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## How the Tiger Keeps Its Stripes: A Case Study of Black Student Involvement and Retention at Clemson University

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HOW THE TIGER KEEPS ITS STRIPES: A CASE STUDY OF BLACK  
STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND RETENTION AT  
CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
Communication, Technology and Society

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by  
Sherman Jones  
May 2020

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Travers Scott, Committee Chair  
Dr. Kristen Okamoto  
Dr. Rhondda Robinson-Thomas

The docuseries project for this thesis,  
***How the Tiger Keeps Its Stripes: A Case Study of Black Student Involvement and  
Retention at Clemson University***

by Sherman Jones,  
Master of Arts, Communication, Technology, and Society  
May 2020  
Clemson University

may be viewed at  
[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL\\_R0sASVNnE6N2olRztNCaK6L1glr8ieX](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_R0sASVNnE6N2olRztNCaK6L1glr8ieX)

### Abstract

This manuscript documents and elaborates upon a creative project thesis that used documentary filmmaking to explore organizational involvement and black student retention at Clemson University. The produced docuseries contains five episodes of student and faculty interviews about their experiences at Clemson. This manuscript expands upon the documentary by discussing Clemson University's general and racial history, as well as academic literature on student involvement, critical race theory, and documentary research. Due to my own involvement and experiences as a black student at Clemson, my positionality is incorporated throughout the project. This manuscript concludes with an overview of project content and an outline of the documentary.

*Keywords:* Clemson, race, ethnicity, student development, higher education, student involvement, student organizations

### How the Tiger Keeps Its Stripes:

#### A Case Study of Black Student Involvement and Retention at Clemson University

The project outlined in the following manuscript was an idea inspired by a qualitative methods graduate course project I completed in early 2019. That project was an interview-based study on black students' organizational experiences. I choose "black" to include those who identify as African-American as well as other ethnicities represented in the African diaspora. I interviewed three friends about black student organizations they were proud to be in and loved the stories they told me. When the time came later that spring to develop an idea for my thesis, I knew I wanted to do a non-dissertation project that continued the work from the interviews. I wanted to know if organizational involvement was a factor in black students staying at Clemson. I spoke with some of my mentors, who worked as directors of programs that advise and sponsor primarily black student organizations, about what kind of project I could do for my thesis that had the potential to actually inspire some lasting change. After our conversations, I found that my mentors and I agreed that leaving behind a video as an educational tool for future Clemson students would be a great way to inspire lasting positive social change. To anchor this inspiration: I was asked to use video-style representation for this project by some of the Clemson faculty and staff who plan to use this content to educate their students on the black Clemson student experience in organizations. The project eventually grew beyond this scope after my committee and I realized how impactful it could be to a larger audience. The project yielded more robust stories than originally expected and so developed into an account of the black experience at Clemson.

Here, I will describe the two components of the thesis project: first, this written manuscript and then the accompanying docuseries. I begin by providing a brief history of

Clemson University, where this case study was performed, and the school's history with black people. This account of history includes past (pre-21st century) and recent (2010s) events on campus to provide a chronological context to the racial climate currently at Clemson University. I then explore scholarly perspectives grounding the case study in theory and supporting choices made for the project. Critical race theory and phenomenology are outlined in the literature review as theoretical perspectives through which I approach the students' stories. Student involvement theories are outlined to support the goal of the case study: to investigate black students' experiences in organizations at Clemson and explore how these experiences have factored into their retention. Scholarship on film-making practices supports the use of a documentary as an effective educational tool. This manuscript ends with an account of the documentary's development versus the original plan.

The accompanying docuseries to this manuscript consists of five episodes. The first episode of the docuseries describes the racial history of the university as context for the principal content: the student interviews. The next three episodes of the docuseries investigate what factors of student involvement positively affect black student retention by showing interview footage of black students involved in various campus organizations and clubs. The interviews show students telling their own stories highlighting their experiences being involved and connecting what aspects of those experiences have affected their decision to retain at Clemson. The final episode of the documentary mainly consists of my own interview, detailing my experience as a black Clemson student and highlighting the role being involved played into my Clemson experience. The episode ends with a conclusive account of the patterns in student interview content displayed in the middle three episodes and overviews connections made with historical and theoretical perspectives.

## **Clemson University**

Founded in 1889 as Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina, Clemson University<sup>1</sup> is a land-grant institution that sits in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains in upstate South Carolina. Land-grant institutions were born of the Land-Grant College Act, or Morrill Act, of 1862, which provided various states the land and/or resources needed to establish universities expected to educate their residents in agriculture and mechanical arts so that they can provide those skills back to the state (Cunningham, 2019). These land-grant institutions opened opportunities to thousands of working people previously excluded from higher education (Cunningham, 2019; “Morrill Act,” 1862). Clemson College was founded as the embodiment of Thomas Green Clemson’s last will and testament (Haire, 2015). The college was an all-white, male military college from its first class of 446 in 1893 until it became a coeducational, civilian institution in 1955. The college was the first segregated educational institution in South Carolina to integrate racially with the admission of Harvey Gantt in 1963. Today, Clemson University is recognized as a top 30 public institution in the United States and is classified as an R-1 research institution: “a Doctoral university with highest research activity” (“Doctoral Universities,” 2019). With nearly 25,000 total students, Clemson is the second-largest educational institution in South Carolina by student population. Athletically, Clemson is an NCAA Division I institution represented by the Clemson Tigers athletic teams and their mascots, the Tiger and the Cub. The Clemson Tigers football team won national championships in 1981, 2016, and 2018.

### **Early Black History at Clemson**

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<sup>1</sup> Clemson Agricultural & Mechanical College was established in 1889; the name was changed to Clemson University in 1964 by state legislature to formally recognize the school’s expanded academic and research developments. (clemson.edu/about)

Edmund Burke said, “People who never look back to their ancestors will not look forward to posterity,” meaning those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it (1872, p. 34). Clemson University holds a dark history with African Americans, both students and non-students. Taking advantage of a system commonly used in the South during post-slavery and post-Reconstruction eras, convict labor was used as a means of utilizing the massive labor force of emancipated blacks to build the foundation on which today’s campus stands (Everyhope-Roser, 2014). Dr. Rhondda Thomas, an Associate Professor of English at Clemson, has led the charge in uncovering the oppressive black history of the university. She has performed research that unearthed various facets of convict labor life for those who built Clemson’s original campus (Everyhope-Roser, 2014). Thomas notes many oppressive aspects of Clemson’s early history; especially important are the facts that laws were constantly changed to heighten misdemeanors to felonies. The labor—working in mines, building roads and bridges, molding and laying bricks, making turpentine from tree sap—was unbearable, and, with the absence of 19<sup>th</sup>-century juvenile system, adolescents convicted of petty crimes were often grouped in with much older men (Everyhope-Roser, 2014). In her own published research, Thomas (2018) delves deeper into the specifics of convict laborer life at Clemson. Thomas (2018) writes:

The vast majority of the nearly 700 convicts assigned to Clemson College between 1890 and 1915 were African Americans, and the prison records for those men and boys portray them in broad strokes that negate the complex nuances of their lives. (p. 593)

Following the laws of segregation, although black men and boys actually built the campus with their bare hands, these same black bodies were not allowed to attend the institution from its foundation in 1889 until its desegregation almost 75 years later.

Throughout this time, America mulled over its “Negro Problem,” Clemson included (Suggs, 2003). Black applicants to Clemson during this period were routinely forwarded to South Carolina A&M College for Negroes in Orangeburg, SC, thanks to the segregation clauses written into the Morrill Act of 1862 (Suggs, 2003). Eisiminger (2003) writes about what Clemson to this day calls “Integration with Dignity”: the story of Clemson’s admittance of Harvey Bernard Gantt as the first black student in January of 1963. To explain where Integration with Dignity originates, Eisiminger (2003) writes: “Unlike desegregation at most previously all-white Southern institutions of higher learning, Clemson’s integration occurred without riots, violence, the presence of federal marshals, protests or acts of defiance by students, government leaders or anyone else” (p. 2). The story proves more complicated than just uncharacteristic peace; Suggs (2003) provides information on early plans by high-ranking South Carolina officials to change the admissions laws and policies at Clemson to bar Gantt’s first attempt at admission—a legally oppressive maneuver similar to that mentioned in the previous section on convict labor. On the other hand, Eisiminger (2003) tells of a complex strategy by then-Clemson president R.C. Edwards to garner the support of many important men, such as SC State Senator Edgar Brown, SC Governor Ernest Hollings, SC State Senator Marion Gressette, and Clemson Dean of Students Walter Cox, to ensure that the proper channels would be in place to establish and maintain peace and order on campus as Harvey Gantt enrolled and attended. According to Suggs (2003), Gantt’s attendance sparked more progressive change at Clemson, but more recent history has shown that Clemson never fully acclimated itself to true inclusion of black students.

### **Recent Clemson Black History**

After Gantt’s experience at Clemson concluded in 1967, not much is known about Clemson’s racial history during the post-Jim Crow era of the 1970s-1990s. Thomas (2018)

addresses evidence of Clemson's lasting connections to the Confederacy, which first appeared within the first decade of the institution's history. Thomas (2018) also notes that the song "Dixie"—analyzed by Holmberg (1985) as a song having heavy and lasting impact on secessionist pride in Confederate states—and the display of the Confederate flag were not officially eliminated from university events until 1972, and additionally explores the continuing discussion of Confederate heritage at Clemson well into the 1980s. In 1982, the center for government and public affairs research at Clemson University was established and named for Clemson alumnus, US Senator, and archfoe of civil rights legislation Strom Thurmond. Although there has not been any official Confederate flag display by the University since my arrival here in August 2014, I have seen students and visitors display the Confederate flag in various forms. I specifically remember seeing students hanging the flag in their windows at move-in, and I can also recount seeing the flag boasted at off-campus fraternity houses in 2014. That same year, Clemson hired its first external administrators in President James Clements and Provost Robert "Bob" Jones to inspire student-focused leadership at the institution.

Nevertheless, it took until about 2016 for the University and its Board of Trustees to finally acknowledge the dark history Clemson has with black people, when ground was broken for three historical markers meant to symbolize the start of such acknowledgment efforts (Barnett, 2016a). This change of heart did not come suddenly, but rather was born of a string of racially-tense events. While a graduate student at Clemson, A.D. Carson created a timeline from 2013-2016 of racially tense events on campus, complete with national and regional events which may have left effects on the campus racial climate (Carson, 2016). Carson's Ph.D. research and social activism developed into his "See the Stripes" campaign, which advocated for and promoted more racial inclusion at Clemson (Carson, 2016). This campaign, which was launched

while I was a Clemson student and saw grow, was the inspiration for the title of this project. Two of the most notable events from that timeline are the Cripmas party of 2014 and the Sikes Sit-In of 2016.

According to Ohlheiser (2015), the Cripmas party was a gang-themed off-campus party thrown by a few members of the Clemson chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity. Photos of attendees dressed in various colored bandanas, oversized T-shirts, and low-slung pants circulated on social media, prompting on-campus protests from mostly black students. Ohlheiser (2015) also reports that the university investigation led to the two-year suspension of the Clemson chapter due to violations of alcohol rules and student code of conduct. The national Sigma Alpha Epsilon organization indefinitely suspended the chapter. The event had occurred less than a month after the suspension of the University of Oklahoma's chapter of the fraternity after a video of members participating in a racist chant also circulated on social media. The Cripmas party and its circulated photos were said to have resurfaced "long-standing concerns among many minority students at [Clemson University] about the overall racial climate at the school" (Ohlheiser, 2015, p. 2). According to Carson's (2016) timeline, following this incident and the protests, a resulting document of grievances and demands from the Clemson "Coalition of Concerned Students" was delivered to administration, challenging university leaders to make changes to improve the campus atmosphere for minority students.

Approximately a year of smaller protests ensued, mostly regarding lack of movement from the Board of Trustees to act on the renaming of buildings on campus titled after racist forefathers. The iconic clocktower building on Clemson's campus as seen on T-shirts, postcards, skyline photos, and various other media is currently named Tillman Hall. The building is named for "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, a man who was adamant about the exclusion of black people from

political power and the restriction of black people's civil rights (Haire, 2015; Kohl, 2017).

Tillman was a man with a murderously racist and politically corrupt adulthood that he was proud of, but he contributed heavily to the establishment of Clemson College in the 1890s while serving as South Carolina Governor and U.S. Senator ("Benjamin", n.d.; Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019a; Haire, 2015). The building was originally named the Main Building and colloquially called "Old Main" until being renamed 54 years after its construction in 1946 and 28 years after Benjamin Tillman's death (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019a; Haire, 2015). Amidst calls to return the building to its original name in 2015, the Board of Trustees publicly announced that they would not change the name from Tillman Hall, with chairman David Wilkins stating that it is important not to deny the unpleasant parts of history because it is more important to understand and learn from them (Haire, 2015; Kohl, 2017). Wilkins, in 2013, was ironically one of the state leaders who led the charge for the Confederate flag's removal from the South Carolina State House because of its controversial representation of state and national history (Haire, 2015; Levine, 2013). I can say from my own experiences as a student at Clemson in 2015 that when these protests happened, the average Clemson student did not know anything about Benjamin Tillman and the university still does nothing to inform students about Tillman's legacy so that we may "understand and learn from the history" like the Board of Trustees wants us to.

The Clemson campus was shaken heavily again on the morning of 11 April 2016, the day before the scheduled groundbreaking for the aforementioned historical markers symbolic of the beginning of the university's efforts to acknowledge its dark history. That morning, a student discovered a bunch of bananas hanging from one of the brand new "African Americans at Fort Hill" signs on campus (Carson, 2016). With this wake-up call that the racial climate had not

improved in a year's time, a new group of concerned students—including me—convened to plan and execute the Sikes Sit-In.

The protest began on 13 April 2016 at the Fort Hill House where the incident occurred with a speech from Richelle Hayes, sophomore Computer Science major, expressing student sentiments regarding the banana incident itself, as well as the lack of productive action by administration to resolve racial-climate issues in the past (Barnett, 2016b). The march ended at Sikes Hall, the home of high-level administration at Clemson University, and with a dual speech from Clemson students Remy Barnwell, junior English major, and myself, sophomore Computer Science major. The demonstration transformed from a simple march into an elaborate sit-in inspired by the Greensboro Diner Sit-Ins of 1960. Vasilogambros (2016) reported on the Sikes Sit-In as a peaceful student protest demanding more action from administrators on diversity and inclusion efforts at Clemson University. According to Carson (2016), the same set of grievances and demands presented in January 2015 by the Clemson Coalition of Concerned Students was used as a checklist for administrators to create solutions in order to end what became a nine-day demonstration. An article in *The Atlantic* (Vasilogambros, 2016) reported that five students were arrested for trespassing after protesting overnight on Wednesday, 13 April 2016, and for much of the following day before refusing to leave the building at 5:30p.m. Lee and Barnett (2016) note that near the end of the Sit-In, “Racism at Clemson seems to happen more behind the scenes, on social media, [Freshman Alice Bridgeman] said. One Clemson student was charged a day earlier with making threatening comments on the anonymous social media platform Yik Yak” (p. 2). After nine days of protest, including back-and-forth meetings between students and executive leadership team members, organizing students decided to suspend the Sikes Sit-In, coincidentally right after president Jim Clements released a letter outlining a list of eight items and responsible

officials in response to the student and community protest (Lee & Barnett, 2016; Logue, 2016).

The necessity and initiative of the black students that had mobilized to respond to these racist incidents on campus at Clemson were indicative of not only the impact of Clemson's history and heritage on current black student life, but also of how crucial leadership experiences are for black student development.

Following the suspension of the Sit-In, Clemson Chief of Staff Max Allen predicted that not even a year later, students would see significant change on campus as a result of the protest (Logue, 2016). Since the Sikes Sit-In, Clemson's campus has been uncharacteristically quiet regarding racial relations. The only possible bias incident I can remember occurring afterwards was the impeachment of student body Vice President Jaren Stewart in 2017 for past misconducts, just weeks after he, as the highest ranking black student leader, led attendees of a Student Senate meeting to sit during the Pledge of Allegiance in a protest of the racial climate on campus (Zamudio-Suaréz, 2017). Now, instead of protest and demonstration based social activism, I see more black student leaders occupying high ranking positions in student government and joining other majority-white organizations and committees on campus than in days past. Every semester after the Sit-In until spring 2020, I attended a meeting with student government leaders and high-ranking university officials to discuss progress on the initiatives inspired by the protest. In my last semester as a graduate student, I helped undergraduate black students create the Clemson Improvement Association, an organization dedicated to the improvement of black student life at Clemson and responsible for continuing to hold those semesterly Sit-In progress meetings from now on.

### **Literature Review**

In order to root the basis of this project in theory and scholarship, I conducted a review of existing literature from scholarly sources across communication and other disciplines to provide a framework through which to gain insight into my case study at Clemson. The following literature review discusses scholarship on theories that highlight the power of experience in qualitative methods, critical race theory with an emphasis on higher education, phenomenology, and researcher reflexivity. I also review scholarship on the impact of student involvement in general and black student involvement specifically. To support the choice of medium for this project, I also review scholarship outlining documentary filmmaking as a research and educational tool.

## **Experience**

Human experience (of both researcher and research subject) is the centerpiece of qualitative practices such as ethnography, phenomenology, and conducting interviews. Lived experience represents an understanding of human choices, behaviors, and beliefs and the ways in which those things affect people (Given, 2008). Qualitative practices are heralded for their pure depth and their robust data on a number of individuals rather than for the sake of observing a sample most like the greater population as in quantitative practices (Daher, Carré, Jaramillo, Olivares, & Tomicic, 2017; Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). On the unexpected power of collecting experience, Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey (2016) state: “When researchers invite people to talk about their reflections on experience, they can sometimes learn more than they set out to discover” (p. 499). Qualitative practices should seek to unearth participants’ and researchers’ reflections and experiences regarding a phenomenon or environment and then make meaning out of those perspectives and stories (Daher et al, 2017). The positionality or perspective that a participant or researcher occupies within an experience is

referred to as their standpoint. Frank (2000, p. 356) explains that a “standpoint both reflects one’s own unique experience and asserts membership in a community of those who understand shared experiences in mutually supportive ways.” Frank (2000, p. 356) continues about standpoints: “First, standpoints are never static: One aspect of my responsibility for my standpoint is that it continues to change as experiences and communities change. Second, standpoints are not optional; the only difference is whether or not they are acknowledged. No one can opt out of having a standpoint.”

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from the critical legal studies sect of the civil rights movement as a means of applying a racial scope to the legal injustices and backlash of civil rights legislation (Hiraldo, 2010; McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). CRT grew because of critical legal studies’ inability to address people of color’s struggles before, during, and after encounters with the legal system; the theory provided political scientists and critical scholars a way to view how the same phenomena affected people of color differently in the justice system (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). CRT was established as a way to challenge dominant systems of racial oppression and has evolved over time; the theory has grown out from the legal world and into many social disciplines (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). At its core, CRT aims to uncover the underlying social disparities between dominant and marginalized racial identity groups that support systems of oppression (Hiraldo, 2010). As a theoretical framework, CRT can examine the inequities of power and resources in a system along the intersection of race and other social identities (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). To do this, CRT utilizes five tenets: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism (Hiraldo, 2010). CRT has proven an important analytic tool in the field of education,

offering critical perspectives on race and the causes, effects, and manifestations of racism, inequity, and the systematic dynamics of power and privilege (Hiraldo, 2010; Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings, 2009). In the scope of this research, one of the key tenets of CRT—experiential knowledge—provides a fundamental lens through which to tell black students’ stories academically; the theory is actually partially dependent on the power of storytelling in educational research (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015; Wiley, 2015). According to McCoy and Rodricks (2015), critical race educational scholars recognize black students’ stories as legitimate and critical to understanding racial subordination and its effects in education. The authors also note that with its emphasis on social justice, CRT accounts for race and racism's role in education and works toward the eradication of systemic racism in a process of seeking to facilitate positive change toward a socially just system for people of color (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). Additionally, Wiley (2015) posits that CRT can be framed as a student development theory; the author uses CRT to explain how various factors—such as lack of validation of students of color, cost-cutting student programs, and lack of physical spaces representing communities of color—of campus environment can negatively affect students of color’s development and success.

CRT sees engaging with students of color’s experiences as crucial to providing scholars with the data necessary to understand and analyze issues of racism on college campuses, so this project will aim to take this framework and apply it to the case of black student organizational experience at Clemson University. Hiraldo (2010) emphasizes that the primary tenet of CRT is counter-storytelling: using the composite, personal stories of people of color’s experiences to expose and critique racially dominant ideologies and support the permanence of racism in America’s major systems. This highlight on the power of individual experience is mirrored in phenomenology as well.

## Phenomenology

Spiegelberg and Biemel (2017) describe phenomenology as a gradually-developed concept that was never born, but rather grew and evolved along and after Husserl's—the German philosopher who developed the concept of phenomenology in the early 20th century—academic career. Early on, phenomenology adopted the concept of directedness toward objects (described as “intentionality”) as one of its cornerstones (Spiegelberg and Biemel, 2017). Husserl's philosophies over time added consciousness and intuition to the core of phenomenology, and with time, “the objects of phenomenology are ‘absolute data grasped in pure, immanent intuition,’ and its goal is to discover the essential structures of the acts (noesis) and the objective entities that correspond to them (noema)” (Spiegelberg and Biemel, 2017, p. 5). Groenewald (2004) and Ahmed (2006) both argue that phenomenology is much more than an ethnographic method. As a theoretical communication framework, phenomenology can be used to permit an adequate understanding of people and their interactions with the things around them, with a focal attention to how social meanings are constructed out of individual experiences. Ahmed (2006) contends that “Phenomenology helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures” (p. 33). According to Groenewald (2004), “To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure ‘phenomena’ and the only absolute data from where to begin” (p. 4).

Given these two definitions of phenomenology, this project aims to treat the student narratives of experience and their realities as the phenomena to use as “data.” The historical contexts of Clemson's racial history as well as the current campus climate as a result of recent

racial incidents serve as boundaries that shape the aforementioned student experiences. Due to the extensively specific but nuanced nature of phenomenology as a theoretical framework, it can provide a perspective through which to view student experiences by using one of the tenets of critical race theory: whiteness as property. Ahmed (2006) also discusses how objects take the shape of the work they do and then relates this interaction to the way bodies are used as tools to navigate not only the world, but also each other. This direct correlation lies in how what bodies and objects both can do are shaped by what they do primarily, stressing the arrival and intention of both entities in a space (Ahmed 2006). In a later work, Ahmed (2007) combines these two concepts by questioning whiteness as a phenomenological issue, posing the question of how whiteness exists and goes on in background to experience. Ahmed (2007) posits a phenomenological perspective of whiteness that places it as the object of study, but also uses it to highlight systems of power that affect those who do not possess whiteness. Given this additional perspective, this project sought to use phenomenological perspectives in tandem with a framework inspired by CRT to highlight the power of experience as an object of study.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

The qualitative approach of this project lends itself to a certain level of researcher reflexivity as noted in Berger (2013) as a quality control strategy. Berger (2013) also offers reflexivity as a strategic means of reaping the benefits of a researcher's familiarity with their project topic. Although gathering the experiences of students was the primary focus of this project, my own experiences—as a student participant and documentarian—have value to add to the content of the project as well. Therefore, researcher reflexivity was also incorporated into this project. The inclusion criteria for the interviewees of this project were simple: they must be black students involved in any campus organization or club. Due to my own involvement with

Clemson Black Student Union, Programs for Educational Enrichment and Retention, and A.Bevy Collegiate Group at Clemson over the last six years, I fit these same criteria and therefore occupy an important standpoint in the core of the project. With my own experiences and perspectives as an involved black student to consider, this manuscript and the docuseries also include my own insights and memories. Alexander (1999) explains that my situation is one not new for black writers theorizing on black experience; this is described as autoethnography, a highly reflexive methodology that can be put to use in education. This standpoint that I occupy is in direct relation to the content of the student interviews, and I have perspectives due to experiences with recent events in Clemson's racial history during my time as a student. To that point, Alexander (1999) and Janesick (1999) both note that autoethnography is incomplete without researchers taking time to reflect on their positionality throughout their research projects. For further reflexivity, this project took inspiration from Janesick's (1999) suggestion for qualitative researchers to keep a journal and incorporate entries into the research process to provide reflections as additional data. Using the journal entries, I was able to accurately refer back to my reflexivity throughout the project's development to completion.

### **Student Involvement**

The relationship between academic success and student involvement has been proven to be direct in literature over several decades (Astin, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Smith, 2017). This project explores what aspects of organizational involvement served as retention factors in black students at Clemson University. Wyrick (1998, p. 8) explains that retention is the "ultimate product of involvement," and this is important for collegiate administrators to explore what kind of comprehensive support systems their institutions should have in place to ensure student success outside of the classroom. Wyrick (1998) and Smith (2017) both highlight Greek

life and student government as critical areas of campus life many students use as the crux of their involvement in college. Additionally, Wyrick (1998) explains that involvement can be seen as a bidirectional factor in student retention, serving as both motivation and as a side effect.

Basically, if students remain in school for the sake of being in an organization, they will have more opportunities to pursue academic success. Simultaneously, many student organizations have academic requirements, and students will set those requirements as goals in order to remain in the organizations they hold dear (Kuh, 1993; Wyrick, 1998). Kuh (1993) found that students recognize the importance of out-of-class experiences on their personal development; the results taxonomy lists personal competence, cognitive complexity, knowledge and academic skills, practical competence, and altruism/estheticism as student-told outcomes of their extracurricular involvement in college.

According to Smith (2017), student involvement outside of the classroom is the foundation of student personal development. Smith (2017) further narrows the scope of his research to black students by focusing on Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs), which typically serve majority black students. Smith (2017) posits that student involvement is one of the major catalysts to success at HBCUs (and so, for black collegiate students)—more involvement, that is, opportunities to demonstrate and develop leadership and cultivate out-of-class experiences generates more developmental outcomes. Research on HBCU student involvement by Outcalt and Skewes-Cox (2002) supports Smith's (2017) position on the beneficial academic and professional effects for black students of being in and investing energy in a black environment. On black student retention at Primarily White Institutions, or PWIs, Hunn (2014) argues that black student retention can be negatively affected by multiple culturally insensitive facets of collegiate life. No matter the environment, scholarship demonstrates a direct

correlation between academic experience and non-academic experience in the majority of students; collegiate student success is dependent on the two lives students lead (Hunn, 2014; Smith, 2017). There is a lack of intersectional literature that explores in depth the specific aspects of out-of-classroom involvement that promote black student retention at PWIs, but by presenting the cases above, this project sought to explore what factors of student organizational involvement at Clemson inspired black student retention.

### **Organizational Identification**

Although organizational identification literature has yet to focus specifically on the culture of black student organizational involvement at PWIs, the literature addresses concepts useful to academically founding some of my expectations. In my own experiences being involved, I found that one of the most rewarding benefits of organizational life was the creation of a second family. Organizational identification can describe a cognitive, fluid relationship between oneself and their organization; represented by the ways in which a member's identity is impacted and shaped by interactions within the organization (Cheney, Christensen, and Dailey, 2014). Literature on organizational identification with foundations in the *belongingness hypothesis* posits that the more a member identifies with their organization, the more likely they are to stay with it; the hypothesis emphasizes the critical role of interpersonal relationships to human experience and the motivational power of maintaining social bonds (Cheney, Christensen, & Dailey, 2014; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In terms of student retention, this scholarship supports my expectations that the involved students mention the importance of the relationships they have formed within their organizations in their interviews for the docuseries.

## **Documentaries as Research**

The design of this project was rooted in documentary filmmaking for multiple reasons. To be clear, I draw on documentary-as-research literature for guidance in the filmmaking process, not because this is a research project. First, as noted in Munro and Bilbrough (2018), a documentary filmmaker occupies a practitioner-as-researcher standpoint, “a position that allows for an interplay between the two forms of knowledge-making, creating a site for generative and unexpected results,” but also puts the researcher in a unique position to extrapolate interesting relationships about the knowledge they create and apply in the process. The authors discuss three documentary practices in their dialogue: participatory, poetic, and essayistic. Participatory practices describe the ethnographic methods of creating documentaries. Poetic practices describe artistic manifestations of imaginative richness. Essayistic practices describe essay forms translated into documentary media; these forms usually are based in practice-led research. The dialogue between the authors suggests that bridging these areas in documentary research methods develops hybrid forms of filmmaking; just as multimethod approaches warrant more effective data, these hybrid forms of filmmaking may offer more to the audience. This project bridges essayistic and participatory practices by combining segments of academic literature presented in an essay form and segments of student interviews as a practice-based approach.

Second, it is important for black students to feel represented in media. This project draws from Christian’s (2017) study of networked television performances to extrapolate the importance of creating black content for black people. Christian (2017) argues that research creation and participatory action research as methodologies could “develop the data to deepen our understanding of value” in representation in networked culture. Hughes and Robertson

(2010) resounds the teaching effectiveness of the essayistic method indicated in Munro and Bilbrough (2018).

### **Project Description**

In the spring of 2019, for my qualitative methods core course term assignment, I conducted a small research experiment that became the pilot study for this project. That research experiment sought to explore black college students' sense of belonging in organizations at Clemson. I interviewed three students who all then agreed to participate in this project as well: Kiyana, Talmon, and Damea. Although they were asked different questions for this project, their responses to the questions for that assignment motivated me to turn the concept into my thesis and use that assignment as the pilot study for it. I incorporated most of the feedback from the mock defense of that pilot study into my planning for the prospectus for this thesis, including; moving from Social Identity Theory to Critical Race Theory, conducting more interviews, and emphasizing the locale/setting in the project. Thus, after writing many drafts and attending many meetings in fall of 2019, my prospectus was successfully defended on 5 December 2020 pending minor edits submitted for approval on 15 December 2020.

Following approval of my prospectus, the project plan was further developed by collaborating with Dr. Rhondda Robinson Thomas to gather her insights on the scope of the project and to possibly interview her for more information and visual footage about Clemson's black history. Dr. Thomas not only agreed to speak on the history sections of this manuscript, but she also agreed to serve as third chair on my committee. Dr. Thomas has been the spearhead for telling the entire black Clemson story since my arrival to Clemson. Her African American Literature background combined with her passion for the research support the fact that her insights and storytelling are essential to the authenticity of the project for me. The journal for this

project was stored on Google Drive so that it could be accessed from any computer, and entries to that journal discussed my thoughts and reactions at various points in the project timeline as a researcher. The next step was to recruit black students involved in various organizations and clubs at Clemson. These students were involved in an organization or club at the time, or had been involved in one in the last five years. This time period was chosen to correlate with exposure to Clemson's racially tense atmosphere following the 2014 Cripmas party and the 2016 Sikes Sit-in. The goal was to interview more than three and up to ten students for the project. As a black student at Clemson involved in various organizations during my undergraduate career, I still had access to many different possible interviewees who fit my target demographic. Reaching out to them was as easy as posting to our community GroupMes (a mobile mass messaging app for smartphones), asking a few colleagues when I saw them on campus, and sending emails to a few organizational leaders in the community. With my role as a communication graduate assistant, I had access to basic images and videos of Clemson to use for parts of the documentary. Luckily, I got in contact with Clemson's Media Relations team rather early in the process to collect that footage and begin video production before interviews were scheduled. Around this same time, I reached out to Wanda Johnson, Clemson's Director of Student Media, to borrow a camera for recording and a laptop for video editing. She also provided me with the media release form my participants needed to sign in order for me to use their images. In the middle of recording and editing interviews amongst friends and participants, and pending recommendation from the second chair of my committee and said friends/participants, I realized that I must include my own interview-style story in the documentary. This extra story and editing required me to alter my completion schedule and episodic layout (outlined below).

Following the collection of all necessary footage, I analyzed the student interviews following methods inspired by Riessman's (2003) narrative analysis theories. Riessman (2003) provides various perspectives through which to transform student interview responses into narratives and analyze them as solutions to narrators' problems, in terms of cultural contexts, identity performances, and as representations of larger parts of narrators' lives. After this analysis process, I then drafted a synopsis of these narratives' main points and connected them back to the scholarship presented in this manuscript to serve as a conclusion to the documentary at the end of my episode.

Pre-production work began immediately and included developing the introductory information and literature review from the prospectus into a script appropriately condensing it all to fit the time restraints for their respective segments outlined above. Additionally, pre-production work included soliciting potential interviewees. I provided ahead of time and asked the following interview questions, allowing students to simply talk about their experiences for as long as they wanted to.

1. Is there any organization you are most proud to be a member of?
2. What is being a member of that organization like for you?
3. Tell a story about when you felt you most belonged in that organization.
4. Tell a story about how being in this organization has impacted/defined your Clemson experience.
5. How has being in this organization affected your choice to stay at Clemson?

Production of the documentary began following the successful defense of the prospectus and consisted of conducting and recording interviews, transcription, analysis, and video editing.

When interviewees provided shorter than desired narratives as answers to the questions, probing questions were asked following dialogic interview practices as outlined by Way, Zwier, and Tracy (2009). The goal of ten interviewees was set after considering time needed to solicit interviewees, conduct and record interviews, transcribe interviews for analysis, and complete video editing processes over the three month period I had to complete the project. The original goal was to have production completed by 1 March 2020; production was completed on 16 March 2020 instead due to the unexpected amount of work the project required as it evolved. The documentary was recorded and edited by me, in the same format as an essay: introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction discusses early and recent Clemson black history. The body consists of nine student interview segments as described below. The conclusion addresses patterns in interview responses as they intersect with support from academic literature. The conclusion also includes my own interview for appropriate reflexivity.

The original plan was for one comprehensive documentary film to be made, and then for it to be divided into segments/episodes, all to be shared both individually and holistically on YouTube. Instead, I realized early on that it would be easier to perform that in the reverse, so I created each segment/episode, and then planned to merge those final videos into one comprehensive documentary. After editing the fourth interview's footage and with the inclusion of my own episode still pending, I realized the total run time was going to be much longer than anticipated. For this reason, I decided to alter the episodic layout again; instead of one long documentary of all the segments, I created five titled episodes that contain all edited content, and uploaded them to YouTube on 16 March 2020 for initial viewing by the committee on 17 March 2020. Content from Dr. Thomas' research and both of our experiences was used to anchor and found the research topic. The next episodes were footage of student interviews; the camera

focused on the interviewees individually sitting down, chest-up, answering the interview questions. When I got the chance to ask them follow-up questions, the camera still remained on the interviewee to capture their reaction. Below is a brief outline of the docuseries, which is divided episodically in the style of a Netflix docuseries.

- I. Episode 1: “Welcome to Black Clemson” - Clemson University’s Black History
  - a. Introduction to the docuseries: B-roll images voiced over by me
  - b. Dr. Thomas’ and my own edited interviews
  - c. Run time: 38 minutes, 27 seconds
- II. Episode 2: “Imperfect Fit” - Student Interviews
  - a. Introduction for student interviews: B-roll and silenced student interview footage voiced over by me
  - b. Persia’s, Mark’s, and Damea’s edited interviews. These three students were grouped together to highlight the experiences of black engineering students.
  - c. Run time: 1 hour, 36 seconds
- III. Episode 3: “Ever Loyal” - Student Interviews
  - a. Kiyana’s, Talmon’s, and Robert’s edited interviews. These three students were grouped together to highlight the experiences of students who did not seriously consider transferring from Clemson amidst the university’s racial climate.
  - b. Run time: 55 minutes, 45 seconds
- IV. Episode 4: “Risk & Reward” - Student Interviews
  - a. Joscelyn’s, Vanessa’s, and Cleo’s edited interviews. These three students were grouped together to highlight the experiences of students who took a risk in

attending Clemson but made some type of beneficial discovery during their time here.

- b. Run time: 50 minutes, 44 seconds

V. Episode 5: “Lessons Learned” - Conclusion

- a. My edited interview (Robert interviewed me)
- b. Conclusion: B-roll and silenced student interview footage voiced over by me
- c. Run time: 34 minutes, 35 seconds

Following production, post-production consisted of an initial screening for the committee and the parties at Clemson who were initially interested in the development of this project for use at the university in the future. Due to the national coronavirus pandemic and state of emergency in March 2020, instead of a live screening, committee members and selected parties were distributed the link to an unlisted YouTube playlist of all five episodes. The visibility setting for this playlist was set to unlisted so that only those with links to the videos had access to view them online. Given feedback from this initial “screening” (link was distributed on 17 March 2020) and the public virtual defense on 1 April 2020, final edits were made to the docuseries, such as fact corrections and adding introductions to each episode. One copy of the final complete version of the documentary project remains with the Executive Director of the Gantt Multicultural Center on an external hard drive for future educational use at Clemson. The visibility settings on the playlist were then changed to public on YouTube, so that the videos can be accessed by anyone online.

## **Discussion**

The scholarship addressed in the literature manifested in a few different ways in the production of the docuseries. From beginning to end, the docuseries highlights human lived

experiences as the raw data, and the lens of critical race theory demonstrates how the same phenomena (i.e., being a student at Clemson University) affect black students differently through the experiential knowledge gained from watching the interviews. One highly relevant example of such experiential knowledge is during Cleo's explanation of the changes she sees in the black community at Clemson near the end of "Risk and Reward". In her explanation, Cleo mentions that Clemson has recently recruited more black students who don't necessarily feel inclined to be active in the Black Clemson community by getting involved. Cleo stressed these types of students "aren't interested in connecting with black culture as they come [to Clemson]," and as a result, the active and involved black community at Clemson has dwindled. CRT scholarship also led me to expect the student stories to contain manifestations of racism, inequity, and power/privilege dynamics present at Clemson University. Not only did students share examples of each of these within their interviews while explaining background information in their stories, but they also—just as CRT also led me to predict—explained the wide range of effects these phenomena have had on their education. On one hand, the students in the "Ever Loyal" episode seemed rather unphased, if not motivated like Robert, by those manifestations and experiences. On the other hand, some of the students in the "Imperfect Fit" and "Risk & Reward" episodes were at first discouraged and/or distracted from their academics by those inequities and racist experiences. In my episode, "Lessons Learned", I talk about my own experiences in the same way I hoped my participants would. Just as the scholarship on reflexivity suggested, I shared a lot of experiences and feelings with the participants as I reflected: Robert's motivation, Cleo's self-discovery, Joscelyn's sense of family and home in A.Bevy, and all of the "Imperfect Fit" participants' experiences being black in STEM (I was a Computer Science major in undergrad, remember!), to name a few.

Going into this project, I expected that the use of student interviews would highlight the specific, relevant aspects of student organizations that directly affect black student retention at Clemson University. Given Clemson's tumultuous history with black people and the recent events that have resulted in the tense racial climate on campus, non-academic involvement must be a cornerstone factor in Clemson black student retention. The theories on student involvement all acknowledge it as the crux or cornerstone of collegiate student success, and that is definitely one of the common expressions from student interview footage. However, student interviews (specifically from the "Ever Loyal" episode) also demonstrated that there are other factors—such as financial situations and convenience—in their retention that could outweigh involvement as the primary success factor. Furthermore, scholarship on student involvement, specifically Kuh (1993), implies that college students are also aware of the positive effect on their personal development that being involved has on them. All of the student interviews at some point reflected participants' growth and development as a person (more than a student) due to their organizational experiences at Clemson. On another note, I notice that the student involvement literature fails to emphasize something present in most of the student interviews from this project. An important by-product of being involved that student participants from this project mention as a factor in their retention is the development of familial relationships with other members to create a sense of home and belonging within their organizations. These perspectives and outlooks are all possible for me with the scholarship on phenomenology in mind: meaning is made out of these experiences by looking at the bigger picture surrounding instances and phenomena themselves.

## **Reflections**

Although this case study is not a generalizable research project, the content produced leaves room for greater research implications. In my journal, I repeatedly wrestled with the dissonance of abandoning some traditional research standards and methodology for the creative sake of this project. I often thought that if this were a traditional research project, then it could aim to address a lack of literature on what nuanced factors of involvement directly and indirectly positively affect black student retention at primarily white institutions. I also thought that a research project with this topic could help fill the gap in literature addressing the sense of home and second family that organizational involvement can provide for black students at PWIs. I believe research of that nature could help improve retention and recruitment programs for minority students in higher education. Some days, I reflect and think that even this case study can still help serve those purposes—especially with a long-lasting and digestible visual aid to accompany it in the docuseries. Nevertheless, there were many points throughout this process where I considered other uses for this project outside of simply “what if this were real research”.

The first of these moments was addressed in my 11 November 2019 journal entry, when I first thought about scaling down the scope of the project. In those early days, I figured the project would be more useful if it were more specific, and to focus more on the academic side of things instead of the creative. Of course, I grew out of those feelings, and continued on to develop the goals of the project. February 2020 was more eventful in my thinking about the uses of this project because that was the month I conducted and edited all of the interviews. On 4 February 2020, I was contacted by the Clemson University Historian to help add to the big university history project being worked on at the time. I ended up not responding to that request until after my footage was all edited later in March 2020; but by that point, the coronavirus pandemic barred us from being able to meet for the rest of the semester. On 17 February 2020,

after my recording session with Dr. Thomas for what became the “Welcome to Black Clemson” episode, I reflected in my journal about how this history is too important to remain confined to the scope I had originally imagined for this project. I knew that more education and more positive social change could come from the content Dr. Thomas and I had to offer regarding Clemson’s black history. Finally, on 24 February 2020, after months of working with Joscelyn (from “Risk & Reward”) on a passion project for one of the academic departments at Clemson, I reflected on a connection between the two projects. There were a lot of things we had altered about the department’s curriculum, and I noticed how qualified I am to discuss many of those things. In my journal entry, I pondered on an idea that I could use my project to teach one of the classes we proposed in the major and for the department.

Upon completion of this project, I also reflected back to my journal so I could see the journey. In my entry from 11 November 2019—only four days after my 23rd birthday—I wrote about the nerves I was feeling regarding my prospectus only being 17 pages after edits going into my defense. After my defense on 5 December 2019, I was even more nervous about the scope of the project and the edits I would need to make in both the short and long term. Relief for me did not kick in until 21 December 2019 while I was home with family, reflecting on my completion of the first half and my excitement for my final semester of school at Clemson. My journal entries throughout January 2020 tell a story of a rough start for both academic and external reasons, like traveling, writer’s block, and an emergency general surgical procedure near the end of the month. On 11 February 2020, I participated in a reenactment of when black students at Clemson asked for university help in travelling to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral, and it was aired on ESPN later that month. After reliving a day in Clemson black history, I was motivated all over again to go full speed ahead with this project; especially since the rest of the

month was full of fantastic interview sessions and a lot of fun yet productive editing hours. Soon after, I endured another period of discouragement and lack of motivation, according to my 4 March 2020 journal entry. Nevertheless, it was not long until I hit my home stretch of completion goals on 10 March 2020; when I hit 35 pages and added multiple sections and references before final edits were submitted on 17 March 2020. After sending the link to the YouTube playlist and the final draft of the written component to my committee on 17 March 2020, I could not believe I was done producing content, but I was never more excited to near the finish of a project in my life than I was that night.

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