

# Minority Perspectives on Enhancing Engagement and Belonging in a Liberal Arts Environment

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## **Abstract**

*Three women of color—a professor and two students—describe the role that community engagement has played in helping them gain a sense of belonging in a predominantly white, liberal arts college environment. They discuss how engagement with one another within these three domains assists in their adjustment and retention, as well as how their engagement contributes to the community.*

Many African American students and professors are the first in our families to attend college and/or to have a career in academia. Whether a student or a professor of color, we may find ourselves in academic environments that have a very different feel, culturally, than our home environments. While all students struggle with “belonging” when adapting to new college environments, students of color are particularly vulnerable to feeling out of place and un-welcomed in spite of an institution’s seemingly best efforts (Feagin and Sikes 1994). Faculty of color may experience similar challenges concerning belonging, which may in part account for the difficulties in retaining minority faculty experienced by many academic institutions (Turner 2002). Developing a connection with community, and both receiving from and giving to community, can be a saving grace for faculty and students of color, especially if they are from environments that do not match the traditional feel of the small liberal arts environment.

In this paper, we three women of color—a professor and two students—all of Africana heritage (biracial, African American, and Caribbean American) discuss the role that community engagement has played within teaching, research, and service, and how that engagement has assisted in our coping with and gaining of a sense of belonging in a predominantly white, liberal arts college environment. In this reflection on our development of a sense of belonging through community engagement, Professor Dunlap will discuss teaching, Christina Burrell will discuss research, and Penney Jade Beaubrun will discuss service.

## **Professor Dunlap: On Bringing Belonging into Teaching**

We are situated in a small, highly-selective, private liberal arts college that is in walking distance to, yet substantially offset within, the urban communities that surround it. A short drive from the College are elementary and middle schools with student populations consisting of more than 90 percent African American and Latina students, with the vast majority of these students coming from economic conditions that qualify them for social service programs such as reduced or free breakfast and lunch programs (Dunlap 2000a). Our college is very active in the surrounding community, engaging in thousands of hours of community service and service-learning each year. We have several offices and programs at the college that are devoted to facilitating the community engagement and learning process: the Office of Volunteers for Community Service (OVCS), the Children's Program, the Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy, and the Program in Community Action (PICA). Service-learning and other forms of community engagement are important activities for many of our students and are included in many academic courses at the college.

Since my arrival here at Connecticut College fifteen years ago, within my human development courses I have incorporated community engagement in a variety of ways, most notably, through service-learning, field trips, guest speakers, research readings, narratives, case studies, films, and documentaries (Dunlap 2000a, 2000b). The experience that has created the greatest sense of connection or bonding between me and my students, and among my students themselves, has been the field trips. With support from a grant from the Holleran Center, I take my students to locations and events in the community that connect with our course curricula. For example, in my Development of Black Children and Families course, my students visited a local NAACP banquet, two local black churches, a community youth arts program's annual gala banquet, and an African American health disparities conference. Dining and intellectually processing with my students was always included as part of each event, either before or after, if not during. Fourteen of my sixteen students accepted the option of attending at least one of these field trips during the course of the semester. However, the entire class benefited from each field trip as we processed each of our experiences together in the classroom. I found that the field trip component helped to bring a new level to both my sense of belonging and my enjoyment of teaching. Perhaps in part because of the curricular focus on black children and families, 56 percent of my students were of African American descent, while 44 percent were European American. This was the first and only time in my fifteen years of teaching that minority students outnumbered white students. Representative comments from students' notes to the Holleran Center at the end of the semester suggest that students of both backgrounds found the field trip component to have a positive impact on their sense of bonding and belonging both within the course and college and among their peers:

These field trips have given my class the opportunity to bond as a class. During this semester we have gone on an array of field trips such as attending the NAACP banquet, attending [two local black] churches. We also attended a play

produced by [the community youth arts program]. I enjoyed going on these field trips with my professor. It gave us a chance to get to know her better outside of the classroom....This [was] an opportunity to explore and learn outside of the four walls of [the college's] classroom. (African American female)

Our class actually [got] first-hand interaction with the black children and families that we have been talking about in class. By having students enter environments such as [local churches, youth programs, and banquets], the class as a whole was able to get closer looks at the lives and thoughts of black children and families. Without this, the class would have to simply rely on popular media and textbooks instead of first-hand experiences. [This] made the class a better experience. (African American male)

I was able to go to [a local church] with Professor Dunlap. As a white student without religious experience, this gave me a look into a very different world and really helped me understand the black community. Many of my other classmates also went on field trips, including banquets, performances, out on meals and [to hear] speakers. After every one of these trips there was a time for us to process the experience, first with just the small group then later with the class. These experiences allowed for much more interesting and concrete discussions. For example, in class we talked about Africana cultural socio-types [styles or ways of being], and after the trips we could apply the different cultural socio-types we had seen. The trips also made this course more fun. They were all optional, but people took advantage of them....[The trips] really enriched this course. (European American female)

I attended the NAACP banquet and the [youth arts program] 'gala.' These experiences were extremely valuable to my course. The themes explored were applicable to the course and effectively demonstrated the themes of our discussions. (European American male)

The surrounding community landscape is one with which I have become very familiar and involved, and consider myself to "belong." By sharing the community as I know it with my students and connecting it to our course curriculum, I found that the bonds with my students were strengthened. This is very different from service-learning (which I also include) where I send my students out into the community and they report their experiences back to me and to their class. With the field trips, we experience the community together, and we process together both in "real-time" and then again later in class with the entire group. I do not think that field trips should serve as a substitute for service-learning, but rather as a complement to service-learning if the professor is already integrated into the community. Had I not already been well-integrated into the community, I believe that my and my students' experiences would have been very different and perhaps negative. Under those circumstances, I would not have been serving as a liaison or ambassador, but rather as a voyeur leading a group of younger voyeurs merely observing a community.

In addition to field trips, we have had the vice-president of a local NAACP branch visit our course to speak on his personal experiences growing up in the segregated south, his involvements in the civil rights movements, and the role and directions of the NAACP for black children and families both traditionally and in the future. My students have been riveted by his first-person accounts of experiences that they have only read or heard about in their courses. Of particular interest to my students was a photograph that our guest has of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that was personally signed by the Reverend himself. Other guest speakers included an investigative journalist and book author who for twenty years wrote for the likes of the *Washington Post* beginning with the period when HIV and AIDs were first entering our communities. Again, students were quite engaged as he spoke on the disproportionate impact of HIV and AIDs on black women and children, and the systemic reasons involved. Another guest speaker was a middle school teacher who spoke of her approaches and philosophies for educating black children as well as the challenges and achievements that she experiences in that arena.

I also expose my students to scholarly readings on black children and families and racial identity development (Harris and Graham 2007; McAdoo 2001; Tatum 1992), and provide them with documentary and film excerpts that will also help to bring their curriculum to life, such as the PBS specials, “Race: the Power of an Illusion” and “Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick” (Adelman 2003, 2008; Dunlap 2000b).

While the course topic and any one of these approaches alone may not have added to minority students’ sense of belonging significantly, the combination of a diverse curriculum and a variety of curricular and community engagement approaches, I believe, has assisted some of my students with their sense of belonging. For minority students, it may have assisted in their ability to find a place of inclusion and belonging in the curriculum, in the community, and in the college environment more expediently.

## **Christina Burrell: On Bringing Belonging into Research**

Professor Dunlap has had a team of research students working with her over her many years at our college. During our freshman year, several of the women students from our Development of Black Children and Families course decided to join Professor Dunlap’s research team the following semester. By the middle of the spring semester, we had a very diverse group of eight women students on the team.

We began meeting regularly, our objective being to assist Professor Dunlap in collecting and analyzing data from two hundred local social service employees with regard to their perceptions and misperceptions of African American communication and child discipline using the first fifteen minutes of Spike Lee’s “Crooklyn” (1995) movie as a stimulus. We met every other Tuesday evening for two-hours to qualitatively analyze and code the data.

During this time, Professor Dunlap asked if any of us would be interested in applying for the college's ConnSharp Research Grant Program. The competitive ConnSharp program enables one or more students to work with a faculty member full time, with pay, over the summer. With Professor Dunlap's encouragement of the entire team, three of us elected to apply and two of us were awarded the grant and given the opportunity to work with Professor Dunlap full time for the entire summer.

During this time Professor Dunlap also met a senior from another college, Jessica, who was looking for an opportunity to engage in research in preparation for applying to graduate school. So upon graduating, Jessica made herself available to volunteer on the research team, but on another project also related to the community—minority experiences in the consumer marketplace. So while Penney and I entered quantitative data from the “Crooklyn” Study for a good deal of the summer, Jessica worked on transcribing about a dozen interviews that Professor Dunlap had conducted with community members who had experienced heart-wrenching discrimination while shopping, banking, and the like.

Professor Dunlap, while present for the summer, gave us a great deal of autonomy. We met for about half an hour daily to track our goals and objectives and we ate lunch together, but other than that we worked on our own as a team while Professor Dunlap worked nearby, easily accessible to us if needed. We accomplished a great deal. We entered hundreds of columns and rows of data, but we also accomplished a lot more. I, Penney, Jessica, and Professor Dunlap continued to bond with one another, and we shared activities that went beyond the college walls. For example, on Fridays we always went out into the community to eat—we ate at community restaurants, at parks, on the waterfront. We met interesting people from the community and intellectually engaged among ourselves about our research accomplished that week.

We also had a couple of opportunities to assist elders known to Professor Dunlap in the community. In addition there were several occasions when community youths came to work with us for the day to learn about what we were doing and to be mentored by us. And finally, and most enjoyably, with grant funds from the Holleran Center for Public Policy and Community Action, we went on a field trip with community youth to Harlem, New York as our culminating summer experience.

The following fall, our entire team began to meet again, to strategize and practice for two presentations that we would make at regional and national conferences. Our team members also requested and planned a field trip to visit a community elder in another part of the state after hearing the elder's interview with Jessica. We wanted to have the opportunity to meet personally with this woman elder and learn more about her life and achievements. We organized a trip and went to see her the following fall, and it was an incredibly fulfilling experience.

The community members we met have played an instrumental role in my success in college. For example, the graduate student we met and worked with through the summer research program, and the community youths we met (not only through

Professor Dunlap but also through another faculty member here) made me feel even more like I was at home. I had opportunities to meet people who are similar to the people I am around at home: older people who act as role models and positive influences in my life constantly, and children and young adults because they seem to be the most honest people that I meet. They won't lie to me, for example, if I ask them their opinion of something I'm doing they will "keep it real" with me rather than change what they think in an attempt to preserve my feelings or change my thinking. I like being able to be around people like this because I feel even more encouraged in doing what I have to do to reach my goals. Most people need other human contact on a deeper level in order to function effectively. Being able to bond with others who remind me of home helps me maintain my sanity in college, and everywhere else for that matter. This also helps to enable and maintain my cross-cultural connections, bonding, and nurturing of relationships.

I've always been a person who looks for personal growth in any way that I can find it, and being on the research team has most definitely aided my efforts to grow. I came to this college as a freshman, to a town 1,400 miles from home, having always prided myself on being able to adapt to my surroundings effectively and on my strength to cope with stressful events. However, I was at a loss upon my arrival at college. I found myself feeling alone, and for the first time in my life I questioned myself and whether or not my decision to go to school here was the best choice. But I found support and friendship through a mentoring program in which I became involved, and among my freshman seminar peers, and also through being on the research team. Being a part of the research team made me feel that I had a very significant reason for being here at this college. I realized that although it may seem lonely at times, and I may not always feel completely confident in my abilities to succeed in an environment so different from what I am used to, I have some excellent support to help me through.

Being a part of this research team has made my, Penney's, and our team's college experience more enjoyable and has opened doors that we never thought would be open to us so early in our college careers. We came to school knowing we wanted to be part of something big, something we could enjoy while also having a positive impact on our community and helping in areas that we are passionate about. The research team has been that venue for us. We have been able to work in one of the fields we're interested in, human development, in a way that isn't merely conversational; we've had hands-on experience that has given us a better appreciation for the field and its importance. We've had the opportunity to meet wonderful people who share the same interests; people with whom we've built strong and lasting relationships which is an integral part of not only the college experience, but life.

Being part of the "Crooklyn" Study team in particular was also a big plus for several reasons. In observing the reactions that the social workers and other social service participants in the study had after watching a film of an African American family in their daily lives, we gained insight into how others may view the way our families operate. While I am from Alabama, Penney is from Haiti. Being from Haiti, Penney also was able to relate to the "Crooklyn" Study and, like me, was shocked to see the

various insensitive comments expressed toward the different ways that an African American family raised their children. Some respondents said that the mother in the scenes was abusing her children, but for me and Penney it was just a way of teaching children how to become responsible. We were raised pretty much the same way, and it was hard for us to understand why some social service employees thought so negatively about the family's good intentions. We recognize that families may differ in their ways of disciplining children, but we found the "Crooklyn" family to be a non-abusive and happy family.

As in previous studies along this line (Dunlap 1999), we are continuing to find that there is a lot of variation in how the "Crooklyn" film family is perceived depending upon the race, gender, and income of the observer. We noted, for example, that many of the participants in our current study are from non-African American families and, therefore, are providing a viewpoint from the outside looking in; a view that we were aware of but weren't fully understanding before actually seeing the data and the critical and sometimes extremely harsh responses that these people, who work everyday with children and families, had to our culture. Being able to see this view and discussing the responses with other research team members who were also of other ethnicities was very enlightening for us. This experience helped us to see the vast differences in our mind-frames versus those of other culture groups, and it helped us to understand those differences.

We appreciate that both of our research projects (the "Crooklyn" Study and the minority marketplace experiences interviews) investigate the impact of our cultural frameworks and diversity upon our experiences in the world and our judgments of others, and we find this validating and reinforcing in terms of our own experiences as college students. We anticipate that as our research is presented and published, it will make a significant community impact by helping social service providers and businesses think more carefully about how their expectations and sometimes negative and inaccurate stereotypes concerning minorities may shape their evaluations of and behavior toward them.

I have heard the word "diversity" quite often, coming both from a predominately white boarding school that was set on being as diverse as possible, and now a college that tries to promote similar values. Being part of the team, however, has allowed me to have a more in-depth outlook on diversity. The other team members are all of different races, ethnicities, classes, religions, regions, and have different interests as far as academics and extracurricular activities go. I've been able to connect with, for example, Jewish students and synchronized skaters that I may not have met on any other occasion. I am able to work with people who can provide a different outlook on various things and with whom I can share my own differences, and that really makes me feel like I'm not just another random face of minorities on campus.

I feel that it is important for me to feel at home, or to have some sense of belonging, wherever I am in order for me to perform effectively. As a student from Alabama going to school in Connecticut, I did not feel as at home in an environment of predominately

white, middle- to upper-class students. I come from a working class family in a very close-knit neighborhood where I always feel like I'm accepted and needed; an environment where I am always encouraged to do my best and supported for the choices I make. I'm not saying that it isn't here also, but I did not have this feeling when I first came into this college environment. I remember seriously considering returning home where I knew that—even if I did not end up at a great school like this one—I'd still have the support of my friends, family and church, all of which I would need to be happy. But I was able to find this type of connection in several ways in addition to the research team: with the college's ALANA (African American, Latina, Asian, and Native American) mentoring program; with several close friends; with two clubs in which I am a member (the Gospel Choir and the UMOJA cultural alliance group); and with my Freshman Seminar (Development of Black Children and Families) class. I can remember being a lot more excited to get up and go about campus every morning knowing that I had something like the Gospel Choir to go to afterwards, or that I'd be able to go to my Freshman Seminar that day. Just the feeling of having other people in my college environment who in very obvious ways supported my efforts was enough to encourage me to work to the best of my abilities in every aspect of my life at college.

Penney's outlook is similar. Coming to a predominantly white college was a culture shock for her. Being from Haiti, her school didn't have a diverse population of students. The norms and values were almost the same in Haiti, so it was very hard for her to fit in at first. She did not want to say anything offensive to others, and she also did not want to react differently so that others would mistake her for a racist. It took some time, but the research team helped her learn how to express herself freely without saying anything out of place. For Penney, because the research team is so diverse, she was able to more easily see how others live and interact with their peers. We get along very well within the research team, and there is a great sense of well-being even with our many differences. Through our quality time, collaborations, and support of each other, we all have managed to become like a big diverse family, which has helped to increase our sense of belonging significantly.

Both Penney and I have found an additional benefit in our research collaborations with the team. We have found that the work or tasks that we do in the research team also helps in our other courses. For example, throughout participation in the research team we've worked in different sized groups and capacities: groups comprised of not only the other members of the research team but also with Professor Dunlap, with a single partner, with multiple partners, and by ourselves. Penney and I have appreciated the experience of problem-solving in many different forms of partnership. In numerous classes I've taken in the past, as well as the classes in which I'm enrolled for the upcoming semester, group work is an integral part of the curriculum. Being a part of the research team with people whose ideas may not resemble mine in any way has provided a means to work on how to communicate in situations where a collective answer is not readily available. Furthermore, in the research team, we have a goal-setting system to prioritize our current needs, which seems to work pretty well when something needs to be accomplished. In one particular class I took this past semester,

we operated along the same lines and there came a point where I stepped in and brought us back on track, calling upon some of the same organizational skills I observed, learned, and used in the research team.

Not only have I taken away general operational skills from the research team, I've also been able to use SPSS, a program for analyzing data in numerous capacities such as forming correlations, in my Statistical Methods in Psychology class. Using SPSS presented its own challenges, both positive and negative, while working on the research team. SPSS is typically used in psychological studies to analyze data. I hadn't used this particular method of analyzing data before in my basic level psychology and human development classes, but I was aware from talking to my friends who are also psychology majors that some of the future classes that I would have to take would require learning how to use SPSS. During my time in the ConnSharp summer program, Penney and I learned how to navigate through SPSS semi-efficiently with the help of Professor Dunlap and the SPSS manual. My usage of SPSS in the summer helped me in my Statistical Methods in Psychology class the following fall.

Penney's experiences with SPSS within the research team have benefited her as well. She is more aware of and more open to trying different computer programs. She says that SPSS was very challenging for her, but she and I helped each other, and we consulted with Professor Dunlap as needed. Professor Dunlap also had us review the SPSS manual and take summary notes so that we would have background prior to her working with us on it. There were times when we found our initial notes and Professor Dunlap's subsequent notes very useful when referring back to them and then applying them for specific analyses that we were conducting. In many of our classes we have to take notes from our books and lectures and refer back and dialectically synthesize them in order to complete assignments so we found this approach very reinforcing to our college experience.

In conversations with a few of my other professors, we've talked about my involvement with the research team and our collaborative work. I've also shared with my family and friends from home about these experiences, and I always get the usual "congratulations" with the realization that they may not really know the full significance of being able to work with a professor and other students on relevant research while yet being freshmen and sophomores. My professors, however, always seem taken aback by the fact that as a freshman, myself and another freshman were given this opportunity. My professors and other faculty members I've grown to know during my summer involvement in the research or have come into contact with throughout my college days are very encouraging and seem impressed that I am involved in something that is in direct relation to my desired field of study. Many times when I encounter my professors they immediately inquire about how I'm doing and if we've had any new exciting findings or developments concerning our research. The research team and the work we're doing has not only touched those immediately involved in it, but it has reached other faculty members who seem to maintain an interest in what we're doing and what we will find from our research studies. In my opinion, this shows just how special our faculty members are here at our college; they

care enough to honestly take an interest in things that aren't directly affecting them, not only once but also enough to continue to follow up, inquire, and encourage us. All of this promotes our bonding and belonging within the college experience.

## **Penney Jade Beaubrun: On Bringing Belonging into Service**

Service has been brought into our collaborations in several ways including formal service learning, informal community service, inclusion of community youth and mentoring in our research and field trip activities, and involvement in extracurricular activities that had a service component.

Community service is highly valued here on our campus, especially among students who are planning on majoring in human development and/or psychology, as Christina and I are. Service-learning was required in Professor Dunlap's Development of Black Children and Families class, and in that capacity both Christina and I met the administrators and teachers of our college's children's laboratory program. We have been engaging in service-learning both within and outside of the college ever since. Just getting organized for our service-learning has had many benefits for us. It helped us to learn how to seek out staff and administrators at the college and/or in the community to negotiate our responsibilities and schedules for fulfilling our service-learning requirements. We have found that the benefits can extend throughout the service-learning semester and beyond. For example, while I was engaging in service-learning over the course of the semester, I found out that one of the classes that I will be taking next semester is going to be taught by one of the administrators with whom I had an opportunity to get to know through my service-learning. Now that I am already familiar with her, I feel that it will be easier to get along with her, and I also now feel more confident about communicating with a person in the administrative capacity that she is in. Likewise, Christina also is aware of the many benefits of service-learning and other forms of community engagement. She participated in various forms of community service as a high school and middle school student in Alabama, so she was already aware of the impact that such engagement could have not only on those on the receiving end of the service, but also on those on the giving end as well. We are pleased to note that all the research team members have been a part of community engagement through our various courses, and we've all reported positive experiences. In fact, most of us continue to engage in community service outside of our courses, even if it's no longer required.

We also consider our research team collaborations with Professor Dunlap to be mutually beneficial service-learning experiences. We are learning a wealth of skills and having a plethora of cultural experiences that will benefit us for years to come, while we also assist Professor Dunlap in the collection, coding, analyses, and presentation of research data. We also sometimes serve as role models to other young people mentored by Professor Dunlap. As a group, we also enjoy sharing tasks among members of the research team. As Christina mentioned above, there were two hundred surveys that had

to be qualitatively coded, so we divided the work among the eight of us, in teams of two, and we coded the data in an amazingly short period of time. Our teams of two had to make decisions, and sometimes we did not agree. We had to present unresolved disagreements in our coding to a third team member, or sometimes even further to the entire group for discussion and resolution.

Early on within our research team experience, Professor Dunlap organized graduate students and alumni to come meet us. They talked to us about how past undergraduate research team experiences with Professor Dunlap helped them throughout their years after graduation. They also spoke of the benefits of engaging in service and the benefits of having such experiences and skills on our resume as well as how the experience helped to improve their college and community involvement.

Further, we find ourselves inspired by Professor Dunlap, her service to others, what she has achieved, and her impact upon our community. Not only does she keep engaged with the community, but also she supervises dozens of her students each semester as they go out to learn from and serve the community. She also frequently shares her expertise on child and adolescent development issues, diversity and multicultural issues, and community engagement issues with others in the community both inside and outside of the college. For example, for many years she has taught a parenting class for a local church community, and she works with a singles committee to help organize conferences and activities for single parents. She also mentors many community youth and exposes them to cultural and educational events that they otherwise might not have experienced. She consults with different organizations in the community often at no charge and is invited by many other colleges and universities throughout the United States to share her knowledge and experiences. Deservedly, she has received local, state, and now national awards for her service and engagement. The fact that Professor Dunlap is a woman and an African American, I feel that I myself can become very successful and give back to my community, even within an environment that is predominantly white, because she has done it in a way that has allowed her to help people of African, Latina, Native American, Asian, and European descent. She has been an inspiration by showing us that it is possible to achieve our goals and dreams and to serve the college and the communities most in need. Being a part of what she does makes us feel even more like we belong in a higher educational environment.

Our educational and service collaborations and community explorations with Professor Dunlap have also lead to or inspired us toward other service-related collaborations outside of the college. For example, both Christina and I love the art of step-dancing and because of a serendipitous community connection that we made through Professor Dunlap at a local church's community development center we were able to regularly teach to and perform step-dancing techniques and routines with a group of children who would have the privilege of step-dancing at a health disparities conference.

Along a similar vein, and further extending our interest in step-dancing, Christina and I recently partnered with other students and started a multicultural volunteer

entertainment club here on campus. The club began with four of us wanting to perform step-dancing for campus events, and in a short period of time it turned into twenty-six individuals of very different backgrounds who wanted to come together and step-dance while serving and enjoying each other's company. Christina is the chair of the group, and in that capacity she finds that there are about twelve students from within the group who frequently seek her out because they are looking for opportunities to get involved in other constructive initiatives. They often ask her about the things that she does outside of the club, and a few have expressed interest in being a part of the research team after hearing about what we do and how it makes us feel. It makes Christina feel good to know that freshman are coming in and connecting early, trying to do something positive in their fields of study. Knowing that there are many special opportunities for bonding and connecting through groups such as the research team, the step-dancing team, and through the many other organizations on campus lets them know that our college is indeed the right place for them to pursue their goals.

Also of particular significance for us, culturally and in terms of service, have been the opportunities to connect and bond with elders outside of our college. While spending time during our summer project with Professor Dunlap, we had the experience of accompanying her to assist elders with whom she has been acquainted in the community for many years. We have come to realize that this is a form of service or volunteerism that often goes unrecognized in the literature about community engagement and about African cultures. As Professor Dunlap has noted to us, many times the service in which women and minorities engage is not of a formal nature or under the auspices of a particular organization, but rather it is of a more informal nature that is more difficult to document and quantify. This has led to the assumption that women and minorities do not "volunteer" as others do. But we do volunteer; it's just not as formal in nature, professionally organized, or well documented. Our volunteering however is ever-present among many minority communities—the grandmother who rears her grandchildren, the neighbors who assist their elders, the blood and non-blood extended kin who rear and support multiple generations. This became more evident to us as we spent more time with Professor Dunlap outside of the classroom and noted the similarities in how she informally served the community, especially the elders and children, and how our families and communities informally provide service back home in Alabama and Haiti. This, in turn, also had a positive impact on our sense of belonging in that it enabled us to engage in ways that felt like "home" to us.

Further, meeting and engaging with the older individuals from the community while in college and hearing what they have to say to us has helped us to further realize how much our ancestors worked hard to provide the younger generations with the opportunities that we have which have helped us to get where we are. Having an opportunity to continue to share such knowledge inspired me to get more involved in and take a more proactive stance in my education. Christina and I do not want to disappoint any elders. They have always looked after us and have encouraged us to do our best, and we do not want to let them down whether they are in the community that surrounds our college or in the communities in Haiti or Alabama. Spending time with

elders in this capacity reinforced for us what we already knew about how we should behave around older individuals. We know that we should not act in certain ways, but rather we should apply especially good manners. It is even more important to say “please” and “thank you” when asking for something when addressing an elder. It is important to help them when they are struggling with either opening a door or another object or when standing up. At home we are taught to show others respect in general, but especially to elders. To have it reinforced at college not only provides a civic learning outcome, but it also nurtures our sense of belonging and home at college.

Meeting the elders that we have through our Freshman Seminar, research team, and summer research program has helped us to understand the generational differences more clearly and to accept them. Just being able to sit down and have a conversation with elders or laugh with them about our differences really makes us feel at home. The elders always offer a kind word of encouragement or some quirky story that is meant to impress their ideas upon us (such as the idea that a tattoo is bad, but at the same time letting us know that they can learn to deal with those differences). I myself have found it very easy to cope with the elders that we have met. My mother and father are very strict and, in a way, act like the three elders that we have connected with off-campus. I sometimes call my mother “old-school,” but I understand why she acts like she does sometimes. The elders want our well-being, and the world is moving way too fast at times. It is good to have our elders around, even while we are here at college, because they keep us on the right track at times and help us to make right decisions.

Besides connecting with our elders and mentoring youths from the community, the inclusion of a currently matriculating graduate student from the community on our research team also has been an extremely powerful benefit to the members of the research team. For one, meeting different phenomenal role models in this way has helped us to respect those who are achieving educational success even more. Being able to interact with them and learn from them as role models helped us to grow both cognitively and emotionally. The graduate student who is currently working with us has been an excellent role model for us. She is always there to give us good advice and to support us in any way she can. Professor Dunlap is also an awesome support to us as well as a mentor and role model to the team’s undergraduates, community youth, and our graduate student community member. She consistently meets with us and checks up on us and tries to help when assistance is needed.

The elders, graduate students, alums, fellow students, professors, administrators, and staff, along with our own families, all have helped us to succeed throughout these first two years of college and have helped us in making decisions that have affected our lives positively. Professor Dunlap has made our environment easier to cope with through the community of new people to which she has introduced and linked us, both within and outside of the college. We now have a network of people that we can talk to about specific needs and wants, and again, this has assisted us in our sense of belonging and bonding. We appreciate that we are able to call these wonderful people and not be ashamed about our concerns, situations, or actions. It is always good to be able to confide in our support systems and know that what we have told them is going to be

kept confidential. When we are stressed, we can always find at least one person from within our support system who is able to assist us. Our research teammates, in particular, are sometimes in our classes also, and we support one another in our studying and are there to acknowledge and help one another as we go about college life.

For Christina and I and many of our other research team members, community engagement has become more like an extra-curricular activity than something that is done out of duty or service. We have found that not only does it help those who need it in various ways, but it also helps, empowers, and brings a greater sense of belonging to those of us who are providing the service.

## **Conclusion: On Incorporating Belonging through Teaching, Research, and Service**

In summary, we together believe that it is possible for these kinds of collaborations to be replicated if professors themselves become more engaged in the communities in which they also desire to have their students engaged. We have offered a variety of ways that this engagement can be enhanced through teaching, research, and service. We also have tried to highlight the programs and financial grant supports provided by the college that help to make our collaborations possible. We all appreciate the hands-on experience that we receive through the opportunities that have been afforded us. Rather than just watching others engage in exciting opportunities, we ourselves are connecting, bonding, and finding exciting ways of engaging with our communities both inside and outside of the college. We also appreciate the freedom of choice of activities in which to engage and the ability to find connections that seem adaptable to our individual styles and needs. And finally, we appreciate the support and resources made available to us: colleagues, professors, role models, administrators, staff, offices, and community members. As students and faculty of color, we are always questioning ourselves. However, being able to bond and connect with other students and professors of all backgrounds has helped us to feel accepted and understood more readily and, therefore, more grounded and bound for success at an earlier stage of our experience.

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