

Unseen and Unheard to Understood: Discovering Belonging at an HBCU*Martina Malone**Northwestern State University of Louisiana***Abstract**

The journey to finding one's place in academia can be complex, especially for Black students navigating Predominantly White institutions (PWIs). My path through higher education—from feeling invisible in some White spaces to discovering true belonging at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU)—illustrates how educational environments shape not just our learning, but our sense of self. Through my personal narrative, I explore how the transition from being unseen and unheard to understood transformed my academic experience and professional growth.

Keywords: Black students; Historically Black Colleges and Universities; microaggressions, Predominantly White institutions; racial identity; belonging; Southern University and A&M College

First Glimpse

“Wow—I’ve never seen so many Black people at one time,” I whispered to myself as I navigated the steep bleachers at my first football game at Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The sight of so many people who shared my racial identity felt foreign yet comforting. This experience stood in stark contrast to my upbringing in a predominantly White neighborhood and school, which was my norm throughout my formative years. My parents had humble beginnings and were steadfast in their commitment to provide my siblings and me with the best opportunities, including access to private schools—which sometimes posed challenges to my sense of belonging. There was a small Black student population, and I rarely saw teachers who looked like me or could relate to my experiences. I vividly remember one fifth-grade picture day when a White classmate made a racist remark that left me in tears—my red eyes captured in that year's yearbook photos. Such moments felt particularly isolating given how few Black students there were with whom to share and process these experiences.

Neither Seen Nor Heard

One particularly distressing memory is from a high school history class. I sat with a few Black friends, engaging in conversation like the other students. However, because we were few in number, we stood out. The teacher, visibly annoyed by our presence, furrowed his brows and in a deep southern accent, sternly commanded us to “Be quiet!” He then proceeded to separate us, instructing one of the boys in our class to sit near me and another friend, while scattering the rest of my friend group into a sea of Whiteness. One White male student, displeased about being moved near me and my friend, cynically remarked, “Ughhh, you’re sending me to the ‘coffee section’?! ” This remark elicited a roar of laughter from the entire classroom, and I felt...small. The teacher’s failure to correct the White student only reinforced the idea that my presence was unwelcome. My experience is not uncommon for Black students navigating predominately White educational spaces. Research (Solórzano et al., 2000) suggests that Black students often face unique challenges in these environments, including feelings of isolation and microaggressions.

Upon graduating from high school, I enrolled at a PWI in my hometown of Lake Charles, Louisiana. While my overall experience was exceptionally positive, encountering a few racially biased professors was unfortunately not unusual. These encounters often manifested in subtle ways, as illustrated by one particular class discussion. I recall sitting in class with my hand raised waiting to be called on. My professor, a tall, lanky, brown-haired White man with large glasses perched on the end of his nose, scanned the room. His gaze seemed to hover over me briefly before moving on, calling on one non-Black student after another. Each overlooked moment reinforced a sense of being unseen, similar to how I felt in high school. As his eyes darted from student to student, it became evident he was deliberately skipping over me.

I became irritated and assertively said, “Excuse me, but I have a question too!” Only then did the professor decide to acknowledge my presence—his reluctant attention feeling more like a bothersome obligation than genuine recognition. This was far from an isolated incident between he and I and the intimate class size made it implausible that he had simply overlooked me.

Though not representative of all my interactions, these experiences gradually shaped how I approached academic spaces. The dismissal by both peers and professors and the need to assert my right to participate became an unexpected part of my educational experience. My story echoes the experiences of countless other Black students who have faced the indifference of White professors (Johnson et al., 2008) in their pursuit of knowledge. It is a silent struggle for

many and often unnoticed by those who have never had to fight for their voice to be heard in a classroom.

Seen and Heard

Years later, I relocated to Baton Rouge, Louisiana for work. I found myself drawn to the opportunity to enroll at an HBCU. “The deadline to apply for Southern University’s MBA program ends soon!” said JT—my colleague-turned-friend, with a sense of excitement and urgency. Following his advice, I submitted my application and began my studies that fall. Part of what drove my decision to pursue my MBA was my eagerness to get promoted on my job. I explored several schools, both HBCUs and PWIs, but Southern University and A&M College had special significance to me. Many of my loved ones, had attended and graduated, including my mother who was a student in the engineering program. They all also spoke highly of the wonderful experiences they had.

Research has consistently shown that HBCUs create safe and nurturing environments that not only support Black students but empower them to thrive academically, personally, and professionally (Lomax, 2020). Stepping onto the campus as a graduate student, I was overcome with a sense of awe that was reminiscent of my first Southern University football game. Witnessing the plethora of educated Black students pursuing similar goals filled me with inspiration. This sense of inspiration and belonging is a hallmark of the HBCU experience. Studies also reveal that this unique dynamic leads to a multitude of positive long-term outcomes for students such as enhanced well-being (Gasman & Esters, 2024). Looking back on my educational journey prior to my HBCU experience, I realized that encounters with Black educators had been rare. Seeing a diverse array of Black students and professors at Southern University was a refreshing change, highlighting the importance of representation in academia. I looked forward to my in-person classes every week and recall how freeing it was to be asked to participate in class discussions. I felt seen. In my academic research and in my own personal experiences, I have found that these educators often serve as mentors and role models, fostering relationships that shape students’ academic journeys and future careers.

In a qualitative study involving a focus group of 11 Black students attending a PWI, Davis et al. (2004) identified a recurring theme characterized by the sentiment, “They Seem the Same; I’m The One Who’s Different.” This theme encapsulated the students’ perception of their academic environment, wherein they expressed feeling different from their peers. The

participants also noted that they felt a greater sense of comfort in verbal expression in classes with a substantial representation of Black students, or those taught by Black professors. They described feeling less constrained in their communication, because they could articulate their thoughts without the need for cautious language selection, and without the fear of inhibiting class discussions. This mirrors my own HBCU experience, where I found a freedom of expression and sense of belonging that allowed me to flourish. The positive impact of this environment extends far beyond the classroom. I have never felt safer in a learning environment. I did not have to tip-toe around topics to avoid offending my colleagues. Instead, I felt safe to share how I felt with authenticity. This freedom to be myself, combined with the rigorous academic environment and supportive faculty, created an experience that went beyond mere education—it was truly transformational. The impact of this environment became even clearer to me as I began researching educational outcomes for Black college students in my doctoral program.

Understood

My sentiments are not an anomaly. HBCUs excel at providing a nurturing atmosphere and HBCU graduates often report higher levels of well-being and job satisfaction in their post-collegiate lives compared to Black graduates from PWIs (Seymour & Ray, 2015). These experiences inspired my research and doctoral dissertation which examined career advancement challenges through a multigenerational lens, specifically investigating perceived barriers faced by Black graduates of HBCUs and PWIs in Louisiana. The study explored how factors including race, institutional type (HBCU vs PWI), work structures, and best practices influenced upward mobility across four generations—Baby Boomers (Boomers), Generation X, Generation Y (Millennials), and Generation Z. One interesting observation from my study was how the sense of belonging and support HBCU graduates received often translated into confidence on the job. This speaks to the power of HBCUs. My sincerest desire is to create a body of work that provides fact-based evidence and best practices for all educational institutions to provide their students with a similar transformative experience, where they feel seen, heard, and understood.

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Author Biography

Dr. Martina Malone is an award-winning Senior Instructional Designer at a global aerospace and defense company, where her leadership development programs reach thousands of professionals worldwide. Her Ed.D. research investigated career advancement challenges for Black graduates, with findings presented at academic conferences across the United States.