

Embracing Diversity via an Unusual Sister Circle: The Pursuit of an Undergraduate Social Work Degree at an HBCU

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Abstract: The pursuit of a college degree is often accompanied by opportunities to experience stress, and institutions of higher education are challenged to address the various personal or mental health barriers to degree completion. HBCUs have often been described as supportive of student needs, but does that include white students who become minorities for the first time? The extant literature indicates that white students report concerns of being discriminated against and often feel isolated, leading to an important question: What supports might mediate these feelings for white students? Historically, “sista circles” were the domain of African American/Black women, but five BSW students expanded their personal support systems to be more inclusive via age, race, and privilege. The development and value of this unusual “sister circle”—designated as such to reflect its mixed-race composition while paying homage to the original “sista circle”—is presented in the students’ own words. Implications for future programming and services are explored.

Keywords: HBCU, sister circles, academia, social work

As an assistant professor of social work, I (Val) teach graduate social work classes and also fulfill duties as the MSW admissions director. Due to an onboarding delay in the hiring of a new undergraduate social work faculty member, I was asked to teach an undergraduate social work course for several weeks until the onboarding process could be completed. During the first class, I mentioned an article co-authored by two MSW students regarding the mental health concerns of social work, psychology, and nursing students. I encouraged the students to read the article since it was applicable to their course of study. I overheard one student say that it might be interesting to write an article, but she was sure it would take a lot of time and that she probably wouldn’t be able to write well enough. I advised that student that it was not that difficult as I was always available to help students through the process.

I viewed co-authoring with students as a natural step in their professional development but never considered writing with undergraduates. Nor did I expect anyone overhearing the conversation to volunteer to co-author an article. A few days later, one of my BSW students sent an email indicating she wanted to speak with me about the possibility of co-authoring. A few hours later I received a follow-up email from that student indicating that another student was also interested. I was now intrigued and scheduled a meeting for the following week. Five minutes before the scheduled meeting, the number of students interested in co-authoring had snowballed from two to five.

During our first meeting, the students discussed possible topics that would interest everyone but realized there were a number of differences such as race, age, marital status, privilege, socioeconomic status, motherhood, and different research interests. They had one obvious status

in common: they were all female, undergraduate social work majors in my class. As they continued to talk about their experiences in the social work program, an idea for the article began to surface. The students talked about how they first met in an evening social work class and how they would call each other for information, support, and ideas. If one was experiencing a low day, the others would do something to encourage that person to maintain their focus. As they spoke and laughed about some of their adventures, I realized that they had unknowingly formed a support group despite their differences: Chajurnee, a 21-year-old, single, Black female; Dione, a 54-year-old, married, Black mother of four adult children; Amber, a 32-year-old, married, pregnant, White female; Felicia, a 42-year-old, married, Black mother of three; and Devan, a 32-year-old, married, White mother of two minor children. This group represented a variety of diverse statuses. The support and sense of belonging these women displayed reminded me of my entry into academia five years earlier. As a Black female junior professor, I became a member of an organically developed “sista circle.”

Several common themes emerged from the students’ discussion, and it was at this point that I suggested that the students write about their unusual support group that I referred to as a “sister circle.”⁵ This group represented so much of what social work promotes: diversity, equity, and inclusion. The development of this truly diverse network sparked my curiosity as to how their unusual (mixed race, age, socioeconomic status, privilege) support system evolved. My fascination with what I identified as an “unusual” sister circle was partially influenced by two recruiting visits to two different primarily white institutions (PWIs). As I presented information about my university’s MSW program, the two administrators seemed concerned about referring White students to an HBCU. It honestly seemed as if they did not expect White students to be welcomed there. I examined the literature on student recruitment, engagement, social support, and retention to enhance my understanding of this phenomenon.

Race in Higher Education

For more than 150 years, Black women have taken advantage of “sista circles,” an experience grounded in the Afrocentric perspective. The sista circle provides support and understanding of gender- and race-related challenges and fosters a sense of belonging for women of African descent. In addition to providing support, sista circles work to dismantle racist and oppressive systems, allowing Black women to make meaning of their experiences (Allen, 2019). Sista circles began as “support groups built upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and a sense of community” (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011, p. 266), offering a safe place to manage daily assaults on Black women’s mental health (Allen, 2019). Sista circles operate from an empowering position where Black women and girls work together to gain the control to heal themselves as they shed feelings of isolation and aggression.

The literature suggests that White students attending HBCUs do not always feel welcome, accepted, or safe (e.g., Arroyo et al., 2016; Donald, 2010; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009), and

⁵ When referring to this mixed-race student support group, the spelling “sister circle” is used. I intend this to convey its likeness to (but not exact mirroring of) the sista circle concept, respecting the original’s genesis as purposeful solidarity among groups of Black women in response to the specific marginalization experienced at the intersection (Crenshaw, 1991) of Blackness and femaleness (Allen, 2019).

Black students often feel unwelcomed or marginalized at PWIs (Alang, 2019; McGee & Stovall, 2015). If students do not feel welcomed, wanted or valued due to their race, age, gender or other characteristics, this could enhance their level of distress and ultimately impact retention. In the quest to recruit new students, institutions of higher education would be wise to consider services and programs to enhance diverse students' sense of belonging. Supportive social relationships enhance opportunities for collegiate success and retention (Arroyo et al., 2016; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Donald, 2010; Tinto, 1993). Supportive social relationships reflect social work principles that recognize the importance of human relationships.

The topics of race and privilege are frequently discussed in social work classes, providing opportunities for White students to experience White racial consciousness (WRC) and hypervisibility (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). As temporary minorities, White students might be reluctant to voice their opinions on certain topics that could lead to controversy and heightened emotions. The extant literature suggests that White students attending HBCUs may also lack a sense of connection to their university and may struggle with social exclusion (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Hall & Closson, 2005). In addition to race, age may present as a challenge for nontraditional students who feel “out of place” matriculating with millennials, potentially providing another opportunity for social isolation. Thus, being White and a nontraditional student could exacerbate opportunities for social isolation. To provide the support that White, nontraditional, and otherwise isolated collegians might need when attending an HBCU, something similar to a “sista circle” could prove beneficial—and, in this case, did.

The Unusual Sister Circle

At some point during my students' pursuit of their BSW, race ceased to function as a barrier to inclusion and acceptance and status as a nontraditional student took center stage for four of the five members. I (Val) don't think my students recognized the novelty of their “sister circle,” but they agreed to write about their experiences and the unique nature of the support provided. This treatise is not about the experiences of two White female students at an HBCU but more about the bond that developed between a group of women with similar concerns, experiences, and needs—and is presented in their own words.

The Dynamics of Identity, Bias, and Privilege in Pursuit of a BSW: Amber's Story

As a non-traditional student working on my second career, it took me a while to decide what I wanted to do after the military. Fortunately, during my time in the Navy, I was exposed to the social work profession and, following my research, I quickly fell in love with the values and ethics. Once I decided on a career in social work, I didn't look back. Knowing that my contract was soon ending, I started searching for local BSW programs. My main qualifications for what school I would attend revolved around price, proximity, and whether they had an available graduate program that I could transition into after obtaining my BSW. When I discovered Norfolk State University's (NSU) School of Social Work, I was thrilled. Although the commute would be a commitment to traffic, the school offered a BSW, MSW, and even doctoral program. Furthermore, NSU is one of the most economically attainable schools in the area, which meant I would be able to sign up for payment plans, avoiding student loans after my annual tuition

assistance allotment was reached. However, I must admit I did have some reservations about attending an HBCU.

Since I am White, I was not confident that I would be accepted or welcomed. I feared that I would not fit in or that my peers would resent my presence. For the first time in my life, I had to consider what I would feel like as a minority, and that fact terrified me. These concerns really encouraged me to digest and evaluate my privilege, biases, and fears. Ultimately, when I was accepted, I knew NSU was the school for me. Looking back now, I am so grateful that I am allowed this opportunity to obtain my undergraduate social work degree at an HBCU because the ongoing conversations we have regarding race, privilege, and oppression are more meaningful when I get to hear accounts from my peers who have such diverse backgrounds from my own. I think the quality of my social work education would have been limited if I had attended a primarily White school.

As a White woman, it is my duty and responsibility to recognize and address my privilege. In the past when I discussed White privilege with White friends and family, I have been met with resistance. Often, the resistance I meet is due to a misunderstanding of the idea of “White privilege,” which is mistaken for power, prestige, and wealth. When people from lower socioeconomic statuses or the working class hear that they benefit from privilege, they wonder how someone who is struggling can be privileged. Thanks to my experience, I know better today what privilege really signifies. It doesn’t mean that my life was necessarily easy or without struggle, but it does mean that my skin tone has afforded me protections and advantages. I have never been targeted by the law, store owners don’t look at me suspiciously while I’m shopping, and I have never once feared for my life when I saw the police in my neighborhood. My skin shields me from those hazards.

My identity, however, is so much more than my race. I am also a woman who served in the Navy. I have experienced toxic environments, especially while deployed, where it was culturally accepted for women to be harassed, dismissed, and discriminated against. I witnessed mental health issues being mocked, peers being called weak for expressing suicidal ideations, and women being sexually assaulted. These issues are by no means unique to military culture, but my exposure to them as normal occurrences inspired me to get the education I need to make meaningful changes in the future. I aspire to utilize my education to address these issues.

I believe the social work education I am receiving is forcing me to reflect on my privilege and biases and will help to make me a better social worker in the future. Attending an HBCU has allowed me to experience what it feels like to be a minority, pushing me outside of my comfort zone and giving me an opportunity to embrace diversity fully. This education is exposing me to oppression, systemic racism, and social injustices that will enable me to empathize with oppressed clients and communities, meet them where they are, and truly hear them and their situations to produce results. I do, however, acknowledge that I will have an ongoing uphill battle to recognize and dismantle my own biases so that they do not become a barrier to services. Knowing that I want to work with military populations, I believe my Navy experience provides a valuable foundation on which to build.

My greatest challenge in pursuing my BSW is prioritizing my education while not neglecting other important areas in my life. Balance has been difficult to maintain. Throughout my time at NSU, I have juggled being a full-time student and active-duty Navy; I have undergone ankle surgery which prevented me from walking and driving for months; and I pursued fertility treatments and am currently experiencing my first pregnancy. Next semester I am anticipating delivering my baby and adjusting to motherhood—while simultaneously beginning my senior year and my field practicum. Life is always presenting hurdles and barriers, but with support, I have proven time and again that I am capable of success.

The biggest resource that I have been able to tap into is my personal resilience and determination to start a new career in social work. Pursuing a career shift in my thirties has at times been scary and difficult, but I am confident this is the right path. An additional resource I have tapped into has been my support systems. My husband, who has never complained that I must write yet another paper over the weekend or who willingly gave up his evenings after work to drive his post-operative wife to school, has been a constant source of encouragement. When I have struggled or lost focus, he has always been the first to remind me of my resilience and my purpose.

After my husband, a second source of this reminder has emerged: I have been embraced in a sister circle which naturally formed while taking night classes and consists of a diverse group of women who provide support, advice, and information whenever needed. We have curated a symbiotic relationship which transcends collegueship and friendship into the territory of camaraderie which I have never before experienced outside of the Navy. I have leaned on this network of goal-oriented women when facing hardships that affected my attendance, and understanding of a topic, and during bouts of self-doubt when I needed reassurance. In return, I have offered the same support: a shoulder or an ear when needed, a second set of eyes on upcoming papers, or an explanation of topics covered in class. This support group has provided me with a built-in network of friends with whom I have the honor to learn and matriculate side-by-side, providing me with the confidence that we will all be successful social workers one day.

Reflecting on my BSW journey thus far has provided me with valuable insights into what has contributed to my success in my education. The most important action students can take is to surround themselves with a network of supportive friends and family who will encourage them to keep pushing forward. School requires focus and countless hours of studying, researching, and writing, so being around people who understand and can push you forward is invaluable. Also, it is critical to put yourself out there and share your perspectives within the classroom setting. Speaking up during class discussions adds value to the material, encourages further classroom participation, making learning fun, and reinforces the curriculum. When you share your perspective and hear others, it also provides an opportunity to form peer support groups.

Overcoming Self-Doubt: Dione's Story

Growing up, I always dreamed that I would be a teacher or a nurse. I never thought about being a social worker. I didn't even know what a social worker was. After having my children, being a single mom, and living off the welfare system, I was determined that I had to provide a better

living for my family. At the time all I had was a high school education, but I knew if I wanted to make a difference in our lives, I had to attend college. I looked around for schools that would fast-track my pursuit of financial stability. Within that search, I found a college that I could complete and receive a degree in 18 months. I attended day classes and while two of my children were off to school, my other two children and I went to college. It was hard balancing school and four children, but I had to stay strong and continue to fight for our lives. Eighteen long months passed by, and I had achieved my goal. I graduated with honors with an associate degree in medical assisting. I worked in a doctor's office for a few years, but it did not provide the financial stability needed. I eventually obtained a position as a mental health technician, where I was exposed to a multitude of interdisciplinary teams that included social workers. My exposure to social workers influenced my love for what they did and how they made families feel as they located resources for them. My new quest began.

I started looking for colleges that offered bachelor's degrees in social work. I did not intentionally decide to attend an HBCU, but during my research, I found that NSU was a public college with reasonable tuition, was 15 minutes away from my home, and was known for their excellence, high standards, and production of top-tier social workers.

As a former welfare recipient with four children living in poverty, I was very familiar with the social welfare process and what was to be expected of me as a social worker. By no means would I ever blame anyone for the situation that I allowed myself and my children to be in—however, I dreaded going to the social services building because the workers made me feel ashamed. I did not feel empowered nor experience the “dignity and worth of a person” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021, Ethical Principals section, para. 1) we so strongly take pride in promoting as social workers. As I made my decision to become a social worker, I remember how I felt applying for services and I vowed not to display the coarseness that was displayed to me.

My past experiences only groomed me to be an effective social worker. From my welfare to college dynamic, I made up my mind that I would have integrity and show empathy to those who are in need. Through self-reflection, I know that my desire to help may be a hinderance because I would try to go beyond what I may be capable of doing. As a professional social worker integrity is very important to me because it encapsulates every core value that I would be expected to possess according to the NASW.

One of my many challenges in the pursuit of a BSW centers around the fact that I am not your traditional college student, straight out of high school. I have lived my life and undergone experiences that I have had to overcome. I am a married, older woman with four adult children. Where would I find a job at this age? How would I pay for college? Would I be able to find time to go to school? Is my mind still good enough to retain and pass the classes at this level? Would I be focused enough? I considered each of these questions, but I knew if I wanted to have financial stability, I would have to take a chance. I couldn't let the fear of the unknown and my fear of failure stop me. I had the challenge of making sure that I would have time to study and time to spend with my husband, family, and friends. My biggest challenge was how I could

manage school and work a full-time job. I work 12-hour shifts, and if I had to work part-time, I would not be able to afford the benefits that I desperately need.

To maintain my focus on obtaining a BSW, I had to rely on a number of resources. I used the writing lab in the college library to proofread my papers. If I had any questions about assignments or papers, I emailed my professors or group texted my classmates. The most important resource that I have is a group of women that I met in my sophomore year. In class, we created a bond that is ongoing. We continue to schedule our classes together as much as possible. Each of us has different personalities and qualities that contribute something unique to our relationship. We make sure that we all understand, complete, and turn in our assignments on time. We talk daily. Throughout the day and some nights, we discuss and read each other's assignments to provide an extra eye before they are submitted. We cry, encourage, and support each other to do and be the best scholars. We also empower each other when times become stressfully difficult. I remember a time when we had a twenty-page paper due—none of us were sure of what was expected or that we were even writing it correctly. We talked daily about this paper, reading portions to each other and making sure that each section sounded right. We did this until each of us finished our papers. After we submitted our papers, we worried about each of our papers being good enough and whether all of us would get good grades. We have that special bond which goes far beyond ourselves; our families are entwined together. My bond with my sister circle is preparing me to become a better social worker. It is teaching me integrity, accountability, and commitment.

During my collegiate journey, I have learned that I must first take care of myself before I can help someone else. Self-care is of vital importance during my studies, and it will continue to be a significant part of my professional career. If I am stressed and mentally drained, I cannot function properly and my education will suffer, and every other aspect of my life will suffer. I have also learned that just as a tribe is needed to properly raise a child, I needed a close-knit circle (sister circle) to help me through the ups and downs of my years as an undergraduate.

Champions of Success for a White Woman at an HBCU: Devan's Story

I grew up in a low-income White family. My parents did their best to support me and my two brothers despite marital issues and my mother becoming disabled early in their marriage. These factors lead to me being reared in a broken home. I found myself rebelling against my later divorced parents because I thought they cared more about their issues and less about their kids. During this rebellious period, I found out I was pregnant at age 15. My father advocated against my pregnancy, offering an array of options from abortion to adoption. Despite this, I decided to go through with giving birth to my daughter. I struggled to graduate high school and support my household (comprised of my mother, little brother, and daughter). Looking back, I realize that my parents did the best they could given the socioeconomic hand they were dealt.

I started college straight out of high school. I was 19 years old and attended a local community college studying pre-nursing. At the time, I was less focused on my education and more focused on how to provide for myself, my daughter, and my family. When I couldn't afford the electric bill, I quickly realized I couldn't focus on school while working 40 hours a week and having all

the added stress of deadlines and due dates. I dropped out of community college with a 2.67 GPA at age 20 and entered the retail workforce.

Ten years later I was engaged, my then 14-year-old daughter was entering high school, and I was ready to start my educational journey again. I went to the same community college I previously attended to meet with the pre-nursing student advisor. I was told that my GPA wasn't sufficient or "nearly as competitive as needed" and that I should give up my pursuit of a nursing degree. The advisor didn't ask me about my circumstances or resources, nor offer any support. To him, I was just a number on a page—I was a 2.67 GPA student. I felt defeated. I was frustrated that this advisor told me to give up my dream.

I walked away trying to come to terms with the fact that I had no clue what I was going to do in life. I felt so strongly that nursing was what I wanted to do. As I was walked through the hall, I was approached by a gentleman, a representative of NSU, a local HBCU. He invited me to schedule a meeting with him later that week to discuss options for my future. I went home feeling hopeful about this meeting and its potential. Now, I always say that I didn't choose an HBCU; rather, an HBCU chose me.

I searched the internet for information about the programs NSU had to offer in preparation for my appointment later that week. While skimming the NSU catalog I noticed the School of Social Work. Among my research, I happened upon various social media pages with images of prideful students exclaiming their love for social work but, even more, their love for this HBCU. I thought to myself, social work seemed close enough to nursing, right? I had never thought about the reason I truly wanted to be a nurse—I guess because medical professions ran in my family. When choosing to pursue a social work degree, I realized that I could advocate for children and families that were coping with some of the same issues I went through, like homelessness, teen pregnancy, disabilities, and substance abuse. Social work—or, better, social justice work—that was something I could see myself doing. I met with the representative of NSU later that week. We had a great dialogue about the opportunities that the HBCU had to offer its students. For me, the proximity, low in-state tuition costs, and options for flexible class schedules were appealing. But the representative of NSU believing in my future was the deciding factor in my decision to pursue an undergraduate social work degree at an HBCU.

As I consider potential barriers to my ability to practice social work, my empathy and compassion present as possible challenges. My similarities in childhood or rearing may lead to me becoming overly involved with service users. The fact that I have faced similar challenges in life, such as being lower class, unemployed, homeless, and a teen mom, among other things, may cause my compassion and empathy to lead to fatigue in my career. On the other hand, my ability to relate to my clients may help me become a better social work practitioner. Another presenting challenge may be my ethnicity, in relation to the blatant White privilege that exists in social work institutions and practices. Although not all service users will be racially different from me, this could present a problem for some.

My biggest stressor in pursuing my undergraduate social work degree is comparable to other working women. How do we balance school, work, and our traditional socially constructed roles

at home? Navigating how to be proficient professionally, studious, and an attentive mother comes with mixed emotions. Am I spending too much time away from my kids? Am I worth less than my male counterparts who don't have to take time off work when their kids are sick? What happens if I become pregnant? Will I lose my job or stop pursuing my degree?

I have found that my fellow female cohorts are inundated with the same fearful thoughts as I am despite our differences in ethnicity. Fears that I am judged for being a woman that is pursuing my dreams and education. Fears that I am less of a wife for not being home every day with a hot cooked meal for my husband. Fears that my children will resent me for taking time outside of the home to pursue my degree. Combating those fears, learning to grab the helm, and navigating all the roles I play in life has been uniquely challenging.

Being a nontraditional 32-year-old student returning to college after being out of school for 10+ years was a challenge in and amongst itself. I have utilized various resources to help navigate my BSW pursuit, including family, classmates, tutoring services, the Writing Center, and the Student Health Center. I have leaned on family for daycare during classes, monetary support for tuition and housing costs, and overall for moral support. My most utilized resource has been a group of women I befriended in my second semester attending NSU. With the COVID-19 pandemic still looming, I spent my first semester taking virtual classes, never developing lasting relationships with classmates. Heading into my second semester and my first in-person class, I was wracked with anxiety about being a White woman attending an HBCU. Would I be accepted or seen as an outsider? Would I be discriminated against by professors who felt that I did not belong there? Would I be able to face my inherent socially constructed biases as a White woman?

My first class was an evening course. When I walked in, I realized that most of my classmates were also nontraditional students. Most were dressed in their work uniform or professional attire and appeared to be in their mid to late 30s. I was relieved that I would at least have age in common with them. I quickly made friends with several women in class, and we exchanged phone numbers to help each other navigate our new pursuit. I now find myself calling on those same women when choosing classes for each semester; when I have difficulty or need clarity on an assignment; or if I miss class due to one of my children being ill—truly I call these women for any and everything. They have become champions of my success and I of theirs.

The most important thing that I have learned about how I have survived the last two years of undergraduate social work education is how important human relationships are. My relationships with family and my sister circle at school are the reason I have been successful in my educational endeavors. Navigating everyday life is a daunting task but with their support, I feel that I can cope with the stressors of being a nontraditional adult student. If I can lend any advice to prospective undergrad social work students it would be to find your sister circle; find your family; and find your place in clubs, organizations, and school events. These human relationships will be your pillars as you cross uncharted territory in pursuit of your social work degree.

In a way, I am thankful for the advisor that didn't believe in me. Without him I would not have found my passion for social justice work and would have been blinded by the title HBCU. I am thankful for the intrinsic benefits I have received while attending NSU. I believe attending an HBCU has allowed me to learn about past and present race relations with a diverse lens, something I wouldn't have gotten at a PWI.

I Don't Need Permission to be Successful: Felicia's Story

I grew up in a middle-class, blended African American household. My mother worked for the government and my stepfather was in the Navy. I never thought I would be attending an HBCU or becoming a social worker: that was the furthest thing from my mind. I always thought I would attend Old Dominion University due to the fact they have a great nursing program and that is what I always wanted to do. The main reason I considered attending an HBCU was because my younger sister not only received her undergrad but also her graduate degree from NSU. One of the most important reasons I decided to go into the social work program is because about 14 years ago I was in an abusive marriage. At that time, that was all I really knew, and I had my first daughter at the age of 19 with someone who was physically abusive. I got out of that relationship only to marry someone who was emotionally abusive. In the process of ending that marriage, I realized that I had no money and three children to feed. So, of course, I had to get a job. Once I gained employment, I had no choice but to take my children to work with me because I could not afford daycare for three kids with no support from my ex-husband. In my transition from being married to single again I lost myself, and my ex-husband always reminded me that I would be nothing without him; that took a toll on me mentally. I felt stuck. I started to believe what he said because he told me every time he saw me. His words stayed in my head for the next 9 years until I got the determination to stand up and prove that I was worth more.

Growing up I always envisioned myself as a registered nurse because my aunt was in this field. Watching my aunt go to work to help others set off a passion in me to help those who could not help themselves—that is, until I became a licensed practical nurse. Once I got into healthcare, I absolutely loved it until I started seeing my patients from a different perspective that I had never fully noticed. Seeing my patients become depressed because they were unable to afford certain medications or witnessing a client struggle to eat in a food desert made me want to reach out and do more about it. The only way I felt that I could make a change was by becoming a social worker. I believed that my background in the medical field could help me in my future profession.

During my sophomore year, I decided to start taking night classes because I felt that would be a better fit for me: I am so glad I did. The first day of class I was very nervous because I did not know anyone, or so I thought. When I walked into my first class, I immediately laid eyes on the one person I knew, Devan. I was so excited to see her because I had taken an online class with her before. It was like a breath of fresh air, but I thought she would be the only person I would talk to that semester, not knowing that she was just the first of many of the friends I would grow to love as a sister. Over the last few years, I have learned that self-care and friendships are everything. The past two years have been so rough, and I have cried about papers often, but my friends always reeled me back in. They have absolutely been my rock when I felt like I wanted

to quit school; they always remind me that I am not alone. Before, I would look at the younger ladies 18 to 20 years old and say to myself, I cannot do this—I have children their age! My sister circle is always there to give me words of advice or just a little push here and there to let me know I am just fine, and that they will always be there if I feel like I need to talk. Friendships like these are one in a million and they may become your lifelong friends that you count on and talk to when times get tough during divorces, marriages, and babies.

If I could do anything differently, I wouldn't because I have no regrets. I love that I came back to school when I did. I think if I had started when my kids were little, I would have failed because I would have focused on my children more and not my studies. If I had come when I was a teenager, I would have failed because I would not have studied—I would have partied more than anything else. I chose a time when I could focus more and excel in my studies, and that time is now. Remarkably, it is my time to finally put myself first since I have always focused on others. As Kelly Price (2014) says, "It is my time to shine" (line 5), and it *is* my time because this is MY STORY, and I am so proud to tell it in my OWN WORDS.

I Always Wanted to Attend an HBCU: Chajurnee's Story

I've always desired to attend an HBCU because I wanted to embrace the culture portrayed in television programs like "A Different World" (1987). While in high school, we took tours to colleges, but we rarely visited HBCUs; nonetheless, when we did, I immediately felt at home. Since ninth grade, NSU has been my top choice, and I was thrilled to be accepted. It has always been my intention to pursue a social work undergraduate degree: This may have been fueled by my childhood experiences. My mother suffered a massive stroke when I was about eight years old, leaving her paralyzed on her left side. My siblings and I took on the role of her caregiver. My mother was unable to come with me to my doctor's appointments when I was a child, leaving this task to my father or my eldest sister. I never spoke about my situation to anyone, but people were aware of it. Some of the school's faculty knew about my home situation, but I think people may be unsure of what inquiries to make of children regarding their homes. And, in some cases, students don't speak up or want to talk about their situations at home even though they could be going through a lot.

When I first heard the term "social worker," like many others, I immediately thought of Child Protective Services or CPS. My family and I would visit my cousins frequently when they were in the foster care system. As a child, I knew very little about the system. However, as I spoke with my cousins and listened to their concerns, I realized there was something deeply wrong with the system. Some of the difficulties they experienced included switching households and wishing to be with their families, making relationships with their foster family tough. As a social worker, I intend to pay more attention to problems that affect both individuals and families. I also want to understand people better, be more involved, and truly uncover resources and solutions that could help them. There are a lot of children in need.

In college, my biggest struggle has been my tendency to just go with the flow and not talk to anyone. I would keep to myself in class, but occasionally I would approach the professor or email them with any questions I had. Due to COVID-19, I started taking classes online,

making it difficult for me to establish a relationship with my professors. How could I develop a relationship with someone who only sees me on the screen? Networking while being timid is difficult. I sometimes find it difficult to speak up since I am shy, but I'm working to improve in this area. Being home throughout COVID-19, I began to feel lonely, and I was unsure of who to contact for certain needs. When I returned to the university for face-to-face classes, I began to visit the social work department and utilize other facilities on campus. I enrolled in the summer bridge program to learn more about the field before I began my courses. While participating in the summer bridge program, self-care and professional writing were the most prevalent topics. I embraced staff suggestions and now believe I am getting better in the two areas where I struggled most.

I've needed to find a support system for the past two years; when my sister returned to school, we became each other's support system. But I also realized that in order to succeed in my major, I needed to connect with my peers. As a result of inquiring about an opportunity to co-author a journal article, I was exposed to several female classmates with similar interests. It's going well establishing a fresh friendship with my new support network, *now* my sister circle. Even though I'm just joining the group, I already feel valued and loved by this new group of ladies. It's enjoyable to talk to them because we can relate to each other about various things. They act like my big sisters, supporting and laughing with me because I am the youngest and least experienced. I began to realize that I am not alone after I started talking to my classmates and now feel more at ease joining groups in class and posing questions to my peers.

Conclusions

The lived experiences of these five BSW students reflected common themes and challenges: family struggles, teen pregnancy, pecuniary instability, gender expectations, role strain, self-doubt, the need for self-care, and concerns about being a non-traditional student for several. Social work students are trained to be self-aware and to practice self-care, an essential element for competent and ethical social work practice. Each narrative was also reflective of resilience as students utilized available familial, social, and institutional resources. The students' informal network (sister circle) appeared to be functioning effectively, as four of the five indicated plans to enter graduate school together upon graduation.

Implications (Isiah Marshall, Dean of School of Social Work)

The unusual sister circle is a creative, yet organic strategy that can address the complexities of retention, persistence, and student success within the context of women's empowerment and diversity. The sister circle participants collectively suggest that their bond has a two-pronged approach: academic support and social deisolation. In terms of academic support, the circle participants were able to hold each other accountable for course work and class responsibilities without the support or prompting of an outside person (i.e., professor, advisor, or family). The group also serves to encourage and to assure that everyone's knowledge of the subject matter is accepted and well-received. These actions build the needed confidence to manage and persist through the academic rigor of the program and maintenance of their personal lives. Furthermore, the literature notes that students are more likely to listen and take lessons from other students

rather than instructors or authority figures in a college or university setting (Shin et al., 2017). This implies that professors should encourage peer support rationales inside and outside of the classroom to support student success.

Secondly, but most importantly, this group is committed to breaking down barriers of isolation in terms of race, age, and inexperience to create a sense of belonging. After building trust and rapport, the sister circle provided a safe space to not only discuss course assignments but also create a space where misunderstood concepts of race, gender, and worldviews could be examined without judgement.

The diversity of the group proves that when people move beyond the differences of race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status, they bond through commonalities of life experiences. This supports Tinto's (1993) claim that student integration (belonging) into all facets of campus life leads to persistence and graduation. Lastly, these women find themselves in an undergraduate social work program, where they are proudly living out concepts of cultural proficiency; self-awareness; and self-regulation before they engage in professional social work practice. Their current and continued participation in this circle leads these students to be well-equipped to understand and respond appropriately to issues of diversity of race, gender, education, and socio-economic status in practice.

The unusual sister circle is a novel approach to student retention and persistence. Although the group emerged organically, circles such as these can be replicated with students who share common interests or those with varied interests. University student support service professionals, as a solution to encourage male participation and bonding, can assist in forming circles. For example, a circle could be created to focus on veterans who are returning to school after active-duty service. For Black males, institutions can form circles that focus on empowerment or support community-based projects such as mentoring or tutoring children. The circle concept could be used as a mechanism to bring together single mothers who are attempting to attend school and manage their families. A circle could be formed for first-generation college students to discuss ways to cope with the new college experience. Some would argue that a traditional club or an organization would function just the same; however, a club or organization may be too restrictive, with demands such as structured meeting times, paying dues, or being subject to constraining campus policies.

The lived experiences of the unusual "sister circle" members suggest an opportunity for research into how helpful sister circle-like groups might be in minimizing isolation, providing support, enhancing retention, and increasing graduation rates for collegians based on age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, religion, or other statuses. However, use of Latoya Johnson's (2015) sister circle methodology by non-Black researchers is not recommended.

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