A Phenomenological Investigation into the Impact of the College Student Union on Student Engagement at a Historically Black University

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE IMPACT OF THE COLLEGE STUDENT UNION ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AT A HISTORICALLY BLACK UNIVERSITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The College of Human Sciences and Education
School of Education
The Department of Educational Leadership, Research, & Counseling

by
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ABSTRACT

Known as the proverbial “living room of campus,” college student union facilities date back to the late 1800s. Unions were a place for congregation and fellowship, a place where student engagement was crucial. Today’s college union varies from campus to campus, with some focused on student development, some with a keen focus on generating revenue through providing services, and some that attempt to strike a balance between the two.

The concept of student engagement and the research surrounding engagement rarely has shed light on the role of the college student union facility in the engagement process. Entities traditionally found within student unions such campus life divisions, dining, multicultural affairs programming, or recreational spaces have more foundational research that ties those areas directly to student engagement.

More specifically, little published research is available on student union space and its relationship to student engagement on historically black college and university campuses. This qualitative phenomenological investigation explores whether the college student union building serves a purpose on today’s historically black college campus, whether that purpose is relevant, and whether there is a relationship between the student union facility and student engagement.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

History of College Student Union Facilities

The words of former President Woodrow Wilson when he was the president of Princeton in 1909:

The chief and characteristic mistake which the teachers and governors of our colleges have made in these latter days has been that they have devoted themselves and their plans too exclusively to the business, the very commonplace business, of instruction, and have not enough regarded the life of the mind. The mind does not live for instruction. The real intellectual life of a body of undergraduates, if there be any, manifests itself, not in the classroom but in what they do and talk of and set before themselves as their favorite objects between classes and lectures (Wilson, 1909, p. 111).

The history of college student union buildings or student centers (referred to as student unions in this research) dates to the late 1800s. According to Butts (1971), college unions originated in Europe, specifically at Oxford and Cambridge, in the 19th century. The early college unions, originally touted as debate societies, gained popularity in the United States through the idea of establishing comprehensive clubs. Mirroring the European model, Harvard University founded The Harvard Union in 1880, which is believed to be the first union in the United States. Other institutions across the nation created areas outside of classroom spaces for social interaction and gathering, including Houston Hall, the first union facility erected at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896. Houston Hall was a pioneer facility in the landscape of unions as it included meeting spaces and recreational outlets for male students to enjoy (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013).

“Providing a facility that brings students together for recreation and scholarly debate provided the opportunity for students to organize themselves into teams and discussion groups,” asserted Jordan and Vakilian (2013, p. 4). Discussion groups progressed and unions changed through the years. During difficult times as the Great Depression and World Wars I and II,
college union transitioned into an outlet that provided an escape from academics. Additionally, those times called for a transformation in the way students were served, and thus leisure and arts programs became part of the offerings in student unions (Butts, 1971).

As Butts (1971) noted, unions started as institutions for societal debate between white males. College unions have undergone many modifications with the changing times and shifting demographics. Women’s suffrage and the Civil Rights Movement necessitated different thinking about the college union. Legislation and societal movements caused college unions to consider ways to be more inclusive to those who were traditionally excluded from their doors (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013).

**Transformation of the College Union**

The evolution of student unions has continued and many serve distinctive functions and roles on their respective college campuses. Traditionally, a college union was the proverbial living room of campus (Association of College Unions International [ACUI], n.d.). According to Rouzer, DeSaval, and Yakaboski (2014), a student union was the “community center of the college, for all members of the college family—students, faculty, administration, alumni, and guests” (p. 3). Some campus student unions were the first buildings that were constructed that did not serve academic or residency purposes. Unions were a place for congregation and fellowship, a place where student engagement was crucial. “College unions created the conditions for faculty and students to gather in what could be considered a neutral space for both social and intellectual interactions” (Rouzer et al., 2014, p. 3).

Today’s college union varies from campus to campus, with some more focused on student development, some focused on generating revenue through providing services, and some attempting to strike a balance between the two. As the demographics of college students change
to increases in both older students and part-time students, the offerings in college unions evolve to meet the changing clientele (Milani, Eaken, & Brattain, 1992). Rouzer et al. (2014) asserted:

Changes in technology, politics and the economic climate could threaten college unions’ connection to educating students and being a community builder. As the demographics of college students have changed so too has the purpose of attending college and the value of education (p. 7).

**Role of the College Union**

The college student union is an integral part of the educational mission of the college (ACUI, n.d.). As college unions launched and spread across the country, students gathered to exchange ideas and best practices. As college enrollments grew and the needs of students changed, the student personnel movement was initiated. Professional associations emerged, including the Association of College Unions (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013). The Association for College Unions International was founded in 1914 initially as an outlet for student leaders to meet to discuss common challenges; it became an organization for those working in student unions who were thought of as community builders and were dedicated to meeting students’ co-curricular needs (ACUI, n.d.).

Adopted by the Association of College Unions International's general membership in 1996, the following declarations are based on the Role of the College Union Statement (ACUI, 1996):

- As the center of the college community life, the union complements the academic experience through an extensive variety of cultural, educational, social, and recreational programs. These programs provide the opportunity to balance course work and free time as cooperative factors in education.

- The union is a student-centered organization that values participatory decision-making. Through volunteerism, its boards, committees, and student employment, the union offers
first-hand experience in citizenship and educates students in leadership, social responsibility, and values.

- In all its processes, the union encourages self-directed activity, giving maximum opportunity for self-realization and for growth in individual social competency and group effectiveness.

The union's goal is the development of persons as well as intellects. Traditionally considered the "hearthstone" or "living room" of the campus, today's union is the gathering place of the college. The union provides services and conveniences that members of the college community need in their daily lives and creates an environment for getting to know and understand others through formal and informal associations. The union serves as a unifying force that honors each individual and values diversity. The union fosters a sense of community that cultivates enduring loyalty to the college (ACUI, 1996).

The college union stands as the educational program of the institution with facilities and services designed to enhance the college student’s experience. “The domain of the college union is the education of the complete person: mind, body and spirit” concluded Milani et al. (1992, p. 4). The college union is intended to be part of the students’ educational experience. By offering opportunities for development through student organizations, services, programs, and flexible options for socializing, the college union’s role as a physical space and an intrinsic gathering point is to provide opportunities for engagement and development (Milani et al., 1992).

**Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

The United States Department of Education defines Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as “a source of accomplishment and great pride for the African American community as well as the entire nation” (Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 1976 to
According to the Higher Education Act of 1965, an HBCU is an accredited institution founded prior to 1964 with the express mission of educating Black Americans. The National Center for Education Statistics’ 2004 report on HBCUs noted:

Three colleges for Blacks were established before 1862. Cheyney University of Pennsylvania was established in the 1830s. Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce College in Ohio were established in the 1850s. In 1862, Congress enacted the first land grant college provisions, known as the First Morrill Act. By the late 1860s, Morrill Act funds were distributed to the states, with the intention that they would foster educational opportunity for all students, especially newly freed Blacks. Congress passed the Second Morrill Act in 1890 that required states with dual systems of higher education (all-White and non-White) to provide land-grant institutions for both systems (p. 1).

Today, there are over one hundred HBCUs in the United States, educating more than 300,000 students (Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman, 2010). Though they cover a variety of missions and purposes, these institutions seek to address the gaps for minority students at traditionally White institutions (Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams & Holmes, 2007). Nelson Laird, et al. (2007) concluded:

HBCUs were created expressly for the purpose of educating African Americans and for years served as the only postsecondary option for the vast majority of this ethnic group. One of the positive legacies of this history is that the environments on these campuses seem particularly well-suited for promoting collegiate success among African-American students (p. 42).

Significance of the Study

A quick glance at any higher education publication will call attention to various issues plaguing the public postsecondary education system today. The State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) Association State Higher Education Finance Report (2016) noted that for the fourth year, state and local support for public postsecondary institutions continued to trend lower than in pre-recession years. Only a handful of states reported increases in public support of higher education. The latest SHEEO report notes that Louisiana ranks 49th in total educational revenue per full-time student and 49th in total percent of change since 2011 in public
higher education educational appropriations per full-time student. According to the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), Louisiana ranks last in funds for educational and general operations per student.

The lack of funding in collegiate spaces leads to an abundance of educational facilities in a state of disrepair. In Louisiana, there is a backlog of over $1.7 billion in deferred maintenance, according to the Louisiana Board of Regents (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2018). A Wall Street Journal article indicated, “The state (of Louisiana) spent $132 million on campus deferred maintenance between 1996 and 2000. Aside from a $119 million infusion after Hurricane Katrina, it next allotted funds of $4.7 million in 2013, and $18.4 million in 2016,” (Korn, 2017, p. 2). Korn (2017) noted, “public universities across Louisiana are falling apart,” (p. 2).

Equally as astounding to some are statistics surrounding graduation rates. According to the Southern Regional Education Board, Louisiana ranks lowest in the SREB in four-year graduation rates and second lowest in six-year graduation rates. Research has indicated that there is a direct correlation between the involved or engaged student and graduation or persistence rates. Astin (1999) concluded:

It turned out that virtually every significant effect could be rationalized in terms of the involvement concept; that is, every positive factor was likely to increase student involvement in the undergraduate experience, whereas every negative factor was likely to reduce involvement. In other words, the factors that contributed to the student’s remaining in college suggested involvement, whereas those that contributed to the student’s dropping out implied a lack of involvement (p. 523).

So, what is the connection between funding for spaces and student engagement? Why is the physical environment important to today’s college student? Carney, Strange and Banning (2001) found in a variety of campus environments that the physical environment—layout of buildings, architecture, condition of buildings—was the most important factor in promoting a feeling of not only safety, but also inclusion on a campus. With the continued trend toward
limited funding for campus facilities, is a college student union facility a worthwhile investment to encourage and support student engagement?

**Research Questions**

“Research specifically related to college unions is limited even though other student affairs functional areas have a foundation of research studies that examine the impact of their specific role on campus,” concluded DeSawal and Yakaboski (2014, p. 97). The combination of the historical significance of colleges providing student unions to enhance the holistic student experience and the current demise of higher education public funding necessitates study in these areas.

**Research Question One**

At a time of dwindling financial resources and evolving campus spaces, where even classroom buildings and recreation centers now include common areas, retail and food concepts, what role, if any, does the union idea play on today’s HBCU campus?

**Research Question Two**

If indeed, student unions are still relevant in today’s campus community, to what extent does the union impact student engagement at a historically black university?

**Theoretical Framework**

Grant and Osanloo (2014) defined a theoretical framework as the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed for a research study (p. 13). Further, the theoretical framework provides a basis upon which a study can be built. Defining a theoretical framework allows the researcher to determine direction in reviews of literature and methods of study. The following frameworks guided this study: Alexander Astin’s Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1968); the more recent, yet related, George Kuh’s Student Engagement Theory (Kuh, 2001); and The
Campus Ecology Theory, often attributed to C. Carney Strange and James Banning, which provides context into the importance of the physical space planning and use of the actual college student union building (Strange & Banning, 2001).

**Astin’s Student Involvement Theory**

Astin (1968, 1999) penned his theory on student involvement in an effort to develop and expound upon the student development field, particularly principles and activities that impact student behavior. Astin intended his theory to be utilized in assisting the design of effective learning environments for students. Astin (1968, 1999) defined student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience,” (p. 518). Astin’s (1999) theory included the following five postulates:

- Involvement refers to the investment of energy in objects that can be either generalized or specific.
- Involvement occurs as part of a continuum with different degrees of involvement at different points in time.
- Involvement can be quantitative or qualitative.
- The amount of student learning is directly associated with the quality and quantity of student involvement.
- The effectiveness of any educational practice is related to the ability of that practice to increase student involvement (p. 519).

When applying Astin’s theory to student union research, the last two postulates are particularly relevant, though all were easily applicable to this research. As Astin (1999) noted, much research on involvement tests those last two postulates as they “provide clues for designing more effective educational programs for students” (p. 519). Astin’s theory encourages a deeper
look at student behavior and responses, including specifically noting what motivates the student and how much time and energy the student devotes to the learning process.

Astin’s Input-Environment-Output model (1984) highlighted the importance of understanding student inputs and the nature of the environment to understand the outcome, or output.

Figure 1. Astin’s Student Involvement Theory Model

The three core concepts of the student involvement theory combine to allow for a more in-depth understanding of why outcomes are as they are. First, the inputs include a student’s background, experiences, and demographic information. Second, the environment includes all the experiences a student will encounter while in college; specifically, for this research, the environment centered on the experiences in the student union. Last, the outcomes encompass the attitudes, beliefs and experiences students have following their departure from the collegiate environment (Astin, 1984). While Astin’s theory has many applications, Student Development Theory (2007) noted it is one of the strongest providers of evidence supporting the necessity of student involvement.
George Kuh’s Student Engagement Theory

Kuh’s work built upon Astin’s foundation. Kuh (2006) acknowledged the connection between student engagement, learning, and personal development. He also recognized the impact physical spaces on college campuses may have in the engagement of students. Kuh acknowledged that even with the theoretical basis for student engagement, there was a lack of evidence to evaluate the impact of college on students.

Kuh’s National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) produces an annual report, The College Student Report, that details survey results gathered from hundreds of institutions. The NSSE provides information on how college students spend their time, what services college students utilize, and how institutions provide resources and activities to support the student experience. In addition to The College Student Report, the NSSE publishes several other reports, provides metrics for comparison between institutions, and recommends best practices.

Kuh’s work in the realm of student engagement theory provides context for evidence of student learning. Kuh (2001) noted that his goal was to go beyond focusing on what campuses provided to students by shifting the discussion to how students use the learning resources the school provides. Kuh’s theory underscores the notion that before a place can matter, students and people should matter (Manning & Kuh, 2005).

Kuh and Pike (2005) continued study on the correlation between student involvement or engagement with successful matriculation on campus. They concluded that student involvement in activities on the college campus had a positive relationship with retention and academics.

Campus Ecology Theory

Strange and Banning (2001) used the theory of campus ecology to define the campus environment. Their work highlighted the thought that “all sets of environments coexist and
interact in a complex variety of physical and emotional forces that help determine not only how students act, but also how they feel about their academic preparation” (p. 122). The researchers asserted colleges and universities need to understand and accommodate issues of the whole student and not limit issues to academic interests. Initially introduced by Banning and Leland Kaiser in 1974, the theory of campus ecology focuses on the relationship of physical space to the development of students.

Additionally, Banning provided further context into the concept of the “third place”, a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999). Oldenburg defined the third place as a space away from home or work that provides a zone to build community, retreat, or socialize and provides a space for expression and connection (p. 22). The college union can be considered a third place as it is a place outside of the classroom, home or the work environment that provides outlets for comfort and community (Banning et al., 2010). Banning also explored campus ecology through the “sense of place” and the attachment or connection to a particular area or physical space.

In 2001, Strange and Banning introduced a campus design matrix, shown below. The matrix provides a tool by which spaces can be evaluated in a campus environment.

Figure 2. Strange and Banning’s Campus Design Matrix
By questioning the impact of the environment and purpose of the design, Strange and Banning contended administrators could determine how well spaces meet the needs of the student population. Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh (2003) concluded:

Systematic examination and intentional design of the campus environment are important steps that educators can take to enhance student learning. The physical environment, the human aggregate, the organizational environment and student perceptions all influence student satisfaction and success in college (p. 106).

“Colleges and universities with such a palpable sense of place also have salutary effects on student success,” concluded Manning and Kuh (2005, p. 1). Determining if and how the college student union provides that sense of place was essential to this research. Further, examining the connection of that physical space as a sense of place to student involvement and engagement was the crux of the proposed research questions. Is investing limited monetary support into building and maintaining college student unions a beneficial endeavor for the future? This research adds to the body of knowledge about the planning process of campus facilities and connects those facilities to the concept of success through the engagement of students.

**Definition of Terms**

In this study, the following terms are used to explain phenomena and further expound upon related concepts:

Campus Ecology— The behavioral study of the complex transactional relationships among the social and physical dimensions of campus environments and those who inhabit them, students, staff, faculty, and visitors (“campusecologist.com,” 2018).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities— Institutions that were established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2015).
Physical Space—The facilities, grounds, structures, and additional organizational elements that define the campus (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Predominately White Institutions—Institutions of higher learning where Whites account for at least half of the enrollment (Reeder & Schmitt, 2007).

Student Union or “Union”—“Community center of the college, serving students, faculty, staff, alumni, and guests. By whatever form or name, a college union is an organization offering a variety of programs, activities, services, and facilities that, when taken together, represent a well-considered plan for the community life of the college,” (ACUI, 1996).

Student Engagement—“Time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (Kuh, 2009, p. 683).

Student Involvement—Synonym to student engagement in this research defined as the “amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 518).

Assumptions

Several assumptions were made for this study. First, it was assumed that all participants responded to the survey questions openly and honestly. Secondly, it was assumed that the sample size in this study was appropriate to provide findings of value to conclude this study. Finally, the participants represented a select group of students identified as engaged in campus activities and the findings may not be generally applied to the overall campus population.

Personal Statement

As a former student union professional, this topic holds importance for me as both a researcher and a practitioner. During my tenure in the collegiate environment, I served on the
board for a national association that governed college student unions. Therefore, I witnessed first-hand not only the daily operations of the space, but also learned the doctrine and aspirational goals of the potential of the space. I remained keenly aware of the threats and conceivable challenges to the college union of the future.

I assert research in this space is crucial to the future of student unions. As funding dwindles and resources are scarce, it can be argued that the time of the college union has come and gone. Many college unions are considered auxiliaries on campus. Traditionally auxiliaries serve the purpose of funding the academic and co-curricular missions of their institutions. Milani et al. (1992) noted, “The lack of money may, in fact, be the proverbial root of all evil for the college union of the next decade…the more their programs emphasize the creation of revenue by marketing services and conveniences, the less unions are able to build community among student consumers and the less the impact on personal development” (p. 6).

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation contains five chapters. Chapter one, Introduction to the Study, includes a history of student union facilities, a brief description of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the significance of the study, research questions, theoretical frameworks that guided the study, and definition of terms. The second chapter, Review of the Literature, provides a discussion of the relevant literature and the relationship between the literature, theoretical frameworks and the area of study. Chapter three, Research Design and Methodology, explores the methodological framework utilized to answer the research questions and also discusses research design, sampling, data collection, and analysis. Chapter four, Research Findings, details the research findings, including institutional and participant information. Finally, chapter five
includes a summary of findings, recommendations and conclusions, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

“Every institution must chart its own course to create a distinctive learning environment and campus culture that imbues the student experience with a sense of specialness” (Manning & Kuh, 2005, p. 4). An essential part of that learning environment involves physical facilities and buildings on the campus. Pittman (2012) noted that the physical environment helps students form relationships and develop a sense of community. The sense of community and engagement on campus tends to lead to positive outcome metrics for students (Lane & Perozzi, 2014). Facilities and structures, most especially those with the probability to promote engagement and form ties to institutions, have the potential to make powerful connections meaningful to both students and institutions (Manning & Kuh, 2005). Unfortunately, as public funding for higher education dwindles, investing in facilities such as college student unions may decline.

This chapter presents a review of the relevant literature and the relationship between the literature, theoretical frameworks, and the area of study. It includes literature discussions on student engagement, the college student union and its role in student engagement, campus ecology, and student engagement on the Historically Black College campus.

Student Engagement

Though a relatively new area of scholarship in the landscape of higher education, the concept of student engagement has been widely researched and examined. Axelson and Flick (2011) explained that though there may be fundamental conflicts with the use of the term “engagement”, it typically involves a measure of a student’s involvement with their learning environment or a variable that examines how one can predict a student’s behavior within a certain learning environment.
According to Astin (1984), student involvement refers to the “quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (p. 528). Further, Astin (1999) explained such involvement “takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participating in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel” (p. 528). Chen, Ingram, and Davis (2014) concluded that “Astin’s theory of student involvement provided the foundation to understand the meaning of student engagement and student satisfaction” (p. 567).

Kuh (1994) defined student engagement as the involvement of students in the process of development and learning. Though some researchers and theorists debate the synonymous nature of the terms “involvement” and “engagement”, Astin (1999) and Kuh (2009) held the concepts as similar and indeed interchangeable (Axelson & Flick, 2011).

Astin (1999) identified three widely held educational theories—subject matter, resources, and individualization of approach—to highlight the importance of connecting those theories to the student involvement theory. He believed that by linking the theories to learning outcomes, the theory of student involvement would receive more attention and validation. Astin (1999) noted the “construct of student involvement in certain respects resembles a more common construct in psychology: motivation” (p. 522). However, Astin (1999) concluded involvement to be more concrete and measurable than the concept of motivation, which can be abstract.

Since involvement takes many forms, Astin’s (1984) theory maintained that the greater the student’s involvement in college, the greater the amount of student learning and development. Further, Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) acknowledged, “Student engagement is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning and personal development” (p. 2). Axelson and Flick (2011) asked, “If we define engagement in the more limited sense—i.e.,
student involvement in a learning process—we can move past the issue of who is responsible to a more productive question: What are the factors affecting student engagement in a particular type of learning process?” (p. 42).

Pittman (2012) explained, “The community aspects of colleges and universities helps students form important relationships, utilize well-established support mechanisms, and establish a certain level of trust in the community that surrounds them” (p. 33). Lane and Perozzi (2014) concurred and noted that student engagement has positive associations with student grades, critical thinking, and achievement. It is widely concluded that student engagement is a predictor of success in a collegiate environment (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Astin (1999) resolved, “The theory of student engagement provides a unifying construct that can help to focus the energies of all institutional personnel on a common objective” (p. 527).

Within the collegiate environment, the concept of student engagement is a dynamic and active process. It is uncertain that there is a terminal point for an engaged student. The thought of engagement as an on-going process necessitates that both students and institutions constantly work toward and through the progression of engagement, whether that means providing engagement opportunities or participating in those opportunities. Laird et al. (2007) found:

Although students themselves largely control their levels of this kind of engagement, institutional culture, climate, and practices play a role in determining how much students get engaged. In particular, students are more actively engaged in their education, and consequently gain more from their experiences, when they are at institutions that they perceive as inclusive and affirming and where performance expectations are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels (p. 39).

Student engagement is not solely the responsibility of the institution; neither is it the singular responsibility of the student. Students and institutions each are accountable in the engagement process. Axelson and Flick (2010) concluded, “Clearly, students and institutions each have responsibilities for the quality of student learning. Students need to put forth the effort
necessary to develop their knowledge and skills, and institutions need to provide the appropriate environments to facilitate student learning” (p. 42). Harris and BrckaLorenz (2017) added, “Engagement involves both the time and effort students put into educationally effective practices, as well as the time and effort institutions put into engaging students” (p. 783).

The necessity for student engagement can extend beyond the walls of the campus. Aside from the published links between student engagement and positive educational outcomes, engagement may be beneficial after college. Carini et al. (2006) concluded, “The very act of being engaged also adds to the foundation of skills and dispositions that is essential to live a productive and satisfying life after college” (p. 2). Student engagement is one of the numerous learning outcomes that lead to positive educational results. Engaged students develop life-long habits of continuing education and enhancing personal development (Carini et al., 2006).

The College Student Union and Its Role in Student Engagement

Once the mutual responsibilities in the engagement discussion are understood, researchers can further examine questions related to how physical spaces at institutions are involved in the engagement matrix. Perhaps more important than understanding where the responsibility for engagement lies, is the determination of what factors affect student engagement process—in this case, how does the student union impact engagement? Rouzer et al. (2014) found that the historical roots of college unions are indeed based in student involvement.

Chun-Mei Zhao and Kuh (2004) concluded intentional physical spaces like college unions on campuses encourage engagement and participation in activities outside the classroom, and are important for student retention, success, and personal development. College unions provide an outlet for activities outside the classroom and away from academic pursuits. Lane
and Perozzi (2014) noted that student unions provide a forum and a space to bring students together to engage in meaningful ways that can span from major campus events to serving in clubs, providing volunteer service to participating through a job as a student worker. The union provides a landing base, a space to serve as a hub of campus life and a physical point for the exercise of the intrinsic concept of building community (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013).

The student union transcends existing as merely a physical building on a college or university campus. Lane and Perozzi (2014) explained, “College unions are one of the few entities in higher education that can be a set of programs that embody institutional ideals and, in many cases, also a physical structure” (p. 30). Therefore, the planning of the structure and the spaces in the student union can impact the culture and the engagement of students within the culture. The union can be either a physical space, a more undefinable concept that elicits the “living room of campus”, or a destination for activity that includes programming and events. Regardless of the definition of the space, the union exists to build community to enhance student engagement (ACUI, n.d.).

Further, Dahlgren, Dougherty and Goodno (2013) noted that college unions were the only spaces on campus erected with the intention of building community. They wrote, “This foundational mission and vision to build community is integral to the college experience since learning hinges on bringing a diverse group of people together to exchange ideas and opinions” (p. 62). Noting the distinct and unique patrons of a student union, Lane and Perozzi (2014) asserted, “Because college unions’ physical spaces typically are highly desired and enjoyed by a large cross section of a campus community, the planning and execution of physical spaces in the union can impact the culture of the college or university” (p. 30). To foster meaningful
engagement, the physical space in a college union, should be inviting and considered safe for all members of the campus community (Lane & Perozzi, 2014).

Jordan and Vakilian (2013) explained that through times like world wars and the Great Depression, the role of college unions became increasingly important on campuses in the United States. College unions provided a safe and/or neutral space for gathering and conversation in the midst of uncertain times. Rouzer et al. (2014) agreed, “Physical space on campus provides structure to social institutions, durability to social networks and persistence to behavior patterns” (p. 4). They further noted that the history of college unions on campus illustrated how the role of the union has evolved over time to “showcase campus services, establish new sources of revenue, and dedicate space for informal and formal learning” (Rouzer et al., p. 4).

Today’s college unions have evolved to include more diverse student demographics, advances in technology, and increased institutional financial pressure. Milani et al. (1992) found, “The student constituency at many colleges and universities is graying, as the number of older students who are often part-time and have different needs for services and programs increases” (p. 5). Rouzer et al. (2014) noted:

College unions struggle between pressures to enhance the overall university’s revenue as state funding continues to decrease and college costs increase while maintaining a commitment to student development and engagement and supporting the academic mission of the institution amid changing student demographics and values (p. 5).

DeSawal and Yakaboski (2014) concluded that for college unions to remain relevant and have an impact on student engagement, professionals working in college unions should embrace assessment to ensure long-term survival. Rouzer et al. (2014) asserted, “The two college union functions of providing services and creating conditions for student learning can be connected; however, college union professionals will have to be intentional in their approach to balancing the delivery of services and creating the optimal conditions for learning within the college union”
Astin (1984) added, “The effectiveness of any policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement” (p. 529). Astin’s student involvement theory allows institutions, faculty, and administrators to assess their facilities and activities in terms of how successful they are in encouraging students to become more fully immersed in the college experience.

When researching student engagement, most of the studies of the college union space center on offerings within the facility – campus life, multicultural affairs, auxiliary services, dining—versus the actual student union building. “Research specifically related to college unions is limited even though other student affairs functional areas have a foundation of research studies that examine the impact of their specific role on campus” (DeSawa & Yakaboski, 2014, p. 97).

**Campus Ecology**

Dedicated spaces with specific design and purpose are the centerpiece of the discussion on campus ecology. Banning (2000) defined campus ecology as the study of the campus as an ecological system made up of three components: inhabitants including students, faculty, and staff; environments both academic and social and the physical features of the environment including the buildings and the associated higher education related learning outcomes, including student engagement (p. 16). In articulating the foundation for the concept of campus ecology, Banning (1978) noted:

Campus ecology incorporates the influence of environments on students and students on environments. The focus of concern is not solely on student characteristics or environmental characteristics but on the transactional relationship between students and their environment. Campus ecology represents a perspective for student affairs that shares the profession's longstanding concern for individual students, but incorporates in a more systematic manner the importance of environments and student-environment transactions (p. 5).
Campus ecology, rooted in traditions of human and developmental ecology, highlights student behavior in relationship to the external environment. Campus ecology is one of the disciplines that explores the relationship between the environment and learning and is linked to environmental psychology (Zandvliet & Broekhuizen, 2017). On a college campus where the various environments co-exist, the innumerable elements and external forces present may determine how students behave and how they respond to academic and social preparation.

Campus environmental theory holds that it is essential to provide atmospheres that support the feeling of inclusion (Strange & Banning, 2001). Banning’s (2000) extended definition of campus ecology framed the theory in terms of a system of opportunity, noting the opportunities and supports “form a transactional relationship with the inhabitants of the environments – with students being of particular interest” (p. 16). Those institutions that create places to facilitate social interaction plan and maintain their facilities to promote student engagement (Manning & Kuh, 2005).

Banning et al. (2010) described the creation of places that promote inclusion as exhibiting a sense of place. A sense of place is defined as, “the emotional attachment to a particular geographical or physical space,” (Banning et al., 2010, p. 906), and studies have connected the sense of place to the college campus. Those studies found “The concept (sense of place) plays an important role in making the campus more attractive for prospective students, contributing to higher retention rates once enrolled, and increasing institutional giving by alumni” (Banning et al., 2010, p. 906). Zandvliet and Broekhuizen (2017) concluded that the importance of the physical environment and sense of place on campuses “thereby enhances or detracts from our perception of the natural surroundings or local contexts in the same conceptual ways as the psychosocial learning environment we experience” (p. 178).
Banning et al. (2010) provided additional context into campus ecology through the concept of the “third place”, a term coined by sociologist Oldenburg (1999). Oldenburg’s third place, a space away from home or work that provides a zone to build community, retreat, or socialize, provides a space for expression and connection. Oldenburg noted the importance of the third place as a vehicle to bring students together to work toward form community (Banning et al., 2010); many of the activities traditionally found in a student union such as eating, drinking, socializing, and studying are the focus of students’ interaction with the third place. Banning et al. (2010) concluded attention to campus spaces, including the concept of the third space, “may offer the most direct route to the building of a successful campus environment including student satisfaction, student development, student stress reduction and institutional growth and financial success” (p. 912).

Additionally, the focus on campus ecology and students’ interaction with the environment has shifted the thought process when building new spaces, with added focus and consideration on determining how students will engage with a space prior to the building design process (Strange & Banning, 2001). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) added, “Because individual effort and involvement are the critical determinants of college impact, institutions should focus on the ways they can shape their academic, interpersonal and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement” (p. 602). Astin (1999) linked the decisions about campus facilities with student engagement:

Moreover, administrative decisions about many nonacademic issues (e.g., the location of new buildings such as dormitories and student unions; rules governing residency; the design of recreational and living facilities; on-campus employment opportunities; number and type of extracurricular activities and regulations regarding participation; the frequency, type and cost of cultural events; roommate assignments; financial aid policies; the relative attractiveness of eating facilities on and off campus; parking regulations) can significantly affect how students spend their time and energy (p. 523).
Broussard (2009) concluded because of the ability for spaces to create relationships and influence engagement, colleges and universities should not underestimate the importance of campus ecology and the spaces on their campuses. Temple (2008) suggested spaces should be built with an awareness of their social purposes and that the “designs should facilitate social interactions, as well as meeting standard operational requirements” (p. 234).

**Student Engagement and the Historically Black College and University**

In Gasman, et al.’s (2010) “Unearthing Promise and Potential--Our Nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities”, the authors provided an overview of the history of HBCUs and explored present issues the minority-serving institutions face. The authors commented:

> Proponents often anecdotally hail HBCUs as some of the best institutions for African Americans because of their nurturing environments. Interestingly, few scholars have made the characterization of the HBCU college environment a primary focal point. In some cases, scholars have provided well-evidenced justifications for how HBCUs have propelled black students through postsecondary success, noting relatively smaller classes; faculty advising; a built-in support system from African American peers, faculty, and administrators; and access to formal remedial programs (p. 38).

The researchers further explained the role of the campus environment on student engagement at HBCUs, noting research that supports the notion that African American students at HBCUs are more academically successful and engaged on campus. Laird et al. (2007) suggested that through support networks, mission-centered curriculum, and activities, African American students’ experiences at HBCUs are more educationally beneficial. Additionally, Laird et al. found that African American students exhibited higher levels of extracurricular involvement on HBCU campuses, which may be a result of the homogenous environment on the institution’s campus (Laird et al., 2007), and also points to the role of social organizations in providing outlets for student engagement on the HBCU campus.
While some studies detail aspects of student engagement on the HBCU campus, most of the studies are comparative research in nature and explore the experiences of students at HBCUs versus the experiences of students at Predominately White Institutions, PWIs. “These comparative studies overwhelmingly indicate that HBCUs, in spite of their poorer financial resources, offer better learning environments and support outlets for African American undergraduates, thus more positively affecting African American student outcomes” (Harper et al., 2004, p. 271). One such study (Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017) concluded that Black students are more engaged than White peers at their institutions. Further, Harris and BrckLorenz (2017) noted their findings “support research that suggests the environment at HBCUs is supportive of and/or fosters Black students’ engagement” (p. 787).

There is little research in higher education literature that addresses student outcomes and engagements on a HBCU campus, without including a comparison of the HBCU to a PWI (Harper et al., 2004). There is little published research on how students on the HBCU campus spend their time and how actively engaged those students are on campus (Harper et al., 2004). Gasman et al. (2010) noted that despite an increase in research in recent years, there is much to be learned and explored in the area of the HBCU student experience. Published studies suggest HBCUs offer more appealing, culturally relevant opportunities and venues for student engagement that positively impact a variety of student outcomes (Harper et al., 2004). Laird et al. (2007) noted, “Institutions that purport to specifically serve, support, and affirm ethnic groups, such as African Americans and Hispanics, often seek to more fully engage those students in educationally appropriate tasks and behaviors” (p. 39).

Philosophically, some research (Gasman, Spencer & Orphan, 2015) concludes that, by their very nature, HBCU campuses are purposed to do more to support student engagement on
their campuses than PWIs. Former president of Southern University Ron Mason Jr. argued HBCUs have a natural inclination to produce students who are engaged and civically minded (Gasman, et al., 2015). Likewise, former president of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) Michael Lomax concluded, “For historically black college and universities (HBCUs) engagement is not an enhancement of their curriculum but part of their birthright” (Gasman et al., 2015, p. 351). Laird et al. (2007) added, “As a result of HBCU cultures being aimed at student involvement and success, African American students have more opportunities to engage in effective educational practices and encounter fewer impediments to engagement at HBCUs compared to PWIs” (p. 51).

However, similar to the concepts of Astin’s Input-Environment-Output model (1984), Kimbrough, Molock, and Walton (1996) cautioned, “One cannot assume that African American students at predominantly Black universities are necessarily better off” (p. 305). Kimbrough et al. concluded that, prior to assuming the HBCU environment may provide better outlets for students, the students’ value systems and cultural environments with which they entered the HBCU should be examined.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter three includes the methodology used to conduct this phenomenological case study. In examining the role of the college student union on a Historically Black College and University campus, this study considered if the physical space influenced student engagement. In this chapter, the researcher outlines the rationale for the qualitative methodology that guided this study and provides a brief overview of the epistemological lens and research design. Following a review of sampling, interview protocol, and data analysis, the chapter concludes with discussions on validity, reliability, and researcher bias.

Philosophical Assumptions

This phenomenological case study intends to fill the gap in the literature about student engagement and the college student union facility, specifically on a Historically Black College and University campus. Central to the exploration of this topic was the selection of a research design that reflected the researcher’s beliefs and worldview. Creswell (2014) explained, “In planning a study, researchers need to think through the philosophical worldview assumptions that they bring to the study, the research design that is related to this worldview, and the specific methods or procedures of research that translate the approach into practice” (p. 34).

Paradigms, or worldviews, are the beliefs about ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) characterized those beliefs as fundamental evidences that are used in qualitative research through the inclusion of explanatory frameworks. Creswell (2007) described the following four philosophical assumptions:
- Ontological: Exploring reality and the nature of reality. Researchers investigate multiple forms of reality and ground their work in the experiences of the perspectives and experiences of their research participants.

- Epistemological: Inquiring about how knowledge is learned. Researchers explore how participants know what they know by working closely with study participants and gathering evidence through field research.

- Axiological: Understanding the role and place of values in research. While investigating, researchers acknowledge and report upon individual beliefs and biases in addition to the information gathered through their study.

- Methodology: Utilizing methods in the process of research: inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing the data (p. 17).

This researcher held the ontological belief that multiple forms of reality of the researched phenomenon were contingent upon the perspective of the participants. The researcher is the instrument in the epistemological approach to qualitative research. This approach includes observations, documents, interviews; the researcher is open to the environment under study and how the participants under observation respond to that environment (Creswell, 2013). This researcher also held the epistemological belief that the investigator and research participants may be linked and that findings are created through the process of conducting research.

This study was influenced by the postpositivist worldview, the belief that studying and researching the behavior of students in their environment may not lead to an absolute truth. The study was grounded with a constructivist lens, however, recognizing that the research involved subjective meanings of the students’ experiences with their college student union facility; the research relied heavily, if not in totality, on the students’ views of the facility.
In his framework for research, Creswell (2014) noted the influence researchers’ philosophical ideals have on research and recommended researchers explain individual worldviews, the definition of the worldview, and a description of how the worldview may influence the approach to the research. Guba and Lincoln (1994) noted, “Questions in method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (p. 105).

Figure 3. Creswell’s (2014) Framework for Research

According to Creswell (2014), constructivists seek to understand the world through the environment of lived experiences. “Researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (p. 37). Guba and Lincoln (1994) noted, “The aim of (constructivist) inquiry is understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new interpretations as information and sophistication improve” (p. 113).
Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

The three approaches to conducting research are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Quantitative research is defined as research that tests theories by comparing variables to determine a relationship between the variables, and is used to measure or quantify data of an object or phenomenon. Quantitative research involves a hypothesis that is placed under experiment and upheld or refuted through the resulting mathematical or statistical data. Creswell (2014) described quantitative research methods as those that include the processes of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and writing the results of a study that can include survey and/or experimental research.

Quantitative research can be viewed as a strong and reliable form of research as the results should be able to be replicated by future experimentation. Quantitative research can be cumbersome and time consuming to conduct, however, some results may not be able to be explained in a concrete and absolute form, most especially as they relate to human behavior and interaction (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative methods are informed by purposeful sampling, collection of data, analysis of data--text or pictures, representation of information in a graphic format, and individual finding interpretation (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research reaches beyond numerical or statistical data and delves into deeper into probing questions of how and why things occur or exist. Qualitative research can be characterized as exploratory research gathered through gaining and understanding of phenomena. Tierney and Lincoln (1994) defined qualitative research as “a human endeavor where individuals interview, observe, record, and interpret the words and actions of other individuals” (p. 110).
Using qualitative research methods, a researcher can become intimately familiar with the topic of research, which may allow for a deeper understanding or the development of new theories or hypotheses. An additional advantage of qualitative research is that it allows for the examination of issues that cannot be measured by quantitative methods, as it is not as rigid in practice. Some researchers question the validity of qualitative research. Disadvantages of qualitative research include that it is difficult to replicate, seemingly subjective, and separating the research data from the inherent bias of the researcher can be difficult. (Creswell, 2014).

**Methodological Approach and Research Design**

Lack of research on the space of college unions and student engagement relative to the lived experience of the student dictates the need for a qualitative research design. Qualitative research focuses on how people interpret and make sense of their experiences and their environment; therefore, to determine how students and college administrators make sense of their experiences in the college student union, and how that experience contributes to student engagement, necessitated a qualitative method.

This study is defined as a single-case study as it involved observation and interviews that were centered on one entity, the student union. Robert Yin (2014) noted, “The development of this research design is a difficult part of doing case studies. Unlike other research strategies, a comprehensive ‘catalog’ of research designs for case studies has yet to be developed” (p. 18). This research is defined as holistic as the case study focused on the larger, rounded aspects of use of the student union and the relationship of the space to student engagement. This interpretive case study addresses the questions of whether college unions are relevant today and, if they are relevant, what is the relationship between student unions and engagement on the campus of a Historically Black University.
Applying Edmund Husserl’s (1859-1938) phenomenological tradition with roots in sociology and psychology, this research focused on the lived experiences of college student union patrons and administrators (Creswell, 2012). Lincoln (2010) asserted, “Phenomenological inquiry has as its goal deep understanding of some phenomenon, with no mandate for prediction or control” (p. 6). Davidsen (2013) professed, “The aim of phenomenological qualitative research is to deal with experiences and meanings” and “to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place” (p. 320). Following Husserl’s (1913) model, this researcher’s phenomenological study involved the following:

- Bracketing - the process of identifying and suspending any preconceived beliefs and opinions that one may have about the phenomenon that is being researched.
- Intuiting - the researcher remains open to the meaning attributed to the phenomenon by those who have experienced it; resulting in a common understanding about the experience.
- Analyzing – the process of coding and characterizing the common themes to make sense of the meanings of the phenomenon.
- Describing – the researcher communicates how the phenomenon is defined.

(Van Manen, 1990).

Using a narrative approach, the researcher examined whether the union building still serves a purpose on today’s college campus, whether that purpose is relevant, and ultimately whether there is a relationship between the student union and student engagement. Qualitative data, especially narratives both from present administrators and patrons, afforded a better understanding of perceptions and ideas about the student union.
Creswell (2007) concluded that interviews provide the richest information in phenomenological research. Seidman (2006) noted:

The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the “others” who make up the organization or carry out the process. Social abstractions like “education” are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built (p. 10).

Interviews with current student affairs administration, union directors, student leaders and patrons were conducted as data collection for this research. The interviews conducted with individuals with first-hand knowledge and experience explored the participants’ perceptions and understandings of the college student union, the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013).

**Sampling Strategy and Interview Protocol**

According to Creswell (1998), qualitative sample sizes should be large enough to obtain feedback to review different perceptions. For phenomenological studies, Creswell recommended at least five subjects. Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2016) found, “Qualitative studies typically use purposively selected samples…and focus more on the quality and richness of data than the number of participants” (p. 591). Qualitative samples that are too large may waste time and money and provide unnecessary data, while conversely, samples that are too small may not fully lead to accurate findings or provide inaccurate results (Hennink et al., 2016).

Through purposeful sampling, two student leaders at a Historically Black College and University were identified and contacted via electronic mail. Those two students had proven engagement in campus activities and expressed personal experience with their campus student union. Through snowball sampling, a strategy where “members of a sample are chosen with a purpose to represent a location or type in relation to the criterion” (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003,
p. 77), six additional participants were identified at the same HBCU. The researcher selected participants from a pre-defined population to more narrowly define parameters of the study. The study sample of students, mixed in gender with five females and three males, included juniors and seniors at the institution. The sample was homogeneous in some respects as some students at the same institution were engaged in at least three campus activities or student organizations outside of academics and had personal experience with the college student union at the institution. Those without first-hand experience in and around the student union and those who were not engaged in campus activities were excluded from this study. Additionally, administrators with expertise in student affairs and union facility management were interviewed to provide context to the student experience and more specifically to speak to the campus ecology theory. Administrators were identified based on job responsibilities relevant to the management of the union or work in the area of student engagement.

The interviews consisted of key open-ended questions to define the participants’ definition of student unions and the participants’ experience with the student union on their campus. Using the semi-structured interview approach, follow up questions were asked when necessary, based on the interviewee’s responses and to pursue an idea or elicit more details about a response. This flexible interviewing approach allowed for an opportunity to discover more information and provided space for elaboration on a topic that may not have been directly addressed with the initial line of questioning. Interviews were conducted inside the college student union on the Historically Black University campus.

Prior to conducting interviews with the students, one pilot interview was conducted. The pilot interview participant embodied the same characteristics as the students in the study and was identified in the same manner. The pilot interview highlighted the need to change some of the
original research questions based on the interviewee responses and the direction of the interview.

The researcher noted during the pilot interview that many questions led to one-word answers. Additionally, the pilot interviewee misinterpreted the direction of some of the original questions. Finally, the flow of questions proved disjointed and the researcher realized the need to shift the order of questions to allow for more connectivity. The questions were amended prior to conducting participant interviews.

The researcher discussed Seidman’s (2006) abstract concept of engagement with participants. After obtaining informed consent, semi-structured personal interviews with predetermined questions were administered to each participant and recorded via iPad technology to allow for verbatim transcription.

Interview questions included the following:

**Questions for administrators**

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<th>Question</th>
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<td>What is your professional or personal experience with the student union or student center on your campus?</td>
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<td>How does your daily work as a student or professional contribute to the events or activities found within the student union?</td>
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<td>As you observe students in your union, what do you see?</td>
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<td>How would you describe student engagement on your campus?</td>
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<td>What role does the student union play in engagement?</td>
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<td>Where are the opportunities to increase student engagement through the student union?</td>
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<td>How does your personal experience with a student union as a student shape your view of the union and its purpose?</td>
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<td>Does the student union have a role or purpose on today’s college campus?</td>
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<td>What does the union mean to your student population?</td>
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<td>What would engagement on your campus look like if the student union did not exist?</td>
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<td>How does your college student union provide a sense of place for students?</td>
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<td>How does the college student union fulfill the mission of your institution?</td>
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<td>How would you characterize the available funding to support your student union to provide services to further its mission or the mission of the institution?</td>
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<td><strong>Questions for students</strong></td>
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<td>Can you tell me about your experience of visiting or working in a college student union?</td>
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<td>Describe your ideal college student union. Did your collegiate union match with your ideal image?</td>
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<td>Can you describe in as much detail as possible your use of a college union during your time in school?</td>
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<td>How did you feel when you visited a college union on campus?</td>
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<td>What message or value is conveyed by the college union building on your campus?</td>
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<td>How would you describe your sense of place on this campus?</td>
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<td>Does your student union provide you with a sense of place?</td>
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<td>What are the learning opportunities offered by your college student union?</td>
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<td>Do you have further examples of times when you or your friends visited college unions?</td>
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<td>How do you think other people on campus characterized their experiences with student unions?</td>
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How much of your student fee supports the college student union?

Do you think the college student union provides a value to you?

Please provide any other information or details regarding college unions that you find relevant to this study.

In addition to interviews, field notes were gathered and augmented through observation of student use, engagement, and interaction at the student union facility. The field notes provided context to the narratives of the interview process and allowed for the researcher’s immersion into the HBCU college union experience at the study site.

**Saturation**

Data saturation references the point in data collection when answers tend to become repetitive or redundant and no additional data is discovered (Hennink et al., 2016). An abundance of published research exists regarding data and sample sizes in qualitative research. In homogenous populations, it is assumed that saturation would be achieved more quickly because of the similarities of the population. Achieving saturation can depend on the complexity of the data, experience of the investigator, and the number of persons reviewing the data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). “Saturation is an important component of rigor. It is present in all qualitative research, but unfortunately, it is evident mainly by declaration” (Hennink et al., 2016, p. 607). In gathering data, the researcher noted saturation differed in occurrence depending on the research question. However, overall saturation occurred when the interviews produced similar comprehensive data on a range of issues.
Data Analysis

Once it was gathered through interviews and observations, qualitative data was analyzed to identify and interpret any trends that were present. Understanding the analysis centered around the main research questions; key groupings included:

- What is the union experience?
- Is the experience still relevant today?
- Does the experience link to student engagement?

Inductive analysis is defined as allowing the research to permit theory to come from the data under investigation (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). Thomas acknowledged, “The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (p. 238). Consistent with the use of the inductive approach employed in many realms of social science research, the researcher engaged a general inductive approach in analyzing data for the study.

Following Creswell’s (2014) data analysis flow chart, interviewee responses to the individual key topics and questions were analyzed and explored, and themes or patterns were identified and categorized to connect with current research or ideas. The grouping of themes and patterns were coded, a term defined by Weitzman (2000) as “probably the best-supported approach at the current writing” (p. 813). Creswell (2014) added that phenomenological research uses the analysis of significant statements and places the statement together in units that have similar meaning. To assist with the coding process, the interview data collected was inserted into a computer program. Interviews were transcribed using Atlas.ti.
Once the response relationships were determined, findings were articulated. In analyzing norms that surfaced, commentaries on the implications of future research were concluded. Understanding that the narrative data collection would be a fluid process, the researcher interpreted the findings and drew implications and conclusions based on the information received and how it connected to the main research questions.

**Research Questions**

Once coded and evaluated, interview responses and field notes addressed the research questions of the study to understand whether the college student union has an impact on student engagement at a Historically Black University.

**Research Question One**

At a time of dwindling financial resources and evolving campus spaces, where even classroom buildings and recreation centers now include common areas, retail and food concepts, what role, if any, does the union idea play on today’s HBCU campus?
Research Question Two

If indeed, student unions are still relevant in today’s campus community, to what extent does the union impact student engagement at a Historically Black University?

Validity and Reliability

The concepts of reliability and validity are widely debated in qualitative research. No matter where a researcher falls in the debate on reliability and validity in qualitative research, it is important that researchers demonstrate credible studies (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For this study, the researcher authored the survey instrument questions. That instrument was administered to all participants in the same manner. In testing the validity of the survey instrument through this research, the reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor, and quality (Golafshani, 2003).

The survey instrument questions were evaluated based on the following:

- Content validity - Do the questions reflect the issue,
- Internal validity - Can the questions explain the outcome, and
- External validity - Can the results be generalized to the target population the survey sample represents? (Leung, 2015).

The reliability of the survey instrument relates to the consistency of the survey and the manner in which the survey was administered (Golafshani, 2003). Leung (2015) added,

Validity in qualitative research means ‘appropriateness’ of the tools, processes, and data. Whether the research question is valid for the desired outcome, the choice of methodology is appropriate for answering the research question, the design is valid for the methodology, the sampling and data analysis is appropriate, and finally the results and conclusions are valid for the sample and context (p. 326).

The constructivist researcher believes in interpretive or open-ended perspectives of reality. Validity in that context includes trustworthiness of participants and authenticity of the
data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To further establish validity in this study, the researcher employed the technique of triangulation through observations, interviews with students, and interviews with administrators to locate and validate major themes. Creswell and Miller (2000) defined triangulation as “a step taken by researchers employing only the researcher’s lens, and it is a systematic process of sorting through the data to find common themes or categories by eliminating overlapping areas” (p. 127).

The researcher also employed the member checking technique to further ensure validity. Participants were given the opportunity to review interview transcripts to ensure accuracy. They were also asked to certify that the transcripts reflected their thoughts and did not omit any facts that they articulated during the data collection interviews.

Limitations

The researcher recognized several limitations in this study. The observation included a targeted subset of student leaders at a selected Historically Black University. The behavior, engagement, and interaction of the selected students may vary with the presence of external forces. As with any observation, the conclusions drawn in this study generalized student behavior and that behavior may not indeed be indicative of the larger population of students.

Additionally, as discussed in the research, it can be difficult to explain what student engagement is and what it looks like. Therefore, it was crucial for this research to focus on the given definitions of concepts that may vary in application from researcher to researcher.

Human Subjects

The study was conducted in accordance with the policies and procedures of the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at Louisiana State University and Southern University.
Louisiana State University granted an IRB exemption from oversight and Southern University provided IRB approval.

**Researcher Bias**

A qualitative researcher must be aware of personal bias. The researcher recognizes and acknowledges the epistemological worldview is an essential part of maintaining the authenticity of qualitative research (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). “It is particularly important for researchers to acknowledge and describe their entering beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand their positions, and then to bracket or suspend those researcher biases as the study proceeds” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

As I embarked on this research, I paused to articulate my position and lens as they related to the college student union space.

For over four years, I served as a student affairs professional directing various programs in a college student union setting. I worked closely with leadership on framing policies and procedures. In addition to supervising numerous employees, I also employed a number of student workers. My work in the student union environment, both with students and fellow professionals, provided context for my research but also presented biases of which I had to be aware.

In addition to my work on campus, I was also active in the Association of College Unions International (ACUI). I held office on the regional level of the organization and served on a committee for the larger international body. During my time volunteering with ACUI, I became aware of the broader context of student unions, the history of college student unions, and the concept of the student union existing as more than just a facility on a college or university campus.
Aside from my professional work, I am the product of an HBCU. As an undergrad, I attended an HBCU and was immersed fully in the college experience; I participated in numerous student activities and held office in a few organizations. By extension, I frequently patronized the college student union on my HBCU campus.

Though I bring personal and professional experience in the college student union realm, I understand that my beliefs should not interfere with nor conflict with my research. While acknowledging my potential personal bias, I find that my experience afforded me the opportunity to gain the trust of my research subjects and enhanced my ability to collect data to contribute to the limited discourse in this arena. I committed to remaining transparent and aware of how my personal background and biographical history may have played a role in the shaping of my research (Creswell, 2013).

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher provided the backdrop of the research by examining the philosophical assumptions, paradigms, and rationale guiding the study. Besides a description of the research design, this chapter also identified the participant sampling and interview protocol. Discussion of the data analysis, the researcher’s thoughts on saturation, and the basis for validity and reliability in the research were also included. The chapter concluded with an acknowledgment of researcher bias. The findings of this study will be presented in chapter four and discussed in chapter five.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

No other ecological feature embraces all campus inhabitants—students, faculty, staff and visitors. No other ecological feature offers programmatic structures to foster the academic, social, physical and cultural development of students. No other ecological feature provides a full range of support and retail services to the campus. No other ecological feature addresses the full sense of the concept of community—both campus and local communities. Certainly, there is no ecological feature within the campus landscape that functions in all of these diverse ways – typically under the roof of one building – besides the college union (Banning, 2000, p. 16).

This qualitative phenomenological investigation explored the questions of whether the ecological feature – the college student union building - still serves a purpose on today’s Historically Black College campus, whether that purpose remains relevant, and ultimately whether there is a relationship between the student union facility and student engagement.

Study Site

The study was conducted at a public Historically Black University in the southern region of the United States. The university supports agricultural and land grant research and had an enrollment of nearly 6,500 in the Fall of 2017 (Louisiana Board of Regents Statewide Student Profile System, 2017). The institution offers bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. Under the pseudonym, Evangeline A&M University (EAMU) in this research, the university reported a predominantly female enrollment with females outnumbering males two-to-one (Louisiana Board of Regents Statewide Student Profile System, 2017).

Participant Information

The twelve research participants were identified through purposeful sampling. Among the four administrators were three males and one female. The student interview population reflected the gender enrollment on the campus as there were five females and three males; they
were a mix of male and female upper class students who self-identified as engaged students having been involved in at least three student organizations or activities outside of academics, the criteria determined by the researcher. Each student participant was a junior or senior at the institution where they engaged in campus activities. Although not central to this study, all participants, including administrators, self-identified as African-American. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms assigned by the researcher.

Table 1. Student Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terri</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trey</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Terri**

Terri was a senior English major and a member of Pi Sigma Epsilon Fraternity. She also served as the deputy chief of staff for the Association of Women Students. Additionally, she was a member of both the Urban Forestry Club and the Manners Club.

**Brandi**

Brandi reigned as the campus queen. In addition to her role as Miss Evangeline A&M, she also was a member of Pi Sigma Epsilon Fraternity, Beta Kappa Chi National Honor Society, the
scientific honor society and the National Institute of Sciences. Brandi had sung in the gospel choir since her freshman year.

**Trey**

Trey was a senior majoring in mass communications with a concentration in public relations. He served as the Men's Federation president at EAMU within the Student Government Association. He has also served as sophomore class president and was a part of his freshman class cabinet. Notably, he was a member of the school’s famous marching band and was a member of the Collegiate 100 at the university.

**Ava**

Ava was a junior majoring in chemistry and chemical engineering, a part of the Honors College, Student Government Association, Pi Sigma Epsilon, and Beta Kappa Chi. Ava was an EAMU Ambassador and an Honors College Ambassador. She also tutored for the Center for Undergraduate Student Achievement.

**Joshua**

Joshua was a junior mass communications major. He was involved in Pi Sigma Epsilon National co-ed business fraternity and served as the current junior class president. Joshua also lent his graphic design talents to several student organizations.

**Mimi**

Mimi was involved in several organizations on campus, one of which she founded, a network to get to know people and execute different community service events. She was also in the Student Government Association, having served as a senator for three years. Mimi was the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on campus.
Brittany

Brittany was in her senior year at EAMU. She also had the experience of being a student at a Predominately White Institution in the same town. She was the editor of a campus publication and engaged with a debate team on the campus as well. Aspiring to become a lawyer, Brittany also participated with a mock trial competition team at EAMU.

August

August, a senior criminal justice major, performed as the co-ed squad cheer captain. He was a member of a business fraternity, served as a class volunteer, and was the current chief of staff for the Student Government Association.

Administrators were identified for participation in this study based on their work with the college student union, from either a facility management aspect or in a student engagement role. Interviews with four administrators provided additional context to the study; the researcher assigned a pseudonym to each participant.

Table 2. Administrator Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Taylor</td>
<td>Interim Dean of Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Terrell</td>
<td>Director of Campus Facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Hannah</td>
<td>Union Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Bennett</td>
<td>Director of Student Life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mr. Taylor

Mr. Taylor was the Interim Dean of Students and had oversight of student conduct and an active role in student activities. Prior to the interim title, Mr. Taylor served as Associate Dean of Students at EAMU. He was an alumna of the institution, having graduated nearly ten years ago.
While Mr. Taylor expressed his fulfillment in his current role, he announced his departure from the university prior to the completion of this research.

**Mr. Terrell**

Mr. Terrell served as the Director of Campus Facilities at EAMU. His role included the design, planning, implementation, and upkeep of buildings in the EAMU system. Mr. Terrell oversaw the renovations to the EAMU Student Union including the addition of a food court, bowling alley, and computer lab. He saw his goal as using facilities to bring a cohesiveness to the student body. His tenure at EAMU extended over 23 years.

**Ms. Hannah**

The director of the EAMU Student Union, Ms. Hannah was immediately responsible for all aspects of the management of the union building. She oversaw maintenance of the facility, managed a custodial staff, and set up for all meetings and events. Prior to joining the EAMU staff three years previous to this research, Ms. Hannah worked in a similar role at a rival HBCU.

**Mr. Bennett**

Mr. Bennett, an EAMU alum, served in the role of Director of Student Life. He was directly responsible for various aspects of student life on the campus including Greek life, student government and a spirit squad team. Unlike other institutions, Mr. Bennett did not have a staff. He managed student life on the campus with the assistance of two student workers.

**Emergent Themes**

Through purposeful sampling, two student leaders at Evangeline A&M University were identified and contacted via electronic mail. The students had proven engagement in campus activities and personal experience with their campus student union. Through snowball sampling, six additional participants at EAMU were identified. The researcher selected participants from a
pre-defined population to define parameters of the study. The study sample of students, mixed in
gender with five females and three males, included juniors and seniors at the institution.
Additionally, administrators with expertise in student affairs and union facility management were
interviewed to provide context to the student experience and, more specifically, to speak to the
campus ecology theory. Administrators were identified based on job responsibilities relevant to
the management of the union and work in student engagement.

The interviews consisted of key open-ended questions to help define the participants’
definition of student unions and the participants’ experience with student unions. With the semi-
structured interview approach, follow up questions were asked when necessary and were based
on the interviewee’s responses to pursue an idea or elicit more details on a particular response.
This flexible interviewing approach allowed for an increased opportunity to discover more
information and provided space for elaboration on a topic that may not have been directly
addressed with the initial line of questioning. Interviews were conducted at the Evangeline
A&M University Student Union.

In reviewing responses to the questions and coding in groups, several major themes and
sub-themes emerged.
Table 3. Identification of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Place or Just a Place?</td>
<td>• Union as a destination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Barriers to use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where Have All the Students Gone?</td>
<td>• The case of the unengaged student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The necessity of engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Resource Challenge</td>
<td>• Providing activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Providing a suitable space.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme One: Sense of Place or Just a Place?

The Student Union as a Destination

The first major theme that emerged was the idea of the EAMU Student Union as a destination. Each of the students interviewed commented about their use of the college student union as a destination for services. All respondents commented with that same thought when asked to explain their opinions about the facility and their individual use of the facility. Reflecting on their experiences with the EAMU Union, interview participants described the union foremost as a physical space.

Nearly 100 years ago, the college student union was described as a place that made a university a more human space (Butts, 1971). When unfolding her thoughts about the union, Terri commented:

It's pretty much like a central place where everyone just kind of gathers around. People go there to eat or do homework or like, wait until the next class. I used to go in there a lot, but now I just go for food. I don't go between classes anymore. Most people do.

Similarly, Ava added her perspective about the union space and her visits to the facility:

Um, I can come in here to just hang out with friends at times when I have gaps in my schedule or even just to get a little business done for one of my organizations. I more so just come in my free time and if I see people I know, I go and hang with them a little bit, see how they're doing. Mostly I come in here just to get work done for AWS (Association of Women Students) or SGA (Student Government Association).

Trey characterized his experience with the EAMU Union as being directly related to activities or events going on at the campus center:

From a student leader perspective. We definitely use it (the union) for a lot of spaces for like forums, events, um, you know, kind of relax in between class and come grab something to eat or you know, talk or we have meetings and stuff like SGA or different organizations. We talk to administrators in between classes, but for the most part just like more of a downtime destination, getting work done in the space in most cases.
The Role of the College Union (ACUI, 1996) defined the union first and foremost as a center of college life. In that description, the union is described more as an ideal and less like a physical space. The union is described as an organization, an entity that encourages activity. Reflecting on the connotation of the union, Ava continued, “I do think that the union can at times be a pillar for, uh, for things that students can learn and kind of become more aware of things going on in society.” Temple (2008) found, “learning is helped by providing students with possibilities for a socially catalytic third place, neither where you live nor work” (p. 236). Terri further described the union in the context of Banning et al.’s (2010) third place: “I kind of feel chill when I'm going to go there like, you know, get away from the actual work. So, it’s an escape from that kind of work stuff.”

The students and the administrators differed in their intangible descriptors of the Union. While the students tended to reference the Union only in terms of the physical space, the administrators described the intrinsic characteristics of the space. Milani et al. (1992) described the domain of college student union as “the education of the complete person: mind, body and spirit” (p. 4). Mr. Taylor spoke of the Union with the seemingly inherent connotations traditionally assigned to a college student union:

(The union is) Somewhere that we call a second or third home at the university. The purpose is for students to have somewhere to feel like it’s home. Again, a student union would be a place for a student to actually relax for themselves or with their colleagues than to be in a dorm room. And I think the Union is kind of a safe house for them to come to just to stay out of trouble.

Mr. Bennett pointed out that in his work with students that he hoped they found the Union as an open space, conducive to their learning and engagement. He emphasized the importance of thinking of the Union as a home base for students:

I think students, like I use the word home before, it's not really used loosely because I really think it is. Unions are normally the hub of the campus and so um, students are
engaged in a multitude of things in here from computer technology and working on homework or for fun spaces. Most of the time you'll see them for fun spaces in the union. It’s more of a socializing atmosphere or they're holding an event. Events are normally the more fun type of events because of its location and where it is and it’s being like the center of the campus.

“Built structures, signage and landscaping can buoy students’ feelings of well-being, belonging and identity” (Manning & Kuh, 2005, p. 3). Mr. Terrell was descriptive in his accounts of the inherent value of having the Union on a campus to serve as a safe-haven or a destination that offered additional outlets for students:

I think the Union provides a sense of, uh, stability, gathering, home feeling and it reaches out to students. We are here to help you adapt to the college life to, uh, adapt to any complications that you may run into and to ease your mind.

Terri’s feelings about the Union were similar to the administrator’s position:

It (the Union) definitely makes you feel like you belong since it’s the place everyone gathers…You see people that look like you, act like you, move like you, want the same things as you. So, I feel that it’s a common place that feels like me.

Broussard (2009) found the character of a place supports a student’s sense of personal identity.

Though Trey thought the Union may provide a sense of place, identity, and belonging for students, he acknowledged those feelings may not be universal:

Does the Union provide a sense of place? For a certain percent of students, yes, but for the majority, no. A lot of students don't feel like they're at home. Like they just come and grab something to eat on the go. They don't see a sense of excitement to come to the union and just almost like it’s kind of kind of dull.

Ava agreed:

For some students, I guess the Union can feel like theirs. Yes. Other students--no. I would always see a crowd of people who are always there and kinda dancing cause dance, it is their life. So, they would come out and just try out new things and stuff. So, for them I can kind of see the Union being a sense of home for them. But um, I can see it being home for some people but not all.

“By examining the influence of architecture and the physical campus on student behavior, professionals in college unions can create physical environments for learning and
facilitate a sense of belonging for students” (Rullman & Harrington, 2014, p. 39). While the views expressed by some participants aligned with the tenants of creating purposeful spaces and Banning’s (1978) campus ecology theory in making place matter, not all student participants shared the same view. Joshua pointed to what perhaps will be identified as a challenge to the college student union facilities of the future—the inclusion of services traditionally found in union spaces now integrated in other buildings around campus:

Personally, I feel more home being in my designated school building like my major, I feel more at home there. We all come to the Union and its supposed to be or feel fun for us, to feel innovative. It’s supposed to feel homey to the students. To me it doesn't feel like that because you can't get what you need in a timely manner or just get it all.

Brandi shared similar views about the EAMU union space, mostly while discussing the difficulties she’s experienced with her use of the space:

It doesn't (feel like home), like I said before, it doesn’t make me feel anything. It’s just like a location to host stuff. I don't feel like we have a place, like I said, we can't just come like, be home.

**Barriers to Use**

When describing their use and thoughts about the EAMU Student Union, many of the students explained their thoughts on the restrictions of use and their enjoyment of the union. It became obvious that the students did not perceive the EAMU Student Union space as a freely available space. Brandi noted:

It's so many rules and restrictions to where we can't even enjoy--just like chilling on the courtyard, you know, the EAMU police department comes and shuts it down. So, I just feel like it's kind of like drawing students away. You get what I'm saying--from all the restrictions. But in the near future, I hope that they can realize, you know, that we are young adults and we can have fun without all the drama and commotion.

Trey agreed with Brandi’s sentiments:

I just feel like the strenuous procedures turn students away from even getting involved or even wanting to be interested or doing an event here in the Union for whatever reason. Like I said, we gather somewhere in Union without a building request, they go call the
police department to come shut it down and it just kind of like why don't you trust us? if it weren't for our money to pay, then there would be no student union, there will be no university. So, most of the time students feel like they can't have somewhere to have fun or even, you know, just enjoy without somebody micromanaging or calling the police to just take away the excitement.

Manning and Kuh (2005) found “Students are more likely to flourish in settings where they are known and valued as individuals contrasted with settings where they feel anonymous” (p. 3).

Several of the student participants commented on a feeling of not being valued or appreciated as a barrier to their use of the facility. Brandi remarked:

It's not a place that I would just hang out in as just the destination. As far as like the persons who work here, some of them are inviting, and some are rude and don't have great communication skills. So, I think that's a reason why people really don't come to the union.

Trey contrasted his feelings with the EAMU Student Union to his visits to other unions on similar campuses. As an ambassador, Trey often provided tours of the facility to prospective students. He saw the setting and treatment of students as a barrier to be addressed:

I've been bringing around high school students and stuff. You really don't get much of a welcoming sense here. But just me being on the outside, looking from the outside, the inside, it could be so much better. Like we'll grab so many more people, more students to, you know, be around if we had a more student driven union.

Joshua concluded his interview by saying that perhaps more students would visit the Union if EAMU had better customer service.

**Theme Two: Where Have All the Students Gone?**

**The Case of the Unengaged Student**

During both the student and administrator interviews, the theme of lack of student participation or engagement emerged and recurred. Both groups of participants agreed that despite the efforts of the leaders who planned student events and the facility, morale and interest in campus activities in and around the Union have dwindled in recent years. Trey connected the
decrease in morale to the EAMU Student Union facility, insinuating that the facility was not conducive to eliciting excitement or a will to participate from students:

I know usually I have a lot of friends that go to other HBCUs. I visit them there. I had to be kind of like, wow, like if I would have my union look like this, I definitely think a lot of the student morale would go up. So, sometimes we just wish that the Union would expand in most cases. A lot of students feel the same way as well.

When speaking of the low morale, Joshua described his personal experience in terms of a lack of information and awareness:

It's just like the students never know what's going on and I feel like if the Union is the center of the campus, the center of student life, then they should always be aware of what's going on here on campus. They have events and our students would be like—no, I had no idea that was going on.

In their research, Kenney et al. (2005) asserted, “Most institutions agree that college life outside the classroom is a vital part of the college experience and a significant factor in creating a sense of community” (p. 55). Further, Kenney et al. (2005) noted that engagement in a community cannot exist unless institutions freely provide spaces that support and encourage such interaction. Brandi reflected on her interaction with students and the Union and how her personal interaction with the space has changed over time. While expressing her frustrations about the obstacles to using the Union such as police shutting down events and tedious paperwork to request use of the space, Brandi noted how dealing with what she called barriers contribute to a decrease in positivity and the result that fewer students participate in activities in the Union:

When it's time to host an event, the students, they don't want to come. It's like what's the point? And the only time they come is if it's like if it's a party or something, but you know, we really host like very informative, um, events and stuff. But it's like the students, the students’ spirit, the morale of everything has just dropped tremendously.

Kuh et al. (1991) found institutions that recognize and respond to the total student experience encourage involvement. Trey did not agree that EAMU responded to the student
experience and thought students did not feel heard. As a leader, he was committed to elevating morale, however, it was difficult for him when his concerns were not addressed:

I know it's a process to everything, but it (suggestions or complaints) still has to be taken into consideration, then we should see those results further down the line. But we don't see those results about what we feel like should be improved and what we voiced our opinions about. We kind of feel like it's falling on deaf ears and that it's not really like a student driven union space for us.

In her role as Union Director, Ms. Hannah agreed that the participation, interest, and student engagement were not where they should be:

To be honest and not to drag on our students, but um, they're not as engaged. And I think that's one thing that we need to figure out--why they're not engaged and how do we get them to be engaged. They're not engaged until something like food is provided, a t-shirt is provided, um, an increase in their declining balances (campus card system), you know, something like that. It has to be an initiative where you've gained something in order for your participation. So, it's a question of what can we do to gain their participation.

Kuh (2009) found that at many institutions, a limited number of students actually participate in “high-impact” engagement activities (p. 698). Joshua agreed with Ms. Hannah’s thoughts about the difficulty of encouraging his fellow students to engage and participate in campus activities:

If there were no students, there will be no institution and so student engagement is a hard topic on this campus because our students just don't engage actively unless it's a party or something free.

Using student engagement, or lack thereof, as an indicator of quality begs the questions of whether or not resources are effectively utilized to foster student learning, build community, and student success (Kuh, 2009). Noting the opportunity to improve the institution’s engagement of students, Mr. Taylor echoed similar sentiments as Ms. Hannah, particularly contrasting the morale of the current student population to the spirit when he was a student at EAMU:

The engagement is there, but it’s not where I think it needs to be. Um, school pride and morale isn’t anything near what we used to have. That was sporting events, that was blockbuster programs, that was pep rallies, that was voter registration, um, we were highly engaged in whatever we did here at the institution. Not saying the students are not engaged, but there is room for improvement.
Similarly, Mr. Bennett, Director of Student Life, recalled his time as a student at EAMU and compared the engagement then to what he observed in the current student population:

I’ve been here for a while, so I’ve seen the changes in engagement. Engagement is a little bit different from being an undergrad here and seeing the first generations after you graduate. Engagement was high. I mean people spoke, there's a lot of handshaking, a lot of interactions, face-to-face talking. And the newer generations, they’re so phone, social media savvy. I think it (the Union) served as a place for them to see each other rather than engage as much besides for the eating facilities. I think that union served as that middle ground as the space where in between their academics in class areas, instead of going all the way back to the dormitories or some of their friends lived off campus and for commuters, it was that meeting space. The Union was a refuge spot after academics to sort of release. I don’t know if I see that today. The engagement is different.

The Necessity of Engagement

Though the student participants clearly articulated the problems with lack of engagement, they were enthusiastic to extol the benefits of being engaged in the campus community. The administrators also were energized when describing their perspectives on the engaged student and the role the EAMU Student Union played in student engagement. Lane and Perozzi (2014) found, “Professionals working in college unions contribute to student success through positive, meaningful engagement of students in the co-curriculum,” (p. 27) by providing opportunities for engagement through events and activities that complement the academic curriculum.

Mr. Taylor characterized the Union as more than a destination for enjoyment. He grew the definition of the Union to go outside of the physical space to also connect the importance of the space to the engagement of the students on his campus:

We have so many opportunities for the students to actually be engaged…a multitude of events and activities…Um, our main focus now is to get them there. Once we get them there, we will show them the platform, we will show them what we have to offer. But again, the students have to meet us halfway, um, to have the best student engagement here at the university that we can.
Mr. Taylor’s comments underscored Axelson and Flick’s (2010) findings that both the students and the institutions have a responsibility and a role in the engagement of students. Further, Kuh (2009) asserted institutions should engage students by seeking “ways to channel student energy toward educationally effective activities” (p. 688).

“College unions engage students through a variety of opportunities and collaborations and act as the community center for the campus while providing a forum for bringing individuals together” concluded Lane and Perozzi (2014, p. 30). Further, Lane and Perozzi detailed the engagement opportunities as students participating in producing events, leading a club, and/or working in the facility—any way that students connect with the campus community. As Trey added in reflecting on his engagement with the Union:

A lot of our functioning offices are here in the Union…A lot of events we do are geared here in the Union. So, uh, definitely I can say that from perspective. I think every organization I've been a part of was tied into the Union some kind of way.

Ava agreed with Trey’s reflection on the engagement opportunities in and around the Union noting:

Well, I know for orientation, like the Union is the central location for all the activities that we do. Um, even with the seminars from the administrators telling people about the different things that they need to know about and how to get your financial aid right. I feel that the Union is kinda that door that can open for people to get everything that they need.

In addition to the engagement opportunities offered by the Union facility, the student participants identified numerous reasons for their individual engagement on campus. Brandi characterized her involvement as central to her desire to impact change on campus:

I feel like it’s important (to be engaged). The college world is kind of the medium between childhood and the real world. So, I feel like it's important to be involved, number one, so you can know what’s going on; number two so that you can actually put into action the solutions that you feel like you have to certain complaints. Um, it's one thing to complain about something, but it's another thing to actually get involved and doing something about it.
Trey described his engagement on campus as life changing:

I think student engagement is one of the biggest factors in having a great matriculation in the university. And I say that because like, yeah, you can come to school, get your education, go home, but when you get involved, when you get in different organizations, get to travel and meet people at other institutions. It just like I could just personally say it took my experience on another level. Like it makes me want to come to school. It makes me want to be excited and to do what I do every day because it's a new experience.

Ava sees her involvement not only as pivotal to her time on campus, but also a part of her growth for a lifetime, like the findings of Carini et al. (2006), researchers who concluded the act of being engaged adds to the foundational skills necessary for a productive and satisfying life after college. Ava commented:

I feel it's (engagement) important because at the end of the day, you are the only one who can make your experience better than what it is. You're the one who determines how this HBCU can affect you in the future. If you don't use the resources that you have here, then you kinda are shortchanging yourself because there's so many resources…You can network, you can develop yourself professionally and getting involved puts you in the place to do that. But if you just go to class and then leave and go home, it kind of takes away from everything because you're getting the academic side, but you're not getting the social side and out there in the workforce. It's more than just, oh, you're doing the work. You have to work with people.

Mimi also described the importance of her engagement on campus as essential as she prepared for her future career:

I love talking to people, meeting people. It (being engaged) gives me the opportunity to learn about people which will help me in nursing because in nursing you're like the person who sees somebody kind of at their worst and when they need help. So just learning how to interact with people by being involved and feed off the energy and help them. Help them whenever I can.

Theme Three: The Resource Challenge

Providing Activities

Kuh (2009) found, “The college experiences that matter most to desired outcomes are those that engage students at high levels in educationally purposeful activities” (p. 687).

Whether referencing educational programs, leadership development activities, or how the
offerings in the union were physically used by students, Mr. Taylor illustrated that the use and need for the Union on his campus as an outlet for activities:

I see more students just holding, again, various meetings, various social settings as far as different programs, or they’ll have just different events lined up to use the actual Union. We have organization fairs that give students over a hundred to 200 organizations to choose from to actually be a part of…orientation leader, EAMU ambassador, honors college, NAACP, African-American heritage club. I want to see the students excited and engaged to be in the Student Union…somewhere to have actual research, somewhere to have development of some sort, a home to activities.

Though her description was more limiting, Brandi agreed with Mr. Taylor:

In my honest opinion, the Union is just a central location where other organizations can host events.

Lane and Perozzi (2014) found the central element of the college union is to design and maintain environments that foster engagement in programs and activities that are associated with outcomes that positively benefit the student. Yet the idea of the union as “just a space for activities” was echoed in many of the student interviews, specifically an event held weekly on Wednesdays and referred to as “Pretty Wednesday”. “Pretty Wednesday”, as described by Trey, gave the students an opportunity to don their finest attire and socialize during lunchtime at the EAMU Student Union with a backdrop of music and spoken word. Brandi thought that outside of that event, her time to enjoy Union activities was limited:

So, you have your days where the Union is really popular, which is on Pretty Wednesdays. So that's when you have a DJ in the patio and everybody is missing class to be at Pretty Wednesday…Unless it’s a Pretty Wednesday or they're hosting something like a cultural week or something like a lesson, unless its organizations hosting something, then the Union is really not somewhere where we can come and just have fun.

Ava agreed that her time patronizing the EAMU Union would not have been the same without the Pretty Wednesday event:

I'm pretty sure I never missed a Pretty Wednesday, which is, I never had a scheduling conflict. So, Pretty Wednesday was just always like, hey, I have to go to it. So, let me go and see what everyone's doing.
Ava mentioned some frustration with her fellow students beyond that weekly event:

But a lot of students kind of only see the union as, only Pretty Wednesday or only Chick-fil-A and Burger King…they don't really come here (to the Union) for the educational things. More so only for the fun side of things.

While Joshua agreed, he also thought that activities in the union space should not be limited to one day a week:

I feel like the Union should have something going on, whether it's big or small, at least three times out of the week rather than just on Wednesdays…with different vendors or different job opportunities for professional development or companies coming in to recruit. I feel like it should be more than just on Wednesdays.

As facility administrator and in reference to Pretty Wednesday, Mr. Bennett, said he often observed the student use of the facility and realized that activities were fundamental in and around the building:

I think here at the Union and especially from the staff with the Union and the academic support offered, a lot is presented for the students to participate in…especially, I know there's major activities on Wednesdays for students because they're already inundated with homework, hitting the books and studies, so you need that. So, having that downtime to participate, um, the staff does a super job by having a number of activities for the students to participate. So, what I've observed is that the Union is very active…and I think that's very vital.

While Ms. Hannah agreed with the need for more activities in and around the Union as echoed by the students and Mr. Bennett, she also acknowledged the challenges:

We have to make sure that we are doing activities that fall in line with the mission of the institution. I found that minimizing the number of events to have quality over quantity may help. So, for instance, when I first got here in 2015, I was trying to have like three events a week but they (the students) weren't coming. So now I try to have one event, you know, biweekly, that will be suitable for the students. It’s a better use of our resources.

“Professionals working in college unions play a critical role in connecting student to their campus experience and helping them sort through myriad options, choices and decisions” asserted Lane and Perozzi (2014, p. 31). In describing the Union, Ms. Hannah referred to it as
the central hub of activities on campus. In explaining the complexities of her job of providing a space and activities while balancing a limited budget, she remarked:

So, there’s a lot of things this Union is used for. The bowling alley is the biggest new thing. They’re (the students) in there all the time. Once we get some roofing issues fixed, the game room will be the next spot, but in order for all those things to be successful and for us to provide activities, we have to have staffing and resources…

**Providing a Suitable Space**

“Although matters connected with physical facilities seemed to be ranked lower by students than issues directly related to teaching and learning, this is not necessarily to say that the physical environment does not matter to students” (Temple, 2008, p. 238). Lane and Perozzi (2014) asserted, “Design and implementation of diverse, unique, energetic and soothing spaces provide for a dynamic element in the lives of college students and the campus community” (p. 33). While they did not rank their union facility as sub-par, the student interview participants did echo thoughts that the physical environment did, indeed, matter to them and they offered recommendations for improvements. Both Brandi and Trey described the Union facility as uninteresting. Trey noted:

Coming to the Union, you don't get excitement. Like you wouldn't like to rush out of class just to go to the Union. Let’s just say I don't get the excitement. So, I just feel like more of a spacious union, another floor, more student spaces or more high tech. Probably like one or two more food choices. I think the Union we have now is pretty straight. Pretty average. But it always could be better or just different just looking at other schools and what they have. I just feel like we can have so much more.

Banning (2000) noted that the entrance and look of a college student union can convey a warm and welcoming message depending on its design and placement. Brandi commented, “Our Union is kind of like dull to me. I just feel like we need to like spice it up a little bit.”

Researchers (Temple, 2008: Lane & Perozzi, 2014) acknowledged campus designs should indeed create welcoming spaces that provide for informal opportunities for students to
engage, meet, talk, and work in small groups. “Making sure that physical space within college unions is inviting and safe for all members of the campus community is critical in setting the state for deep engagement of students,” commented Lane and Perozzi (2014, p. 33). Participants Joshua, Terri, and Ava reflected on the EAMU Student Union and offered their thoughts on what would make it a more suitable and inviting space. Ava stated:

The Union would be perfect if it was a place where students can go to get anything they need. Like they can print in here, they can go to an open mic, they can pretty much do anything they wanted, in a sense, in the union. And our Union...It's kind of that, but not really because some of the things that you will need, you will have to go to library for.

Joshua added:

So, I would like a variety of different things, a lot of sit down areas, a lot of study areas, so that way you don't have to go all the way to the library when the union is the center on campus. And just more spacious I would say. Our Union is a little cramped. I think it needs a lot of technological advancements. Like there's no way to print quickly and expeditiously, and if you're trying to get food, you don't have 10 minutes, you're going to be late for class. So, we just need more things and then it's like the Union gets packed because it's only so big, so it needs some expansion and upgrading and just more things to help the students and the student life get better on campus.

Terri summed up her thoughts:

The Union needs more fun things to do and a lot of quiet places to read, places to eat, quiet places where you can study. It should be a place that allows a lot of room for people to be social.

Mimi echoed the need for more space:

I guess the furniture...we could have more furniture, more seating around the Union, more space really would be better ‘cause you know, everything's centrally located on like the first floor which is good because it's easy to access it but having a bigger union would be better.

Banning (2000) acknowledged the need for buildings to adapt as usage changed. In his research, Banning (2000) concluded, “The point for management is that buildings learn from usage and begin to change in response” (p. 17). In his work on the redesign of the facility, Mr.
Terrell acknowledged that he strove for a balance for between student desires and usage and EAMU’s available resources:

You have to think collectively, keeping up with current trends. So, as a planner, if something is popular and it is not on the campus, then you try to reach out and do research for other student unions and activities throughout other universities and try to bring that to the university, into the union. And sometimes it can be a daunting challenge, especially when you're dealing with budgets, but once you establish a goal and a budget, then you're able to accomplish and reach your objective for the students. So that's an ongoing process for me as a planner for the campus.

Director of Student Life Mr. Bennett gave context to the availability of resources. He explained his vision for the space but acknowledged the limitations:

Here (at EAMU) in particular, because I've seen on some campuses have brand new state of the art four-story union areas, whereas there are a lot of schools that are in the same predicament as we are when we deal with state funding and those types of issues. We're constantly...our renovations are paint and building a couple of walls and transforming spaces rather than transforming the building itself. Funding here could be a lot more.

During the interview participants responded about the EAMU facility and perceived challenges or opportunities for growth, and the topic of HBCU emerged without prompting by the researcher. A few participants pointed to the major difference in their union facility versus unions they had experienced on Predominantly White University campuses as a lack of funding and resources. August concluded that he realized his union may be different or missing a few things because HBCU financial resources are different. Trey commented that he had friends at different HBCU’s across the country and he was impressed with their facilities when he compared them to those at EAMU.

Ava discussed the difference between the union on her HBCU campus and her experiences on other campuses from a need standpoint. She highlighted that the difference may go beyond monetary resources:

I feel like with non-HBCU campuses, there's a union but then there's most of the time, the Black student union, so all Black people kind of gravitate towards the Black student
union whether they want to or not. It is kind of, you can't miss it because that's where they see their culture for the most part. And here, at an HBCU, it's like students don't really have to come to the Union because the culture is kind of everywhere and they don't really need...It's not really something that's connecting them to everybody else because on a non-HBCU campus you're not going to see, you're not going to see that many Black people in your classes. So, if you are feeling a bit, you know, I don't know how to describe it. If you are feeling a bit like a little, I guess white-washed in a sense, you can go to the Black student union and be around your people and your culture and what you've grown up around. And here you see people, you see Black people everywhere, so it's like, it's not a need to come to the union to see people.

**Future of the College Student Union**

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked what their campus would be like without the union. Though the students may have provided the perception during interviews that the union did not mean much or contribute considerably to the campus environment, when asked about the look of their institution without the union, responses were met with gasps, audible sighs, or moments of pause that underscored the importance of the facility on campus.

August exclaimed:

> Oh, God. No Union???. It would probably be boring because that’s kind of the most enjoyment that the students get...going to the Union on Pretty Wednesdays; a lot of students wouldn’t have anywhere to eat if we didn't have a Union, so it would create a problem.

In agreement with August, some students supposed the lack of the Union would cause a shift in the way students interacted with each other and with the university. Terri noted the way the campus climate would change:

> I feel like it would be just kind of come there (to EAMU), do your work, go home...because it wouldn't be a central place for you that provided so much besides the library. But with the library, people are focused on writing papers and studying. I don’t feel like it would be ideal to not have a union.

Ava had a hard time picturing a campus without a student union. She thought about the shift in campus dynamics if the EAMU Student Union was not a part of campus life:
Without the Union, I feel like the library will probably become the spot to be. Then, I mean the library is big and spacious, so yeah, without the Union, I don't know, everything would just be...I feel like things would be different, absolutely different because the Union is used a lot in a sense, even though we don't realize it, the Union is kinda used a lot and it's, it's I feel important in our matriculation at EAMU. So, I guess without it, it would just...I don't know, I really can't imagine it without the Union.

Though Brandi did not think a campus without a union would have a negative impact on student engagement because of current missed opportunities, she thought that a campus without a student union would be less desirable:

I mean if the Union wasn’t here, hmmm… in the Union you only have the bowling alley and the game room. So, if you take the Union out, like I said, it's a central location to host events like orientation, stuff like that. So, you take it out, of course we'll have to find another place to host events... So, if you take it out I could see it being kind of like a downfall... As far as that, I feel like it might be a disadvantage but as far as like just having the Union here to have fun and stuff, I really feel like it wouldn't be a big deal.

Trey concluded:

Wow, I think we'd just try to make our own fun. I think we would make our own space. It would definitely be missed. I mean, I ain't gonna say it would be like, oh, we would be stuck inside. But I think it'll definitely be a missing component for sure. Regardless of what people probably feel, if they like the Union or if they don’t like the Union, they'll definitely miss it some kind of way.

Summary

This chapter articulated the findings of the phenomenological investigation of the impact of the college student union on student engagement at an HBU. Data gathered through semi-structured interviews was analyzed, interview transcripts were reviewed, and data was coded. Three major themes emerged:

-Sense of Place or Just a Place?

-Where Have all the Students Gone?

-The Resource Challenge
The themes highlighted the lived experiences of both the student and administrator participants in and around the EAMU Student Union. The first theme explored the participants’ perception of the EAMU Student Union as a physical facility and as a more intrinsic landing spot. Moreover, the second theme centered around student engagement or the lack thereof on today’s EAMU campus. And the final theme touched upon the challenges in providing activities in and spaces around the EAMU Student Union for the campus community with limited financial and personnel resources.
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study

Sacred and meaningful spaces have great power. In a society in which so many of our institutions are in flux, colleges and universities have the opportunity and the duty to create such spaces. Higher education has a true opportunity to transform students, allowing them to touch and be touched by the stories, people and spaces that contribute to a sense of place (Broussard, 2009, p. B12).

Through this qualitative phenomenological investigation, the researcher explored questions of whether the college student union building still served a purpose on an Historically Black College Campus, whether that purpose was relevant, and ultimately whether there was a relationship between the student union facility and student engagement. This phenomenological case study attempted to fill the gaps in the literature surrounding student engagement and the college student union facility, specifically on an HBCU campus. Centered on Husserl’s (1913) phenomenological tradition with roots in sociology and psychology, this research focused on the lived experiences of college student union patrons and administrators (Creswell, 2013).

Believing that studying and researching the behavior of students in their environment may not lead to an absolute truth, this study was influenced by the postpositivist worldview (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It was grounded with a constructivist lens, however, recognizing that the research involved subjective meanings of the students’ experiences with their college student union facility; the research relied heavily, if not totally, on the students’ views of the facility. The researcher held the ontological belief that multiple forms of the reality of the researched phenomenon were contingent upon the perspective of the participants.

The researcher is the instrument in the epistemological approach to qualitative research. This approach includes observations, documents, interviews; the researcher is open to the environment under study and how the participants under observation respond to that environment
(Creswell, 2013). This researcher held the epistemological belief that the investigator and research participants may be linked and that findings are created through the process of conducting research. “Research specifically related to college unions is limited even though other student affairs functional areas have a foundation of research studies that examine the impact of their specific role on campus” concluded DeSawal and Yakaboski (2014, p. 97).

This study addressed the following research questions:

**Research Question One**

At a time of dwindling financial resources and evolving campus spaces, where even classroom buildings and recreation centers now include common areas, retail and food concepts, what role, if any, does the union idea play on today’s HBCU campus?

**Research Question Two**

If indeed, student unions are still relevant in today’s campus community, to what extent does the union impact student engagement at a historically black university?

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Analysis that is meticulously done, based on clearly articulated theories, and responsive to research questions can be good analysis. However, to create good research findings, analysis must also yield results that are meaningful to the people for whom they are intended and described in language they understand (LeCompte, 2000, p. 152).

After the Institutional Review Boards granted permission, two student leaders at a Historically Black College and University were identified through purposeful sampling to participate in this study and were contacted via electronic mail. Through snowball sampling, where “members of a sample are chosen with a purpose to represent a location or type in relation to the criterion” (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003, p. 77), six additional participants were chosen at the same HBCU, Evangeline A&M University (EAMU). The researcher selected specific participants from a pre-defined population to define parameters of the study. The study sample
of students, mixed in gender with five females and three males, included junior and senior upperclassmen at the institution. The sample was homogeneous as it contained students at the same institution who were engaged in at least three campus activities or student organizations outside of academics and had personal experience with the college student union at the institution. Those without first-hand experience in and around the institution’s student union and those who were not engaged in campus activities were excluded from this study.

Administrators with expertise in student affairs and union facility management were interviewed to provide context to the student experience and, more specifically, to speak to the campus ecology theory. Administrators were identified based on job responsibilities relevant to the management of the union or work in the area of student engagement.

Interviews were held in the college student union on the Historically Black University campus and consisted of key open-ended questions to help identify the participants’ definition of student unions and their experience with student unions. Interviews were semi-structured and follow up questions were asked, if necessary, to clarify an interviewee’s responses or to pursue an idea or elicit more details on a reply. This flexible interviewing approach allowed for increased opportunity to discover more information and provided space for elaboration on a topic(s) that may not have been directly addressed with the initial line of questioning.

Prior to conducting interviews with the group of students, one pilot interview was conducted with a participant who had the same characteristics as the students in the study and who was identified in the same manner. That pilot interview highlighted the need to change some of the original research questions based on the participant responses and the direction of the interview.
After obtaining informed consent, semi-structured interviews with predetermined questions were administered verbally to each participant and recorded via iPad technology to allow for verbatim transcription. Once the qualitative data gathered through interviews and observations was entered into Atlas.ti, it was analyzed to identify and interpret any trends present. The analysis centered around the main research questions and key groupings included:

- What is the union experience?
- Is the experience still relevant today?
-Does the experience link to student engagement?

Inductive analysis allows themes to emerge from the data under investigation (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). Thomas (2006) acknowledged “the primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (p. 238). Consistent with the use of the inductive approach employed in realms of social science research, this researcher engaged a general inductive approach in analyzing data for the study.

**Summary of the Findings**

In reviewing responses to the questions and coding in groups, major themes and sub-themes emerged:

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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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<td><strong>Sense of Place or Just a Place?</strong></td>
<td>• Union as a destination.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Barriers to use.</td>
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<td><strong>Where Have All the Students Gone?</strong></td>
<td>• The case of the unengaged student.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The necessity of engagement.</td>
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<td><strong>The Resource Challenge</strong></td>
<td>• Providing activities.</td>
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Sense of Place or Just a Place?

“Campus ecology represents a perspective for student affairs that shares the profession's longstanding concern for individual students, but incorporates in a more systematic manner the importance of environments and student environment transactions” (Banning, 1978, p. 5). The first theme that emerged linked with the campus ecology theory. The students described the EAMU Student Union in concrete terms that defined the space, referring to it as a destination for events, activities, and as a location for quick service restaurants. While most of students defaulted to a physical definition of the union, the administrators for the EAMU Student Union used different descriptors. The administrators explained the Union in terms of the facility providing a value to students that was difficult to quantify or describe. The idea was echoed that the Union was “home” or was the third place, outside of home and the classroom. While the students seemed more focused on the destination, administrators wanted the students to see the facility as much more and to recognize its intrinsic value.

Where Have All the Students Gone?

Banning (2000) found, “There is a universal rule: union buildings learn important messages from the users and the buildings teach important messages to users. It is an ecological relationship between person and environment – the essence of campus ecology” (p. 19). Some of the student participants indicated that the EAMU union building might not convey a message that encouraged engagement by students. Both the students and the administrators pointed to a marked decline in campus engagement and morale. While extolling the benefits of the engaged student, the student participants described the decline as barriers they experienced when using or attempting to enjoy events at the EAMU Student Union. The students commented on their feelings about the building and the messages conveyed by the building. They cited a more
welcoming atmosphere, increased ease of use, timely addressing of concerns, and improved customer service as ways to re-engage the population of students in and around the EAMU Student Union.

Conversely, the administrators contributed the decline in engagement to a different demographic and student population. Offering examples of students’ utilization of technology and lack of socialization, administrators thought they offered ample opportunities for students to engage in activities, which, however, suffered a lack of participation. Yet, the administrators expressed the commitment to determining why students at EAMU were not engaging more fully and to making the changes necessary to shift the dynamics.

The Resource Challenge

In the pedagogical research theory of resources, Astin (1984) noted, “The resource theory maintains that if adequate resources are brought together in one place, student learning and development will occur” (p. 520). While Astin further surmised that many college administrators think the acquisition of resources is their most important duty, research on student engagement suggests that, instead of providing more activities or spaces that would utilize additional resources, institutions should instead focus on maximizing student participation within what is available and how those spaces provide opportunities for interaction and engagement (Temple, 2008; Manning & Kuh, 2005; Broussard, 2009).

During the interviews with both students and administrators the limitation of resources surfaced. Students thought the resources offered by the EAMU Student Union were limited in terms of spaces in the facility and event offerings, and they expressed the desire to have supplementary open spaces and added services available in the facility. They also characterized
the lack of activities as a resource that negatively impacted engagement, citing only one popular weekly activity hosted by the facility.

Administrators commented at length about the lack of resources. Though the EAMU Student Union had undergone recent renovations and additions, more money was needed to provide the enhancements desired by the students. Furthermore, a recurring theme with the administrators was the challenge of personnel resources. Not central to this research but relevant, both the Director of Student Activities and Union Director are one-person offices. They do not have the resources to hire staff, staff they say could assist in providing additional services and activities to enhance the EAMU Student Union and, by extension, engagement on the campus.

Conclusion

The researcher drew several conclusions in reflecting on the initial research questions and the data gathered. First, in answer to the research question of what role, if any, the union idea played on today’s HBCU campus, the students and administrators described numerous functions the EAMU Student Union provided on their HBCU campus. According to the participants, the union served as a destination for services, a home to events, and a spot for socialization. Further, the union served as a safe space that was conducive to engagement away from their dwellings and academic pursuits, a goal desired by the administrators.

Examining the second research question of to what extent the union impacted student engagement at a Historically Black University proved more complex. While there seemed to be a consensus about the various roles the Union plays on the EAMU campus, the extent of the facility’s impact on student engagement was varied and personal. Through the identified themes, the researcher noted ways in which the union facility impacted engagement, the most prevalent of which was providing a space for purposeful student interactions through activities; the extent
of that engagement varied from participant to participant, however, and by extension, student to student. Strange and Banning (2001) recognized “that environments that offer inclusion and safety, and involve participants in significant and meaningful roles, fulfill two primary conditions for promoting learning, growth, and development: a sense of belonging and security and a mechanism for active engagement” (p. 159). Through examining the lived experiences of the research participants, the researcher concluded that despite limited resources, the EAMU Student Union served as a mechanism for engagement, and to the extent that mechanism was utilized by the individual student.

**Implications**

While acknowledging the limitations of this study, the researcher concedes the conclusions generalize student behavior and may not be indicative of the thoughts or behaviors of a larger population of students. Considering the limitations, however, the results of this study yielded several implications for the future of college student unions on HBCU campuses and the engagement of students through the use of a physical space. This research adds to the body of knowledge of the planning process of campus facilities and connects those facilities to the concept of success through the engagement of students. Specifically, this study reinforces a need for purposeful planning and building design that allow for maximum opportunities for student engagement. Further, this study highlights the importance of the inclusion of student voices in the planning and design processes of the evolution of campus spaces.

Astin’s (1999) and Kuh’s (2009) student engagement theories supported this study. Astin (1999) concluded involvement or engagement occurs as part of a continuum with students experiencing different degrees of engagement at different points during their collegiate careers. Students in this study reported varying degrees of engagement with the union facility throughout
their time on campus. The participants also acknowledged the challenges of encouraging engagement and recognized there is no terminal point for engagement. Throughout the study, the participants echoed statements that aligned with Kuh (2009). Whether referring to customer service or the Union eliciting a welcoming feeling, the student participants expressed the desire to be valued and heard as an overarching impact of the importance of the college student union facility. The theory of student engagement underscores the notion that before place can matter, students and people should matter (Manning & Kuh, 2005).

Place matters, students matter, and connecting students to physical spaces serves to enhance desirable outcomes for students’ successful matriculation, but also for a more cohesive and comprehensive campus community. Regarding Strange and Banning’s (2001) theory of campus ecology, the researcher perceived a disconnect between the students’ ideas of the student union environment and the administrators’ thoughts about the space and what it provided to students. Administrators readily identified the union as providing a sense of place or a third place for the students while the students identified the space more as a destination for services and events. By questioning the impact of the environment and purpose of the design, Strange and Banning (2001) contended administrators can determine how well space meet the needs of the student population. Chen et al. (2014) noted prompting student feedback can increase student satisfaction. “Providing a medium for students to offer their responses to current events, policies and institutional services can ease the tension between students and administrators” (p. 574).

The study’s findings can be situated in the literature that underscores the need for campuses to understand the necessity of purposeful design. First, institutions must understand the need for a deeper look at student behavior and responses, including what specifically motivates the student to be engaged and how much time and energy the student devotes to the learning
process (Astin, 1999). Second, the physical environment influences student satisfaction and success in college (Hamric et al., 2003). Colleges and universities that “provide a palpable sense of place also have salutary effects on student success” (Manning & Kuh, 2005, p. 1). And lastly, facilities should be flexible with the changing dynamics of the student populations. Banning (2000) noted that while buildings by nature do not adapt well, usages in and around the union constantly change. Institutions must learn from student behavior and usage and change in response.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

To revisit DeSawal and Yakaboski (2014), the concept of student engagement and the research surrounding engagement rarely shed light on the role of the college union in the engagement process. Entities traditionally found within student unions such as campus life divisions, dining, multicultural affairs programming, or recreational spaces seemingly have more foundational research that ties those areas directly to student engagement.

Consideration of space in higher education has commonly taken place either in the context of space planning, or as a part of campus master-planning and architecture, rather than being seen as a resource to be managed as an integral part of teaching and learning, and research activities (Temple, 2008, p. 229). Temple (2008) further found that, of the main spaces on campuses, libraries have received the most consideration in literature in terms of enabling student learning. Therefore, this researcher finds need and space for this research, and more specifically, research in the student union space on HBCU campuses.

With the changing dynamics of campuses and the evolving student populations, research in the college student union space should focus on the increasing use of technology and how that impacts the offerings in a college student union. Additionally, as the competition for resources
increases and competing facilities on campus are built, additional research should be conducted to assess how those seemingly competitive spaces impact the college student union of the future. Rouzer et al. (2014) found “traditional students are no longer the tradition” (p. 5). With changing student demographics across the collegiate landscape, how does the college student union adjust to address the shifts and changes?

Central to this research is a plethora of topics surrounding the student union on Historically Black Colleges and University campuses that warrant additional study. As stated, this research was purposefully not a comparison between HBCU’s and Predominantly White Institutions, but rather this research provides a glimpse into the experiences of students with their college union, how they navigate the space, and how the space contributes to their involvement and engagement on campus. Opportunities abound to expand the reach and breadth of this work. Some of the participating administrators pointed to one such opportunity as a focus on students who are not engaged with the facility and what modifications or additions could be made to draw in more students. With little research centered on the HBCU student’s engagement experience with facilities on their campuses, this research opens the field to more examination.

Personal Reflections

I faced a few roadblocks when embarking upon this research and seeking approval from the Evangeline A&M University Institutional Review Board. The IRB chair was apprehensive about my study. His biggest concern was that his facility, staffing, and students should not be compared to those of my institution, a state flagship university a few miles away. I agreed with him and expressed that my research was not to compare but rather to examine and understand the unique position, role, scope, and mission of the EAMU Student Union, and how its students interpreted the same. After several meetings where I defined and defended my topic and the
intent of my research, he granted approval. Because of those interactions with the IRB chair, I reflected more deeply on my research topic and the perspectives of the university and the students. The conversations also allowed me to re-examine my personal experience for biases that I may have brought to my research.

Research in this space is crucial to the future of student unions. While funding dwindles and resources are scarce, it can be argued that the time of the college union has come and gone. In mulling my time as a union professional and observing the interview participants in their union atmosphere, however, I am convinced that the union does indeed still fill a crucial and important role on today’s college campus.

With the increasing use of technology, students are more readily observed tweeting, snapping, or engaging in social media than they are communicating with each other. Though those are the current trends, I think the college student union is crucial as it provides support and encourages personal interaction. I think there is a need for a place that promotes personal interactions and engagement in the larger campus community for college students outside of academics and their living spaces.

My research and observations of the students at EAMU gave me many moments of pause. Having worked in a college union facility at a large public institution, I noticed the difference in the physical facility and available resources. Knowing the levels of work and output necessary to provide suitable facilities and activity options for a student body, I was stunned to learn about the EAMU staffing and amazed that all happened with only a handful of full-time employees.

I admit that I was discouraged by the lack of student participation and engagement. Knowing the benefits of the engaged student and understanding the efforts of the staff, I was
disheartened to learn about the lack of students taking advantage of the activities and occasions; I also wondered where the students were engaging in their time away from academics. At the same time, I was aware of the opportunities for improvement at the EAMU Student Union. That the students did not feel heard and expressed frustrations with building use are situations that can easily be addressed, and potentially can shift the dynamics toward a more student-driven space.

In closing, this study solidified my belief that the college student union is still necessary on today’s HBCU campus. The union should be more than just a physical facility. It should provide a landing place for students, an outlet for meaningful engagement in campus activities. As university administrators, faculty, and staff work to increase successful, timely matriculation of students, the role of the college student union should not be underestimated. I believe, and research shows, that a student-centered purposeful college student union can increase meaningful interactions and support a feeling of inclusion in the campus community, and also, by extension, positively impact student learning, academic persistence, and student retention.
REFERENCES


Dahlgren, M., Dougherty, K. and Goodno, A. (2013). The role of physical space in establishing community. In D. M. DeSawal & B. A. Jacobs (Eds.), A 100 Year Perspective on the College Union (p. 62-86). Bloomington, IN: The Higher Education Student Affairs Program at Indiana University.


APPENDIX A: IMAGES OF THE EVANGELINE A&M UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNION
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL (STUDENTS)

Hi [Student’s Name]!

My name is Nikki Godfrey, and I am a doctoral student at LSU. I am conducting a research study on the impact of the college student union on student engagement at a historically black university. My study specifically seeks to learn about your experiences in and around the student union and how the facility impacts your engagement on campus.

You were selected because you are a student leader on campus with the relevant knowledge and experience about the student union. I am hopeful that you are interested and able to participate in the study. Participation includes a maximum one hour individual interview where I will ask questions about your experiences. Please know all information shared will remain anonymous and your identifying information will not be shared.

If you can participate, I will forward a consent form, which will indicate your willingness to participate in the study. I will schedule an interview, at your convenience, the following week.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at (225) xxx-xxxx or via e-mail at ngodfrey@lsu.edu. Thank you for your time and I look forward to meeting you!
Hi [Administrator’s Name]!

My name is Nikki Godfrey, and I am a doctoral student at LSU. I am conducting a research study on the impact of the college student union on student engagement at a historically black university. My study specifically seeks to learn about your experiences as an administrator working in student engagement and the student union.

You were selected because you are an administrator on campus with the relevant knowledge and experience about the student union. I am hopeful that you are interested and able to participate in the study. Participation includes a maximum one hour individual interview where I will ask questions about your experiences. Please know all information shared will remain anonymous and your identifying information will not be shared.

If you can participate, I will forward a consent form, which will indicate your willingness to participate in the study. I will schedule an interview, at your convenience, the following week.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at (225) xxx-xxxx or via e-mail at ngodfrey@lsu.edu. Thank you for your time and I look forward to meeting you!
APPENDIX D: SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

- Can you tell me about your experience of visiting or working in a college student union?
- Describe your ideal college student union. Did your collegiate union match with your ideal image?
- Can you describe in as much detail as possible your use of a college union during your time in school?
- How did you feel when you visited a college union on campus?
- What message or value is conveyed by the college union building on your campus?
- How would you describe your sense of place on this campus?
- Does your student union provide you with a sense of place?
- What are the learning opportunities offered by your college student union?
- Do you have further examples of times when you or your friends visited college unions?
- How do you think other people on campus characterized their experiences with student unions?
- How much of your student fee supports the college student union?
- Do you think the college student union provides a value to you?
- Please provide any other information or details regarding college unions that you find relevant to this study.
APPENDIX E: SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

• What is your professional or personal experience with the student union or student center on your campus?

• How does your daily work as a student or professional contribute to the events or activities found within the student union?

• As you observe students in your union, what do you see?

• How would you describe student engagement on your campus?

• What role does the student union play in engagement?

• Where are the opportunities to increase student engagement through the student union?

• How does your personal experience with a student union as a student shape your view of the union and its purpose?

• Does the student union have a role or purpose on today’s college campus?

• What does the union mean to your student population?

• What would engagement on your campus look like if the student union did not exist?

• How does your college student union provide a sense of place for students?

• How does the college student union fulfill the mission of your institution?

• How would you characterize the available funding to support your student union to provide services to further its mission or the mission of the institution?
Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Nathalie Godfrey successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 02/14/2017.

Certification Number: 2326099.
APPENDIX G: LSU IRB EXEMPTION

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Nathalie Godfrey
Human Sciences and Education
FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board
DATE: October 18, 2017
RE: IRB# E10671
TITLE: A Phenomenological Investigation into the Impact of the College Student Union on Student Engagement at a Historically Black University

Review Date: 10/17/2017
Approved X Disapproved
Approval Date: 10/17/2017 Approval Expiration Date: 10/16/2020
Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2b
Signed Consent Waived?: No
Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)
LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):
Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING – Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:
1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb
APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT

Consent Form

Title of Research Project: PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE IMPACT OF THE COLLEGE STUDENT UNION ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AT A HISTORICALLY BLACK UNIVERSITY

Principal Investigators: Principal Investigator: Nathalie N. Godfrey, LA-LSU: 225-257-9473, nagodfrey@lsu.edu
Dr. Roland Mitchell, 121D Peabody Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, (225) 578-2156, rwmitch@lsu.edu

Study Site: Library

Purpose of the Study: To develop an understanding of how a student union facility is utilized on the campus of historically black universities and the impact that the physical space has on student engagement, if any.

Eligibility: This study will include ten (10) student leaders who are actively engaged on campus and visit the student union and four (4) administrators who are work in student engagement and facility management. Individuals who do not have personal experience in or around the student union will be excluded from this study. Participants will be recruited via targeted selection of student leaders and administrators by email.

Taking Part in Study: This study will entail a recorded interview of participants. Interviews will be recorded via iPhone or iPad technology to allow for transcription. Participants will be asked the same questions (student questions or administrator questions). Participants will be asked to answer questions and provide follow up information as applicable. Interviews will last no longer than 60 minutes.

Risks or Discomforts: There may be possible minimal risks or discomfort by your participation in this study. Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the participant's identity. A pseudonym may be utilized in all written reports. All data will be kept in secure files in which only the investigators have access.

Benefits: This study will reveal valuable information about the impact of physical spaces on student engagement. The study will be beneficial in the planning of future facilities on college campuses.

Alternative Procedures: None. Subjects/participants have the choice at any time not to participate in the study and can withdraw (quit) without penalty.

Questions or Problems: Subjects/participants can contact the principal investigator(s)/researcher(s) if they have any questions or problems. The subjects/participants can also contact the student's major professor, Dr. Roland Mitchell, 121D Peabody Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, (225) 578-2156, rwmitch@lsu.edu.
If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research volunteer in this study or you want to report a research-related injury, contact Dr. Patrick Carriere, Ph.D., Chairperson, Institutional Research Oversight Committee, P. O. Box 9272, Southern University, Baton Rouge, LA 70813-1241; Voice 225-771-5290; Facsimile 225-771-5721; E-mail – patrick_carriere@subr.edu or Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

Privacy:
Every effort will be made to maintain subjects/participants’ anonymity and the confidentiality of their study records. Study findings may be used for a presentation, report, publication, etc. and the private information of the subject/participant, such as your name and other identifying information, will not be included in any presentation, report or publication.

End Participation:
Subjects/participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Also, the principal investigator(s)/researcher(s) may terminate the participation of subjects/participants at any time. The subjects/participants’ failure to complete study procedures or to answer all questions during the interview could result in the data not being used in the study.

Charges:
None

Payments:
None

Medical Treatments:
N/A

Medical Information:
N/A

Signatures:
The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator.

I agree with the terms above and acknowledge that I have been given a copy of the consent form. I understand that I have not waived any of my legal rights by signing this form. I will be provided a signed copy of this form.

Signature of Volunteer: ____________________ Date: ______________
(or mark if unable to sign)

Signature of Person: ____________________ Date: ______________
Administering Informed Consent

Signature of Principal Investigator: ____________________ Date: ______________
VITA

A native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Nathalie (Nikki) Godfrey is a summa cum laude graduate of Southern University where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in mass communications. She was awarded a post-graduate fellowship and received a Master of Science degree, with honors, in broadcast journalism, with a concentration in African-American Studies, from the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communication at Syracuse University. Following her tenure at Syracuse, Godfrey began her accomplished career in sports. Nikki progressed from an intern to be named one of the first African-American female executive directors of a major collegiate sporting event. After an eleven-year career, Nikki transitioned into a role in Auxiliary Services at Louisiana State University. Her time in Auxiliary Services was her mainspring to enroll in the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at LSU. Nikki’s newest career challenge is that of Assistant Commissioner for Public Affairs for the Louisiana Board of Regents. She anticipates receiving her doctorate degree in May 2018.