

For Us, By Us, With Us, and About Us:

The Impact of Building Black Communities at Predominantly White Universities

**Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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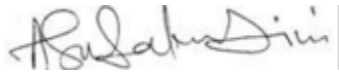
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Abstract

This paper examines how community is understood by members of the Clark University Black Student Union (BSU) and how the BSU engages in community-building efforts for its Black members. Executive board members of the BSU set out to make greater efforts to foster community by changing the structure to account for more general member meetings. To understand the impact of these efforts by the BSU executive board, I collected data in the form of interviews and field notes. I then used discourse analysis methods to analyze the data to determine how participants thought of community. Additionally, I identified and categorized what participants noted as significant impacts of BSU's community-building efforts. In particular, I examined what actions and practices contributed to the community-building experiences, as well as, the structural and interpersonal challenges that arose.

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1. Introduction

For most of my freshman year, I had spent every other Thursday, cooped up in my room on Zoom participating in the virtual version of the Sisters in Stride (SIS) affinity space for women of color through the Office of Identity, Student Engagement, and Access. My freshman year of college was mostly defined by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of it, several restrictions were placed on how and when people could meet. Getting to be part of the virtual SIS space was helpful for me as it allowed me to connect with other women of color. However, the racial tensions¹ I felt on campus and in the world between Black people and non-Black people, made me continue to long for a space for me to connect with other Black people. The Black Student Union at that time was doing a lot of advocating for racial justice, organizing protests, and mostly working internally with their executive board. Though the work they were doing was extremely important, the narrow focus made the club inaccessible for students like me looking to join. When dreaming of college, my idea of what a Black Student Union (BSU) should look like was heavily influenced by the Netflix series “Dear White People.” I expected there to be weekly meetings where people joined together and spoke passionately about injustices they were experiencing or seeing, leading to organizing efforts, or for there to be conversation about the latest TV series they were into.

In April, 2021, the Black Student Union held a rally to advocate for the disarmament of Clark University Police and the humanization of students of color and international students.

¹ In 2020 there was a revival of the Black Lives Matter movement leading to mass protests advocating for racial justice. This led to movements being made on college campuses across the United States advocating for the protection of Black and Brown students. These movements also exposed some of the underlying racial tensions

This came after months of BSU's demands² being ignored and unacknowledged by the university's administration. I attended this rally, with my two Black friends, and we were met by smiling faces of Black students. They handed us T-shirts that said 'Humanize US' and Black Lives Matter stickers and buttons. The rally was emotional, and, at that moment, I felt a sense of community among my Black and Brown peers. Though we were hurting, we recognized one another's pain, beauty, courage, and strength to come out and protest for our right to be comfortable in the place we are learning and living at. After the rally, I saw the BSU as the only place I could connect with other Black folks as there was no affinity space dedicated just to Black people. By the end of that semester, I joined the BSU and since have benefitted from being part of a space that is predominantly Black and where I can be more hands on in terms of organizing and planning events that center Black people. In my time at Clark, I served for three years on BSU's executive board and throughout my time, I've felt more connected to Black

² The BSU's demands can be summarized as followed:

1. We demand that the University Police cut ALL ties to Worcester PD.
 - a. We demand that funds gained from this action be redistributed to resources that can support Black Students on campus
2. We demand University Police to stop carrying automatic and semi-automatic weapons and batons
3. We demand ALL campus administrators, trustees, faculty, staff, and officers to undergo a required semi-annual anti-racism training as a supplement to our existing cultural competency training...the anti-racism should focus on the trauma faced by Black people across the diaspora.
4. We demand that ALL undergraduate students, including student leaders such as Residential Advisors and Peer Mentors, and graduate students of the Clark University be required semesterly cultural competency training and anti-racism training with a focus on Black racial injustices.
5. We demand to have a Black Student Union representative or Black faculty or staff on the search committee for the new Police Chief of Clark University.
6. We demand ALL racial and bias incidents reported to any faculty and administrators to undergo a full investigation that leads to disciplinary probation, especially in matters of hate speech and harassment towards Black members of our community.
7. We demand more Black mental health practitioners and demand that they get paid an equal amount as their white counterparts along with sufficient funding to provide us with the proper health care to address the traumas of anti-Blackness
8. We demand that ALL progress achieved to be shared with not only the Black Student Union but with the student body in the form of a semesterly report.

students at Clark, meeting them through BSU events, mutual friends, classes, and living in the Affinity House³.

It wasn't until my second year on eboard during the 2022-2023 academic year, that I and others began to notice some tensions arise in BSU. Specifically, we began to have conversations about the sense of connection and community among the Black students at Clark. Several Black BSU general members shared with me and other executive board members that unless they were a part of the executive board of the Black Student Union, they didn't feel like they were a part of the Black Student Union. They also shared that they struggled to connect with other Black students on campus because it didn't feel like there was a centralized place for people to come together unless it was a big BSU event. Every year when new members joined, they mentioned how they didn't feel like they were part of BSU unless they were on eboard. This was something I felt my first year and I only felt part of the club once I became part of eboard. I didn't know many general members and could only name the ones that were my friends who I knew from outside of BSU. In my conversations with eboard this year, I began to feel as though this was a really big tension between eboard and general members and that overall there was a lack of true community among the Black students in our club.

At an eboard meeting during the Spring 2023 semester, several eboard members shared that they believed that changes needed to be made to what our club goals were and the structure of the club as well. They felt that too much of what the club prioritized were events for the wider Clark community. Because of this, eboard members were not only feeling disconnected from one another but felt disconnected from Black students generally. This led to a consensus that BSU

³ The Affinity House was an initiative proposed by Clark Students for Affinity Housing, A Clark University Student Group in which students proposed that the University create Identity-Based Affinity Housing for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students as well as students of other marginalized identities. In Fall 2021, the housing was piloted.

needed to focus on community building in and through BSU. Eboard members felt like we needed to do more to bring Black students together and foster greater community among Black people on campus. This led to a decision to specifically shift our focus to community building within the Black students on Clark's campus, putting more energy into smaller, intimate events, as opposed to the big campus-wide events.

Upon reflecting on my own experiences in this space, specifically, why I joined BSU, in addition to the conversations with the club about the lack of community, I realized that there was value for myself and for the greater Clark community in capturing the efforts being made in this upcoming academic year by the executive board members to foster a Black community on campus and generally what it is like being a Black student at Clark. I became interested in exploring what members of the BSU experiences have been like at a Predominantly White Institution (such as Clark), what they considered a Black community, and what that community consists of. I wanted to know how the BSU could foster a greater community for Black students on campus. Thus, my research questions became:

1. How does BSU foster community for Black students on campus through programming, events, and interaction?
2. How does a predominately white institution impact the need for community spaces for Black students on campus?
3. What does it mean to have a Black community on campus?

In order to answer these research questions, I collected qualitative data on the Black Student Union's processes and impacts of actively trying to foster greater community through our programming, primarily by prioritizing having general member meetings more often. As a leader of the club, I actively participated in this intervention and as a researcher I documented

the ideas and actions of eboard and general member's perspectives on what community is to them, and what BSU's role is within community building for Black people at a predominantly white institution. To gain these perspectives, I drew from field notes from these meetings and interviewed members of the Black Student Union both executive board members and general members throughout the 2023-2024 academic year who consented to be participants and collaborators in this research. I analyzed my field notes and interviews in tandem to seek an understanding of what community is to Black people, what it means to have a Black community on campus, and what is the Black Student Union's role in fostering a greater community for Black people on Clark's campus. In this research project I sought to explore how a PWI impacts these kinds of spaces and more generally the importance of community for Black students who attend PWIs.

2. Okay so what is it even like being Black at School?: A Review of the Literature

In order to conduct this research, I first needed to examine what literature is out there already on the experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWI). This allowed me to set the scene as to what current and past experiences at PWIs have been like to gain an understanding of what it might be like being at Clark. Additionally, I wanted to gain an understanding of what impacts their experiences and what community looks like for Black students at PWIs. Because my research specifically focuses on community, it was important for me to look into how community is built at college more generally and what the importance of community is at college. In addition, because this research focuses on the site of Clark's Black Student Union, I believe it was important for me to look into the history of Black Student Unions

and similar clubs and student organizations as spaces/places in which Black students build community.

Though the following sections describe the current literature on the experiences of Black students, there are still some limitations. Despite there being a lot of research on the experiences of Black students in higher education, the literature talks generally about them not looking into the nuance of Black students experiences regarding gender identity outside of the binary, ethnicity, class, sexuality, or nativity. Additionally, there was a lack of research surrounding student clubs and experiences including identity-based club spaces in higher education. Overall, this literature review will attempt to provide an overview of what I felt was important in providing context into the experiences of Black students in higher education.

2.1 The Experiences of Black Students at Predominantly White Institutions

There is significant research that shows that Black students at PWIs have a lower sense of belonging than their white peers (Mckinney, 2020). This is due to the racial climate of most college and university campuses. Because of interpersonal and institutional racism, both historic and ongoing, Black students feel as though their campuses are tense and hostile (Leath et. al, 2022). One of the main contributors to the tensions on campuses are microaggressions, first coined by psychiatrist Chester Pierce in the 1970s, microaggressions can be understand as forms of bias, discrimination, and othering based on one's perceived race or ethnicity (Pierce, 1970; Francois et, al, 2023). These negative interactions happen both inside and outside the classroom, in academic and social spaces (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). In social settings, Black students also experience racial stereotypes around attractiveness and dating and exclusions from fraternities and sororities (Vlope and Jones, 2023). Black students often have to face assumptions

that they are at college on an athletic scholarship as opposed to because of their academic achievements by White students (Bourke, 2010). In addition, they are often assumed to be attending university because they have overcome great life challenges (Bourke, 2010). The culmination of these stereotypes has often forced Black students to take on the role of an educator, having to inform their White counterparts about their experiences (Bourke, 2010). Residential settings also contribute to the low sense of belonging from Black students; in resident halls Black students experience racism in forms of written and verbal slurs, lack of representation on behalf of Resident Assistant roles, threatening the safety, health, and academic success of Black college students due to the inability to have a safe space to rest (Vlope and Jones, 2023).

Also contributing to the low sense of belonging on campuses is the lack of action on behalf of the college or university; racial microaggressions often go unaddressed resulting in an underreporting of racial bias and discrimination incidents on college campuses. However, when incidents are reported, colleges and universities often fail to make institutional changes that address equity, diversity, and inclusion, making campuses feel unsafe and unwelcoming to students of color (Francois et. al, 2023). In academic spaces, students often experience being criminalized, experiencing prejudice, and feeling hypervisible, invisible, or isolated from their peers and faculty (Vlope and Jones, 2023; Jackson and Hui, 2017). Black students are left feeling frustrated and isolated from their peers through the centering of Whiteness at PWIs through curriculum and campus culture, which promotes the idea that Blackness is not a priority in the space (Hui and Jackson, 2017). As a result, Black students are rarely provided with spaces to reflect and explore their racial identity in positive and affirming ways (Hypolite 2020).

2.1.1 Gender and Blackness

One additional identity that also informs Black students' experiences on college campuses is gender. For example, Black men on college campuses combat negative stereotypes that are informed by their race and gender such as that they are dangerous criminals (Hui and Jackson, 2017). Black men are harassed more by campus police even when doing the same activities as their white peers as a result of racial bias and discrimination. The retention and graduation rates of Black men is lower than Black women and white people (Pope 2009 cited in Glenn & Johnson 2012). Some reasons for the lower retention of Black men in higher education include the lack of financial resources, internalized oppression, negative experiences in the classroom and the lack of support (Glenn & Johnson, 2012). Black men have also been noted to mask the negative impacts of being at PWIs through adopting certain styles of speaking, dressing, or obtaining specific objects that allow them to be perceived as "cool" (Glenn & Johnson, 2012). In addition, they often do join programming specific to helping Black men succeed in college (Laster 2006 cited in Glenn & Johnson, 2012). In order to survive school, some men have resorted to assimilating to White culture, adopting their ways of dressing and speaking. Others avoided making these changes as they felt they had to compromise their social identity (Glenn & Johnson, 2012). Overall in their study, Glenn and Johnson (2012) found that regardless of the changes Black men made to their lifestyles, they all still feared negative interactions with university police at night.

The current literature on Black women experiences is often positioned in opposition to Black men as if to assume their experiences are better due to lower retention rates and attendance of men (Patton & Croom, 2017). How patriarchy and white supremacy impact their experiences is not often considered; in an institution where Black women are supposedly succeeding, that

same system has not done work to address the systems that oppress them (Patton & Croom, 2017). Due to the narrative that Black women are successful in higher education, many of them have begun to feel pressured to be strong and resilient, taking on the strong Black woman stereotype (Donoan & West, 2014; Watson & Hunter, 2015 cited in Reavis et al., 2022).

Although the scholarship on queer students has started to increase in recent decades (Bradley, 2020; Duran, 2019; Forbes, 2021; Coleman & Wallace 2020), a shortage of literature exists that examines the lives of collegians who identify as both queer and people of color. This has led to a monolithic narrative of Black student experiences in college that determines the kinds of systems of support (Winkle-Wagner, 2015 cited in Reavis et al., 2022). While the general programs may work to address some issues pertaining to Black people, the lack of programming working to address the issues and needs specific to Black women and gender-expansive people, often leave them unaddressed (Collins, 2022; Commodore et al., 2018; Patton & Croom, 2017 cited in Reavis et al., 2022). Black women have felt ignored and excluded from their peers similar in the way as Black men, as I am sure of Black gender expansive people as well. They have experienced stereotypes and misperceptions that have led to a difficult navigation of college (Porter & Dean, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, Kelly, et al., 2018 cited in Reavis et al., 2022). This exclusion has led to low academic performance (Miller, 2017 cited in Reavis et al., 2022).

Despite the intricate differences in experiences due to gender identity, Black students tend to have more negative experiences at PWIs, feeling isolated and disconnected from their campus community. They are met with overt and covert forms of racism via microaggressions and other more extreme acts of harm. The experiences of Black students have led them to desire support

programs and networks at PWIs through academic and social spaces, in which they can process their experiences as well as learn skills and create connections that allow them to succeed.

2.2 How is Community Built at College?

For students who go away for school, they have to adjust to a new lifestyle as they are often away from family and friends. Many are disconnected from the only community they have ever known. Thus, upon arrival to campus, the institution is massively responsible for fostering community among students (Nunn, 2021). From the first year, there is an emphasis on extracurricular activities. These community spaces are diverse in what they offer and who they are run by—students, staff/faculty, or a combination of the two. These spaces vary from student organizations, teams, academic clubs, support programs, resource centers, and the like (Stayhorn, 2012; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014 cited in Nunn, 2021). A big part of what allows an individual to feel as though they belong to a community has a lot to do with their sense of belonging. The people part of a group allows someone to feel like they belong. It is the feeling that you matter and are an essential part of the space (Nunn, 2021). Nunn breaks down between social belonging and campus-community belonging, defining social belonging as being part of a social group, including “participating in student organizations, sports teams, clubs, performance troupes, religious groups, and the like where students meet new people and strengthen friendships through shared experiences and shared interests” (Nunn, 2021, p 16). Campus- community belonging, on the other hand, is also related to student involvement in the academic and social components of their college lives, but more importantly, their sense of belonging is influenced by the organizational structure of those groups (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013; Wariko, 2016; Reyes,

2018 cited in Nunn, 2021). Sense of belonging is not only reliant on who is in the space and what kind of space it is, but it is also heavily influenced by one's identity. Therefore, given what we know about Black student's experiences at PWIs, the existence of these community spaces on campus often does not provide the sense of belonging they desire.

2.3 How Black Students Contribute to Belonging

Black students are left to develop and maintain a strong sense of self, especially as they experience covert and overt forms of racial bias and discrimination (Leath et. al, 2022). In their study, Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, (2000) found that on their participating campuses, Black students created counter-spaces through several different organizations for Black students to come together. Counter-spaces offer a positive racial climate as opposed to a site where there are deficit notions of people of color (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000). Some of these counter-spaces were supported by faculty and even existed in classrooms. Counter-spaces aren't something one can necessarily find on a school website— instead, they look like student unions or clubs within academic departments and student-life groups. The creation of cultural clubs and student organizations on campus is also believed to reduce racial bias on campus by creating a sense of belonging among students of color on campus that validates their existence on campus (Negy and Lunt, 2008).

Black Student Organizations (BSOs) can sometimes become a counter-space; they are groups that create spaces of collective identity and resistance and allow Black students to come together with shared academic, social, professional, and political interests (Nagbe, Anderson, and Reddick, 2020). BSOs provide spaces for students to be in community with others who share

common academic interests, expand their professional networks, and provide welcoming spaces in hostile campus environments (Nagbe, Anderson, and Reddick, 2020). Some of the first BSOs were Greek letter fraternities; in 1906 the first intercollegiate Black Greek-letter fraternity became Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. became the first Black Greek-letter sorority (Nagbe, Anderson, and Reddick, 2020). BSOs vary in type and include but are not limited to professional and academic organizations, advocacy and political groups, mentorship, religious groups, and Black Greek Letter Organizations (Nagbe, Anderson, and Reddick, 2020). BSOs offer peer, institutional, and national relationships through their different formats.

By the mid-to-late 1960s, Black Student Unions (BSUs) a type of BSO, were formed as a result of the growing racial consciousness among Black people coupled with the Black Power Movement (Williamson, 1999). The first BSU was formed at San Francisco State University and differed from fraternities and sororities in that they employed principles of the Black Power Movement (Nagbe, Anderson, and Reddick, 2020). During this time period, most BSUs were formed to create solidarity and unity among Black students, expressing positive aspects of Black culture, and challenging college and university campuses to make the needed changes for Black students on campus. Additionally, they addressed issues involving the United States foreign policy and university investments. including opposing the Vietnam War and supporting the divestment from South Africa. By the 1990s, the BSU organized on emerging issues involving recruiting, accessing, and retaining Black students on campuses (Nagbe, Anderson, and Reddick, 2020). Overall, most Black Student Unions were motivated by the sociopolitical culture of America during the 1960s (Williamson, 1999).

Evidence suggests that BSOs and more specifically, BSUs, help Black students connect with the larger Black student and faculty community (Volpe and Jones, 2023) and cope with incidents involving racial bias and discrimination (Leath et. al, 2022). Black student Organizations provide informal safe havens for Black students to be able to connect and form relationships with one another as well as, with faculty and staff (Hui and Jackson, 2017), contributing to creating more of a sense of belonging among Black students at predominantly white institutions. Despite providing an informal space for students to connect, these spaces are more organized than the spaces created by their White peers which can come more naturally (Tinto, 1993; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Involvement in Black Student Organizations allows Black students to exist away from “the White world” and be able to dress, talk, and socialize in ways that are comfortable and familiar without fearing they are perpetuating negative stereotypes (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). At some institutions, students have developed support systems based on other identities they hold or academic departments they are involved in. As Glenn and Johnson (2012) discuss, many institutions develop programming to help Black men succeed in college. Overall, it is generally found that through the existence of various BSOs on college campuses, Black students can better navigate higher education, as they curate spaces where they can truly be themselves and among people similar to them without feeling uncomfortable.

2.3.1 The Dynamic of Black Student Clubs & Organizations

Black Student Unions came out of the rise of the Black Power Movement (BPM) on campus (also known as the Black Student Movement) (Biondi, 2012). Black student activism in the mid-to-late 1960s advocated for the affirmation of Black culture and history and social justice. Students wanted to make higher education more accessible as well as ensure that these institutions were able to meet the needs of a more diverse student body. Tensions existed

between Black men and women. The BPM elevated black male leadership, unfortunately following the same patterns of the larger patriarchal society (Biondi, 2012). Their experiences and voices dominated the narrative of Black student experiences. Despite the dominance of men on campuses, Black women did advocate for their voices and experiences to be heard in a time when Black feminism was not very prominent in the discourse. Despite tensions, both Black men and women were prominent participants in the Black Student Movement.

2.4 Limitations in the Literature

So much of the current literature on the experiences of Black students focuses on the differences between men and women, resulting in a shortage of literature existing that examines the lives of students who do not fall into the gender-binary. There is a lack of research documenting the experiences of non-American Black people being racialized as a Black person and how they learn to navigate predominantly white spaces. Additionally, this literature failed to touch on some of the tensions that exist when there are differences within Black people, failing to provide nuance. Rather, much of the literature focuses on identity-based organizations as a solution to all of the problems with racism on campus. Though these spaces do offer students some sort of refuge, they are not one-size-fits-all. There is no acknowledgment of the complexities of these spaces, and the way these spaces can leave certain individuals isolated because of other identities they hold that aren't necessarily reflected in the space. They don't acknowledge how even within a club or organization, there can still be a lack of community and understanding. For some, simply co-existing in a space with people of their shared racial identity is enough to provide them with the safety and feelings of belonging, but for others, the other

identities they hold complicate their experience. This study seeks to better understand how Clark's BSU fosters community and to deeply understand how these intersections play a role in the grander scheme of fostering a community on campus. I want to explore how different Black people define community and how one's identity outside of race could pose potential barriers to the fostering of community at a PWI.

Additionally, much of the research focusing on Black student experiences is incredibly outdated given the shifts in campus culture due to COVID-19 and the revival of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020. Granted, it has been less than four years since the BLM uprising occurred in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and others, therefore scholarship on this matter is limited because of timing. However, it is important to consider the role Black Student Unions and other similar student organizations have played in creating a new campus community culture that is shifting away from centering whiteness and trying to adopt anti-racist practices and programs. Additionally, it is important to consider the impact identity-based groups specifically have had in contributing to student life in higher education outside of using their existence in ways that tokenize the existence of Black students and namely Black student life on campus. This study works to highlight the experiences of Black students at a PWI in a new racial climate in the post-2020 BLM revival.

3. So what makes a community, capital C Community? A Conceptual Framework

The above literature review emphasizes the nuanced experiences of Black students at college campuses. Overall due to feelings of isolation and lack of belonging, students have taken it upon themselves to create and be part of student-led or staff-run identity-based organizations

that allow them to find some form of Community. These spaces allow them to thrive socially and/or academically.

Thinking about capturing BSU's actions as we work towards our goal of fostering community, I first needed to understand what makes a community a capital C Community. The mere existence of a space that promotes itself as a space for Black students to come together was not enough for Community to exist— rather I understood that there are specific facets that contribute to Community. Specifically, I began to wonder: what does it mean for someone to belong somewhere? What is it about the people or the physical space itself that contributes to that sense of belonging? What is needed in the space so people feel that sense of belonging and want to be in that space? This section seeks to unpack how I conceptualize the facets I found important in dissecting what capital C Community is.

3.1. Difference as Power

I particularly became drawn to Audre Lorde's 1984 speech, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* given at the Humanities conference hosted by New York University. In this particular speech Lorde touches on the ways in which in the fight for liberation oppressed people use the same tools that are used to oppress them and how white women have fallen victim to this. Lorde (1984) states, "those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older— know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths" (p. 2). Lorde emphasizes the importance in recognizing difference as a strength when it comes to feminism. She stated, "difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged. As women, we have

been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change” (p. 2). We are taught to focus on the things we have in common as a way to build community as we expect those commonalities to make us feel part of something. Lorde however tasks us to go beyond this. She asks us to consider our differences and to consider what happens when we make room for the embracing of difference. As Lorde states, “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist” (1984). We can develop a new definition of community, one that doesn’t ignore the differences between them, but wrestles with and embraces them, allowing us to form communities that are more inclusive and go beyond the surface level. In this study, I recognize that despite the shared racial identity among my participants, there are still differences that inform our individual experiences as Black people on Clark’s campus. In addition to being Black, some of us as low-income, first-generation, women, men, non-gender conforming, class privileged, queer, etc. Some of us are more privileged because of the shade of our skin and the texture of our hair. As Lorde writes, our differences shouldn’t be tolerated, if anything they should be acknowledged and embraced, as this can help us develop a deeper understanding and make deeper connections. Thus, this becomes a salient idea in thinking about a key component to Community.

As June Jordan (1982) expands on the importance of differences in her work *Report from the Bahamas*. In her work she emphasizes that for many of us our identities are ascribed to us; we are told that we are Black or women or poor. Because of these markers, we are grouped with others under the idea of a common identity. However our identity isn't an either/or situation, as the way one identifies is multifaceted. Someone may self-identity based upon other aspects of

their identity such as their class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., causing for tensions to arise in the way folks are able to connect with each other as these differences inform one's individual experience. Jordan's position as a Black American woman at the Bahamian resort as a tourist informs her inability to fully understand Olive, the Black maid who cleans her room. As Jordan points out, this either/or way of thinking isn't very sustainable: "When these factors of race and class and gender absolutely collapse is whenever you try to use them as automatic concepts of connection. They may serve well as indicators of commonly felt conflict, but as elements of connection they seem about as reliable as precipitation probability for the day after the night before the day" (Jordan, 1982, p 13). Despite shared identities, sometimes the differences we hold divides us more than they can bring us together, but as Jordan and Lorde point out, we should not allow it to. Their works highlight the need to reconstruct how we think of differences; instead of seeing differences within a common identity group as a barrier to building community, there needs to be a collective move to seeing difference as a tool in the creation and fostering of genuine community—where people are recognized and seen in their full humanity and complexity. In the context of this study, I recognize that despite the shared racial identity among my participants, there are still differences that inform our individual experiences as Black people on Clark's campus. It was important for me to consider the differences in the analysis of my data especially when considering the nuances of identity and space as it pertains to the idea of fostering a greater Black community at a predominantly white institution such as Clark University.

3.2 Interdependence

Additionally, in thinking about this idea of Capital C Community, I kept coming back to the idea of interdependence, first brought to my attention through Lorde's work as well. Lorde

touches on this in her work, emphasizing that interdependency unlocks a level of empowerment that allows individuals, especially those of us who are marginalized to navigate the world. Rather than being alone, we will be part of a collective. As I see fit, interdependence is an important aspect to building Community. Interdependences asks the question of what it means to depend on someone. What does it require of people and more specifically of a community? As Lorde (1984) writes, “Only within that interdependency of difference strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters” (p. 2). Part of interdependence, as well as capital C Community, is making space for differences, as already emphasized in the prior section. When our differences are acknowledged there can be a different way of being in community with people, a bond that runs deeper than the surface level.

Another important part of interdependence is that it requires trust. Trust is not something that comes easily necessarily, in fact it requires a lot of work (Noddings 2005). It is also not something that is exactly tangible, rather trust is about feelings. Trust can be built through small or big actions, but overall it requires intention and effort. Nel Noddings (2005) explores the importance of trust and more specifically care in student-teacher relationships. Though Noddings’ offers a perspective specific to education and school, it still was relevant to my praxis project as she highlighted the importance of deep listening and talk or dialogue in fostering deep trusting relationships in the classroom (Noddings, 2005). By prioritizing deep listening and dialogue, there leaves room for individuals to be vulnerable, further deepening relationships and affirming the presence of interdependence. These ideas can be easily applied to any kind of setting and is something I am thinking about in this larger idea of Community.

3.3 Collective care

A huge part of understanding community in the context of higher education was looking into the already described communities that exist in higher education and understanding what aspects of them make them communities. bell hooks in her 1990 essay, *Homeplace (a site of resistance)*, defines it as a safe place created by Black women where Black people could affirm one another's experiences with racial bias and discrimination. These spaces were created by Black women for Black people; many Black women spent their days doing housework for white people and at the end of the day returned to their homes where they had to care for their families (hooks, 1990, p. 383). The formation of a homeplace allowed Black people, and especially Black women, to reclaim their self-worth, learning to respect themselves in that space despite being in spaces where there is a culture of white supremacy (hooks, 1990, p. 383). According to hooks, a homeplace is a site of resistance (p. 388). The creation of this space is in no way easy and its impact extends beyond its mere existence. As hooks (1990) states "It was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination...in that 'homeplace,' most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, nurture our spirits" (p. 388). As previously discussed, one of the ways Black students cope with feeling isolated is through the creation of a community with other Black students. Scholars have expanded upon hooks' notion of homeplace to suggest that the communities formed by Black students on university campuses are such spaces. Though homeplaces are spaces that exist outside of a racially oppressive space, by suggesting homeplaces exist within predominantly white institutions, suggests that they can exist within racially oppressive institutions (Leath et. al, 2022; Kelly, 2020). If a space is to be considered a homeplace they don't necessarily need to be as rigid and structured as other

organizations, rather, the space can exist in such a way that allows people to come together and truly vibe.

The idea of homeplace closely aligns with ideas of a counter-space, another kind of described community in higher education. As briefly mentioned, counter-spaces are spaces where Black people can create their own sense of belonging and contribute to a positive racial climate within a racially oppressive institution, such as predominantly white college campuses (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Their purpose is to provide a venue within an institution where one can truly be oneself in the presence of their peers (Vaccaro, & Camba-Kelsay, 2016). Within colleges and universities, they exist in academic spaces—within a certain academic department—or in social spaces, such as a student organization or club. By nature, counter-spaces are more structured spaces often defined by a clear mission or goal (Leath et. al, 2022). They work within a system but achieve their goals through specific programming. There are aspects of a counter-space that are still informal as these groups contribute to the blossoming of friendships and community that provide educational, emotional, and cultural support (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). It becomes apparent that one of the distinct differences between a space that is a counter-space and a space that is a homeplace has a lot to do with the structure. Homeplaces are informally created and sustained, where counter-spaces are often more structured. As a student on campus, you know when and where to attend a meeting for the organization, where a homeplace might be something a little less organized, perhaps a group of friends one formed on campus. It isn't necessary to dwell on their differences too much, as it is what is similar about these two spaces that is even more significant in thinking about Community.

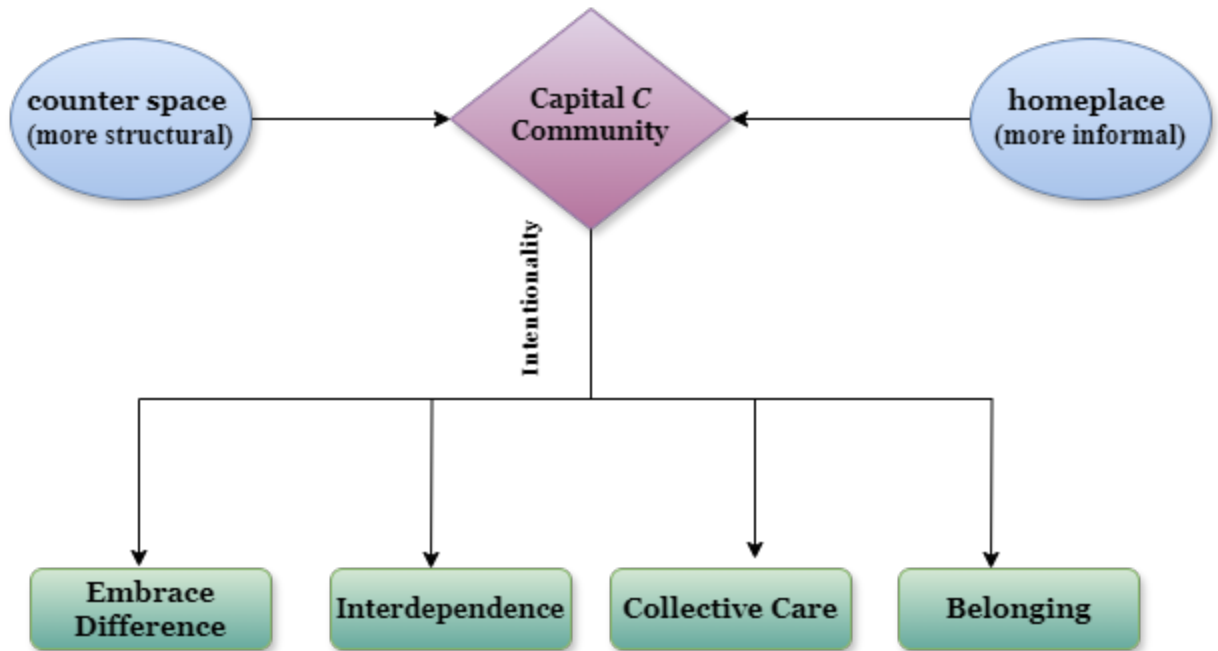
Something that stands out to me in thinking about both counter-spaces and homeplace as a type of community that can exist in higher education was the idea of collective care and

intentionality. Already this has been touched upon in my discussion of interdependence in the prior section, but the work of building community is not on one individual, but it takes the work of everyone in the space to make people feel safe, secure, and even loved. A distinct aspect of homeplace and counter-spaces in thinking about community and community building is the fact that there is space for love and care. In Chapter 8 of hook's creative nonfiction novel *All About Love*, she speaks on communities being essential to human survival, and sustaining life (hooks, 1999). Though her ideas of community are connected to friendships/platonic relationships, hooks argues that community allows us to "process all our issues, to cope with differences and conflict while staying connected" (hooks, 1999, p 134). Extending oneself to form Community allows individuals to heighten their capacity for fellowship and through fellowship, learn how to serve and care for others beyond themselves (hooks, 199), characteristics essential to sustaining community. Both homplaces and counter-spaces prioritize collective care, escape, and retreat in some way. Thus, it becomes evident that collective care or even love is an important part of a community being a Capital C community.

3.4 Belonging

Something else I am thinking about in this overall idea of Community is about belonging. Something I have been wrestling with is the question of what it means to belong or what is true belonging? Belonging, to me, is a feeling one has. It is the feeling that you and your identities are affirmed and welcomed in a space. But how can a community create that? In some ways the tenets I have brought up one could argue all encompass what it would mean for one to feel as though they belong. But thinking one step further, specifically about the act of creating and sustaining spaces that prioritize identity based work and racial justice is another part of fostering that sense of belonging. In a world that continues to perpetuate anti-Blackness, I am moved by

the idea of Black Livingness as I continue to think about belonging as a component of Community. Griffin & Turner (2021), write about moving towards a pedagogy of Black Livingness in which Black students see themselves centered in literacy, offering different perspectives in which they see themselves beyond the negative stereotypes that persist. They write, “Black Livingness urge[s] us to consider Black aliveness – Black hope, emotionality, and futures – in a world that presupposes Black death” (Quashie, 2021). Black Livingness poses a way of thinking about resistance to anti-Blackness in that it turns its foundational premises – Black death and the inhumanity of Black people – on their head by (re)asserting Black life and declaring the fullness of Black humanity. Thereby, Black Livingness embraces the possibility of a Black world (Quashie 2021 qtd in Griffin & Turner, 2021).” Investing in these spaces challenges the dominant narrative that communities of color such as Black Student Unions and other identity-based organizations are not valuable and thus affirm the belonging of Black bodies on campus and in the larger world. Community requires belonging and such belonging comes from the affirmation of Black life and Black Livingness. It requires the affirmation that marginalized bodies are here and cared for and important.



The above diagram works to illustrate how all these ideas (embracing difference, interdependence, collective care, and belonging) came together to more holistically describe what makes a community Capital C Community. More specifically, in having an idea about what goes into a Community, I was more easily able to see how these things did (or did not) show up in Clark’s BSU. In understanding BSU as a Community space, it became less important to me to give BSU a concrete label such as counter space or homeplace. Rather, I wanted to move beyond those labels and think more about the importance of embracing differences, interdependence, collective care, and belonging as we think more critically about Community. I am challenging the idea that Community exists by itself and that in order for true community to exist it requires intention and work. In the analysis of my data, rather than trying to define BSU, I am trying to see in what ways these aspects of Community are present, where and when, and why or why not through the reflections offered by the participating BSU members.

4. How we did this: Methods

4.1. Methodology

The research approach I took to conduct my research was participatory action research (PAR). PAR is different from traditional research in that there is an emphasis on collective investigation. Participatory action research is a scholar-activist approach to research that often brings together community members, activists, and scholars. By nature, PAR is collaborative and open-ended, prioritizing the expertise of those who are being impacted by the issue, and professional researchers often based in universities (Cornish, et al. 2023). There are four key principles of PAR: 1) authority of direct experience, acknowledging that those who are impacted harmfully by the issue have deep knowledge; 2) knowledge in action where through the experience of making changes, new knowledge is generated; 3) acknowledging research as a transformative process that aims to create empowering relationships and environments within the process of research itself; and 4) collaboration through dialogue where PAR's true power comes from highlighting the diverse experiences of its participants (Cornish, et al., 2023). These four principles are essential in the greater goal of what PAR is. Overall, the process of conducting research via PAR allows for the generation of knowledge-for-action and knowledge-through-action, in achieving the goals of specific communities (Cornish et al., 2023).

In the context of this project, PAR was most compatible in the execution of this project. Collectively, the Black Student Union eboard decided to focus on improving the way we foster community and throughout this past year, we worked together towards this goal, revisiting it in the planning for the year. Through PAR, participants were provided a space to offer reflections and suggestions that helped to improve how we were going about our goal, while the research and the semester were still happening. This type of research allowed me to center the voices of

those who are impacted by the issue being addressed, Black students. As Black students, we know what it is like to be at Clark and also be in the BSU space. Therefore, we know ourselves as members and had the best insights on what we wanted to change and improve. This method allowed for not only eboard members to offer reflections but general members too, who are more disconnected from the everyday tasks of an eboard member. Through PAR I was able to bring the insights from the general members back to the eboard so we could better assess the impacts our changes were having more broadly and allow us to make modifications to enhance our impacts. PAR allowed me to really consider how past and present practices of BSU impacted the effort to build community. Additionally, it allowed me to gain a better understanding from my participants about what their experiences were like and how they defined community based on their identities. I felt as though through PAR, I was able to better recognize how a greater community is being fostered on campus and what indicators are present that the practices are effective. I was also able to authentically capture the experiences of Black students in the BSU through this method as well.

4.2. Site

The site for my Praxis Project is the Clark University Black Student Union. Founded in 1969, the Clark University Black Student Union has been a place where activism, events, and professional development take place, all while centering the experiences and issues important to the people of the African Diaspora. The Black Student Union is diverse in gender, languages that are spoken, nationalities, and race, as you do not have to identify as Black to be part of the BSU per the Student Life and Programming student Club and Organization Handbook. Thus, the BSU is not an affinity space, but a student organization and is funded by the student activities fee.

Therefore, though the club works to center the experiences of Black people and more generally people of the African Diaspora, however, any programming or events must serve the entire student body.

On a wider scale, Clark University is a predominantly white institution with a total enrollment of about 2350 undergraduate students according to the 2022-2023 common data set. Of the undergraduate students, only 25% of the student body identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color), according to the university website. According to the 2022-2023 Clark University Common Data Set, out of 2389 undergraduate students (both degree-seeking and non-degree seeking), 112 (or 4.688%) of them identified as Black or African American from a non-Hispanic heritage. Of the total number of Black students at Clark, a third of them were first-year students. This does not account for students who are Black but also Latino/Hispanic or consider themselves to be two or more races. Additionally, this leaves out International students. In the last two academic years, this percentage has not shifted much as the number of Black students who identify as Black is still less than 5% of the study body.

These percentages are much lower than the percentage of Black people in the state of Massachusetts (9.5%) and the nation as a whole (13.6%) according to the 2022 US Census data. . This data demonstrates the low numbers of Black students on Clark's campus. This reality is why, and I am sure many of my Black classmates feel motivated to join spaces such as the Black Student Union, that center their Black identity and experiences. Though *what* the BSU does on campus has shifted and morphed over the years of its existence on campus, the club continues to be a space available to students on campus. Thus, when thinking about the fostering of community for Black students on campus, it made sense to focus on a club that has for a while focused on the experiences of Black people.

4.3. Positionality

Being a Black Clark student and President of the Black Student Union has offered me a unique position. Before my involvement with BSU, I was a young Black woman from a low-income background, trying to navigate higher education and understand who I am outside of where I am from. My class and gender have shaped a lot of my experiences since being in college almost as much as my racial identity. Similar feelings of isolation and stress due to existing as a Black individual, let alone a Black woman, have been present because of my status as a low-income college student. Starting college amidst a pandemic only exacerbated the isolation I felt attending a predominantly white institution, 4 hours away from home. I had never had any problems finding my people before Clark, even though my high school was also a predominantly white institution. But once I got here, I found myself longing to be around other Black people. By the end of my freshman year, I joined the Black Student Union at Clark and this is now my third year serving as an executive board member, and my second year as President. Because of my seniority and position, I undoubtedly hold a lot of power. Despite this, I am just as responsible as any other member to contribute to the club. Combined, my experience as a Black student at Clark and a member of the BSU positions me as an insider to my participants, while my role as President and a researcher causes me to be an outsider. I have been able to better understand the relationship between my identities and how they inform my own experiences and how I relate to others, due to the scholarship of Kimberle Crenshaw and her intersectionality framework. The concept was used to acknowledge how race and gender interact to shape the experiences of Black women's lives but has since extended into additional factors such as class and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1991).

This framework was an important aspect in conducting this research, as it is important to me to always recognize the differences individuals have despite the shared racial identity that brings us all together. It is because of these intersected identities that I can never fully relate to one’s experience as my experience is unique to me and it is important for me to acknowledge these nuances as a researcher, as a BSU member, and as the President of the club as well.

4.4. Participants

The participants of this project are undergraduate students who are members of the Clark University Black Student Union during the 2023-2024 academic year and who identify as Black. Their membership varied as general members and executive board members of the BSU as variety in the representation of the kind of members provided diversity in the reflections offered as contributors to the club and its goal as well as recipients of said contributions. In total, I interviewed seven members of the BSU,, five of whom are on BSU’s eboard of eighteen people. The other two members were general members of BSU. The participants in the project held different identities outside of their race which I outline in the chart below:

Name ⁴	Class Year at Clark	Other Salient Identities
Rebecca* ⁵	Freshman	Cis-woman, East African, Straight
Jalen	Freshman	Cis man, Bi-racial (African American & White American), Straight

⁴ Names are pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities.

⁵ Names with asterisk indicate executive board members

David	Sophomore	Demi-boy, Bi-racial (African American & White American), Queer
Angel	Junior	Gender fluid, African American, Bi-sexual
Sandy*	Junior	Gender fluid, Afro-Latinx, Bi-sexual,
Quinn*	Senior	Gender-queer, East African, Queer
Blake*	Senior	Bi-racial (African American & White American

4.5 Data collection

The data collection strategies I used in this research were mainly transcripts from two interviews with my participants: one held in the Fall 2023 semester and the second held in the Spring 2024 semester. [All but one participant completed the second interview]. The interviews were semi-structured with the main goal of understanding my participants’ perspectives and understanding of the initiatives of the BSU in working to foster greater community on campus and generally understanding each participant’s interpretation of what makes a community a Capital C Community. In addition, field notes taken during multiple meetings over the two semesters along with my own reflections of past eboard conversations allowed me to describe the interventions and supplemented the insights gained in the interviews.

4.6. Data analysis

As stated, I am collecting data in the form of interviews and field notes, therefore, my analysis came out of what was recorded in my transcriptions from the interviews in addition to my observation notes. One of the analytical methods this research utilizes is discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is the study of language at use in the world based on the details of speech (along with gaze, gesture, and action) relevant to the context the speech is used. Through discourse analysis, I was able to make meaning of definitions participants used to describe community as it related to my conceptual framework focused on Capital C Communitycounter-space. I sought to understand if from my participants' own reflections and observations, in what ways BSU has made progress in fostering Capital C Community. Additionally, I considered the importance of intentionality when determining this from the language used by my participants. These indicators primarily came from what was observed as well as the reflections provided from my interview questions about their experience being part of BSU as well as their ideas of community, community building, and their experiences as Black people.

It was crucial for me to understand what participants' reflections were on their experiences in the club and the wider campus to determine the role of BSU at Clark. I wanted to specifically highlight the importance and role identity-based student organizations play in higher education and to understand the role BSU played in creating Community and belonging at Clark University. Additionally, I wanted to understand how the efforts of the BSU impact the fostering of a greater community among Black people on campus and what potential barriers existed.

These indicators will be provided through interviews. Overall, I wanted to gain a better understanding of how BSU general members and executive board members understood community, explore the barriers people saw and experienced, and gain an understanding of what people felt like a Black community even is.

5. The BSU's 2023-2024 Academic Year Wrapped

5.1. What did we even do?

The main goals of this Praxis project was to 1) identify what community is to Black students at a predominantly white institution and 2) to identify ways that a community of Black people can be fostered on Clark University's campus and what the role the Black Student Union is within that. As the literature shows, Black students, do not feel a sense of belonging at PWIs and seek out spaces on campuses where we are seen and understood. The desire to belong, to foster spaces of community and healing, and/or to address white supremacy have often led to the creation of student unions and organizations around racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. Black students are actively looking for spaces where they are seen and their experiences are valued. However, for some Black students, being among people who have the same racial identity as you is not enough to feel a complete sense of belonging or community because their experiences are also informed by the other identities they hold. As a collective, the Clark University Black Student Union identified that our existence as a club on campus that centers the Black experience is incredibly influential in creating community and yet we had not been very successful in doing that. The BSU executive board identified that there was a need for more intentional community building among the members of our BSU given the separation between the "executive board"

and “general members” and even Black students who are “non-members.” Our theory of change became about *intentionality*; by increasing our frequency in general member meetings and events, we hoped that Black students who attended meetings would begin to feel a sense of belonging and community.

In a conversation that occurred in Spring 2023, when a couple of Black Student Union eboard members came back from spring break, I received a text message from BSU member and participant Blake, requesting if they could lead the next eboard meeting. They specifically requested we have a reflective eboard meeting in which we stop and pause to think about what we’ve done so far, what we’re doing, and how we want to move forward. They said other members who they had chatted with over break had also felt the need to take a pause to recuperate and recenter. The meeting started off with a reflection on the past month’s programming. In February, we had conducted an abundance of programming for Black History Month and heading into March, had lost a lot of that momentum. Sandy expressed feeling burnt out during eboard meetings last year in our first interview:

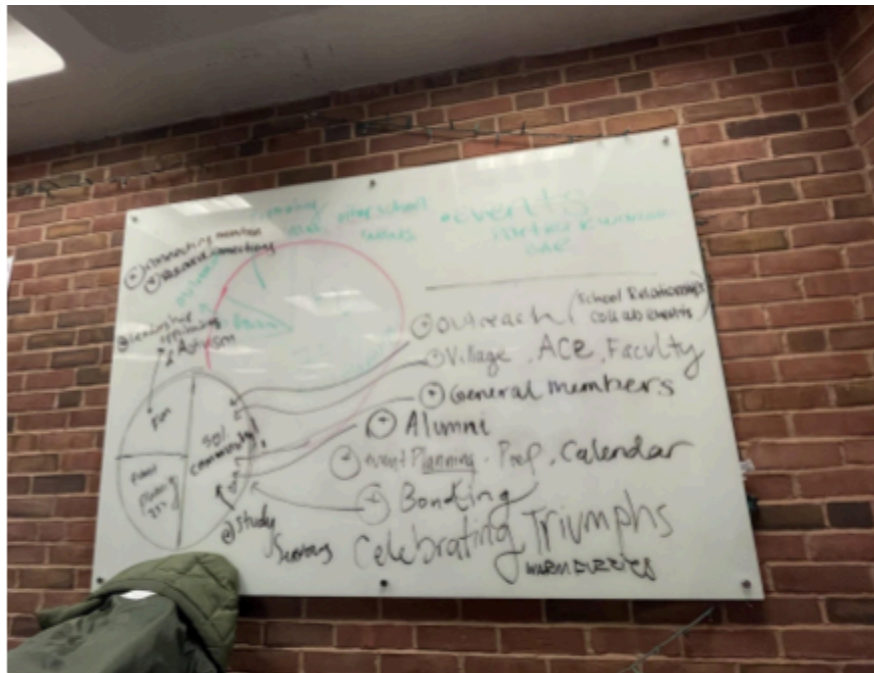
And like I feel like because it's an eboard and because we have stuff to do, it tends to be like feel a little like work, work, work. At least last year it did just because we had so much work to do. (Sandy, Interview 1)

These feelings were present across the eboard and brought up by other interviewees when reflecting on their involvement in BSU last year, such as Blake who agreed with Sandy about feeling exhausted by the demands of event planning for the club.

I'd say a drawback, and we've addressed this from last year's work, but like. I think that there's definitely a drawback with eboard becoming clicky or feeling separate from

general interest members, and on that note, like what kind of environment are we creating for the eboard here if when we meet weekly, it's only to plan? I think it was important to open up those second week meetings to like more general interest members and focusing on bonding events, because you were definitely exhausted from that labor from last year, so I'd say yeah, just making sure that we don't get fatigued keeping up with one another, I think. (Blake, Interview 1)

Blake led us through this conversation, having all of us think about what we really wanted to do and what to prioritize in thinking about the rest of the time we had in the academic year and next year. I took on the role of documenting what was being shared from this meeting, and created the Jamboard as shown in image below from March 13th 2023:



Long term goals



short term goals

general member meetings



It became overwhelmingly clear that there was a want, at least from people on eboard, to commit to building community. We decided that in the short and long term into next academic year, we wanted to dedicate 50% of our time to trying to build communitu. It was at this meeting that BSU identified that it needed to begin to foster community and if that were to be the goal, some structural changes needed to happen. This looked like implementing some new programming and increasing the frequency and the type of general meetings we run. This allowed for the creation

of an informal meeting space. By creating this space, our goal was to allow for new faces to join the space and for folks to hopefully connect with one another. Additionally, we thought that by increasing the number of general member meetings, it would allow a space for eboard members to let their guard down, relax in the space, and also connect with one another and general members.

I had also spent time reflecting on the past year of BSU programming, and recognized that BSU is the one of the few spaces on campus run by students that centers the experiences and needs of Black students, as there is no designated affinity space specifically for Black people. Therefore, though we put on programming that we feel is relevant and needed for Black students, according to the handbook for clubs and organizations on campus, we are not allowed to say programming is only for Black people. In the 2022-2023 academic year, the scale of the events we held were often large and inclusive of the entire student body. To me, it began to feel as though BSU was doing a lot for the image of the school and less for actual Black students. These feelings were shared by others on eboard, as people expressed that they felt as though we were doing things for “everyone” as opposed to for “us”, and that a shift in who and what we prioritize was necessary. We acknowledged that by focusing on community building, we might all feel a greater sense of community on campus; instead of all of our meetings being dedicated to planning our next big event, we would be meeting together more often to actually connect with one another and have fun. As a result, our action plan ultimately became to change the frequency of our executive board meetings to account for more general member meetings. Additionally, because hosting more meetings targeted for general members is simply not enough, we wanted to be intentional about the programming in which we were offering, focusing on ways we could

bring in more fun and ways for both eboard and general members to connect with one another such as through study halls, game nights, movie nights, and the like.

5.2 The Impact

When we returned for the 2023-2024 academic year, our first eboard meeting was held on September 3rd and the goal I had was for folks to check in with one another about the summer and get centered on what it is we want to do this year as we tried to meet our new goal. I reminded everyone that we committed to prioritizing community building over event planning this year and needed to figure out a way for us to more consistently have general member meetings. As a result, we created a loose schedule where every other meeting would be a general member meeting. This was different from the previous year in which little to no effort was made to bring members in and be intentional about the ways they were being invited into the space. Though the first month was mostly dedicated to securing who was on our e-board for the year, we were successful in hosting about two general member meetings each month. In the Fall 2023 semester, BSU hosted a total of 10 general member meetings or general member targeted events. The dates of these meetings are listed below as well as a brief mention of what they entailed:

Meeting Dates	Content
September 10th, 2023	General Interest Meeting (GIM)
September 24th, 2023	Getting to know you
October 12th, 2023	Study Hall

October 15th, 2023	Game Night
October 19th, 2023	Study Hall
October 26th, 2023	Study Hall
October 29th, 2023	Hang Out
October 30th, 2023	Movie Night
November 12th, 2023	Mental Health & Karaoke Night @ The Village
December 10th, 2023	Trivia Night
January 28th, 2024	Game Night
February 11th, 2024	Game Night
February 25th, 2024	Conversation about identity

These meetings were successful in terms of BSU’s goal– to host more general member meetings. Because of the frequency and consistency of them, they consistently drew in people. As earlier discussed in my literature review, Black students tend to experience a lot of challenges on campus, experiences overt and covert forms of racism, leading to them to seek spaces where they can be among other Black students, often student organizations like Black Student Unions, where they can be their truest selves. The following subsections will delve more in depth into the impact of the intervention as expressed by participating eboard and general members of Clark’s Black Student Union.

5.2.1 “We are having fun”

Our very first game night hosted on October 15th, drew in about 30 people from all different class years. Upon entering, most folks with friends or people they seemed to know, people separated themselves by the game they wanted to play, mainly sticking with the people they came into the space with. As they walked in, I had music playing to give the space a vibe and layed out different games so people could grab the game they wanted to play. One of the most popular group games to play is UNO, so naturally there were two tables with UNO, one of them including me, Angel, Rebecca, and Quinn and other women and AFAB (assigned female at birth) people. The other UNO group was primarily cis men on eboard and general members. Another table included David and some general members playing heads up, and the last table included Blake and some general members playing a game as well. At this meeting neither Sandy or Jalen were present. At my UNO table as folks came in late, we continued to distribute cards to them and play together, laughing and making friendly competition. I observed other tables do the same; there were rarely any pauses in conversations and everyone seemed to be engaged with one another. I came around to tables to take pictures of people and chatted with members as well. One person complimented me on the music playing and said they enjoyed it. When I came back to my seat, Angel had transitioned to trying to teach people to play Spades. Majority of the original group was still engaged, attempting to learn the game, but unfortunately time had ran out before they could actually begin. Upon reflecting on their experience this past year as opposed to others, Angel acknowledged the game night as something that stood out to them as part of the efforts of BSU this past year:

I definitely think it's doing a better job of involving more students like that are on eboard.

I think before, especially due to like interpersonal conflicts with people the E board was

closed off and not a lot of things were happening on a general member scale. But I think they're allowing the space to have students just play, which I think is important, like just Black joy, whether it be musical chairs, card games like they're creating a space for students, especially younger students to come and congregate. (Angel, Interview 2)

Sandy as well spoke to the impact of hosting more meetings this year highlighting a game night held on January 28th 2024:

Instead of like doing a million events, we're hosting more general interest meetings and we're inviting more Black people into our space. I feel like last year we held like maybe one or two general interest meetings. And I feel like by having the VP take on that role, it encourages, like it makes us seem more open because we want people to be in this community, but also like it makes sure that like, people know that we're here and then we can have fun and that I loved like the other night we had a game night like seeing my, like my mentees come and like, also engage with eboard members and have fun and laugh like, that was so cute. Yeah, I feel like that's the direction we're moving. I feel like that's the direction we need to be in (Sandy, Interview 2).

Quinn also shared that they felt like the meetings we had was making some sort of a difference in who shows up in the space:

For one, I see more Black people that I haven't seen in meetings. That is very important because it seems like having consecutive like consistently having meetings and spaces open, events, has made a difference in the turnout, and that's very good and big. It shows that they see it, you know, so that's good (Quinn, Interview 2,).

Jalen, a freshman and general member of BSU shared similar sentiments; though new to Clark and BSU, he felt as though he was happy to have access to some sort of space he could see himself in: “I feel like I need a few more years of being at Clark...but I know I like it. The community is really cool and I like, I like being a part of it” (Jalen, Interview 1). Later, Quinn spoke more about the community they felt had been fostered in the space because of the changes and notability, how intentional BSU eboard has been about trying to build this community:

I think there has been. More of a community this past year than there was before. With like the change in our like what the conversation we've had as eboard and the things we're considering. Whenever we're creating events or planning out our year. I think it has definitely been a priority to create space than just to do things for the sake of doing them. There's more intentionality in what we say and do. And that that has created more community than... we've had in the past. (Quinn, Interview 2)

It was also noted by Sandy that the intervention had also contributed to a difference in the way that BSU eboard meetings feel, notably that BSU was a lot more fun as an eboard member. They noted, “ because we have like a break every other week, kind of there's. A lot more room. For joking, we're also getting our work done and there's a lot more like I feel like it's a lot more relaxed in general. And it feels like a safer space. (Sandy, Interview 1) Not only did eboard laugh and joke a lot more with one another, but we also talked to each other. Our November 12th meeting at The Village⁶ was marketed as a Karaoke & Mental Health night event in which members can get off campus and see a community space as well as engage in meaningful

⁶ The Village is a Afrocentric cultural, learning, and healing center in the Main South neighborhood of Worcester, MA. The Village builds grassroots power by connecting BIPOC groups, healers, and individuals whose work is rooted in racial justice, learning, creativity, community, & healing. (<https://worcesterculture.org/organizations/the-village-worcester/>) Clark's BSU was first introduced to the founder and director of the space in the fall of 2022 when we partnered with them for our annual Kwanzaa dinner. Since, we have been lucky to sustain a relationship with them.

conversation and have fun. Given the time of our meetings, we offered food since the off-campus location away from the dining hall could have created a barrier in terms of access to food. I had waited at Red-Square for any members who wanted to walk over to The Village. After a few minutes, I was joined mainly by eboard members and we walked over to The Village which is about 15 minutes away from campus. As we trickled into The Village, some members were already present, eating food and chatting in separate groups. Though a general member meeting, only one general member showed up and one non-Clark student who was a guest of an eboard member. Similarly to the game night, the right side of the room mainly contained men and the other had women and gender expansive folks. This was the dominant seating arrangement— for a good 30 minutes, folks stayed in the areas they assigned themselves to, chatting with people they normally do.

At some point, the men loudly started talking about hygiene routines, specifically if showering every day was necessary. The outside guest was making a point to say that it wasn't while the vast majority of people felt as though it was. Me, Quinn, and two other members, turned around to better listen and join in on the conversation. This soon shifted into us forming a circle to better talk to one another as a whole group, which was suggested by one person. One by one, members turned their chairs to face inward so that they could face everyone. Somehow, the conversation landed on talking about the intersection between gender, hygiene, and enslavement. I referenced a video on YouTube by a video-essayist who discussed the influence of slavery on what Black Twitter⁷ calls the “hygiene olympics” among Black people, but in particular Black women. I brought up that due to the lack of access to hygiene products, once granted freedom and given access to those products again, hygiene became a really big deal to Black people. I did

⁷ Black Twitter is an internet community consisting of mainly Black folks who talk about Black folk things in pop culture and media see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Twitter

disclaim that I did not necessarily remember the intricate details and sent the video to our BSU group chat if anyone was interested. The outside guest shared that they were also talking about “pretty privilege” and colorism, which others began to comment on. At some point in the conversation, I whispered to Quinn, “I feel like this is the first time we have *really* talked”.

This was unlike any eboard meetings we had in the past because this meeting did not center any planning. Though and impromptu almost eboard meeting and though the topic of conversation should have been mental health, this was the topic that we all organically decided to talk about. Holding space for people to talk to one another outside of those they might feel more comfortable being around felt like an important moment in BSU. Something about the disruption in our usual routine gave space for BSU members to have this sort of informal discussion about something we kind of *all* thought about, but it also gave room for us to have fun as well. We ended the night off singing songs off the *Hamilton* soundtrack and taking silly pictures and videos of one another. It seemed as though we somehow had found some sort of balance to the club. As Sandy noted:

Every other week we're playing games at every other week. We're listening to music and like giggling and being like being stupid teenagers because we deserve that. But it has the structuredness but also has the social, community aspect like it has the social life. The social aspect I guess is what makes it more like a community rather than a workplace.

(Sandy, Interview 1)

Participants noted that the impact was generally positive. Hosting more meetings created a shift in the morale of the club as members were able to engage with one another in ways they were not able to before. Eboard members also noted that BSU felt less like “work” as opposed to last

year where the constant labor led to burnout, even going as far to say that they were having fun. General members such as Angel noted the importance of games in creating an environment in which people can relax and enjoy themselves. This is primarily due to BSU's intentionality of trying to bring people into the club by being consistent with the structure of trying to have a general member meeting at least two times a month. The added smaller, more targeted events have also allowed for a more intimate setting to make connections opposed to bigger campus wide events that serve the entire student body. As seen in the chart detailing our meetings and events this year, we often held general member meetings or events that centered around games and fun activities with the intended goal of bringing people together in a more informal way (as opposed to a planning meeting). Even experimenting with immersing ourselves within the Main South community by going to The Village, completely removing ourselves from Clark's campus, this seemed to allow eboard members especially to connect with one another through informal talk, something that didn't happen very often. Overall the efforts made though not perfect had an impact in changing the morale of BSU. Additionally, these impacts show just how intentional the eboard was about opening up our space and diversifying the quality of our meetings for general members outside of whole-school events.

5.2.2 What if we talked?: The issue of vulnerability

BSU was able to successfully accomplish the goal of hosting more meetings. Additionally, the more consistent general member meeting space contributed to both general member and eboard members feeling more relaxed and most notably, eboard members noted having more fun. Despite all the positive changes that came about the BSU space, there are still areas of improvement. In the previous section, I noted that at the specific game night meetings in addition to our meeting at The Village, there was some division across gender lines.

Additionally, in the case for our first game night, as well as other meetings, members tended to come in and section themselves off so that they were only with their friends. This highlights one of the main “issues” that consistently was brought up by my participants. Something about the way the space was being constructed and led was not really allowing for true connection. David shared that he felt that members could be more vulnerable with one another, specifically through talking. He stated:

I think we would be able to build our stronger sense of community as we're being vulnerable and being. Telling each other of our like, what were you, what we've witnessed and what we need within each other, which I feel like is good because sometimes we don't have the ability really to realize what other people's needs are unless they verbalize them. So it's just like one of those things where it's I feel like it's helpful because when people were really ohh, that person's. Experience this so. If maybe I've experienced this, I'll like talk to them about it. (David, Interview 2)

This is reflected in the types of meetings we held this past academic year. The majority of the meetings we held this year were game nights which I characterize as informal and fun. The priority of “fun” was a direct response to how people felt in prior years, that BSU was “work” and didn’t really allow people to be more relaxed. Additionally, these fun meetings brought more people in, allowing for people to be and feel more involved, something people noted was missing from the club in prior years. For some members, such as Angel and Jalen, being more involved in the club or at least having the option to be in the space was enough for them to feel part of something. However, for other eboard members, this was not enough for them to feel connected to the space and to others on a deeper level. Members specifically seemed to be seeking a deeper

connection to one another through dialogue. It became clear that being with people who have the same racial identity was not enough to feel a complete sense of belonging because their individual identities informed their experiences as well. This influenced the experiences people were having in the meeting space; many highlighted that there was still a lack of diversity within meeting topics that allow people to share and discuss the differences within our shared identity. Generally they felt as though the club focused on this monolithic idea of Blackness that not everyone could relate to. Quinn felt this disconnect in the club, calling it the ‘slight elephant in the room’:

I think that it is a bit segregated in some sort of way because obviously...not all black people are the same. And there are spaces that feel or fit more for certain black people in certain spaces than others, like BSU, CASA, MSA, like all those different other spaces. Some black people might focus on some other parts of their identity than others in some way. So I, guess it's like...It does seem like there isn't enough dialogue between us as Black people, I guess, especially at Clark or specifically at Clark that enables us to talk about like the slight elephant in the room of just like, why are we not like there for each other in some sort of way? (Quinn Interview 2)

As shared in the participant chart, Quinn is someone who is not African American and joined BSU later in their time at Clark partially because they were unsure about fitting into the space because of their East African identity. David and Blake both shared similar feelings. As people who identify as biracial, specifically Black and White, they experienced doubts about their ability to be part of the space. They did however, acknowledge that they felt as though BSU was a space even biracial people could find themselves being part of because of the current biracial representation in the club. This tension was specifically brought up when I asked David and

Blake about their thoughts and feelings on whether or not they felt like they could easily relate to Black people. David responded by stating:

Sometimes I feel like no. Specifically at BSU, but meeting more biracial individuals that share identity, it becomes easier to understand. Like with Blake, talking to them more and stuff and talking about what it's like...just being biracial...and stuff like that is more so, OK, we understand each other now. There's this weird occurrence like, are you Black enough? (David, Interview 1)

Blake responded:

I've always felt a little bit different. I've also questioned I think at the beginning I questioned if I would also be welcomed in BSU because of my biracial identity. But I think quickly I got rid of that fear, like I also had some friends in there originally and we have had non black people in that space. (Blake Interview 1)

I wanted to gain insight on what David believed the cause of the isolation he felt and specifically whether or not he felt like it was coming from the structure of the club. He expanded his thinking by stating that the cause for isolation could be unintentional:

It could be unintentionally, but I also think BSU offers the space of like, hey, there's Black people that are all different shades of color in this room and...well...they probably have this idea of what it's like, what they're going to come into, but they're going to see something totally different and stuff. And then some people are just more introverted and don't want to come out of their rooms and stuff, which I totally understand. (David Interview 1)

This feeling of isolation and possibly confusion is something Rebecca is experiencing. Though having been part of BSU for a few months now, she expressed that because of her ethnic background, she felt out of place in BSU as it centered the African American experience. She stated, “I feel like it's very African American and then other places. And then East Africans just don't know what to do” (Rebecca Interview 2). This was especially brought up at our general member meeting on February 25th. Taking advantage of the feedback being given through these interviews, I facilitated a dialogue where we discussed our general experiences as Black people at Clark. I asked questions prompting people to discuss how our experiences might differ due to our ethnicities, where we grew up, class, gender, etc. One member shared about being Afro-Latinx and being assumed to be the monolithic African American archetype and when expressing that she didn't know a specific pop culture reference, being put down because of it. This was co-signed by Sandy, who is also Afro-Latinx, who shared how this might be due to assumptions made about BSU because of its name:

Because of the things that we talk about or like because of the name Black Student Union, there's an assumption that you can't join the club if you're not African American. Like I myself am not African American. And even in the club I'm like “ohh like that's just not how I grew up.” I'm Caribbean American, which is true for a lot of people in the club as well. So from like [an] outsider looking in, I think also there's that like culture wise but also like...But even like, because other people who are in the club we tend to cater for the people who are in the club so then because we don't have a lot of African identifying people, then we don't make an effort to like like bring in African culture or the Black African experience because, like we just don't have that representation. (Sandy Interview 1)

Making space for individuals' identities outside of their racial identity is an important theme that I will return to in a later discussion on barriers. Sandy, Rebecca, David, and Blake all point to the fact that they are more complex people outside of their racial identity. They have different parts of themselves that are connected in the way that they experience the world that they all expressed originally hindered them from wanting to join the club or influenced how they felt in the space. Participants highlighted blindspots in which the greater goal of building community wasn't totally met. They specifically showcased how vulnerability and openness was an important missing piece in the bigger puzzle due to the lack of intention on our parts to make this more central to our programming. Though the heavy emphasis of fun allowed general members to be more involved, it has also led to feelings of isolation that members have expressed could have been resolved through dialogue. Unfortunately, what Lorde and Jordan both discuss comes out here— because there is not an embracing of difference, individuals have felt left out and disconnected from one another. In striving to build and foster greater community on campus, there needs to be that embracing of differences. As highlighted by participants, intentional talking would have allowed for the true embracing of all our different identities as it would have given people the opportunity to connect in a new way.

5.2.3 Unequal Labor

In addition to the lack of talk influencing the lack of connection for some members of BSU, participants on eboard especially, felt as though not *everyone* on the eboard contributed equally to the intervention contributing to the way they felt about the club and an unequal distribution of emotional and physical labor. Rebecca, shared that she noticed that when it came

to the smaller more intimate meetings, there was a lack of effort from certain members in the club:

I think more people on eboard need to give effort when it comes to contributing to working on these like community like events. Because I feel like we really hit the big ones, like Kwanzaa and stuff, but we don't really put too much effort into, like, our biweekly meetings. I don't know. I feel like sometimes they're not enticing enough.

(Rebecca, Interview 2)

Rebecca's point speaks to some of the structural issues I came across as a leader in the space. Despite the conversation we had last spring, and the continual reminders of our goal. It didn't feel like *we all* were working towards the same goal or idea. Participants noticed that majority AFAB, (assigned female at birth) people in BSU carried the weight of the club and generally seemed to care more about the goal of community we had set this year resulting in specifically cis-men not contributing nearly as much to the club, particularly when we were engaged in more community-building/fun meetings. This is one of the biggest active tensions in the club. But this is not new this year as noted by Sandy, this was the case last year as well:

I'm also seeing a very gender dynamic where pretty much the only people that speak are Black women except for one or one or two people that aren't women. So there's that. And I'm seeing like...this kind of happened last year too, when we call out the gender divide, people like at least the male identifying people kind of get a little defensive. But I'm kind of seeing that again this semester. (Sandy, Interview 2)

Blake touched upon BSU's historical pattern that femme and masculine people seemed to be divided resulting in an unequal balance of labor:

Yeah, there's definitely been a division there in terms of perception and treatment of people who look like they have, like, feminine bodies. So I think that there's something to work on there in terms of, yeah, acceptance and respect and, yeah. Also, like workload too, I think there was a gendered component like last year where there was this like fall out about the boys in the back of the room and like not doing their work to like a satisfactory level to what the women were doing, or like some of the younger boys being having to like like be “mothered.” That was something that came up or like, being instructed by the women to lead for what they should be doing to micromanage. So yeah, just like kind of like Mommy representations and like secretary, teacher, representations in the group. (Blake Interview 1)

The issue of who's doing the work is not new to BSU or any organization really. Blake touches on what they are seeing are traditional gender roles being reinforced in the club space. They recognize the ways in which cis-men in the space often rely on cis-women, or femme presenting people more generally to do the work or tell them what to do, essentially filling in the role of some sort of caretaker. The unequal distribution of labor influenced by gender speaks to the way the club is structured— many of the AFAB people in the club have more prevalent roles in the club in which they are taking more of a leadership position. Additionally, the lack of contribution from cis-men in the club can be attributed to the fact that the idea that we needed to focus on community was vocalized more by AFAB people in the club last year, who also made up the majority of club members both this and last year:

Um and we saw a greater ratio of women taking the lead again, and I feel like it's a lot more of the AFAB, female identifying people being like, let's do something community oriented and the the male identifying people being like OK or like just being, like,

dragged through the mud of it. And I think I'd be more curious on how to form more reflective community rather than just like being in each other's space because I feel like it's not necessarily commitment to community if we're not all on the same page of what community is, what that looks like and how invested in community everyone has to be. Is there a threshold of investment? I think because it has been, our call for community was generally called by the AFAB people and received opposition by the male identifying people, or at least seemed like it wasn't as enthusiastic on the end of the male identifying people. We are still kind of, we're seeing gender dynamics there in of itself, who wants community and who doesn't? I'm not saying that they don't want community, but who is more committed to finding and building that community? (Sandy, Interview 1)

Sandy noted this in our interview and additionally that question of who cares about community is creating a division about ideas of community, noting that there might have been a pressure to commit to this because of the dominant group's voices. Reflecting on club planning meetings, it mainly has been AFAB people giving their thoughts and opinions on what meeting and events we should do for general members. Because I run the eboard meetings, I naturally take up a lot of space in talking through plans and ideas. Whenever I do turn over the floor for members to speak, I am often met by blank faces and shrugs from the men of eboard. Overall, this speaks to the division felt on behalf of eboard due to gender dynamics and creating some sort of disconnectedness among eboard members. But as mentioned before, gender divides were apparent in general meeting spaces as well. As noted in meeting descriptions, at meetings people typically separated themselves by gender. Cis-men often sit with one another, while cis-women and gender expansive people are physically on another side. David shared that it felt consistent

that the cis-men clique up with one another, creating a barrier between themselves and everyone else:

Well, like I said before, like with the community thing like it's usually separated by like our intersectionalities. Like a lot of the black men usually are a clique with each other. Which is a typical thing, but there also needs to be a space where like all of us can figure out, as we are an eboard kind of thing, although it is a big eboard, but it's also having that like huge clique and they're just sometimes they're just kind of there. They talk with each other but they don't let anyone know what they're talking about. (David Interview 2)

David's quote is also surfacing the importance of this divide, this time calling attention to what the space in the room might look like at BSU meetings even when general members are in the space. Why is it that men gravitate to sitting with other men and all the other marginalized genders find community with one another? This noticing has made me question if this dynamic is caused by the long-standing history of the BSU being primarily AFAB led, or if it is something occurring on behalf of the AMAB people. Regardless of the origins, it raises the question of whether or not BSU can create an inclusive Capital C Community when we maintain traditional hierarchical relationships as these points raised about the uneven distribution of labor as influenced by gender dynamics may be pointing to larger structural issues.

It's no secret that this is even reflected in my research; of all the members in BSU, only one cis-man offered to be a participant and offer reflections. All of the other participants interviewed were not cis-men (mainly in fact, gender expansive individuals) and the majority of them identified gender identity, as well as other identities such as multiracialism and ethnicity, as something they actively thought about and wanted to be more intentional about when trying to connect with people. Unfortunately, due to the lack of male voices, this analysis lacks a full

understanding of their perspectives. However, it becomes clear to me that non-cis men in the club feel disconnected from their cis-men counterparts, due to the separation happening between the cis-men, and pretty much everyone else. Simply existing around one another has not made anyone feel any closer or connected to one another. In thinking about what could be further exacerbating this separation, I return back to the idea of talk. Once again because we all have our individual experiences as informed by things like our ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality, class, etc., these things can also be causes of tensions or misunderstanding when they go unspoken. It seems as though similarly in the last section that that is due to the lack of dialogue within BSU, there is a disconnection that persists in terms of gender identity, in addition to ethnicity/culture. that seems to translates into the structure of the club itself.

5.2.4 What all this means about the intervention

To say that the intervention was unsuccessful due to the more negative reflections shared would be a disservice to the work the BSU has done this past year. It is clear that the intervention was successful as 1) more general meetings were had; 2) members expressed that these meetings allowed for more fun to be had through playing and talking; and 3) generally made BSU feel more relaxed for eboard members and allowed general members to feel involved and part of something. However, the intervention was not as successful as it could have been because there remained divisions and patriarchal practices. Connecting to the comments in the previous section, there is the question that there could have been a greater sense of community and connection through vulnerability if we created the space to confront these differences and challenges by fostering more dialogue.

The absence of a space for dialogue across our differences meant that the challenges around gender were never confronted. Indeed, inclusive of gender, there was little consideration for people's identities outside of 'Blackness' such as gender identity, ethnicity, and being multi-racial contributing to some feelings of isolation still occurring in the club and a general monolithic Black identity being created. Based on the reflections it became clear that the eboard members of BSU need to have a unified and clear goal that *everyone* is committed to. I would not characterize this intervention as failing or truly succeeding, rather, these tensions and accomplishments only show that this is work that can be continued as especially since members identified areas of improvement that can be put into practice currently and beyond. The following section will get into the intricacies of what individual students' imagined community is defined as and how this can be used in imagining a BSU that is a capital C Community and what the facets are.

6. What is Community for Black Students at Clark?

In my conceptual framework, I theorized that in order for a community to be a Community with a capital C there needed to be an embracing difference, interdependence, collective care, and belonging. In coming to understand what Community entails, I became less interested in giving BSU a definite definition; instead I wanted to move beyond those labels and think more about the importance of these tenets as we think more critically about Community. Community though can be different things for different people and so through my conversations with my participants, I aimed to understand more clearly how they defined community, gaining a more concrete understanding of the important facets of building Community through identity-based clubs such as BSU at Clark and more broadly PWIs.

6.1 It's about coming together

Family was one of the most influential factors in the way participants defined and thought of community. They felt that their family and by way of that, their background and culture influenced their ideas of community, particularly around the way they treat people and what they do. Quinn and Sandy are both two people who felt that their specific cultures influenced their ideas of community. Quinn shared how their identity as an East-African influences the way they view community, but how in developing relationships outside of their family, their ideas about community have grown and expanded.

I think like, community came from the idea of being there for each other, either that being from like the sense of your neighborhood, your street, to as, like, you know, basic as your family...to...I think at some point the transition to also finding community and your friends. I guess I kind of grew into like, the idea that like community is not only in families. Once I grew out of that like vision of things or seeing things like that, I kind of found community in friends and that transition was big because I felt like I was able to customize what kind of community I can be part of (Quinn Interview 2)

Sandy shared similar ideas about the influence of their Caribbean family on teaching them about what community looks like, specifically discussing community as a necessity. Similarly to Quinn though, in developing bonds outside of their family, they've become someone who is a believer in found family. They specifically stated, "So I've formed communities based off of like similar identities and also like similar values, motives, whatever. Like for me community is like people who want to be in a space together and uplift each other" (Sandy, Interview 1) Both Quinn and Sandy speak to the idea that community is not a fixed thing or idea, rather it is ever evolving and

changes with you. One's needs when they are younger and have less autonomy changes as they get older, including who one might include as part of their community. One thing for sure is that community is tied to something familial even if it is not necessarily one's family, one's community feels like some variant of that.

David on the other hand discussed how growing up low-income heavily influenced the way he thinks about community.

Growing up in like a low-income... household... where everyone pulls their weight, especially helping raise like 2 [siblings].... It's also around... my family practices and stuff;... just helping each other—like giving someone soup or if they they're sick or something and stuff and just having peoples backs no matter like their views and just kind of being kind towards each other. (David Interview 1)

David's ideas of community as influenced by his family connects to Sandy's. They both bring up that there is an expectation that a Community shows up for one another, cares for one another and uplifts one another. A big part of what I hear in what David and Sandy have described in what they learned from their families is that community prioritizes care and that there is a shared responsibility for all the individuals for who you consider part of your community.

That when you are part of a Community, you are not caught up in any sort of individualism, rather thinking about others whom you are in Community with. As described here, being part of a Community is being part of some sort of collective. These ideas speak back to ideas of interdependence, especially around the importance of creating a caring and trusting community that goes beyond the self. Quinn offered a definition of community that frames what I believe her, Sandy, and David are getting at.

I can imagine people who are kind but like willing to be able to hear people out and not just impose their beliefs on another. People who have different experiences in different life... Yeah. Have different life experiences, and who are sharing them with others too and help one another. And then, in this community, we would be again, like helping each other in different ways, mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, it could be being there for each other. Teaching each other. (Quinn Interview 1)

Quinn's definition surfaces the importance of the people part of a Community being able to help one another in ways that are physical and spiritual is important as well. These ideas only affirm that trust though important does not come easily and requires effort and intention. As noted by members, it could already begin to be built through the implementation and prioritization of dialogue in the space that opens members up to be open-minded and mindful and aware of the differences across individuals. What's important here is that members find interdependence important in their definitions of Community and are looking for that to exist within BSU as it is a big part of their own understanding of community that stems from their backgrounds.

6.2 “Just like a good ole’ hug”: Community and Care

I don't know. It's like a warm, warm, trusting and loving feeling. Like I just want to. Just like a good, good ole' hug. (Jalen, Interview 1)

Two members described community as feeling like a hug, which for me called attention to think through some idea of how Community feels and the physicality of it as well. . Participants believed that part of Community was loving one another as well. Not necessarily in the same way one loves their family or a partner, but loving people by allowing oneself to share space

with them, even if they aren't someone you consider a friend. Blake speaks on their own individual experiences within BSU not necessarily agreeing or liking everyone, but how genuine love has afforded them the ability to share a moment or experience, or some sort of life together, something significant for Blake:

You might not always agree with the person that you're sitting with, but as long as you can meet together and be in relationship and focus with one another, then you can make something really positive about that experience. I've had like folks in BSU who I don't necessarily get along with well or who I wouldn't want to be in common space with outside of the group. But I think that there's something really forgiving and human about just being able to gather with people that you wouldn't normally and think together with.

(Blake, Interview 1)

The love in which is being discussed here is not romantic or fluffy, but love that is challenging and hard work. As Blake sees it, love is an important part of community because it challenges you. When you are leading with love, it allows you to open yourself up to new people and for participants, this was important to them. Part of a space being open is that the place in which they consider their community doesn't isolate people. Rather a community is actively trying to bring people into the space. They are accepting of people and encourage everyone to come as they are. For Angel, they emphasized that one should feel welcomed in a Community, not further isolated. Angel frames it as follows:

And also like when you enter a space that should be your community, you should feel welcomed. And you should feel like this is a place where you can grow, at least for a

good community. That is cause it doesn't have to be a good community, but what I define as community, is something that should be loving and like a hug. (Angel Interview 1)

Here we see Angel as echoing Jalen's metaphor of a hug. The hug is about being welcomed in. Much like a family, you may have your differences, but with a family one is expected to feel cared for and loved and as though they can be their authentic self in a space. From this, there is some level of vulnerability that then allows you to grow. Building on that sense of acceptance and feelings of being welcomed, Quinn adds the dimensions of acceptance and being taken care of. They also express that there is a feeling component to it, perhaps not unlike hooks idea of homeplace:

Well, immediately I want to say feeling, the sense of feeling that I get when I am in a space that I feel accepted in, welcomed in UM, taken care of. Like, taking care of in. I think community makes you feel that way. (Quinn, Interview 2)

As mentioned prior, this acceptance comes from the embracing of differences, namely making room for diversity in gender, sexuality, ethnicity, country of origin, etc. Quinn for example had a lot of doubts about whether or not BSU was a space they could find themselves in as a third culture kid. In their personal lives, they felt split between their American identity and Ethiopian identity. It wasn't until their Junior year that they decided to join BSU. Prior to joining eboard, they spent a lot of time in a lot of white spaces and began to realize how important it was for them to be in spaces with majority Black people. They would find that they were happier leaving meetings and wanting to spend more time in the space, more time around people they could relate to. Jalen talked of what he noticed in BSU, speaking on the vibe of the space. He emphasized that for him BSU was not a space that necessarily as unwelcoming and upon entering a room, he noticed everyone talking, smiling, and in a good mood:

I just noticed like, the vibe is pretty chill in the room and just like, everybody's already conversating and just like having a good time. Smiles all around, nobody's really like upset. And it just feels like a safe space. For everybody, it already feels like a good community whenever I walk in. (Jalen Interview 1)

Jalen here adds a dimension that has not really been explored yet the idea of a safe place. Jalen feeling safe in the BSU space is not necessarily the same feeling shared by others, likely due to some of the identities he holds given his position as not only a cis-het man but a newer student on campus. In order for a place to be deemed as safe though, it needs to be safe for everyone. There are underlying tensions and unspoken experiences that may influence why one would not consider BSU to be a safe place, such as the inability for individuals to talk and discuss about the identities they hold that may be different. Jalen's feeling of safety comes at the expense of the people in the space who are unable to speak about these experiences. Though other aspects of care have been brought up as existing within BSU, it's sticky to say that BSU is also a safe space as it becomes evident that it may not be experienced that way by all.

There is something to be said about the effort BSU is making as an act of love and care as well. Sandy speaks about how being more intentional and reflecting as a group has allowed us to curate a space that people feel cared for. Continuing to put in effort and have consistent meetings, is in some way a labor of love and one that is challenging. BSU has experienced the challenges that comes with taking on this kind of labor and how the tensions that come about sometimes push you to grow. In considering Blake's words about how leading with love allows for deeper and perhaps meaningful connection, I think to our time at The Village. Majority of eboard time, despite check-in questions being built into agendas is firmly dedicated to planning

and logistics for upcoming events, meetings, etc. But the meeting at The Village turned into a impromptu, causal BSU meeting. Though the lack of general members perhaps our failed attempt at bringing in general members into a new space, it gave us the opportunity to be together with eboard informally. As mentioned, there are already several interpersonal tensions that existed and are further exacerbated because of larger structures in which we all need to be conscious of and unlearn. However, the opportunity for us to come together in this informal way and talk, really showcased a moment of us working through tension and awkwardness and it turned out to be something positive. Blake's words are salient to me in affirming the importance of love when it comes to Community is a place of love. When we lead with love, we allow for openness and understanding and care to also exist in the space. We are able to exhibit the acts of love that are hard such as calling people in and having tough conversations, because Community should be a place where people can be cared for in that way. Love isn't easy and in being intentional about building Community, it should not be easy either. At the end of the day however, it is these tensions that push you to grow.

6.3 It's something comfortable

In addition to what's been shared, comfort was another significant aspect of Community. Similarly to safety, ideas of comfort varied across participants, heavily influenced by their identities. David and Jalen spoke of finding comfort in people regardless of whether people shared similar identities to them. They have found and continue to find community with people outside of their racial, ethnic, and gender identity because of their other interests and involvements on and off campus. In the case of being in community with people who did not share many of the same identities as individuals, it was emphasized that there were specific characteristics that determined who they considered as part their community. David who

reflected on the multiple communities he is part of as someone who is involved in different spaces on campus (some of those not populated by a lot of students of color), often found himself surrounded by a lot of White people. These relationships are distinct to him because they don't happen intentionally and he doesn't look to them for all the same support as he does for his main group of friends who are predominantly people of color. To David, it is important to have all of these different groups and people as part of a wider community. Some of the people he can relate to on behalf of race and others he can relate to in terms of his interests. This makes up his extended community (David Interview 1). For Jalen, race wasn't an important factor in how he picked friends and made connections, rather he picked friends based on how he feels around them. He acknowledged that majority of his friends tended to be Black stating that that was just who he "fucked with," but at the end of the day, all that mattered to him was that you had a "cool vibe" (Jalen Interview 1). There was a bit of irony in both of their statements as they first stated that they didn't think the race of the people who became a part of their community mattered *too* much and yet, they found themselves connecting more deeply with other people or color or Black people or generally people who shared some sort of overlapping identity. It seems that in some way, whether or not these individuals are super intentional about who they spend their time around, the race of the people they choose to be around matters in terms of who is the closest to them.

For other participants, such as Angel, race in addition to the other identities they hold such as their sexuality and gender identity matter a bit more in how they chose friends and who they considered as part of their community. Because these identities were so prevalent in their lives, being with people who shared these identity markers allowed them to connect with people on a deeper level. They felt as though their prior experiences and relationships influenced what

kinds of people they naturally gravitated towards and what they were looking for out of the communities they formed at Clark. They wanted to just be comfortable and to have some level of familiarity. As a queer Black person, Angel felt like the intersections of these two identities greatly influenced who they keep company with. They explained that cis-het Black people, and especially cis-het Black men, were often homophobic or transphobic, things they don't condone and also personally are impacted by. As a result, a lot of the friendships they've made and the company they keep are other queer Black people. They didn't feel like queerness or Blackness was more important than the other, but that being able to understand what it is like being a marginalized person and respecting those experiences was:

I think being queer is not more important, but I think being able to sympathize with struggles period, is important. For example, my best friend is Bengali, but she's a Bengali queer person. We don't have the same struggles. But we have similar issues in the sense that she's still a person of color who is queer and neurodivergent. So it's just the, it's just the fact that it has to be like the multiple intersections of, what is it, intersectionality?

(Angel, Interview 1)

For Sandy the intersections of their identity as a Latinx queer person has similarly created some sort of struggle in who they find community in. They see the Latinx community and queer community sometimes as two opposite communities, often seeking relationships with queer BIPOC folks who can understand the nuances of what it is like to be marginalized because of both of these identities. It becomes apparent that a part of what makes someone feel comfortable around people is rooted in feeling affirmed or accepted. Their ideas of Community are closely related to Griffin and Turner (2021) ideas of Black Livingness— in order for them to feel a sense of belonging, their Community needs to be a space that truly accepts them for who they are,

affirming their existence and presence. In addition to their racial identity being affirmed in the space, Sandy and Angel want to feel as though all aspects of their identities are being welcomed, represented, and respected. When there is space for them to exist in a space holistically and not in parts, they then feel as though they belong. Jalen's ideas of comfort and belonging were greatly attached to feeling, specifically, in coming to Clark, he is looking to sort of feel the same as he does with friends at home. He spoke on the relationships with his friends back home and how that influences the way he views community:

I don't know. Whenever I'm back home with my friends, I can just, like, sit down and actually just like, say whatever, whatever comes to mind. Say whatever I'm feeling and like, I'm not going to be judged for whatever I say. Like they're going to. They'll always just kind of be there and understand and then like. If I really needed it, they'd definitely give me a hug. So that's just kind of how I'd feel about it like. That's kind of what I. What I'm looking for on campus, I guess just like...people to talk about how I'm feeling and like. Maybe even seek for advice just like. Just that trusting feeling a secure feeling.

(Jalen Interview 1)

Jalen seems to think that ideas about security are related to feeling a sense of belonging. In feeling secure, he emphasizes that among his friends or within his community, he has the ability to say or be who he is without judgment and that he can find comfort. In order for him to feel this sense of security, he needs to be able to trust the people in the space as well. As previously identified, creating caring and trusting communities is continual work required by the people in the space Noddings (2005). Here, this looks like Jalen pointing out that when he is around this particular group of friends, he feels affirmed in his existence, in their connection. They make space for him and welcome him in a way that allows him to feel as though he belongs. Belonging

is tied with security in that sense as when one feels secure, they feel as though they belong. David shared similar thoughts to Jalen, emphasizing that community isn't something you can necessarily force yourself into or to have. Over time you are able to build trust in order for one to really feel that sense of security. Once you have that trust, you then know that you belong and then that you are a part of a Community (David Interview 1). They both really emphasize that this kind of work requires one to be intentional and aware— and it also takes time. Some part of doing the work to foster a Community that is caring and trusting requires being open to challenges and risks. Though we all look for places in which we feel as though we belong, what it means to belong does look different across different people and taking into account different identities. For some people they prefer to be only with people who understand their experiences because there is little to no room for harm. This speaks to why some Black students choose to only be in spaces they know are occupied by other Black students. For others, they may feel comfortable taking more or less of a risk, finding community in people who are different from them but share similar values or interests. All relationships serve different purposes and so do all communities. One is allowed to not share parts of themselves with people who they don't trust or feel safe around. I think regardless of who is in the space and what their identities are, to belong is to have your existence affirmed. Community then is about trust, risk-taking, and being open and fostering belonging.

6.4 The barriers we erect to build to community

The reflections offered by the participants brought attention to some of the barriers there are to building community on an interpersonal and structural level. Due to Clark's Black Student Union's status as a student club and organization, we technically serve the entire student body, not just Black students. This means all of our programming and events are open to all students

regardless of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. Additionally, there is no affinity space on campus dedicated to just Black students. In the past there have been non-Black students on our eboard and even running the club. Quinn pointed out that she didn't really mind when BSU has had non-Black people, but could imagine the way others might feel.

I don't know. Like, OK, yes, there are people who come to our BSU meetings who aren't Black, and that's I don't honestly, personally, like, I don't mind that. But like I... can imagine if that might be a bit odd... for other people, for many different reasons. (Quinn Interview 1)

Participants not only expressed that non-Black students being part of BSU was “odd”, but that it was harmful for them. Blake reflected on how the presence of non-Black people in the club has made them feel like BSU was not for them and as though they weren't welcomed in the space. They spoke on their personal experience in the past and reflected on the impact of their presence in the space:

We have had non-black people in that space who have been a little harmful, like not been exactly respectful of Blackness at Clark. Like, if we want to have an all Black event, why is the only non-Black person being like oh, I feel like we should do that, you know? So I think that it's important to be in tune with how you carry yourself in an all Black space, but also to know that it is welcoming and that people do have a voice there, even if you are not 100% Black or you might not act in like the monolithic Blackness. (Blake Interview 1)

Clark's non-discrimination policy is one of the biggest challenges we continue to face as we attempt to create a mini-HBCU within this PWI. Big events or small, there is a desire across

eboard members to have certain events and meetings dedicated *just* for Black people. There is the idea that if this were the case, people would feel more comfortable with one another and expressing themselves. Currently as it stands, the ability for non-Black people to come into the space and then take up space does not necessarily make BSU feel like a Community that is solely for Black students at Clark. It isn't easy for an affinity space to be created on campus either, and currently there are only three designated Clark affiliated affinity space: the Men of Color Alliance (MOCA), Sisters in Stride (SIS), and the Queer and Trans Student of Color group (QTSOC). These groups are a diverse mix of students of color from all backgrounds. As of now, there is only one affinity space that is designated for a specific group Latines Out Loud, for Latine students on campus. David spoke on their efforts to try and build an affinity space for bi-racial students. He discussed how when he brought it up with staff on campus, he was told the space was unnecessary because there are spaces already available for him to explore that identity specifically QTSOC. David emphasized how the lack of space for him to explore and understand what it is like as a bi-racial Black person has left him unable to embrace that side of himself even though he knows people are perceiving him in that way (David Interview 2). Even designated spaces such as the Affinity House on campus has limitations placed on it. Though the original idea by students was for it to be a place where students of color (at the very least) can live comfortably separate from White people, the housing is open for all students of marginalized backgrounds and also includes those who are committed to fighting for racial inequity. All of these things are expressed via a online form in which students apply for the housing. Clark's unwillingness to allow for a Black affinity space on campus speaks to its lack of care for Black students on campus. Instead, they see the grouping together of all students of color into one affinity space as enough to allow students to explore and understand their identity and their

experiences. It is evident that Clark's policies around who is allowed to create spaces extends beyond just BSU but heavily impacts the club's ability to truly create a space that is for Black people in some ways.

Some of these feelings of isolation as noted before are beyond the structural limits of the institution. Sometimes *we* build the barriers to connection because of things on an interpersonal level, that is often still connected to the larger system we all tethered to. Angel had already touched on this, expressing how sometimes it felt people's personalities clash or their beliefs don't align which prevents them from truly connecting with each other. Because of their own personal experiences with BSU eboard members as well as Black people they have interacted with who are general members, they felt like BSU wasn't necessarily their community. They discussed how though they had friends who attended and were part of eboard, there were still some people who are part of the space who have either caused harm to them or their friends, or who they felt were not there because they truly care because of their actions. Angel shared that they still saw BSU as a Community but not one that they would necessarily call their own because of all of these interpersonal factors:

There's interpersonal beef that will never be resolved because of the diverse people that we bring. Not everyone's going to get along within a bigger community. And also, some people don't even want to be a part of the community. They're just there because they're Black and can't stand white people or other people of color, but it doesn't mean that they should tear other Black people down while they're doing it. (Angel Interview 1)

Angel seems to be getting at a very real sentiment which is 1) sometimes you're just not going to get along with everyone and 2) not all skin folk are kin folks. When working in a club structure in which not everyone might think the exact same way, it is a very real possibility that certain

personalities will not be compatible. Additionally, not everyone cares about the same thing even if they are the same race and are possibly having similar experiences. It is okay for not everyone to want community or to build it necessarily, but that doesn't negate the influence it has on making BSU into a greater community. Angel touched on some of their thoughts regarding their personal friendship and how they have come to be on campus:

A couple of my friends have felt frustrations with certain other Black people because assumptions were made about who they are as people when they could have been friends. It's just the fact that there are these assumptions that come with certain identities and I feel like a lot of black people might be pigeonholed into those identities. By their peers, whether that be friends and you're expected to be this way, or people that perceive you and expect you to be that way. And I think that also is a driving factor and why is a lot of not tension, but distance from other black people on campus (Angel Interview 2)

Angel's experiences reminded me of points raised earlier by Sandy. Because BSU is thought of as a predominantly African American place, heavily influenced by African American cultural norms, it leaves out space for experiences that fall outside of that, outside of what our society has deemed the singular Black experience. Thus, when one falls outside of the norm rather than being embraced, they are only further ostracized because of their different experiences. Sandy agreed that on an interpersonal level, the different identities of people does cause tension in our ability to sometimes connect. They saw this dynamic playing out beyond just differences in ethnicities:

This is true with any community that there's always going to be sub communities within those communities. Because we are in a PWI and there's so many people coming from all different walks of life. There's often the [question] are you black enough? The factor, like

whether it's culturally or like what you're mixed with?..But like there's this like, oh, if you don't know this thing, then you're not black...But yeah, there's like this separation in terms of like, what, what blackness even means and also like what kind of how everyone else defines community. Because like, because there's so many different, like walks of life that people are coming from like. There's like southern black people and northern black people, whether you're born West Coast or East Coast, like your definitions of community, are gonna be so different based off of the kind of community you've been exposed to...I don't know. There's like, the there's more of like a gender and class divide among black people as well. Like ohh. Like. Black black men on campus tend to group together and black women on campus tend to group together. Or like are you? Were you born rich or were you born poor? And like that's true of any community, but specifically in the black community. And since there's so few of us, it's become so obvious, especially in space. It's like in BSU because of like, then we're just a group of black people who don't have the same definitions of community, and it often causes some tension. (Sandy Interview 2)

All of these tensions point to dynamics that exist outside of just Black people, outside of BSU and have to do with the racist, capitalist society we all live in and how we have been socialized. However it is not beyond ourselves to unlearn these patterns, to be more open-minded. Once again, we are reminded about the importance of embracing the differences. Both Sandy and Angel seem to be hoping for a BSU that can one day better make space for these differences. Where despite their differences, people can still be together, support one another, care for one another. A Community that is diverse in people and thought, but still is respectful of people's identities and backgrounds. When I asked Rebecca about this, she pointed out that it has to come

from all of us together, but also internally has to come from someone to want to be more open-minded:

I feel like power comes from us connecting more and I feel like having a barrier to that, negates the whole purpose of these like clubs, because we're supposed to, like, celebrate both our similarities and our differences. But I don't think..But [our differences] isn't also necessarily like a negative thing, because I don't think it's entirely anyone's fault. You know, like communication and like that. That goes both ways. So I know there's, like, so much we can do to, like help people like come to, like, different places. But like, I feel like you can't at the end of the day, you literally like. You can't force someone, they have to be wanting and willing. (Rebecca Interview 2)

Rebecca's ideas raised an interesting question around labor once again. Talking about the work that is required in order to foster greater community in which there is space for all these things made me question if it the responsibilities of students of color, specifically Black students, to curate their experience to meet their needs? And how can we curate this when there are so many limits and barriers from the institutions on how we throw events and spend our money? Interpersonal barriers will in some ways always exist and we should not allow them to prevent the larger goal of fostering a greater Community even if it is that people don't sometimes get along or agree with the initiative. But barriers that are erected outside of that make it more difficult and challenging. Later in our interview, Angel connected the tensions between Black people on campus back to the pressures of the institutions on cultural clubs. As students of color at a PWI, it can sometimes feel like we are constantly being asked to perform and curate our experiences through student clubs and organizations in order for us to enjoy our time. Or when

we do throw events, it feels like a marketing scheme for the university. All of these pressures have made building genuine community through clubs a lot harder:

Because clubs are too much work, I don't think that the club can do that space justice. I think it can allow for those connections to be made and then flourish outside of the club, but I think the pressure of having a club and to perform is too much, especially for multicultural groups. And I've talked to some of the leaders of other multicultural groups and they're they're tired, like it's draining to have to, like, generate events to catered to a certain diaspora, and there was even tensions with other multicultural groups of certain aspects of other diasporas not being represented, especially...Afro Latinas having issues with the other Hispanic groups and it just being a mess. (Angel, Interview 2)

Angel brings up a good point that these tensions aren't separate entities and are interrelated and sometimes work together to create such a strong barrier against building Community.

Institutional pressure can lead to interpersonal tensions. Both Sandy expressed that despite all of these tensions and challenges that come about on the institutional and interpersonal level, it is possible for BSU to become the community we all seem to be searching for because we continue to try. We try to uplift our community, we try to center our experience, and we continue to do this work because some parts of all of us do care for one another. Sandy sees the potential in BSU because our intention to create more intimate meeting space has allowed some sort of Community to begin to be built. They highlighted that it's possible that we're all still trying to figure things out as well:

I firmly believe that if you like love something, then you would want to grow. And I do think it's the community and I do think it has the foundations of a community we have like especially like our E board. We have Community agreements at the beginning of the

semester and we have goals and like we as black people. We reflect on that we're like, what does it mean? What does the BSU mean and what do we want it to mean and like, how do we bring? How would we bring community to the campus? Like we do a lot of work where we're, like, uplifting black artists and we're doing a lot of like, I think it's a lot of identity centered work that we do that brings people in and we also celebrate Blackness rather than just talking about that stuff. So I think that's why it feels a lot more like a community. (Sandy Interview 1)

Despite the barriers, the efforts and intention to continue to try within and outside of the system to create the kind of Community we all deserve is an act of resistance in and of itself.

Community isn't something that is fixed; it requires this constant work as pointed out here and elsewhere. As an eboard working within a bureaucratic system, we have already started to build the foundations needed to foster that greater Community on campus through setting our intentions and goals and constantly engaging in reflection. Quinn added that they too see the potential in BSU becoming the community that they imagine for themselves as there are already aspects present. They too emphasized the importance of continuing to do the work. Returning to Rebecca's point, their own willingness to learn to be open and knowing that others in the space feel similarly is a big reason for why they feel like BSU can be that Capital C Community. It really just takes that work.

The insight participants provided into the way they thought about and defined community and even the BSU space itself, gave me a new way to understand what community means for Black students and to think more critically about what kind of community BSU is and what makes a community a Community. Community isn't something that can be reduced down to a checklist and there is a lot of nuance in what people are looking for in a community. But

Community, with a capital C, requires the space being intentional about the work they are doing. Community asks the community itself to constantly be engaging in some level of reflection, requiring individuals to not only be looking internally but externally about the people in the space. A Community needs to have space for the embracing of differences. Love, care, and appreciation are all important feelings and acts that are present in a Community as well as challenges and risk. Through engaging in these acts, through intentional talk and thus vulnerability, it is believed that Community brings about feelings of comfort and belonging. Participants have emphasized that they as well as others need to feel respected, as though who they are and their identities are affirmed in a space. People need to be able to trust one another and talk to one another. A Community should not box anyone in or limit anyone to certain standards. Instead it's about the effort people are making and intentionality. Community exist when the community is trying and making an effort. BSU is a Community because it tries to do these things, and it needs to continue to make improvements to bring in some of what is missing that could better foster a sense of greater community at Clark.

7. Where does this leave us?

7.1 Centering Intention

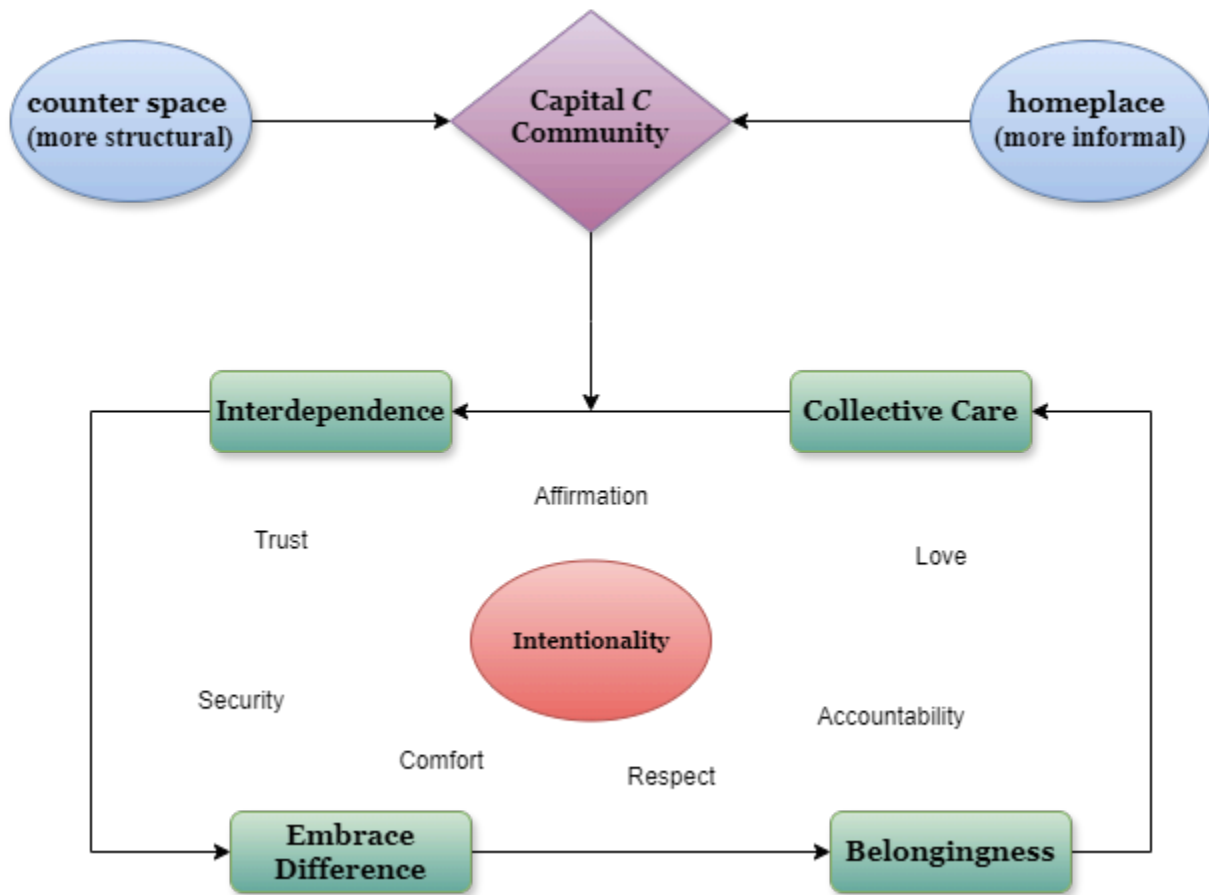
Overall my goal in capturing this praxis project was to document the work of BSU specifically our efforts as we try to be more intentional in fostering greater community for Black students on campus and to really understand how different Black students in BSU think about community. As a collective, BSU decided that in trying to foster greater community, we needed to make our meeting spaces more accessible to general members, through the hosting of more general member meetings. We were able to do this by changing the structure of BSU where

bi-monthly there would be some sort of general member meeting or event that focused less on planning and logistics and were centering fun and enjoyment. Compared to last year, BSU hosted over 10 general meetings/events that brought in general members more intentionally and was expressed by participants as allowing changing the way BSU felt and was experienced by members, specifically that the new structure allowed all BSU members to have more fun.

When I first came into this project as a researcher, I thought I would be trying to determine what kind of community BSU is, especially when engaging with the literature regarding counter spaces and homeplace. I thought of community as something definite, rather than considering it to be more nuanced and fluid. Engaging with the goal of fostering more community as an eboard member and as a researcher has allowed me to realize that defining a community is much more complex. Through my conversations with my participants, I was able to extract some of the important tenets to Community, getting a sense of the feelings involved with Community (care, comfort, love) and the barriers that exist in fostering community through a club structure (interpersonal relationships and institutional barriers).

The reflections I have engaged in and offered have shifted me away from trying to definitively decide whether or not BSU is a Community. As mentioned, it became important to me to look at the things that make a community a capital C Community and from my findings it is evident that effort and intention is an important part of Community as well. This work has highlighted some of the areas of improvement in which Clark's BSU can be more intentional in meetings to make space for everyone, such as creating more room for conversation in order to

have real embracing of differences.



The diagram above works to make sense of how my conceptual frameworks around Community has expanded and grown as I have gone through this project. While homeplace and counter spaces are still important frameworks in helping me understand the aspects of community that are important, they are less central in making sense of BSU and the kind of work members engaged in this past academic year. As discussed, intention is more central to my understanding of capital C Community. Many feelings were brought up in connection to these tenets, indicators of how Community should feel. It was emphasized in discussion with my participants that in thinking about embracing difference and belonging, people needed to feel respected, comfortable, and affirmed. Ideas of security were also connected to belonging and discussed as something that was connected to trust. When you are able to trust someone, you are

able to feel a sense of security in your identity (recalling affirmation of existence and identities). Additionally, connected to Collective Care and Interdependence, it was emphasized that people wanted or needed to feel loved in the space, thinking about love beyond the fluffy feelings but as an act of holding people accountable. Overall, in thinking about capital C Community and BSU, intention is really important part of BSU's ability to foster that greater Community through it's space.

7.2 The Need for Fun: Theoretical Implications

Majority of my frameworks focused a lot on what one feels. Mainly I focused on feelings and actions that touched on how to ensure people belong in a space. The initial frameworks allowed me specific lenses in which to look into how Community was working within BSU. Something I did not consider though that came up several times was the need for fun and enjoyment in building community. Participants noted how the increase in accessibility of BSU meetings and the opportunity to not *only* engage in meetings by way of logistics and planning, made them feel more relaxed and they found themselves having more fun. Additionally, the content of our meetings tended to focus on engaging members through fun activities such as game nights, movie nights, and karaoke. However, these meeting were created without the intention of fostering the feelings of love, care, belonging, etc as important parts of Community.

It is important to not disregard the importance of fun and enjoyment in the space in addition to fostering feelings of love and care. From the findings, it is evident that fun is another way in which people can connect with one another even if it the connection seems surface level. In thinking about the discrimination Black students are experiencing on college campuses both overtly and covertly, the need for fun is an important reminder that Black joy is necessary and

radical. Additionally, it calls back to Griffin & Turner (2021) ideas about Black Livingness—another affirmation of Black life is through joy. It is another way of saying that Black people are here and matter. In the past couple of years, there has been an overall push for Black joy in the media as instances of brutality and harm flood our social media timelines and the news. It is important to center Black joy in the spaces and communities we are part of, especially when thinking about ways in which we can connect. The reason why fun became such a prominent actor in allowing the space to feel differently is because of its power. The absence of Black joy only reaffirms the narrative of Black life and culture not having any sort of positive attributes. This paper highlights through the participants testimonies just how making room for fun through identity-based student clubs and organizations in predominantly white higher education spaces is radical and transformative for the way people feel in a space. By recentering Black joy in these spaces, through laughter, music, dance, games, etc., we are reaffirming the importance of Black life and Black community.

7.3 Getting out of my Head: Practical Implications

My role as a researcher and leader in the space was especially challenging given I had to balance not only just my duties as President of BSU, but continue to be conscious of what I and my participants were saying or doing in the space that could be potential moments to note and later analyze. I wrestled a lot with how I was showing up in the space that allowed my research needs to be met and the needs of the club to still be met. I was naive about the ease of engaging in this kind of work collectively with BSU, feeling as though the united goal would ease the challenges I faced as a club leader. However, engaging in this kind of work in some way emphasized the challenges that seemed to already exist within the club, becoming points of reflections for not only me but my participants as well.

There were several moments when participants brought up things presently happening in BSU that could have been addressed or implemented but I found myself hesitant to make these changes because I didn't want people to feel as though I was dictating the every move of the club or that people felt as though I was trying to manipulate them to ensure a positive outcome. I remember David in particular offered some reflections of how to bring in connection into BSU eboard meetings that I had considered implementing into our meeting structure, but did not immediately bring up into the space. It wasn't until several of my participants brought up the need for dialogue, that I found myself making the executive decision to facilitate a dialogue during the last general member meeting I observed. In my approach, I was transparent about the ask for this kind of meeting from participants and how this change was a response to what the people I was in conversation with were saying. To my surprise, I was not met with any animosity. I think had I considered some of the ways in which the reflections of my participants could have been brought into the space earlier, there could have been changes that they could've later reflected on. In the future, BSU members should find ways to implement dialogue based meetings throughout the semester that allow people to discuss about their experiences, identities, and differences as Black people at (and beyond) Clark.

Another area in which I faced a lot of issues was with recruitment. It was hard for me to get a diverse group of participants resulting in a lot of my participants sharing similar identities and ideas. Despite majority of my participants sharing similar identities, I was sure to make this apparent in my analysis of my data connecting the similarities and threads across participants. Though, I wanted to gain the perspectives of the cis-men part of BSU because I theorized that ideas of community differed across different gender identities. Reflecting on my primary use of individual interviews, I would engage in different methods of collecting data. Though individual

interviews were effective in getting personal insights and anecdotes, I think it would have been effective for members to listen to one another's perspective in conversation with one another. It would have been good for general and eboard members to come together to talk on their unique experiences given the kind of membership they hold in addition to eboard members then feeling empowered to bring these ideas back into our planning meetings.

7.4 Further Exploring

Within this project there were limitations that were erected that are potential areas for exploration. Because this research existed within the context of a club, there is opportunity to expand on the perspectives of community for Black students outside of BSU. At Clark, BSU is not the only club in which Black people/people of the African diaspora are represented. Including clubs like the Caribbean African Student Association would provide points for deeper analysis especially around ideas of identity and community and who one chooses to invest their time in. As previously mentioned, there was a lack of male voices represented in this research though I know that there are spaces in which men conglomerate. Gaining insights on the way Black men part of groups such as the Men of Color Association think about and define community is another area in which this research could be expanded on.

7.5 Closing

Engaging in this research is essential in understanding the importance of identity-based clubs in higher education and the importance in investing in community-based work within these spaces. They reaffirm the need to ensure that Black students on campus feel as though they belong on campus and can find space in which they can explore their identities and connect with their peers academically and even socially. Over the past three years, I have put in a lot of

emotional, mental, and physical labor in shifting and shaping BSU into the kind of space that benefits the most people including myself. BSU is a space I deeply care about and appreciate. It is the sole reason why I feel like I was able to manage the past couple of years here. I recognize and see its values every week when I see other Black students showing up in our space and enjoying themselves.

Just this past week as I write this in mid-April, our general member meeting was a Family Feud game where eboard and general members were mixed up within families. Though the first few minutes were awkward, by the end of the game, people were hyped up and engaging in healthy competition. It filled me with joy to see a side of BSU I never imagined existing. When I first got here my Sundays were filled with Black people from all different places in Clark, coming together to plan out the next event, the next event, the next event. And though this work was essential and important, there is so much value in the new structure of the club. Now every other week, Black people from all different places in Clark come together to enjoy their time for just an hour on a Sunday evening.

Despite the hardships I experienced on an interpersonal and external level and the challenges I faced as a leader in the club and a researcher in this project, I still found it important to highlight the work we are doing in BSU even if it is messy and imperfect. Engaging in this kind of scholarship and highlighting the voices of Black people and Black life is so important in reshaping that dominant narrative and reframing our understanding of Black student life in higher education.

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