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The African American Women's Summit: A Case Study of a Professional Development Program Developed by and for African American Women Student Affairs Professionals

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The African American Women’s Summit: A Case Study of a Professional Development Program Developed by and for African American Women Student Affairs Professionals by

Nicole Mary-ella West

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Adult, Career, and Higher Education
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June 27, 2011

Keywords: Black women, higher education, underrepresentation, professional success, personal well-being

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mom and dad, Mr. & Mrs. Reuben C. and Dorothye V. West, and to the memory of my maternal grandmother, Ms. Mary-ella Woodley.

Mom, thank you for proofreading this entire document from cover to cover (including checking all of the references). Thank you for being the one who took initiative, exercised your parental prerogative, and taught me to read before I entered the public school system at four years of age. Thank you for eavesdropping on my telephone conversations and despite my chagrin, insisting that I spoke to my friends using Standard American English. Your patience and persistence planted a seed deep within me, which has grown into an insatiable love for and command of the English language. There is absolutely no way I would have been able to accomplish this tremendous achievement without you.

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I love you both and am eternally indebted to you for your love that rescued me and set me on course to realize my potential and fulfill my destiny. Because of you, greatness is inevitable!
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Abstract

While African American women have been participating in American higher education for more than a century, they remain significantly underrepresented among college and university administrators. Researchers have noted that when these women are able to secure administrative positions, many of them contend with intense isolation and marginalization, which compromises their personal well-being and jeopardizes their professional success. Black feminist scholars have suggested that African American women may be assisted by involving themselves in supportive networks that provide them the opportunity to connect with other African American women. Further, these scholars contend that these activities should be facilitated by African American women.

The African American Women’s Summit (AAWS) is a national professional development program that has been developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. The AAWS is offered during the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators’ (NASPA) Annual Conference and provides a venue for African American women student affairs administrators to connect with one another and exchange information related to the successes and struggles they face on their respective campuses. The purpose of the present study was to explore and describe how the AAWS assisted African American women student affairs professionals employed at predominantly White institutions resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, and
contributed to their personal well-being and professional success. This purpose was accomplished by conducting a qualitative case study, which included an analysis of AAWS participant interview data. In addition to themes relevant to the purpose of the study, an in-depth description of the case of interest (i.e., the AAWS) was also constructed, which included the history philosophy, and curriculum of the AAWS as well as 2006-2011 participant demographic data.

The demographic profile of the African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the study closely resembled that of the African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the AAWS between 2006-2011. Findings revealed that there were common ways in which participating in the AAWS assisted the African American women student affairs professionals in this study to resist challenges related to the oppressions they face as higher education administrators at PWIs. Themes related to this research question included the identification and validation of oppressive experiences, the dissemination of strategies to resist oppressions, and the fortification of African American women’s standpoint. The three themes that emerged relative to how the AAWS contributed to the personal well-being of the participants (research question #2), focused on the centrality of the participants’ own physical, spiritual and interpersonal wellness. Participants’ responses in regards to how the AAWS had contributed to their professional success (research question #3) were centered on mentoring and networking opportunities created by the AAWS, as well as encouragement to engage in professional development initiatives.
The findings of this study seem to suggest that African American women student affairs professionals may be able to derive tremendous strength from culturally affirming environments that are created when they assemble in intentionally-designed spaces created by and for themselves. Thus, these women are encouraged to pursue opportunities to develop and participate in professional development opportunities similar to the AAWS. Higher education institutions, as well as student affairs professional associations, that are committed to promoting and facilitating the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals should look to these women to define the types of support they need and then facilitate the creation of programs that have been developed by and for us.
Chapter One:

Introduction

Although African American women have been participating in American higher education for more than a century, and have made significant strides in occupying their place within academe, they continue to be severely underrepresented among students, faculty, staff, and campus administrators (Gregory, 2001; Howard-Hamilton, 2003a; Zamani, 2003b). For example, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2009), during the 2007-08 academic year, Black women accounted for merely 15.5% of 114,000 undergraduates enrolled at 1,600 colleges and universities in the United States. Even more disconcerting are the numbers regarding African American women working in higher education. In the fall of 2007, Black women represented merely 5.8% of college and university executives, administrators, or managers compared to White women who represented 41% and White men who represented 39% of this same cohort (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009). The picture becomes even more bleak when examining the rates among college and university faculty during this same time period; Black women accounted for less than 4% of college and university faculty members (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009).

One of the ways in which the underrepresentation of African American women in higher education may be conceptualized is by understanding the idea of critical mass. Miller (2003) argues that critical mass “exists whenever, within a given group [of individuals], there are enough members from a particular group such that they feel
comfortable participating in the conversation and that [others] see them as individuals rather than as spokespersons for their race” (para. 18). Using Miller’s (2003) definition, underrepresentation may be defined as a lack of critical mass. In other words, the underrepresentation of African American women in postsecondary education exists when there is a significantly and noticeably smaller number of these women present in institutions of higher education as compared to the number of members of other cultural groups present. It is important to note that while underrepresentation is a measure of the negligible quantity of African American women in higher education, there are other issues, which result from their underrepresented status, that affect the quality of their experiences in the academy, which some researchers contend is an even more critical issue (Mabokela, 2001).

Factors that are exacerbated by the underrepresentation of African American women in higher education, have been explored by a number of researchers interested in explicating the complex and intermingling conditions these women face as students (Rosales & Person, 2003; Watt, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Zamani, 2003b) and higher education professionals (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Gregory, 2001; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Holmes, 2003; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Watson, 2001). Some of the factors that have been studied include culturally unsupportive, unresponsive and insensitive campus environments (Henry & Nixon, 1994; Watt, 2003); challenges encountered by African American women in establishing and maintaining healthy interpersonal and professional relationships on campus (Harris, 2007; Henry, 2008; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patitu & Hinton, 2003); as well as the psychological distress African American women experience while attempting to resist the negative stereotypical perceptions of their
culturally dissimilar peers and colleagues (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Watson, 2001). Researchers have also investigated the burden and responsibility placed upon African American women in higher education to serve as the female and African American representative in various campus settings (Henry & Glenn, 2009), and experiences of blatant racist and sexist discrimination and harassment (Gregory, 2001; Guillory, 2001). A synthesis of the literature reviewed revealed that within the context of the aforementioned factors, the broader issues of marginalization and isolation appear repeatedly as issues which affect the professional realities of African American women who work in higher education.

Several commentaries designed to elucidate the African American woman’s experience of being marginalized and isolated within the context of higher education have been offered in the literature. In her seminal treatise, Black feminist thought scholar, Patricia Hill Collins (1986), described the marginalized and isolated status of African American women in various professional and academic settings as the “outsider within” (p. S14). Howard-Hamilton (2003b) relied on the phraseology coined by Collins and noted that African American women in higher education:

> have been invited into places where the dominant group has assembled, but they remain outsiders because they are still invisible and have no voice when dialogue commences. A sense of belonging can never exist because there is no personal or cultural fit between the experiences of African American women and the dominant group. (p. 21)

The same type of isolated and marginalized existence described by Collins has been echoed by several contemporary scholars who explored the experiences of African American women in a variety of higher education settings. Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) described marginalization as “a feeling of invisibleness” (p. 166), and added that African American women are often asked to “compromise their gender and/or
racial/ethnic identities” (p. 167). Patitu and Hinton (2003) defined marginalization as “any issue, situation, or circumstance that has placed [African American] women outside of the flow of power and influence within their institutions” (p. 83). Isolation, which has been described as a by-product of marginalization, leaves many African American women with a persistent sense that they do not belong or do not fit in (Clayborne, 2006).

McKay (1997) described the isolation Black women suffer:

In White universities and colleges, these women experience the workplace as one of society’s exclusive clubs to which, even though they have as much right as everyone else to be there, they will never gain full membership—at least, not in the lifetime of this generation of scholars. (p. 21)

Further, in discussing the isolation experienced by African American nursing administrators in the academy, Daniel (1997) explained that these women are often “isolated both from male power groups and from other women in the university. They may have less access to communication and feedback about their job performance or to informal channels of information about university-wide issues, problems, challenges, directions, and politics” (p. 174).

Researchers have cited the deleterious impact that underrepresentation, isolation and marginalization have on the personal well-being and professional success of African American women in higher education (Aguirre, 2000; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Viernes Turner (2002) described the personal well-being of women of color in the academy and noted that the underrepresentation of these women in various academic settings tends to leave them feeling more pressure to conform and perform. In addition, she discussed the women’s paradoxical feeling of being both socially invisible and constantly on display and being disrespected and distrusted by colleagues and supervisors. These types of experiences typically result in more personal stress in the lives of women of color in the
academy (Viernes Turner, 2002). In addition, some African American women may be vulnerable to greater psychological and physical health issues, which are related to the emotional and mental fatigue they experience from having limited, or no support in their professional environments (Daniel, 1997) or from having to cope with blatant racism and sexism (McKay, 1997). The experience of living their professional lives on the periphery, has also been described by African American women administrators in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as “psychologically draining as well as physically exhausting” (Holmes, 2003, p. 53). Further, it has been noted that the professional success of African American women in higher education is also directly impacted by their underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized status in the academy (Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Gregory, 1995; Mabokela & Green, 2001; McKay, 1997).

While many African American women in the academy (i.e., students, faculty, staff, and administrators) share the common experience of being the “outsider within,” they also possess unique experiences that are shaped by serving in distinct educational and professional roles (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 2003a). However, the majority of research regarding African American women in higher education tends to aggregate the experiences of these distinct cohorts of women, rather than provide an in-depth analysis of the idiosyncratic journeys of each of these subgroups individually. In other words, the peculiarities of African American women working and learning in distinct capacities within higher education have not yet been sufficiently explored, nor are they adequately understood. “African American women in higher education also are not a monolithic group; they have different challenges, concerns,
contexts, and cultural heritages. Therefore, one must keep in mind…that one size does
not fit all” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003a, pp. 2-3).

Similarly, as noted by Moses (1989) “most research conducted on racial/ethnic
minorities [in higher education] continues to treat minority groups as sexually
monolithic; it assumes that what is true for minority men is also true for minority
women” (p.2). For example, in a special journal issue published by the National
Association of Student Affairs Professionals in 2003, titled *Diversifying Student Affairs:
Engaging, Advancing, and Retaining African Americans in the Profession*, only two
articles specifically addressed the impact of race and gender and disaggregated the
experiences of African American women and men. This trend can also be observed in
higher education research that explores the experiences of women in higher education
without explicitly addressing issues germane to African American women (Jackson,
2003). In scholarly conversations that are presumed to call attention to the lives and
needs of minority groups, the unique experiences of African American female students,
faculty, staff, and administrators are subsumed and lost in studies that negligently and
myopically focus on the larger cultural groups (i.e., African Americans and women) to
which these women belong (Howard-Hamilton, 2003a). This issue has been discussed
extensively in Wing’s (1997) articulation of Critical Race Feminism, which holds central
the reality that “women of color are not simply white women plus some ineffable and
secondary characteristic, such as skin tone, added on” (pg. 3).

Further, while African American women have demonstrated a great deal of
resiliency in coping with the oppressive conditions they encounter within the context of
postsecondary education, there is very little research that explicitly explores and
describes the survival and success strategies that have been employed by African American women in higher education. The vast majority of archival and contemporary research regarding African American women in higher education focuses primarily on the various manifestations of the racial and gender oppression these women have endured and continue to face. While it is critically important to acknowledge both the historical and contemporary challenges that have plagued the experiences of African American women in the academy, it is equally important to engage in research that illuminates strategies these women have developed to cope with the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face in higher education.

One specific cohort of individuals, which continues to be underrepresented (Engstrom, McIntosh, Ridzi, & Kruger, 2006; Turrentine & Conley, 2001), isolated and marginalized (Holmes, 2003; Watson, 2001) in American postsecondary education, is African American women student affairs professionals. Data which reveals the actual number of African American women student affairs professionals is scarce. However, a salary survey conducted by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2000), which included data from more than 400 institutional participants, revealed that of the 8.4% Blacks employed in student affairs administrative positions, slightly more than half of them were women. While it was encouraging that the difference between the percentage of Black male (44.5%) and Black female (55.5%) student affairs administrators was not enormous, this resulted in only 4.5% of student affairs administrators being Black women. Regrettably, data is not available on the number of African American women employed in specific positions within the field of student affairs.
Although recent data regarding the actual number of African American women student affairs professionals employed at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is not available, Locke (1997) contended that HBCUs were responsible for employing half of the African Americans who work in higher education. In addition, Johnson and Harvey (2002) reported that although HBCUs represent only 3% of higher education institutions in the United States, “58% of full-time African American faculty are concentrated at these institutions” (pg. 298). Zamani (2003a) supported this finding and attested that “greater numbers of African American faculty and staff are found at historically Black colleges and universities in contrast to those employed at predominantly White institutions” (pg. 93). These assertions suggest that the underrepresentation of African American women student affairs professionals may be less pronounced on historically Black campuses.

While there is a dearth of research that has explicitly examined the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at HBCUs, Johnson and Harvey (2002) concluded that “African American faculty at HBCUs are supported and have an overall positive socialization experience” (pg. 312). In their qualitative study of the socialization experiences of 17 Black faculty members (nine women and eight men) at four HBCUs, these researchers highlighted the supportive professional relationships that the participants in their study were able to cultivate with colleagues at their respective institutions. While the findings of the study are limited due to the relatively small sample, they do suggest that African Americans employed at HBCUs may be less prone to contend with issues of isolation and marginalization (due to race) because of their majority status in a racially-homogenous milieu. From this supposition, it may be
deduced that African American women student affairs professionals at HBCUs are similarly situated in more racially hospitable campus climates than their counterparts employed at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). It is important to note that although African American women student affairs professionals at HBCUs may not have to contend with the effects of racial discrimination, they are often subject to issues of gender oppression, including sexual harassment and discrimination, that are far more intense than those experienced by their peers at PWIs (Locke, 1997). In fact, several researchers have documented the salary inequities that African American women administrators face due to the sexism they encounter in HBCUs, which typically overshadows issues related to racism (Bonner, 2001; Jean-Marie, 2005).

Although the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs have not been studied extensively, there are several studies that document barriers these women face, which are embedded in the challenges faced by African American student affairs professionals in general. For example, Jackson (2003) noted “serious questions about the success of predominantly White institutions in solving the dilemmas of administrative diversity” (p. 10). The scant research regarding the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs indicates that these women continue to contend with issues related to underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization (Holmes, 2003). Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of the experiences of these women and strategies that may be employed to assist them in resisting challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators at PWIs (Moses, 1997).
As a result of the historical evolution and contemporary iterations of the student affairs profession, there are several ways in which these professionals are identified and described in the literature (Nuss, 2003); a detailed discussion of this issue will be presented in the literature review. At this point, a general definition of this group may be instructive. Student affairs professionals may be defined as individuals who are employed in full-time; non-faculty; entry-, mid-, or senior-level positions, who contribute to the co-curricular (i.e., out-of-class) experiences and holistic (i.e., physical, social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual) development of students enrolled in institutions of higher education (Nuss, 2003). Due to the tremendous depth and breadth of student affairs professionals’ involvement in the academic and personal lives of the students they serve, it is important to explore factors that impede, as well as strategies that facilitate, their personal well-being and professional success. Similarly, the survival and success of African American women student affairs professionals within the academy is critically related to the personal development and academic success of African American students (Drummond, 1995; Konrad & Pfeffer, 1991; McEwen, Engstrom, & Williams, 1991; Patton & Harper, 2003), particularly African American female students, who are among the most represented minority group participating in American higher education today.

In an attempt to foster more positive professional experiences among African American women student affairs professionals, scholars have suggested ways in which these women, as well as other cohorts of African American women in higher education, may be able to resist the myriad of challenges, which are related to the isolation and marginalization they face as “outsiders within” (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Watt, 2003). In fact, Henry and
Glenn (2009) offered several individual and institutional strategies that could be employed to assist African American women employed in higher education succeed in spite of the intermingling issues of underrepresentation, isolation and marginalization they continue to face.

One specific strategy suggested by these authors is for African American women student affairs professionals to connect with other African American women in supportive and collegial settings outside of the institution in which they are employed (Henry & Glenn, 2009). Participation in professional associations is one way that African American women student affairs professionals can engage in this strategy. Twale and Shannon (1996) noted the findings of several researchers who contend that “association involvement has often offered a more hospitable environment than the academic workplace” for women in higher education (p. 117). The two primary, national student affairs professional organizations are the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NSAPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). One of the benefits of involvement in either of these organizations is the formal and informal opportunities for African American women student affairs professionals to engage in supportive and scholarly dialogue with other African American women regarding the issues they encounter within the context of their lives in the academy.

**Theoretical Framework**

The primary theory that undergirds the focus of inquiry of the current study is Black feminist thought (BFT; Collins, 1986, 1990, 2000, 2002, 2004; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). This theoretical model provides useful cues for conceptualizing the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization that African American women student
affairs professionals continue to experience in predominantly White institutions (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b). In addition, BFT is instructive in providing a theoretical framework for the exploration of a professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals.

Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) described how the central dimensions of BFT can be used to inform and guide practice related to enhancing the experiences of African American women in higher education:

Support systems include opportunities for African American women to form sister circles and share counterstories that refute some of the negative information they may have received during their daily campus routines. Such support systems are not intended to portray or reinforce a debilitating sense of self and hopelessness but, instead, to provide settings in which to create an identity not based on gender roles or racial stereotyping. The role models and facilitators of these support groups should be African American women. (p. 101)

The African American Women’s Summit


This national gathering has provided a venue in which African American women student affairs professionals can connect with one another and share their personal and
professional struggles and success strategies. As the coordinators and faculty of the AAWS—who are African American women student affairs professionals—and the participants engage one another in interest sessions geared toward the issues and concerns of African American women in the academy, sister circles emerge, which have the potential to contribute to the personal well-being and professional success of this distinct cohort of women.

**Statement of the Problem**

According to Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2007), a problem statement identifies with piercing clarity the primary issues that ground the focus of a study and introduce the reader to the researcher’s motivations and objectives for undertaking a specific line of inquiry. Two broad areas of concern have contributed to the conceptualization and development of the present study: problems related to research and problems related to practice. Problems of practice refer to the practical challenges that exist within a particular professional context that will be addressed by the study (Richardson, 2009). The problem of research is defined as the quality and quantity of existing scholarship, or lack thereof, which is related to a specific issue (Richardson, 2009).

**Problem of research.** There are three problems related to research that have directed the aim of the current study. First, the majority of extant research regarding African American women in higher education tends to aggregate the experiences of this somewhat homogenous, yet diverse group of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Second, as noted by Jackson (2003) “for the most part, the current literature places consideration of African American women within one of two contexts: (1) women; and
(2) African Americans…therefore, there is very little surprise to find that [their] voice is often over-looked when examining the experiences of student affairs administrators” (p. 19). Finally, although African American women student affairs professionals continue to face significant personal and professional challenges related to their employment in PWIs, existing research that does document their experiences fails to describe in sufficient detail strategies these women have developed to cope with the effects of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized (Henry, 2010).

**Problem of practice.** There are two primary issues related to professional practice in higher education that have contributed to the development of the present study. The first issue is consanguineous to the isolation and marginalization African American women student affairs professionals have endured and continue to encounter, which is both perpetuated by and a consequence of their underrepresentation in higher education, especially in PWIs. This inveterate and vicious cycle of detriment, which continues to impede the progress of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs, should signal a need to sustain, enhance, and increase the number of professional development programs designed to meet the unique needs of these women. This issue is directly related to the second problem of practice. Currently, there is a dearth of professional development programs that have been specifically created to address the unique challenges that African American women student affairs professionals face, and even fewer that have been developed by these women themselves (Foriest, 2002).

The aforementioned problems related to research and practice are enmeshed and work together to render the experiences and contributions of African American women
student affairs professionals virtually nonexistent. The neglect of African American women student affairs professionals in existing research literature is a consequence of their underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization within higher education. Similarly, the scarcity of existing professional development programs created by and for African American women student affairs professionals is one of the factors that makes this topic a severely understudied phenomenon.

**Purpose**

The current study was derived in an attempt to address the aforementioned problems of research and practice. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore a national professional development program, the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS), which is designed specifically by and for African American women student affairs professionals. This line of inquiry was pursued in an attempt to describe how participating in this specific and unique program assisted African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators. In addition, the study aimed to describe how participating in the AAWS contributed to the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs.

Within the context of the single case being investigated (i.e., the AAWS), data is offered to describe the history, philosophy, and curriculum of the AAWS, as well as the personal, professional, and educational characteristics of AAWS participants between 2006-2011. This study aimed to resist the trend in current research, which subsumes (and renders virtually inaudible) the voices of African American women student affairs
professionals within studies that explore the experiences of African American student affairs professionals and women student affairs professionals in general.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. How does the AAWS assist African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators?
2. How does the AAWS contribute to the personal well-being of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?
3. How does the AAWS contribute to the professional success of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?

**Significance of Study**

There are three types of significance related to the study: short-, mid-, and long-term significance. The short-term significance is related to the problems of research, while the mid- and long-term significances are related to the problems of practice.

**Short-term significance: Gaps in the literature.** The purpose of this study was to explore a national professional development program, which was designed specifically for African American women student affairs professionals by African American women student affairs professionals. It is believed that this line of inquiry may begin to fill a gap in the literature by explicitly examining the positive contributions that African American women student affairs professionals are making in an effort to overcome the effects of the historical and contemporary oppressions they have endured and continue to face in higher
education. It is hoped that illumination of the AAWS will motivate other African American women to research and document the individual and group strategies they are employing to facilitate their own success in the field of higher education.

Within the context of an examination of the AAWS, this study aimed to describe how the AAWS contributed to the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs and helped these women resist the challenges they face as higher education administrators. The distinct voices of African American women student affairs professionals are missing from the literature and it is believed that attempts to contextualize the experiences of African American women in the academy will remain incomplete and incoherent until the voices of African American women student affairs professionals have been fully included in the conversation. Further, it is believed that the knowledge garnered from this study will provide useful information regarding the personal and professional realities of African American women student affairs professionals for African American women (and other women of color) who aspire to become, or are already in pursuit of careers as student affairs professionals.

**Mid-term significance: Dearth of professional development programs for African American women student affairs professionals.** The focus of this research is being undertaken in an attempt to stimulate dialogue about and interest in programs that can be developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. It is believed that the findings of this study may be useful in assisting African American women student affairs professionals develop strategies to overcome challenges related to the issues of underrepresentation, isolation and marginalization that they face in
postsecondary education. It is also believed that the results of this study will be useful to other individuals and organizations interested in creating professional development programs for African American women student affairs professionals. Further, it is believed that the findings of this study will provide valuable insight to current and future coordinators of the AAWS regarding its impact on the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. Finally, it is believed that the findings will explicate the role that the AAWS plays in the professional lives of African American women student affairs professionals for members of the higher education community at large.

**Long-term significance: Vicious cycle of detriment.** Overall, it is believed that the findings of this study will contribute to a fuller understanding of the experiences and contributions of African American women student affairs professionals among members of the higher education community. It is expected that this will simultaneously serve to fortify an alliance, strengthen the resolve, and validate the efforts of higher education administrators who are committed to and capable of decomposing and destroying the vicious cycle of detriment (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization) that impedes the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals.

**Limitations**

Within any particular research initiative, there are unique issues which will restrict the conduct and limit results of the study. It is the researcher’s responsibility to meticulously consider which limitations may be permitted, and to fully disclose those issues so that readers may use this information when assessing the validity and reliability
of the findings offered (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007). The limitations in this study were consistent with those issues that are commonly associated with qualitative research and more specifically, case study research.

As is common in qualitative studies, the researcher served as the sole instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002). Thus, the specific data collected and the interpretations drawn were a function of my past personal and professional experiences, beliefs and attitudes, and interest in the topic of inquiry. In addition, my unique perspective as a past participant in the AAWS undoubtedly influenced the interpretations derived during the data analysis process.

Another limitation present in this investigation is related to the time period that was selected for study (i.e., 2006-2011). Due to the limitations of the registration database from which potential participants were identified, the data collected and subsequent analysis, only represents the perspectives of African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the AAWS during this specific time period. This issue limits the emergence of themes to those expressed by the participants in this study. In other words, there may be other important and alternative perspectives related to the research questions of interest that were not captured in this study.

**Delimitations**

According to Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2007), “delimitations describe the populations to which generalizations may be safely made” (p. 16). However, in case study research, generalizability is not the primary objective. In fact, Creswell (2007) noted that studying a large number of cases for the purpose of being able to generalize the results may in fact dilute the overall analysis. Further, he cautioned that the more cases a
researcher includes in a single study, the less depth of understanding will be achieved in any of the single cases. However, Stake (1995) distinguished one type of generalization that may occur in case study research:

Naturalistic generalizations are conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life’s affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves. To assist the reader in making naturalistic generalizations, case researchers need to provide opportunity for vicarious experience. Our accounts need to be personal, describing the things of our sensory experiences, not failing to attend to the matters that personal curiosity dictates. (pp. 85-86)

The results of this study are not intended to be generalized to other professional development programs designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals, but rather they are intended to contribute to a greater understanding of one such program. The findings may produce naturalistic generalizations related to the personal and professional realities of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs, but even these types of generalizations should be made with caution due to the relatively small sample, which was drawn from a restricted population of participants in a single national professional development program.

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for inclusion in this study. The final sampling frame criteria that was employed consisted the following: African American women student affairs professionals who had the majority of their professional experience at a PWI; who identified with the experience of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized within the context of their professional lives, due to their identification as an African American woman; who had participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits; and who had been continuously employed as student affairs professionals prior to and following their participation in the AAWS. Thus, it should be noted that the specificity of the sampling frame criteria used in this
study, further delimits the naturalistic generalizability of the findings to the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs, who have participated in the AAWS, who identify with the experience of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized in the context of their professional lives.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 contains an introduction to the background and theoretical framework; the case of interest (i.e., the AAWS); and the purpose, significance, limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 is used to situate the research topic in literature, which is relevant to the purpose of the study. The method used to conduct the study, including the research strategy and plan; methods of data collection and analysis; strategies to enhance validity and reliability; a discussion of the presentation of the findings; and the researcher’s disclosure, are presented in Chapter 3. An in-depth description of the case of interest in this study is offered in Chapter 4, followed by the presentation of the findings obtained from semi-structured interviews with AAWS participants, which is discussed in Chapter 5. Study conclusions, implications for practice and research, as well as a closing vignette are presented in Chapter 6.
Chapter Two:

Literature Review

One strategy that has been described to explicate the concepts, definitions, theories, and assumptions that will be used to guide a specific qualitative inquiry is to situate the study in existing literature (Merriam, 2009). This literature review provides a framework, which can be used to contextualize the conduct of the present study. The sections contained herein are intended to highlight studies that have been conducted within the past ten years (i.e., 2000-2010), which will give meaning to the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), that are relevant to the current line of inquiry. This particular time-period was selected due to the fact that many of the themes present in the literature regarding this group of higher education professionals have persisted from 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s into the 21st century (Henry & Glenn, 2009). In addition, due to the myriad of approaches that have been used to define and identify student affairs professionals in the literature (Komives & Woodard, 2003), there are several terms such as higher education administrator, student development specialist, student personnel worker, and student affairs officer or administrator, which were used interchangeably to capture the essence of the experiences of this unique cohort of African American women higher education professionals.

The review of literature begins with a discussion of the epistemology of Black feminism and proceeds with a section intended to illuminate the central dimensions of
Black feminist thought, which is the theory that undergirds this qualitative exploration of a national professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals known as the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS). A section is included which discusses extant research that explores the experiences of African American women in higher education, but neglects to specifically examine the unique experiences of African American women student affairs professionals. In order to provide a context for understanding the contemporary experiences of African American women student affairs professionals, a brief history of their involvement in the student affairs profession is offered. In addition, a review of studies that have investigated the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization that African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs face is also included, which is key to understanding the role that the AAWS may play in helping these women resist the challenges they face in higher education. Next, literature is reviewed, which is used to frame the definitions of personal well-being and professional success that were used in this study. In addition, an overview of success strategies employed by African American women at PWIs to resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face is presented to provide a rationale for the conduct of the current study. Finally, information is offered to describe the specific case (i.e., the AAAWS) that was explored in this study.

**Epistemology of Black Feminism**

Although African American women have been engaged in a multifarious struggle to redefine themselves independent of the erroneous and stereotypical images propagated by the Western world’s dominant ideology for more than 200 years (Radford-Hill, 2002),
scholarly literature documenting their rich history of activism and intellectual resistance is sparse. This void in academic discourse perpetuates the widespread misconception that African American women have not been as active in the fight against sexism as they have been in the battle against racism. According to Collins (2000):

The shadow obscuring this complex Black women’s intellectual tradition is neither accidental nor benign. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization. (p. 3)

In constructing knowledge central to the experiences of African American women in contemporary society, it is critical to elucidate the fact that each successive generation of Black feminists stands on the shoulders of women who “wrote essays, speeches, autobiographies, slave narratives, poems, and songs, …[and who] spoke out, sang out, and at times cried out against injustice” (Pough, 2004, p.48). This brief discussion of the epistemology of Black feminism is intended to resist the dominant ideology that peddles Black feminism as a contemporary conception with shallow roots. Black feminism and its resulting theory, which has evolved from the intellectual inquiry and activism of African American women who were laden with the dualistic burden of racist and sexist oppression, is steeped in a history, which is as rich and complex as these women’s marginalized existence in American society.

**Limitations of the wave theory of feminism.** One approach that has been used to describe the evolution of feminism in the United States is the wave theory of feminism, which divides feminism into three time-bound categories of effort, focus, and results (Bordeau, Briggs, Staton, & Wasik, 2008; Radford-Hill, 2002; Siegel, 2006; Springer, 2002). Although this approach has been criticized for being racially biased (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995) and not representative of the concerns of diverse women from various
races and social class backgrounds (hooks, 1984; Lessane, 2007; Springer 2002), it is useful in describing the social issues that framed the development and evolution of the Black Feminist Movement. In addition, a brief discussion of the waves of “so-called White feminist thought” will illuminate the negligence of this approach in adequately addressing the multiple and complex oppressions suffered by Black women in historical and contemporary America (Collins, 1990, p. xii). However, it should be noted that in keeping with Black feminist ideals, the discussion of first, second and third wave feminism in this review will be purposefully restricted. In the present study, which seeks to examine a national professional development program designed *by and for* African American women student affairs professionals, I have made a deliberate decision to limit the discussion of the broader feminist movement (which ironically, was and still is, relatively narrow). Instead, the experiences and ideas of Black women are held central in this discussion of the inception and evolution of Black feminism in the United States. As Collins (1990) noted Black feminism explicitly rejects grounding the analysis of the experiences of African American women in tenets developed by White, middle-class, Western women feminists.

The first wave of feminism in the U.S. was birthed in the late 19th and early 20th century Suffragist Movement and eventually led to White women’s right to vote in 1920. Although the early pioneers of the first wave fought for the abolition of slavery, race as a focal point within feminism was short-lived in this wave. As a result, women of color, especially Black women, did not obtain the same political, economic, and social liberation as White women (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003). The second wave of feminism occurred between the 1960s and 1980s and was largely characterized by the
sexual revolution and women’s rights movement (Radford-Hill, 2002). Unfortunately, this wave was also replete with an overwhelming manifestation of White women’s privilege, which prevented most women of color and women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds from identifying with the feminist movement (Lessane, 2007). Third wave feminists are critical of the exclusivity and narrowness the previous waves of feminism and work to address issues related to “work-life balance, international women’s rights, sexual harassment, including men and boys in the feminist movement, and the use of today’s technology to mobilize the fight against government and business entities whose work contradicts the goals of feminism” (Bordeau, Briggs, Staton, & Wasik, 2008, p. 45).

Although third wave feminism places a greater emphasis on the experiences of women who identify with different races, religions, socioeconomic classes, and sexual orientations and examines how the multiple identities of women interact to shape their lives (Radford-Hill, 2002), the unique and cumulative effects of the multiple oppressions endured by African American women in the United States signals a need for a distinct approach that can be used to analyze and understand their lived experiences. This premise is articulated among the central tenets of Black feminism espoused by Guy-Sheftall (1995):

1. Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources; 2) This “triple jeopardy” has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of Black women are different in many ways from those of both White women and Black men; 3) Black women must struggle for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously; 4) There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism as well as the other “isms” which plague the human community; 5) Black women’s commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience. (p. 2)
History of Black feminism in the United States. These premises have evolved out of the protracted and arduous history of Black women’s resistance to the conditions that have shaped their existence in the United States of America. Contrary to popular propaganda, African American women have been deeply entrenched in the struggle against racism, sexism, and classism since the mid-19th century (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). As Collins (1990) noted there were three interdependent dimensions that characterized the oppression of African American women in the U.S., which have contributed to the suppression of Black feminist history and thought. The first was related to exploitation of Black women’s labor that relegated them to all-consuming service occupations, which left these women with virtually no time, energy, or opportunity to engage in the intellectualism that was a prerequisite for their liberation. “The drudgery of enslaved African-American women’s work and the grinding poverty of ‘free’ wage labor in the rural South tellingly illustrates the high costs Black women have paid for survival” (Collins, 1990, p. 6). The persistent economic oppression of Black women in contemporary American society is shrouded to the naïve observer. However, to the sagacious skeptic it is painstakingly clear that millions of African American women are now psychologically enslaved in an economic system designed to satiate their hunger for mass liberation and replace it with an appetite for individual survival.

The second dimension of oppression experienced by African American women is the political disenfranchisement that has characterized their existence in the U.S. Since their arrival in the United States, African American women (and men) have been precluded from participating in the governmental, educational, and civil life of American society more than any other group of people. Denying African American women’s
suffrage, excluding them from holding public office, subjecting them to equitable
treatment in the criminal justice system, and refusing them access to literacy and
education were the primary means used to enforce the political subordination of African

Finally, the ideological oppression of Black women that originated during their
enslavement provided a contrived, yet potent, justification for the disregard of the
contributions of Black feminist intellectuals (Collins, 1990). “From mammies, Jezebels,
and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake boxes, ubiquitous
Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the
nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been
fundamental to Black women’s oppression” (Collins, 1990, p. 7). The economic,
political, and ideological dimensions, which have comprised the oppressive experiences
of African American women in the United States have rendered the voices of these
women virtually silent and have simultaneously cloaked the knowledge developed by and for these women in relative obscurity.

Despite the dominant culture’s covert and overt efforts to suppress the intellectual
resistance of African American women, Black feminism has a long and rich tradition
(Collins, 2000; Radford-Hill, 2002; Smith, 2001). Although the birth of Black feminism
is commonly believed to have been firmly rooted in the abolitionist movement of the 19th
century, it was actually the horrid conditions that had plagued the lives of African
American women slaves since the early 1600s that “inspired their first yearnings for
freedom and rebellious spirit. They resisted beatings, involuntary breeding, sexual
exploitation by White masters, family separation, debilitating work schedules, bad living
conditions, and even bringing into the world children that would be slaves” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 2). This observation is not intended to minimize the influence of abolitionism on the evolution of Black feminism, but rather is offered to pay homage to the scores of unnamed and unknown African American women whose longing for “a better way” planted seeds of hope in the women who we now venerate as the pioneers and heroines of the Black Feminist Movement. This critique is also offered to resist the notion that the early African American women (and men), who were brought to the U.S. against their wills, conceded as passive participants in their enslavement.

It is clear that the movement to eradicate slavery was the principal endeavor that assisted African American women in orating, authoring, and organizing the Black Feminist Movement (Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Springer 2002). In response to the damning conditions of early-nineteenth century slavery in which Black women found themselves, a small group of free Black feminist-abolitionists from the North including Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, were among the first to challenge the racist and sexist oppression to which Black women were subjected (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). In fact, Maria Stewart is cited as the first woman (of any race) to deliver a politically-charged public lecture to a racially-mixed audience (Springer, 2002). In the four unprecedented public addresses, which she delivered in 1832, she admonished African American women to harness the utility of forging relationships with one another in order to resist the forces of oppression and to form networks of activism and self-determination (Collins, 1990). Although Maria Stewart played a pivotal role in the inception and conceptualization of Black feminism, it is Sojourner Truth who is most often credited as the “most revered black feminist-abolitionist” (Guy-Shetfall, 1995, p.
5). The dueling burden of fighting racist and sexist oppression that African American women still face in contemporary contexts was the source of intense debate even among these pioneering Black feminist. Sojourner Truth’s legendary “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, delivered in 1851 at the Akron, Ohio Women’s rights convention, was a precursor to the dissent that was arising among equal rights advocates including Fredrick Douglas, who believed that Negro suffrage, rather than women’s suffrage, was the critical issue to be addressed (Guy-Shetfall, 1995). The original treatise provided by Sojourner Truth in the mid-19th century suggested that there are implicit connections between race and gender in the lives of African American women that must be considered in constructing accurate and complete notions of womanhood. Her premise permeated the annals of history and provided a foundation upon which contemporary Black feminism has been established (Pough, 2004).

The formation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896, which consolidated three of the largest federations of local Black women’s clubs, as well as more than a hundred local Black women’s clubs (Lerner, 1974), signaled what is commonly recognized as the formal inception of the Black women’s club movement (Whetstone-Sims, 2006). Although the emergence of the national Black women’s club movement in the 1890s closely paralleled the development of White women’s clubs, the impetus and foci of these bodies was drastically different (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). While White women organized clubs in an attempt to harness the greater freedoms with which they were now privileged, African American women used these platforms to strategically resist a host of social injustices that were plaguing the Black community, Black women, and Black children (Lerner, 1974). A common misconception is that the formation of
Black women’s clubs was solely in response to the exclusionary practices of White women’s clubs (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Although African American women were not permitted to affiliate with White women’s clubs, the legacy of community organizing for the purpose of self-determination, self-improvement, and community development was already present within the African American community long before White women began assembling (Shaw, 1991). It is interesting to note that although many of the leaders of the Black women’s club movement, including Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper, fought voraciously to ensure better living conditions for African American women and girls, they did not consider themselves feminists (Smith, 1998). This reluctance to identify as feminists could be attributed to the unique and isolated position in which African American women found themselves—they were simultaneously battling the effects of racist and sexist oppression, an activity with which neither White women nor Black men could identify.

In the early 20th century, the arm of African American women’s activism also reached into the spiritual arena, where women like Nannie Burroughs challenged sexism in the Black church and criticized Black male church leaders for not aiding in the establishment of African American women’s political rights (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Burroughs’ argument, presented in the August 1915 edition of the Crisis (the official communiqué of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), foreshadowed the unveiling of a host of issues related to the divergent political agendas between African American women and men.

The desperate conditions that besieged post-World War I America, led African American women to amend their feminist agenda to include issues related to economic
stability (Smith, 1998). In addition to efforts to unionize African American women laborers, birth control advocacy emerged as one strategy promoted by some African American women (and several prominent civil rights organizations) in an attempt to sustain the financial viability of African American families during the depression (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). In the midst of this agenda African American women asserted their right to reproductive freedom, which was independent of the broader crusade for economic empowerment of the Black race; these women demonstrated “a feminist perspective on excessive childbearing, linking it to burdensome physical and mental problems” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 12). According to Guy-Sheftall (1995), “this issue sparked controversy, however, within certain circles as nationalist concerns about racial extinction and traditional male views about women’s primary role as mothers clashed with feminist demands for sexual autonomy among Black women” (p. 12).

Although African American women played a critical role in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, they were seldom recognized for their leadership (Smith, 1998). As a result, some African American women began to become as disenfranchised with the civil rights movement as they had become with the women’s rights movement (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). African American women were once again confronted with the stark reality that their issues were unique, and were not of paramount importance in either of the rights movements of the 20th century. This realization manifested in a literary awakening among Black women, which included the publication of Toni Cade’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Shirley Chisholm’s *Unbought and Unbossed*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, and Audre Lorde’s *Cables to Rage* (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). The 1970s ushered in a new era of feminist identification among African
American women including the founding of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO; Smith, 1998), which is cited as “the first explicitly Black feminist organization committed to the eradication of sexism, racism, and heterosexism” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 15). While the NBFO’s agenda centered on issues related to inclusion for Blacks and women, the Combahee River Collective (which began as the Boston chapter of the NBFO) emerged as a more radical grassroots organization established to tackle issues of sexuality and economic development among Black women exclusively (Harris, 2009).

The premises which comprised Black women’s late 20th century feminist consciousness were explicated in the Combahee River Collective’s groundbreaking statement released in 1977 that unapologetically foregrounded issues related to homophobia (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). As Smith (1998) noted:

> The Collective's work broke significant new ground because it was explicitly socialist, addressed homophobia, and called for sisterhood among Black women of various sexual orientations. In fact, the early commitment of Black lesbian feminists such as Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Margaret Sloan, and Barbara Smith was crucial to building the movement in the 1970s, when many heterosexual Black women were reluctant to identify themselves as feminists. (p. 203)

> The Collective’s landmark treatise laid a foundation upon which contemporary feminism rests (Harris, 2009) in that its agenda was intentionally inclusive of the multitude of issues that oppressed the lives of all African American women. In addition, the Collective issued an ultimatum requiring Black feminists to assert the legitimacy of their fight against sexual exploitation and oppression (Harris, 2009)—an issue which had received relatively no attention in earlier feminist discourse. With renewed vitality and focus, Black feminism in the United States at the end of the 20th century was characterized by a resurgence of African American women writers including Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Paula Giddings, June Jordan, Ntozake Shange, and Barbara Smith.
(Guy-Sheftall, 1995). These women’s writings gave voice to a broader political sentiment, which was captured in the words of one of the most prominent and controversial contemporary Black feminists, bell hooks (1981):

Feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (p. 194)

The 1991 testimony of Anita Hill against United States Supreme Court nominee, Clarence Thomas and the U.S. Senate’s succeeding confirmation of Thomas, has been described as both a defeat and victory for Black feminism. Bell (2004) noted the Hill-Thomas event “serves as a painful reminder of how vulnerable [Black women] are especially when it comes to having their stories of sexual abuse heard and taken seriously” (p. 146). Despite the strong reaction of Black feminists to the outcome of the hearing, the Hill-Thomas saga has also been credited with energizing the women’s movement (Bell, 2004) because it catapulted issues related to the oppression of Black women into the consciousness of mainstream America (Seigel, 2006). Similar to the historical development of Black feminism in the U.S., the future of this particularly relevant sociopolitical orientation (i.e., Black feminist thought) will continue to be influenced by the events that emerge on the national horizon and will be shaped by the responses of emerging generations of African American women who possess a feminist consciousness.

**Defining Black feminists in a contemporary context.** In addition to the rich history that has shaped the development and proliferation of Black Feminism in the United States, there is another aspect of the discussion of this sociopolitical orientation
that is useful in delimiting the specific tenets of Black feminist thought that will be used to guide the present study. A variety of parameters have been used to describe the individuals who may be considered “Back feminists” and to distinguish the diverse strands of thought that exist among contemporary Black feminists (Collins, 1990). The most inclusive approach that has been used to describe Black feminists was offered by McDowell (1985), who asserted that any individual, regardless of race or gender, could be classified as a Black feminist as long as they embraced and advanced a Black feminist political perspective. McDowell (1985) also attested that any Black woman who wrote critically about issues affecting Black women, regardless of her specific political perspective could be defined as a Black feminist. Using a slightly narrower schema, Guy-Sheftall (1986) cited membership in the Black race as the primary prerequisite for attaining the consciousness necessary to be labeled a Black feminist and noted several prominent Black men, including Fredrick Douglas and W.E.B. DuBois, among those she considers Black feminists. Because the concept of race as a biological categorization has been challenged (Smedley, 2007), Guy-Sheftall’s (1986) classification of Black feminists, which relies on race as its primary criteria, is susceptible to ideological scrutiny. In addition, by placing race identification above gender identification, this approach diminishes the centrality of African American women’s role in defining their own experiences independent of the perceptions of Black men. Other scholars have added to this race-based definition the necessity of identification with the female gender and the presence of a feminist consciousness (Beale, 1970; Combahee River Collective, 1983; hooks, 1984; Smith, 1983; White, 1984). However, Patricia Bell Scott’s (1982) contention that all African American women (regardless of whether or not they possess a
feminist consciousness) are Black feminists has been criticized for indiscriminately applying a label that may not fit certain women, and for potentially conflating the term Black feminist (Collins, 1990).

The parameters used by Patricia Hill Collins (1990) to define Black feminists are especially relevant to the conduct of the present study of a national professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. For example, Collins (1990) contends that the definition of Black feminists should not be limited to “a materialist analysis—one whereby all African-American women by virtue of biology become automatically registered as ‘authentic Black feminists’—nor on an idealist analysis whereby the background, worldview, and interests of the thinker are deemed irrelevant in assessing his or her ideas” (p. 33). Collins’ (1990) approach places the theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality in their own hands and is also appropriately cognizant of the sociopolitical context (including the influence of other groups’ standpoints) in which these women’s lives evolve. As such, she emphasizes the marginality of Black women in academic settings, which is viewed as an “outsider within” status—invited into the dominant group’s location, but still invisible and having no real voice in the conversation.

As evidenced by the diversity of thought, which comprises contemporary Black feminism and the rich history that has shaped the development of this sociopolitical orientation, Black feminism in the United States stands as a significant intellectual tradition. This culturally-relevant and responsive ideology contributes to a fuller understanding of the lived experiences of African American women.
Black Feminist Thought

In describing the journey towards regaining her voice through the articulation of Black feminist thought, Collins (1990) expressed an especially apropos sentiment which, resonates deeply with my experiences as an African American woman learning and working in higher education:

Beginning in adolescence, I was increasingly the “first,” or “one of the few,” or the “only” African-American and/or woman and/or working-class person in my schools, communities, and work settings. I saw nothing wrong with being who I was, but apparently many others did. My world grew larger, but I felt I was growing smaller. I tried to disappear into myself in order to deflect the painful, daily assaults designed to teach me that being an African-American, working-class woman made me less than those who were not. And as I felt smaller, I became quieter and eventually was virtually silenced. This book reflects one stage in my ongoing struggle to regain my voice. (p. xi)

It is this sentiment expressed by Collins (1990) that has guided my strong identification with Black feminist thought and which captures the essence of my deliberate decision to use this theory to examine a national professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. This dissertation also reflects one stage in my ongoing struggle to regain my voice and be heard.

The evolution of Black feminism in the United States has resulted in a specialized body of knowledge, known as Black feminist thought, that aims to relocate the oppressive experiences of African American women from the periphery of consideration and hold them central in discussions regarding their lived experiences. There are several dimensions embedded within Black feminist thought (BFT; Collins, 2004) that illuminate the appropriateness of using this theory to explore a national professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b). Further, Collins (2001) specifically acknowledges and
addresses the collective “outsider within” status experienced by African American women in higher education, as well as the tremendous breadth of diversity that exists among these women. According to Alicia C. Collins (2001), “Black women in the academy differ in their experiences, backgrounds, appearances, educational levels, demographics, occupations, and beliefs. What connects them all is the struggle to be accepted and respected members of society and their desire to have a voice that can be heard in a world with many views” (p. 39).

The first dimension of BFT holds central the reality that the worldview of African American women cannot be explored in a manner which separates and compartmentalizes their experiences as women from their experiences as African Americans. Due to the oppressive sociopolitical settings in which African American women’s lives have developed (and continue to develop), these women share a common bond that is a result of their inherited struggle against racism, as well as sexism and classism. This common bond that exists among African American women, which is known as standpoint, is the product of the “experiences and ideas shared by African-American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society” (Collins, 2002, p. 155).

Although a thread of commonality exists among the experiences of many African American women, BFT also acknowledges variations in response, which result from the distinct, concrete experiences that individual African American women encounter due to their simultaneous membership in other cultural groups. Collins (2002) asserts that this variation in response is due to the diversity that exists among African American women in terms of their sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, regional locale, degree of
urbanization, and age. From this assertion, it may be inferred that diversity related to the various professional settings that African American women occupy is also a factor which impacts and frames their response to common experiences with racism and sexism. Thus, BFT is an appropriate framework, which may be used to explore the specific and unique experiences of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs within the context of a national professional development program designed *by and for* these women.

Another dimension illuminated within BFT that is highly relevant to the current study is the interdependence of thought and action. Collins (2002) specifies that BFT makes explicit the connections that exist among African American women’s collective and common experiences with racism and sexism, the influence of each African American woman’s unique individual experiences and responses, the self-defined standpoint that is developed as a result of those combined experiences, and the stimulation of actions intended to resist oppression. Thus, BFT offers a strong rationale for the merger between exploring the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals and illuminating the strategies these women actually engage in to resist the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators.

Central to BFT is the critical role that African American women intellectuals play in producing specialized theories regarding the common, yet unique experiences of African American women and in providing leadership which empowers African American women to resist the oppression they face in a variety of social contexts.
According to Collins (2002), BFT is both produced by African American women and is for African American women; she notes:

Black women intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought for several reasons. First…it is more likely for Black women as members of an oppressed group to have critical insights into the condition of our own oppression than it is for those who live outside of those structures…Second, Black women intellectuals provide unique leadership for Black women’s empowerment and resistance. (p. 163)

Related to the conduct of the present study, there is relatively little scholarly literature which is produced by and for African American women student affairs professionals related to their experiences as higher education administrators in PWIs. Further, there is even less research that explores and documents their development of and participation in programs designed to assist them in resisting the myriad of challenges they face within these specific institutions.

Black feminists simultaneously validate the intersection of African American women’s collective common experiences, as well as the distinctness of their individual unique experiences; they assert that both are central to development and conceptualization of African American women’s unique worldview. In addition, according to BFT, it is essential to provide a platform upon which self-defined thoughts about and actions of African American women can be presented. Taken together, the dimensions espoused in BFT suggest that there are valuable insights to be gained by exploring a national professional development program, such as the AAWS, which was designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. Examining the AAWS from a Black feminist perspective may serve to elucidate certain critical nuances of experience that would be obfuscated by majority monocultural human development theories. Insights gained from this theoretical vantage may be used to
construct a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the strength that is derived from African American women’s active and intentional engagement in their own personal well-being and professional success.

**Research Related to African American Women in Higher Education**

One cohort in the academy warranting specific attention is African American women student affairs professionals considering the significant role they play in supporting African American college students (Jackson, 2003; Patton & Harper, 2003). However, research related to this unique population is typically found embedded among studies that explore the aggregated experiences of African American student affairs professionals, women student affairs professionals, and African American women higher education professionals. Each of these approaches neglects to extrapolate the distinct experiences of African American women student affairs professionals from the general study of three broader groups to which they belong (i.e., African American student affairs professionals, women student affairs professionals, and African American women higher education professionals).

In recent years, literature particular to African American women higher education professionals began to flourish (Harley, 2008). For example, within this decade, two different journals—the Journal of Negro Education (2001) and New Directions for Student Services (2003)—have dedicated entire special issues to examining the needs of African American women involved in postsecondary education. The title of the Journal of Negro Education’s (2001) special issue was “Black Women in the Academy: Challenges and Opportunities.” The purpose of the issue was “to document the continued oppressive experiences of Black women in the academy while accentuating the lessons of
survival, strength, and resilience gained from adversity” (Bonner & Thomas, 2001, p. 121). The purpose of the New Directions for Student Services’ (2003) sourcebook, which was devoted to “Meeting the Needs of African American Women,” was to explore the critical needs of African American women college students, faculty, and administrators and to provide recommendations for meeting the needs of these groups of women (Howard-Hamilton, 2003a). A review of both of these special issues, comprising a total of 14 articles, revealed that six articles were devoted to understanding the history and contemporary challenges and needs of African American female college students. The majority of remaining studies pertained solely to the experiences African American or Black women faculty (Caldwell, 2001; Elabor-Idemudia, 2001; Gregory, 2001; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Mabokela, 2001), while two of the remaining articles examined the collective personal and professional experiences of African American women faculty and administrators (Bonner, 2001; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). One of the remaining studies examined a mentoring program comprised primarily of African American women staff members in nonteaching and non-administrative positions (Green & King, 2001).

A recent report of current articles published in 2009, by approximately 14 higher education and student affairs refereed journals, revealed only 13 articles related to women in general, 2 articles related to women in student affairs administration, 1 article related to African American women in higher education, and no articles related to African American women in student affairs (Women in Student Affairs Current Research Sub-Committee, 2009). Taken together, these findings indicate the lack of research that exists regarding African American women student affairs professionals. Neglecting to examine the specific experiences of African American women student affairs
professionals, places the impact they have on attracting, retaining, and contributing to the academic success and personal development of students at the periphery. This trend is particularly troubling considering the fact that several researchers have documented the critical role African American women student affairs professionals play in supporting and promoting the success of students from underrepresented populations, especially African American women college students (Drummond, 1995; Konrad & Pfeffer, 1991; McEwen, Engstrom, & Williams, 1991; Patton & Harper, 2003).

**History of African American Women in Student Affairs**

In order to fully understand the contemporary experiences of African American women student affairs professionals, it is helpful to briefly explore the presence of African American women in higher education from a historical perspective. Within the context of Black feminist thought, Collins (1999) rearticulated the meaning of the “outsider within” and highlighted the importance of fully acknowledging the specific oppressive histories, which have characterized particular groups of individuals in U.S. society. Collins (1999) asserted that “outsider-within identities are situational identities that are attached to specific histories of social injustice—they are not a decontextualized identity category divorced from historical social inequalities that can be assumed by anyone at will” (p. 86). Thus, it is vital to consider the long battle against racist and sexist oppression that African American women have endured in order to be allowed access to higher education (Evans & Chun, 2007). One indication of this oppressive reality is the fact that the first African American woman to earn a bachelor’s degree was not able to do so until 200 years after a White man, 39 years after an African American man, and 25 years after a White woman had accomplished this same task (Franklin, 1986).
During the mid 1800s, African American women, despite a lack of access to higher education, secured leadership positions in education by establishing schools to educate black children (Williams, 2005). By the late 1800s, the creation of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which aimed to provide education for Black students who had been denied access to mainstream higher education, resulted in the emergence of African American women faculty. It was not until 1866 that Sarah Woodson Early was appointed “Preceptress of English and Latin and Lady Principal and Matron” at Wilberforce University and became the first African American woman known to teach at the college level (Foner & Branham, 1998). Many of the first African American women who were allowed entrance into academia as faculty were typically given less desirable teaching jobs, and were seldom offered administrative positions (Evans & Chun, 2007). Although these pioneering African American women faculty were severely underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized, it has been noted that from the beginning, these women consistently maintained strong ties with the communities in which their institutions were located. A theme noted in the teaching style of early African American women faculty was that they linked education with community involvement (Evans & Chun, 2007). In essence, it appears that even prior to filling formal student affairs positions, African American women faculty were cognizant of the need to serve students outside of the classroom.

The first involvement of African American women in the field of student affairs was through the Dean of Women position. Women were hired to fulfill these types of positions in order to serve as an advocate for women enrolled in college and to aid the intellectual, social, and vocational development of undergraduate college women. One
prominent African American woman to serve in this capacity was Lucy Diggs Slowe, who in 1922 became the first Dean of Women at Howard University. As more African American Deans of Women were employed by colleges and universities, the National Association of Deans of Women and Advisors of Girls in Colored Schools (DOWA) was established in 1929. In 1954, DOWA merged with the National Association of Personnel Deans of Men in Negro Educational Institutions (DOMA) to form the National Association of Personnel Workers, which in 1994 became known as the National Association of Student Affairs Professionals (NASAP), which is prominent in the field today (Belk, 2006).

Although some African American women had the opportunity to exercise their leadership in their positions as Deans of Women, the number of these positions decreased, and eventually the position disappeared. This was due to the fact that in the 1950s, following World War II, large numbers of men returned from the war and assumed higher education positions which had been previously occupied by women. As a result, the Dean of Students position was created and White men overwhelmingly filled these positions (Belk, 2006). Since this trend, African American women have continued to be underrepresented in the student affairs profession (Flowers, 2003).

**African American Women Student Affairs Professionals at PWIs**

Although research regarding African American women higher education professionals has grown substantially within the current decade (i.e., 2000-2009), there still remains a paucity of studies that focus on the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. Among the studies that do exist, researchers have investigated several concepts that appear repeatedly in Black feminist thought.
literature, which have been used to describe the common oppressive experiences that African American women encounter in predominantly White institutions.

**Underrepresentation.** Numerous researchers have cited both the historical and contemporary underrepresentation of African American women student affairs professionals (Holmes, 2003; McKay, 1997; Moses, 1989, 1997; Mosley, 1980; Watson, 2001; Wolfman, 1997). Although it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of African American women currently employed as student affairs professionals, even rough estimates suggest that these women still remain severely underrepresented. For instance, in the 2009-2010 Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, it was reported that in the fall of 2007, Black women were employed in less than 6% (n=12,722) of college and university executive, administrative and managerial positions, as compared to 41% of White women and 39% of White men who were employed in these same positions. It is important to note that these figures do not distinguish the actual number of African American women student affairs professionals from the total number of Black women executives, administrators, and managers included in this data. Thus, it is reasonable to surmise that the exact number of African American women student affairs professionals reflected in this data is less than 12,722.

Another source that may be used to ascertain an approximation of the underrepresentation of African American women student affairs professionals is data obtained from the two primary, national student affairs professional associations—the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NSAPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). In 2009, among NASPA’s 11,000 members, merely 5.6% (n=618) were Black women student affairs administrators (W. Diehl,
personal communication, November 12, 2009). During this same year, there were 591 (7%) Black women student affairs professionals registered among the approximately 8,500 members of ACPA (S. Gatson, personal communication, December 8, 2009). While the numbers presented above do not indicate the exact number of African American women student affairs professionals employed within higher education, they may be used to construct a better understanding of the underrepresentation of these women, which perpetuates their experiences of isolation and marginalization at PWIs.

**Isolation and marginalization.** The isolation and marginalization that African American women student affairs professionals encounter in higher education has been well-documented in the research literature (Bonner, 2001; Gregory, 1995; Henry & Glenn, 2009; Moses, 1997; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Watson, 2001). In fact, it has been these two issues, which have framed many of the historic and contemporary discussions regarding the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals.

One qualitative study, which included open-ended interviews with 12 African American women student affairs professionals employed in PWIs in the Midwest, revealed the extreme isolation and marginalization experienced by these women (Holmes, 2003). The participants indicated that they regularly contended with the burden of being an African American woman at a White institution, suspicions regarding their qualifications, tokenism, heavy institutional and community service loads resulting in low job task completion, lack of true collegiality and support, issues related to cross-gender interactions, and the challenges related to the “double whammy” of being Black and female (Holmes, 2003, p. 60).
Another facet related the isolation and marginalization that African American women student affairs professionals face at PWIs is the experience of being physically isolated from other African American women and African American men who work on the same campus. According to Henry and Glenn (2009), due to the lack of critical mass, and the resulting dispersion of African American women on some predominantly White campuses, many of these “women find themselves navigating the socio-political complexities of the ivory tower in isolation” (para. 6). In addition, due to the segregation of student affairs functional areas that is common on many mid- to large-sized college campuses (Allen, 2002; Tinto, 2003), which results in limited geographic proximity among the African American professionals on campus, the effects of being underrepresented, isolated and marginalized are compounded for many African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs.

Unfortunately, the issues of isolation and marginalization are inextricably bound together with African American women’s underrepresentation in the academy, which constitutes a vicious cycle of detriment for African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. In other words, underlying, undergirding, and perpetuating the isolation and marginalization of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs is their underrepresentation in this setting. Directly related to this phenomenon is the fact that African American women’s underrepresentation as student affairs professionals is further exacerbated by the interpersonal, environmental, psychological, and physical consequences of being isolated and marginalized within the context of predominantly White institutions (Henry & Glenn, 2009).
Indicators of Personal Well-Being and Professional Success among African American Women

As suggested in Black feminist thought, it is important to consider the variation in response to the experience of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized, which occurs among African American women due to their respective positions in various professional settings. As it relates to African American women student affairs professionals, it is critical to explore indicators which may be used to identify the effects of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized as higher education administrators in PWIs. The following section provides a review of literature exploring the concepts of personal well-being and professional success among African American women, which will be used to guide the current study.

Although literature regarding the experiences of African American women in higher education is replete with references to the personal and professional consequences associated with existing in professional settings in which these women are underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized, there are few studies which actually document and define the specific outcomes that are the result of their compromised status in the academy. As a result of this gap in the literature, it is difficult to identify specific factors that may be used to indicate that African American women student affairs professionals are leading lives, which are both personally enriching and professionally successful. Miller and Vaughn (1997) conducted a modest qualitative study of African American women executives in higher education to determine the participants’ perceptions regarding their freedom to achieve personally and professionally, and to solicit their definitions of success. The women in this study used the following indicators
to define personal and professional success: “freedom to grow and develop, the quality of
time they spent with family and friends, participation in community service, the ability to
balance work and other dimensions of their lives, enjoying their employment positions,
and faith and adherence to personal standards” (Miller & Vaughn, 1997, p. 186). It is
interesting to note that the respondents did not include career mobility as an indicator of
success although they all had achieved positions of leadership in higher education. An
implication derived from the findings of this study is that it is important to provide
African American women student affairs professionals with the opportunity to explore
and define their own ideas related to personal well-being and professional success.

Jackson (2001) supported this assertion and noted:

PWIs should provide the opportunity to African Americans to personally and/or
professionally define “quality of life.” Sometimes it is assumed that African-
American administrators need larger salaries, or need to be at large or prestigious
universities, or in close proximity to urban centers. Allowing administrators the
opportunity to define their own quality of life gives them the opportunity to share
what they value and how their values relate to the institution. (p. 106)

Within the context of the present study, African American women student affairs
professionals will be asked to consider and describe their own conceptions of personal
well-being and professional success, a practice supported by Black feminist thought.

Success Strategies Employed by African American Women at PWIs

Research has been conducted that explores success strategies employed by
African American women who are employed at predominantly White institutions of
higher education. Among studies related to this topic of inquiry, researchers have found
that African American women rely on a variety of professional activities which help them
resist the challenges they face within higher education. The most frequently cited
strategies include relying on some form of engaging in mentoring relationships,
establishing formal and informal networks, and participating in a variety of professional development opportunities.

**Mentoring.** The majority of studies that document the success strategies employed by African American women student affairs professionals are related to the mentoring experiences of these women. One study in particular (Mumford, 1996), was conducted utilizing interviews with 19 mature (the average age of the participants was 41.7 years old) African American women in higher education. Mumford (1996), found that these women believed that mentoring was “somewhat to very important” in the process of enhancing their personal growth and development, educational growth, and career success. The participants in this study had identified mentors among a wide variety of individuals including friends, relatives, former and current supervisors, and professional peers.

Another study related to the effects of mentoring on the personal and professional lives of African American women employed at PWIs examined the Sisters Mentoring Sisters (SISTERS) Project, which occurred at a predominantly White state university in central Florida. The purpose of the SISTERS Project was to:

- foster challenging and rewarding experiences within an academic environment that is perceived by some as neglectful, antagonistic, and at times brutally threatening; to provide the SISTERS participants with a variety of effective techniques and strategies for nurturing one another; and to help these women address the realities of ‘glass ceiling’ issues that often exist for women, particularly those women who are Black, in the academy. (Green & King, 2001, p. 156)

Focus group findings from this qualitative study, indicated that the women felt a greater sense of connectedness to their institution and “sister colleagues” as a result of participating in the SISTERS Project. Moreover, several of the participants were promoted, enrolled in advanced degree programs, and began mentoring Black students at
their institution. Participants also reported an increased awareness of Africentric social, spiritual, and cultural values as well as a heightened sense of empowerment. Although the purpose of this article was to describe a mentoring program designed to facilitate the “empowerment of ‘sisters’ by ‘sisters,’” further data regarding the history, philosophy, and curriculum of the SISTERS Project would be needed to replicate its development. In addition, due to the limited information provided regarding the participants’ perceptions of participating in the SISTERS Project, the results of this study lack transferability. There were also no methods employed to enhance the dependability of the results.

**Networking.** Although it has been noted that networking is an essential strategy that may be employed to achieve career success, African American women employed at PWIs are often excluded from the informal networks of support that are so critical to their professional success and survival (Wright Myers, 2002). As noted by Black feminist scholars, Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003), African American women may be able to achieve greater levels of personal well-being and professional success by involving themselves in supportive networks comprised of other African American women; these networks can be formal or informal and are known as “sister circles.” However, these authors also acknowledge that this recommendation is usually very difficult or impossible to achieve for many African American women at PWIs who are geographically isolated from other African American women on their campuses. Similarly, Henry (2010) asserted that:

> It is in the company of other trusted African American women that the African American female student affairs administrator may experience a safe environment in which she can speak expressively and directly about issues and experiences that have the potential to impact her emotional, psychological, and physical health.
Acknowledging the challenges related to Hughes and Howard-Hamilton’s recommendation, Henry and Glenn (2009), suggested that one strategy that may be employed by African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs is connecting with one another through a variety of traditional and non-traditional mediums. In their review of literature regarding the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization experienced by African American women in academia, these authors asserted the importance of African American women engaging in formal and informal support networks. In addition, several individual and institutional strategies were offered to assist African American women at PWIs identify opportunities to connect with other African American women. Some of these implications for practice included connecting through involvement in professional organizations and programming opportunities. According to these authors “it is essential that Black women be provided the space and time to engage in meaningful and safe interpersonal exchanges with one another” (Henry & Glenn, 2009, “Institutional Strategies,” para. 2).

**Professional development.** One of the strategies that African American women student affairs professionals employ to resist the challenges they face at PWIs is involvement in professional development programs that are designed *by and for* these women themselves (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). A review of scholarly literature revealed that there are very few studies that describe professional development programs designed for student affairs professionals, and even fewer studies that provided an analysis of professional development programs designed for women in higher education administration. However, two qualitative case studies were located that explored the impact of two different higher education professional development programs on the
professional development of their respective women participants and one study, specifically examined a national, African American women’s, grassroots professional organization.

The more dated study, conducted by Balukas (1992), utilized a survey to solicit the perceptions of 440 women who participated in the Higher Education Resource Services (HERS)/Bryn Mawr Summer Institute for Women in Higher Education Administration. The purpose of the Balukas’ (1992) case study was to assess the program’s role in the career development of its participants. The four areas of inquiry that were assessed included the women’s: 1) professional advancement, 2) personal development, 3) perceptions of the Institute’s organization and environment, and 4) perceptions of the value of their subsequent inclusion in the HERS network (Balukas, 1992).

In general, the findings, which were based on participants’ survey responses, interviews, observations, and primary documents, revealed that the women believed that Institute had positively contributed to their professional advancement and personal development (Balukas, 1992). In addition, the majority of participants reported that they benefited tremendously from their inclusion in the HERS network. An interesting finding was related to the organization of the Institute. While some of the participants believed the Institute’s four-week format was appropriate, others noted that this significant time commitment may have been working to eliminate women in lower-level administrative positions who would benefit the most from attending the Institute, but who could not secure extended leave from work.
Although the purpose of Balukas’ (1992) study did not demand an analysis of data by race, a major limitation of this study is that there was no data offered to describe the racial composition of the participants. Thus, it is unclear if, and to what degree, the perceptions and experiences of African American women were included in the findings. In addition, this particular professional development program was not specifically developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals.

In a more recent study by DeFrantz-Dufor (2007), five African American female senior administrators who participated in the American Council on Education’s (ACE) Fellows program were interviewed to determine how participating in the program had impacted their careers. The participants were employed as senior and chief administrators at five different PWIs in the Midwest and Northeast. A qualitative case study approach was used to construct detailed descriptions of the participants’ lives through the analysis of structured interview transcripts. The research questions in this study revolved around the following topics: the impact of the ACE Fellows program, participants’ career paths and mentoring experiences, and strategies to bolster the number of African American women executive leaders in higher education. DeFrantz-Dufor (2007) concluded that for the women in her study, participation in the ACE Fellows program “enhanced their leadership abilities, advanced their careers, and enabled them to become exemplary presidents, provosts, and chief executive officers” (p. iii).

Although this study did assess the impact of a professional development program on the careers of African American women executive administrators, the ACE Fellows program is not developed specifically by and for African American women student affairs professionals. Thus, the observation of nuances related to culturally-responsive
environments that may emerge when African American women student affairs professionals are the focus and facilitators of professional development programs was missing from this study. In addition, the participants only represented executive-level administrators (i.e., President, Provost, Chief Executive Officer). Because the ACE Fellow program is specifically designed for mid- to semi-senior-level higher education administrators, this study did not include the perspectives of the majority of African American women who are employed in senior-, mid-, and entry-level student affairs positions.

There was also one study found that described a national, African American women’s, grassroots professional organization—the Association of Black Women in Higher Education (ABWHE; Foriest, 2002). The purpose of the study was to compare the perceptions of African American women higher education leaders regarding the role of ABWHE (“a grassroots organization”) and the American Council on Education’s National Identification Program (ACE/NIP; “a racially and ethnically diverse funded organization”) in the development of African American women higher education leaders. Interviews with 10 African American women who were members of these professional organizations revealed that each organization offered unique benefits to the participants related to their professional development (Foriest, 2002). More specifically, it was reported by the participants in this study that the grassroots organization, ABWHE, provided a “sisterhood,” while the racially and ethnically diverse funded organization, ACE/NIP, served as a vehicle by which the women were advanced into senior-level higher education administrative positions, including college and university presidencies (Foriest, 2002).
Foriest (2002) called for the future examination of national professional development programs and organizations and specifically noted the importance of examining the racial/ethnic identification of these entities. In addition, she suggested that the essential dimensions of these programs and organizations be investigated, including purpose and vision, operating principles, and outcomes. She asserted that “future research in these areas could enhance national professional organizations in better achieving their organizational goals and improving the quality of organizational life for women in higher education. Intersections of race, class, and gender should be central in” these studies (Foriest, 2002, pp. 187-188).

While each of these studies contributes to the knowledge base regarding the professional development strategies employed by women in higher education, collectively they present findings that are incomplete regarding the unique experiences of African American women student affairs professionals and professional development programs which have been specifically developed by and for these women themselves.

The African American Women’s Summit (AAWS)

According to Henry (2010), the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS) is an important forum where African American women student affairs professionals engage in supportive dialogue in order to resist the myriad of challenges they encounter within the context of postsecondary education. The Summit has been convened at the national conferences of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) as a full-day pre-conference workshop. During this professional development program, African American women often tell stories about their challenges and victories, share success strategies and present
data about the successful student outcomes they facilitate in their pivotal roles as student affairs professionals (C. Brightharp, personal communication, March 8, 2009). Each year, the theme and curriculum of the Summit is structured to coincide with the theme of the specific conference during which the Summit is being hosted. In addition, the Summit’s theme is determined in a collaborative manner by its current coordinators, who are African American women with significant professional experience in student affairs at a variety of higher education institutions.

Although the AAWS has been offered in two different professional settings—as a pre-conference workshop during the annual conferences of both ACPA and NASPA—the bounded case that is of interest in this study is the African American Women’s Summit that has occurred at the NASPA Annual Conference. This particular case represents the AAWS that has occurred on a more stable basis and is the one with which I have been affiliated, established rapport, and gained access, factors which are critical in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009).

Conclusion

The literature reviewed herein was intended to provide an overview of topics relevant to the conduct of the present study. Black feminist thought (BFT; Collins, 1986, 1990, 2000, 2002, 2004) was the theory, which guided the inclusion and exclusion of literature related to the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. The dimensions espoused in BFT were used to construct a review of the history of the Black feminist movement in the United States. From this brief review, it is apparent that African American women have been active participants in the struggle against racist and sexist oppression since they were involuntarily immigrated to
the U.S. As a result of this enduring legacy of oppression and resistance, Black feminist scholars have produced a specialized body of knowledge, which can be used to contextualize the contemporary experiences of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs.

African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs hold membership in a variety of groups (African Americans, women, and African American women higher education professionals) that have been historically marginalized and that continue to struggle for equal representation in research literature and equal status within the context of higher education. It is believed by the researcher of the present study that African American women student affairs professionals’ affiliation with these groups (which, are also underrepresented in the larger society) contributes to their underrepresentation in the literature, as well as in their underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization in the field of higher education.

The majority of existing literature regarding African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs focuses on the reality that they have been, and continue to be, underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized. Although some of these women have established and taken advantage of a variety of success strategies (i.e., mentoring, networking, and professional development) to help them contend with the oppressive conditions they face, there is limited research that documents the existence and development of these strategies. There is even less research that explicates strategies such as professional development programs, which have been designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. In fact, Henry (2010) noted that “studies regarding the professional development initiatives in which African American women in
student affairs are engaged (i.e., local, regional and national association involvement) are also important in promoting and maintaining a diverse perspective, while simultaneously recognizing the contributions of these women.” Thus, the present study was intended to explore a national professional development program developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals.
Chapter Three:

Method

The purpose of the present study was to yield data that describes how the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS), which is a national professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals, contributed to the personal well-being and professional success of these women employed at PWIs. In addition, this study aimed to describe how the AAWS assisted African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators. In this chapter, the research method is discussed, which includes a discussion of the research strategy, an overview of the research plan, methods of data collection and analysis, strategies to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, presentation of the findings, and the researcher’s disclosure.

Research Strategy

Methodologists (Hartley, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2007) have noted that qualitative case study research is the most appropriate strategy to employ when the researcher is interested in providing answers to “how” or “why” questions “about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2009, p. 13). Further, Hartley (2004) cited the usefulness of using case studies when understanding how organizational and environmental contexts impact social processes is important. In order to explore and fully describe how the AAWS assisted African
American women student affairs professionals at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, and contributed to their personal well-being and professional success, it was important to explore the organizational context of the AAWS. In their seminal work, Kenny and Grotelueschen (1984) suggested that a case study is an extremely suitable approach when the objective of a study is “to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of a program [and] when it is important to…convey a holistic and dynamically rich account of an educational program” (p. 5). A definition of case study research proposed by Creswell (2007) was particularly helpful in delimiting the scope and focus of the present study: “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system… over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information…and reports a case description and case-based themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73).

There are several types of categorizations that have been used to clarify the form and function of case study research. Authors have described researchers’ interest in a particular case as either instrumental or intrinsic (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). In addition, the unit of analysis that is the focus of a particular case study (i.e., individuals or groups of individuals, programs, organizations, processes, etc.) has been used to delineate the following types of case studies: biographical, observational, organizational, and historical (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Further, intended research outcomes have also been used to categorize case studies as either exploratory (Stake, 1995), explanatory (Yin, 2009), descriptive (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009), interpretive (Merriam, 1998), or evaluative (Yin, 2009). Another variable that has been used to
differentiate among various case study approaches is the actual research design employed in collecting and analyzing data related to the purpose of the study. Several authors distinguish between single- and multi-case designs (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009), as well as holistic (or single-unit of analysis) and embedded (or multiple units of analysis) designs (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Yin, 2009). The specific research strategy that was used in this study employed a holistic, single-case, intrinsic case study approach; each of these categorizations is discussed separately.

**Holistic case study.** Yin (2009) suggested that holistic designs are more appropriate when the focus of the study is the global nature of an organization and when the underlying theoretical framework is of a holistic nature. The primary question that was addressed in the present study was related to exploring how the AAWS, as a whole, contributed to the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs. In addition, Black feminist thought was used to contextualize the development and implementation of the AAWS. The central dimension of Black feminist thought that was used to explore this national professional development program, designed specifically *by and for* African American women student affairs professionals, is the concept of *standpoint*, which according to Collins (2004) results from the common personal and professional experiences of African American women. Thus, it was presumed that the collective experience of participating in the AAWS holds tremendous personal and professional significance for African American women student affairs professionals.

**Single-case case study.** A rationale for electing to employ a single-case study design was articulated by Yin (2009), who noted:
One rationale for a single case design is when it represents the critical case in testing a well-formulated theory…A single case, meeting all of the conditions for testing the theory, can confirm, challenge, or extend the theory. The single case can then be used to determine whether a theory’s propositions are correct or whether some alternative set of explanations might be more relevant. (p.47)

In this study, the AAWS is the case that was used to test the application of Black feminist thought, which is the theory that undergirded the focus of this inquiry. AAWS participants were interviewed to explore how this specific case assisted African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, as well as contributed to their personal well-being and professional success.

**Intrinsic case study.** More specifically, this study may be described as an intrinsic case study, which Stake (2007) defined as an approach to be used when “the study is undertaken because, first and last, one wants better understanding of this particular case” (p. 121). The primary feature of the AAWS that distinguishes it from other professional development programs is the fact that it is designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals; it is this unique feature that makes this specific case of particular interest in this study. In other words, professional development programs that were created by non-African American women student affairs professionals, in which African American women student affairs professionals participate, are not of interest in this study. While these programs may contribute to the personal well-being and professional success of these women, there are certain propositions elucidated in Black feminist thought, which suggest that these programs may not be as efficacious in the struggle for self-definition and empowerment as those
programs developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals.

Collins (2002) asserted:

Our experiences as African-American women provide us with a unique standpoint on Black womanhood unavailable to other groups. It is more likely for Black women as members of an oppressed group to have critical insights into the condition of our own oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures…Only African-American women occupy this center and can “feel the iron” that enters Black women's souls, because we are the only group that has experienced race, gender, and class oppression as Black women experience them. The importance of Black women's leadership in producing Black feminist thought does not mean that others cannot participate. It does mean that the primary responsibility for defining one's own reality lies with the people who live that reality, who actually have those experiences. (pg. 163)

Overview of the Research Plan

Fetterman (1989) noted that a research plan is an “idealized blueprint or road map” that assists the researcher in thinking about how the steps in a research project inform one another and work together to construct a rich understanding of the topic being studied (p. 18). The research plan that was employed in the present study has been derived from the research strategy outlined above. A distinction made by Stake (1995) regarding the conceptual structure of case study research is helpful in delineating the phases of the research plan that guided this qualitative inquiry. Within the context of case study research there are both “issue questions” (i.e., research questions) and “topical information questions” that must be answered in order to provide sufficient coverage of the case that is under investigation (Stake, 1995). Issue questions are those which may be used to focus inquiry into the case as a whole; these questions direct “attention to the major concerns and perplexities to be resolved” (Stake, 1995, p. 28). Topical information questions are those needed to obtain data related to providing a description of the case, or the context within which the answers to the issue questions are embedded (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The collection and analysis of data related to the topical information
questions and issue questions germane to this study occurred in three distinct phases, which are discussed separately.

**Topical information questions.** In order to offer a sufficient description of the case of interest (i.e., the AAWS) in this study, as well as provide a context for interpreting and understanding the answers that emerge from the issue questions, the following topical information questions were explored:

1. What is the history of the AAWS?
2. What is the philosophy of the AAWS?
3. What is the curriculum of the AAWS?
4. What are the personal characteristics of AAWS participants between 2006-2011?
5. What are the professional characteristics of AAWS participants between 2006-2011?
6. What are the educational characteristics of AAWS participants between 2006-2011?

**History, philosophy, and curriculum.** Obtaining information related to the history, philosophy, and curriculum of the AAWS was critical in constructing an in-depth description of this national professional development program designed specifically by and for African American women student affairs professionals. In order to obtain this data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the founders, current coordinators, and faculty members of the AAWS. Interview questions were used to solicit information regarding the inception, evolution, guiding philosophy, purpose, goals, and activities of the AAWS. An interview guide containing the following four sections were used to facilitate consistency across these interviews: 1) AAWS history, 2) AAWS philosophy,
3) AAWS curriculum, and 4) closing questions (see Appendix B). Data from the interviews were used to construct a narrative case description relevant to the three foci of this area of inquiry (i.e., AAWS history, philosophy, and curriculum).

**AAWS participant demographic characteristics.** In order to present a more complete description of the AAWS, a descriptive profile of the personal, professional, and educational characteristics of AAWS participants between 2006-2011 was also constructed. This specific time range was selected because it represented the period during which demographic data was collected by the coordinators of the AAWS and was available. A secondary analysis of this archival demographic data was used to compute descriptive statistics related to the age, marital and parental status, educational attainment, employment status and history, and institutional demographics of the AAWS participants between 2006-2011.

**Issue questions.** There were three issue questions (i.e., research questions) that guided the collection and analysis of data related to the purpose of this study, which was to explore and describe a national professional development program that was designed specifically by and for African American women student affairs professionals:

1. How does the AAWS assist African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators?
2. How does the AAWS contribute to the personal well-being of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?
3. How does the AAWS contribute to the professional success of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?
The methods of data collection and analysis related to these questions are discussed in the following section.  

**Data Collection**

The three primary sources of data collection in qualitative studies are interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2007; Devers & Frankel, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). However, as Merriam (2002) noted:

> The data collection strategy used is determined by the question of the study and by determining which source(s) of data will yield the best information with which to answer the question. Often there is a primary method of collecting data with support from another. Sometimes only one method is used. (p. 12)

Merriam (2002) suggested that interviews yield the most data when the intent of a study is to explore the experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals. Similarly, Yin (2009) supported Merriam’s position and offered the following perspective: when the aim of a specific study is to explore participants’ opinions or attitudes, “corroborating these opinions or attitudes against other sources [of data] would not be relevant” (p. 109).

Due to the retrospective and introspective nature of the research questions that were the focus of this study, the researcher did not have the ability to directly observe the participants’ professional experiences prior to and following their participation in the AAWS. Thus, data needed to explore the issue questions related to this study were gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews. Several research methodologists have cited this approach as an appropriate qualitative data collection method (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Fetterman, 1989; Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2009).

**Participant selection.** In case study research, as opposed to other forms of qualitative research, there are two levels of sampling that must occur (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). The first level is related to the specific “case” that is the subject of the study;
the second level deals with the unit of analysis that will be used to yield data about the case itself. In this study, the “case” was the AAWS, while the unit of analysis occurred at the participant level.

Several authors have described the process by which individuals are selected for inclusion in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007; Devers & Frankel, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). The most appropriate sampling strategy in qualitative research has been referred to as purposeful (Patton, 2002), nonprobability (Merriam, 2009), or purposive (Chein, 1981) sampling. This approach to sampling represents the idea that in a qualitative study, researchers are looking to identify and include those individuals that have the greatest potential to yield significant (i.e., quality and quantity) data central to the purpose of the study (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Patton, 2002). Within the context of this study, purposeful sampling was used to identify and select individuals who represented information-rich sources of data, who were able to contribute to the exploration of the case (i.e., the AAWS) that was the focus of the study.

Researchers have discussed the importance of considering the number of participants that can be reasonably included in a study, as well as the amount of data that can be successfully mined and managed (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). When there are more than 20 to 30 possible participant candidates, Yin (2009) recommended that the participant selection process proceed in two phases. He described this process in the following manner:

The first stage consists of collecting relevant quantitative data about the entire pool, from some archival source... Once obtained, you should define some relevant criteria for either stratifying or reducing the number of candidates. (p. 92)

The second stage in Yin’s (2009) description includes collecting limited information that is relevant to the study’s purpose about the potential participants. He suggested that the
screening criteria be defined prior to the collection of this information. Several other authors have endorsed this sampling procedure and referred to it as criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), targeted selection (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), establishing an inclusion/exclusion criteria (Fetterman, 1989), and sampling frame construction (Devers & Frankel, 2000).

Following Yin’s (2009) model, participant selection in this study proceeded in two phases. A review of AAWS registration records obtained from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) indicated that there were approximately 276 individuals who participated in the AAWS between 2006-2011. This time period was selected because it represented the time period for which archival registration records were available from NASPA. The criterion used to reduce this initial pool of candidates included identifying those African American women who participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits. This specific criterion was chosen because it limited the initial pool of 276 potential candidates to individuals who were believed to represent information-rich sources of data related to the purpose of this study.

A preliminary analysis of AAWS registration records indicated that there were approximately 10 African American women who met this initial delimiting criterion; these individuals were invited to participate in the study.

Potential participants were contacted via telephone and email, provided with a description of the study, and asked to indicate the following: 1) whether or not they identified as an African American woman student affairs professional; 2) whether or not they had experienced underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization within the context of their professional life, due to their identification as an African American
woman; 3) whether or not the majority of their professional experience had been at a PWI; 4) whether or not they had participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits; and 5) whether or not they had been continuously employed as a student affairs professional prior to and following their participation in the AAWS (see Appendix C).

The final sampling frame criteria that was used to select participants for inclusion in the study included the following: African American women student affairs professionals who had the majority of their professional experience at a PWI; who identified with the experience of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized within the context of their professional lives, due to their identification as an African American woman; who had participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits; and who had been continuously employed as student affairs professionals prior to and following their participation in the AAWS. The following definitions were used to assist potential participants in determining if they met the sampling frame criteria:

**African American woman**—a woman of African descent who self-identifies with the experience of being born and raised in the United States and who is a U.S. citizen.

**Student affairs professional**—an individual who is employed in a full-time; non-faculty; entry-, mid-, or senior-level position, who contributes to the co-curricular (i.e., out-of-class) experiences and holistic (i.e., physical, social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual) development of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions (Nuss, 2003).

**Majority of professional experience at a predominantly White institution (PWI)**—more than 50% of cumulative full-time employment has been at accredited, two- or four-year, degree-granting institutions that are not ethnically classified as historically Black
colleges or universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), or tribal colleges (Hirt, 2006).

**Underrepresented**—refers to the experience of being a member of a specific cultural group (in this study, African American women), whose numerical distribution is significantly and noticeably less than that of other cultural groups present in the same environment (Viernes Turner, 2002).

**Isolated**—refers to “feelings of loneliness, to the persistent awareness of ‘not fitting in,’ to always being on guard, and/or to the fatigue that comes from always having to be one’s own support system” within the context of one’s professional environment (Daniel, 1997). In addition, this term refers to the experience of being geographically separated from other African American women and men professionals on the same campus due to the common segregation of student affairs functional areas (Henry & Glenn, 2009).

**Marginalized**—refers to the persistent experience of being covertly or overtly forced to compromise one’s cultural identity and/or being relegated to a peripheral position within the context of one’s professional environment (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Wolfman, 1997)

**Participated in at least two African American Women’s Summits** —physically present in at least two African American Women’s Summits for the entire duration of the Summits (i.e., 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.) and participated in Summit activities and discussions as a registered participant.
Continuously employed—was employed as a student affairs professional (see definition above) at least 12 months prior to attending their first AAWS and has maintained employment as a student affairs professional until participation in this study.

Although potential participants were provided with the aforementioned definitions to assist them in determining whether or not they met the sampling frame criteria, it is important to note that broad definitions of the terms underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization were purposefully offered in order to allow participants to consider their own unique experiences related to these concepts as they contemplated their participation in the study. Providing potential participants with rigid definitions of these terms may have unintentionally excluded participants who represented information-rich sources of data, yet who may have endured unique experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization, which were not explicitly articulated in the definitions provided. Participants were instructed to use the definitions of these terms as a guide, but were encouraged to consider other expressions of underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization that were relevant to their own unique professional experiences as African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. This approach is consistent with Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), which is the theory that undergirded this study. Due to the tremendous diversity that exists among African American women and the subtle nuances of experience that are commonly associated with these terms, Collins (2002) noted that it is critical to remain cognizant of differences in the concrete experiences of these women and the various reactions that result from their unique experiences.
The final sample size was determined by the number of potential participants (i.e., those who were not excluded by the initial delimiting criterion of attending at least three African American Women’s Summits) who met the sampling frame criteria and agreed to participate in the study. Seven African American women student affairs professionals were included in the study. As purported by Rubin and Rubin (2005), large numbers of interviewees are not needed to increase the credibility of study findings, but rather researchers must be sure to construct a sampling frame criteria that yields participants who have first-hand experience with and knowledge about the research problem being investigated.

**Interview protocol.** Qualitative interviewing has been cited as an increasingly popular and appropriate method of data collection that should be used when answers to the questions being asked are not directly observable (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Further, as noted by Stake (1995) “the two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others. The case will not be seen the same by everyone…The interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). In order to explore the case of interest (i.e. the AAWS) in the present study, qualitative interviews were conducted with seven African American women student affairs professionals; this sample size included all of the individuals who met the initial delimiting criterion and the sampling frame criteria and who agreed to participate in the study.

Each participants was emailed a letter to thank them for agreeing to participate in the study (see Appendix E), as well as a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F), which was used to obtain their personal, professional, and educational background information, as well as their own definitions of terms that are central to the study (i.e.,
underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional success). The demographic questionnaire was also used to determine participants’ first, second, and third preferences for an interview date and time. Participants were given the opportunity to schedule their interviews during the NASPA Annual Conference on March 13-16, 2011, from 7:00 a.m.-9:00 a.m., 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m., 2:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m., or from 6:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m. Following this contact, a letter of support from the current coordinators of the AAWS was emailed to participants endorsing the study and encouraging their participation (see Appendix D). In addition, during the 2010 and 2011 Summits, the AAWS coordinators provided the researcher with an opportunity to discuss the study, which helped facilitate the researcher’s entrée to the participants.

Each participant was asked to participate in a face-to-face interview, during the NASPA Annual Conference, designed to solicit their perspectives regarding how the AAWS contributed to their personal well-being and professional success and helped them resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators. Frankel and Devers (2000) contended that one of the responsibilities of qualitative researchers is to “carefully consider the resource demands made on research subjects, particularly their time…While some subjects may have lots of time and enjoy participation, others may have little time and experience participation as a burden” (p. 259). Related to the conduct of this study, it was important to be conscious of and sensitive to the time constraints that many African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs contend with, due to the demands of their regular job responsibilities, as well as their underrepresentation on their respective campuses.
Data collection in this study included the use of a semi-structured interview format (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured, or open-ended, interviews are the preferred method in case study research because they allow the researcher to pursue a consistent line of inquiry with multiple participants, but also leave room for flexibility and responsiveness (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). In addition, Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) asserted that semi-structured interviews are best suited for exploratory research inquiries. Merriam (2002) defined the semi-structured interview as one in which: 1) an interview guide is used that includes a mix of more and less structured interview questions, 2) all question are used flexibly, 3) specific data is required from all respondents, 4) the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues being explored, and 5) there is no predetermined wording or order.

The use of an interview guide has been suggested as a useful strategy, which “provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject…[and that helps] ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed” (Patton, 2002, p. 343). The interview guide that was utilized in this study consisted of four sections (see Appendix I). The first section included questions designed to obtain professional and educational background information from the participants, while the second section contained questions related to the nature of the participants’ AAWS involvement. The third section of the interview guide was used to probe the participants about the research questions that were central to the purpose of the study. Interview questions in the third section of the interview guide were developed based upon
insights the researcher gained from reviewing related literature, participating in the
AAWS, and conducting interviews with AAWS founders, coordinators, and faculty.
Interview questions in this section were designed to explore participants’ pre- and post-
AAWS experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization as African
American women student affairs professionals at PWIs, as well as their perceptions
regarding the impact of the AAWS on their personal well-being and professional success.
In addition, participants were asked to provide definitions of these terms (i.e.,
underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional
success) relevant to their own unique experiences as African American women student
affairs professionals at PWIs. The fourth section of the interview guide was used to
provide participants with the opportunity to contribute any additional insights related to
the purpose of the study.

Participant interviews were conducted from March 13-16, 2011, during the
NASPA Annual Conference. Prior to attending the conference, participants were emailed
to confirm their participation in the study and to provide them with relevant details
regarding their interview date, time, and location (see Appendix G). At the beginning of
each interview, the researcher introduced herself and reminded the participants of the
purpose of the study. Further, participants were asked for permission to audio-record the
interview and were ensured of the confidentiality of their responses; the researcher
obtained informed consent prior to the beginning of each interview (see Appendix H).

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed as immediately following the
interview as was feasible; this practice has been suggested by several authors as a
strategy, which enhances the quality of the data analysis that proceeds from the
interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Participants were asked for permission to contact them for a brief follow-up interview if it was deemed necessary by the researcher. In addition, the participants were asked if they would be willing to review their individual interview transcript for accuracy once it had been produced.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is the process of making sense out of the voluminous amount of data that has been collected in a study by “consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen, [heard], or read” (Merriam, 2002, pp. 175-176). In essence, the practical goal of data analysis is to mine the data for answers to the research questions being explored. The primary data that was analyzed in this study was obtained through the use of semi-structured interviews with African American women student affairs professionals who participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits between 2006-2011. The purpose of these interviews was to explore how a national professional development program, designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals, assisted these women in resisting challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, and contributed to their personal well-being and professional success.

Several authors (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) have suggested that the following three-step process is commonly used in qualitative data analysis: 1) preparing or organizing the data for analysis, 2) condensing the data into themes through the process of coding, and 3) representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. One strategy that has been suggested to aid in the process
of analyzing qualitative data is using theory to guide the interpretation and presentation of data (Yin, 2009).

In this study, following the participant interviews, verbatim transcripts were produced utilizing Microsoft Word 2007. In an attempt to verify the accuracy of the verbatim interview transcripts, each participant was asked to review their individual interview transcript and to notify the researcher of any discrepancies and/or missing information. This process of member checking resulted in minor changes related to the spelling of proper nouns and the clarification of inaudible portions of the audio files.

Once the final verified interview transcripts had been produced, the researcher began the process of condensing the data into manageable units of analysis. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to identify the smallest meaningful units of data that were relevant to the purpose of the present study, which emerged from a line-by-line review of the interview transcripts. Open coding has been described as an analytic strategy, which includes an exhaustive and expansive review of qualitative data without the use of preconceived themes (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). In other words, in the process of open coding the researcher remains open to any meaningful segment of data that may be relevant to the research questions that are central to the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2002).

Following the identification and labeling of the open codes that emerged in the interview transcript data, axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Creswell, 2007), or analytical coding (Merriam, 2002), was used to group the initial set of open codes into larger units, or categories, that reflected more abstract concepts. During this phase of data analysis, in vivo codes (descriptors that are derived directly from the language of the
participants; Creswell, 2007) were used to retain the integrity of the participants’ responses and to capture certain cultural nuances related to the participants’ identification as African American women student affairs professionals. This process was repeated for each of the interview transcripts and was used to sort recurring, or new, codes that emerged into broader categories. According to Creswell’s (2007) recommendation, it is advisable not to develop more than 25-30 categories, regardless of the size of the database, so that the data can then be reduced into a meaningful and manageable number of themes. Further, Merriam (2002) recommended that categories be identified according to the following criteria: “categories should be responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitive as possible to what is in the data, and conceptually congruent” (pp. 185-186). These criteria were used to guide the identification of categories that were then reduced into themes relevant to the research questions that were explored in the current study.

Next, the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to identify larger themes that emerged from the categories extrapolated from the data. The constant-comparative method requires at least the following four steps: a) organizing the data; b) using the data to generate categories, themes, and/or patterns; c) testing the emergent propositions against the data; and d) searching for contrary evidence or alternative explanations of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This procedure was used to reduce the number categories into a manageable number of themes related to the research questions that were the focus this study. The third step in the data analysis process—representing the data—is discussed in a later section entitled “Presentation of Findings.”
Strategies to Enhance Validity and Reliability

One of the ways to evaluate the quality of any research project is to identify evidence of measures that were employed to enhance the internal and external validity, and reliability of the study’s findings (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Internal validity refers to accuracy or truthfulness of the findings, or to how congruent the findings are with the state of reality (Merriam, 2002), while external validity is related to the ability to generalize, or make inferences about a larger population based on findings collected from a smaller sample (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Reliability has been defined as the “replicability of research results over time, different sites and populations, and with different researchers” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 271). In qualitative studies, these issues take on a slightly different nuance, which can be observed by noticing the different terms used to describe these similar types of validity and reliability evidence. In most qualitative research, internal validity is referred to as credibility (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) or trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009), and external validity is classified as transferability (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) or applicability (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007); reliability is known as dependability (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Merriam, 2002) or consistency (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Merriam, 2009).

There are several strategies that can be employed to enhance the quality of findings generated in qualitative research. Measures incorporated in the present study to increase the credibility, applicability, and dependability of the findings are discussed separately.

Credibility. The term credibility is used to describe the amount of confidence a reader can place in the conclusions and assertions made in a study (Rubin & Rubin,
Approaches that can be undertaken within qualitative case study research to enhance a consumer’s confidence in the findings are myriad. Creswell (2007) recommended that researchers engage in at least two distinct strategies in any given study to build confidence in the internal validity of the study’s findings. One strategy involves clarifying the biases of the researcher, who is often the sole instrument of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). In this study a disclosure of the researcher’s past personal and professional experiences, beliefs and attitudes, and interest in the topic of inquiry was included to elucidate some of the factors which likely influenced her interpretation of the data.

Another strategy that was employed to enhance the credibility of the findings in the current study was member checking. In this procedure, the researcher solicits participants’ perspectives regarding the accuracy of the data collected and/or the interpretations of that data (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). As Stake (1995) noted, participants “play a major role directing as well as acting in case study…and regularly provide critical observations and interpretations…[that] help triangulate the researcher’s observations and interpretations” (p. 115). In this study, each participant was asked to review their individual interview transcript and provide the researcher feedback regarding the accuracy of the transcript, and note any discrepancies and/or missing information. This process yielded minor changes to the verbatim interview transcripts related to the spelling of proper nouns cited by the interviewees, as well as the clarification of inaudible portions of the audio-recordings.
Pilot testing was a final strategy used in this study to increase the credibility of the findings (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). This strategy was employed to ensure that interview questions were clear and structured to solicit responses that were relevant to the purpose of the study. In addition, feedback regarding the researcher’s conduct of the pilot interview was sought. The interview guide was pilot tested with an African American woman student affairs professional who had participated in the AAWS in 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011. The pilot interviewee was a senior-level student affairs administrator at a small HBCU with a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. Although the pilot interview was conducted via the telephone, the researcher attempted to make all other aspects of the interview (i.e., question order, interview length, etc.) consistent with the interviews that were to be conducted with the study participants. Feedback from the pilot interview resulted in a reordering of the questions in the third section of the interview guide. In the revised interview guide, participants were asked to provide definitions of the terms central to the study (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional success) prior to being asked to discuss their own unique experiences with each of these terms. Further, several questions in the second section of the interview guide, which were related to the nature of participants’ involvement in the AAWS, were reworded to elicit more descriptive responses from the participants. An interesting observation was made by the pilot interviewee regarding her familiarity with existing scholarly literature related to the purpose of the study. She indicated that the depth and nature of her responses were most likely influenced by her knowledge of research related to the experiences of Black women college administrators. This observation was noted as a variable, which had the
potential to influence the depth of responses obtained from participants who may not have been as familiar as the pilot interviewee with literature related to the experiences of African American women in the academy.

**Applicability.** Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) purported that the concept of applicability is more appropriate when considering the external validity of case study research. In a case study, the term applicability is used to describe the process by which individuals are able to learn about the general nature of one case in order to inform their understanding of the phenomenon being explicated (Stake, 1995). In regards to the essentialness of generalizing the results of one case to others, Stake (1995) purported:

> Case studies are undertaken to make the case understandable. Often, this case will be as important to its readers as any other case—they care about it; their interest in generalizing from this case to others is small...they are familiar with other cases and they add this one in, thus making a slightly new group from which to generalize, a new opportunity to modify old generalizations. (p. 85)

One approach that has been suggested to enhance the applicability of case study research is to employ purposeful sampling (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In the present study, a sampling frame criteria was established to clearly delineate participant characteristics that are germane to the research questions being explored. It has been suggested that this strategy can be used to increase the probability that the results of one specific case study will be applicable to other cases (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Another method that can be used to increase the applicability of case study findings is to provide a thorough and detailed description of the case being explored (Merriam, 2002). This is done to assist readers in the process of identifying how similar the case being studied is to other cases they are familiar with or will encounter in the future. This strategy was accomplished in this study by offering an in-depth description of the history, philosophy, and curriculum of the AAWS, as well as by providing a detailed description of the
personal, professional, and educational characteristics of AAWS participants between 2006-2011.

**Dependability.** Dependability of findings in qualitative research refers less to the expectation that other researchers will obtain exactly the same results when replicating the study, but rather to the idea that others will agree with the interpretations drawn from the data collected (Merriam, 2002). In other words, in case study research, the objective of dependability is “to be sure that, if a later investigator followed the same procedures as described by an earlier investigator and conducted the same case study all over again, the later investigator should arrive at the same findings and conclusions” (Yin, 2009, p. 45).

Several authors have suggested that the use of an audit trail is one method to enhance the reliability of findings in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Merriam (2002) noted that the “audit trail is dependent upon the researcher keeping a research journal…throughout the conduct of the study, [which contains the researcher’s] reflections, questions, and decisions on the problems, issues, [and] ideas” encountered during data collection (p. 27). To this end, during the data collection and analysis processes the researcher utilized a reflective research journal to document the cognitions and decisions that informed the conduct of this study. An emergent use of the reflective research journal, especially in studies that are situated in feminist theoretical paradigms, is to consciously explicate the researcher’s own values, presuppositions, decisions, and experiences throughout the data collection and analysis processes (Ortlipp, 2008). In other words, the goal in using a reflective research journal is to create an air of transparency regarding the conduct of the study rather than to attempt to control researcher bias throughout the study, which is virtually impossible in qualitative research.
(Ortlipp, 2008). As suggested by Merriam (2002), there are several specific topics that were explored within the reflective research journal used in this study: 1) a description of how the data were collected, 2) a description of the cognitions and steps that guided the analysis of the data, and 3) a discussion related to the conclusions derived from the interpretation of the data.

Another strategy that has been suggested to enhance the reliability, or dependability, of qualitative findings is conducting peer reviews (Merriam, 2009). During the data analysis process, peer review was employed by one of the researcher’s colleagues who is a seasoned (i.e., at least ten years of professional experience), African American woman student affairs professional and is familiar with the purpose of the study, but who has not participated in the AAWS. This procedure was used to assess the degree of congruence between the findings and the raw AAWS participant interview data. Due to the race, gender, and professional experiences of the participants that were interviewed in this study, there may have been subtle cultural nuances present in the participants’ responses that could be missed by an individual who is unfamiliar with the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. Conversely, employing the assistance of one of the researcher’s colleagues who has not participated in the AAWS, was intended to reveal and challenge any of the researcher’s biases that influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data. Thus, it was believed that a seasoned African American woman student affairs professional who has not participated in the AAWS was most able to provide objective feedback regarding the interpretation of the data collected in this study. This procedure was employed to solicit feedback that was used to enhance the reliability (i.e., dependability) of the study’s
findings. Findings from the peer review indicated a high degree of congruence between the interview data collected in this study and the researcher’s interpretation of that data.

**Presentation of the Findings**

Case study has been described as both a methodology and “an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). One of the unique features of case study research that distinguishes it from other forms of qualitative research is the descriptive nature of the end product that typically results from the analysis of case study data (Stake, 1995). Merriam (2009) noted that “as the product of investigation, a case study is an intensive, holistic, description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 46).

Although there is no standard, prescribed format for reporting the results of a case study (Merriam, 2002), Stake (1995) has suggested an outline that may be used to guide the presentation of case study findings. An extensive description of the case is presented, as well as findings related to the issue questions that were raised within the context of the case. The researcher also offers conclusions and assertions that have been derived from their active engagement with the data related to the case and may close the case study report with a vignette that illustrates that the perspectives contained within the report do not capture the complete complexity of the case. Following this outline, Chapter 4 of the present study begins with the presentation of data related to the topical information questions that were explored regarding the AAWS (i.e., history, philosophy, and curriculum and participant demographic characteristics) in order to provide an in-depth description of the case. Chapter 5 contains findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews with African American women student affairs professionals who participated
in at least three African American Women’s Summits in order to explore the research questions that were the focus of the study. Study conclusions, implications for practice and research, as well as a closing vignette are presented in Chapter 6.

Researcher’s Disclosure

In conducting qualitative research, it is important for the researcher, who is often the sole instrument of data collection and analysis, to disclose relevant information and experiences that are likely to influence the collection and interpretation of the data, and even the conceptualization and design of a study. The following is my opportunity to unearth, reflect upon, and bring to conscious consideration the meaning behind some of the experiences in my life related to the topic being studied. In addition, I offer this perspective to provide the consumer of this research with a candid disclosure of my past personal and professional experiences and resulting perspectives, which influence my work as a qualitative researcher exploring a national professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals.

On some level and certainly unbeknownst to me, I suppose that the cultivation of my interest in this research topic began more than 15 years ago, when I enrolled and began taking classes at a predominantly White, public, Research I institution in the southeast. In fact, it probably goes back even further to my experiences as a little Black girl growing up on Martha’s Vineyard Island, Massachusetts, where my very best friends were two little White boys named Timothy and Gregory. It may even date back to the elementary school years I spent in a gifted education program in Orange County, Florida where I was the only Black child. Or perhaps, it was the time I spent attending a predominantly White, private, Christian academy during middle school that planted a
seed of curiosity deep within me. Although each of these settings differ drastically from one another, they share one striking similarity: in all of these situations I have often been “the only one,” or “the only one of a few.” Besides my experiences growing up in a very stable, two-parent, Black family and in a traditional, Black, southern Baptist church, and my current affiliation with a charismatic, non-denominational church, which is predominantly (yet not exclusively) Black, I have been the only African American female—or at best, the only one of a handful of African American females—in the majority of the social, academic, and professional settings which have comprised my life.

I do not offer this brief biographical background to suggest that African American women are the only cultural group who has experienced this phenomenon (i.e., “being the only one”), nor to complain about the circumstances that have characterized my life. Quite the contrary; I recognize that it has been these very experiences that have uniquely positioned me to fully appreciate the position in which I now find myself—on the precipice of earning a terminal college degree. I offer this perspective to elucidate some of the personal and professional life experiences that make me sensitive to the need for African American women to create places and carve out spaces that are by and for us.

From my perspective, it has been the existence of these “by and for us” spaces that have lessened the impact of the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization that characterize the life experiences of many African American women; this has certainly been true throughout the course of my journey. My own personal encounters with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization have occurred primarily within the context of both my academic and professional experiences. As mentioned earlier, my familiarity with these types of experiences (which I believe are the result of deeply
embedded racist and sexist ideologies that permeate the western society in which I live, learn, and work) is not limited to the last 15 years of my life, which I have spent at the same predominantly White institution. However, due to the nature of the research in which I am now engaged, it is my academic and professional experiences which are particularly salient at this juncture.

My conceptualization of underrepresentation is both a statement regarding the unequal physical distribution of individuals from different cultural groups who comprise a larger cultural group (i.e., students in a particular class, resident directors, student affairs professionals, etc.), and the psychological strain that is a consequence of this disproportion. During the completion of my M.Ed. program, I can recall sitting in a meeting where the professional and graduate student residence life staff were discussing whether or not we should continue using a retreat facility (owned by the University) that was a former slave plantation for our annual resident assistant training. Some of the African American resident assistants had expressed concern about returning to this facility. Although I was certainly underrepresented in number (I was one of two African Americans in that meeting), what I remember most is the tremendous anxiety, fear, and anger I experienced before, during, and after the meeting. In other words, underrepresentation is both a description of a physical reality—which is usually immediately visible—and an expression related to the insidious consequences of that physical reality, which is typically invisible, especially to individuals who are members of groups that are overrepresented.

The experiences of being isolated and marginalized are usually an unavoidable by-product of being underrepresented in a particular setting. In addition, due to the
nebulousness of these terms it is particularly difficult to define them, especially for individuals who have had limited personal exposure to these types of experiences. Adding to the complexity of these terms is the plethora of subjective, unquantifiable experiences that comprise many African American women’s encounters with isolation and marginalization. An assertion which is certainly apropos regarding my conceptualization of these terms is that although I may have difficulty defining them, I know when I am being subjected to or experiencing them.

From my perspective, *isolation* is the persistent sense of being physically present in a specific group, but being forced to function in the group as an individual entity, with little to no support or genuine camaraderie. Similarly, I describe *marginalization* as the experience of having your ideas, experiences, beliefs, and contributions devalued, dismissed, and relegated to the periphery of the group’s conversations, decisions, and actions. What has plagued my cogitations about both of these terms is the lack of definitive validation regarding my conceptualization of these terms from those who possess the power and privilege to perpetuate the isolation and marginalization of underrepresented individuals and groups. In other words, it is the subtlety that characterizes the isolative and marginalized experiences of African American women that makes these terms difficult to define. I must also point out the probability that, in my experience, being at the same predominantly White institution for more than 15 years has also served to soften the effects of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized—a unique and fortunate consequence of my own individual experience, which I suspect is *not* the case for many of my sister-colleagues.
As I reflect upon some of the experiences that have characterized my life and simultaneously consider the juncture at which I now find myself (i.e., working towards the completion of my Ph.D.), I am fully aware that it has been the constant presence and strong support of many African American women that have contributed to my success. From my mom, aunts, “favorite cousin,” and other “church mothers,” to my 9th grade Pre-Algebra teacher and a handful of my college professors, I have been fortunate to have been surrounded by African American women who believed in me and communicated their belief in me in tangible ways. I always knew I could do it! And it didn’t matter what the “it” was; they constantly reminded me that I was smart enough, good enough, strong enough, pretty enough, etc. And although at this point I am unable to fully articulate exactly how these meaningful interpersonal exchanges have contributed to my personal well-being and professional success, I am absolutely positive that they have been, are, and will continue to be an instrumental factor in my ability to resist the challenges I face as “the only one.” It is my hope that this research will provide the answer to that question for my sister-colleagues and the African American women who have invested so much in our lives.

My interest in this topic was piqued when Dr. Wilma J. Henry, who has been my mentor for more than 15 years and who also currently serves as my major professor, invited me to attend the 2009 African American Women’s Summit. Dr. Henry was serving as one of the coordinators of the AAWS and thought it would be a fulfilling experience for me to be able to connect with other African American women who were student affairs professionals and/or students in higher education administration or student affairs graduate programs. As an African American woman with more than 15 years of
combined academic and professional experience at the same predominantly White institution, I have often experienced the underrepresentation, isolation and marginalization discussed in the literature and was tremendously refreshed to be in a room full of individuals who, relatively speaking, looked like me, spoke like me, listened to me, and understood me.

As a result of participating in the Summit that year, I was inspired and compelled to explore, describe, and document the transformation that I saw occurring in the demeanor of many of the African American women student affairs professionals I met during the AAWS. I expect to find the answer to the question regarding how this particular national professional development program has contributed to the personal well-being and professional success of these women and helped them resist the challenges they face as “the only one” or “the only one of a few.” I suspect that contained within their answers to this question, I may also find the answer to the same question as it pertains to my interpersonal experiences with the African American women who have so greatly impacted my own life.

A feature of my research experience that is noteworthy and rare (even in the year 2011) is that my dissertation committee is comprised of all African American women. In the process of constructing my dissertation committee, I was very purposeful about selecting a group of professors who were not only interested in my topic and who represent a wide range of expertise related to my topic, but who were also highly committed to advising and supporting me through the process of completing my dissertation. Once I had selected those individuals whom I believed would be the most
qualified to assess my work and offer constructive feedback, I realized that I too had constructed a space and carved out a place by and for African American women.
Chapter Four:

The African American Women’s Summit

Methodologists have indicated that the case study approach is an appropriate research strategy when “how” or “why” questions are the focus of an investigation (Hartley, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2007; Yin, 2009). Further, Stake (1995) suggested that in order to provide sufficient coverage of the specific case being investigated, researchers should employ a two-tiered research plan, which includes the exploration of both topical information questions and issue questions. Issue questions, which are also known as research questions, are used to specify the broad area of inquiry that is the focus of a study (Stake, 1995); the issue questions that were the primary focus of this study are discussed in Chapter 5. Topical information questions solicit background information relevant to the case and contribute to a richer understanding of the case itself. In addition, they provide a context for interpreting data related to the issue, or research, questions that are the specific focus of the inquiry (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The topical information questions that were explored in this study were related to: 1) the history, philosophy, and curriculum of the AAWS and 2) the demographic characteristics of AAWS participants between 2006-2011, and are discussed below.

The History, Philosophy, and Curriculum of the AAWS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the founders, coordinators, and faculty of the AAWS in an attempt to explore and describe the history, philosophy, and curriculum of the AAWS. An interview guide was used to facilitate these interviews,
which included the following four sections: 1) AAWS history, 2) AAWS philosophy, 3) AAWS curriculum, and 4) closing questions. Findings related to each of these areas of inquiry are presented below.

**History.** The history of the AAWS, which has been offered as a pre-conference workshop during the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators’ (NASPA) Annual Conference, is relatively brief and spans less than a decade (2004-2011). However, despite the brevity of its existence, this important gathering for African American women student affairs professionals has emerged as one of the pre-conference offerings, which has consistently garnered support from conference program reviewers and conference attendees alike. The AAWS, as well as the African American Male Summit, has become a staple among the pre-conference workshop offerings at the NASPA Annual Conference.

**In the beginning.** The inception of the African American Women’s Summit is attributed to Dr. Mary McKinney Edmonds, who observed a desperate need to convene African American women in student affairs. Her keen insight and progressive thought were undoubtedly influenced by her experiences as an African American woman, who had earned several prominent appointments, including her role in founding the Physical Therapy program at Cleveland State University and her years at Bowling Green State University as the Vice-President for Student Affairs.

On March 24, 1995, while Dr. Edmonds was the Vice-Provost and Dean for Student Affairs at Stanford University, she accomplished the goal of convening African American women student affairs professionals at the NASPA Annual Conference in San Diego, California. It was during this educational session titled, “African American
Women in Student Affairs: Understanding and Celebrating their Differences,” that she discussed the large numbers of African American women who were leaving the student affairs profession due to racism, which was taking a tremendous toll on the personal fulfillment and professional satisfaction of these women. In particular, she noted the challenges faced by African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs.

From Dr. Edmonds’ perspective, the only way to combat this mass exodus, which would have disastrous consequences on the academic success and personal development of African American students enrolled in higher education, was to identify a mechanism that would provide African American women with the opportunity to connect with and support one another. During her opening address, she commented to the women present, “we need to establish supportive bonds among ourselves, because as you will hear, it is lonely at the top, especially in predominantly White institutions” (Edmonds, 1995). This sentiment expressed by Dr. Edmonds was the seed planted, which was watered by other African American women in student affairs, and eventually grew into what is now the African American Women’s Summit.

*If at first you don’t succeed.* One of the African American women student affairs professionals who was instrumental in making Dr. Edmonds’ vision a reality, was Dr. Mary Howard-Hamilton. Following Dr. Edmond’s first assemblage of African American women student affairs professionals, Dr. Howard-Hamilton attended an extended NASPA conference session in 1996 entitled, “The African American Student Affairs Professional: Lessons for All,” which was also coordinated and facilitated by Dr. Edmonds. As a result of her participation in this session, she recognized the need to provide these meaningful sister circles with a “larger venue and a broader platform” (M.
Howard-Hamilton, personal communication, November 10, 2010). In an effort to address the needs of African American women student affairs professionals, Dr. Howard-Hamilton eventually submitted a proposal to NASPA and ACPA to transform the workshop sessions for African American women in student affairs into a full-day pre-conference workshop. Her proposal was rejected. However, Dr. Howard-Hamilton’s persistence prevailed as was evidenced by the establishment of the AAWS as a pre-conference workshop in 2004, and every year since (see Table 1).
Table 1

History of the AAWS at NASPA Annual Conferences (1995-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>NASPA Annual Conference Theme</th>
<th>AAWS Session or Pre-conference Workshop Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>San Diego, CA</td>
<td>The Promise of Challenge</td>
<td>African American Women in Student Affairs: Understanding and Celebrating their Differences (Educational Session)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
<td>Redefining Learning</td>
<td>The African American Student Affairs Professional: Lessons for All (Extended Special Session)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Denver, CO</td>
<td>It’s About Students, Period</td>
<td>African American Women’s Summit: Finding Our Voices, Sustaining our Strength (Pre-conference Workshop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Tampa, FL</td>
<td>Imagine and Explore the Future</td>
<td>Sister Circles: Exploring Strengths from our Past to Bridge to the Future (Pre-conference Workshop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>Individual Commitment—Collective Action</td>
<td>African American Women’s Summit (Pre-conference Workshop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Orlando, FL</td>
<td>Our Power and Responsibility to Shape Education (joint conference with ACPA)</td>
<td>Shifting: How Women of Color Exist in Student Affairs (Pre-conference Workshop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
<td>Chart a Course for Student Success</td>
<td>African American Women’s Summit: Navigating Campus Politics and Culture (Pre-conference Workshop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Seattle, WA</td>
<td>Nourishing Partnerships for Lifelong Learning</td>
<td>African American Women’s Summit: Fostering Relationships to Strengthen our Resiliency (Pre-conference Workshop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>Live the Legacy—Be the Movement</td>
<td>African American Women’s Summit: Live the Legacy Using Strengths (Pre-conference Workshop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Philadelphia, PA</td>
<td>Educating for Lives of Purpose</td>
<td>African American Women’s Summit: A Quest for Authentic Leadership (Pre-conference Workshop)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from A. Bowers, personal communication, January 25, 2011.

Preserving the legacy. One of the themes that has persisted throughout the history of the AAWS is the commitment of those who founded the Summit (or were instrumental in its establishment) to preserve its existence, ensure its relevance, and strengthen its impact. From the beginning, even until this present moment, the success of the AAWS has depended on the willingness and adeptness of women like Dr. Edmonds and Dr.
Howard-Hamilton to identify and collaborate with other African American women in the academy who were impassioned about enhancing the personal well-being and professional success of African American women in student affairs. As such, Dr. Howard-Hamilton enlisted the expertise of a diverse cadre of seasoned African American women student affairs professionals to ensure the persistence of the Summit and to provide participants with a broad range of experiences from which to draw strength, insight, and guidance.

The legacy of the AAWS has been preserved by the commitment of several of these women in particular including, Dr. Carolyn Brightharp, Dr. Wilma J. Henry, and Dr. Bettina Shuford, who faithfully coordinated and facilitated the Summit from 2005-2011. These women have worked together each year to prepare and submit the pre-conference workshop proposal, although the AAWS has become an expected pre-conference offering, which is in high demand. In addition, Drs. Brightharp, Henry, and Shuford have coordinated the AAWS curriculum, which included sharing this powerful platform with a nucleolus of seasoned African American women student affairs administrators to serve as faculty during the Summit (see Table 2). Within the past two years, a new group of African American women student affairs professionals, consisting of Dr. Gail Buck and Dr. Tracy Shaw, have been invited to join the coordinating team.
Table 2  
**AAWS Faculty (2004-2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Current Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Barbara Avery</td>
<td>Dean of Students</td>
<td>Occidental College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Renee Barnett-Terry</td>
<td>Dean of Student Affairs</td>
<td>Revelle College/University of California, San Diego</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Rosie Phillips Bingham</td>
<td>Vice President for Student Affairs</td>
<td>University of Memphis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Johnetta Cross Brazell</td>
<td>Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs</td>
<td>University of Arkansas-Fayetteville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Carolyn Y. Brighttharp*</td>
<td>Academic Dean</td>
<td>Virginia College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Gail Buck*</td>
<td>Student Services and Communication Studies</td>
<td>Loyola Marymount University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Javaune Adams-Gaston</td>
<td>Vice President for Student Life</td>
<td>The Ohio State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Mary Howard-Hamilton</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Indiana State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Barbara Henley</td>
<td>Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs &amp; Associate Professor</td>
<td>University of Illinois at Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Wilma J. Henry*</td>
<td>Associate Professor &amp; Program Coordinator</td>
<td>University of South Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Carmen Jordan-Cox</td>
<td>Vice President for Student Affairs</td>
<td>Rowan University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Darnita Killian</td>
<td>Vice President of Student Affairs</td>
<td>Spelman College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Jennifer Meningall</td>
<td>Vice President of Student Affairs</td>
<td>University of South Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Theresa A. Powell</td>
<td>Vice President for Student Affairs</td>
<td>Temple University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Tracy Shaw*</td>
<td>Assistant Director and Training Coordinator</td>
<td>Loyola Marymount University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Bettina C. Shuford*</td>
<td>Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs</td>
<td>University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Barnett Terry</td>
<td>Dean of Student Affairs</td>
<td>Reveille College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Carmen Tillery</td>
<td>Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students</td>
<td>Indiana State University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *Current coordinator; Adapted from W. Henry, personal communication, January 25, 2011.

As the AAWS prepares to enter its 2nd decade of existence, as a NASPA pre-conference workshop, its continued success will be dependent on future generations of African American women, like Dr. Mary McKinney Edmonds and Dr. Mary Howard-Hamilton, who are in touch with the reality of the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals and are courageous enough to propose innovative solutions. Further needed are African American women, like Dr. Carolyn Brighttharp, Dr. Wilma Henry, and Dr. Bettina Shuford, who as they were engaged, took time to reach back and look for meaningful ways to connect with and mentor the next generation of
African American women student affairs professionals who will follow in their stead and extend the legacy of the AAWS into the next decade.

**Philosophy.** The overarching philosophy of the AAWS was most succinctly expressed by one of the interviewees who offered this statement when she was asked to discuss the purpose of the Summit: “We want these young women to know this—we did it and you can do it too, and we’re going to show you how!” This sentiment was expressed in one form or another by each of the interviewees regarding their perception of the philosophy of the AAWS.

As one of the most published scholars in the field of student affairs (Keim, 2008), it is no surprise that Dr. Howard-Hamilton’s approach to conceptualizing the needs of African American women student affairs professionals was steeped in extant research literature regarding these women’s experiences in the academy. In collaboration with a team of seasoned African American women student affairs professionals, Dr. Howard-Hamilton developed a NASPA pre-conference proposal, which drew from Collins’ (1986, 1990, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004) theory of Black feminist thought to aid in the formation of the AAWS. Further, with years of personal experience related to underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization to draw upon, this team of women was able to build upon the concepts unearthed by Dr. Edmonds in the earlier gatherings of African American women student affairs professionals and produce a national professional development experience that was relevant, real (i.e., authentic, and candid), and rare.

**The research literature.** It was Dr. Howard-Hamilton’s research regarding the experiences of African American women enrolled and employed in the academy that helped further define the philosophy of the AAWS. In fact, during the fall of 2003, Dr.
Howard-Hamilton served as the editor of the 104th volume of *New Directions for Student Services*, which was titled “Meeting the Needs of African American Women.” In the introduction to this volume, she noted the cursory manner in which the needs of minority women in academia had been addressed in existing research literature and critiqued the scholarly community’s tendency to overlook within-group differences that existed among African American men and women in the academy (Howard-Hamilton, 2003a). The collection of articles that comprised this sourcebook not only provided specific data, information, and recommendations related to the unique experiences of African American women students, faculty, and administrators, but was also demonstrative of Dr. Howard-Hamilton’s commitment to disseminating knowledge constructed *by and for* African American women.

One of the insights that emerged in Dr. Howard-Hamilton’s discussion of issues pertinent to African American women in higher education was the need for these women to be active participants in creating and maintaining their own opportunities to connect with one another in supportive environments. Several recommendations proposed by Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) in the final chapter of the *New Directions* sourcebook, are directly related to the establishment and guiding philosophy of the AAWS. These authors noted that “African American women must provide spiritual and psychological support for one another...[and that] one way African American women [in the academy] can support one another is mentoring” (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 101). However, Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) also acknowledged challenges related to physical proximity that many African American women would encounter when
attempting to implement these recommendations due to their underrepresentation in higher education. Thus, they posited that on an institutional-level:

A mechanism to make this process more fluid and less cumbersome, such as a structured mentoring program facilitated by a highly visible office at the university, could make the mentor-protégée association less daunting. (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 102)

The AAWS, which occurs as a pre-conference workshop at the NASPA Annual Conference, was established to provide an example of this type of mechanism, within a highly visible, national professional organization. African American women student affairs professionals, who participate in the AAWS and take advantage of access to women like Dr. Howard-Hamilton, are to be commended for their proactive approach to resisting challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators. And while Dr. Howard-Hamilton (2003b) used the platform provided by the *New Directions* volume to encourage African American women to participate in their own emancipation, she also acknowledged the role that “individuals who have the power and authority to move the campus toward cultural enlightenment” must play (p. 103).

*Black feminist thought.* It is clear from Dr. Howard-Hamilton’s discussion of “Theoretical Frameworks for African American Women” in the *New Directions* volume that she edited in 2003—one year prior to the establishment of the AAWS as a NASPA pre-conference workshop—that Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990, 2002) is one of the primary theories that undergirded the development of the AAWS. There are three themes inherent in Collins’ (2002) Black feminist thought, which were expounded upon by Dr. Howard-Hamilton (2003b) that provide insight into how the theory contributed to the establishment of the AAWS.
First, Howard-Hamilton (2003b) noted that the identities of African American women have been shaped by a wide variety of external sources, including their experiences as underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized members of the higher education community. Thus in many instances, African American women are left alone to decipher an externally-defined standpoint that is replete with erroneous information and stereotypical images of themselves. The AAWS represents one attempt to “replace the negative images of self in the minds of these women” with new stories that are representative of the experiences and culture of African American women “from their own personal points of view” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b, p. 22).

The second theme is related to the commonality of African American women’s membership in multiple cultural groups that have been historically oppressed (i.e., race, gender, class, etc.; Howard-Hamilton, 2003b). Dr. Howard-Hamilton (2003b) describes African American women’s journey in the academy as one, which has been plagued by challenges related to underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization. As a result of these types of shared oppressive experiences, which African American women student affairs professionals have endured within the context of higher education, there is a collective strength that can be derived when these women assemble themselves in settings that are homogenous in terms of race and gender. “In other words, survival for black women is contingent on their ability to find a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b, p. 25). The AAWS is one setting where African American women student affairs professionals are able to engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue with individuals who are relatively familiar with their challenges and who can strengthen their resolve to persist. In this particular setting,
certain cultural nuances related to their status as African American women student affairs professionals do not require deep exploration and/or explanation. Thus, these women—operating from a common vantage—are liberated to discuss strategies that will assist them in resisting challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators.

Lastly, there is tremendous diversity of experience that exists among African American women, which suggests that these women should be leading efforts to “develop, redefine, and explain their own stories” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b, p. 22). The tendency of dominant ideologies, which have perpetually suppressed the voices of African American women, is to categorize all African American women into myopic and narrowly-constructed paradigms that rob them of their ability to identify with alternate expressions of reality. The acknowledgement of within-group differences is an essential component of empowering African American women to reclaim their voices and offer a multifarious portrait of reality that more accurately captures the essence of what it means to be an African American woman. The purpose of the AAWS is to provide a respite for “African American women who have been searching for a voice within rather than one heard on the outside” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003b, p. 22).

**Personal definitions of terms central to the study.** Each of the interviewees (i.e., AAWS founders, coordinators, and faculty) was asked to provide their own definitions of the terms that are central to this study (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional success). The women were asked to describe these concepts in terms of the experiences that had characterized their professional lives as African American women student affairs professionals. Their
responses contribute to a better understanding of the perspective from which they approached the tasks of establishing, coordinating, and/or leading the AAWS.

*Underrepresentation.* The first term that interviewees were asked to define was underrepresentation. The definitions provided by a majority of the interviewees included references to the unequal numerical proportion of individuals from various cultural groups who share a common physical environment. One interviewee offered the following perspective: “I would describe under-representation as a minority status in a majority setting.” Interestingly, the participants also defined underrepresentation in terms of how closely the presence of a cultural group in a micro setting (i.e., a college campus) reflects that same group’s presence in the larger macro setting (i.e., American society). One interviewee noted, “for example, African Americans represent 10% on my campus, but are 12.7% of the overall population. Therefore, they are underrepresented on my campus.”

In addition, each interviewee also discussed the psychological expression of underrepresentation as well. This aspect of underrepresentation was defined as the “being one of the only…” experience, in which many African American women student affairs professionals, especially those employed at PWIs, are often the only African American woman in their office, department, or division. The interviewees noted the psychological consequences of this experience, which included the pressure of always being expected to speak on behalf of *all* African Americans, the self-inflicted stress to perform at a level of perfection to prevent judgment and devaluation of the underrepresented group to which you belong, and feelings of depreciation associated with the underrepresented group’s lack of presence and power.
Isolation. Each interviewee was also asked to discuss her personal definition of isolation related to her experience as an African American woman student affairs professional. Each woman alluded to the tremendous sense of having to serve as one’s own support system. In other words, the challenges that African American women student affairs professionals contend with seem to be compounded when these women are situated in environments “without a support system to hear, respond [to], and empathize with the trauma” of being underrepresented and marginalized.

Marginalization. Interviewees were next asked to define the term marginalization within the context of their professional lives as African American women student affairs professionals. When asked to describe her experiences with being marginalized, one of the interviewees provided the following analogy:

When we were taught how to write in elementary and secondary school, they told you to stay within the margins. And there was always this red border running down the side of the paper. That’s marginalization. It’s a very thin strip and there’s only so much room in the margin. And then on top of that, when you use that visual, there was this red border. And red means stop—don’t go any further than this. And then on the inside of the margin is all this space, and all this room for you to move around, be creative, do what you want to do. That’s marginalization. You’re dictated, you’re told, and you’re being dictated to by teachers for years and years and years, stay within the margins, stay within this boundary. If you go outside of the margin your grade will be lowered, you will be penalized for that. So no one wants to be on the margin. Nobody wants to be in that little thin strip, but that’s where we are. That’s where people who are disenfranchised are.

This visualization presented a clear picture of the status and position of many African American women student affairs professionals, who live their professional lives on the fringes of the academy. This analogy also echoed the sentiments of the other interviewees, who discussed their experiences being “out of the mainstream,” and “not [being] included in the inner circle.” In addition to being relegated to less important (i.e., less powerful) physical and social spaces in their work environments, the cultural norms
(i.e., negotiation and communication patterns, spirituality, etc.) of many African American women are also deemed inferior and are rarely integrated into the mainstream functioning of groups in which they participate. The interviewees also discussed the position of marginality that many African American women student affairs professionals occupy within PWIs and the resulting lack of access to resources, individuals, and information that would empower them to achieve professional success (i.e., impact, upward mobility, satisfaction, etc.).

**Personal well-being.** Interviewees cited the connection between maintaining a sense of personal well-being and remaining connected with family, friends, and other forms of social support. One interviewee also believed that another aspect of personal well-being for African American women is “getting away and finding space between [themselves] and others who do not look like [them].” Another salient feature of personal well-being expressed by the interviewees was related to the need for African American women to connect with one another in emotionally supportive relationships. These strategies (i.e., spending time apart from non-African American others and developing meaningful relationships with other African American women) were mentioned as critical factors which may determine the degree to which African American women are able to maintain their own personal well-being.

**Professional success.** Interviewees discussed the importance of helping other African American women as a key factor in defining their own professional success. In other words, the interviewees believed that their own professional success was directly related to the degree of effort they expended in promoting the success of other African
American women. The women also noted the importance of “being able to make a
difference where [they] worked” and “feeling self-fulfilled” in their respective positions.

In terms of personal well-being and professional success, each of the interviewees
discussed the importance of encouraging African American women to identify and
maintain a balance between their personal lives and professional lives that was
appropriate according to their own unique individual needs and desires. The interviewees
suggested that externally-defined notions of balance may or may not be appropriate, or
even attainable, for African American women student affairs professionals. From their
perspective, one of the goals of the AAWS is to present participants with a wide array of
real-life archetypes who, look like themselves, and who define (and experience) personal
well-being and professional success in many different ways. As the interviewees noted,
the goal of the AAWS is to chip away at, and ultimately dismantle, the dominant and
prevailing ideology that there is a single formula (based on Eurocentric values), which
will guarantee personal well-being and professional success in the lives of African
American women student affairs professionals.

Each of the interviewees’ responses provided great insight into how their own
personal experiences (as African American women student affairs professionals) with
underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization informed their work in developing the
AAWS. Their responses also shed light on the types of issues that may also be common
among the African American women student affairs professionals who have participated
in the AAWS. Further, the overarching philosophy of the Summit can also be interpreted
by taking into account how the founders, coordinators, and faculty of the AAWS define
personal well-being and professional success in their own lives.
**Curriculum.** In this study, the curriculum of the AAWS is defined as the structure, or agenda of activities, which facilitates the discussion of issues relevant to the experiences of African American women student affairs professionals, as well as the dissemination of information designed to assist these women in unraveling and navigating the complexities of their personal and professional lives. It is important to note the duality that is contained within this definition. In other words, the structure, or agenda of activities, used to deliver the Summit content is as critical as the actual content itself. Inasmuch as the curriculum (i.e., the activities and the issues) of the Summit has been designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals, these women are engaging in a form of resistance and activism, in which they define the content that is worth discussing and the mechanisms that should be used to facilitate the discussion. This subtle distinction is a significant feature of the AAWS, which is alluded to by Collins (1986) in her discussion of the *Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought*. In her treatise regarding the meaning of self-definition and self-valuation, Collins (1986) asserted that “while Black female self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in the act of defining images of self and community, the theme of Black female self-valuation addresses the actual content of these self-definitions” (p. S17). Although Collins’ (1986) discussion is related to the overt act of “challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood,” her discussion may also be used to understand the benefits of resistance experienced by the African American women student affairs professionals who develop and experience the AAWS curriculum (p. S16). In this particular setting (i.e., a national professional development program), African
American women student affairs professionals resist externally-defined notions regarding the types of interaction and the kind of information they need by producing a curriculum (i.e., activities and issues) that is developed by and for themselves.

The AAWS curriculum has essentially consisted of interactive opportunities intended to allow participants and faculty to engage one another in candid dialogue regarding the collectively common and individually unique personal and professional realities these women face as higher education administrators. Further, there are several core issues that have comprised the content of the AAWS curriculum including professional growth, personal development, spirituality, mentoring/networking, and work/life balance. During each Summit, these issues are explored and discussed within the context of the agenda of activities. An example of an AAWS agenda is provided in Figure 1.
Sample AAWS Agenda

African American Women’s Summit
9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

9:00 a.m. – 9:15 a.m. Welcome and Overview
9:15 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Participant Introductions
10:00 a.m. – 10:05 a.m. Introduction of Speaker
10:05 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Keynote Address/Participant Q & A
11:00 a.m. – 11:15 a.m. Break
11:15 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. Discussion of Sister Circles Survey Results
              Credentialing
              Mentoring
              Personal and Professional Integration
12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m. Lunch
1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. Roundtable Discussions
3:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. Joint Session with African American Male Summit Participants
8:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m. Joint Networking Reception with African American Male Summit
Overall, the AAWS curriculum serves as a mechanism by which insight and strategies can be shared among participants and the AAWS faculty to promote personal well-being and professional success in the lives of these women. A discussion of the specific activities and the core issues which comprise the AAWS curriculum is offered below.

**The activities.** There are several key components that have comprised the curriculum of the AAWS, as a full-day, pre-conference workshop at the NASPA Annual Conference between 2004-2011, including keynote addresses, roundtable discussions, and question and answer (Q&A) sessions. In addition, within the context of the AAWS curriculum, there are opportunities for African American women and African American men student affairs professionals to interact as a collective group. Each of these components is discussed separately.

**Keynote addresses.** One of the ways that participants are provided with information regarding the personal and professional realities of African American women student affairs professionals is through the use of keynote addresses. Over the years, the coordinators of the Summit have enlisted the expertise of a number of seasoned African American women student affairs professionals by inviting them to share their personal and professional life experiences with AAWS participants. Through these keynote presentations, AAWS participants are given access to real-life stories that have characterized the professional journeys of African American women student affairs professionals who they aspire to emulate.

**Roundtable discussions.** The AAWS coordinators have strongly encouraged and consistently provided AAWS participants with the opportunity to dialogue with one
another. Besides the many informal conversations that take place prior to, during, and following the Summit, participants spend time in topical discussion groups, which are facilitated by seasoned African American women student affairs professionals. The topics of these discussions are guided by the conference theme, the Summit theme, and/or contemporary issues that have relevance in the personal and professional lives of African American women student affairs professionals.

*Question and answer (Q&A) sessions.* A particularly engaging component of the AAWS curriculum is the Q&A sessions that participants are involved in during the Summit. AAWS participants are encouraged to ask questions related to their experiences as African American women student affairs professionals. These questions are typically fielded by a moderator and directed towards members of the AAWS faculty, who are assembled on a panel. The range of questions (and answers) reveals the tremendous diversity of experience and perspective that exists among both the AAWS participants and faculty.

*The African American Male Summit (AAMS).* One of the unique features of the AAWS is the opportunity for African American women student affairs professionals to discuss issues that are pertinent to their own unique experiences in higher education independent of the issues that affect other cultural groups that are underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized in higher education, including African American men. Although these two groups of student affairs professionals (i.e., African American women and men) contend with some of the same challenges due to their racial identification, there are also issues that African American women student affairs
professionals encounter that are unique because of the “double whammy” of being a racial and gender minority (Holmes, 2003, p. 60).

However, recognizing that there are commonalities of experience between African American women and African American men student affairs professionals that are worthy of exploration, the coordinators of the AAWS and the AAMS have included joint sessions, which allow these two distinct groups to dialogue, strategize, and support one another. The joint sessions between AAWS and AAMS participants typically occur as the final activity on both of the Summits’ agendas and consist of a facilitated discussion on a variety of topics pertinent to both groups.

The issues. There are five core issues including professional growth, personal development, spirituality, mentoring/networking, and work/life balance, which have comprised the curriculum of the AAWS since 2004. These issues are explored in a very fluid manner within the context of the Summit activities discussed above. In other words, due to the complex and comingled ways that these issues express themselves in the lives of many African American women, it would be culturally unresponsive to compartmentalize the discussion of these issues into rigidly delineated boundaries of space and time during the Summit. Each of the core issues is discussed below.

Professional growth. Due to the fact that the Summit is offered as a full-day, pre-conference workshop during the annual conference of one of the primary national student affairs professional organizations (i.e., NASPA), enhancing the professional growth of AAWS participants is of tremendous significance. In fact, this core issue often serves as the overarching framework that guides the exploration and discussion of the other core AAWS curriculum issues. Each year the AAWS coordinators identify a theme for the
Summit that is related to the NASPA Annual Conference theme, but that also reflects an area of professional growth that is relevant and meaningful for African American women student affairs professionals. For example, in 2008, the theme of the Summit was “Navigating Campus Politics and Culture.” Some of the learning outcomes that were addressed during this Summit were as follows: 1) identifying the challenges of working in a political arena as a person of color, 2) learning about successful strategies for navigating campus politics and culture, and 3) formulating coping strategies to mediate the unique issues encountered by African American women student affairs professionals on a daily basis. Other topics related to professional growth that have been explored during the AAWS include managing up and down (i.e., supervisee/supervisor relationships); interpersonal communication styles; job search decisions and strategies; how to escape being pigeonholed in diversity/multicultural positions; the necessity of academic credentialing; awareness of and openness to the globalization of higher education; and strategies for coping with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization.

*Personal development.* Oftentimes the discussion of issues related to the personal development of AAWS participants is inextricably tied to overarching Summit theme, as well as the other core curriculum issues. Some of the discussions related to the personal development of the AAWS participants have centered around making oneself a priority (i.e., recognizing and avoiding self-neglect); managing dating and romantic relationship issues; understanding sisterhood among African American women; confronting and overcoming personality flaws; establishing a health, internally-defined sense of identity; as well as monitoring and improving physical, financial, and psychological health.
Although the discussion of these types of issues helps to facilitate the personal growth of AAWS participants, equally important is the personal renewal that some AAWS participants experience as a result of discussing these issues within the safety of a setting which is homogenous in terms of race and gender.

Spirituality. As one AAWS participant commented on her Summit evaluation when asked if the Summit had met her expectations: “My spirit was uplifted, rejuvenated, nurtured and energized. Student Affairs is a passion for me, a calling on my life. This workshop was a confirmation for me. Thanks for sharing.” Another Summit participant echoed this sentiment and indicated that the AAWS had been “intellectually stimulating, spiritually uplifting and a wonderful networking opportunity.” These comments illuminate the centrality of spirituality that is inherent within the Summit curriculum. Further, each year within the scope of the Summit’s agenda of activities, there are both direct and indirect references to the spiritual lives of the AAWS participants and faculty. Theses references include discussions related to using spirituality as a coping mechanism; the role of spirituality in decision-making; reconciling conflicts between professional duties and personal spiritual beliefs and values; and the power of spirituality in the personal and professional lives of the AAWS participants and faculty. It is interesting to note that while some references to spirituality within the Summit curriculum are broad and purposefully vague, others are directly related to the Christian experiences of the women present.

Mentoring/Networking. Another distinct feature of the AAWS curriculum is not only the exploration and discussion of mentoring/networking, but the actual opportunities for mentoring/networking that evolve among the AAWS participants and faculty.
Discussions about mentoring have included topics such as identifying and soliciting a mentor; engaging in cross-cultural, cross-gender mentoring relationships; maintaining non-competitive mentoring relationships; understating components of effective and appropriate mentoring relationships; and balancing the demands of serving as a mentor.

In addition to these topics, the AAWS curriculum has also focused on the following issues related to networking: maintaining professional integrity and personal character as it relates to other’s willingness to speak on your behalf; participating as appropriate in social events (i.e., office parties, company outings, etc.) with colleagues and superiors; understanding collegial intimacy within the student affairs profession (i.e., the relatively small and close-knit circle of individuals who work in the profession); and becoming comfortable and confident in pursuing networking opportunities. As AAWS participants and faculty engage one another in these discussions and others, opportunities abound for the establishment of mentoring relationships, which often extend beyond the confines of the AAWS. Further, by the very nature of the interaction that occurs during the Summit, participants are afforded the opportunity to network with one another, as well as with the AAWS faculty.

*Work/Life balance.* The final core issue that has comprised the AAWS curriculum is work/life balance. Topics related to this issue have included discussions about many women’s primary role in caring for young children, teenagers and/or aging parents; the tendency of supervisors and colleagues to infringe upon the “free time” of single women without children; demands of single motherhood; consequences of personal sacrifices made in an attempt to achieve professional success; using community engagement/service to enhance personal life; and explaining demands of student affairs
work to immediate and extended family and friends. In addition to the discussion of topics related to work/life balance, AAWS participants are exposed to African American women student affairs professionals who occupy varying positions of balance along the work/life continuum. In other words, work/life balance is not a variable that can be divided into discrete categorizations of either “balanced” or “not balanced.” Rather, African American women student affairs professionals fall along a spectrum in their pursuit of work/life balance.

The AAWS curriculum has been comprised of an intentionally-designed, culturally-responsive agenda of activities, which facilitates the discussion of issues relevant to the personal and professional experiences of African American women student affairs professionals. The specific issues, which have been the focus of the AAWS curriculum, include professional growth, personal development, spirituality, mentoring/networking, and work/life balance.

AAWS Participant Demographic Characteristics

A secondary analysis of archival demographic data, which was collected by the coordinators of the AAWS between 2006-2011 (excluding 2008 when the demographic questionnaire was inadvertently not administered), was conducted to obtain data related to the personal, professional, and educational characteristics of AAWS participants. In order to reduce the likelihood of duplicative responses from one year to the next, AAWS coordinators instructed AAWS participants to refrain from completing the questionnaire if they had done so in a previous year. There were 81 individuals who completed the questionnaire in 2006, 67 in 2007, 21 in 2009, 42 in 2010, and 27 in 2011. Descriptive
statistics were used to construct a profile of AAWS (n=238) participants who completed the demographic questionnaire between 2006-2011.

**Personal characteristics.** Participants were asked to answer three questions, which were intended to provide personal demographic information related to their age, marital status, and parental status. The majority of participants (33%) were between the ages of 26-30, while the smallest percentage of participants (0.85%) were 60+ years of age. Data related to this question are summarized in Table 3. The overwhelming majority of participants (75%, n=176) indicated that they were single, while 20% (n=47) reported that they were married; in addition, 5% (n=11) indicated that they had a “life partner” (frequency of missing responses=4). When queried about their parental status, 77% (n=178) of the individuals who completed the questionnaire reported that they had zero children; 9% (n=22), 10%, (n=23), and 4% (n=11) indicated that they had one child, two children, or three or more children respectively (frequency of missing responses=4).

Table 3

*Age Categories of 2006-2011 AAWS Participants (by frequency and percentage)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-34</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n=234; frequency missing=4
**Professional characteristics.** Participants were asked to answer a series of demographic questions related to their current and prior professional experiences. These questions were designed to obtain information regarding the participants’ current professional title and length of service in their current position, the type (i.e., private vs. public and 2-year vs. 4-year) and size (i.e., student enrollment) of the institution at which they were currently employed, and the number of colleges/universities in which they had been employed.

The majority of the participants (70%, n=161) were clustered in director-level positions and below (excluding those individuals who selected the “other” category). However, it is important to note that even among those participants that selected the “other” category (n=44), 93% (n=41) reported that they were currently employed in positions at the director-level and below; 7% (n=3) of the participants in the “other” category were employed in faculty positions (i.e., professor and assistant professor).

Figure 2 displays the number of participants who indicated that they were employed in a variety of professional positions, ranging from vice-president to graduate student.

Participants were also asked to indicate how long they had been employed in their current positions. Approximately 65% (n=149) of the respondents had been employed in their current positions for less than two years; only two participants (0.9%) had been employed in their current positions for more than 15 years. In addition, 48 (21%), 19 (8%), and 10 (4%) participants had been employed in their current positions 3-5, 6-10, and 11-15 years respectively (frequency of missing responses=10).
When asked to specify the type of the institution at which they were currently employed, approximately 58% (n=131) of the respondents indicated that they worked at public institutions, versus 42% (n=95) who reported working at private institutions (frequency of missing responses=12). Additionally, 92% (n=161) of the participants were employed at 4-year institutions compared with 8% (n=14) who were employed at 2-year institutions (frequency of missing responses=63). Participants were also asked to indicate the number of students enrolled at their institutions. Slightly more than half of the respondents (51%, n=118) were employed at large institutions with more than 20,000 enrolled students. Figure 3 displays the student enrollments of the institutions at which the participants were employed.
Participants were asked to indicate the number of colleges/universities at which they had worked. The majority of participants (62%, n=142) had worked at 1-2 institutions while only 3% (n=7) had worked at 6 or more institutions. Approximately 35% (n=80) of the respondents had worked at 3-5 institutions (frequency of missing responses=9).

**Educational characteristics.** Participants were presented with several questions designed to assess their current level of education, as well as their educational aspirations. The first question solicited information about the academic degrees already attained by the participants. More than half of the participants (63%, n=147) reported that
they had earned a master’s degree. Figure 4 displays the types and number of academic degrees held by the respondents.

Figure 4

*Academic Degrees Held by 2006-2011 AAWS Participants (by percentage)*

![Pie chart showing academic degrees held by respondents.](image)

*Note:* n=234; frequency missing=4

Almost 41% (n=96) of the participants indicated that they were currently enrolled at a college or university in pursuit of further education (frequency of missing responses=6). In addition, among the respondents who indicated that they were pursuing further education, approximately 35% (n=39) were pursuing Ph.D. degrees, 17% (n=19) were pursuing Ed.D. degrees, 46% (n=51) were pursuing master’s degrees, 2% (n=2) were pursuing certification, and 1% (n=1) was pursuing a professional degree (frequency of missing responses=126). Further, 69% (n=77) of the participants who were pursuing further education, indicated that they were enrolled as full-time students versus 31% (n=35) who reported being enrolled as part-time students.
Chapter Five:

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS), which is a national professional development program, developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals, assisted these women who were employed at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) to resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators. In addition, this study aimed to describe how participating in the AAWS contributed to the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs. Findings related to the purpose of the study are presented below; the presentation of findings is preceded by a descriptive demographic profile of the African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the study.

Profile of Study Participants

Data related to the purpose of the study was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews with seven African American women student affairs professionals. This sample size represents the number of women who met the initial delimiting criterion (i.e., had attended at least three African American Women’s Summits), were eligible to participate in the study based on their identification with the sampling frame criteria, and who agreed to participate in the study. Data related to the personal, professional, and educational background of each participant was collected via a demographic
questionnaire, as well as during each participant’s semi-structured interview (see Table 4).
Table 4

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Parental Status</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Length of Service in Current Position</th>
<th>Type of Institution &amp; Student Enrollment</th>
<th>Number of Institutions Employed at During Career</th>
<th>Degrees Attained</th>
<th>Current Enrollment Status</th>
<th>Degree Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>31-34</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No children</td>
<td>Graduate Assistant</td>
<td>0-2 years</td>
<td>4-year Public 20,000+</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>B.A., M.Ed.</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No children</td>
<td>Graduate Assistant</td>
<td>0-2 years</td>
<td>4-year Public 20,000+</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>B.S., M.A.</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No children</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>0-2 years</td>
<td>4-year Private 2,500-4,999</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>B.S., M.Ed.</td>
<td>Not enrolled</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No children</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>4-year Private 10,000-19,999</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>B.A., M.S.P.H.</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No children</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>4-year Public 20,000+</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>B.S., M.Ed.</td>
<td>Not enrolled</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>60+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3+ children</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>4-year Public 20,000+</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>B.S., M.S., M.Ed., Ph.D.</td>
<td>Not enrolled</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>No children</td>
<td>Graduate Assistant</td>
<td>0-2 years</td>
<td>4-year Public 5,000-9,999</td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>B.A., M.Ed.</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n=7
The personal characteristics of the participants in the study were very similar to the personal characteristics of the AAWS participants between 2006-2011. There was one participant (14%) in each of the following age categories: 31-34, 40-44, and 60+. However, the majority of the participants in the study (57%) were between the ages of 26-30. Further, among the seven African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the study, only one (14%) indicated that she was married and had more than 3 children; 86% indicated that they were single and had no children.

Consistent with the professional profile of the AAWS participants between 2006-2011, all of the participants in the study were employed in positions at the director-level and below. More specifically, 43% were employed as doctoral graduate assistants, 43% as directors, and one participant (14%) was employed as a coordinator. In terms of length of service in their current positions, 57%, 29%, and 14% of the participants indicated that they had been employed in their current positions 0-2, 3-5, 6-10 years respectively. When asked to specify the type of institution at which they were currently employed, approximately 71% of the respondents indicated that they worked at public institutions versus 29%, who reported working at private institutions; all of the participants were employed at 4-year institutions. Similar to the AAWS participants between 2006-2011, more than half of the participants in the study (57%) were employed at large institutions with more than 20,000 enrolled students. There was one participant (14%) employed at an institution with each of the following student enrollments: 2,500-4,999; 5,000-9,999; and 10,000-19,999. The majority of participants in the study (57%) had worked at 3-5 institutions, while only 14% had worked at 6 or more institutions; 29% of the respondents had worked at 1-2 institutions.
More than three-fourths of the participants in the study (86%) reported that they had earned a master’s degree, while only one participant indicated that she had earned a doctorate degree. However, 57% of the participants reported that they were currently pursuing a Ph.D.; among these women 75% were enrolled full-time. It is important to note that although more than half of the women who participated in this study were graduate students, this characteristic is consistent with the profile of African American women who participated in the AAWS between 2006-2011 (i.e., the largest number of women who participated in the AAWS between 2006-2011 identified as graduate students). In addition, three of the four graduate students in this study were doctoral students employed in student affairs graduate assistantships, who had worked as full-time student affairs professionals prior to entering their doctoral degree programs. The other graduate student who participated in this study was a full-time director in student affairs who was completing her doctorate degree on a part-time basis. This suggests that these women had significant experiences as African American women student affairs professionals, regardless of their current status as graduate students.

The demographic profile of the participants in the study closely resembled the personal, professional, and educational characteristics of the African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the AAWS between 2006-2011. This finding indicates that the sample of women who participated in the study was relatively representative of the population of women who participated in the AAWS between 2006-2011.
Findings Related to Research Questions

Three research questions were used to frame the collection and analysis of data in the current study. The research questions, as well as the resulting interview questions, were developed consistent with Collins’ (2002) articulation of Black feminist thought, which was the theory that undergirded the study. This practice has been lauded by case study methodologists, who have cited the critical role of theory in designing case study research (Merriam, 2009; Yin 2009). In essence, the research questions in this study were developed to solicit data that would erect a platform that would feature the self-defined experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs, who had participated in a national professional development program developed by and for these women. The following research, or issue, questions were the focus of study:

1. How does the AAWS assist African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators?

2. How does the AAWS contribute to the personal well-being of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?

3. How does the AAWS contribute to the professional success of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?

In keeping with Black feminist ideals, which suggest that the personal and professional realities of African American women should be constructed and explicated from their own unique vantage point (Collins, 2002), it became clear that definitions of the terms central to the study were essential. In order to provide an appropriate context for unearthing and understanding the themes that emerged from the data, participants
were asked to provide their own personal definitions of the terms that were central to the study (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional success); these findings are presented within the context of each research question.

Research Question 1: How does the AAWS assist African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators? The purpose of the first research question was to determine how participating in the AAWS assisted African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs to resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators. Critical to understating the themes related to the first research question, which emerged from participant interviews, are the participants’ definitions of the terms contained within the first research question (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization).

Participants’ definition of underrepresentation. The majority of participants described their experiences with underrepresentation in terms of the actual physical presence, or lack thereof, of African American women in a particular environment or setting. Several participants recounted experiences of being “the only” African American woman, or “the only one of a few” African American women, employed in their department, building, or institution. Participants also described the effects of being underrepresented, such as having limited access to the decision-making table and not having their perspective represented within the larger group.
Participants’ definition of isolation. In describing their experiences with isolation, most of the participants discussed the physical seclusion, as well as the overwhelming lack of support that they had endured within the context of various professional settings. Several participants made reference to the physical reality of being separated from other African American women and men on their respective campuses. In addition, one participant described her experience of being physically segregated from the rest of the staff in her department: “it was a point of angst for me because I thought, ‘You put me on the second floor. Nobody even knows I’m here.’” In addition to physical isolation, participants also noted their inability to connect with non-African American colleagues in supportive, collegial relationships.

Participants’ definition of marginalization. The primary description that emerged among participants’ definitions of the term marginalization was related to their struggle to gain full access to the culture of their respective work environments. Most of the women discussed the limited ways in which they were able to participate in the life of the departments, offices, and/or institutions at which they were employed. One participant described this experience as being “stuck in a corner.” Participants also noted the subtle, yet intentional nuances of exclusive behavior exhibited by their colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates, which relegated them to the figurative, and sometimes literally, periphery of their respective work settings.

Themes. Themes which emerged from the data in the study revealed that there were common ways in which the AAWS assisted African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education
administrators. From the data, it was clear that although there were many different manifestations of oppression (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization) suffered by the African American women student affairs professionals in this study, many of the participants indicated that the AAWS had helped them resist these oppressions in similar ways. In other words, due to the interdependent nature of the oppressions African American women endure, the themes that emerged relative to the first research question could not be parsed apart into mutually exclusive categories related solely to underrepresentation, isolation, or marginalization. Thus, themes related to the first research question are presented as a collection of experiences directly related to the AAWS, which assisted the African American women student affairs professionals in this study resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators. A summary of themes and categories related to research question #1 is presented in Table 5.
Table 5

Themes and Categories Related to Research Question #1 (by frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>THEME #1: Identification and Validation of Oppressive Experiences</th>
<th>THEME #2: Dissemination of Strategies to Resist Oppression</th>
<th>THEME #3: Fortification of African American Women’s Standpoint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Acknowledging that our experiences as African American women are different</td>
<td>Helping me to know that I am not being overly sensitive</td>
<td>Learning to reframe negative situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n=7; “X” = occurrence of category in participant’s responses; “--” = no occurrence of category in participant’s responses.
Identification and validation of oppressive experiences. Participants described the critical opportunity that the AAWS provided them to discuss their experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization as African American women student affairs professionals. As one participant explained:

I think at a basic level it’s the inspiration and the normalizing of, yes, there are other people who are working at institutions like you, that are going through some of the same things. And you just sometimes feel so alone, but when you get to the Summit, you’re like, “Wow, I’m not alone even though I feel like it physically.”

Summit discussions served as a mechanism by which some participants were able to identify non-collegial behaviors being exhibited by their colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates as covert attempts to isolate and marginalize them in their respective work environments. One participant was quite candid regarding her pre-AAWS naivety related to the various expressions of marginalization she was experiencing: “I didn’t even know I was being marginalized previously. Then I go to this Summit in 2003 and then experienced marginalization and said, ‘Oh, this is what this is.’”

Other participants discussed the affirmation they experienced as a result of having a culturally homogenous (i.e., same race and gender) community of listeners validate and identify with their experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization. One participant’s comment in particular captured this sentiment:

For me it reaffirmed that even though their situation may not have been the same as mine, it reaffirmed that there were other women who felt marginalized, or who felt like they were an island by themselves. You know, sometimes you wonder, “Am I being overly sensitive and am I looking at this in the wrong way?…Am I on the right track? Am I overreacting?”

Another participant shared this comment in regards to being validated and reaffirmed among others who could relate to her experiences with oppression as an African American woman student affairs professional:
I think what the Summit really has done—I don’t know if it helped me deal with underrepresentation per se, but I think it’s just reaffirmed that we still have to do our job 120, no 150%. And that, do your job and do it well, do it with confidence, and stop second guessing yourself….And then knowing that if I’m coming to the Summit that I will see a roomful of people who look like me, who are experiencing the same thing as me. And being able to sit there and go, “Oh I can talk about this, and don’t have to worry about it.”

Dissemination of strategies to resist oppressions. The majority of the participants commented on the sharing of specific strategies that occurred at the AAWS, which they could use to resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization that they face as higher education administrators. One participant described the Summit as “an opportunity for us to come together to learn from other people's experiences…I wouldn't necessarily say it's like a ‘how-to’ but, you know, [it’s] like an opportunity to come in and learn how to deal with things.” Participants noted that they had gleaned incident-specific strategies during various components of the Summit from both the AAWS faculty, as well as from other AAWS participants, that could be applied to their own personal experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization. A specific example of this was offered by one participant who recounted a discussion during the Summit that helped her deal with being physically isolated in her work environment:

They talked about looking at where you are, and not so much looking at the negative. How can you make it positive? Because if you’re upset all the time, or you’re angry all the time, you’re not as productive. And I think that’s why I finally thought, “You know, yeah, you are on the second floor. But so what? How can you make this a positive experience as opposed to a negative experience and stop worrying about being in the line of traffic, or students not knowing where you are?” The flipside of that was a Godsend, because at that point I was in school. And when I could get my work done, I worked on class work…And so, as time progressed I realized, “Okay, this will work.”

Many of the strategies offered by AAWS faculty and other AAWS participants were gained as a result of their own experiences with underrepresentation, isolation, and
marginalization as African American women student affairs professionals, and were
shared during the recounting of some of those painful experiences. In spite of the depth of
sharing that occurs during the AAWS, participants noted the overarching emphasis on
action that inspired them to find ways to apply the strategies to which they were being
introduced. One participant explained it this way:

I think that because I seek to put into action the things that are spoken about
during the Summit, I think that for me, it’s a strategy to help [me] feel like I’m
worthy in different ways. But, the Summit, like I said, makes me think about
things and want to put to them into action.

Another participant offered this perspective:

A lot of people outside [of the Summit] may think it’s a ―B session,‖ but it’s not.
It’s enriching. It’s invigorating. It’s supportive. It provides an opportunity to share
in confidentiality...[It’s a] support system to say ―Yeah, you can get through it,
and this is what my advice would be for you since you’re experiencing this. And
this is what you need to do.‖

*Fortification of African American women’s standpoint.* One of the ways
participating in the AAWS assisted the African American women student affairs
professionals in this study resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation,
and marginalization that they face as higher education administrators was by helping
these women to reconsider their identity within the context of a supportive and culturally
homogenous group of individuals. One participant explained it in this manner:

It’s like we get such a bad rap as Black people in society. And here you have this
large body of people who are here just doing great things, making change...You
have VPs, you have presidents, people who are running institutions in there and,
you know, they’re all a part of our community. They’re here supporting me and
they’re here encouraging me. So, I think that's important. I just think it’s really
important that we see that. We have the opportunity to come together to support
each other, to encourage one another and just to be in a space with each other. I’m
all about affinity groups [and] sometimes you just want to be with your people.

The AAWS provided a safe environment in which the African American women
student affairs professionals in this study were able to (if only temporarily) shed their
status as second-class citizens who were underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized on a daily basis, and replace erroneous, externally-defined notions of their worth with affirming, yet realistic appraisals of their identity as African American women based on the common experiences with oppression that these women face. As one participant explained, the Summit helped me know “that I wasn’t, you know, crazy. That I wasn’t a lunatic. And that these are experiences that we have as African American women.” The supportive and collegial environment that exists during the AAWS assisted the women in this study reconsider their identity as contributing, valuable, and indispensible members of their work settings. Another participant described the impact that participating in the Summit had on helping her to re-evaluate her identity:

You know sometimes when you feel isolated and marginalized, you just forget who you are, and you forget the value you bring to any situation. And I think coming to the Summit is like a shot in the arm. It’s like a vitamin [participant chuckling]. You know? Yeah, I needed this. I needed to see my sister to say, “Okay, you’re okay.” And so for me it’s a way to rejuvenate.

**Research Question 2: How does the AAWS contribute to the personal well-being of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?** The second research question was designed to ascertain how participating in the AAWS contributed to the personal well-being of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs. Participants were asked to provide their own definition of personal well-being in order to provide a context for extrapolating and framing the themes, which emerged from the data relative to this research question.

**Participants’ definition of personal well-being.** Participants’ definitions of personal well-being included the critical importance of monitoring and attending to their own physical, spiritual, and interpersonal health. Participants also mentioned the importance of engaging in activities that promote inner peace, happiness, and overall
contentment with life in maintaining a sense of personal well-being. The vast majority of the participants also discussed how their faith had played an integral role in helping them to maintain personal well-being. When participants were asked what strategies they used to maintain a sense of personal well-being, one participant commented:

One of the biggest things I do is pray. I literally will just—wherever I am, if I’m feeling some kind of way, I’m like, “Please, Lord, help me,” or I’ll say, “the blood of Jesus.” Because I feel like when I tap into my source, I feel more at peace with myself.

In addition, each of the participants talked about how their various interpersonal relationships had served as a mechanism, which has helped them to both monitor and enhance their personal well-being. One participant noted:

[I] spend time with people I care about, like my nieces, for example. I find that when I’m out of balance, I don’t spend as much time with them as I would normally. When I’m out of balance, once again, I retreat. I go into myself to get back to me. And so my way of, like, ensuring that I’m not spending too much time in the retreat process is me going and taking my nieces to a basketball game to do something that they enjoy.

**Themes.** The three themes that emerged related to the second research question were consistent with the participants’ definitions of personal well-being. The themes (and corresponding categories) focused on the centrality of the participants’ own physical, spiritual and interpersonal wellness and are summarized in Table 6.
Table 6

Themes and Categories Related to Research Question #2 (by frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>THEME #1: Emphasizing the Importance of Physical Health</th>
<th>THEME #2: Validating the Role of Spirituality</th>
<th>THEME #3: Discussing the Realities of African American Women’s Interpersonal Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Setting clear boundaries regarding demands on my time</td>
<td>Committing to regular exercise</td>
<td>Developing and maintaining healthy eating habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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Note: n=7; “X” = occurrence of category in participant’s responses; “--” = no occurrence of category in participant’s responses.
Emphasizing the importance of physical health. The majority of participants cited the focus on physical health, which occurs during the AAWS, as a factor that motivates them to strive for a greater sense of personal well-being in their own lives. In fact, one participant in particular shared how she had restarted her exercise regiment prior to attending the Summit “because I knew it was gonna come up. I was like, ‘they’re gonna tell me I need to work out again, and all that stuff.’”

In addition to conversations about the importance of proper nutrition and regular exercise, several participants noted the impact of hearing stories from AAWS faculty and other AAWS participants regarding their experiences as survivors of life-threatening illnesses such as cancer. Participants also noted the increased awareness they had gained about specific health issues that affect African American women as a result of participating in the Summit. One participant commented on the Summit’s role in raising her awareness of these issues:

I think also reiterating that you have to be physically in a good place. African American women, health-wise, nationwide heart attacks are the number one killer. And you need to be physically fit, whether you want to be a vice president, dean, or even president. What I’m learning—you got to make the time for yourself, and be physically fit for the challenge. And you know, just like they were saying once again today, to do some type of exercise—daily!

Further, participants also discussed lessons they learned related to pacing themselves in the profession in terms of maintaining their capacity for the physical rigors of a long-term career in student affairs (i.e., long hours, high-stress, moderate compensation, etc.). One participant noted:

Particularly, we’re sitting up here as administrators in high stress jobs. You know what I mean? You get parent phone calls, presidential phone calls. You may have a building that floods, or leaks, or something, or a shooting on campus, or whatever. And all this other craziness that happens, and we have to be well-prepared…It’s a physical thing, you got to have stamina. We work more than 80 hours a week and you have to have the stamina to do those things.
Validating the role of spirituality. According to participant responses, the role of spirituality in the lives of the African American women student affairs professionals in this study was validated by their participation in the AAWS. A comment shared by one of the participants clearly illustrates this sentiment: “What I think the Summit has really instilled in me [is] it’s okay to be who you are. It’s okay for me to say that I have a faith life.” Another participant described how the Summit had influenced her faith this way:

I think one other thing that has come from the Summit is just my relationship with God and faith…When you feel like you’re not in a good place or you’re struggling, I mean that is one thing that you can always go to, one person. And so, I guess that ties in with what I originally said. I said support and maybe I was thinking, you know, more people, but that’s spiritual faith, I think as well, when you don’t necessarily have the tangible support.

Participants also noted the fluidity with which AAWS faculty spoke about their spiritual beliefs and their professional lives; they believed that these genuine and candid discussions were instrumental in bridging the unnatural divide that had been created between their own spiritual values and work as student affairs professionals. One participant offered these comments, which captured this sentiment:

And so that’s why the Summit has just been great for me, to know the personal and professional do intertwine…To be able to say, “You know it’s okay. You’re spiritual life should be important—is important! And it should help sustain you. And it’s okay!”

As a result of working in professional settings that did not always affirm, and in some cases dismissed, their spiritual values, participants viewed the transparent conversations regarding God, the Bible, prayer, and faith, which occurred during the AAWS, as a factor that inspired them to hold their spiritual values central, even in the context of their professional lives. Several participants also described their participation in the Summit as a spiritual experience, which left them feeling inspired and rejuvenated. For example, one participant said that during the Summit she felt like, she was listening to “that sermon in
church where you know they’re talking to you.” Related to this sentiment, another participant added, “I think it’s just a rejuvenation process right now. You know like for example...reconnecting to the spirit piece was really—it resonated with me.”

**Discussing the realities of African American women’s interpersonal relationships.**

There were two facets of this particular theme that emerged from the data, which participants described as central to their personal well-being. Participants mentioned the importance of being able to discuss the realities of their interpersonal relationships with one another, as well as with African American men, within the context of the Summit. Several participants noted the startling statistics regarding the marital status of African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the AAWS. One participant described an activity she participated in during a Summit, which gave her greater insight into the interpersonal realities of African American women student affairs professionals’ lives:

I remember one of the very first ice breakers we did and this may have been my second or third Summit. They told everybody to stand up and they divided us by these, like, classifications. So, if you’re single, here. If you’re single and have a child, here. If you’re divorced, here. If you’re divorced with kids, here. If you’ve never been married, here….And it saddened me, but it also made me look at things a little bit more realistically with regard to being married and in the profession…and having a family. The largest group I remember, was the divorced group…But through that conversation, I was able to see women who were okay being who they were.

In addition, when discussing how the AAWS had impacted their sense of personal well-being, participants described their increased awareness of the necessity of connecting with other African American women in settings similar to the AAWS as a result of participating in the Summit. Another participant recounted her experience developing a long-term friendship with another AAWS participant as a significant outcome of her participation in the AAWS that was related to her personal well-being:
I think it was the first Summit I attended and I was sitting at a table and I had my—I had different pins that I wear on my nametag—and I had my sorority pin on it, and it’s very small. So, I think you would have to be standing in front of me to see it. But, a young woman who was in our Master’s program saw it, and she introduced herself as my sorority sister, and so ever since then, we stayed in communication. Actually we both live within an hour of each other. So, we go to lunch, we were roommates this past NASPA, we’ve gone to regional conferences for our sorority. So, that connection has led to a friendship outside of the profession.

**Research Question 3: How does the AAWS contribute to the professional success of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?** The purpose of the final research question was to explore how the AAWS contributed to the professional success of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs. Participants were asked to discuss their perspectives regarding professional success in an attempt to expedite the identification and conceptualization of themes present in the data.

*Participants’ definition of professional success.* The majority of participants describe professional success in terms of intrinsic motivators like feeling content and happy with the work they were doing, being able to affect change in their respective work settings, and fulfilling their calling and/or purpose. For example, one participant commented, “I think the success piece comes when what you're doing is making an impact and it shows that people are changing, lives are changing, policies are changing because of the work that you do.” Interestingly, participants also alluded to the struggle to remain true to themselves in the midst of work environments that were sometimes in direct conflict with their personal values and beliefs. One participant described the struggle as such:

I think you have to really figure out how to navigate that...And that’s part of that process of leadership, growth, and development...Say what you mean, mean what
you say, but at the same time you need to make sure that you are authentic and true to yourself, and to your beliefs and your core values.

Further, participants also noted the importance of mentoring other African Americans in the profession, as well as African American college students, as an indicator of their own professional success. Other participants cited more tangible indicators of professional success such as obtaining a terminal degree (i.e., Ph.D., Ed.D., etc.), taking advantage of various professional development opportunities, and achieving notoriety in the student affairs profession.

Themes. There were three themes that emerged, which were related to the third research question. Participants’ responses in regards to how the AAWS had contributed to their professional success were centered on opportunities created by the AAWS for mentoring, networking, and the encouragement they received to advance their careers through professional development. Themes and categories related to research question #3 are summarized in Table 7.
Table 7

Themes and Categories Related to Research Question #3 (by frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>THEME #1: Providing a Mechanism for the Establishment of Mentoring Relationships</th>
<th>THEME #2: Expanding Participants’ Professional Network</th>
<th>THEME #3: Encouraging Professional Development</th>
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<td>Accessing individuals in roles I aspire to fulfill</td>
<td>Obtaining on-the-spot mentoring</td>
<td>Experiencing genuine interest in my career success</td>
<td>Announcing job/internship opportunities</td>
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Note: n=7; “X”=occurrence of category in participant’s responses; “--”= no occurrence of category in participant’s responses.
Providing a mechanism for the establishment of mentoring relationships. One of the most significant ways participants benefited, in terms of their professional success, was through the opportunity that the AAWS provided for them to connect with seasoned, senior-level student affairs administrators in formal and informal mentoring relationships. In fact, many of the participants believed that one of the primary purposes of the Summit was to “connect [African American women student affairs professionals] with folks that could be mentors.” One participant labeled the informal, impromptu counseling that occurs during the Summit as “on-the-spot mentoring.” The experience of attending the Summit served as a mechanism by which, participants in this study felt comfortable approaching AAWS faculty members for specific advice, or to solicit their support in the form of a long-term mentoring relationship. One participant provided this perspective, “It provides mentoring opportunities…particularly for those that work at predominantly White institutions. We don’t necessarily have someone that we can go to and say, ‘Hey, can you mentor me?’ But that outreach is there [at the Summit].” In other words, participants noted that the AAWS faculty was extremely responsive to their requests for advice and support, which they believed was a function of the faculty members’ demonstrable commitment to a professional development program developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals.

Expanding participants’ professional network. Participants noted the expedient manner in which their professional network was expanded simply as a result of participating in the AAWS. For example, one participant shared how she was able to secure a summer internship as a result of networking during the AAWS:

“I’ve had all kinds of networking opportunities. One thing that I realized really, really early on was that I needed to diversify my experiences as best I could. So, I
met a VP at a Summit and was like, “Hey, I want to do an internship. Can you let me come do an internship at your institution?” And I went down and worked for the summer at a HBCU, which was really cool, but also really different for me. So, I’m able to say that I’ve had that experience, even though it was very minimal. So, for me it’s been more networking opportunities.

Although the student affairs profession, as a whole, is a relatively intimate professional network, participants commented on the Summit’s capacity to provide them with instant access to a cadre of seasoned African American men and women student affairs professionals, who were also in networks with a host of other student affairs professionals. Related to this theme, one participant noted:

Another thing that I will say that comes from the Summit is knowing how to work a network. How to reach out to people. How to make those connections, to maintain those connections and how small the field really is. You may not have a position at your campus, but you may know someone who does have a position somewhere that could utilize my expertise or my skill set. And you, being committed to me,…you're comfortable enough to reach out to extend that recommendation or whatever the case may be.

Encouraging professional development. Participants noted several ways that participating in the AAWS had inspired them to engage in a wide variety of professional development activities. Some of these activities included publishing scholarly work in the field and pursuing an advanced academic degree. One participant shared the impact that the AAWS faculty had on her professional development:

I feel like every time I go, I get something that I want to go, and like, share. They had talked about making sure that you get a Doctorate. They talked about making sure that you publish something. We had talked about that my second year of grad school, and before the summer, I had published…They don’t necessarily say things that I don’t think about, but they put it in a way that it mobilizes me. The things that we talk about usually mobilize me to wanna do, or be better than I am.

Another participant also described the emphasis that was placed on earning a terminal degree:

My experience has been like the last two times that I went, that you’re in there and the moral of the story is, you know, go get your Ph.D. or get your doctorate
degree, which is good information. You definitely want to be encouraged to go and do it, but it's like in order for you to get going, you got to have the Ph.D. So, do the doctorate. Do the doctorate degree.

According to the participants in this study, the AAWS represents a place where African American women student affairs professionals are encouraged to set and pursue their professional goals and are applauded (literally) for any accomplishments that move them closer to the realization of those goals. One participant described the support that she has experienced as a result of participating in the AAWS:

Every year, honestly, we would get up and we would say who we are and where we’re from, and any time somebody is like an SSAO [senior student affairs officer], everybody was like [participant clapping hands & laughing], or if people would say, “I’m finishing my Doctorate,” you know, everybody would clap [participant clapping hands & laughing]. So, I think that is one thing that I look forward to doing every year—standing up, saying what I’m doing differently.

The comments of one participant are especially illustrative of the impact that the AAWS has had upon the professional development of the African American women student affairs professionals in this study:

Participating in the Summit has, uh, made me into the professional I am today. It’s just the nurturing—that’s the key word for me—and support that I received. And to know that I can make it. I can do anything. I just need time, and the tools to do that.
Chapter Six:

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore a national professional development program, the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS), which was developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. This purpose was pursued in an attempt to describe how the AAWS assisted African American women student affairs professionals employed at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) to resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators. In addition, a focus of this research was to determine how the AAWS contributed to the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals employed at PWIs.

The following discussion is intended to summarize and provide conclusions related to the findings of the study. In addition, implications for practice relative to African American women student affairs professionals, higher education institutions and student affairs professional associations, as well as the coordinators of the African American Women’s Summit are offered. Recommendations for further research are presented, as well as a closing vignette.

Conclusions

The exploration of the case that was the focus of this study (i.e., the AAWS) proceeded in two distinct phases. The first phase of data collection consisted of an in-depth investigation of the AAWS, which included interviews with AAWS founders,
coordinators, and faculty. In addition, a secondary analysis of archival demographic data was conducted in order to construct a profile of AAWS participants between 2006-2011. Data obtained from the interviews with AAWS founders, coordinators, and faculty, as well as AAWS participant demographic data (2006-2011) were used to construct an in-depth description of the AAWS, which was the case being explored in this study. The second phase of research included semi-structured interviews with African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs who had participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits. This phase of the research was designed to solicit data related to the three research questions that were the focus of this study. Conclusions related to each of these phases of research are presented below.

**The African American Women’s Summit.** The AAWS has been offered as a pre-conference workshop during the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators’ (NASPA) Annual Conference since 2004. The AAWS in its current form was birthed almost a decade earlier, in 1995, by Dr. Mary McKinney Edmonds, who had a vision to convene African American women student affairs professionals during a regular NASPA Annual Conference session. In its relatively brief history the AAWS has secured its place as a pre-conference workshop offering that African American women NASPA conference attendees expect and look forward to attending.

The African American women, Dr. Mary McKinney Edmonds and Dr. Mary Howard-Hamilton, who were responsible for founding the AAWS, were sensitive and responded to the unique challenges encountered by African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. Thus, the AAWS founders established a venue in which these women could gather and reaffirm one another. Although the first AAWS program
proposal was rejected by NASPA program reviewers, it is clear that this national professional development program developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals has become a well-regarded component of the NASPA Annual Conference agenda.

From its inception until the present, the African American women student affairs professionals who have been responsible for the establishment and proliferation of the AAWS have continued to rely on several theoretical propositions from Black feminist thought to guide their work with the Summit. The first proposition is related to the critical need for African American women to be validated and affirmed as they individually and collectively consider and adopt internally-constructed perspectives of themselves, their experiences, and the world around them. Collins (2002) asserts that the interpretations of African American women’s reality, which have been constructed by their common inherited struggle against racism, sexism, and classism, must be placed in their own hands. The AAWS provided the African American women student affairs professionals in this study with a venue in which they could discuss and decipher the challenges related to underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization that they face as higher education administrators.

The second proposition contained within Black feminist thought that guided the establishment of the AAWS is the realization that African American women need spaces created specifically by and for themselves. It is in settings like the AAWS that African American women student affairs professionals seemed to derive collective strength as a result of engaging in constructive dialogue regarding strategies that assisted them in resisting challenges related to the various oppressions they endure within the context of
their professional lives. The final theoretical proposition that was critical in the
development of the AAWS is related to the importance of acknowledging and
recognizing within-group differences that exist among African American women and
providing a setting in which these differences can be discussed, explored, and
promulgated in the larger higher education community. The AAWS represented a
gathering of African American women whose experiences as student affairs professionals
(i.e., members of the academy) may differ from those of other African American women.
In other words, there are nuances of experience that should not be overlooked, but rather
explored and used to assist this specific cohort of women in resisting the oppression they
face, maintaining personal well-being, and achieving professional success.

As a result of the AAWS coordinators’ philosophical orientation in Black feminist
thought, the AAWS curriculum consisted of specific activities and issues, which were
carefully constructed each year to stimulate thought and discussion aimed at empowering
the African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the
Summit. Activities included keynote addresses, roundtable discussions, question and
answer (Q&A) sessions, and a joint session with the African American Male Summit.
The issues that were commonly incorporated into the AAWS agenda included, but were
not limited to professional growth, personal development, spirituality,
mentoring/networking, and work/life balance.

The demographic data of the AAWS participants between 2006-2011 revealed
that the majority of the attendees were between the ages of 26-30, single, and had no
children. In addition, the majority of participants were graduate students, had been
employed in their current positions less than two years, and worked at public, 4-year
institutions with more than 20,000 students enrolled; most of the participants had also only worked at 1-2 institutions in their careers as student affairs professionals. More than half of the participants reported that they had already earned a master’s degree and many of them were currently enrolled as full-time students pursuing master’s and doctorate degrees.

An interesting observation related to the demographic profile of the AAWS participants between 2006-2011 is the high percentage of these women who remain single. It is unclear if these numbers are disproportionately higher for African American women student affairs professionals as opposed to African American women in other professional fields. However, participants in this study noted the alarming rate of divorce among the African American women student affairs professionals they interacted with during the AAWS. It is speculative to suggest that the demands of work in student affairs administration (i.e., long hours, high-stress, moderate compensation, etc.), or other high-demand professional positions, is responsible for the high rate of divorce among African American women, but this line of thought certainly warrants further investigation. In light of the emphasis on professional development (including the pursuit of advanced academic degrees), it is impressive that so many of the African American women student affairs professionals who participated in the Summit had already earned or were in the process of attaining graduate degrees. Although, as research suggests (Henry, 2008), this may further diminish their chances of getting and/or remaining married, especially to African American men of equivalent professional status.

The research questions. In their definitions of the terms central to the study (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization), participants focused on the
psychological effects of the oppressions they had endured, as opposed to the actual oppressive behaviors exhibited by their colleagues and/or supervisors. One interpretation of this finding is that the African American women student affairs professionals in this study were more focused on how to move forward and repair the psychological damage they had suffered as a result of working in oppressive environments.

An observation related to the participants’ definitions of personal well-being and professional success is that they seemed to define these concepts mostly in terms of intangible indicators, such as inner peace and spiritual and interpersonal wellness, and intrinsic motivators such as feeling fulfilled, staying true to oneself, and mentoring other African American colleagues and students. This finding seems to suggest that African American women student affairs professionals may thrive in higher education professional settings that are sensitive to their definitions of these terms and intentionally create opportunities for African American women to engage in activities that elicit these types of internal responses.

There were three research questions that were the focus of the present study. These questions were designed to explore how the AAWS assisted African American women student affairs professionals employed at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) to resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, and contributed to their personal well-being and professional success. An analysis of data related to the first research questions revealed that there were three ways the AAWS helped these women resist the acts of oppression they experienced within the context of their professional lives. Participating in the Summit: 1) helped the participants identify and validate
occurrences of oppression, 2) aided in the dissemination of strategies to resist oppression, and 3) served as a means to fortify the standpoint of the African American women in the study.

Three themes emerged related to the second research question, which explored how participating in the AAWS contributed to the personal well-being of the participants. Those themes included emphasizing the importance of physical health among African American women, validating the role of spirituality in the professional lives of the participants, and discussing the realities of African American women’s interpersonal relationships.

The final research question was aimed at exploring how the AAWS contributed to the professional success of African American women student affairs professionals. Themes related to this research question included: providing a mechanism for the establishment of mentoring relationships among African American women, expanding the participants’ professional network, and encouraging participants to engage in a variety of professional development initiatives.

**Implications for Practice**

The following implications for practice are offered in an attempt to strengthen African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs who contend with issues of underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization. The personal well-being and professional success of these women is intimately interconnected with the personal, academic and professional success of African American college students, especially African American female college students who are facing these same challenges within the context of their academic lives. In addition to providing African American women
student affairs professionals with strategies which may help them resist the multiple forms of oppression they endure at PWIs, implications are also recommended for higher education institutions and student affairs professional associations that are committed to improving workplace conditions for African American women student affairs professionals. Finally, implications are provided to the coordinators and faculty of the AAWS in order to secure the future of this extremely relevant, and much needed, national professional development program designed specifically by and for African American women student affairs professionals.

**For African American women student affairs professionals.** Based on the findings of this study and due to the large number of African American women student affairs professionals who find themselves employed at institutions where they are severely underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized, the importance of connecting with other African American women in collegial and supportive relationships cannot be overstated (Cole, 2001). This recommendation certainly may be easier said than done for many African American women student affairs professionals who do not have access to other African American women in their professional settings. However, there are several ways these women may be able to connect with one another. One way is to participate in national professional development opportunities, like the AAWS, that are designed specifically by and for African American women student affairs professionals. The national gathering (i.e., the NASPA Annual Conference) during which the AAWS occurs draws a large number of African American women student affairs professionals and thus serves as a mechanism to convene a critical mass of these women during the Summit. Although many of the women who participate in the AAWS are underrepresented and
physically isolated on their respective campuses throughout the year, from their perspective, “coming to the Summit is like a shot in the arm. It’s like a vitamin.”

Based upon the findings of this study, African American women student affairs professionals may reap multiple benefits from connecting with one another, as well as with other African American women in general, by seeking out and engaging themselves in spiritual communities, social and civic organizations, and formal and informal athletic groups. In addition to identifying culturally homogenous settings in which these women may find psychosocial support and affirmation, African American women student affairs professionals may also enhance their personal well-being by regularly participating in spiritual events, social and civic initiatives, and physical activities.

Another way African American women student affairs professionals can connect with one another in meaningful interpersonal relationships is through engagement with technology (Henry & Glenn, 2009) and social media. There are numerous online professional networks such as Linkedin™ and others hosted by student affairs professional associations like NASPA, that African American women student affairs professionals may find helpful in expanding their network of culturally homogeneous professional associates. In addition, technologies such as Elluminate™ and Skype™ may be used to establish and maintain open lines of communication with African American women student affairs professionals on other campuses, who are not physically accessible.

For higher education institutions and student affairs professional associations. The responsibility for fostering professional environments and campus cultures where African American women student affairs professionals can thrive
personally and professionally, cannot be placed on the shoulders of these women alone.

As higher education institutions seek to enhance the academic success of their matriculating students, particularly African American students, they must not neglect policies and procedures that will assist African American women student affairs professionals in resisting challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators (Jackson, 2003). According to Howard-Hamilton (2003):

> The university community should be prepared to support African American women when they seek a safe haven within predominantly black student associations, black sororities, and black female support groups. Faculty and administrators must be comfortable with black women establishing these spaces. (p. 25)

In other words, campus administrators at postsecondary institutions should be aware of and support the need of African American women student affairs professionals to connect with one another in meaningful and sustainable ways (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Ultimately, executive leaders at higher education institutions should be committed to increasing the critical mass of African American women student affairs professionals on their respective campuses. Supporting this assertion, Patitu and Hinton (2003) asserted that “institutions should avoid having only one African American faculty member or administrator in a department” (pg. 90). Flowers (2003) extended this recommendation and encouraged an aggressive recruitment and promotion process for African American student affairs professionals and suggested that:

> Individual colleges and universities should compute representation ratios for African American student affairs administrators (using African American students on their campus as the reference group) to measure the degree and extent of their representation on campus. Senior-level university administrators should then use this information to aid in hiring and promotion decisions. (pg. 39)
Based on the findings of this study, student affairs professional associations, such as NASPA and ACPA, should continue supporting programs like the AAWS and be receptive to expansions of these programs that may be forthcoming. In addition, each of these organizations should solicit input from their respective internal cultural affinity groups (i.e., NASPA’s Knowledge Communities, ACPA’s Standing Committees) to assess the specific needs of their various constituencies. A tangible recommendation that may be implemented to attract a broader audience for the AAWS, is for student affairs professional associations such as NASPA and ACPA to supply dedicated web space that can be used to advertise the AAWS, store archival presentation information, and feature biographical information of African American women student affairs professionals who are making a difference on their respective campuses and in the field at large.

One of the most significant ways that higher education institutions and student affairs professional associations can assist African American women student affairs professionals to resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, is to allow these women to define for themselves the types of support they need (Jackson, 2001). It is then critical that higher education institutions and student affairs professional associations direct the necessary fiscal resources towards helping these women develop programs and services designed specifically by and for themselves.

**For the African American Women’s Summit.** Based upon the responses of the participants in this study, the AAWS has filled a tremendous gap in professional practice for African American women student affairs professionals. This national professional development program designed specifically by and for African American women student
affairs professionals has assisted many of these women to resist challenges related to the multiple forms of oppression they face as higher education administrators. In the face of being severely underrepresented, the AAWS has helped many of these women persist in institutional settings where they also experienced intense isolation and marginalization.

The following recommendations are being provided in an attempt to solidify the longevity of the AAWS to ensure that future generations of African American women student affairs professionals, who unfortunately will face many of the same challenges, have access to this national professional development program. The first recommendation is related to marketing the Summit to a broader audience of African American women student affairs professionals. One of the participants in this study shared her experience attending another regular conference session during the NASPA Annual Conference for African American women student affairs professionals and not recognizing many of the women as AAWS participants. When she inquired in her small group if the women present were familiar with the AAWS, many of the women were unaware that the Summit existed. A strategy that may be implemented to increase awareness of the AAWS is to specifically challenge AAWS participants to invite other African American women student affairs professional colleagues to attend the Summit. In addition, it may be helpful to contact African American women student affairs professionals who are members of NASPA via email and inform them of the opportunity to participate in the AAWS.

Another implication is to enhance the Summit curriculum to expose African American student affairs professionals to specific professional trends and issues including but not limited to budgeting, improving interpersonal communication skills, managing up
and down, and implementing strategies to enhance student development and success. In other words, AAWS participants could benefit tremendously from the professional wisdom that has been amassed by the senior-level AAWS coordinators and faculty.

Finally, the coordinators of the Summit may wish to further stratify the leadership of the AAWS to include graduate students and new professionals. This may help to provide greater insight into the unique and changing needs and interests of these cohorts of African American women student affairs professionals who are overrepresented in the Summit. In addition, participants noted their desire to be exposed to the experiences and perspectives of African American women college and university presidents.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore the African American Women’s Summit, which is a national professional development program developed *by and for* African American women student affairs professionals. Due to the comprehensive and broad nature of this case study, which was pursued to fill a gap in the existing literature, further research should include a more in-depth examination of the personal and professional experiences of African American women student affairs administrators. This may be accomplished by conducting in-depth cultural ethnographies, or anthropological studies, that delve into the multiple and interdependent life experiences that shape the complex identities of African American women student affairs professionals. Studies investigating the personal and professional realities of African American women faculty at PWIs may also serve to elucidate issues that could be used to unite, fortify the resolve, and enhance the persistence of African American women employed at PWIs.
It is notable that quantitative data related to the current status of African American women student affairs professionals was also unavailable in the literature. Thus, further research is needed to determine the actual number of African American women student affairs professionals, the types of institutions and positions in which they are employed, their personal and educational backgrounds, as well as data related to their salaries in comparison to student affairs professionals from other cultural ethnic groups (i.e., African American men, White women, Latino men, etc.).

Based upon the findings of this study, future research should include an investigation of the role of spirituality on the personal well-being and professional success of African American women employed in higher education and in other professional milieus. This line of inquiry may specifically focus on the Christian experiences of African American women due to the salience of this particular religion in the lives of the women in the present study. Similarly, it would be interesting to explore the impact of involvement in social/civic organizations, as well as formal and informal athletic groups, on the personal well-being and professional success of African American women student affairs professionals and other African American women employed in higher education.

Further, due to the high percentage of African American women graduate students who participated in the AAWS between 2006-2011 and who participated in this study, it seems that valuable insights may be gained by investigating these women’s encounters with underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization within the context of their academic experiences. Future research may also be used to identify and examine the impact of programs similar to the AAWS, which are developed specifically by and for
African American women graduate students. If these types of programs do not exist, studies should be conducted to hasten and aid in their development.

While the present study was aimed at exploring and describing a national professional development program developed by and for African American women student affairs professionals, further research is needed to determine the impact of other professional development programs on African American women. Due to the relative scarcity of professional development programs designed specifically by and for African American women, it is advisable to study other types of professional development programs to determine how these programs aid African American women in their personal well-being and professional success. In addition, studies exploring and describing similar pre-conference programs that are developed by and for other minority cultural groups, which also occur during the NASPA Annual Conference (i.e., the African American Male Summit, the Latino/a Knowledge Community pre-conference workshop, etc.) are warranted.

Closing Vignette

A story recounted by one of the participants captures the essence of the Summit and is related to the way that AAWS participants and faculty take care of one another and help one another deal with the intense emotional strain that is the result of being underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized as African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs:

I think it was the second Summit that I’d attended. It was at the very beginning and women just began introducing themselves and their institutions and why they chose to participate in the Summit. And I can’t remember this woman and what institution she was from but, she began to speak about why she was attending the Summit and she began to cry. She was going through some very challenging experiences in her position and you could tell that it was bothering her. And she
chose NASPA to participate in the Summit to, I guess, learn some ways and how to experience this, but I guess she just got caught up in what she was going through that it moved her to tears. And it was the way that not only the facilitators, but the women at her table that she didn’t even know embraced her and comforted her...that’s building community that occurred in the Summit that keeps women going.

Further, after collecting voluminous amounts of data related to the research questions that guided this study, I realized that it was my own personal experience participating in the AAWS that resonated with the accounts provided by the African American women student affairs professionals who participated in this study:

As I sat in the company of my sister-colleagues, I was able to literally feel the energy in the room rise to an almost tangible presence with each passing introduction. It was at this moment that I realized how important these types of gatherings were, not only to me, but to many of the women who began their introductions with, “Good morning sisters, I am sooo happy to be here! I am the only African American woman in my department and y’all look wonderful!” or “Good morning. My name is ____________ and I am delighted to be here because I am the only African American woman student affairs professional on my entire campus.” Within the first 10 minutes of introductions (which lasted almost an hour), it became painstakingly clear that for some of the women in the room, this was going to be the one time during the year that they would be genuinely listened to and heard. They had been ignored, overlooked, discounted, and undermined, but it was our time to listen to, recognize, affirm, and support them; they had been torn down, but it was our responsibility to build them up. There was no doubt in my mind—this was a unique space created intentionally and specifically by and for us!
List of References

Aguirre, A., Jr. (2000). *Women and minority faculty in the academic workplace: Recruitment, retention, and academic culture*. Retrieved from ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. (ED446723)


Harris, T. M. (2007, Summer). Black feminist thought and cultural contracts: Understanding the intersection and negotiation of racial, gendered, and professional identities in the academy. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 110, 55-64.


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Appendices
Appendix A: IRB Initial Approval Letter

August 6, 2010

Nicole West  
Adult, Career and Higher Education

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review  
IRB#: Pro00001324  
Title: The African American Women’s Summit: A Case Study of a Professional Development Program Developed by and for African American Women/Student Affairs Professionals

Dear Ms. West,

On 8/6/2010 the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above referenced protocol. Please note that your approval for this study will expire on 8/6/2011.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.116(d) which states that an IRB may approve a consent procedure which does not include, or which alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent, or waive the requirements to obtain informed consent provided the IRB finds
and documents that (1) the research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects; (2) the waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects; (3) the research could not practically be carried out without the waiver or alteration; and (4) whenever appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-9343.

Sincerely,

Krista Kutash, PhD, Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board

Cc: Anna Davis, USF IRB Professional Staff
Appendix B: AAWS Founders, Coordinators, and Faculty Interview Questions

SECTION 1: AAWS HISTORY

1. How did you become involved in the AAWS?
2. Why did you become involved in the AAWS?
   a. Were there any significant personal or professional experiences that led to your involvement with the AAWS?
3. What was your role in the establishment of the AAWS?
4. What has been your role since its establishment?
5. What were the events surrounding the decision to establish the AAWS?

SECTION 2: AAWS PHILOSOPHY

6. What is your personal definition of underrepresentation? Please discuss any personal experiences you have had with underrepresentation as an African American woman student affairs professional.
7. What is your personal definition of isolation? Please discuss any personal experiences you have had with isolation as an African American woman student affairs professional.
8. What is your personal definition of marginalization? Please discuss any personal experiences you have had with marginalization as an African American woman student affairs professional.
9. How do you define personal well-being? Please describe when and how you have experienced personal well-being in your own life as an African American woman student affairs professional.
10. How do you define professional success? Please describe when and how you have experienced professional success in your own life as an African American woman student affairs professional.
11. Tell me about the philosophy/theory that guided the development of the AAWS?
12. What was the original purpose of the summit?
   b. Has the original purpose changed and if so, how?
      i. What influences led to those changes?
13. What were the original goals of the summit?
   c. Have the original goals changed and if so, how?
      i. What influences led to those changes?

SECTION 3: AAWS CURRICULUM

14. Please describe the general structure of the summit?
   d. What other individuals are involved?
   e. What are their specific roles?
15. How were the themes/subject of each summit selected each year?
16. Are there any activities that you remember that were especially memorable during any of these specific summits?

SECTION 4: CLOSING

17. Is there any other information you believe would be useful to me in understanding the history, philosophy, and curriculum of the AAWS?
Appendix C: Email Invitation to Participate

Dear African American Women’s Summit Participant:

While African American women have been participating in American higher education for more than a century, they remain significantly underrepresented among college and university administrators and many of them contend with intense isolation and marginalization. Further, research regarding programs developed by and for these women to resist these challenges is sparse.

My name is Nicole M. West and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at the University of South Florida. I have participated in the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS) for the past two years and am writing to solicit your participation in my dissertation research.

The purpose of my dissertation is to explore how the AAWS assists African American women student affairs professionals at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, and contributes to their personal well-being and professional success. This purpose will be accomplished by conducting a qualitative case study of the AAWS, which will include interviews with AAWS participants.

Participation in this study would require approximately 2 ½ hours of your time, including one, 2-hour interview and a 30-minute review of your interview transcript. Interviews will be conducted during the 2011 NASPA Annual Conference. Your responses will be kept confidential and at the conclusion of the study, you will be provided with a copy of the findings. It is believed that this research will illuminate the role of the AAWS and will incite other African American women to research and document the individual and group strategies they are employing to facilitate their own success in the field of higher education.

If you meet the sampling frame criteria below and are willing to participate, please respond to my inquiry at nwest@mail.usf.edu. In your response please indicate if you plan to attend, and are registered for 1) the 2011 NASPA Annual Conference, and 2) the 2011 African American Women’s Summit. If you have any questions related to the conduct of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me via the contact information provided in my signature below.

I sincerely appreciate your consideration of my invitation to participate; I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Nicole M. West, M.Ed.
Graduate Research & Teaching Assistant
College of Education
University of South Florida
4202 E. Fowler Ave., EDU 105
Tampa, FL 33620
(XXX) XXX-XXXX
nwest@mail.usf.edu
Sampling Frame Criteria

In an attempt to identify and include those women that have the greatest potential to yield significant (i.e., quality and quantity) data central to the purpose of the current study, the following sampling frame criteria is being employed to delimit the number of participants. In order to participate in the present study you should:

- identify as an African American woman student affairs professional;
- have experienced underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization within the context of your professional life, due to your identification as an African American woman;
- have had the majority of your professional experience at a PWI;
- have participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits; and
- have been continuously employed as a student affairs professional prior to and following your participation in the AAWS.

The following definitions may be used to assist you in determining if you meet the aforementioned sampling frame criteria. Please note that broad definitions of the terms “underrepresentation,” “isolation,” and “marginalization” have been purposefully offered. Please use these broad definitions as a guide, but be sure to consider other expressions of underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization that are relevant to your own unique professional experiences as an African American woman student affairs professional at a PWI.

- **African American woman**—a woman of African descent who self-identifies with the experience of being born and raised in the United States and who is a U.S. citizen.

- **Student affairs professional**—an individual who is employed in a full-time; non-faculty; entry-, mid-, or senior-level position, who contributes to the co-curricular (i.e., out-of-class) experiences and holistic (i.e., physical, social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual) development of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions (Nuss, 2003).

- **Majority of professional experience at a predominantly White institution (PWI)**—more than 50% of cumulative full-time employment has been at accredited, two- or four-year, degree-granting institutions that are not ethnically classified as historically Black colleges or universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), or tribal colleges (Hirt, 2006).

- **Underrepresented**—refers to the experience of being a member of a specific cultural group (in this study, African American women), whose numerical distribution is significantly and noticeably less than that of other cultural groups present in the same environment (Viernes Turner, 2002).

- **Isolated**—refers to “feelings of loneliness, to the persistent awareness of ‘not fitting in,’ to always being on guard, and/or to the fatigue that comes from always having to be one’s own support system” within the context of one’s professional environment (Daniel, 1997). In addition, this term refers to the experience of being geographically separated from other African American women and men professionals on the same campus due to the common segregation of student affairs functional areas (Henry & Glenn, 2009).

- **Marginalized**—refers to the persistent experience of being covertly or overtly forced to compromise one’s cultural identity and/or being relegated to a peripheral position within the context of one’s professional environment (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Wolfman, 1997)
Participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits —physically present in at least three African American Women’s Summits for the entire duration of the Summits (i.e., 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.) and participated in Summit activities and discussions as a registered participant.

Continuously employed—was employed as a student affairs professional (see definition above) at least 12 months prior to attending their first AAWS and has maintained employment as a student affairs professional until participation in the current study.
Appendix D: Email Endorsement from AAWS Coordinators

Dear African American Women’s Summit participant:

On behalf of the coordinating team of the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS), thank you for your support of the Summit over the past several years; your participation has enriched the success of this highly significant and well-regarded NASPA pre-conference workshop. It has been an absolute joy to coordinate the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS) during the NASPA Annual Conference for the past six years, and to spend time sharing with women in higher education leadership roles. We are writing to solicit your participation in a very important research study regarding the African American Women’s Summit.

Nicole West is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida is conducting a qualitative case study of the AAWS for her dissertation research. She is interested in exploring how this national professional development program, which was designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals, assists these women who are employed at predominantly White institutions resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators, and contributes to their personal well-being and professional success.

We expect that the findings of this study will provide us with valuable information regarding the impact of the Summit on the personal and professional lives of African American women student affairs professionals. In addition, we believe that this research will lead to greater exposure of this national professional development program, and thus enhance its potential to impact a greater number of African American women in higher education.

Nicole is a former AAWS participant and several of us serve as her mentors; thus, we fully endorse her research and strongly encourage you to participate. Should you have any questions related to the study, you may contact Nicole at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at nwest@mail.usf.edu or Dr. Wilma Henry, Nicole’s dissertation director, at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at whenry@usf.edu. Thank you in advance for your valuable contribution to this important research initiative.

Sincerely,

AAWS Coordinators,
Gail Buck, Ed.D.
Carolyn Brightharp, Ph.D.
Wilma Henry, Ed.D.
Tracy Shaw, Ph.D.
Bettina Shuford, Ph.D.
Appendix E: Email Thank You for Agreement of Participation

Good afternoon research participant:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my dissertation research regarding the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS). I look forward to interviewing you in March during the 2011 NASPA Annual Conference in Philadelphia!

The purpose of my study is to explore how the AAWS, which is a national professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals, assists these women who are employed at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators and, contributes to their personal well-being and professional success.

In preparation for your interview, I have attached a brief demographic questionnaire for you to complete. The first page solicits some basic personal, educational, and professional background information and asks you to provide a definition of several terms that are central to my study (i.e., underrepresentation, isolation, marginalization, personal well-being, and professional success). Questions on the second page will assist me in scheduling your interview. At your earliest convenience, please complete the attached form and return it to me via email at nwest@mail.usf.edu. In order to complete the form, you will need to open the attached PDF, fill it out on your computer, save it, and attach the saved PDF to your email back to me.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at the contact information below. Thank you again for your time and support.

With sincere appreciation,

Nicole

Nicole M. West, M.Ed.
Graduate Research & Teaching Assistant
College of Education
University of South Florida
4202 E. Fowler Ave., EDU 105
Tampa, FL 33620
(XXX) XXX-XXXX
nwest@mail.usf.edu


Appendix F: AAWS Participant Demographic Questionnaire

African American Women’s Summit  
Participant Demographic Questionnaire

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<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<td>Today’s Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. My age category is:</td>
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<td>2. My marital status is:</td>
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<td>3. The number of children I have is:</td>
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<td>4. The highest degree I have earned is:</td>
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<td>5. Are you currently enrolled at a college/university for further education?</td>
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<td>5a. If yes, what degree are you pursuing?</td>
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<td>5b. If yes, what is your enrollment status?</td>
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<td>6. What is your current professional title?</td>
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<td>7. Is this your first professional position?</td>
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<td>8. How many years have you been employed in your current position?</td>
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<td>9. How many years have you worked in higher education?</td>
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<td>10. At how many colleges/universities have you worked?</td>
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<td>10a. What type of higher education institution are you currently employed at?</td>
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Please provide a personal definition of each of the following terms. In constructing your definition, please consider and include ideas that are central to your own unique experiences as an African American woman student affairs professional.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Underrepresentation</td>
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<td>Isolation</td>
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<td>Alienization</td>
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<td>Personal Well-Being</td>
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<td>Professional Success</td>
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Interviews will be conducted Monday, March 14th - Wednesday, March 16th during the 2011 NASPA Annual Conference and will last approximately 2 hours. Please indicate below your 1st, 2nd, and 3rd preference for an interview date and time. Interviews will be scheduled in the order I receive your responses. However, every attempt will be made to accommodate your 1st preference.

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<td>My 2nd Preference</td>
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<tr>
<td>My 3rd Preference</td>
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Have you registered for the 2011 NASPA Conference?

Have you registered for the 2011 African American Women’s Summit?

Thank you for your responses and participation!
Appendix G: Email Confirmation of Participation

Good evening ____________________.

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my dissertation research regarding the African American Women’s Summit (AAWS). I look forward to interviewing you during the NASPA Annual Conference on ________________ from ________________.

Your interview will be conducted at the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown (1201 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107). I will provide you with the exact room number at the African American Women’s Summit on Sunday and/or will call you on your mobile telephone on Saturday evening once I have checked in and received the room number.

In your reply, please indicate 1) if you are still willing/available to participate, 2) your mobile telephone number, and 3) your consent to participating in an audio-recorded interview.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me via email or my mobile telephone (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

I sincerely appreciate your support in helping me accomplish this tremendous goal. Thank you again for your participation!

Nicole M. West, M.Ed.
Graduate Research & Teaching Assistant
College of Education
University of South Florida
4202 E. Fowler Ave., EDU 105
Tampa, FL 33620
(XXX) XXX-XXXX
nwest@mail.usf.edu
Appendix H: Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: The African American Women’s Summit: A Case Study of a Professional Development Program Developed by and for African American Women Student Affairs Professionals

USF IRB Reference Number: 00001334

Dissertation Chairperson: Wilma J. Henry, Ed.D.
Telephone Number: (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Principal Investigator: Nicole M. West, M.Ed.
Telephone number: (XXX) XXX-XXXX

1. INTRODUCTION

I, Nicole M. West, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Adult, Career, and Higher Education at the University of South Florida, am inviting you to participate in a research study, which I am completing in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree. The research will be conducted under the direction of Dr. Wilma J. Henry, an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychological and Social Foundations in the College of Education at the University of South Florida. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

2. WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of my study is to explore a national professional development program designed by and for African American women student affairs professionals. The African American Women’s Summit (AAWS), which occurs at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators’ (NASPA) Annual Conference, is the program I will be investigating. I am particularly interested in how this program assists African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators and contributes to their personal well-being and professional success.

You are being asked to participate because you identify as an African American woman student affairs professional; have experienced underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization within the context of your professional life, due to your identification as an African American woman; have had the majority of your professional experience at a PWI; have participated in at least three African American Women’s Summits; and have been continuously employed as a student affairs professional prior to and following your participation in the AAWS. I will be interviewing a total of approximately 6-8 African American women who also meet these criteria and will use this information as the basis for my doctoral dissertation. I may also use this information in articles that might be published, as well as in academic presentations.

3. WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?

I will video-record and transcribe your interview so as to make sure that I remember accurately all the information you provide. I will keep these video files and transcripts in a locked file cabinet in my office and they will only be accessible to and used by me for purposes related to this research.

Your participation today should take about 2 hours. In addition, I will be asking you to review your interview transcripts to ensure that I have accurately captured your responses; this should take approximately ½ hour. If necessary, I may also contact you after your initial interview in order to clarify any of your responses that were unclear or to solicit missing data. Please keep in mind that your participation is on a purely voluntary basis. If you agree to participate, you will be...
asked to answer questions related to the following topics: 1) your personal, professional, and educational background; 2) the nature of your involvement in the AAWS; 3) how participating in the AAWS has assisted you in resisting challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization you face as a higher education administrator; and 4) how participating in the AAWS has contributed to your personal well-being and professional success.

4. WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY?

Due to the personal and sensitive nature of some of the questions you will be asked, you could possibly experience some discomfort as a result of reflecting on and sharing your beliefs and experiences. Besides this potential risk, which is minimal, there are no other physical, financial, or psychological risks anticipated.

5. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY?

In addition to the minimal risk mentioned above, you may also personally benefit from the opportunity to reflect on and share your beliefs and experiences. In addition, your participation will enhance the scant body of knowledge regarding the personal and professional experiences of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs. Besides these potential benefits, which are minimal, there are no other physical, financial, or psychological benefits anticipated.

6. WHAT ARE MY OTHER OPTIONS?

Other than participating in an individual, video-recorded interview there are no alternative ways to participate in this study however, your participation is completely voluntary.

7. CAN I STOP PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY?

If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to answer any questions, please feel free not to. If at any time you would like to stop participating, please tell me. We can take a break or stop altogether. You will not be penalized in any way for deciding to stop participation at any time.

8. WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY?

You will not receive payment or any other form of remuneration for participating in this study?

9. IS THERE ANY OTHER INFORMATION I NEED TO KNOW?

Confidentiality:

All the information I receive from you, including your name and any other identifying information will be strictly confidential and will be kept under lock and key. I will not identify you or use any information that would make it possible for anyone to identify you in any presentation or written reports about this study.

Problems, Questions, or Concerns:

If you have questions, you are free to ask them now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at Nicole M. West, 4202 E. Fowler Ave., EDU 105, Tampa, FL 33620, via telephone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX, or via email at nwest@mail.usf.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the University of South Florida’s Division of Research Integrity and Compliance at (813) 974-5638 or my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Wilma J. Henry, at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at whenry@usf.edu.
10. DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I understand the information printed on this form. I have discussed this study, its risks and potential benefits, and my other choices with Nicole M. West. My questions so far have been answered. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study and my understanding that I can withdraw at any time.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject’s Name (print and sign)</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Person Obtaining Informed Consent (print and sign)</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator’s Name (print and sign)</td>
<td>Date</td>
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Appendix I: AAWS Participant Interview Questions

SECTION 1: PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Career path, including educational background.

SECTION 2: NATURE OF AAWWS INVOLVEMENT

2. How did you learn about the AAWS?
3. Why did you decide to participate in your first AAWS?
4. Were there any specific personal or professional experiences that surrounded your involvement with the AAWS?
5. Why did/do you continue to participate in the AAWS?
6. What did you gain from attending a 2nd or 3rd time that you didn’t gain the 1st time you attended?
7. Experiences as an AAWS participant:
   a. Interactions with other participants.
   b. Interactions with coordinators/faculty.
   c. Engagement with the curriculum.
   d. Other significant experiences.
8. Please describe any AAWS experiences/activities that you found especially relevant/helpful/enjoyable?
9. What do you believe is the purpose of the AAWS?

SECTION 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTION 1. How does the AAWS assist African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators?

UNDERREPRESENTATION

10. What is your definition of underrepresentation as an African American woman student affairs professional?
11. Can you discuss any experiences that stand out in your mind related to being underrepresented as an African American woman student affairs professional that occurred before your 1st summit? Please give me a specific example.
   a. How did you respond to that experience?
   b. What coping strategies did you employ?
12. Can you discuss any experiences that stand out in your mind related to being underrepresented as an African American woman student affairs professional that have occurred since attending your 1st summit?
   a. How did you respond to that experience?
   b. What coping strategies did you employ?
13. Do you perceive any differences in how you responded/coped as a result of something you learned encountered as an AAWS participant?
a. Explain.

**ISOLATION**

14. What is your definition of isolation as an African American woman student affairs professional?

15. Can you discuss any experiences that stand out in your mind related to being isolated as an African American woman student affairs professional that occurred before your 1st summit? Please give me a specific example.
   a. How did you respond to that experience?
   b. What coping strategies did you employ?

16. Can you discuss any experiences that stand out in your mind related to being isolated as an African American woman student affairs professional that have occurred since attending your 1st summit?
   a. How did you respond to that experience?
   b. What coping strategies did you employ?

17. Do you perceive any differences in how you responded/ coped as a result of something you learned encountered as an AAWS participant?
   a. Explain.

**MARGINALIZATION**

18. What is your definition of marginalization as an African American woman student affairs professional?

19. Can you discuss any experiences that stand out in your mind related to being marginalized as an African American woman student affairs professional that occurred before your 1st summit? Please give me a specific example.
   a. How did you respond to that experience?
   b. What coping strategies did you employ?

20. Can you discuss any experiences that stand out in your mind related to being marginalized as an African American woman student affairs professional that have occurred since attending your 1st summit?
   a. How did you respond to that experience?
   b. What coping strategies did you employ?

21. Do you perceive any differences in how you responded/ coped as a result of something you learned encountered as an AAWS participant?
   a. Explain.

**RESEARCH QUESTION 2. How does the AAWS contribute to the personal well-being of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?**

22. How do you define personal well-being?

23. What strategies have you implemented in order to maintain a sense of personal well-being in your life?
a. Were any of those strategies influenced by your participation in the AAWS? If yes, please tell me how?

24. What impact do you think participating in the AAWS has had on your personal well-being, if any?

25. What is the greatest lesson you have learned from participating in the AAWS related to your personal well-being?

26. Has the opportunity to network and be mentored by AAWS faculty affected your personal well-being? Please describe how?

RESEARCH QUESTION 3. How does the AAWS contribute to the professional success of African American women student affairs professionals at PWIs?

27. How do you define professional success?

28. What strategies have you implemented in order to achieve professional success in your life?
   a. Were any of those strategies influenced by your participation in the AAWS? If yes, please tell me how?

29. What impact do you think participating in the AAWS has had on your professional success, if any?

30. What is the greatest lesson you have learned from participating in the AAWS related to your professional success?

31. Has the opportunity to network and be mentored by AAWS faculty affected your professional success? Please describe how?

SECTION 4: CLOSING

32. Are there any other comments you would like to add regarding how you believe the AAWS assists African American women student affairs professionals resist challenges related to the underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization they face as higher education administrators?

33. Is there anything you would like to add that would better help me understand how participating in the AAWS has helped you personally or professionally?
Appendix J: Researcher’s “Protecting Human Research Participants” Certificate of Completion

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Nicole West successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 12/04/2009

Certification Number: S43001
About the Author

Nicole Mary-ella West is a proud alumnus of the University of South Florida (USF), where she earned a B.A. in Psychology in 1997, an M.Ed. in College Student Affairs in 1999, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration. She has been employed as a student affairs professional for more than 10 years and has served in a variety of professional roles at USF including Coordinator of the Office of Multicultural Activities, Recruiter and Assistant Director in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, and Adjunct Faculty in several different academic departments. She has co-authored several research publications, which explore the experiences of African American women employed and enrolled in higher education. She is currently employed as a Graduate Research & Teaching Assistant in USF’s College of Education and is also the proprietor of N-Vision Designs, a graphic design company she founded to help bring the visions of Christian businesses, ministries, and churches to life.