten students who participated in their institution's judicial process. He observed that although what was learned varied, students uniformly attributed their knowledge to the objectivity they felt during the disciplinary process. He also noted that students believed these experiences would influence them to make better future choices. The results of this study affirmed that interventions by conduct practitioners could modify behavior, thus contributing to academic success. However, Howell did not gather data on whether there was an affirmative link between decision-making after participation in the conduct process and academic success.

Equally inspired by Mullane (1999), King (2012) examined the fairness and educational value of the conduct process. King adapted Mullane's DIT questionnaire, surveying 1884 students across three residential campuses and developing 40 items across four categories. Results revealed that students who were identified as academically struggling positively rated their experience with the conduct process, and resembling previous studies, a significantly positive relationship between perceived fairness and educational value were present. Surprisingly, participants in King's analysis were not automatically influenced by prior considerations, such as hostile campus climates, as research would suggest. Because learning can be acquired from different sources and influenced by elements such as one's environment (Astin, 1993), this is a significant finding for practice.

Impact of Postsecondary Environment

As previously stated, environmental factors can significantly impact educational achievement. Janosik and Stimpson (2017) examined the role played by both the campus setting (institutional value, mission, or policies) and student conduct environment (communication of discipline process, disciplinary meeting, and timeliness of adjudication) on student learning. The authors analyzed data from 13,671 participants surveyed through the Student Conduct Adjudication Processes Questionnaire (SCAPQ). Designed by Janosik and Stimpson (2007), the SCAPQ "measures the efficacy of student conduct systems" (p. 30), self-reported student learning, and perceptions of campus climate, including interventions by conduct administrators, timeliness of the process, and observed consistency.

Like earlier studies, participants in Janosik and Stimpson (2017) credited the disciplinary system and its administrators as key to their learning. The authors concluded that the campus environment and positive experiences with the conduct process influenced student learning. This finding is crucial as it further suggests that campus environments play a critical role in positively influencing students. Moreover, Janosik and Stimpson asserted that learning could only be achieved by fostering and investing in positive conduct processes and campus environments that treat students in a caring manner.

Influence of the Disciplinary Process

Akin to resource officers in K–12 institutions, higher education campus police or security officers are often involved in addressing student misconduct. Schuck (2017) examined the impact of postsecondary disciplinary systems on undergraduate graduation rates when behavioral referrals are made to law enforcement without going through the university's conduct process. She hypothesized that with the rise in campus policing structures, an arrest by police rather than

a referral to an internal discipline system "may have unintended consequences that affect student achievement" (p. 82).

Using national data compiled by the Department of Education on Campus Safety and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems, Schuck (2017) examined more than 1,250 public and private postsecondary schools across the United States. Incorporating Kuh et al.'s (2006) student engagement model, Schuck applied this framework to measure academic success because of participation in a student conduct process. This study included "activities that are associated with successful student outcomes and determining which institutional structures and organizational policies increase the level of participation by undergraduates" (Schuck, 2017, p. 78). Results suggested that using university internal disciplinary systems (student conduct processes) instead of external organizations (local law enforcement or campus police) to address student misbehavior was more likely to bolster academic success. While Schuck examined scholastic success related to participation in the university conduct process versus the criminal justice system, she did not directly assess the conduct officer, sanctions, or disciplinary policies as possible contributors.

Allen's (1994) dissertation also analyzed student learning, yielding similar results to the previously mentioned studies. She compared the desired educational outcomes of 67 conduct personnel with the articulated results of 124 students involved with the disciplinary process. Likewise, Allen highlighted participant appreciation for becoming familiar with judicial procedures, an expanded awareness of how individual behavior and decisions affect others, and behavioral changes because of participation in the discipline process. Analogous to other studies' results, Allen revealed that the conduct officer was influential to student development, observing that "students identified their relationship with the disciplinary officer or board as one of the

strongest aspects of the disciplinary process" (p. 112). Participants in Allen believed the conduct process helped them learn the rules and avoid future policy violations. They reported that the process critically contributed to their educational success. Still, Allen failed to discern whether observed differences in learning were impart based on race or any other demographic considerations.

Effect of Disciplinary Sanctions

The final stage in the conduct process is the sanctioning of students. According to Kompalla and McCarthy (2001), this phase is a significant element in the disciplinary process that may impact development. Differing from consequences assessed by the courts, sanctions imposed by colleges and universities specifically seek to "facilitate the moral, emotional, and intellectual development of students" (Wilson, 1996, p. 36). Sanctions assigned to students responsible for policy violations at the conclusion of the student conduct process can vary from an educational course to suspension or expulsion from the institution in severe cases. However, regardless of the sanction issued, conduct personnel focus on the needs of each student.

In one of the few studies surrounding the effectiveness of sanctioning, Kompalla and McCarthy (2001) examined the efficacy of active sanctions (e.g., community service hours and reflection papers) versus passive sanctions (e.g., warnings or suspensions) on student learning and recidivism, and retention rates. The authors hypothesized that passive sanctions would result in lower recidivism rates and higher student retention. They examined four different samples of students involved in misbehavior from 1997-1998. Data from their study revealed that 76% of students who received active sanctions were retained. This finding affirmed that intervention in student misbehavior must be meaningful to elicit positive outcomes. Notably, Kompalla and McCarthy determined that active sanctions can significantly affect student retention compared to

passive sanctions. The authors concluded that active sanctions positively contributed to academic achievement. Contrastingly, they found no equivalent change in recidivism rates when active or passive sanctions were issued. While Kompalla and McCarthy provided positive data on student conduct outcomes, differences in African Americans' engagement with postsecondary institutions were not considered.

These analyses represent a small part of the literature examining postsecondary discipline outcomes. This is in stark contrast to a thronged number of K-12 studies which have focused on disciplinary outcomes at length (e.g., Anyon et al., 2016; Calderhead, 2017; McNeal, 2016; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Slate et al., 2016; Tajalli & Garba, 2014). Dissimilar to the K-12 sector, no postsecondary studies specifically focused on the link between disciplinary practices or policies and academic success in postsecondary education. Further, existing research fails to focus on the differing ways African American students may navigate the disciplinary process. Categorically, gaps in knowledge examining Black students' experience in disciplinary procedures are lacking (King, 2012; Starcke & Porter, 2019).

Because the African American college experience fundamentally differs from other racial groups, understanding possible influencers and Black student navigation of postsecondary environments are critical. The studies mentioned above demonstrate the instrumental role postsecondary discipline processes and administrators can play in positively changing student behavior. This implies that the deliberate and purposeful interaction within the student conduct process can affect a student's future outcomes.

Since relationships and campus climate are essential to underrepresented student populations (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002), incorporating frameworks such as campus ecology, which examines relationships, may hold the key to increasing African American degree

fulfillment. This relates to my study since undergraduates often experience an emotional attachment to their academic community, and interactions with others are especially significant (Banning et al., 2010). Moreover, there is a "direct correlation between educational attainment and job participation" (Starks, 2017, p. 6); examining all student experiences is critical and may help increase African American degree completion. Uncompromisingly the demand for research exploring the influence of postsecondary discipline practices on African American academic achievement is urgent (Palmer et al., 2011).

Racial Context

Postsecondary institutions have struggled to overcome their long legacies of racial exclusion and discrimination. Consistently African Americans have reported racist incidents and unwelcoming campus climates (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Johnston-Guerrero, 2016; Palmer et al., 2011). Undeniably these negative experiences have affected Black students' reactions to situations and environments (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; King, 2012). According to Schuck (2017), conduct practitioners must create "a system that is developmentally appropriate, promotes student learning, and advances a campus climate where all members of the community live and learn" (p. 80). Moreover, discipline personnel must invest in understanding the Black student experience to improve college completion (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Dotson (2020) emphasized that African American interactions with faculty hold "the greatest potential" for academic success.

In one of the few studies inclusive of race as a consideration, King (2012) quantitively analyzed differences regarding perceptions of fairness based on a student's racial demographics. Results revealed no difference in discernments-based student ethnicity. Surprisingly, participants in King were not automatically influenced by prior considerations, such as hostile campus

climates, as research would suggest.

Currently, our understanding of racism within the context of higher education is non-existent (Starcke & Porter, 2019). In 2020, Dotson suggested that campus racial climates affect underrepresented populations. Further, Wei et al. (2011) noted that minority students experience more stress than their white counterparts simply because they are part of a marginalized group. According to Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2003), African Americans are more likely to experience direct and targeted forms of racism. While King (2012) identified differences in "psychological, sociological, cultural, and economic factors" (p. 77) as affecting and influencing the academic success of African American students, she conceded these demographic characteristics are seldomly examined in adjudicated student conduct cases placing African American students at a disadvantage.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study employed campus ecology theory (Banning, 1978) as a theoretical framework. When describing campus ecology, Hurst (1987) stated, "the roots of campus ecology theory are as ancient as the writers of antiquity, who pondered the impact of their surroundings on thought, feelings, and behaviors" (p. 9). In 2010, Renn and Patton suggested that students often adapt their behavior to match the design of campus spaces.

Campus ecology examines the relationship between postsecondary students and their academic environment (Banning, 1978). Developed during the 1960s and 1970's, campus ecology "applies principles of human and developmental ecology to higher education settings" (Renn & Patton, 2010). Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined human ecology as interactions between people and their surroundings. Moreover, ecology examines the conditions and environments where different kinds of people engage in dissimilar types of behavior (Wachs, 1987). This

includes higher education administrators, campus architecture, and social gathering spaces (Renn & Patton, 2010).

As a collection of multi-purpose settings, college campuses present innumerable "challenges and opportunities for educators to create optimal learning and development" (Renn & Patton, 260, p. 260). This includes the diverse ways students live, work, and learn on college campuses. Banning and Bryner (2001) noted that campus ecology urges administrators to modify environments to meet student needs. Further, this theoretical framework encourages the design and redesign of campus spaces inclusive of all students (Hurst, 1987). Made up of three components: organisms (students, faculty, staff), settings (curriculums, co-curriculum, social functions), and activities (learning and personal development), this theory focuses on whether one's relationship with their environment can benefit or dissuade student development (Banning, 2008). Campus ecology examines the interdependent relationship between these aspects of postsecondary settings (Banning & Kuk, 2005). This framework suggests that student behavior directly results from the transactional relationship between their social and physical environment (Banning & Kuk, 2005).

Grown out of "activism for change," student affairs practitioners have utilized campus ecology theory to transform campus settings and systems (Banning & Bryner, 2001, p. 20). However, notably, a review of the literature has revealed that this theory has not been empirically applied to misconduct processes (Stimpson & Janosik, 2017); instead, it has been used to examine the influence of campus environments on other aspects of student experience (Heeren & Romsa, 2017; Kretovics, 2003; Marr, 2015; Vaccaro & Kimball, 2019) and understanding ways campuses are or sometimes are not supportive towards all students (Cabrera et al., 1999). This theoretical framework in higher education is crucial as it focuses on the

relationships between students and their environment (Banning & Hughes, 1986).

Summary

Since 1836, colleges and universities in the United States have addressed student behavior. As detailed in this chapter, over time, responsibility shifted from university presidents and faculty to trained disciplinary personnel within student affairs. This transformed higher education from only training clergy to developing the whole student outside the classroom. Yet, African American postsecondary completion rates lag behind all other ethnic groups. With the rising costs of postsecondary attendance and calls for higher education to prove its effectiveness (Ewell, 2009), understanding all contributors to academic success is critical.

Previous studies have frequently revealed a beneficial effect on students after participation in the student conduct process. However, knowledge of the student experience within the postsecondary discipline processes continues to be inadequate (Starke & Porter, 2019). As Walsh (1978) described, student behavior has different meanings depending on the environmental setting. In this study, I investigated interactions with the disciplinary process and the way this contact shaped student interactions with university staff and the way they navigated the campus environment.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study explored African American students' postsecondary perception of their

contact with the discipline process shaped their academic experience with their campus

environment. Specifically, I examined aspects experienced by students, such as interaction with

personnel, the process, and the activities assigned. Because I aimed to understand participants'

lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2021), I discussed why a qualitative

phenomenological design. In this chapter, I explained why a qualitative hermeneutical

phenomenological approach was best suited for this study. I also described the research site,

participant selection, data collection, the analysis procedures utilized, and detailed steps taken to

ensure the credibility of the data collected. Further, the limitations and delimitations of this study

were explained in detail.

Research Questions

The following two research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American students who participated in the student conduct process at a

    4-year public research university describe their experience with student conduct

    practitioners?

2. How do African American students who participated in the student conduct process at a

    4-year public research university describe its influence on their academic experience?

Research Design

As previously mentioned, there is a lack of research examining the student conduct

process on the African American academic experience. A qualitative analysis was executed to

allow participants to describe their involvement with disciplinary offices. Purposefully chosen,

this approach allowed the interpretation of a phenomenon similarly experienced by a group of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Merriam (2009), the overall goal of qualitative analyses "is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). When trying to make meaning of students' experiences, this research design was best suited to gain an in-depth understanding of participant encounters.

Since participation in student discipline processes can have undesirable consequences (e.g., suspensions or expulsions), it is critical to recognize that interactions with the Office of Student Conduct may have influenced academic experience. By using qualitative methods, an examination of the *why* was illuminated through the voice of participants (Dotson, 2020). Through a phenomenological lens, I aimed to capture the lived experience of African American students who interacted with the university's discipline process. Because of its "focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 4), this method was appropriate to answer the research questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) described phenomenology as the exploration "of individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon" that explores the "what" and "how" the essence of an event is experienced (p. 76). Further, phenomenology examines shared and often intense human experiences (Merriam, 2009). For this analysis, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach was best suited as it helped interpret and narrate a person's lived experience (Creswell, 2007). According to Peoples (2021), the hermeneutical lens "focuses on interactions between the researcher and the data" (p. 64).

Research Site

SU is one institution situated within a multicampus system. Enrolling over 59,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional studies students annually, as an academically rigorous

research university, SU serves a large transfer population. As a non-traditional residential campus with only 6,500 students living in on-campus housing, over 10,000 students live within five miles of the university, giving the campus a somewhat residential feel. At SU, the student body consisted of African Americans representing 15% of the undergraduate population, while Whites (35%), Hispanics (33%), Asians (5%), and international students (13%) made up the remaining population (Shorthorn Rate Card, 2020).

The Office of Student Conduct (OSC) at SU is staffed by five full-time personnel, processing 3,000+ disciplinary cases per year, including behavioral misconduct and academic integrity. The concentration of conduct cases in one office was crucial for selecting this research site. Unlike other postsecondary institutions, the OSC at SU solely administers the institution's disciplinary system. This was critical, as it ensured students had a similar experience with the discipline process, whether the policy violations took place on or off-campus.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study must contain participants who have experienced the phenomena being studied. A criterion sampling strategy was applied. As described by Creswell (2008), this is the selection of participants who meet specific criteria surrounding a phenomenon. The following criteria were used to identify potential participants:

- Currently enrolled African American students who were previously found responsible for at least one university policy violation within the last year. Interviewing students who have recently interacted with the discipline process will allow participants to recall their interactions more easily. Further, students who were found responsible were more likely to receive a disciplinary outcome.
- Students who received a sanction (e.g., fine, warning, online modules) but

remained enrolled at the conclusion of their conduct case. If previously suspended

through the disciplinary process, they returned to the institution once their

suspension was completed. Because disciplinary sanctions are purported to be

educational, perception of their impact is imperative.

- The disciplinary case status is closed or resolved at the time of their participation. These students are key to understanding the phenomenon as they have completed all aspects of the conduct process.

All participants were enrolled at SU at the time of their interview. To reveal multiple

topics and themes, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested a sample size of five to 30 participants.

Because disciplinary records are confidential, and I work in the OSU at SU, the Director served

as a gatekeeper to ensure confidentiality and eliminate potential power imbalances. Once I

received IRB approval (see appendix A) from the Office of Regulatory Services at SU, my

gatekeeper and I met to confirm study guidelines and eligibility before potential participants

were contacted. Initial communication and description of the proposed study were sent to eligible

students by the gatekeeper via their student email (see appendix B).

A total of eight students expressed interest; however, only seven were considered and

interviewed due to one participant being unable to recall detailed information about their

violation. Interested students were instructed to contact the researcher directly. Once contacted,

participants were sent a QuestionPro link via their student email and asked to complete a

demographic questionnaire that gathered preliminary information about their experience with the

disciplinary process (e.g., police involvement and completion of sanctions). Participants were

also asked to create an alias name before submitting the completed survey. The email also

contained available times to schedule an interview (see Appendix C for a copy of the

questionnaire sent to students).

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of an eight-question demographic questionnaire, one virtual semi-structured interview with the researcher, and a review of their transcript by participants. As previously described, the gatekeeper sent eligible students a study summary via their student email. Individuals interested were advised to contact the researcher directly to express interest and schedule an interview. Before beginning the interviews, an IRB-approved consent form was read aloud (see appendix D), and students were asked to consent to participate in this study verbally. After participants agreed to take part, IRB-approved questions to elicit reflection on their experience were asked. Each interview lasted 50 - 60 minutes (see Appendix E for interview questions).

A total of seven students were interviewed virtually. Each interview was conducted and transcribed via Microsoft Teams software. Participants were advised to turn their video on or keep their cameras off based on their comfort level. Some turned their cameras on, while others did not. Participants articulated their experience with the disciplinary process in their own words while I created memos noting my initial thoughts about the interview. Individuals were addressed by their created pseudonyms indicated on the demographic questionnaire. Because disciplinary records are private and sensitive, pseudo names provided an added layer of confidentiality, allowing students to speak openly about their experience. The OSC and my gatekeeper were not notified of who responded to the invitation or agreed to be interviewed. All interviews and transcripts were electronically stored on a secure password-protected Microsoft OneDrive server with the university. Memos were kept at the researcher's home in a closed cabinet.

Data Analysis

Participants participated in one interview, lasting 50 – 60 minutes. Because this qualitative study examined the lived experiences of participants, it was important to become immersed in the data. This analysis included (a) *transcription of interviews*, (b) *memo writing*, and (c) *lean coding*.

Transcription of Interviews

Interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams. Each interview was individually transliterated verbatim through Microsoft Teams. To confirm accuracy, I listened to each interview multiple times. Incorrect spellings and some repeated phrases were removed to avoid misrepresenting participant responses. The data was filed on a secure Microsoft OneDrive. Interview recordings and transcripts were named and organized into a digital filing system to keep the information organized, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Memo Writing

While listening to each interview, I documented my initial thoughts and emerging themes by memoing. Memoing allowed me to articulate and clarify my thoughts regarding each participant's transcript (Birks et al., 2008). Moreover, memoing ensured my initial ideas were preserved (Birks et al., 2008) and helped with the initial writing of this study's findings. Through memoing and notetaking, participants lived experiences were examined and compared with others who encountered the same phenomenon as recommended by Peoples (2021).

Lean Coding

Participant responses were grouped into themes for classification. Once answers were aggregated, themes were combined to provide a summary, as suggested by Peoples (2021). Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended this form of "lean coding" (p. 190), which begins with a

small number of categories and then expands as needed.

Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, Creswell (2007) recommends that researchers incorporate at least two validation techniques; this study included three. Thick, detailed descriptions enable "readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred" (p. 209). This was attained by including direct quotes from participants on their experience with the disciplinary process. The second technique used to ensure trustworthiness was member checking. This involved soliciting feedback from participants on the accuracy of their interview transcript. After each interview, I electronically sent each transcript to the corresponding participant using their preferred pseudonym. Students were asked to review the document and make corrections or additions using track changes to keep a record of all documents. This process was explained at the commencement and conclusion of each interview. Application of this method was key to "ensuring accuracy and credibility" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). Finally, notetaking was incorporated. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), during each interview, I took notes on initial emerging themes. These notations helped guide follow-up questions as I engaged in active listening.

<div align="center">

Reflexivity Statement

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Mirriam (2009) described researchers as human instruments. She emphasized that "investigators need to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken" (p. 219). Mirriam asserted that this elucidation helps readers understand data collection approaches by researchers. Furthermore, Creswell (2007) suggested that researchers must describe their experiences, then bracket their views before analyzing that of others.

Currently, I serve as a student conduct practitioner. As a disciplinary administrator, I

strive to support all students on their academic journey. I understand sometimes students make mistakes causing institutional policies to be unintentionally violated. As an undergraduate student, I interacted with the disciplinary process at my institution. As a freshman, I took a computer chair from a public lounge in my residential building. Simply put, the computer chair was more comfortable than the hard chair I used. Initially, I was afraid of participating in the student conduct process when I received the initial notification letter; however, my Resident Director (RD), put my fears and concerns at ease. I remember she patiently answered all my questions and thoroughly explained the discipline process to me. Although interacting with my RD was initially scary, by the end, I felt connected to a person whom I could go to with questions at any time. This experience helped me see the benefit of institutional discipline processes. However, I recognize that conflating my experience with that of participants in this study oversimplifies the challenges they may have previously faced.

The student conduct process is educational, and all sanctions issued to students have some educational benefit. For example, reflection papers as sanctions allow students to contemplate their past behaviors and decisions that led to participation in the disciplinary process. If a student struggles socially or academically, this reflective activity enables an individual to examine factors contributing to these adverse outcomes. Finally, it is my role to hold students accountable, and the relationships I build through one-on-one meetings with students help strengthen their connection to the university.

To reflect on the details of each interview, I approached the data diligently and objectively. The previously described assumptions and pre-judgments were suspended while capturing the essence of the African American experience with the student conduct process. As a researcher, this strategy allowed me "to take a fresh perspective" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has several limitations. First, eligible participants have yet to graduate. As a result, it is unclear how the conduct process may impact African American students' degree attainment. This offers limited information regarding student perception of the influence of the conduct process on their scholastic achievement. Second, only African Americans who were found responsible for a code of conduct violation through the conduct process were examined. There are other disciplinary processes in which students can be held responsible and issued sanctions for a violation. Finally, the participants interviewed primarily resolved their case virtually; only one interacted with the conduct officer in person. Due to COVID-19 procedures, SU allowed students to choose whether they interacted with the disciplinary process in person or virtually. It is uncertain whether the one student who reported a positive experience was an anomaly. The type of cases examined was limited, as well as the knowledge regarding the violation. Student perception may be formed based on the violation alleged by the conduct office.

Peoples (2021) defines delimitations as deliberate choices to include or exclude elements of a study. First, only participants who experienced the disciplinary process within the previous 12 months were included in the study. The interaction was limited to this time frame to ensure students would more easily be able to recall the conduct process and its overall influence on them. Students who resolved their cases after meeting with an administrator were also intentionally chosen. This group of students is most likely to have had interactions with multiple intervention parts of the conduct process compared to students who do not meet with conduct personnel. For this study, SU was the only research site that was intentionally considered. Depending on the institution, conduct processes may vary and are not centrally handled through

one office. SU was chosen explicitly because all conduct cases and reports are similarly processed regardless of the type (e.g., academic, behavioral, or housing) and individual administering the process.

Summary

Within this study, I applied a phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experiences of African Americans that interacted with the disciplinary process at SU. As previously mentioned, there is a flagrant gap in research detailing the impact of the student conduct process on the African American Academic experience. While earlier research acknowledged the impact of discipline personnel and sanctions on student learning, these studies did not examine the impact on the academic experience and the different ways African Americans navigate postsecondary environments. By utilizing a qualitative approach, my findings allowed the participants to tell their stories in their own words. The data collected in this study may provide a roadmap to supporting African American students during and after their interaction with university disciplinary processes, thus positively aiding Black student graduation rates.

In the next chapter, I describe each participant and discuss thematic findings with supporting quotes.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I examined African American students' perceptions of the influence of participation in a postsecondary student conduct process on their academic experience. While previous studies have addressed the impact of campus climate and student engagement on the scholastic achievement of African Americans (Harper, 2009; Palmer et al., 2011), other environments, such as the disciplinary processes, are understudied (Glick & Haug, 2020; Howell, 2005; King, 2012; Schuck, 2017; Starcke & Porter, 2019). King (2012) postulated that knowledge of the impact of postsecondary discipline processes is hampered by the lack of student inclusion in empirical research. Moreover, Howell (2005) suggested that because disciplinary interactions are brief, empirical research is challenging to obtain. As such, understanding all factors that potentially impact the academic experience of African American students is critical. Therefore, the following questions guided this study:

1. How do African American students who participated in the student conduct process at a 4-year public research university describe their experience with student conduct practitioners?

2. How do African American students who participated in the student conduct process at a 4-year public research university describe its influence on their academic experience?

Seven students were interviewed and shared their experiences and thoughts on the disciplinary process at SU. In the subsequent section, I introduce the participants and provide demographic and contextual information regarding their conduct violation. Next, I present the three primary themes that emerged from participants' responses. The first theme, *Encounters*

with Conduct Personnel, described the wide-ranging impact disciplinary administrators had on participants and, consequently, the perception of their campus environment. The second finding, *Value of Disciplinary Sanctions*, depicted the effect of outcomes issued to participants on student learning and student feelings about SU. The final theme, *Perception of Discipline Policies*, illustrated that institutional codes of conduct were perceived as prohibitive to differing student learning styles. I conclude the chapter with a summary of my findings.

The Participants

In this section, I formally presented all participants interviewed for this study and includes the demographic information they provided. All participants had previous contact with the disciplinary process within the last year, were enrolled, found responsible for a code of conduct violation, and issued sanctions at the conclusion of their conduct case. Due to the sensitive nature of disciplinary violations before each interview, I was unaware of the type of incident resulting in contact with the discipline office. During each interview, participants were invited to share any contextual information about their policy violation.

Because conduct records are confidential and protected by law, a gatekeeper was commissioned to identify participants at SU. My gatekeeper sent the initial call for participants to eligible individuals. Interested students were instructed to contact the researcher directly. Once participants expressed interest, they were asked to create a pseudonym. All documents related to participant responses contained the alias of their choice to maintain confidentiality and trust.

Participants represented diverse academic levels and policy violation types. Four of the seven interviewed were referred for academic misconduct, two for housing violations, and one associated with a general behavioral incident. Regarding their academic level, three participants were graduate students, four undergraduates, and one transfer student. Two participants

identified as male, and five were female. At the time of their incident, three participants lived in campus housing, and the remaining four were commuters. Only one participant had a previous interaction with the disciplinary process. In the following section, I introduce each participant interviewed.

A. J.

A. J. was a graduate student working on his second master's degree. His first was in social work, and at the time of his interview, he had completed graduate courses in special education. He lived off-campus and had not been involved in any student clubs or organizations. During his interview, A. J. shared that his disciplinary case was related to self-plagiarism. As we discussed his case, A. J. disclosed that this was his second time going through the conduct process. For this study, the interview only focused on this most recent incident. Virtually, his disciplinary case was resolved with an administrator from SU's conduct office. A. J. did not dispute the reported violation, though he disagreed with the classification of it being plagiarism. Although he did not believe his case was considered correctly, he spoke highly of the conduct officer he met with, calling him very professional.

Meme

Meme was a graduate student completing her master's degree. She lived off-campus and commuted to SU. She worked off-campus and was previously involved in on-campus clubs/organizations, but at the time of her interview listed, she was no longer active in these groups. Meme's incident was an academic integrity violation. Although the case was resolved with her faculty member; however, the conduct office issued the assigned sanctions. Meme stated that her alleged violation was for self-plagiarism and that she did not dispute using text from a previous assignment. Meme communicated that before the incident, she was unaware that

self-plagiarism was a thing.

Ren

Ren was a sophomore who lived in the residence halls on campus. She was a traditional-aged (18-24) student and had a two-month-old brother she helped her mom take care of. When school was not in session, Ren worked off-campus at a daycare. Ren noted that she was involved in one to two student organizations and clubs on campus. Ren's incident was classified as a violation of university housing policies. To resolve her case, Ren met with her RD virtually. Ren stated her offense was because she accidentally set off the fire alarm while using a blow dryer in her room. Because of her experience with the conduct process and the RD, Ren stated she became "standoff-ish" with building staff. This included not wanting to engage or interact further with the RD. Out of financial necessity, Ren confirmed she would be living in campus housing during the Fall 2023 semester.

Rochelle

Rochelle was a graduate student at SU working on her master's in nursing. She lived off-campus and worked full-time as a cardiac nurse. On her demographic survey, Rochelle indicated previous involvement in student organizations, but at the time of her interview, she was no longer active on campus. Rochelle's violation was related to academic integrity, explicitly cheating. For her conduct case, Rochelle met virtually with a practitioner from the student conduct team. Rochelle disagreed with the classification of her violation as cheating. Further, Rochelle stated that the conduct process left her "disappointed and discouraged."

Tanisha

Tanisha was a transfer student. Before attending SU, she attended community college; this was her first experience living on campus. Tanisha was a traditional-aged (18-24) senior

student. Tanisha worked off-campus and was involved in one to two student organizations. Tanisha's incident was a housing policy violation, and she met virtually with the Residence Director (RD) of her building to resolve her case. Tanisha's incident was related to an emotional support cat living in her apartment. Although she stated, she filled out the necessary paperwork with her case worker, one additional document needed to be filled out with housing but was missing. As a result, her cat was not approved. Tanisha shared that her conduct experience was traumatizing.

Tyler

Tyler lived in an on-campus apartment. He described himself as a spiritual person guided by faith. Tyler's academic classification was graduating senior in the class of 2023, and he was a traditional-aged (18-24) student working on his first degree. On his demographic questionnaire, Tyler noted he was involved in one to two student clubs/organizations and worked an off-campus job. Tyler was the only participant to resolve his case in person with a conduct administrator and to have had a behavioral incident involving SU police. When describing his incident, Tyler stated that he had no previous interactions with police, so he was unsure what to expect from the conduct process. He credited the conduct officer and university police with excellent communication, making him feel like there was nothing to be afraid of.

Yugo

Yugo was a junior at SU, married, and lived off-campus. She worked full-time as a nurse and was in her second year of the nursing program. On her demographic survey, Yugo indicated that she has never been involved in campus organizations or groups. Yugo's incident was related to academic integrity, explicitly cheating. Yugo resolved her case virtually with an administrator in the student conduct office. In Yugo's case, the incident also involved two other students who

submitted her work as their own for credit. Yugo was adamant she did not know the other two students.

Thematic Findings

Within this study, I examined African American students' perceptions of the influence of postsecondary discipline processes on their academic experience. Using campus ecology theory (Banning, 1978) as a lens, I present my findings regarding student experiences with the disciplinary process. By examining relationships and interactions, campus ecology attempts to understand the way individuals manage and experience their environments (Banning, 1989). Moreover, this framework encourages student affairs professionals to think about interactions with students that can enhance campus environments and "foster student learning and development" (Banning & Bryner, 2001, p. 9).

Banning and Kuk (2005) described campus ecology theory as understanding a person's behavior during and after transactional interactions with one's environment. Campus ecology focuses on interdependent relationships within one's environment and consists of three components, organisms (i.e., individuals associated with the campus), settings (i.e., social and physical environments), and activities (i.e., personal development) (Banning & Kuk, 2005). For this study, organisms were defined as the conduct officer, settings were described as the administrative process and policies, and sanctions portrayed activities. The following section outlines findings that emerged from interviews with African American college students, including (1) *encounters with conduct personnel*, (2) *value of disciplinary sanctions*, and (3) *perception of discipline policies*.

Theme #1: Encounters with Conduct Personnel

In examining participant experience, it was clear that the conduct practitioner substantially impacted the way students navigated their campus environment. Further, interactions with disciplinary administrators largely shaped and transformed student perception of the institution. As described by participants, interactions with disciplinary administrators were characterized as positive and negative. Although the participants illustrated a unique experience with the conduct administrator, regardless of violation type, they all adjusted their attitude towards their campus environment because of the interaction.

In their own words, the following sub-themes encapsulated students' portrayal of their meeting with the conduct officer. The first sub-theme, *feelings of gratitude,* illustrated a distinctive experience that positively transformed the mindset of one participant. Feeling driven to complete their academic goals, the conduct officer was acknowledged as being uplifting and supportive. The next sub-theme, *development of self-advocacy,* detailed the development of additional skills. This hands-on approach was developed by one participant to avoid future interactions with the disciplinary process and to address situations directly instead of waiting on others. The third sub-theme, *feelings of mistrust*, described the wariness and apprehension students expressed towards administrators and the university after meeting with the conduct officer. This outlook resulted in avoiding everyday activities where the disciplinary administrator might be present and changes to previously assumed institutional values. The fourth sub-theme emphasized how feeling unheard and disrespected caused participants to believe their *interaction was pointless*. Mostly all the participants portrayed the conduct administrator as a biased individual because their outcome was predetermined.

Feelings of Gratitude

The conduct officer's encouragement and supportive approach turned a stressful situation into feelings of appreciation. As mentioned, disciplinary officers often interact with individuals soon after they have experienced a challenging situation in their academic or personal life. Therefore, it stands to reason that this may result in negative or resentful attitudes toward the conduct process or administrator. However, Tyler's interaction defied this supposition. After a difficult incident involving another student and the university police department, Tyler expressed that the conduct officer had a profound influence on him and was critical in helping him positively move past the incident.

Favorably, Tyler shared that his interaction with the disciplinary administrator allowed him to become more introspective about his academics and personal matters in his life. When asked about the impact of the conduct officer on his academic experience, Tyler communicated that he felt supported and pushed toward his educational goals: "They do everything they can to prevent you from getting into trouble and to be successful." Further, he conveyed his surprise at how well the meeting went and the strong impression left by the conduct officer. Tyler stated that he was unsure what to expect before the discipline meeting, but he was glad to have interacted with the administrator. Attributing many positive changes in his life to the disciplinary officer, Tyler said he now recognizes "every decision matters" and the importance of one's choices.

As described by Tyler, the conduct officer helped illuminate what was important in his life: "I think about that conversation on a weekly basis, like the decisions I make, whether it's skipping class, going to work, or just how I spend my money can help or hinder my success in life." The disciplinary administrator allowed Tyler to see the connection between big and small

decisions. According to Tyler, this new viewpoint was instrumental to him becoming a "better man and the best version of himself." He added that the conduct officer confirmed that attending SU was the right choice, saying,

> SU is a great university because a lot of things they do is to prevent you from trouble. Instead, they push you toward graduation and toward your future. I would love to graduate from this university because they care about students. I never knew this department existed until I got in trouble. To have this on campus before anything even takes place, I am like they care. They have people in place in case something like this takes place.

The conduct administrator inspired Tyler to change the direction of his thought process and, thus, his life: "I think it's bigger than the billboards they have or like the commercials and the ads like they really care about their students." When Tyler discussed meeting with the disciplinary officer, he appeared to beam with joy. Overall, Tyler articulated that his changes have set him up for success on and off campus. Tyler's experience was favorable compared to other participants. In the next section, I reveal an unexpected outcome resulting from the conduct meeting with the disciplinary officer.

Development of Self-Advocacy

Mostly all participants articulated feeling stressed when meeting with the conduct administrator. This sub-theme highlighted the development of self-advocacy skills by one participant to combat the strain she was feeling. While skill development was not a focus of this study and not directly expressed by others, this critical finding has wide-ranging implications for understanding the way individuals may navigate campus interactions through the development of an added skillset.

Before meeting with the conduct officer, Tanisha assumed that things would work out

once she did her part. Since interacting with the RD, Tanisha said that she now approaches situations in a more hands-on way and is less afraid to address people in power: "Now, I am more firm. I'm not afraid to make calls. I'm more like, get it going, get it done." Tanisha described herself as more proactive: "I take care of my part, and I make sure everybody does their part. I make sure I do not get screwed over...because I refuse to go through another process like that."

Additionally, Tanisha indicated that this diligence was not limited to campus housing or SU but also extended beyond the university environment: "I have become a more assertive and confident person when it comes to me handling my business." The conduct process made Tanisha more confident in herself and in communicating with others. Not wanting to have a similar experience or any miscommunication on the part of others, Tanisha shared that she now goes into all situations asking questions and doing her own follow-up.

Feelings of Mistrust

Although disciplinary meetings allow administrators to address student behavior, some participants felt that the discipline officer favored the code of conduct over their well-being. This led to feelings of mistrust and betrayal towards the discipline officer overseeing their case. Further, they expressed that their interaction was not individualized and that the administration was going through the motions of their job. Sensing this, participants shared their interaction with university personnel, and the way they related to the campus environment was changed.

After meeting with the conduct officer, Ren shared that she no longer desired to live in campus housing. Ren's incident involved setting off the fire alarm in her residential building while using a blow dryer. Ren stressed that the event was an accident; therefore, the disciplinary referral was undeserved. Before the conduct meeting, Ren had not previously interacted with the

RD. Reflecting on the conduct meeting, Ren felt the RD wanted to make an example of her so that others would be deterred from setting off the fire alarm: "I do not think this would have happened to my white counterparts. I have heard of people in school [having] accidentally set off the fire alarm, they were not Black, and they did not get charged."

Although Ren did not state she believed the way her case was managed was due to her race, she conveyed surprise at the conduct officer's lack of consideration since she was also African American. When questioned why she thought this transpired, Ren explained she did not know, but there was supposed to be an understanding between them because of their shared ethnic background: "She was Black, and I feel like we should have stuck together." Ren assumed that another Black person would look out for her and provide support or direction since they were both minorities. Because this did not happen, Ren felt a lack of community and betrayal: "I'm still looking out for myself, but like we are in this together…we are still the minority."

Throughout the interview, Ren was unambiguous that the meeting with her RD made her uneasy: "I do not really feel comfortable asking my RD for anything," Ren added that she had no desire to interact further with the RD: "Not even good morning, good afternoon, nothing." Ultimately, Ren decided that the RD would be her last resort for assistance or support. She shared that the conduct officer caused her to disengage from the housing experience: "If I cannot trust someone who looks like me, who can I trust?" Ren stopped attending programs and community events in her building: "I really would not want to participate because I knew all the rest of the RA's would be there, and the RD would, of course, be there." Additionally, Ren avoided hanging out in rooms with other students, saying, "I would more so stay put to myself so that way I would not be attached or involved in anything if another accident may happen [in] somebody else's room."

Similarly, Tanisha shared unpleasant feelings toward the conduct officer. Meeting with the RD to resolve her disciplinary case, Tanisha's violation involved a missing housing document regarding her emotional support animal. Recounting the incident, Tanisha expressed that she was in disbelief that she was referred to the disciplinary office. Before the conduct meeting, Tanisha believed all the necessary paperwork had been completed with her counselor. Since Tanisha was not provided any documents related to housing, Tanisha assumed everything had been taken care of. Tanisha stated that she tried to explain these details to the RD during her conduct meeting but sensed he did not care, noting the RD "just kept saying there is a sense of responsibility that I needed to take." When describing the meeting, Tanisha shared,

> It was a really negative experience, and it kind of made me not really like living on campus as much anymore. I really only do it because it is convenient for my family, but it kind of made me not enjoy my apartment as much...I just do not really enjoy my living situation as much as I would like to because I realize management [is] going to act like this. When I first got into housing, you know, it [was] my first semester at SU, and I was under the understanding that SU is very understanding.

It seemed the RD "was more concerned about the rulebook." Feeling unsupported, Tanisha explained,

> I fell behind on my coursework, and I felt like I could not really concentrate on my homework. So, it really kind of messed me up academically and put a lot of unneeded stress to where I was not really doing as well and focusing as much because I was so concerned about what was happening back at my apartment.

Further, Tanisha assumed this interaction was not unique and that all of SU worked this way. Tanisha said she no longer believed SU cared about students as she previously did, noting "it

does not have to be with like conduct; it could be with like housing, registrar, admissions, anything like that.". This interaction with the conduct officer broadly changed Tanisha's views regarding the housing staff and the entire university.

As the only participants interviewed regarding a housing violation, Ren and Tanisha did not meet with the same individual, yet similar feelings were asserted. Ren and Tanisha distinctly communicated that their interactions with the conduct officer broadly impacted their feelings toward SU, their academics, and their approach to their campus environment. In the end, both participants distrusted the housing staff and the university.

The Interaction was Pointless

Most participants shared that the meeting was pointless since the decision by the conduct administrator was predetermined. Disciplinary meetings allow students to explain the alleged conduct violation in their own words. However, several participants expressed feeling unheard. A. J. believed that once you are referred to the conduct office, they take "the instructor's word for it without getting more detailed information about the particular incident." A. J. alleged that the details of his self-plagiarism violation were not "fully examined." Self-plagiarism occurs when "authors reuse their own previously disseminated content and pass it off as a new product without letting the reader know that this material has appeared previously" ("Self-plagiarism," n.d.). The assignment A. J. submitted contained parts of a previous paper. A. J. stated that since the project required building on his earlier work, he did not understand why it was self-plagiarism. A. J. said he did what was asked of him based on what he understood to be the assignment. A. J. shared that he asked the conduct officer for an explanation of the violation, but one was not received. Because of this, A. J. said that the conduct meeting was unnecessary. He posited that if they were not going to show him what was wrong or how to make corrections,

then the meeting was pointless.

Similarly, Ren did not feel heard and expressed that her case was not adequately investigated. Ren described the RD as "more just reading off of a script." Explaining,

I felt like the meeting was kind of unnecessary because it was an accident, so I could not have prevented it. I would understand if I were putting a bag over the smoke detector or tampering with it, but it was a genuine accident, so how do you prevent those?

Ren and Tanisha believed their cases were not decided on the merit of their offense. Equally, Tanisha and Ren thought their incidents should have been resolved without disciplinary action.

Yugo also articulated that there was no point in meeting with the conduct officer and that she wished she had not been contacted. Yugo's incident involved two students submitting one of her past assignments. Yugo stated that she did not share her work with them. With no connection to the violation, Yugo expressed that the meeting had no influence on her and was "useless...they could have just written me." Straightforwardly, Yugo acknowledged that interacting with the conduct officer did not change the way she approached her academic work. Like the other participants, Rochelle and Meme were also disappointed in their meeting to resolve their conduct case. Although Ren and Meme received a warning, they found the process uninformative and burdensome. Interestingly, the participants did not voice resentment or negativity towards the administrator or faculty member that referred them to the conduct office. While they expressed disagreement with the policy noted by the staff member, the participants believed that the conduct officer would understand the violation was unintentional.

This theme highlighted participants' feelings toward their campus environment after interacting with the conduct officer. As discussed above, the participants expressed strong opinions about their interactions with their conduct administrator. For instance, Ren and Tanisha

came to mistrust their conduct administrators, and A.J., Yugo, Rochelle, and Meme found the

meeting pointless. On the contrary, Tyler expressed gratitude for the lessons from the conduct

officer, and Tanisha developed self-advocacy skills to navigate the discipline process. These

different feelings and opinions were primarily due to the type of violation experienced by the

students. Participants referred for housing and academic integrity violations believed their

incident was out of their hands and unavoidable; therefore, their disciplinary referral was unjust.

In contrast, the sole individual referred for a behavioral incident expressed regret at his actions

and thankfulness for his interactions with the conduct officer.

Theme #2 Value of Disciplinary Sanctions

This theme detailed participant perception of conduct outcomes. Once a student has

completed their meeting with the conduct officer, outcomes are based on the incident and

circumstances of the violation discussed. Sanctions reinforce accountability within the conduct

process (Olshak, 2006). Further, sanctions are considered an educational and developmental part

of the disciplinary process. At each interview, all participants reported completing their assigned

educational outcomes.

Consequences discussed by participants included warnings, fines, workshops, and a

reflection paper. Participants recounted their sanctions and described frustration, angst, and

indifference toward tasks intended to elicit behavioral change. Most all the participants

expressed disappointment that their sanction did not relate to their alleged violation and reported

no educational value from their completion. The following sub-themes captured participant

attitudes regarding their assigned disciplinary outcomes. The first sub-theme, *inspired,* detailed

the meaningful transformation sanctions can have on participants. Students can better avoid

future violations and change their behavior when they reflectively process their decisions. The

second sub-theme, *no reported value,* summarized the inefficiency of sanctions as explained by several participants. Most participants expressed disappointment at the conduct office's lack of meaningful sanctions. Despite differences in the type of disciplinary violation, several participants were dissatisfied with outcomes that were intended to be educational.

Inspired

When sanctions meet their intended educational goal, they allow students to be positively influenced. Tyler was the one exception who identified his sanction as "very influential." Noteworthy, Tyler was the only participant to complete a reflection paper. When reflecting on his sanction, Tyler shared,

> I realized when I was writing the essay that I had a lot of built-up animosity inside me [when] that incident that took place, and so even when I was writing it, I am like I do not know if I was crying, but I know life like just froze for me because I am [only] 22... Like it is crazy because I thought I had grown up, that was a man, I thought I got over like all of my past.

Tyler articulated that completing the reflection paper allowed him to process past trauma and reflect on his previous behavior. Further, Tyler shared that the exercise helped him recognize that he needed additional support to process his suppressed emotions. Tyler stated that he realized that one day, he "could just [blow up] on a random person." Recounting his sanction, Tyler explained,

> It just helped purify like a lot of the darkness I was holding, you know. In the end, it is crazy how it [took], you know, a university incident to make me see that. But I ended up enrolling in therapy, and it has allowed me to grow.

Tyler said he sought counseling after completing the reflection paper. He expressed gratefulness

for the subsequent changes he has made since his incident.

No Reported Value

Except for Tyler, all participants were dissatisfied with the sanctions they were required to complete. Participants professed that the sanctions received were punitive or too general. Further, most participants communicated concern that their sanction did not directly address the reported violation. When describing his sanctions, A. J. explained that he attended a virtual educational workshop. A. J. noted that self-plagiarism was not addressed during the workshop. He stated that the facilitator only discussed properly citing research and not plagiarizing. A. J. expressed confusion and displeasure that his workshop only covered plagiarism, not self-plagiarism. He described the sanction as useless since it would not have prevented the alleged violation: "It just felt like everybody did wrong, and we are going to just put them all here."

Meme shared a similar viewpoint regarding her online educational course for self-plagiarism. Like A. J., Meme communicated that the virtual modules contained no educational value since they did not cover self-plagiarism. Meme explained,

> I feel like your offense, and the consequences should match. It should mirror. I just do not think it can be a blanket disciplinary action for everything or all plagiarism because all plagiarism is not the same. If self-plagiarism is, you know, a thing that can be reprimanded, I think the information should talk about self-plagiarism.

Meme revealed that the supposed educational modules felt like busy work, explaining, "They should better make sure stuff lines up and makes sense...it cannot be a big umbrella for everyone. If it does not apply, then what benefit are you really getting?"

As mentioned, participants expressed frustration with their educational sanction. Tanisha and Ren received a warning and a fine for their housing violation. Tanisha was fined $200.00 for

missing a document, while Ren was charged $50.00 for setting off the fire alarm. Tanisha and Ren articulated that their fines were a financial burden that impacted their housing experience. As she reflected on the sanction, Tanisha stated, "it really just put a bitter taste in my mouth, to say the least...and it kind of showed me how things are kind of handled through the school."

Additionally, Tanisha described the outcome as punitive and unjust for something out of her control. Ren shared similar opinions. She expressed that the fine was disproportionate to the unintentional nature of the violation. As a "broke college student," Ren reallocated funds from her parents, intended to help support her basic needs, to pay for the fine. Analogous to other participants, Rochelle and Yugo expressed discontent with their sanctions. Although they each received a warning, Rochelle and Yugo were displeased with their sanction and declared it offered no educational value. Further, both Rochelle and Yugo stated that the warning did not change their approach to decision-making.

The experiences in this section revealed that sanctions could play more than an educational or developmental role in the life of students. While outcomes issued by conduct personnel were intended to stimulate behavioral change, most participants expressed that their sanction was useless or had no educational value. Conversely, the only participant that completed a reflection paper, Tyler, voiced appreciation for the ability to reflect. These responses demonstrated the importance of disciplinary sanctions directly tied to conduct violations.

Theme #3: Perception of Discipline Policies

This theme highlighted a nexus between the perception of institutional policy and student learning. Codes of conduct are designed to manage student behavior and set academic expectations. Kalagher and Curran (2020) noted that they guide the work of disciplinary practitioners and serve as a critical element of the conduct process. Frustration with the

enforcement and interpretation of discipline policies by administrators was discussed by mostly all the participants. Throughout each interview, it became apparent that university policies traversed with student academic experience.

The following sub-themes summarized student perception of university policies and practices. The first sub-theme, *scope of policies*, detailed participant attitudes toward SU rules and regulations. Several participants described SU policies as too broad and exclusionary of diverse student learning styles. Although participants grasped the importance of following university rules, they expressed that the categorization of their violation did not correspond with their incident. The second sub-theme, *lack of inclusivity and flexibility*, identified the rigidity of institutional policies as sensed by participants. Several participants communicated difficulty finding value within the conduct process since it often excluded their optimal learning style.

Scope of Policies

Almost all the participants articulated that policy violations should be handled differently and not generalized because they may be similar. For example, blatant plagiarism is not the same as self-plagiarism, and as such, it should be addressed differently. As previously noted, self-plagiarism occurs when an individual reuses previously submitted work as though it were new. Alternatively, plagiarism is described as stealing or passing off ideas or words of another as one's work without crediting the source ("Plagiarize," n.d). A. J. expressed frustration with labeling his violation as plagiarism, noting "I was repeating my own work because it was an assignment. It was more, so I did not use proper citation protocol, more so than blatantly plagiarizing someone else's work."

Meme echoed A. J.'s sentiments. Meme was also referred for self-plagiarism and stated that her incident was labeled as plagiarism. Expressing many of the same thoughts and opinions

as A. J., Meme shared,

> No one talks about self-plagiarism... we were in a class [where] we were told basically
> that the assignments build on each other, so of course, you are asking similar questions,
> so I am thinking, okay, well, if you just ask me the same question in this last paper. It's
> building on each other; I'm expecting you to know that you know, of course, I'm going to
> be using some of the same material because, all in all, this stuff is the information leading
> up to basically my professional project.

Frustrated that her violation was labeled plagiarism, Meme stated that this categorization was akin to calling her principles and values into question. Although A. J. and Meme discussed the alleged violation with their referring faculty before meeting with the conduct officer, Meme believed this was the end of the process and was surprised by the subsequent letter from the Office of Student Conduct. However, because A. J. had previously interacted with the disciplinary process, meeting with the conduct officer was an expected next step.

Rochelle also disagreed with labeling her incident as cheating for talking aloud during an online exam. Rochelle said that the conduct administrator and her faculty told her they did not believe she was cheating. However, talking aloud during an exam violated the university's testing policy. To prevent another person from possibly being in the same room and providing unauthorized answers, university policy prohibited students from speaking audibly during online exams. Because of this, Rochelle stated that she was told she had to be found responsible. This made no sense to Rochelle since she was not cheating, and the administrators concluded the same. When Rochelle received her outcome letter, she was surprised, disappointed, and discouraged.

Further, Rochelle was highly irritated that this allegation was categorized as cheating.

Like Meme, Rochelle expressed that the label attached to her violation called into question her integrity and leadership as a nurse for over 12 years. Rochelle explained that she is a visual learner and recalls information best by drawing it out. Since she did not have additional or prohibited materials during the exam, the incident should not have been labeled as cheating for trying to remember information.

Also irritated by the accusation of cheating, Yugo expressed frustration that she had to interact with the university conduct process. Fervently, Yugo articulated that she did not know the two students who submitted her previous work. She stated that she was disturbed to be labeled a cheater when she had no idea who the other students were.

Lack of Inclusivity and Flexibility

Many participants felt the inflexibility of institutional policy constrained the conduct officer. Additionally, participants shared that their specific circumstances should have mitigated a different outcome. This included their intent and the severity of the alleged violation. Rochelle explained, "the way the policy is written, it is black of white," which is unjust and non-inclusive of the different learning styles of students. Adding to her frustration, Rochelle stated that classroom instruction was contradictory to exam expectations. She described being allowed to create diagrams in class as though she was talking to a patient. Rochelle believed that not being allowed to do so during an examination was contradictory. She explained,

> When we are talking to our patients, we draw it out for our patients, we show them where their blockage is and how the blood flows. So, you know to go through and do that for your patients, and then when I need to do it for my test...to not be able to do it, it is hard not to be able to.

Rochelle conveyed that faculty need to be more understanding of diverse learning styles. When

asked to expand, Rochelle expounded,

> Sometimes people get stuck, and they may just be sitting there thinking, we cannot just assume that everybody learns the same and somebody does not need to draw it out...that is what I've been doing my whole nursing career.

Rochelle believed the zero she received on the exam set her back academically. Further, she expressed having increased stress levels each time she took an exam. Afraid to be accused of cheating a second time, Rochelle said she thinks twice and overthinks her actions (e.g., talking aloud or drawing) when taking exams.

Yugo was also disappointed with her referral to the conduct office. Yugo was the only participant who did not know she was referred until she received a summons letter from OSC. She stated that two students she did not know submitted her work for academic credit. Like others, Yugo disagreed with the alleged violation of cheating. Yugo believed the conduct officer could not be flexible with her situation due to the policies at SU, and he was following the university's process: "He's following a set rule." Repeatedly, Yugo stated that she did not understand why the disciplinary process required her to participate since she did not know the two students involved. Yugo expressed that the conduct officer should have been able to vacate her violation since he said it was a minor incident and was able to confirm she had no connection to the students.

Tanisha also expressed the need for more flexibility. Because the missing document was not on her end, Tanisha wished someone had contacted her to help resolve the issue instead of referring her for disciplinary action. Further, Tanisha insisted that the conduct officer should have considered this a vindicating factor because she was not notified about the missing paperwork. Tanisha no longer believed SU was understanding, saying, "they will base their

understanding [on] the rule book, which I think is kind of broken in a sense."

Along the same lines, Ren believed that since she did not intentionally set off the fire alarm and this was her first incident, the RD examining her case should have vacated the violation. Ren conveyed that she did not think the RD considered these additional or mitigating factors when investigating her case. Mostly all the participants interviewed did not debate the violation; they disputed the category that the offense fell into or that an accidental incident warranted a referral to the conduct office. Additionally, each participant stated that the policy alleged did not fully explain their violation or actions.

Overall, participants desired more flexibility from the administrative staff member deciding their case. Further, as discussed above, several participants articulated frustration that the code of conduct narrowly labeled their policy violation and was non-inclusive of diverse ways to learn and retain information. Participants primarily conveyed that they were troubled by the incongruence of institutional policies and university expectations.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the three main themes, including (1) *encounters with conduct personnel*, (2) *value of disciplinary sanctions*, and (3) *perception of discipline policies*. An analysis of participant responses and my field notes revealed that multiple aspects of the conduct process influenced students. Further, students who participated in the disciplinary process desired education regarding institutional policies. The connectedness of these elements demonstrated the significant role participation in a postsecondary discipline process could have on a student's academic and personal life. Overall, these findings illustrated the need for practitioners and policymakers to review institutional disciplinary practices and policies periodically.

In chapter 5, I discuss the key findings of this study and discuss the implications for policy, practice, and research in detail.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although African American student enrollment in higher education in the United States continues to increase (Allen et al., 2018), Black students are the least likely to graduate from four-year institutions compared to other ethnic groups (United States Census Bureau, 2014). This has negatively impacted African Americans economically and socially (Starks, 2017). With increasing calls for postsecondary institutions to demonstrate effectiveness (Ewell, 2009), it is critical to identify all available opportunities to support and promote African American scholastic success. One such interaction is postsecondary discipline processes.

Behavioral processes have been identified as critical functions on collegiate campuses (Glick & Haug, 2020; Zacker, 2020). Even so, an insufficient knowledge base exists on the influence of the conduct process on postsecondary academic experience. In this phenomenological qualitative study, I explored the African American college students' perceived experience with university discipline processes and its influence on their campus environment. Seven participants were interviewed and shared their involvement with the disciplinary process at a four-year institution in the southern United States.

From a campus ecology theory (Banning, 1978) lens, my findings support and expand existing research surrounding the influence of student interaction with characteristics of the conduct process. In the following section, I begin with a summary of the key thematic findings: (1) *encounters with conduct personnel*, (2) *value of disciplinary sanctions*, and (3) *perception of discipline policies*. Next, I discuss my findings and recommendations for practice and future research. Finally, I conclude with my final thoughts on this body of research.

Summary of Key Findings

In Chapter 4, I introduced and synopsized this study's three themes, which comprehensively summarized student perception of the way interacting with postsecondary discipline processes shaped the academic experience of seven African American students. Through one-on-one interviews, participants communicated that contact with disciplinary personnel, sanctions, and policies transformed the way they navigated and viewed their campus environment. Overall, glaring similarities in each participant's experience were discovered. For example, all the participants depicted changes in subsequent interactions with university offices and administrators. However, regardless of conveyed feelings about the conduct process by participants, everyone communicated strong emotions regarding their experience.

The first theme, *Encounters with Conduct Personnel*, summarized participant descriptions of the way the disciplinary officer impacted their campus environment. Whether they described their experience as positive, negative, or neutral, participants detailed the meaningful ways conduct administrators shaped the way they navigated the institution. While the experiences and takeaways described were distinct, the attitudes expressed by participants regarding the conduct officer were interrelated. From this, four sub-themes materialized, which were:

A. *Feelings of Gratitude.* Words of encouragement and support turned helped ease a stressful situation. Although expressed by only one participant, this interaction helped advance their academic goals. Further, this participant reported receiving invaluable life lessons from the conduct officer when he indicated he needed it most.

B. *Development of Self-Advocacy.* An unforeseen outcome described by one

participant was the development of self-advocacy skills. Although she felt

stressed and exasperated with the conduct officer, the experience helped her

become more assertive. This confidence was extended to interactions, whether on

or off campus.

C. *Feelings of Mistrust*. Meeting with the conduct officer produced feelings of

mistrust toward university staff. Nearly all participants believed the rules

governing behavior superseded their well-being, and they expressed a lack of

support from the conduct officer. Future interactions with administrators were

avoided. Moreover, participants reported skipping campus-wide and community

events designed to encourage scholastic success.

D. *The Interaction was Pointless.* Meeting with the discipline administrator was

seen as unnecessary, burdensome, and irrelevant by mostly all the participants.

They felt their outcomes were predetermined, and the meeting was too generic to

have an impact. Overall, they articulated feeling overlooked and as though the

conduct officer was reading from a script.

The second finding, *Value of Disciplinary Sanctions*, described the perception of

outcomes received by participants on academic experience and learning. Sanctions issued

consisted of active (i.e., reflection paper or workshop) and passive (i.e., warnings of fines)

activities. Several participants considered their given sanction ineffective regardless of outcome

type (academic or housing). Further, participants voiced disappointment that their outcome did

not address the related policy directly. Nevertheless, one participant credited his sanction with

changes in his decision-making process and improvements to his mental health. From this, two

sub-themes materialized, which were:

A. ***Inspired.*** Sanctions dispensed must be intentional. Disciplinary outcomes can be impactful when students are permitted to reflect on the incident and their behavior. Sanctions can influence more than student behavior; they can also guide academic success, improve mental health, and encourage personal goals. Generally, sanctions reinforce the disciplinary meeting with the administrator.

B. ***No Reported Value.*** Sanctions were seen as useless, as they did not intersect with the related conduct violation. Participants expected to receive education regarding university policies and were perplexed that their outcomes did not match the listed violation. A lack of resources to pay assessed fines added additional stress and anxiety to participants. Overall, the reported outcomes shaped the way participants regarded the university.

In the third finding, *Perception of Discipline Policies*, I explained the way participants perceived the institutional code of conduct as non-inclusive of differing learning styles and broadly applied to student behavior. All but one participant communicated frustration; their incident was categorized in the same manner as what they considered a more severe violation. For example, participants believed plagiarism and self-plagiarism should not be similarly classified or sanctioned. Participants also provided instances when actions by faculty contained conflicting academic expectations and the desire for more discretion by conduct personnel. From this, two sub-themes materialized, which were:

A. ***Scope of Policies.*** Participants expressed disappointment and discouragement that the university code of conduct narrowly labels disciplinary violations. Almost all the participants felt their values and integrity were unjustly sullied by the institution grouping similar violations together. Further, participants believed policies and

practices within the classroom should match one another, so expectations from faculty are clear.

B. ***Lack of Inclusivity and Flexibility.*** Codes of conduct should provide more flexibility when assessing student responsibility for university violations. Further, participants expected conduct staff to discern between similar types of violations. Several participants expressed concern that unintentional incidents or violations required involvement in the conduct process.

The following section discusses connections between these critical findings and available literature, followed by implications for higher education policy and practice and feature research.

Discussion

Currently, there is a lack of empirical research examining student conduct processes. Therefore, understanding the relationship between disciplinary processes and scholastic success is critical. Results from this study highlighted whether African American students perceived their interaction with the postsecondary discipline process as influential to their academic experience. As suggested by Dey (1997), differing campus environments can intentionally or unintentionally impact students.

In the current study, participants expressed both positive and negative viewpoints. Several participants expressed feeling unheard, dissatisfied with issued sanctions, uneasiness with the disciplinary administrator, and frustration that the labeled policy violation did not match their actions. While others articulated, they developed skills to handle difficult future situations and learned invaluable life lessons. Consequently, these attitudes shaped the development of interpersonal relationships with institutional staff and the institution. This finding is critical. As Palmer et al. (2011) noted, developing connections with university staff and the institution is

incredibly influential to African American students.

Further, several participants reported no learning after participation in the discipline process and were concerned with the lack of inclusivity and discretion applied by the conduct officer. These adverse conclusions by participants hampered student learning and reduced opportunities for developmental changes. This aligns with previous research on student perception of the conduct process. In Stimpson and Janosik (2015), student perception of the conduct process influenced reported learning. Students that reported a positive experience were more likely to report having received some education regarding the violation than participants reporting a negative interaction.

In the following section, I discuss the influence of organisms (conduct personnel), settings (disciplinary policies), and activities (judicial sanctions) on the African American academic experience. As an ecological approach, campus ecology is defined by these three characteristics (Banning & Kuk, 2005). The first component, organisms, is person-focused; the second, activities, is transactional-focused; and the third component, settings, is environmentally focused. By showing administrators that seemingly independent systems are mutually dependent (Banning & Kuk, 2005), campus ecology helps administrators understand the relationships between these connected systems.

Encounters with Conduct Personnel

The first finding affirmed that conduct personnel could influence students significantly, thus shaping their academic experience. After meeting with the disciplinary officer, several participants reported changes to their opinion of the university and adjustments to their interactions with staff. Students adapted to their perceived environment to fit their needs. Participants also assumed that their encounter with the conduct officer was the way SU's other

university offices treated students. As a result, some participants avoided future contact with administrators. Because the disciplinary process is intended to be educational (Olshak, 2006), this is a distressing discovery. As a component of campus ecology theory, organisms represent person-focused interventions emphasizing the relationship between students and their environment (Banning & Kuk, 2005). Organisms or conduct personnel are critical to the design of disciplinary processes and any subsequent student learning.

Cabrera (2016) pointed out that verbal and non-verbal messages could hold more significance for African Americans than other ethnic groups. This includes the development of interpersonal relationships between African American students and university administrators. Creating these connections is one critical way African American students relate to their campus environment (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). This was evidenced by one participant who indicated he felt connected to the conduct officer. Differing from experiences shared by other participants, this individual expressed feeling motivated to pursue their academic goals because of the conduct officer. Although not echoed by other participants, this outcome is strengthened by findings in Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) and Palmer et al. (2011), which suggested that Black students thrive academically when they develop positive exchanges with higher education personnel.

In comparison, other participants from the present study reported feeling discouraged by the conduct officer and disconnected from the campus environment. They believed the disciplinary meeting was pointless because their outcome was predetermined. Further, several participants reported no learning. This finding is consistent with Brown-McClure and Cocks (2020), who suggested that student learning is more likely to occur when an impartial discipline process I applied. Students are less likely to report learning if the disciplinary process is

perceived as prejudiced. Campus ecology describes this outcome as the result of "the organism-environmental transaction" (pg. 9). So, the way students navigate their environment is directly informed by the organisms within the conduct process and the campus community.

This theme also confirmed a finding from Stimpson and Janosik (2015) that the way conduct personnel administer discipline processes powerfully shapes student learning. Mostly all the participants expressed believing the disciplinary meeting was unimportant and meaningless. Further, they voiced that there was no need for such a meeting if students were made to feel disrespected. Stimpson and Janosik determined that learning is less likely to occur if students do not feel heard or respected during the discipline process. They asserted that students' perception of the process has a "dramatic influence on what is learned" (p. 64) and encouraged practitioners to "give considerable attention to how students perceive processes and procedures" (p. 64). Echoing Stimpson and Janosik, this study's findings support the need for disciplinary personnel to re-conceptualize interactions during the conduct process.

An unanticipated finding not described in the current body of available research was skill development after contact with the conduct officer. A single participant disclosed that she found her voice by applying self-advocacy techniques. Though she reported her experience as unfavorable, she became more assertive and confident when handling issues or seeking resources. Contrary to other participants, this experience fueled her ability to address issues head-on, whereas before, she would wait for a solution.

These mixed outcomes support the need for additional empirical studies on the influence of disciplinary processes on academic experience. Findings from this study indicated that student experience with the disciplinary process was closely tied to their perception of the institution. Like students during the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s, today's students want to be heard and

respected when interacting with university administrators.

Value of Conduct Sanctions

The second finding in this study emphasized the importance of dispensing sanctions that directly align with disciplinary violations. Several participants reported dissatisfaction with their outcome and did not provide educational support. Mostly all the participants described their sanctions as meaningless. Whether participants completed active (workshops, reflection paper) or passive (warnings, fines) sanctions, and regardless of the violation type (academic or housing), this discovery was consistent.

As a component of campus ecology, activities examine the relationship between students and dispensed outcomes (Banning & Kuk, 2005). Like organisms and settings, reported activities swayed academic experience. In one case, the participant expressed feeling supported by the institution and pushed toward his goal of graduation. He identified the reflection paper as his first step in processing pent-up past trauma and coming to terms with prolonged mental health needs. In discussing his outcome, this participant shared that the opportunity to reflect on the incident was significant. This is in line with recommendations by Olshak (2006), who encouraged conduct practitioners to establish the issuance of sanctions that allow students to revisit their disciplinary incidents. Olshak asserted that the potential to influence future occurrences could be increased positively when students are permitted to reexamine their behaviors.

Kompalla and McCarthy (2001) examined the impact of active versus passive sanctions on student recidivism and retention. The authors defined active sanctions as completing a task (e.g., a reflection paper or community service) related to the violation and passive outcomes (e.g., warnings or fines) as tasks not requiring any action. Kompalla and McCarthy affirmed that when active sanctions were issued, students were less prone to repeat the same violation and

more likely to be retained, whereas passive sanctions essentially had no impact. In the current study, participants who were issued passive sanctions, such as fines, identified these outcomes as inconsequential and burdensome. Likewise, several participants in this study who received warnings reported no learning and disclosed that the sanction issued did nothing to change their behavior.

However, contradictory to Kompalla and McCarthy's (2001) findings, the completion of active sanctions did not always ensure student learning. Participants in the current study who completed sanctions related to academic integrity reported this sanction as inadequate. Although considered an active sanction, participants noted there was no direct tie to their violation; therefore, it felt as though it was just something to do. This outcome mirrors King (2012), where student learning and development occurred when outcomes such as workshops, counseling, or developmental assessments were directly developed based on the violation. King defined educational value as the self-reported likelihood of students to change behavior because of the discipline process. Clearly, the value of sanctions comes not from the outcome but from the learning it initiates. As such, the conduct personnel must strive to be more intentional.

My findings suggest that active sanctions do not automatically lead to student learning or behavioral change. Unlike other postsecondary structures, the disciplinary process is not solely designed to keep students socially and academically engaged (Schuck, 2017). Conduct administrators must be intentional and individualize their approach to student development and education. This means sanctions should not be considered interchangeable and must meet students' individual needs, as King (2012) and Mullane (1999) suggested. Further, if disciplinary sanctions aim to elicit behavioral change, conduct practitioners must consider the violation committed when determining the best sanction or outcome to promote reflection.

Perception of Discipline Policies

This finding revealed a relationship between student learning and perception of institutional policy. Through the lens of campus ecology theory, settings or policies explore the connection between students and their environment (Banning & Kuk, 2005). Several participants voiced irritation at the categorization of their violation. They believed the categorization of policies was too broad and was non-inclusive of the many ways students learn in an educational setting. Multiple participants expressed difficulty finding value in the discipline process or their sanction due to this disagreement and incongruence. Not agreeing with the policy classification hindered participants' ability to absorb the conduct process's purpose. The categorization of violations has yet to previously be identified in empirical research as a contributor to student learning.

King (2012) and Mullane (1999) identified student perception of the conduct process as key to learning. Outcomes from both King and Mullane revealed that student perception of fairness within the disciplinary process could increase or decrease recidivism within the disciplinary process. As illustrated by multiple participants from the current study, feeling unheard and disagreeing with the labeled violation can significantly influence student perception of value within disciplinary processes. To support the professed educational value of the conduct process and effectively deter future behavior, disciplinary practitioners must ensure that students feel heard and respected. King identified age, gender, number of prior interactions with the office, and type of violation as critical contributors to student learning. My findings expand this list of contributors to include the institutional policy.

Because disciplinary policies were incongruent with student beliefs, many struggled to find meaning or value in the overall disciplinary process. Although institutional codes of conduct

exist to help students adapt to campus expectations, in many instances, participants felt excluded from the community. Repeatedly participants expressed disappointment with listed disciplinary policies. Interestingly, I discovered that institutional policies were a pivotal inhibitor to student learning and development.

Implications for Practice and Policy

In this study, I examined the influence of postsecondary discipline processes on the academic experience of African American students. While researchers have evaluated legal tenants of the disciplinary process and the evolution of student rights on collegiate campuses, the overall impact of the conduct process on scholastic accomplishment is understudied. This analysis not only contributes to the current gap in research on the effects of disciplinary processes on educational experiences, but my findings also illuminate additional opportunities for student conduct practitioners to support students on their academic journey. I will discuss implications for practice and future research in the following section.

Black student enrollment at four-year postsecondary institutions continues to increase (Starks, 2017). However, African Americans lag all other ethnic groups in college completion. Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) emphasized that postsecondary personnel must invest in understanding the black student experience if administrators intend to increase African American graduation rates. Findings from this study highlighted the need for intentional administrative exchanges with African American students, as stressed by Fries-Britt and Turner. Support and deliberate contact during all parts of the disciplinary process can enhance student learning and enable African Americans to become more connected to campus environments. Consistently the current data revealed a desire by participants to be treated with respect while being adequately informed on avoiding a reoccurrence, thus offering several implications for practice. The results

add to the current body of literature on student conduct processes and provides additional

considerations to practitioners to maximize student learning.

Individualization of the Conduct Process

Postsecondary conduct personnel must do more to customize each student's experience. This includes tailoring individual outcomes to meet the corrective behavioral desires of the disciplinary process and authentically interacting with students. Although the conduct process is a formal interaction with administrators, it is not "scripted" as described by one participant and, therefore, should feel authentic. This can be executed by allowing students to have a more significant say in dispensed disciplinary sanctions, such as allowing students to choose from a list of approved outcomes. Enabling undergraduates to select their behavioral outcome provides an opportunity to be heard and may aid in building trust with the conduct staff. Further, this autonomy may help lay the foundation to develop future relationships.

Moreover, the discipline process must include intentional opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships with African Americans. Palmer et al. (2001) and Dotson (2020) noted that investment in these connections is crucial to improving African American degree attainment. Efforts should be made to include follow-up with students at the conclusion of a case. This additional touch point can be accomplished in person or virtually as time allows and helps reinforce the development of interpersonal relationships. Implementation of a standardized process for follow-up may also serve as an opportunity for practitioners to assess student learning after completing the process.

Institutional Policy

Disciplinary policies and outcomes must also reflect the educational nature intended by the conduct process if the behavioral change is to occur. Further, institutions must consider how

the classification of violations may unintentionally create negative interactions with conduct officers. This was evidenced by multiple participants who expressed difficulty accepting the outcomes of their case because they disagreed with the violation classification. Postsecondary administrators need to revisit the categorization of violations if they are to increase student learning. This includes not treating similar violations of the code of conduct the same. Faculty must consider different learning styles when applying applicable policy violations. For example, visual learners may need to draw a diagram before responding to an exam question. While it is understandable that some restrictions may be applied, the constraints must consider varying learning styles.

Assessment

Within the last decade, colleges and universities have increasingly been challenged by policymakers to demonstrate their effectiveness. Like K-12, postsecondary funding has progressively been linked to college completion metrics. With African American higher education completion rates consistently lagging all other racial groups, increasing academic success is of the utmost importance.

Results from the current study revealed that interactions with conduct administrators could lead to positive outcomes. Although a student generally interfaces with the disciplinary process unwillingly, conduct personnel can encourage scholastic achievement. As Howell (2005) suggested, disciplinary personnel must evaluate the execution of these processes. This includes customizing each interaction to meet the needs of this population of students. With the increasing availability of data, conduct administrators can improve the process and the way we support students.

Implications for Future Research

An interesting finding that needs further exploration is the development of individual skills; one participant reported becoming more assertive and increasing her self-advocacy. Although these skills were developed out of frustration, they may have far-reaching prospects in her life. Additional research is needed as this may be one of the innumerable skills acquired by students to help navigate the conduct process. Future research on this population over time is also needed. While one participant was motivated to continue pressing forward in his academic journey, it is unknown how long this enthusiasm can propel students. A subsequent analysis following students' educational journey after more than one year would be advantageous to examine whether students stay driven and, most importantly, graduate.

Further examination is also needed to understand whether the ethnicity of the conduct officer shapes student perception of the conduct process. As evidenced by one participant, administrators of the same ethnic background were assumed to support Black students going through the process automatically. When this expectation was not met, feelings of betrayal and rejection surfaced. Additionally, research following students more than one year after their interaction with the conduct process is needed to help determine whether the influence of the disciplinary process yields long or short-term impacts.

While I examined the influence of the conduct process, additional analysis is needed on whether more than one interaction with the disciplinary process can impact academic success. One participant shared that this was not their first interaction. However, because of the parameters of this study, both experiences were not compared, and the initial interaction was not discussed. Additional considerations regarding interactions with differing conduct personnel's influence on scholastic achievement are needed.

Conclusion

This study has added to our collective understanding of the influence of the student

conduct process on the African American academic experience. In this study, I explored whether

interactions with postsecondary discipline processes influenced the African American

educational experience. Although previous studies (e.g., Howell, 2005; Janosik & Stimpson,

2017; Kompalla & McCarthy, 2001) examined the conduct process, the focus was on student

learning and not the impact on academic experience. Thus far, researchers have focused on the

sense of belonging, social integration, and campus climate, yet Black students still lag behind

their counterparts when comparing four-year completion rates. African Americans are least

likely to graduate from four-year institutions, although they enroll at postsecondary institutions

at similar rates to all other ethnic groups.

For this study, I sought to provide postsecondary institutions with additional knowledge

regarding the experience of African Americans who interacted with the conduct process and fill

the current gap in research surrounding the influence of disciplinary processes on academic

experience. Consistently, participants voiced that aspects of the conduct process shaped their

engagement with their campus environment. From general assumptions about the entire

university, sanctions being seen as a waste of time, and non-inclusive policies and practices, the

disciplinary process molded how students navigated all aspects of their academic experience.

As a current conduct administrator, I learned that students want and need more from the

disciplinary process. Students expected and desired an individualized approach regardless of

institutional policy. Moreover, students wanted a disciplinary officer who would fairly

administer outcomes that directly match the policy violation alleged. While it stands to reason

that students will automatically have a negative standpoint because they disagree with the

accountability function of the conduct process, this was found not to be accurate in this study. Students were averse to the discipline process because they felt unheard, as though they did not matter, and had not been provided additional education. Further, students who were referred for an academic integrity violation did not fault the referring faculty, rather they criticized the institutional policies. Additionally, the conduct officer processing the cases was thought to just be doing their job. Surprisingly and critically, participants that interacted with the conduct process related to academic integrity only conveyed negative feelings toward the university's policies.

In this study, I aimed to examine whether the student conduct process influenced the African American academic experience. Fundamentally, this analysis revealed that sanctions issued to students during the discipline process, interactions with conduct personnel, and institutional policy all shape the educational experience of African American students. However, as previously noted, the student experience with discipline processes is seldom presented. Since college completion can promote economic and social well-being, adopting institutional policies that support all students' academic achievement is vital. With African American degree attainment consistently lagging all ethnic other ethnic groups, it is time to expand the postsecondary areas considered influential to academic success.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UTA Office of Regulatory Services
DIVISION OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

2/28/2022

IRB Approval of Minimal Risk (MR) Protocol

PI: Melissa Sanders
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Yi Leaf Zhang
Department: Student Conduct Legal Services
IRB Protocol #: 2022-0142
Study Title: *Spare the Rod: The Post-Secondary Influence of Disciplinary Office's on the African American Academic Experience*

Effective Approval: 2/28/2022

The IRB has approved the above referenced submission in accordance with applicable regulations and/or UTA's IRB Standard Operating Procedures.

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor Responsibilities

All personnel conducting human subject research must comply with UTA's IRB Standard Operating Procedures and RA-PO4, Statement of Principles and Policies Regarding Human Subjects in Research. Important items for PIs and Faculty Advisors are as follows:

- ******Notify Regulatory Services of proposed, new, or changing funding source******
- Fulfill research oversight responsibilities, IV.F and IV.G.
- Obtain approval prior to initiating changes in research or personnel, IX.B.
- Report Serious Adverse Events (SAEs) and Unanticipated Problems (UPs), IX.C.
- Fulfill Continuing Review requirements, if applicable, IX.A.
- Protect human subject data (XV.) and maintain records (XXI.C.).
- Maintain HSP (3 years), GCP (3 years), and RCR (4 years) training as applicable.

The University of Texas at Arlington
REGULATORY SERVICES 219 W Main St, Arlington, Texas 76010, Box #19188
(Phone) 817-272-3723 (Email) regulatoryservices@uta.edu

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hello,

My name is Melissa Sanders, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am currently conducting a qualitative dissertation study on how involvement with the student conduct process has influenced the academic experience of African American students.

This study is an important part of my requirements as a doctoral candidate. The information gleaned from this research will help inform the future practices of postsecondary student conduct personnel and student affairs practitioners in similar roles who work with students as a result of the student conduct process. I appreciate your willingness to help and support me in this endeavor.

I am seeking participants to partake in one virtual one-on-one interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded and conducted on mutually agreed-upon dates utilizing Microsoft Teams or Zoom online platforms. After each interview has been transcribed, each participant will be provided with a transcript of their interview for examination. Eligible participants are full-time African American students who:

- Are currently enrolled at a 4-year postsecondary institution
- Have previously interacted with the student conduct process within the last year
- Were found responsible and issued sanctions as a result of this finding
- Directly interacted with a conduct professional

In the interview, participants will be asked to reflect upon and share their thoughts regarding their interaction with conduct personnel, the process, and the sanctions issued and how it influenced their academic experience.

If you meet the criteria and you are interested in participating in this study
, please contact Melissa Sanders at Melissa.sanders@mavs.uta.edu.

Thank you for your assistance!

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONAIRE

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS ★ ARLINGTON

Name: Please provide a pseudonym/alias that you would like to be referred by

---

What is your current academic standing?

○ Freshman

　Sophmore

○ Junior

○ Senior

○ 5th year student

○ Graduate

Age

○ Under 18

○ 18-24

○ 25-34

○ 35-44

○ 45-54

○ 55-64

○ Above 64

I am a

○ Residential/On-Campus Student

○ Commuter/Off-Campus Student

I am currently involved in

○ 1-2 student organizations on campus

○ 3-4 student organizations on campus

○ 5-6 student organizations on campus

More than 6 student organizations on campus

○ I was previously involved in student organizations on campus but am not currently involved

○ I have never been involved in any student organizaion on campus

Currently I work (please select all that apply)

☐ an on-Campus work study job

☐ an on-Campus non-work study job

☐ an off-Campus job

My incident involved

○ UTA Police

○ Arlington Police

○ Both UTA and Arlington Police

○ Police from a differnt city

○ No police were involved in my incident

Have you completed your conduct sanctions?

Yes

○ No

The University of Texas at Arlington - Legal and Privacy Notice

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

The University of Texas at Arlington (UTA)

Informed Consent for Studies with Adults

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT
Spare the Rod: The Post-Secondary Influence of Disciplinary Office's on the African American Academic Experience

RESEARCH TEAM
<u>Student</u>:
Name: Melissa Sanders, Doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Arlington
Department: COEd- Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Email: Melissa.sanders@uta.edu

<u>Faculty Advisor</u>:
Name: Yi Zhang, Ph.D.; the University of Texas at Arlington
Department: COEd- Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Email: lyzhang@uta.edu

IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH PROJECT
The research team above is conducting a research study about the influence of interaction with disciplinary offices on the African American academic experience. The purpose of this study is to explore whether interactions with postsecondary discipline influence African American academic experience. Specifically, this study examines interactions with disciplinary personnel, the process, and activities assigned during the process. You can choose to participate in this research study if you have been thru the student conduct process within the last year, met with a conduct officer, were issued sanctions to complete as a part of your participation, and are currently enrolled at the institution.

You might want to participate in this study if you would like to share your experiences with the discipline process, personnel, and sanctions issued by the conduct office. However, you might <u>not</u> want to participate in this study if you are uncomfortable sharing your personal experiences or if you do not have the time to attend a one-hour interview session via Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

This study has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB is an ethics committee that reviews research with the goal of protecting the rights and welfare of human research subjects. Your most important right as a human subject is informed consent. You should take your time to consider the information provided by this form and the research team and ask questions about anything you do not fully understand before making your

decision about participating.

TIME COMMITMENT
There will be two interactions with the research team:
1. You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one virtual interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. You have the option to share your video or refrain from sharing your video during this interview.
2. Once the interview is over and the recording is transcribed, your transcript will be emailed for your review. You may add or edit any information in the transcript at that time. Please note: the final information will be used in the research study.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES
If you decide to participate in this research study, this is the list of activities that we will ask you to perform as part of the research:
1. Read through this Informed Consent and talk with the research team to ensure any questions you may have are answered. Make your choice about whether to participate and inform the research team.
2. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to allow a research team member to contact you via email to schedule a virtual interview.
3. At the start of the interview session, you will be emailed a brief survey to collect demographic background information, which will take about 5 minutes to complete. Once you complete this survey, the interview session will begin.
    *   Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time without penalty. You can also skip any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.
4. After the interview, you will be emailed the word-for-word transcription of your interview to review and add/edit any information.

The interview will be audio recorded using Microsoft Teams or Zoom conference software. You will have the option to share your video during the interview or leave your video off. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed, which means it will be typed exactly as it was recorded, word-for-word, by a professional transcription service. Audio recordings will be safely stored and potentially used for future research studies.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS
While the research will not benefit you directly, your personal experiences will inform the way practitioners support and intervene in behavioral misconduct interactions with students. Additionally, this study will allow you to reflect on the academic accomplishments you have achieved despite interacting with the discipline process.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
You might experience stress or discomfort while sharing your experiences with the discipline process. This research study is not expected to pose any additional risks beyond what you

would normally experience in your regular everyday life. However, if you experience discomfort, please inform the research team. Remember that you have the right to quit any study procedures at any time without penalty and may do so by informing the research team.

In addition, your personal identification will remain confidential and will not be released or permitted for public use. Your name will not appear in the research student, and all information will be encrypted and stored safely.

COMPENSATION
No compensation will be offered for participation in this study.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS
There are no alternative options offered for this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. All paper and electronic data collected from this study will be stored in a secure location on the UTA campus and/or a secure UTA server for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The recorded interview will be kept with the other electronic data in a secure UTA OneDrive folder for the duration of the study.

The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as a participant. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB would first evaluate the use of any identifiable information, and confidentiality protection would be maintained.

While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. In addition to the research team, the following entities may have access to your records, but only on a need-to-know basis: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the FDA (federal regulating agencies), the reviewing IRB, and sponsors of the study.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS
Questions about this research study or reports regarding an injury or other problem may be directed to Melisa Sanders at Melissa.sanders@uta.edu or Yi Zhang at lyzhang@uta.edu. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject or complaints about the research may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT
If you have concerns or experience emotional distress, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) are available to students by calling 817-272-3671. You may also contact the 24-hr MAVS Talk crisis line at 817-272-8255.

CONSENT

By verbally agreeing to the above, you confirm that you understand the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and your rights as a research subject. You are not waiving any of your legal rights by agreeing to part. You can refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time, with no penalty or loss of benefits you would ordinarily have.   Please sign below if you are at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

☐ **Yes, verbal consent received**   **Date**

☐ **No, verbal consent not received**   **Date**

_____

If you agree to participate, please provide the signed copy of this consent form to the research team. They will provide you with a copy to keep for your records.

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

1. To what extent did you feel heard and respected during the student conduct process?

2. What kind of influence did the conduct officer have on you?

3. What kind of influence did the conduct process have on you?

4. What kind of influence did the conduct sanctions have on you?

5. To what extent did your experience with the student conduct officer influence your academic experience?

6. To what extent did your experience completing the sanctions influence your academic experience?

7. How did you cope with the experience of the student conduct process?

8. In what ways has your interaction with the student conduct process influenced your behavior?

9. In what ways has your interaction with the student conduct administrator influenced your behavior?