THE SISTERHOOD IS ALIVE AND WELL AT SPELMAN COLLEGE:
A FEMINIST STANDPOINT CASE STUDY

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
IN ADULT, HIGHER, AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

BY
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MUNCIE, INDIANA
MAY 2019
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American women in the 21st century have more options from which to select a college education than in the past, yet there are some women who purposely select a women’s college. This study examined the culture of women’s colleges, specifically Spelman College, a Historically Black Women’s College (HBWC) in Atlanta, Georgia, founded by White missionaries in 1881. As the literature surrounding women’s education and Black women’s education is sparse, this study adds a deeper exploration of Spelman’s contribution and experiences of its alumna to the existing research. This qualitative research single-bound case study answered the research questions: (1) What are the components that shape Spelman’s institutional culture, and (2) What makes it a unique learning space for Black women? Data was collected through archival research at Spelman College and the interviews of 13 Spelman alumna (who graduated between 1969 and 2012). Examination of the archival data and thematic analysis of the participant’s narratives revealed sisterhood to be the powerful aspect of Spelman’s institutional culture. However, intertwined within the sisterhood are themes of ritual and traditions, values, and historical racial and gender issues. The findings further revealed that the alumna viewed their undergraduate experience as positive, citing academic excellence as a
norm, a nurturing environment designed for the historically marginalized Black woman, mentoring, freedom of expression, and freedom to lead as other aspects of their holistic experience. Researchers and students interested in single-gender education and feminist and Black feminist theorists may find the study’s conclusions useful as well as educators in the secondary and higher education arena.
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my darling daughter,

Courtney Camille Cox, JD,

my muse.
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CHAPTER 1:

Introduction

Historically, American women had limited access to higher education for nearly one hundred years before winning the right to vote. However, learning is an essential and distinctive experience for women. According to Kopta and Korb (1996), between 1970 and 1993, the number of women enrolled in higher education rose from 3.5 million to 7.9 million. A select group of colleges and universities cater to the unique learning experience of women. Throughout the U.S., women’s colleges identify themselves as having an institutional mission primarily related to promoting and expanding educational opportunities for women in a single-sex environment (Harwarth, Maline, & DeBra, 1997).

Women’s colleges have a long and prestigious role in the education of American women. They have prepared women for leadership roles in society throughout their history and have adjusted their curricula and focus as women have entered new arenas in the workforce. Unlike women of past generations, today’s women have many choices in selecting the college or university they wish to attend. Yet, many young women continue to select women’s colleges because of their rich traditional heritage of serving the educational needs of women (Harwarth et al., 1997).

Women’s colleges have a history of offering access, excellence, and equal opportunities in higher education. The development of private secondary schools for young women (seminaries) during the early 1800s was the beginning of an interest in furthering educational opportunities for women (Harwarth et al., 1997). Colleges for women were founded during the mid- and late-19th century in response to a need for advanced education for women at a time when they were not admitted to most institutions of higher education. Societal trends, such as an
increase in labor-saving devices in the home, a shortage of teachers caused by the growth of common schools, a proliferation of reading materials for women, and more opportunities in philanthropy and employment for women due to the Civil War, led to an increased demand for higher education for women (Harwarth et al., 1997).

According to Harwarth et al. (1997), independent nonprofit women’s colleges, which included the Seven Sisters (Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Radcliffe, Vassar, and Wellesley) and other similar institutions, were founded to provide educational opportunities to women equal to those available to men and were geared toward women who wanted to study the liberal arts. These colleges were largely located in the Northeast. Southern women’s colleges were small schools, mostly affiliated with various Protestant churches. As educational opportunities in the South during the 1800s were limited to Whites only, some higher education institutions for Blacks sprang up during the post-Civil War period, including women’s colleges founded specifically to serve Black women. Two of these, Bennett College, located in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Spelman College, located in Atlanta, Georgia, are the only Black women’s colleges that still exist today (Harwarth et al., 1997).

As the Catholic population in the United States grew due to increases in immigration, the Catholic Church found a need for women’s colleges to educate the daughters of Catholic families; and there was also a need for higher education for nuns. There were some movements in various states to provide public institutions of higher education open to all women in the state. Three of these institutions, Douglass College, a part of Rutgers University in New Jersey; Texas Woman’s University; and the Mississippi University for Women, remain today (Harwarth et al., 1997).
Traditionally, there has been little research published about Black women in higher education. Watson and Gregory (2005) pointed out that despite the existence of Historically Black Women’s Colleges, Predominately White Women’s Colleges, and “majority institutions with Black women students, much of the research on Black women in higher education has been overshadowed by research generalizations of women in higher education which mostly reflect the experiences of White women” (p. 21).

The decades after World War II saw an explosion in the numbers of students entering higher education institutions due to returning veterans and, later, the Baby Boomers (Harwarth et al., 1997). Numbers of public higher education institutions increased to meet the new level of demand. During the 1960s and 1970s, in response to social and legislative changes, several institutions of higher education that had previously been all male opened their doors to women. As a result, many women’s colleges either became coeducational, merged with all-male or other coeducational institutions, or closed because of declining enrollment and financial problems related to the increased competition in higher education. Consequently, the number of women’s colleges shrank from over 200 in 1960 to 83 in 1993 (Harwarth et al., 1997). According to Oguntoyinbo’s (2014) study, in the last 50 years the number of women’s colleges has fallen by nearly 75%, from approximately 200 colleges to about 50—a number that continues to drop. She also recorded that women’s colleges educate only about 2% of American women.

**Background of Women’s Colleges**

The first generations of educated women were products of single-sex secondary and undergraduate schools, with few exceptions. One exception was Oberlin College, which became the country’s first co-ed college in 1837 (Kaminer, 1998). The colleges emerged at a time when men’s access to higher knowledge was expanding, but women’s access was still quite limited
During this era, many people believed that it was unnecessary to educate women, whose place was in the home, and that rigorous study could be unhealthy for women (Harwarth et al., 1997). Opponents to the education of women, such as Charles Eliot, president of Harvard, did not believe women were as intellectually sound as men. He stated,

Women’s colleges should concentrate on an education that will not injure women’s bodily powers and functions. It remains to demonstrate what are the most appropriate, pleasing, and profitable studies for women, both from the point of view of the individual and the point of view of society; and this demonstration must be entirely freed from the influence of comparisons with the intellectual capacities and tastes of men. It would be a wonder, indeed, if the intellectual capacities of women were not at least as unlike those of men as their bodily capacities are. (Harwarth et al., 1997, p. 16)

Additionally, Harwarth et al. (1997) posited that social historians:

Attribute the demand for higher education for women in the mid-to-late 19th century to four other societal trends of the time. First, the growth of the common public school system inculcated in girls a desire for further education, particularly girls who had not been able to attend the more expensive seminaries. With the growth of this system of common schools there was a simultaneously increasing demand for teachers. As employment opportunities in elementary and secondary schools grew, higher education for women became more acceptable, and the public acknowledged its necessity. Women were increasingly regarded as better teachers than men; the President of Brown University wrote in 1854 that ‘women have a much greater natural adaptation to the work of instruction than men.’ College-educated men were not meeting these needs, because teaching constituted a relatively low-status occupation. Women were cheaper to hire as public school teachers, too; one historian writes that throughout the 1800s, ‘the salaries of the men teachers were quite commonly from two to four times those paid to women.’

Second, over this period there was also a proliferation of literature for women, promoting women’s literary interests and tendencies to read widely. Moreover, the gaslight and improved oil lamps were making it possible to use the evening hours for reading.

Third, women’s higher education was made possible by an increase in their leisure time, as the industrial revolution brought with it more domestic labor-saving devices: Spinning and weaving were no longer household tasks. And the invention of such labor-saving devices as the cook stove, the sewing machine, and even the match, were freeing women from much household drudgery. (Harwarth et al., 1997, p. 3)

The development of private secondary schools (seminaries) for young women during the early 1800s was the beginning of an interest in furthering educational opportunities for women. Women’s colleges were founded during the mid- and late-19th century in response to a need for
advanced education for women at a time when they were not admitted to most institutions of higher education (Harwarth et al., 1997).

Harwarth et al. (1997) described the reasons for educating young women and the location of the earliest seminaries:

Because a girl might as maid or widow have to earn her living, because marriage was less certain than it had been with the present surplus of females in the population, because training as a teacher helped a woman bring up her children; all these reasons paved the way for the seminaries (p. 1).

The more renowned Seven Sisters schools opened their doors in the last decades of the 19th century and evolved into a female Ivy League, educating the daughters of elites and providing social and professional mobility to some members of the middle class (Harwarth et al., 1997).

Mount Holyoke, founded in 1837 by Mary Lyon as the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, is the oldest of the Seven Sister schools. Lyon saw the limitations of the seminary, particularly its limited financial resources. In 1836, with the assistance of several prosperous church deacons, she founded Mount Holyoke Female Holyoke College. Mount Holyoke is significant because it became a model for a multitude of other women’s colleges throughout the country (Harwarth et al., 1997).

According to Harwarth et al. (1997), the Seven Sisters was the name given to the collection of women’s colleges that included Barnard, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Radcliffe. These schools were aligned with the Ivy League men’s colleges in 1927. Such schools were essential to the 19th-century women’s movement. They not only inspired activism in women and prepared them to work outside the home but also created wage-earning work, as school teaching became one of the few respectable professional options for unmarried females (Kaminer, 1998).
Gordon (1985) noted that presidents or founders of the Seven Sisters used architectural design to express what their goals were for the students. They believed that women needed special environments in which to live that provided more guidance and protection than men students needed. Additionally, the American public needed reassurance that higher education would not injure women’s health or make them less feminine. The architecture served to represent the combined role for women as mother and teacher. Often the classes were held in the same building as the housing, and faculty and female principals closely supervised the women (Gordon, 1985).

The builders of Smith College had similar aspirations, but they implemented a different architectural plan. The Amherst men, who established Smith College in 1875, felt that integration with normal family life and city activities, rather than isolation in one large building, would provide women students with a more normal setting (Gordon, 1985). Smith’s founders built cottages, scattered about the property, in close proximity to the city of Northampton. This village-like design became a model, as Vassar and Wellesley rebuilt, but Bryn Mawr went in a different direction soon after its opening in 1885.

Under the leadership of second president M. Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr’s architecture came to resemble the buildings of contemporary men’s colleges. Thomas wanted to turn out scholars, not cultured ladies. She cared far less for protecting femininity than she did for allowing students privacy, space, and freedom from petty rules. Thomas’s own educational path provides an example of the academic barriers women faced in the late 19th century.

After graduation from Cornell University, Thomas was denied access to graduate study at any American university. The most education she could acquire was non-degree study at Johns Hopkins. Finally, she received a doctorate in literature from the University of Zurich, summa
cum laude. It became evident to her that resources were needed for women to receive an education equal to that of men, and she sought to ensure that Bryn Mawr had rigorous academic standards (Harwarth et al., 1997). The other Sisters followed Bryn Mawr’s lead during the 1890s and early 1900s, and the women’s college campuses came of age (Gordon, 1985).

According to Gordon (1985), magazines like *The Ladies Home Journal* published articles about college girls at play. The stories and pictorials, accompanied by editorials and fiction, were part of a campaign to push educated women away from careers and into domesticity.

By the 1890s, many realized that women college graduates were departing from traditional lifestyles. A sizeable number of alumnae did not marry, and many had life-long commitments to professions or politics. Thus, the popular literature of the day reflected the public’s alarm over the consequences of women’s higher education. Women who made costumes for campus pageants and giggled together at after-hours feasts represented a far less serious social threat than those speaking at suffrage meetings or taking courses in socialism. (Gordon, 1985, p. 305)

Gordon (1985) went on to report that female faculty at the Seven Sisters colleges rejected their role as wardens, eventually establishing themselves as serious scholars. During the 1890s, they began to move off campus, setting up their own professional and social communities. They encouraged students in academic and political pursuits and set an example of female careerism. They battled with the administration and trustees to maintain the rights of students and faculty to an independent, unregulated, scholarly life.

When looking at the development of women’s colleges in the South, Harwarth et al. (1997) noted the schools were influenced by several societal factors: a belief in separate domains for men and women; the influence of religious evangelism; and a need for White women to learn the classics for the sake of status. The Evangelical Protestantism movement invited women to form predominantly female congregations but also established a model of the ideal virtuous woman who upheld piety and femininity. This Protestant influence intersected with the need for
education to bolster and confirm social status. Farnham (1994) noted these schools were more about gentility than utility.

Southerners believed that a liberal arts education was essential for gentility for both sexes. Consequently, families wanted a college education for their daughters to improve their status for marriage. A college education signified a woman’s upper-class status. There was demand for young women to know Greek and Latin in order to read the Bible and better understand Western civilization; and by the late 1800s, White, middle-class women had opportunities to attend seminaries and receive more than a decorous education (Farnham, 1994).

Southern women’s colleges were attended almost exclusively by White women. However, a handful of Black women’s colleges appeared in the post-Civil War years that also made strong educational contributions. Two women’s colleges (now coeducational) were founded in this period: Barber-Scotia in Concord, North Carolina, in 1867, and Huston-Tillotson in Austin, Texas, founded in 1876 (Harwarth et al., 1997). Bennett College, founded in 1873 in Greensboro, North Carolina, was originally a co-ed institution; however, in 1926 Bennett was converted into a liberal arts college for Black women. In Atlanta, Georgia, in 1881, Sophie B. Packard and Harriet Giles, two White women of abolitionist tradition founded Spelman College (Harwarth et al., 1997).

In summary, early women’s colleges provided women both liberal arts and practical training, enabling some graduates to establish careers, pursue social service and activism, and sometimes to combine one or both of these with the more common role of homemaker (Harwarth et al., 1997).
Background of Spelman College

The history of Spelman College traces its roots back to the early American history of Salem, Massachusetts, where its missionary founders, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles, were born (Read, 1961). Founding the college on a specific set of values and progressive ideals illustrates the temperament of New England and the North Central states during the mid-to-late 1800s. Read (1961) maintained it was an era when Christian consciences were probed and decisions forged about slavery, freed persons, and the right of women to be educated. The history also involves the conditions of life in the South for Whites and Blacks in the years following the Emancipation Proclamation. Thus, the period reflects the state of race relations during a time of educational advancement for Blacks.

While the majority of educational opportunities in the South were for Whites, after the Civil War, education was viewed as the key to the emancipation of Southern Blacks and the status of Blacks in the North. According to Watson and Gregory (2005), in 1860 there were approximately 4 million Black slaves; 500,000 free Blacks; and 27 million Whites in the United States. During the 1860s in the South, laws enacted by Whites prohibited formal education of Blacks, particularly post-secondary education. In 1860, over 90% of the South’s Black population was illiterate.

Black women who worked in the master’s home received opportunities to associate with the White master’s family, though not on an equal basis. This interaction provided chances for many house slaves to assimilate ideals and beliefs unknown to enslaved Blacks working in the fields. Education by imitation was the main source of learning and, for many Blacks, perhaps served as an informal introduction to education (Watson & Gregory, 2005). Watson and Gregory (2005) further noted that on January 1, 1863, four million Blacks (two million of whom
were women) were emancipated after 250 years of enslavement. With no education, freed slaves were afforded little or no opportunity for social and economic success in the land of the free. This disadvantage propelled them to obtain an education at any cost, which became one of the most immediate sources of fear for White Americans. In an effort to justify precluding formal education for newly freed Black slaves and free Blacks, Whites continued the proliferation of the following rationales: (1) the alleged intellectual inferiority of Blacks, and (2) the belief that educated Blacks would “get out of their place” and inevitably compete with Whites in the economic, political, and sexual spheres (p. 4).

Despite obstacles from the White population, Black freedmen established numerous organizations in the North and South, such as churches, African American private schools, and fraternal organizations. These infrastructures provided venues for religious worship and the education of children and adults (Watson & Gregory, 2005).

Intrinsic to the higher education of Black women in its early years was the idea that it would provide these women with economic and social opportunities. During the 19th century, Black education was not rigidly divided along gender lines, and the majority of Black women were educated in coeducational institutions (Harwarth et al., 1997).

According to Guy-Sheftall (1981), few stories concerning higher education for women are more awe inspiring than the Spelman story. It is a tale of hardship, struggle, and finally triumph. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, a Black feminist scholar, writer, and editor, is the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women’s Studies and English at Spelman College, in Atlanta, Georgia. She has written about the history of Spelman College and women’s studies in higher education. She shared Spelman’s history in her book Spelman: A Centennial Celebration, 1881–1981.
The story begins when Sophia B. Packard went to the South in 1880 as a representative of the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society (WABHMS) of New England so that she might gain a better knowledge of the plight of freed persons. During her travels, she was disturbed by the extremely difficult conditions under which Blacks were living and especially by the status of Black women. She was a product of female seminaries and a former teacher and administrator of several outstanding New England academies, and she was particularly sensitive to the lack of educational opportunities for Black girls and women. When she became ill after reaching New Orleans, she made an urgent call to her friend, Harriet E. Giles, in Boston. Giles was equally appalled at the condition of Black women during her stay in the South, and both women became convinced that God had called them to work for their elevation (Guy-Sheftall, 1981). They stated, “We do not feel this is our work; it is God’s work” (Read, 1961, p. 20).

Packard and Giles returned to Boston determined to start a school in the South for Black females; hence, the impetus for the founding of Spelman College and its motto, Our Whole School for Christ (Read, 1961).

On April 11, 1881, White missionaries Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles opened Spelman, as it is now named, as Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary (Read, 1961). Instructed by four White, Northern-born teachers, the students took classes in the cold, damp, coal-dusted, basement of an Atlanta church. Their fate changed when two of those teachers visited Cleveland, Ohio, and met with a congregation from a Baptist church in June of 1882 (Higginbotham, 1993). Two members of the congregation, oil magnate John D. Rockefeller and his wife, Laura Spelman, donated funds to the school for building development. When the Rockefellers visited Atlanta to celebrate the third anniversary of the seminary two years later, as
part of the celebration, the trustees renamed the seminary Spelman to honor Mrs. Rockefeller’s abolitionist family (Read, 1961).

In 1915, at the 50th anniversary, Mr. Rockefeller wrote Miss Packard, “I believe in the school and in the good women who have charge of it. I am happy to feel that of all the investments that we have made as a family, Spelman stands among the best” (Read, 1961, p. 175). Many buildings are named for the Rockefeller family, including Sisters Chapel, completed in 1927 in honor of sisters Laura and Lucy Spelman. There, the students attended daily chapel. Decades later, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was one of the most pivotal events in the history of Sisters Chapel, for it was there that he lay in repose. Rates (2010) recounted that many leaders, world citizens, and dignitaries delivered inspiring messages to the women of Spelman in the Sisters Chapel.

Interestingly, among Black educators at the turn of the century there was a debate as to whether Blacks should pursue vocational education or liberal arts education. Booker T. Washington encouraged the development of vocational skills for Blacks that would give them marketable skills in industry while W. E. B. DuBois maintained that Blacks should continue to acquire liberal arts degrees. Watson and Gregory (2005) noted:

Spelman’s founders never agonized over the need to offer their Black female students the Classical education which male students were being offered elsewhere. Ever mindful of the peculiar history of Black women in this country and the realities of their everyday lives, the founders’ primary aim was to provide training for the teachers, missionaries, and church workers. Equally important was the imparting of those practical skills that would make Black women good homemakers and mothers. (p. 9)

Following Washington’s philosophy, during the 1920s both Bennett and Spelman developed vocational programs for women in the form of a home economics curriculum in addition to their liberal arts programs. Notably, however, when Sophia Packard was approached by Dr. Henry Morehouse to make Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary (Spelman) a part of Atlanta
Baptist Seminary (male), she opposed it, writing: “All here are anxious to keep the sexes separated. Spelman is to be a women working for women school. We feel that to elevate the woman is the only salvation of our country” (Guy-Sheftall, 1981, p. 50).

Because Atlanta did not open a Black public high school until 1924, the first generation of Spelman students enrolled in courses equivalent to high school instruction. In 1887, Spelman awarded its first diplomas at this level. Two women received the school’s first baccalaureate degrees in 1901 (Perkins, 1998). Spelman’s curriculum focused heavily on teacher training; although, the school also initiated a nursing program in 1886 and developed a missionary training department in 1891 (Guy-Sheftall, 1981).

According to Guy-Sheftall (1981), in Spelman’s first decades a series of notoriously strict presidents, all Northeastern friends of the Rockefeller family, required students to adhere to the standards of Victorian-era feminine propriety. Students wore hats and gloves in public, and they needed special written permission to travel off campus. Under the title “Domestic Training,” they learned domestic skills like sewing, cooking, and laundry work. The school’s founders believed that former slaves lacked correct work habits, so they demanded that Spelman students rise at 4:30 a.m. each day to wash and iron their clothes, a practice that continued into the 1920s.

Watson and Gregory (2005) asserted that the mission of women’s colleges has always been to educate females in a supportive and nurturing environment where the development of self is most important. Many women’s colleges were known by some as grooming schools that promote ladylike behavior as well as academic excellence, empowerment, and community service. Traditionally, Historically Black Women’s Colleges not only emphasized ladylike behavior but also the teaching of domestic skills, spiritual development, and rigid social controls. The main difference between Historically Black Women’s Colleges (HBWCs) and
Predominately White Women’s Colleges (PWWCs) is that PWWCs focus primarily on issues pertaining simply to gender, while HBWCs focus on how both gender and race affect the lives of Black women.

Spelman’s Victorian-era propriety has evolved into a 21st-century voice. The seminal work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule (1997) in which they interviewed 135 women from a diverse range of ages, socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities, educational histories, and geographic regions revealed that they had not anticipated the word voice to be more than academic shorthand for a person’s point of view. They became aware that voice is a metaphor applicable to many aspects of women’s experience and development. The authors noted that in describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence: “speaking up,” “speaking out,” “not being heard,” “really listening,” “being silenced,” “words as weapons,” “feeling deaf and dumb” (p.18). These words and phrases all had to do with a sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation or connection to others. The women used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development, and the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined (Belenky et al., 1997).

Spelman developed and maintained a tradition of speaking up and speaking out beginning with their activism during the Civil Rights Movement. Students participated in sit-ins and were arrested at businesses in downtown Atlanta in the 1960s (Lefever, 2005). Dr. King, himself, wrote, “A generation of young people has come out of decades of shadows to face naked state power. They are an integral part of the history which is reshaping the world, replacing a dying order with a modern democracy” (Lefever, 2005, Forward).

Spelman women were among those who stepped out of the shadows and made a difference in society. Forty years later, in the spring of 2004, Spelman students ignited
controversy when they protested the presence of rapper Nelly at a bone marrow drive on campus. A group of students declared the content of Nelly’s music videos “misogynistic, and upon hearing news of the protest, the rapper decided not to appear at the drive to register students as bone marrow donors” (Steptoe, n.d.). Furthermore, an alumna recalled another student government sponsored school administrative lock-in to illustrate their support of having a female president.

In the March 2012, Profiles of Diversity Journal, Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, founding director of the Women’s Research and Resource Center and the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women’s Studies at Spelman, informed readers, “From our vantage point, we see ourselves as producing particular kinds of leaders. We are focused on activism leadership as opposed to a generic idea of producing women leaders” (p. 84). Spelman is focused on developing students who see themselves as transformational leaders, not just leaders who get good jobs and earn big incomes (Austin, 2012).

Early Spelman leadership consisted of four White women: Sophia Packard, Harriet Giles, Lucy Hale Tarpley, and Florence Matilda Read. Read’s retirement in 1953 heralded the installation of an African American president, albeit male, Alfred Manley, followed by another African American, Donald Stewart (Watson & Gregory, 2005). In 1987, Johnnetta B. Cole was appointed Spelman’s seventh president, the first Black woman to lead the college that was founded specifically for the education of Black women. She became known as Spelman’s “Sister President” (Cole, 1993, p. 38). Described as a dynamic leader, Dr. Cole led Spelman during a time of heightened visibility as the school’s rankings and endowment increased. She was followed by Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, and the current president, Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, each a Black woman.
Approximately 2,270 students attend classes at Spelman today under the umbrella of the school’s mission:

Spelman College, a historically Black college and a global leader in the education of women of African descent, is dedicated to academic excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and the intellectual, creative, ethical, and leadership development of its students. Spelman empowers the whole person to engage the many cultures of the world and inspires a commitment to positive social change. (Spelman College, 2018a)

Spelman College offers 26 majors and 25 minors, and students can also register with any of the four partner institutions in the Atlanta University Center, including Morehouse College, Morehouse School of Medicine, and Clark Atlanta University (Spelman College, 2018a). Created in 2017, the Dance, Performance, and Choreography Department gives a nod to the 21st century by using a combination of literature, dance, and technology to foster increased awareness of Black feminism. The curriculum of Black Feminist Theory and dance is a blend between the literature of Black female writers and the Black female body. The dance department leadership feels this is the time for Black feminist theory to emerge. Students at Spelman need to be equipped and prepared to navigate or even block challenges that face them. Ellen, an associate professor, said, “It is time for that self-discovery, pride, and ownership” (personal communication, March 13, 2018).

From its humble beginnings at Atlanta’s Friendship Baptist Church, today Spelman is one of the nation’s most highly regarded colleges for women and has long enjoyed a reputation as the nation’s leading producer of Black women scientists. Spelman’s priority is expanding its relevant creativity, depth, and reach to ensure its population of women of color have the tools to face the future (Spelman College 2018a).

While many women’s same-gender colleges have closed or changed admittance criteria (to admit men), there are those that still hold steadfast to the ideal of a women’s college. Marilyn Hammond, interim president of the Women’s College Coalition in Atlanta,
acknowledged that although women’s colleges face some enrollment and financial challenges, many continue to thrive (Oguntoyinbo, 2014). Spelman is one of them.

**Statement of the Problem**

Women’s colleges have an enduring role in educating women; however, according to Guy-Sheftall (1992), when it came to the Black woman scholars found it exceedingly difficult to separate her from the oppressed Black subgroup and to treat her as a distinct entity, possessing a history and culture of her own. Before the study of Black women can flourish, the larger society must be educated to see Black women as distinct historical beings (Guy-Sheftall, 1990).

Additionally, according to Guy-Sheftall (1990), scholars have maintained an interest in analyzing the racial thinking that emerged during the 19th century as a central current in Western thought. While researchers have also explored attitudes toward Blacks during various points in American history, it is difficult to find an assessment of differences in attitudes toward Black males and females. Almost without exception, both sexes are merged together in studies of the development of racist theories.

Guy-Sheftall (1982) also noted the histories of higher education for women usually focus narrowly on the Ivy League Colleges, known as the Seven Sisters; however, Guy-Sheftall argued that no history of women’s education in America would be complete without the stories of the Historically Black Women’s Colleges Spelman and Bennett.

Such authoritative treatises as Thomas Woody’s classic *A History of Women’s Education in the United States*, Louise Shutz Boas’ *Women’s Education Begins: The Rise of Women’s Colleges*, and Mabel Newcomer’s *A Century of Higher Education for American Women*, are similar in their failure to include even a footnote on Spelman and Bennett Colleges, the nation’s oldest and best-known colleges for Black women. (Guy-Sheftall 1982, p. 278)

Spelman and other private women colleges provide a unique environment that is supportive of female leadership roles while co-ed schools tend to be male dominated. It is the
presence of high-status faculty and administrators at Spelman that helps develop strong identities and positive self-images on the part of Black female students (Guy-Sheftall, 1982).

The concept of sisterhood is another unique characteristic at Spelman. In a *Wall Street Journal* article by Belkin (2017), President Mary Schmidt Campbell, Ph.D., provided the following quotes underscoring the uniqueness of a college experience at Spelman:

One of the things that is fundamental to the Spelman culture is the concept of the Spelman sisterhood. It means we certainly expect you to be ambitious for yourself, but we also expect you to be ambitious for each other. At Spelman, that connection begins early and continues beyond graduation. When Spelman students enter school for the first time they walk into a crowd of alumni. Commencement has a similar ceremony. In between, classmates are expected to pull for each other and constantly let one another know they’ve got one another’s back. (p. 1)

Rituals and traditions have been a major part of the sustainability and legacy of that sisterhood. Guy-Sheftall and Bell-Scott (1989) noted:

The value of sisterhood is an overwhelming theme in the socialization process from the moment new students walk on the campus of Spelman. The term sisterhood is used as a metaphor for family and community. One of the traditions requires that new students be paired with one younger alumna and one older alumna. Students, sometimes, do not understand the relevance of rituals and traditions while participating in them. Updated and deliberate research is one way for new generations of students to understand the value of rituals and traditions. (p. 47)

Higginbotham (1993) presented the 1885 poem “Unlikely Sisterhood” written by a White Northern missionary of the Deep River Connecticut Home Mission and printed in their publication *Echo*. The poem describes the attitudes and beliefs of the missionaries who were activists in education for Black women and illustrates Dr. Schmidt’s principle of women having each other’s backs—irrespective of race.

*Unlikely Sisterhood*

We are coming to help you sisters,

With hearts that are loyal and true

To help you gather the harvest,
And bind up the sheaves with you.

In his work *Co-ed or Not? Women’s Colleges Pondering Path to Survival*, Oguntoyinbo (2014) focused on women’s colleges in the United States and whether they needed to consider being coeducational to survive. Much to his surprise, he found that women’s colleges have higher retention and graduation rates. Additionally, in support of women’s colleges, Perry (2000) noted that single-sex women’s colleges have a particularly strong contribution to make. He found that recognizing the distinct pattern of women’s lives and offering role models of success gave confidence and self-esteem to women.

Additionally, Bogart (2010) shared two salient observations: (1) The National Survey of Student Engagement reports that students who attend a women’s college are more likely to obtain doctoral degrees and earn more money after graduation; and (2) Women’s colleges operating today are among the country’s more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse liberal arts colleges, offering generous financial aid packages, which is particularly important in today’s economy.

**Purpose of the Study**

Perkins (1997) revealed that in a 1900 study conducted by African American scholar W. E. B. DuBois on Black college students, DuBois noted that it was easier for a Black male to gain entrance into a White men’s college than for a Black woman to enter a White women’s college. DuBois also discovered that the White women’s colleges were unyielding in their opposition to admitting African American women. DuBois wrote:

Negroes have graduated from Northern institutions. In most of the larger universities, they are welcome and, on the whole, have made good records. In nearly all the Western colleges, they are admitted freely and have done well in some cases, and poorly in others. In one of two larger institutions, and in many of the large women’s colleges [referring to the Seven Sisters], Negroes, while not exactly refused admission, are strongly advised not to apply. (as cited in Perkins, 1997, p. 107)
Hence, Black women, as double minorities, had to attend schools built for them and create their own culture. Additionally, in the last 50 years, the number of women’s colleges has fallen by nearly 75%, from approximately 200 colleges to about 50 (Oguntoyinbo, 2014). Given these facts, one might think that women’s colleges are simply boarding schools that shelter women from the real world and are no longer relevant.

With these facts in mind, the purpose of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives about the institutional culture within Spelman College. In this study, culture is defined as rituals, behaviors, beliefs, and philosophies. The study intends to dispel myths that plague the validity of single-gender colleges and illustrate that women’s colleges continue to play a vital role in educating Black women by exploring the motivation of women who purposely select a single-gender college, how rituals and traditions foster socialization, what is meant by the term sisterhood, and the perspectives of nontraditional age women re-entering college (the Spelman Pauline E. Drake Scholars).

My research utilizes the literature on women’s colleges, Spelman archival literature, and the experiences of alumnae to examine the culture of Spelman College and determine the characteristics that make it a unique learning space for women in the 21st century. For example, high on the list of priorities at Spelman has been the training of Black women for leadership roles; although, the training of teachers was their earliest mission (Guy-Sheftall 1982). Now, Spelman is a leader in STEM curriculums.

The 21st century is a time of social change and more focused gender equality; for example, women of color are no longer excluded from Predominately White Institutions. Women who attend a women’s college have made a specific choice. The major benefit of this
type of experience is that these students are placed at the center of the learning environment. As a Spelman faculty member put it,

You don’t have to dim your light. You never have to do it anyway, but our societal influences are strong, and studies show that girls do dim their light if there are men or boys in class. Here, you can let your light shine. (Carolyn, personal communication, March 26, 2018)

**Theoretical Basis of the Study**

For more than 150 years, women’s colleges have stood at the vanguard of the fight for women’s equality and have educated some of the nation’s most distinguished female leaders (Harwarth et al., 1997). Early history documented how the abolitionist movement impacted the early suffragette movement during the 19th century. In a similar fashion, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a catalyst for the modern women’s movement. Harwarth et al. (1997) cited Chafe,

The Civil Rights Movement both provided a dramatic example of the point which women activists were trying to communicate, and it provided a model of protest which helped bring a women’s movement to life. It thereby gave women a profoundly political picture of their society and underlined the significance of sex consciousness as an organizing principle. Just as the Brown decision had crystalized the issue of protest for Blacks, the Civil Rights Movement illustrated with unmistakable clarity to women the possibility of people uniting on the basis of sex identity to preserve their dignity and secure equal treatment. (p. 23)

Harwarth et al. went on to explain “women began to mobilize to influence not only the creation of legislation, but also the implementation of public policy that would protect women’s rights (p. 23).

However, the aforementioned strides are not captured through the lens of Black women. Taylor (1998) recounted that the historical evolution of Black feminism in the United States began with the Abolitionist Movement. Taylor (1998) citing Yee (1992) affirmed that African American female abolitionists’ collective feminist consciousness blossomed because they
“campaigned for equal rights within the context of organized Black abolitionism” (p. 151).

Sojourner Truth, a famous 19th-century reformer, couched her sentiments in evangelical language. Truth’s narrative and recorded speech, “Ar’nt I a Woman,” highlight a theological justification to abolish slavery and grant equal rights to men and women. She preached that slave status denied Black women motherhood, protection from exploitation, and feminine qualities—God given rights (Yee, 1992). Thus, Truth’s biblically based feminism empowered Black women because she called attention to the intersection of race and gender (Taylor, 1998).

Therefore, in order to better understand the contribution to society that Spelman College provides for Black women, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism will serve as the conceptual framework for this study. However, feminist standpoint theory, from which Black feminist theory evolved, is discussed in the following section. Likewise, critical race theory is discussed because critical race feminism evolved from its basic tenets.

**Feminist Theories**

There are various strands of feminist theories; all place women at the center of a given study, thought process or, analysis. Most importantly, the theories emphasize that the experience of women in society is not the same as that of men. The three theories implemented in this study (feminist standpoint theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism) reflect issues within women’s education. Each theory, in that way, overlaps with another. However, each theory further sharpens the lens from which to view the issue of inequality. Specifically, Black women’s experiences do not mirror those of White women in every instance.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

A feminist standpoint researcher is required to place women at the center of the research process. Harding (2004) pointed out that the social order looks different from the perspective of
women’s lives and women’s struggles. This approach includes acknowledgement of the diversity of women’s lives and learning across race, culture, and class. When a researcher employs a feminist perspective, she seeks to challenge the limitations placed on women’s voices, visibility, and power (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

Feminist standpoint scholars strive to give a voice to members of oppressed groups—namely women—and to uncover the hidden knowledge that women have cultivated from living life on the margins. In other words, these scholars endeavor to observe various issues from their subjects’ standpoints (Brooks, 2007). Additionally, a standpoint is earned through the experience of collective political struggle, a struggle that requires, as Nancy Hartsock puts it, both science and politics (Harding, 2004, p. 8). By way of emphasis of this point, Hartsock uses the label “feminist standpoint” whereas Dorothy Smith uses the label “women’s standpoint,” reflecting the way in which standpoint theory argues for “women’s place” as a starting point for inquiry (Harding, 2004, p. 21).

One example of a standpoint that reflects feminist standpoint theory is women’s suffrage: the right for women to vote. Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone are a few key women credited with leading the suffrage movement by joining the forces of their individual women’s rights movements. Guy-Sheftall (1995) pointed out that Black women are not widely mentioned in early writings about the suffrage movement. Black women are absent; slavery is not mentioned, and generalizations about American womanhood clearly refer to a particular class of White women, thus, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony are invoked. The women’s suffrage movement is typically described as having appeared in two predictably, as the “quintessential feminists” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. xiii). Spelman founders Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles supported the abolitionist movement (Read, 1961). Though
they were White, they were marginalized as a consequence of being women; therefore, opening Spelman was a political achievement, or standpoint, for them.

For the social context of this study, the epistemological stance is feminist epistemology, which is concerned with the way in which gender influences the concept of knowledge and the practices of inquiry and justification. They recognized the bondage from which they are their families had come and accepted the responsibility of being uplifters to their race.

Harding (2004) explained that it is important for the researcher to begin with learning about the lives of the marginalized Spelman.

**Black Feminist Theory**

Cole (1993) stated in *Conversations*:

As much as the conditions and experiences of White women, African American women, and other women of color may be similar, there are very important differences in our circumstances and experiences, differences that defy singular analyses of women’s oppression and blanket dictums about how to achieve gender equality. (p. 93)

Cole’s statement is the crux of the concept of Black feminism. The essence of Black feminism is different from that of mainstream feminism, which ignores feminists who do not fit a White, middle-class demographic. Unlike White, middle-class women, Black women remain in the distinctly unique position in society in which they are marginalized via their sex, class, and race. Prior to contemporary scholars’ efforts to identity variations in women’s lives, feminist theorists suffered from what Rich (1978) described as White solipsism: to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world. Scholars of Black feminism also address intersectionality by exploring the ways in which racism, sexism, and classism affect Black women. For example, Sarah Case, author of *Leaders of Their Race*, described the contrasting meanings of respectability and sexual attitudes for rich White women and poor Black women at
Lucy Cobb Institute and Spelman Seminary. She believed that White women were born virtuous and chaste, while Black women had to be taught how to live a chaste, virtuous existence.

Collins (2000), a major thinker in the Black feminist movement, suggested that Black feminist thought consisted of specialized knowledge created by African American women that defined a standpoint of and for Black women. The representation of Black women’s lived experience and realities is the unique feature of Black feminism; it is not an interpretation. Black feminist theorists, researchers, and scholars aspire to give voice to the American Black woman whose experience and reality remain outside the realm of knowledge for most.

According to Collins (2000), agency and individual perspectives are further lost and oppressed through the use of controlling images. She argued that Black women are often portrayed in one of three ways: as a hoochie, a mammy, or a matriarch. As such, the Spelman founders’ promoted chastity and sexual purity to avoid the stigma of a hoochie and to train their students to become leaders of their race.

Collins (2000) also noted that if a Black woman chooses solidarity with her race, her identity and struggles as a woman are lost. On the other hand, if she chooses solidarity with her gender, her unique perspective as a woman of color is lost.

**Critical Race Feminism**

Critical race feminism (CRF) was developed from the tenets of critical race theory (CRT). Critical race theory began as a form of legal scholarship that evolved in the 1970s in response to the stalled progress of traditional civil rights litigation to produce meaningful racial reform (Taylor, 1998). CRT is grounded in the realities of the lived experience of racism and demonstrates, with wide consensus among Whites, that African Americans and others are worthy of suppression. It recognizes and confronts a White supremacist model. CRT scholars embrace
the subjectivity of perspective and openly acknowledge that perceptions of truth, fairness, and justice reflect the mindset, status, and experience of the knower (Taylor, 1998).

Some critical race theorists started the process of linking CRT to education, calling for the authentic voices of people of color and raising critical questions about educational research and re-segregation practices, such as tracking (Taylor, 1998). The use of CRT when examining the entire process of education (from preschool to higher education) entails scrutinizing the insights, concerns, and questions students of color have about their educational experiences, whether they are in elementary school or graduate programs. However, according to Wing (1997), similar to how White males in critical legal studies excluded the voices and experiences of people of color in their efforts, often CRT was dominated by men’s experiences, excluding the perspectives of women of color. However, CRT’s founder, Derrick Bell, reached the conclusion that “Black people must come to realize that our greatest strength, our salvation secret, if you will, is Black women” (Wing, 1997, p. xiv).

Additionally, feminist legal theorists highlighted the viewpoints of White and upper-class women but assumed that the gendered experiences of White women and women of color were identical in character. Evans Winters and Esposito (2010) posited, critical race feminism as a theoretical lens and movement purports that women of color’s educational experiences, thus perspectives, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of White women. Scholars of critical race feminism focus on the lives of women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to race, gender, and class. (p. 21)

Because of its deliberate examination of the intersection of race, class, and gender in the legal sphere and the broad experiences of women of color, the premise of critical race feminism is distinct from, but at times, intersects with CRT (Wing, 1997).

Critical race feminism in education is beneficial to the investigation of and theory building around educational issues impacting Black female students in the following way:
Within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression; Critical race feminism asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color (i.e., anti-essentialist); Critical race feminism is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth; and Critical race feminism calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression. (Evans-Winter & Esposito, 2010, p. 21)

For the scope of this study, using the lens of critical race feminism revealed that the early Spelman Seminary was grounded in an essentialist concept: that one authentic voice exists. However, in this instance, it was a race of women who were viewed as identical for Christian conversion, education, and social uplift.

Additionally, CRF uses CRT’s method of storytelling to understand the lives of Black women, and the study’s participants were able to tell authentic stories about their educational experience at Spelman. The practice of storytelling allows traditionally marginalized and disempowered groups, such as women and people of color, to reclaim their voices. In addition, by laying claim to personal stories, oppressed peoples are able to create their own sphere of theorized existence, and thus remove themselves from the marginalized position to which the dominant society has relegated them. The lessons of life are learned faster and told better by those who have experienced the (Amoah, 1997, p. 85).

Additionally, Taylor (1998) asserted that the tenets of the CRT began to extend into to such areas as sociology and women’s studies. As a form of oppositional scholarship, CRT challenges the experience of Whites as the normative standard and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color. This call to context insists that the social and experiential context of racial oppression is crucial for understanding racial dynamics, particularly the way that current inequalities are connected to earlier, more overt practices of racial exclusion.

CRT is grounded in the realities of the lived experience of racism and demonstrates, with wide consensus among Whites, that African Americans and others are worthy of suppression. It
recognizes and confronts a White supremacist model. CRT thus embraces this subjectivity of perspective and openly acknowledges that perceptions of truth, fairness, and justice reflect the mindset, status, and experience of the knower (Taylor, 1998).

**Research Question**

The research study’s questions are:

(RQ1) What are the components that shape Spelman’s institutional culture, and

(RQ2) What makes it a unique learning space for Black women?

**Significance of Study**

The mission of women’s colleges has always been to educate young women in a supportive and nurturing environment where the development of self is most important (Watson & Gregory, 2005). While development of self is a priority, it is coupled with the concept of sisterhood—an abstract term which means “having your classmates’ back” (p. 145).

Uncontested leadership is another characteristic of women’s colleges. Gender inequality does not exist within the walls of a women’s college. Feminism is not clothed in negativity; it is a regular topic that intersects all aspects of college life and prepares women for their postsecondary lives. Former Spelman College president, Florence Read, stated her college stressed, “You learn by leading” (Read, 1961, p. 69). As such, at a women’s college, all opportunities for leadership are open to women. There is no competition with men because a patriarchal society has proclaimed them as designated leaders. That said, women are encouraged to excel without the punitive impact of sexism.

While the specific focus of this study is on women, the act of looking out for another person is applicable to any campus culture with authentic and dedicated administration and faculty leadership. First generation students, especially minority students in a Predominately
White College environment, could benefit from a deliberate, supportive and consistent focus on their personal well-being and academic achievement in the form of mentoring. To blend mentoring and leadership, coed colleges campuses might look at implementing a servant leadership program based on Robert Greenleaf’s concept of servant leadership. According to Greenleaf (Greenleaf.org), servant leadership is the natural feeling that one has of desiring to serve others. It seeks to develop individuals who ensure that the need others’ needs are met. Such a program enhances the leadership skills of students who are motivated by a concern for the welfare of others while simultaneously teaching them how to lead.

Finally, in today’s world of culture wars and divergent opportunities, people who are marginalized often fall from the gaze of society, and we need to hear their voices. Thus, the student experiences and strong feminist training in Spelman’s setting needs to be heard in order to promote favorable changes within society.

**Researcher’s Statement and Assumptions**

According to Renn (2017), the outcomes of qualitative research depend substantially on the positionality of the researcher, and it is essential in feminist standpoint and transnational feminist perspectives to understand the researcher’s subjectivity. Based on my experience and observation as a parent whose daughter attended Spelman, the perspective within which I conceived this study is rooted in a position of advocacy for the cogency of women’s colleges amidst the diverse options offered to women today.

To clarify, after my daughter’s enrollment in Spelman, I joined the Parent Association Board and worked in the capacity of Regional Co-Coordinator for the Great Lakes Region. In this role, I was required to attend an annual meeting with the president and executive administration of the college. These opportunities afforded a bird’s-eye view of the college’s
commitment and dedication to equipping young women with the tools needed to empower themselves. One example was the awareness of the college to address the increasing number of first-generation students who excelled academically in high school but lacked the social capital to fully embrace the feeling of belonging.

Consequently, for three years during Fall Break (until our funding ran out) two other administrators and I (from our urban, low-income high school) took ten junior and senior students from our girl’s group “Project Hope” to Spelman (via chartered bus). We wanted to expose this group of would-be first-generation students to the support, nurturing, and encouragement that is available to them in an environment such as Spelman. At first, their view of a women’s college was negative. They perceived it as living a nun’s life, but they came away with a more positive perspective.

As my daughter matriculated through Spelman, I observed a young woman, who graduated from a high school class of 24, become more empowered, confident, and knowledgeable about not only herself as a woman but also her heritage and the wider world. Today, she is an honor graduate of a top tier law school practicing in a corporate firm in a southern metropolis. While not for everyone, the focused support, opportunities for leadership, ability to exercise voice, and build confidence in an environment built especially for women are elements of a college education that should be at least considered by college-bound women today.

Additionally, I attended a Historically Black College and University (HBCU); however, my experience was from a co-ed perspective; the feminist perspective was not addressed in any way shape or form. I did not miss it because I did not know what I was missing. However, in reflection, perhaps it would have shaped my thinking about many areas of my life.
Finally, I am an African American woman researcher who is currently studying Spelman College as an example of a Historically Black Women’s College. Like the women in this study, I am a double minority. My background as a life-long secondary educator provides the foundation for my love of learning for others and for myself. As a critical researcher, I am studying feminism and how education can shape the lives of women, and this study will yield the opportunity to speak about a facet of it.

The volunteer work I performed at Spelman offered somewhat of an insider status, and I came to realize that my value and belief system fits and aligns with that of Spelman. I have a profoundly positive resonance with the education my daughter received there; however, I am open to hearing other voices about their experiences, both positive and negative, if that is applicable.

**Summary of Chapter 1**

In this chapter, I explained my motivation and positionality for research and the background of women colleges in general as well as the history of Spelman College in particular. I communicated that the study problem is situated in exclusion: the African American college for women is not included in the literature as White women’s colleges have been. The purpose of the study, therefore, was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of alumna of Spelman College. Because the study’s subject is a Black women’s college, the theoretical framework was Black feminist theory and critical race feminism theory. The research question promoted this quest to discover what aspects within the culture of Spelman College make it a unique learning space for women. The process of that discovery will lead us to the significance of the study: hearing alumna voices about their experiences and strong feminist training that could promote a favorable societal change. I approached this study as an educator
and student whose experiences with Spelman have been favorable, but I have applied an
objective ear while hearing other voices. Chapter 2, the Literature Review, offers a glimpse of
the work of authors whose scholarship supports the study and was integrated into the study.
CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Women’s colleges have a respected role in the education of American women. They have prepared women for leadership roles in society throughout their history and have adjusted their curricula and focus as women have entered new arenas in the workforce. The literature surrounding the culture of women’s colleges covers a spectrum of writing that captures the essence, myths, and challenges pertaining to the founding, existence, and sustainability of these storied institutions.

Hayes and Flannery (2007) related that most adult education literature barely touches the surface on the subject of women’s learning. The authors, in their research, discovered the existing literature fails to go deeply into what women are saying about their learning. That is, the vast amount of literature delves into women’s programming and/or their struggle to be equal to men, but it does not describe how women learn through their daily lives—in other words, where they reside as women in society.

According to Irving and English (2011), theoretical developments in the field of transformative learning have progressed significantly over the past two decades, yet little attention has been paid to women’s experiences of transformative learning and to the issues of race, class, and gender. Additionally, Irving and English (2011) posit that even though Mezirow’s (1978) empirical work on transformation started with women returning to college after a hiatus, neither his deliberation in that study nor his more recent work have focused specifically on women.
Finally, Hayes (2000) noted that to understand women’s learning, it is important to understand how they respond to the texts and curriculum they encounter in relation to gender, race, class, and other social structures.

For the scope of this study, I discussed the theories that guide the study, the contrast between Black and White early southern private women’s college; the concept of sisterhood; affirmation, and mentoring. I also shared literature highlighting Spelman’s history; exclusion, racism, and sexism in higher education; issues of inclusion, and women who return to college. Finally, I discussed science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education (STEM) in women’s education, as well as issues of social context, culture, and politics.

**Past Is Prologue**

As previously noted, women of any race were denied entry into most men’s colleges. The Harwarth, Maline, and DeBra study (1997) also informed the reader:

As women rights movement leaders called attention to their status as second-class citizens, they naturally looked to education as a means of attaining the political and legal goals of equality. The colleges and universities for young men were the obvious standard for comparison. The reformers interested in educational equality asked why there could not be similar institutions for women. (p. 4)

However, the women leaders’ concerns about second-class citizenship and educational equality did not include Black women. Black women (or men) were not even thought of as citizens by most of America’s population. According to Guy-Sheftall (1981), the 11 young women who made up Spelman’s first class were former slaves or their daughters.

Case (2017) described the educational divide for women who attended the (White) Lucy Cobb Institute and the (Black) Spelman Seminary. Cobb welcomed White women of the Old South planter aristocracy following its opening in 1859. Its goal was to continue the culture of the planter elite, the ideals of the Confederacy, before and especially after the Civil War. Therefore, Lucies, as the students were nicknamed, learned French, Latin, Greek, music, and art
as well as that their “behavior, deportment, and reputation signified sexual purity, and class status” (Case, 2017, p. 12). More importantly for their culture, they learned their role in ensuring pure bloodlines, to help maintain White supremacy.

Accordingly, while the Spelmanites’ education was industrial and academic, they also learned character virtues, chastity, and respectability. In particular, they learned that individual respectability could be used to demonstrate the “worthiness of Black women as a whole, and the readiness of African Americans as a group for full citizenship rights and privileges” (Case, 2017, p. 12). However, Case (2017) asserted that respectability differed by race: “For White women, respectability meant behavior, deportment, and reputation that signified sexual purity and class status. For Black women, respectability was about defying and overcoming stereotypes of all Black women as sexually aggressive and generally uncouth” (p. 13). Collins (2000) used this stereotype to describe an image of oppression for Black women: the welfare mother “who represents a woman of low morals and uncontrolled sexuality, factors identified as the cause of her impoverished state” (p. 271).

The early Spelman Seminary students were unabashedly aided by White New England missionaries and by wealthy White philanthropists to acquire an education. However, during the early 19th century there was also a body of Black “race women” (or club women) who were advocating for the empowerment of Black women in daily life as equal citizens. Cooper (2017) defined race women as Black women thinkers on matters of Black women’s lives.

One notable race woman was Anna Julia Cooper who was described as “a nineteenth-century southern Black woman who found the courage and the audacity to challenge the thinking of Black male preachers, White male philosophers, and early White women feminists” (Cooper,
Extra (2018), described Cooper as, “The Black feminist who argued for intersectionality before the term existed” (p. 1). Beverly Guy-Sheftall in (May, 2012) shared,

I was literally awestruck when I read Cooper’s insightful and original pronouncement which she wrote long before there was a discourse that scholars would later identify as Black feminist theory: The Colored woman today occupies a unique position in this country. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and as yet, an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both. (p. xii)

According to Guy-Sheftall (1995), it was at St. Augustine College where an “early manifestation of the sensitivity to sexism was Cooper’s protesting female exclusion from Greek classes which were open only to male theology students” (p. 8). She appealed to the principal and was finally granted permission to enroll in the class as the lone female. Her experiences with respect to male privilege at St. Augustine’s awakened a sensitivity in her to the urgent need for gender equality in the educational arena (Guy-Sheftall, 1995).

Her academic ambition led her to earn a doctorate at the Sorbonne in 1925 (in her 60s) and hold several leadership roles at educational institutions. However, she was also a proponent for home hearth and took pride in creating a comfortable space in which to live and entertain. According to Lemert and Bhan (1998), her domestic inclination caused some activists to question her credibility. Nonetheless, like many women activists of the 19th century, she was part of the club movement and worked with other Black women, such as Mary Church Terrell, to address such issues as domestic violence and educational inequality (Extra, 2018).

In her 1892 collection of essays, A Voice from the South, Cooper sent out an [sic] radical call for a version of racial uplift that centered Black women and girls. She made a “plea for the Colored Girls of the South” in which she argued, “There is material in them well worth your while, the hope in germ of a staunch, helpful, regenerating womanhood on which, primarily, rests the foundation stones of our future as a race” (para. 4).
Cooper (2017) concluded the term race woman has no uniform meaning, but it does name and help to make visible multiple generations of Black women who dedicated their lives to the Black freedom struggle, “not only by theorizing and implementing programs of racial uplift but also by contesting the gendered politics of racial knowledge production and pushing back against limiting notions of Blackness and womanhood” (p. 184).

Additionally, Cooper (2018) offered food for thought regarding intersectionality, “What does it look like for Black women to move freely through space when we are always confronting the precariousness of life at the intersections of race and gender, of class and mental health, of love and dreams”?

Historically, African American sorority women have played a leading role in supporting and furthering the education within their communities. Gasman (2005) described their efforts as one of the major arenas of Black self-help and educational advancement. The progress that Black women in education and the professions in the late-19th and early-20th centuries were not felt on the level of the individual but in the growing consciousness of Black women as a group (Gasman, 2005).

According to Giddings (1988), sorority leadership shaped the members to be agents of change; a sorority’s leadership educated members about the educational, political, and legislative issues of the time. Their work collectively has contributed to social change movements in the United States, including the suffrage movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the antiwar movement, and changing the racial climate for African Americans.

From another historical perspective, Kaminer (1998), a graduate of Smith, asserted in her article, “The Trouble with Single Sex Schools,” that all female colleges fed the ambition of women to work outside the home, not just stay home to “produce reasonable, responsible male
citizens” (p. 1). Kaminer (1998) was concerned that education also contributed to women’s restlessness and impatience with domesticity. It may or may not have produced better mothers, but it did seem to produce fewer mothers because young female secondary-school graduates of the mid-1800s tended to marry later than their uneducated peers or not at all. Responding to those who did not support equal opportunities for women in the early 1900s, the president of Bryn Mawr, M. Carey Thomas, famously remarked “Our failures only marry” (Thomas, 2016 p. 1, emphasis added).

**Exclusion, Racism, and Sexism in Higher Education**

For all the unity the Seven Sister Colleges espoused, based on their exclusion from men’s colleges, the “sisterhood” did not automatically extend itself to African Americans (Perkins, 1998). In *The Racial Integration of the Seven Sister Colleges*, Perkins (1998) surmised:

> As many White women sought parity in education and other aspects of American life, they in turn, often denied the same to African American women. Black women found themselves unwanted and often and frequently barred from most White women’s organizations and activities. (p. 104)

In a 1900 study conducted by African American scholar W.E.B. Dubois on Negro students, he noted that the “White women’s colleges were unyielding in their opposition to admitting African American women” (1911, p. 22).

Perkins (1998) acknowledged that some of the colleges admitted Black students as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, while others did so under intense pressure decades later. Vassar officials felt the presence of African Americans would detract from the image it sought to project as an institution for the aristocratic and genteel woman.

Because pictures were not a requirement on the applications for admissions, schools would not know the women were Black until they arrived. Housing discrimination was always a challenge, leading students to find accommodations off campus with Black families. However,
this aspect of college life did not paralyze them. They were excellent students and participated in campus activities (Perkins, 1998).

Admittedly, the Seven Sisters experience set them apart from other women of their race. The experience gave them the freedom, exposure, and opportunity to prove themselves academically with Whites and opened a wide range of career opportunities such as medicine, science, and law. The Black Seven Sister graduates, unlike most of their White counterparts, married and maintained careers because they knew they were expected to be a credit to their race (Perkins, 1998).

The Case for Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Feminist Theory

Black people must come to realize that the race’s greatest strength and salvation is the Black woman, and “so often they have functioned without seeking the limelight of leadership roles that men receive; therefore, they often perform from self-imposed subordinate positions.

~ Derrick Bell

Black feminist theory and critical race feminist theory developed out of the need to separate Black women’s experiences from those of White women and Black men. In this section, a discussion of the literature highlights the conditions under which Black women exist – prompting the creation of theories to better interpret their experiences.

Black Feminist Theory

The early 1960’s Women’s Liberation Movement’s perspective applied a one-size fits all lens to women’s issues by assuming all women shared the same concerns. The movement perceived women as one homogenous group. As such, White feminist did not have a clue about the racial differences that created different and unique experiences. Noting that Black women did not fit into the box prescribed for all women, Black feminists reacted and created a theory that fit their historical being in America because White feminists failed to acknowledge that
throughout American history Black women have been oppressed by White women, White men, and Black men.

_In Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism_ (1982), bell hooks criticized White women for making their social status identical with that of the Black woman.

And it was in the context of endless comparisons of the plight of women and Blacks that they revealed their racism. In most cases, this racism was an unconscious, unacknowledged aspect of their thought, suppressed by their narcissism -- a narcissism which so blinded them that they would not admit two facts: one, that in a capitalist, racist, imperialist state there is no one social status women share as a collective group; and second, that the social status of White women in America has never been like that of Black women or men. (p. 136)

Additionally, hooks (2015) noted that although the recent women’s movement called attention to the Black woman’s racist and sexist oppression; they tended to romanticize it by acknowledging Black women are victimized and simultaneously praise their strength. “They imply that though Black women are oppressed, they manage to circumvent the impact of oppression by being strong” (p. 6). Moreover, according to hooks (2015), most White female writers who considered themselves feminist, revealed in their writing they had been socialized to accept and perpetuate racist ideology. In bell hooks’ essay, “Racism and Feminism” (2001), she argued that “every movement in America from its earliest origin to the present day has been built on a racist foundation” (p. 124). “White women,” she maintained, “have absorbed, supported, and advocated racist ideology and individually acted as racist oppressors in various spheres of American life” (p. 124).

Jan Montefiore (1987) confirmed hooks’ comments:

It is true that White, middle-class feminists (including myself) did not begin to understand the complexity and bitterness of the experiences endured by our colonized, immigrant, black, mestiza, and coloured sisters until the latter started, often angrily, to challenge our ignorance. (p. 196)
Furthermore, hooks (2015) noted, the upper- and middle-class White women leaders of the Women’s Movement failed to emphasize the patriarchal power that men use to dominate women. She surmised White women were so focused on the disparity between White/male/White female economics status as an indication of the negative impact of sexism that they drew no attention to the fact that poor and lower-class men are as able to oppress and brutalize women as any other group in American society. Moreover:

The labeling of the White male patriarch as a chauvinist pig provided a convenient scapegoat for Black male sexists. They could join with White and Black women to protest against White male oppression and divert attention away from their sexism, their support of patriarchy, and their sexist exploitation of women. (hooks, 2015, p. 87)

In essence, Black feminism developed because when Black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of Black women. When women are talked about, racism militates against a recognition of Black female interests. When Black people are talked about, the focus tends to be on Black men, and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on White women. (hooks, 2015, p. 7)

Collins (1995) acknowledged in the essay, *The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought* that while such activists as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Fannie Lou Hamer were visible distinguished African American activists who yielded a sustained resistance to Black women’s oppression within entwined systems of race and gender, their efforts were nurtured and supported by “ordinary African American women, who through strategies of everyday resistance, created a powerful foundation for this more visible Black feminist activist tradition” (p. 338). The shared resistance among African American women sustained the shared standpoint among Black women about the meaning of oppression and the actions that Black women can and should take to resist it. However, Black women’s everyday acts of resistance challenge two prevailing approaches to studying the consciousness of oppressed groups. The first approach claims that:

subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression, and the second approach assumes that the
oppressed are less human than their rulers and, therefore, are less capable of articulating their own standpoint. (Collins, 1995, p. 338)

This means that the oppressed have a flawed consciousness about their own subordination. They understand the rationalizations of the dominant culture but are not psychologically able or equipped to understand their own oppression. The oppressed are not able to affirm their own position, because society has labeled them as less human than their rulers. They are incompetent to completely define their oppression, but they understand how they are defined by society and accept it. However, according to Patricia Hill Collins (1995), this approach does not apply to African-American women even though she is categorized into an oppressed group.

In the essay, Collins (1995) provided avenues for Black women to create a “self-defined standpoint on their own oppression” (p. 339). First, Black women’s status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences offering them a different view of reality that is not offered to other groups. Second, these experiences provide a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning the material reality. One key reason that standpoints of oppressed groups are discredited and suppressed by the dominant society is that self-defined stand points can stimulate oppressed groups to resist domination (Collins, 1995). Collins related the case of Annie Adams, a southern Black woman who shared how she became involved in the civil rights movement.

When I first went into the mill we had segregated water fountains. Same thing about the toilets. I had to clean the toilets for the inspection room and then, when I got ready to go to the bathroom, I had to go all the way to the bottom of the stairs to the cellar. So, I asked my boss man, “What’s the difference? If I can go in there and clean them toilets, why can’t I use them?” Finally, started to use that toilet. I decided I wasn’t going to walk a mile to go to the bathroom. (p. 340)

In this case, Adams found the standpoint of the:

Boss man inadequate and developed one of her own and acted upon it. In doing so, her actions exemplify the connections between experiencing oppression, developing a self-defined standpoint in that experience, and resistance. (Collins, 1995, p. 340)
Black feminist thought justifies the belief that Black women can think independently and provide a different view of their standpoint than the one society has established and defined to them. If this awareness is constantly expressed, Black women can think of ways that will allow them to become more powerful against society.

Paula Giddings’ (1995) *The Last Taboo* is an analysis of the impact of persistent silences within the Black community on issues relating to sexuality and the Black woman. Specifically, Giddings discussed the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas case. She noted that racial solidarity is not synonymous with racial loyalty because solidarity, it seems, requires suppressing information about any African American of standing regardless of their political views or character flaws (Giddings, 1995). As the messenger of this new idea, Anita Hill earned the ill-will of a large segment of the African American community. More at issue than her truthfulness or Clarence Thomas’s character or politics was whether she should have testified against another Black person, especially a Black man nominated to sit on the Supreme Court. Giddings noted that for many African Americans, the inappropriateness was a Black woman’s commitment to a gender issue superseded what was largely perceived as racial solidarity. Giddings (1995) reported that perhaps the greatest taboo was:

> The disclosure of not only of a gender but also a sexual discourse, unmediated by the question of racism. What Hill reported to the world was a Black-on-Black sexual crime involving a man of influence in the mainstream community. (p. 414)

For Black women, the accumulated effects of assault and the inability to eradicate negative social and sexual images of their womanhood had powerful ideological consequences. To protect themselves, Black women created a culture of dissemblance. Giddings (1995) quoting Hine defined this as “the behavior or attitudes of that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives from themselves and their
As Anita Hill’s experience demonstrated, Black women who speak on assault issues are not likely to be believed. Giddings (1995) maintained,

> In the meantime, increasing aggression; date rape on college campuses that tend to go unreported by Black women; the number of children having children; the plague of domestic violence; the breakup of families; and the spread of sexual transmitted diseases among African Americans when we have more “rights” than ever before tells us that gender issues are just as important, if not more so, in the Black community as racial issues have always been. (p. 425)

Nonetheless, Anita Hill’s courageous testimony moved the needle and created clarity on the needed transformation about issues of gender with the Black community.

African American women have been passionate about education and consummate education builders for over a century (Wing, 1995). Despite racist and sexist treatment in a variety of educational contexts, they have continued to struggle for equal access, fair treatment, and images of themselves within the academy.

Margaret Walker Alexander (1995), best known for her novel, *Jubilee* and her poem *For My People*, shared in the essay *Black Women in Academia* she did not notice sexism growing up in the South because of the blatant nature of racism, but after she returned to graduate school for her doctorate, she began to notice discrimination against women. Hailing from a family of teachers, she and her sisters followed the tradition. She described one of her sisters as suffering triple discrimination: she was Black, a woman, and had was an early victim of polio, and for a long time there was question as to whether she could be appointed to teach. However, they argued, if Franklin Roosevelt [president at that time] could run the country from a wheelchair, her sister could teach. Her sister taught in the same school district until she retired, earned two graduate degree and was routinely denied the position of primary school supervisor.

Walker Alexander earned bachelor and master’s degrees from Northwestern and her Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. She taught at Jackson State University in Mississippi for
most of her career. She noted her teaching career had been full of conflict, insults, humiliations, and disappointments. In every area where she succeeded in making a creative contribution to the college, she was replaced by a man, and usually one not as qualified as she. She recounted telling the dean, “I had worked for over 20 years at Jackson State, and although it may have been profitable enough to meet my bills for the barest necessities, it had not been pleasant for a single day” (Walker Alexander, 1995, p. 460).

Guy-Sheftall (1995) arrived at the conclusion that the “continued development of African American scholars, often devalued by the larger community and frequently underappreciated or ignored with our own communities, is critical for both self-understanding and the survival of the group” (p.451).

**Critical Race Feminist Theory**

Critical race feminism evolved from critical legal theory, feminist legal theory, and critical race theory. According to Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010), the theory “legal and academic stratagem for studying and eradicating race, class, and gender oppression is educational in situations” (p. 19). Critical race feminist theory emphasizes the multiplicity of voices of women of color unlike the constructs before it. It focuses on the intersectionality in the lives of women of color. Kimberlé Crenshaw, law professor and social theorist, first coined the term intersectionality in her 1989 paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.* The concept of intersectionality is description of the way multiple oppressions are experienced.

Therefore, critical race feminist theory, if used in an educational context, can potentially center educational discourse on the lives of female students of color just as it has done within in law. Specifically, as is illustrated in the research of Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010), critical
race feminism can impact Black female students by maintaining that the perspectives and experiences of females of color vary from those of males of color and White females. Additionally, critical race feminism can benefit Black female students by focusing on the multiple forms of discrimination they face as a result of the intersections of race, class, gender within a larger system structured by patriarchy and oppression. Through another lens, critical race feminism can benefit Black girls by supporting anti-essentialist standards of identity, by maintaining a “multidisciplinary” scope; and, requiring practices that simultaneously analyze and combat gender and racial oppression (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

In Brief Reflections Toward a Multiplicative Theory and Practice of Being, Wing (1997), introduced what is known as “multiplicative identity” (p. 27). She discussed how the many identities and discriminations that face women of color should be theoretically analyzed in terms of their multiplicative rather than additive nature. For example, Wing described herself as being young x Black x female x wife x mother x international lawyer x professor x activist: a holistic one person, and not Black + female as characterized by White feminist theorists. Thus, the experiences of Black women whether in legal academia or anywhere else, might reflect the basic mathematical equation that one times one truly does equal one (Wing, 1997).

Wing (1997) reflected, “On a daily basis I feel overt discrimination on one or more of those levels” (p. 27). As an illustration, Wing recounted how at an airline ticket counter, she was asked for multiple pieces of ID before receiving the requested seat upgrade. When she asked why, the ticket agent replied, “because you don’t look like you could be a Professor” (Wing, 1997, p. 28). Wing explained this example is only one of the many spirit crushers that Black women face which can destroy the psyche. Moreover, Wing (1997) stressed that having a multiplicative existence is not negative but means that the lives of women of color were
positively diverse. She concludes the essay by reminding Black women that they can no longer afford to think of themselves or let the law think of them as merely the sum of separate parts that could be added together or subtracted from until a White male or female stands before them (Wing, 1997).

The experiences of women of color are specific to each person. In her essay, *Is It Better to Speak*, Angela Gilmore (1997) contributed to the understanding of race, class, and gender by focusing on sexual orientation, “a subject relatively ignored even within critical race theory” (Wing, 1997, p. 9). Gilmore (1997) shared that the title and subject of the essay stemmed from a poem written by the late Black lesbian Audre Lourde, *A Litany for Survival*: “And when we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard; nor welcomed, but when we are silent, we are still afraid. So better it is to speak, remembering we were never meant to survive” (p. 54).

Gilmore reflected that she while in a predominately White law school, she fared well academically but experienced a sense of dissonance because of her gender, sexual orientation and her race. She noted that she worked very hard to appear heterosexual; however, with progressive attitudes about sexuality. When she attended gay events, she attended under the cover of being interested in the subject and was always the only Black. In fact, she did not know any Black lesbians.

In law school, she recalled, the only things she learned about sexual orientation was that as lesbian she would be denied the right to marry, her sexual orientation could be criminalized, and employers could discriminate against lesbians and gay men, so she kept quiet and remained quiet after graduating and joining a law firm (Gilmore, 1997).

Gilmore revealed that she wrote this essay not long after she entered law teaching and not long after she discovered the legal scholarship of women of color such as Regina Austin,
Kimberle Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Mari Matsuda, Judy Scales-Trent, and Patricia Williams, and of lesbians such as Patricia Cain and Rhonda Rivera (Gilmore, 1997).

The affirming writings of these women allowed her to see that women of color and lesbians not only belong in law schools and on law school faculties, but that they also need to be vocal about the ways in which the law and law schools silence them and students. Reading the works of scholars helped her realize that a Black lesbian can and should contribute to law teaching and legal scholarship. Their scholarship has empowered Gilmore to break through her silence and speak up about her multiple identities. She concluded that if she did not speak up, she would be essentializing all women, all Blacks, all Black women as heterosexual; thereby, silencing gays and lesbians.

Troutman and Jiménez (2016) use the work of bell hooks as a foundation for designing and implementing feminist pedagogies and practices for teaching Black feminism in both high school and in undergraduate classes. In Lessons in Transgression: #BlackGirlsMatter and the Feminist Classroom, the authors shared the journey of two young women of color in their feminist classrooms who, as a result of reading hooks, employ a range of literacies—including blogging, public speaking, and campus activism to participate in movement building within intersectional and feminism in general, and #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName in particular (Troutman & Jiménez, 2016).

Troutman and Jiménez, queer women of color, are secondary- and college-level educators at a small progressive, private high school and a large public research university. As feminist educators, they are inspired by hooks’ radical vision of releasing schools from the grip of imperialist, White supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (Troutman & Jiménez, 2016, p. 8). They believe that as teachers within a high school and university setting there is value in sharing how
hooks’ work in both environments can be a model for a continuum of learning by creating spaces where feminist education is as relevant for secondary students as it is for young adults in college. Troutman and Jiménez (2016) acknowledged that if educators truly are committed to answering hooks’ call to create a “mass-based educational movement to teach everyone about feminism” (p. 9), then we must begin by partnering with each other across secondary and higher education as teachers and scholars.

When designing Lessons in Transgressions, Troutman and Jiménez (2016) incorporated the following principles in regard to feminist pedagogy: (a) a commitment to education that is fed by a deep ethic of love and care for students, keeping at the forefront of this love their learning, their agency, and their freedom; (b) the use intersectional, women of color feminisms as their standpoint; (c) the centering marginal voices and knowledges in their work because doing so is politically important in the development of student agency; (d) the recognition of #BlackLivesMatter as an inclusive movement that includes Black girls and women, Black queer and transgender people and all Black people along the gender spectrum, poor Blacks, Blacks who are incarcerated, Black people with disabilities, Black undocumented people and all those belonging to the Black diaspora; (e) the blending of teaching, activism, and writing with ideas, concepts, and references to bell hooks’ work, both in print and in media, because it remains relevant and revolutionary both for the teachers and for the students; and (f) a belief that feminism is for everybody (Troutman & Jiménez, 2016).

In addition to reading and analyzing hooks’ work, the students in the study were able to participate in live or video sessions with hooks and Melissa Harris Perry. The secondary student was able to personally engage with bell hooks and Melissa Perry when hooks was a Scholar-in-
Residence at the New School in New York City. Across the country, the university student was able to view the hooks and Perry collaboration online.

Each teacher shared samples of student work to illustrate students’ thought process as they navigated the course. Jessica, the high school student whose family had a standoffish way of talking about sex wrote:

After attending a talk facilitated by bell hooks and Charles Blow at the New School called “Radical Sexuality: Body Geography,” my entire world flipped upside down. This was the first time in my 16 years of being a young Black girl that I had ever heard a Black woman and a Black man speak so freely on the subject of sexuality. And not sexuality in the context of that awkward talk on the birds and the bees, but in a larger sense of how one creates a relationship with their mind, body, and spirit (Troutman & Jiménez, 2016, p. 15).

According to Jimenez (2016), hearing hooks and Blow “speak so freely” about sex gave Jessica the opportunity to begin analyzing the spectrum of sexuality that she and other Black girls have been denied access to throughout their lives (p. 15).

Marielle, a university student, connected Black feminist theory and struggle with current issues on her campus and in relation to gender roles and sexual politics within the larger Black community:

A lot of the frat boy and Greek Life culture (and sexual assault) are serious problems here. But feminism can help. None of the programs aimed at addressing these issues on campus are feminist in orientation, and I believe that is a problem. On a personal note: I want to delve more deeply into “the reality of black male sexism” because that is a real barrier in Black community building. I also think it plays into us [Black women] being portrayed in certain ways around sex and sexuality. I’m not here for the policing of my sexuality. (Troutman & Jiménez, 2016, p. 26)

According Troutman (2016), Marielle is thinking both about and through the theoretical dispositions hooks offers for considering race and gender. Furthermore, she applied Black feminist theory to material conditions on campus and to larger notions of Black community. He Marielle’s reading and thinking also extended beyond the classroom and into her leadership roles (resident hall advisor, sorority officer, and admissions student ambassador) in the larger campus
structure, as she disappointedly called out that “none of the programs aimed at addressing these issues on campus are feminist in orientation” (Troutman & Jiménez, 2016, p. 26).

The authors offered a pedagogical tool box of the course at the conclusion of the article because they believe hooks’ work can impact Black feminist consciousness and action in young people, especially young Black girls and women. They also acknowledged that feminist education need not be limited by patriarchal notions of classroom instruction as the only mode of learning. They recognized that women of color feminisms can and have been taught and learned through a long line of Black feminist teachings that are rooted in oral history as well as digital history, originating from yesterday’s feminist griots (storytellers) through today’s hip-hop feminists (Troutman & Jiménez, 2016). Finally, they noted young women are immersed in various communities such as blogs, sororities, and families of all kinds that teach them multiple modalities of how to live and learn as young Black feminists.

**Understanding Institutional Culture**

Women’s college culture has been found to have qualities that promote the success of its students. Kuh and Whitt (1988) defined culture for their study as persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off the campus.

Because colleges and universities are social communities as well as educational institutions, the importance of culture for students is evident in the socialization process in professional schools and the general impact of college on students at the undergraduate level. Culture promotes the affective development of students with some institutions having greater measurable impact on their students than other institutions (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).
An institution’s culture reflects the values and accepted practices of the host society (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. v). As such, culture develops from an interaction between the external environment and relevant institutional features, such as an institution’s historical roots, including religious convictions of founders (if applicable) and external influences, particularly the support of constituents, such as alumni and philanthropic sponsors; the academic program; a core faculty group, including senior faculty and administrators; the social environment as determined by dominant student subcultures; cultural artifacts, such as architecture, customs, stories, language, and so on; distinctive themes that reflect core values and beliefs and make up the institution’s ethos; and the contributions of individual actors, such as a charismatic president or innovative academic dean (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

According to Kuh and Whitt (1988) institutional culture is so complex that even members of a particular institution may have difficulty comprehending its nuances. Therefore, to describe an institution’s cultural properties, methods of inquiry are required that can discover core assumptions and beliefs held by faculty, students, and others and the meanings various groups give to artifacts. Techniques of inquiry appropriate for studying culture include observing participants, interviewing key informants, conducting autobiographical interviews, and analyzing documents.

However, Kuh and Whitt (1988) stressed that culture is viewed as an interpretive framework for understanding and appreciating events and actions in colleges and universities rather than as a mechanism to influence or control behavior. As an interpretive framework, cultural perspectives are “like a rainbow: a code of many colors that tolerates alternative assumptions” (p. 3). In this sense, cultural perspectives acknowledge and legitimate non-rational
aspects of college and university life and are incompatible with the myth of organizational rationality (a strong desire for orderliness).

Citing Tierney (1988), the authors emphasized that culture is a complex set of context-bound, continually evolving properties that potentially includes anything influencing events and actions in a college or university. That said, precise definitions of culture remain elusive. Citing Cusick (1987) and Handy (1976), Kuh and Whitt agreed that culture cannot be succinctly defined because it is an inferential concept: something that is perceived, something felt.

Rituals, stories, language, and other artifacts are observable manifestations of culture that reflect deeper values and help faculty, students, staff, alumni, and others understand what is appropriate and important under certain situations (See Appendix A).

Kuh and Whitt, (1988) concluded culture can be described as a social or normative glue based on shared values and beliefs that holds organizations together and serves four general purposes: (1) it conveys a sense of identity; (2) it facilitates commitment to an entity, such as the college or peer group, other than self; (3) it enhances the stability of a group’s social system; and (4) it is a sense-making device that guides and shapes behavior (p. 26).

**The Culture of Sisterhood**

Sisterhood is a recurring phrase used on women college’s campuses. It is used as a term of endearment and a term of support. It seems to fall easily from the mouths of its speakers with love and sincerity. Conversely, hooks’ (1986) essay, *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women*, addressed the challenges of sisterhood and what Black women need to do to maintain a healthy sisterhood.

hooks (1986) posited women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression. As with other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures;
by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo. Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe they are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men (hooks, 1986). Women are taught that relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich their experience. Women are taught that other women are natural enemies, that solidarity will never exist between women because women cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. hooks maintained women have learned these lessons well, and they must unlearn them to build a sustained feminist movement. In essence, hooks appealed to women to live and work in solidarity to learn the true meaning and value of sisterhood. hooks (1986) included in her text a part of Toni Morrison’s 1979 commencement address to enhance her point:

I want not to ask you, but to tell you, not to participate in the oppression of your sisters. Mothers who abuse their children are women, and another woman, not an agency, has to be willing to stay their hands. Women who stop the promotion of other women in careers are women, and another woman must come to the victim’s aid. Social and welfare workers who humiliate their clients may be women, and other women colleagues have to deflect their anger. I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women (p. 130).

Additionally, according to hooks, conscious of the privileges White men as well as White women gain as a consequence of racial domination, Black women were quick to react to the feminist call for sisterhood by pointing to a major contradiction - that they should join with women who exploit them to help with their liberation. To that end, the call for sisterhood was heard by many Black women as a plea for help and support for a movement that was not addressing them (hooks, 1986).

hooks (1986) concluded, when women actively struggle in a truly supportive way to understand their differences, to change misguided, distorted perspectives, they lay the foundation
for the experience of political solidarity, noting that solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, women must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite and build sisterhood because support can be occasional and temporary. It can be given and withdrawn, whereas, solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment (hooks, 1986).

The Theme of Sisterhood in The Color Purple

Author, Alice Walker, was a Spelman College student for two years before transferring to Sarah Lawrence College in New York, graduating in 1965 (“Living by Grace,” 1999). It was at Spelman, no doubt, that she first experienced the endurance of sisterhood, which she illustrated through her characters in the novel, The Color Purple. The women in the novel led dysfunctional lives dominated by male patriarchy and brutality. Thus, there were varied levels of support and liberation the sisterhood afforded the women. For Celie, the main character, female bonds took many different forms, such as with her sister, with a sexual partner, and with friends. Thomas (2016) noted, women supporting one another during times of tribulation are the expression of their uniqueness. It binds them, comforts them, and provides them with a sense of security. Dill (1983) pointed out the concept of sisterhood has been an important unifying force in the contemporary women’s movement. “This concept has been a binding force in the struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy” (p. 1).

However, it was Celie’s relationship with her sister, Nettie that best illustrated the “I’ve got your back” principle of sisterhood. When Celie is first introduced to the reader, she acts as a mother/protector/mentor to Nettie. Moreover, Nettie and Celie maintain a deep and abiding love for each other even though they were separated from one another on a global scale. They never
lost hope in seeing each other again, and Nettie never stopped writing, even when she suspected her mail was not reaching Celie.

Walker also wove sisterhood into the novel through Corrine’s character and through the African culture where women shared a bond of working together and raising their families, *but* they also shared husbands who treated them as cruelly and brutally as the White Americans in Africa treated them (Thomas, 2016). Nettie shared in a letter to Celie, “This friendship among [African] women is something Samuel often talks about because the women share a husband, but the husband does not share their friendships” (Walker, 1992, p. 166).

Corrine and her husband, Reverend Samuel, were missionaries who traveled to Africa and who unknowingly adopted Celie’s children. They also took in Nettie without knowing her background, and she traveled to Africa with them. Corrine treated Nettie like a sister until jealousy and paranoia set in about a notion that her adopted children, who resembled Nettie, were the prodigy of a union between her husband and Nettie. According to Jones (2016), Corrine’s suspicious attitude contrasts with the foundation on which sisterhood is built: faith, trust, belief, and sharing.

In Africa, on her deathbed, Corine did share with Nettie that she recalled seeing Celie in town at the general store and, because of the way Celie looked at the children, she had a suspicion Celie may be the mother. She said she blocked the incident from her memory because she was fearful Celie would want her children back, but also because she was angry at the way she had been treated by the store clerk that day. She recalled, “I was acting like *somebody* because I was Samuel’s wife, and a Spelman Seminary graduate, and he treated me like any ordinary nigger! My feelings were hurt, and I was mad” (Walker, 1992, p. 187). This scene in the novel is not only reflective of Corrine’s dying act of admitting to Nettie that she was wrong
in her accusations, but by Walker naming Spelman, it is also reflective of Spelman’s global sisterhood as early as the 1800s.

**Inclusion, Sisterhood, and Reentry Women**

Women who have been out of the higher educational system for at least five years are termed reentry college women (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). They are usually older than the traditional college student. This group has been recognized as a gendered phenomenon, and its members have been designated “reentry” women. By definition, a reentry woman is “someone who either interrupted her college education for a period of five or more years or a woman who delayed entering college directly after high school and is currently attending college” (Lewis, 1988, p. 2). This group is composed of women of different races and cultures.

The findings of Aiken’s (2000) study showed that the culture of racism was a major factor discouraging the participation of Black women in a registered nursing (RN) completion program. Evidence that emerged from the culture of racism included injustice, psychological distress, and denial. These properties supported the culture of racism because they aided in the maintenance and perpetuation of the status quo (Aiken, 2000). The concept of injustice was noted throughout the educational experiences of the Black women in the study. Injustices were manifested by way of intimidation, difference in treatment, silence, misdiagnosis, ignoring, and humiliation (Aiken, 2000).

According to Evangelauf (1992), Black females comprise the largest number of students of color at the graduate and undergraduate level. Their numbers are twice that of the other groups of color. From this data, it can be concluded that Black women also comprise the largest
group of reentry students of color. Given the barriers that reentry women face, mentoring can be a powerful mechanism toward achievement.

The Pauline E. Drake Scholars are reentry women who are enrolled at Spelman College as undergraduate students. The Pauline E. Drake Scholar program is designed for reentry women of Spelman College as a part of the sisterhood of college women. The goals of the program, which meets monthly, include providing an academic, social, and emotional base of assistance. The group also sponsors social events, recreational activities, charitable service, and educational seminars to help build the Spelman College community. The program has a college-appointed adviser (Pauline E. Drake Scholar, 2018).

**Sisterhood and Mentoring**

In “Why Women Colleges Are Still Relevant,” (Forbes, 2009), Heidi Brown pointed out that women’s colleges are not non-stop utopias of love and support. As in co-ed institutions, there are domineering or difficult people with whom to contend. They still take over the conversations and try to lead the group or convince everyone of their point of view. However, the feelings about them are more about their style of operation and less about them being out of their place or acting like men. Nonetheless, there is the concept of sisterhood and the act of mentoring that are cornerstones of the women’s college experience.

However, for mentoring to be authentic and beneficial, several aspects need to be considered within the mentoring process. Stalker (1994) pointed out that traditional concepts of mentoring reflect a bias toward male experience and do not adequately portray women’s experiences of mentoring. She posited, mentoring is typically portrayed as a supportive relationship of mutual benefit for mentor and mentee, but this view ignores the potential for
oppression and exploitation in mentoring relationships, dimensions that are particularly apparent in the problems associated with men mentoring women.

Stalker (1994) also noted that women mentors may themselves, feel like outsiders on the inside because of a patriarchal structure that continues to marginalize women. Cultivating mentoring relationships among these women is a first step toward broadening the pool of potential mentors for other women. Institutions of higher education should invest in establishing training programs on mentoring (McElhiney, 1990). Potential mentors need more information about meeting the needs of Black women and, in the case of cross-sex pairings, how to defuse sexual innuendoes and gossip as well as establishing a non-paternalistic, mentor–mentee relationship with female students (McElhiney, 1990).

In Juanita Johnson-Bailey’s 1997 study, a major influence for the participants was the presence of Black professors, particularly Black women professors. The participants used similar wording such as “having someone around who looks like me” (p. 7). bell hooks (1994) emphasized the importance of being able to confront issues of race and gender in a Black context by “providing meaningful answers to problematic questions as well as appropriate accessible ways to communicate them” (p. 112).

Unlike women of past generations, today’s women have many choices in selecting the college or university they wish to attend. Yet, many young women continue to select women’s colleges because of their rich traditional heritage of serving the educational needs of women. Women’s colleges have a history of offering access, excellence, and equal opportunities in higher education (Harwarth et al., 1997). Providing access to higher education is only one role that women’s institutions play in the 21st century. Other roles include promoting leadership
development among students, creating welcoming campus climates for female students and faculty, and contributing to gender empowerment in local communities (Harwarth et al., 1997).

**Spelman History and Leadership**

Watson and Gregory (2005) in *Daring to Educate* revealed the founding and leadership of Spelman College. Contrary to widely held belief, the first four presidents of Spelman (including its two co-founders) were White women who believed that former slaves and free Black women should and could receive a college-level education. *Daring to Educate* presents the history of Spelman’s foundation through the tenure of its fourth president, Florence M. Read, which ended in 1953 (Watson & Gregory, 2005). This compelling story is brought up to date by the contributions of Spelman’s (then) current president, Beverly Daniel Tatum, and by Johnnetta B. Cole (Watson & Gregory, 2005). *Daring to Educate* chronicles how the vision each of these female presidents and their responses to changing social forces profoundly shaped Spelman’s curriculum and influenced the lives and minds of thousands of young Black women. The authors, Watson and Gregory, trace the evolution of Spelman from its beginning, when the founders, who were aware of the limited occupations open to its graduates, sought to uplift the Black race by providing an academic education to disenfranchised Black women while also providing training for available careers, to the 1950s when the college became an exemplar of liberal arts education in the South.

Written by Florence M. Read (1961), the fourth president of Spelman College, *The Story of Spelman College* recounts the years prior to Spelman’s opening in 1881 through 1953, the year of Read’s retirement. In the text, she journeys through the backgrounds and lives of Spelman founder Sophia Packard and co-founder Harriet Giles. They were White missionaries from New England (Massachusetts) who believed God had called upon them to educate the freed
women of color in the South. *The Story of Spelman College* traces Spelman’s leadership and administration and the growth of the college.

Kratzok’s (2010) *Tough Questions Facing Women’s Colleges* reported that since their creation in the latter part of the 19th century, women’s colleges in America have undergone many significant changes. In 1960, over 230 women’s colleges were in operation; over the next 40 years, more than 75% chose to admit men or shut their doors entirely. In his work, *Co-ed or Not? Women’s Colleges Pondering Path to Survival*, Oguntoyinbo (2014) focuses on women’s colleges in the United States and their consideration of becoming coeducational to survive. Interestingly, his study found that women’s colleges have higher retention and graduation rates.

**Activism at Spelman College**

Lefever (2005) described the role Spelman College women played in the Civil Rights Movement. His book, *Undaunted by the Fight*, is a study of a small but dedicated group of Spelman College students and faculty who, between 1957 and 1967, risked their lives, compromised their grades, and jeopardized their careers to make Atlanta and the South a more just and open society. Lefever (2005) argued that the participation of Spelman’s students and faculty in the Civil Rights Movement represented both a continuity and a break with the institution’s earlier history. On the one hand, their actions were consistent with Spelman’s long history of liberal arts and community service; on the other hand, as his research documents, their actions represented a break with Spelman’s traditional nonpolitical stance and challenged the assumption that social changes should occur only gradually and within established legal institutions.

For the first time in the (then) 80-plus years of Spelman’s existence, the students and faculty who participated in the Civil Rights Movement took actions that directly challenged the
injustices of the social and political status quo. Too often in the past, the Movement literature, including the literature on the Atlanta Movement, focused disproportionately on the males involved to the exclusion of the women who were equally involved and who, in many instances, initiated actions and provided leadership for the Movement.

**Leadership**

Rezvazni (2010) in her book, *Are Women’s Colleges Still Needed?* noted while women’s college graduates make up only a small minority of the college-educated population, one-third of the female board members of the Fortune 1000 companies are women’s college graduates. Graduates from women’s colleges are twice as likely to earn Ph.D.’s and more often go on to study the sciences and attend medical school. Thirty percent of *Business Week*’s list of rising female stars in corporate America were graduates from women’s colleges and 20% of female members of Congress attended women’s colleges.

Cole (1993) was Spelman’s first African American female president. She led the school from 1987–1997. In *Conversations: Straight Talk with America’s Sister President*, she shared her life story and her awe at being tapped to lead Spelman because she had never worked in such a capacity. However, the reader learns that she uses immersive techniques to prompt conversation and reflection. For example, at Hunter College she taught cultural anthropology (before leaving for Spelman) and would “assign students to visit Bloomingdales and write an essay on what they learned about race, gender, and class in American society” (p. 32) or “take a bus ride to Harlem from Hunter’s east side New York location and report on what they had learned from that voyage” (p. 32).

About Spelman she stated,

I am fundamentally so happy here—even when there are wrinkles in my day. Far more than any time in my life in the United States, I live without racism and sexism defining
each and every one of my actions, thoughts, reflexes, and defenses. In some sense, it is a model of what our nation might be like because the Spelman family is not without men, nor is it composed exclusively of African Americans; and Spelman is a place where African Americans and all others have the freed, encouragement, and the responsibility to reach their potential. (p. 42)

**Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)**

Women’s colleges and universities address the needs of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, and they provide opportunities for leadership development. Jackson and Leyte (2014) in their article “Realigning the Crooked Room: Spelman Claims a Space for African American Women in STEM” described the 21st century Spelman College as a school that is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a highly selective and highly competitive Baccalaureate institution and serves as host to a chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society. It is also one of six Model Institutions of Excellence, as designated by the National Science Foundation, for its achievements in undergraduate science and mathematics education. Spelman ranks second among all institutions from which Black science and engineering doctorate recipients earn bachelor’s degrees (National Science Foundation, 2013).

“Yes, we have come a long way baby! Women in STEM rock,” proclaimed Propsner (2013, p. 1), herself an alumna of a women’s college and advocate. She reminded readers in her *HuffPost*’s “Girls in STEM“ mentorship series (2013) that STEM is on the minds of many—from the president to employers. She noted that one puzzling question remains, how do we encourage more women into STEM careers? Although this question remains unanswered, the good news is that women’s colleges have excelled at educating women in these fields for more than 100 years and have added STEM programs along the way. Women’s colleges are resolute in their dedication to the task at hand and have a successful record for preparing students to start a STEM career or to obtain an advanced degree. The even better news is that more and more STEM girls are discovering this hidden college treasure. Once high school girls become aware
of the supportive, nurturing, focused, research-based environments, they understand how a women’s college will benefit them and their STEM career goals (Propsner, 2013, p. 2).

Sebrechts (1992), in *Cultivating Scientists at Women’s Colleges*, made the point that compared to coeducational institutions, all women’s colleges lose fewer of their science majors to other fields. The author posited that women’s colleges can promote an environment and mindset in which there are no barriers based on gender, an environment that encourages women to pursue nontraditional fields like science and medicine.

**Social Context, Culture, and Politics**

“Women face a multitude of obstacles in developing the power of their minds” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 98). Hayes and Flannery (2000) posited in *How Women Learn* that social context, culture, and the politics of power should be acknowledged and implemented, not ignored as it has been for women learners. The authors explored the numerous ways in which women learn: social contexts, identity and self-esteem, voice, connection, and transformation.

The culture of an educational institution will have obvious and covert influence on a woman’s learning. Johnson-Bailey (2001) posited that women of color are more likely to feel like outsiders because their numbers remain relatively small. For all women, the most obvious aspect of a supportive institutional culture is the provision of services like childcare that permit adult women to attend classes. Another supportive aspect is scheduling. Are courses scheduled at a time that permits adult women to attend classes in order for them to accommodate their work and family responsibilities (Hayes, 2000)? Schroeder and Mynatt (1993) noted in their study of female graduate students that even though women rated female and male faculty members fairly equally on the quality of their advisement, the women still placed considerable importance on female faculty as role models. In accordance, Stalker (1994) argued that women faculty, as both
insiders and outsiders, can help mentor women to succeed in educational institutions and simultaneously learn to challenge oppressive structures.

Chapter 2 Summary

The aforementioned literature suggests that the culture of women’s colleges has a positive outcome for college women. Women from these colleges graduate at higher rates, thrive in the culture of sisterhood and mentorship, are successful participants in STEM initiatives, and are empowered to be leaders within their fields. The literature also explains the theories that constitute the conceptual framework for the study. The following chapter (3) outlines the methodology for the qualitative approach of the research study.
CHAPTER 3:
METHODS

My purpose in this case study was to gain an understanding of the institutional culture of Spelman College, a Historically Black Women’s College (HBCW). Additionally, I sought to discover what makes Spelman a unique learning space for Black women. I conducted interviews with 13 Spelman alumnae, and I engaged in archival research. To obtain rich data, I used feminist epistemology and feminist theories, which complement the study’s subject and participants.

Research Design
The study followed the design outline for a qualitative study approach to describe, better understand, and analyze Spelman College: to make its culture discernable in the reader’s eye through in-depth interviews with participants. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to self (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

The qualitative model uses participants’ observations, in-depth interviews, document analysis, and focus groups through five approaches. They include: narrative research, which explores the life of an individual; phenomenology: understanding the essence of experience; grounded theory, which allows the researcher to develop a theory rooted in data from the field; ethnography: describing and interpreting a culture sharing group; and case study: developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple case (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative data are usually in textual, sometimes graphical, or pictorial form. Qualitative researchers
disseminate their findings in a first-person narrative with a combination of etic (outsider or the researcher’s) and emic (insider or the participants’) perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

A qualitative design encourages flexibility. The research is not based on a single methodology and does not belong to a single discipline (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). While anchored in constructivism, it draws on philosophical ideas in phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and other traditions to support the attention on quality rather than quantity (Brewer, 2003).

Because my study engages with a specific population, a quantitative study would not have been appropriate because interactions among people are difficult to capture with statistical measures. Those measures may not be sensitive to issues such as race, gender differences, economic status, or individual differences (Creswell, 2013). Quantitative research does not allow for the freedom within structure that Oldfather and West (1994) cited:

In *Composing a Life* (1990), Mary Catherine Bateson suggested that life is an improvisatory art and noted ways in which jazz is a suitable metaphor for life. As Bateson explained, “Jazz exemplifies artistic activity that is at once individual and communal, performance that is both repetitive and innovative, each participant sometimes providing background support and sometimes flying free. (pp. 2–3)

Finally, in contrast to quantitative research, qualitative inquiry views the relationship between the knower and known as intricately connected. Therefore, the researcher is expected to develop a close, empathic relationship with the subjects being studied (Creswell, 2007).

**Pilot Study**

Pilot studies of this research began in the Spring of 2016 with the research topic, *The Value of Culture within Women’s Colleges: An Alumna Perspective*. This phenomenological study examined the culture that motivates college-bound women to attend a women’s college through the detailed analysis of one participant’s views and experiences. Specifically, I found four key themes: the concept of sisterhood, mentoring, leadership, and empowerment. Based on
the participant’s story, I interpreted these themes to mean the women (students) and faculty first embraced each other for being in, what the participant deemed, a special place: one of love (including tough love), learning, mentoring, caring, compassion, challenge, tradition, and the ultimate sisterhood. Leadership was addressed from more of a servant leader model based on uplift which is a historical aspect of Spelman’s culture. Empowerment stemmed from self-love and pride which gave the students the power to lead and lift. The study participant described sisterhood as a “forever thing”.

In the Spring of 2017, my research topic, *On Women’s Colleges: A Feminist Standpoint Theory Study* was a qualitative comparative case study that examined the experiences of two alumnae within the culture of women's colleges (from a Predominately White Institution (PWI) and a Historically Black College of University (HBCU) using feminist standpoint theory. The research questions: How do the experiences and perceptions of alumnae from women’s colleges compare when examining a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and a Historically Black College or University (HBCU)? How does power and race intersect with the experience of the alumnae? The research findings indicated that the experiences and perceptions of the two participants are in contrast more so than in comparison. The power struggle on the PWI campus stems from women competing with each other – not women competing with men. On the other hand, the HBCU participant felt empowered by her college’s mission of celebrating the Black woman and emphasis on supporting each other. Male friendships from the male campus were not discouraged; however, the women understood subservient attitudes are defeating the school’s purpose.

The HBCU participant felt a sense of belonging and supported by the sisterhood. The PWI participant expressed the opposite and made it her goal to finish school in three years just to
get it over with, only wanting the college’s prestigious name on her resume. The HBCU participant relished all four years of matriculation. The PWI participant felt no emotional attachment or loyalty to her college; however, the HBCU participant loved her college and felt immense loyalty.

In the fall of 2017, my study, *Rituals and Traditions in Higher Education: A Feminist Standpoint Theory Case Study* prompted me to conduct a focus group interview session in Atlanta, Georgia. I explored the rituals and traditions that surround women’s colleges through the lens of nine Spelman College alumnae who viewed their college experience as enriching and positive. Their story, which included key themes: the concept of the sisterhood, achievement, and activism (finding voice), verified that a culture steeped in rituals and traditions provide meaning and relevance to campus life while simultaneously providing a connection to the past. The sisterhood is the super glue of their experience. Within the sisterhood, they embrace the similarities and differences among themselves. The sisterhood inspires them to achieve because they are motivated by each other. For many in this focus group, finding voice meant standing up to the administration for the right to have a woman of color as their leader.

During the spring of 2018 (and my last semester as a doctoral student) I wrote, *Art Meets Theory: Defining Black Feminist Theory through Dance: A Spelman College Case Study* for my Women, Gender, and Education class. This research study explored how Black feminist theory (through literature and dance) is a corrective to the privileging of middle-class White women’s voices. It explained how story-telling through dance and literature effectively describe or interpret the tenets of Black feminist theory. Dance is a storyteller. Movement becomes the language while body is the medium for story to emerge. The stories emerge from the works of
bell hooks, Audre Lorde (The Audre Lorde papers are one of the most significant among special collections in the Spelman archives), and other significant Black women writers.

Additionally, the study illustrated Spelman College’s evolution in expanding its relevant creativity, depth and reach to ensure its female population of women of color have the tools to face the challenges of the 21st century: recognizing that many of the same challenges were present a century ago (i.e. women are still fighting for their rights and due respect). This evolution of thought includes an understanding of the diversity of lifestyle choices for women - as well as illustrating how can Black women learn, grow, and heal through the marriage of dance and the literature of Black feminist writers.

These research projects assisted in the preparation in the dissertation. In addition to having conversations with my professors about the validity of my topic, I was also able to practice interview skills and to modify questions when applicable. I also had the opportunity to review the literature about Spelman and other single gender schools which I think provided a more solid base for creating interview questions and research questions.

**Feminist Epistemology**

As my study is focused on Black women and their Black college culture, I used feminist epistemology as the lens for the study. According to feminist epistemologists, “knowledge claims are always socially situated” (Harding 1993, p. 54). The way that researchers conceptualize things and the choice of epistemic inquiry are socially and historically decided. One’s way of knowing is affected by one’s class, gender, and racial background. The gender identity of the knower is the main social aspect of knowing that feminist epistemology investigates, although it is not investigated in isolation from other social aspects such as class, race, and culture.
As a result of the perpetual existence of male domination throughout history, male norms have become dominant norms and have been regarded as objective and universal standards for all. To that end, women’s of thinking and knowing have been considered something inferior and invalid (Harding, 1993). Women’s experiences and perspectives have been ignored.

According to Harding, there are seven basic assumptions concerning the differences between men’s and women’s experiences.

1. Women’s different lives have been erroneously devalued and neglected as starting points for scientific research and as the generators of evidence for or against knowledge claims.

2. Women are valuable “strangers”, “outsiders” to the social order; they are excluded from the design and direction of both the social order and the production of knowledge.

3. Women’s oppressions gives them fewer interests in ignorance; this is grounds for trans-valuing women’s differences because members of oppressed groups have fewer interests in maintaining the status quo.

4. Women’s perspectives are from the other side of the “battle of the sexes” that women and men engage in on a daily basis; human knowers are active agents in their learning and women’s knowledge emerges through the struggles.

5. Women’s perspectives are from everyday life, which is best for the origins of research.

6. Women’s perspectives come from mediating ideological dualisms, nature versus culture, which enables them to understand how and why social and cultural phenomena have taken form.

7. Women, especially women researchers, are “outsiders within”; this increases objectivity. (Harding, 1991, pp. 121-131)

In Patricia Collins’ view, the traditional epistemological stance is not helpful in articulating Black women’s consciousness. Collins (2000) proposes an alternative way of producing and validating knowledge claims consistent with Black women’s criteria – based on the lived experiences of Black women. She puts forward using dialogues as a method for assessing knowledge claims. Emphasis needs to be placed on extensive dialogues in
communities rather than thought in isolation. From this perspective, connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process.

Since qualitative findings are highly contextual and case dependent, researchers are expected to keep findings in context and report any personal and professional information that may have an impact on data collection, analysis, and interpretations. Bracketing their points of view and biases, the researchers must avoid making any judgment about whether the situation in which they are involved and the participants are engaged is good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate. In addition, researchers are expected to make their orientation, predispositions, and biases explicit. Qualitative research reports are also expected to provide the reader with sufficient quotations from participants (Patton, 2002). Moreover, rich and detailed or thick description of the setting and participants is a must (Yilmaz, 2013).

**Research Questions**

To better understand the culture of Spelman College, the following research questions guided the study. (RQ1) What are the components that shape Spelman’s institutional culture; and (RQ2) What makes it a unique learning space for Black women?

**Methodology**

In this study, I pursued a case study qualitative investigation using frameworks that aptly authenticated the participant experiences: feminist standpoint theory, Black feminist theory, and critical race feminism theory, all of which place women at the center of the research process. However, feminist standpoint theory was used only to understand the motivation of Spelman’s founders. The theoretical constructs were discussed in the theoretical perspectives section of Chapter One.
A case study is one of five approaches within qualitative research. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) defined a case study as a “detailed examination of one setting, or single depository of document at a single event” (p. 59). Leavy (2014) extended Bogdan’s definition postulating that case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, or institution in a “real life” context (p. 417). In aligning the study with Merriam and Simpson’s (2000) approach to case study research, it is particularistic, focusing on Spelman College; it provided a rich description of my assumption that Spelman is a unique learning space for women; it was heuristic in that it deepened my understanding of the culture within Spelman College and provided new meaning to my research experience.

Specifically, this case study is an educational case study that utilized theories from a range of fields in investigating educational programs and practices and focuses on understanding educational action and their impact on students, teachers, and institutions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). My study investigated the institutional culture of Spelman College and its impact on the students which aligns with educational case research framing within the concepts, models, and theories from anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology (Merriam, 1998).

The study is a single case study within the boundaries of Spelman College and select alumnae. Single cases offer the opportunity to provide a more in-depth analysis of the case and can explore a “unique/extreme typical or longitudinal case more effectively, most often from a single site” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 160).

A narrative approach was used to uncover the stories of the women of Spelman. I say approach because I used semi-structured interview questions and informed participants of the time frame for the interview. However, I did open interviews by asking participants to talk about
themselves. I did not interrupt when a participant was sharing. I also used encouraging body language such as nodding my head in affirmation and smiling – all which took practice.

A narrative approach makes it relatively easy to encourage people to tell their stories, since most people are willing to tell a story about themselves. According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013), stories provide unique information about how people have interpreted their life experiences, how their values have guided them in decisions they have made.

According to Taylor (1998), when working with marginalized groups, storytelling is a powerful way to engage participants. It is a powerful way to challenge the dominant mindset of society. Stories can not only challenge the status quo but they can help build consensus and create a shared, communal understanding (Taylor, 1998). They can, at once, describe what is and what ought to be. As a result, scholars who use critical race theory often use storytelling as a way to engage and contest negative stereotyping. This strategy makes use of the experiences of people negatively affected by racism as a primary means to confront the beliefs held about them by Whites.

My inclination toward a case study also mirrors Leavy’s (2014), “I like interfacing with people, listening to their stories, trials, and tribulations—giving them a voice in understanding the contexts and projects with which they are involved and finding ways to share these with a range of audiences” (p. 456).

**Methods and Data Collection**

Following the tradition of qualitative research, I used in-depth interviews and archival research (document analysis) to obtain data. The interviews began in 2016 when I engaged in IRB approved pilot study research for this topic in three of my research classes. The interviews
included one focus group interview in 2017. All other interviews were single-session interviews. The archival research consisted of one single day the Spelman College Archives.

**Interviews**

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) emphasized the interview is a key site for eliciting narratives that inform us of the human world of meaning. To that end, interviews give voice to common people, allowing them to freely present their life situations in their own words, as well as create space for a close personal interaction between the researchers and their subjects.

According to Stake (1995), the principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others, and the interview is the main road to multiple realities “because each interviewee is expected to have had unique experiences and special stories to tell” (p. 65). Yin (2018) noted the interview is a good site to gather evidence because it is targeted and can focus directly on the case study topic. It is also insightful because it provides explanations as well as personal views: “attitudes, perceptions, attitudes, and meanings.”

**Population**

The population consisted of Spelman College female alumna or alumnae. Spelman College is a private Historically Black College in Atlanta, Georgia. Spelman maintains a student population of no more than 2,000 students. The alumna participants are Black women who graduated between 1969 and 2012. They ranged in age from their late twenties through their mid-sixties. The participants are professional women who are in (or retired from) the fields of education, public relations, politics, medicine and law.

**Sample**

The participants consisted of Spelman female alumnae18 years old or older who identify as female, and who are of African descent. To recruit participants, I collaborated with a friend
and Spelman alumna. She has a campus presence, is active in the alumna association, and works closely with incoming first year students, acclimating them to the culture during orientation. She sent e-mail notifications to the prospective participants with an overview of my dissertation study and invited them to e-mail me within two weeks if they were interested. I also sent emails to women I knew to be Spelman graduates giving them an overview of the study and asked them to contact me within two weeks if they were interested in participating in the study.

Additionally, to obtain participation from the reentry alumna, I called the adviser of the re-entry program and discovered that she was a reentry alumna and be interested in participating in the study. At the end of the two-week period, I e-mailed each of the 13 women who responded to further explain the study and asked for her consent to participate and proceeded with the Informed Consent Form process.

Archival Research

Vonk (2018) posited, in archival research, researchers analyze data pulled from existing records, such as records, personal letters, old newspapers, and census reports. Archival data is useful for studying social and psychological phenomena of the past, social and behavioral changes over time, topics that involve articles, advertisements, or speeches, anything that must be studied after it has occurred, or to re-analyze a topic or situation.

However, Elder, Pavalko and Clipp (1993) offered a more nuanced description of the manner in which I used archival research, which was to broaden my view about Spelman College from a historical perspective and to enhance the interview process and data. The authors noted, “In working with archival data, the investigator seeks to maximize the fit between the research question and the data” (p. 20).
Data Collection Procedures

I used the process of narrative interviews and archival research for data collection. I traveled to Spelman College twice: once for a nine-member focus group interview (October 30, 2017) and once to conduct one-on-one interviews (October 18 - 19, 2018). These interviews were conducted at the Robert Woodruff Library in the Atlanta University Center of which Spelman belongs. It is open to the public, and I was able to reserve a space for interviewing.

I also interviewed participants by phone or SKYPE as far back as 2016 with IRB approval for my pilot on women’s colleges. For this specific study, interviews began on August 27, 2018 and ended on October 19, 2018.

The duration of the focus group interview was one hour and forty-five minutes; all other interviews (phone, SKYPE, and one-on-one) were 60 – 75 minutes in duration.

Interviews

For this specific study, following the IRB protocol, I gathered data from 13 interview participants in one-on-one 60 to 75-minute recorded sessions. I used an Olympus digital recorder in each interview session. Six of the interviews were held in Atlanta on October 18-19 at a rate of three per day. I used the semi-structured interview format with a predetermined set of open-ended questions which gave me the opportunity to probe or explore particular themes or responses further. The semi-structured interview questions are located in Appendix D.

I found that practicing the art of interviewing during my pilot studies and in my research classes to be beneficial as I became familiar with the material and focused less on what I was going to ask next; thus, the interview session was less of a “session.” It was more a comfortable conversation between two people, not a question and answer meeting. Additionally, pilot
researching aided in forming the habits of maintaining a research journal and memoing in Atlanta, Georgia where I conducted three interviews per day over a two-day period.

After each interview, I followed the steps outlined in the IRB protocol and the participant informed consent form. I downloaded the session from the digital recorder to my pass-word protected computer and then to a USB flash drive, and then to the box.com secure file management database provided by the university. Pilot studies also taught me that based on the number of interview sessions I conducted between August and October, a third-party transcription service would be a practical option; thus, I used Rev.com for transcribing. Each interview was transcribed in seven days.

Archival Research

The second avenue for collecting data was through archival research at Spelman College on October 17, 2018 from 10:00 AM until 4:00 PM. The Archives is in the Women’s Research and Resource Center and an appointment is needed to use the resources. It was my first archival visit, and I was excited for this new experience. After filling out the appropriate paperwork and protocols (locking my purse and book bag in a separate room), I was able to request documents listed in the catalogue. With the assistance of college archivist, Holly Smith, I perused the collections of personal papers of Spelman College founders, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles, the Florence M. Read Collection (Spelman’s fourth president), the Audre Lorde Collection, copies of the Spelman Messenger, and photographs, which offered the visual history of Spelman College. The collections are representative of works cited in my dissertation study, and their content generated additional contemplation about feminist epistemology.

This was an awe-inspiring experience, but I discovered I could have used another day because the time I spent there also included a one-hour lunch which I had to take because the
assistant archivist was absent, and archive researchers are not left in the archives alone. On a positive note, the archivist shared a link to digital archival entries that I was able to access.

**Document Analysis**

Feminist standpoint theory, Black feminist theory, and critical feminist theory reside in a common space where telling the stories of the participants’ lived experience is paramount in gathering data. Collins (2009) emphasized that the stories of Black women are not the same as those of White women. Thus, their stories of marginalization in America have to be told from their perspective. Black feminist theory was born out of feminist standpoint theory in which women are at the center of the research process. Taylor (2008) shared that storytelling is a major component for gathering and unpacking data for critical race theory.

To that end, I used thematic analysis to create the story of the culture at Spelman College. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that it is the first qualitative method that should be learned as ‘it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analysis’ (p. 78). Thematic analysis is simple to use that lends itself to use for novice researchers.

It is not tied to an epistemological or theoretical perspective. This makes it a very flexible method within the research process. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes or patterns in the data that are important or interesting and use these themes to address the research.

Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguished between two levels of themes: semantic and latent. Semantic themes “. . . within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written” (p. 84). In contrast, the latent level looks beyond what has been said and “. . . starts to identify or
examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (p. 84).

After checking the transcribed transcripts for accuracy and printing them, I followed the six steps for using thematic analysis.

1. **Become familiar with the data.** During this step, I read (and re-read) the transcripts. While the third-partyRev.com transcription service saved me an immense amount of time, I did not know the content of the transcripts, as well as I would have had I transcribed them myself. To that end, when reading the transcripts, I noted (highlighted) interesting comments that the participants made such as:

   - There was no man for me to have a crush on, that didn’t make me focus on my professor. It was my sisters who challenged me with their astuteness about something that made me want to do better.
   - We did not have sororities because the statement was often made to us, that we are all a sisterhood.
   - I am not interested in rituals or traditions.
   - The Alumnae Arch gave me hope.
   - They were weeping because they realized that all of us had that first experience of going through the arch as a senior in your cap and gown.
   - Sisterhood could be described as a science project.
   - Sisters could tell you about yourself.
   - Sisterhood is a bond.
   - Ruby Doris Smith died while working for SNCC.
   - I knew I was in a special place and had to live up to its history.
• They pour it into you – the heritage of Spelman

• And by-and-large we were older and had come through an era in which women had not been encouraged to go to law school.

• Sisters Chapel is a grounding place.

• They watched me work toward a degree for 10 years to become the first in my family to earn a bachelor’s degree when I was over 50 years old.

• I am a descendant of women who were denied an education

• My children saw me walk across the graduation stage in my white dress as all Spelman women do.

Additionally, I also made handwritten-notations on the transcripts of anything that I thought would be useful in capturing values and beliefs of the participants.

• Roe vs. Wade gave us abortion rights if we chose to do that.

• We were taught, whether it was said outright or intimated, that we could do anything, and that we were going to do something, and the end product was value to society.

• Why didn’t we have a Black woman president?

• Through protesting, I learned to be a leader.

• I now understand with urgency the need advocate for my own self-care particularly as a Black woman.

• I felt empowered by understanding the history of survival, trauma, and resilience of the African Diaspora and equipped to make my own mark on the world.

• Spelman believes in the long arm of community service and uplift.

• Spelman did not challenge the justice system in such an active way.
• So, what did that mean for us in terms of life? Because we had seen Kennedy die. We had seen Malcolm die. We had seen so many people die, and then finally, King.

• Confidence and the ability to stand up for what I believe are two of the many things that I took away from Spelman.

• But all I wanted to do was get back to Spelman where I was treated like I mattered.

• They took the role of in loco parentis seriously.

• Spelman was generous in bringing people who showed you how to be the best you could be as a woman.

From this round of reviewing, I made a notation that the participants appeared to have been in an environment that was historic, and both nurturing and challenging. Additionally, the participants trusted the people and Spelman’s process.

2. **Assign preliminary codes to data in order to describe the content.** Here, I used descriptive words and phrases (transcript quotes) to code ideas regarding values and beliefs that I found interesting in Step 1 and during additional re-reads in Step 2. This process requires multiple re-readings – at least it did for me. One reason was because the interview responses were almost identical in some respects, and I was looking for something different. I also was cognizant of my relationship with the population, and I wanted to ensure that I was not inserting my preconceived thoughts. Therefore, I worked through each transcript coding every segment of text that seemed to be relevant to or specifically address my research questions.

Preliminary codes (written on individual 3x5 notecards) included:
• I belong
• I matter
• Live up to history
• Sisterhood
• White Dress
• Mentors
• In loco parentis
• Leadership

• Gender
• Giving back
• Sisters Chapel
• Careers
• Reunion
• Orientation
• Support

3. **Search for themes.** Thematic analysis does not offer a specific manner in which to progress through the six steps. At this point, I moved away from the overwhelming amount of manual paperwork (transcripts) and created a template in Word to record the themes and codes from the analyzed 3x5 cards. I analyzed the cards by using my hand-written transcription notes as headers on poster-sized sheets on the back wall of my study. Next, I wrote the code under headings that seemed to fit often switching back forth. Because I had to combine codes, I determined there was one major theme that supported three other themes. It was confusing because I wanted to report clear, distinct themes. However, I remembered, this was not my story and that qualitative research is messy. Thus, I used direct quotes to support the themes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can say this to you because I’m your sister.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Socialization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When and Where I Enter in Sisters Chapel.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Values</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The idea of training women for the common good.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADW challenges misconceptions about the African Diaspora, race, and gender</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spelman sisterhood is enduring.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Socialization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generally, nobody liked chapel because of the time.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>I was treated like I mattered.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>Even the adult professors came across as racist.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through years. Through deaths. Through divorces. Though other hardships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Socialization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters Chapel is a grounding place. We started there in orientation, and we have our last ceremony there before graduation,</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The long arm of community service</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spelman imbued me with the confidence in my abilities as a Black woman</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sisterhood is a bond.</td>
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<th>Theme: Socialization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m proud of the traditions of Spelman. I like the white dress, natural hose, and black shoe tradition.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important it is for students to experience and determine their role in the world.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not even a White man could protest at Spelman.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood was instilled in us.</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We learned about the Alumnae arch ritual during our first week.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Values</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence and the ability to stand up for what I believe</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why couldn’t we have a Black woman president?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I met my Big Sister. I became part of the sisterhood the first day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We were wearing our white dresses and marching through the arch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Values</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What most parents wanted was for you to go to Spelman and find some Morehouse man to marry and have a couple of kids and live happily ever after.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby Harris died while working for SNCC</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t have to worry about what a male thought about me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>I had to live up to the history</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do hope it will continue to be a safe place for women.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Civil Rights Act was implemented during our time</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters have each other’s best interest at heart</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The exit ceremony for first year students involved parents.</td>
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<th>Theme: Values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embrace the LGBTQ community and Transgender</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This was the period in which women’s rights and feminism were really taking shape.</td>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I joined a sorority, but it wasn’t what I thought it would be.</td>
</tr>
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<th>Theme: Socialization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In loco parentis</td>
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<th>Theme: Values</th>
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<td>Code</td>
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<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting, nurturing, strong, encouraging.</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and Traditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelman sisters love you even when you aren’t deserving.</td>
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<th>Theme: Values</th>
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<tr>
<td>Spelman sisters love you even when you aren’t deserving.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Intersection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
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<td>Spelman sisters love you even when you aren’t deserving.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theme: Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sisterhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I finally felt like I belonged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. **Review themes.** During this step, I mainly focused on the research questions and whether or not my proposed themes aligned with what I was looking to discover in the study. First, I read and re-read through all the extracts related to the codes to ascertain whether or not they supported the themes. Then, I tested the themes with the research questions.

(RQ1) What are the components that shape Spelman’s institutional culture?

(RQ2) What makes it a unique learning space for Black women?

5. **Define and name themes.** During this step, I developed the preliminary sentence which captured my themes:

6. **Produce the report.** The big reveal (themes) are shared in Chapter 4.

Finally, Braun, and Clarke (2006) advocated to use quotes of what the participants said to demonstrate the themes. The researcher has a responsibility make the participants feel real to readers. Reisman (2008) noted that thematic meanings and understanding the point of the story are emphasized over language and for

**Archival Data Analysis**

I used the Spelman Archival data to broaden my knowledge base about its culture and as a reference for creating themes. I first viewed some of the letters of the founders, but many of them were very faint (in color) and hard to read. I also viewed numerous photographs of early Spelman; the campus locations, land acquisitions, and 19th century students, noting that as the literature had informed, the first students were older and in line with what we term today as re-entry women. Additional documents provided glimpses of the early curriculum which included a heavy dose of Christian training.
The Spelman Messenger was a critical avenue for seeing Spelman through the years in both in print and picture. The publication also solidified my thoughts about the importance of rituals and traditions at Spelman. One of the most rewarding aspects of my archival visit was viewing the first issue of the Spelman Messenger. It has the unique position of being a tradition, a teacher, and a public relations tool.

Fourth president Florence Read (1961) described the Spelman Messenger as “far more than a school paper . . . a journal of intelligence” (p. 344). Read recounted that the students printed the first issue of the Messenger (Volume 1, Number 1) in March 1885 through a gift of a printing press from the Slater Fund. A subscription cost 25 cents per year (Read, 1961, p. 87). Students were given training in type-setting and composition and accuracy, which opened up another avenue for employment.

Viewing issues of the Spelman Messenger verified in writing what the participants shared in their stories. Read (1961) further revealed how the Spelman Messenger became one of the important cultural influences of the Seminary and College:

The founders felt the need, long before the development of public relations as a profession of a means of communication, to inform their friends for the cause, to inform the students, the graduates, and the Negro community of its work and develop and broaden their interests. The opportunity to read papers and magazines, even the ability to read them, was relatively a new thing for Negroes. One can imagine the excitement of the arrival of the Spelman Messenger eight times a year would mean to many of their homes and churches. (p. 344).

Thus, the early Messenger supplied to a population who had few books and no access to libraries, public or private, the printed word on many human activities. It shared some of the knowledge of the authors and literature of the past; of religions of the world, including “Buddhism, Mohammedanism, and Confucianism; of Art, Nature, and Current Events” (Read, 1961, p. 345). Additionally, it reported on activities and happenings on campus and the work of
the graduates. The voices of students and alumnae were heard through articles they wrote for the paper.

To that end, The Messenger documents Spelman culture and seeks to capture every aspect of Spelman life. The Messenger provides visuals and explanations for the rituals and traditions that have been practiced over time, such as:

Spelman’s color blue represents wisdom deeper than the spoken word. The seal of the College reinforces the intellectual, spiritual and industrial aspects of life through its motto: *Our Whole School for Christ*. Service is at the root of one’s efforts. The Spelman College hymn directed students to ascribe to high standards and continue to strive. (Spencer, 1999, p. 10)

The Messenger is a time capsule of sorts that illustrates that class traditions are not happenstance or singular but representative of treasured traditions, a part of a whole. Traditions were fashioned as a reminder that each student would “know her purpose” (Spencer, 1999, p. 11). Students are symbolically introduced to their purpose in a moving ritual that occurs annually when the graduating seniors ceremoniously convey selected colors and emblems to the entering class. Spencer (1999) explained in the Messenger,

The sphinx and the color yellow represent progress, obedience, honesty, ethical rules, manners and unselfishness. The owl and the color blue represent a wisdom deeper than the spoken word. The lamp and the color green dispel the darkness as classmates strive to send forth their light. The eagle and the color red inspire knowledge and urge followers to heights of noble achievements. (p. 10)

Spelman values are emphasized during annual rituals and retained for future generations by the Spelman Messenger. Thus, the Messenger does more than describe accomplishments of students and administrators, it chronicles the richness of the Spelman’s culture as described by the study participants.
Developing Themes from Interview Data

From the stories that my participants shared, I derived data through analyzing transcripts, which then were reviewed, and themes were found. A thematic analysis was a perfect fit. I had to give the compilation of stories a theme. Thematic analysis provided a general sense of the information through repeated handling of the data. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) asserted,

The idea is to get a feel for the entire text by living with it prior to any cutting or coding. The unique aspect of thematic analysis is that the researcher can rely on intuition and sensing rather than by being bound by hard and fast rules of analysis” (p. 440).

I used Savin-Baden and Major’s (2013) six steps for implementing thematic analysis: (1) become familiar with the data, (2) generate data codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, (5) define and name themes, and (6) produce the report.

Reflexivity and Memoing in Data Analysis

Reflexivity and memoing were critical to my research task. I really needed those talks with myself because I was researching in isolation. By that I mean, I did not have anyone with whom I could bounce around ideas or thoughts either by proximity or ethics. To that end, the writing was therapeutic. The writing activities also helped me refine questions or add questions, and certainly helped my memory in all aspects of this process, which was often during the interview process when it was impossible to write full comprehensive notes, just being able to jot down a word or phrase to review at a later time was beneficial.

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) posited that qualitative researchers should engage in reflection, but also move beyond reflection to reflexivity. They stated, “at a fundamental and definition level, reflection is the turning back or illumination of something” (p. 75). It is a mental process that involves a process of consideration and meditation, of “turning thoughts back upon themselves and it involves consideration of a researcher’s capacity for reflection” (p. 75).
On the other hand, reflexivity is a process that helps researchers consider their position and influence during the study. It also helps them know how they have constructed and sometimes “imposed meanings on the research process” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 76). In other words, it is important that I understand myself and my own stance as a researcher since this can color the construct of the research. Understanding myself was a constant reflexivity (and coloring the construct of the research) because of my past relationship with the college and current friendship with some alumnae study participants.

Another helpful tool for reflexivity, memory retention, and credibility is memoing. Memoing is the recording of dated reflective notes about what the researcher is learning from the data (Groewald, 2010). They are my research notes about specific aspects of the data regarding a category or property, and especially relationships between categories. There is no set and right way to write the memo. The organization of the memos must be a pattern that the researcher creates and understands.

**Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

In terms of my own conduct and that of my participants, at no point were there any violations of the research process. I precisely followed the guidelines for working with human subjects as prescribe by the Institutional Review Board.

I respect the data and represented the interview as honestly as possible. I have been transparent about all aspects of the research process, from recruiting participants to how I performed the analysis.

Because qualitative research often requires interpretation by the researcher, I maintained an audit trail throughout the research process which consist of my journal, field notes, and memos. An audit trail is a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a
research project to the development and reporting of findings. Regarding data analysis, Malterud (2001) underscored the need to provide a detailed report of the analytical steps taken in a study when she stated:

Declaring that qualitative analysis was done or stating that categories emerged when the material had been read by one or more persons, is not sufficient to explain how and why patterns were noticed . . . the reader needs to know the principles and choices underlying pattern recognition and category foundation. (p. 486).

Groewald (2010) offered a more detailed account of the importance of memoing during the data analysis stage noting that memos keep the researcher imbedded in the empirical reality and contribute to the trustworthiness of qualitative research. For this reason, regardless of time constraints, memoing should never be regarded as superfluous. It is a particularly important element of qualitative data analysis. When the researcher writes the thoughts down, they become concrete and they are recorded.

**Chapter 3 Summary**

In this chapter, I have described the qualitative design that I used to tell the story of the culture of Spelman College. A qualitative approach offers flexibility in the research process. I have selected to use a case study method to examine how Spelman creates a unique learning community for women. I have given an explanation for the use of feminist epistemology to tell the story of Spelman’s culture. Techniques for data collection (interviews) have been explained and the process for thematic analysis has been described. Finally, the process for ethical considerations and trustworthiness have been addressed.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

According to Johnetta B. Cole, former president of Spelman and Bennett Colleges, “If our historically Black colleges and universities didn’t exist, we ought to create them. They provide an atmosphere where a student’s humanity is never challenged” (Friedman, 2018, para 11).

Historically, Black colleges and universities like Spelman College, were created out of the inhumanity that existed in pre-Civil War America: a nation which boldly declared that all men are created equal yet proceeded to build its economy on enslavement of captured Africans and their descendants. Post-Civil War America, according to noted scholar W. E. B. DuBois, offered the inhumanity of

Two separate worlds; and separate, not simply in the higher realms of social intercourse, but also in church and school, on railways and street-car, in hotels and the theatres, in streets, and city sections, books and newspapers, in asylums and jails, in hospitals and graveyards. (1903/2003, p. 72)

Hale (2006) posited that, in response, Black colleges and universities took steps to succor and protect the emotional well-being of their students. He explained how these institutions were aware of the anxiety-producing conditions of “provocation, discrimination, neglect, and exploitation these students will have to face in society” (p. xxviii); therefore, they created a culture that resonates with the students’ needs.

Hale’s (2006) supposition comes to life through the data analysis extracted from the 13 Spelman alumnae interviews conducted for this current study. The participant’s narratives revealed answers to my research questions: (1) What are the components that shape Spelman’s institutional culture, and (2) What makes Spelman a unique learning space for Black women?
My study’s findings sharply contrast with Michelle Obama’s assessment of her student life experience at Princeton University. She described the anomaly of being a minority: “The Black kids stood out like poppy seeds in a bowl of rice” (2018, p. 72). She recounted, “It was jarring and uncomfortable, at least at first, like being dropped into a strange new terrarium, a habitat that hadn’t been built for me” (p. 72). Conversely, the Spelman alumnae participants revel in the knowledge that Spelman was built for them. In the 2015 welcome address to first-year students, Spelman President Mary Schmidt Campbell, reiterated the legacy,

This is your time and Spelman College is your place, designed and built exclusively for you to enter into the undisputed dignity of your womanhood. The sophomores, juniors and seniors at Spelman are not just women; they are truly your sisters. They will help you succeed academically. They will be there to mentor you. They will help you learn the enduring Spelman traditions, the ties that bind you not only to each other, but to those who came before you and those who will come after. (p. 1)

The interviewees revealed that sisterhood is the most cohesive aspect of Spelman’s institutional culture. However, entwined within the sisterhood are themes of ritual and tradition, values, and historical, racial and gender issues. Kuh and Whitt (1988) emphasized that

Describing the culture of an organized setting as complex as a college or university is like peeling an onion. As one works through the many layers of an onion from the outer skin to the core, the layers differ in texture and thickness, and it is not always obvious where one layer ends and the next begins. (p. 41)

Such was the case in deciphering the narratives of the Spelman participants pertaining to the broad brush of the sisterhood. Their stories blended sisterhood with other components of institutional culture, specifically: physical artifacts, verbal artifacts, behavioral artifacts, and history. Watson and Gregory (2005) offered the following description of campus cultural artifacts:

Physical artifacts can be thought of as those that can be seen or touched by individuals, and those that provide them with immediate sensory stimuli as they carry out culturally expressive activities. Verbal cultural artifacts are transmitted orally by personalizing language, stories or myths and are manifested as either sagas or campus language. Behavioral cultural artifacts include rituals and rites of passage, cultural performances
and traditions that serve to express the traditions of the community, welcome and initiate new members, create a bridge between the here-and-now and the here-and-then, preview the passage from college living to out of college reality, express the community’s beliefs and values and celebrate members’ accomplishments. (pp. 22–23)

Moreover, Kuh and Whitt (1988) acknowledged that “to understand and appreciate a college’s culture, one must be familiar with its history: the college’s original mission, its religious or ethnic heritage, and the circumstances under which the institution was founded” (p. 45).

**Organization of the Chapter**

With these analytical constructs in mind, in this chapter, I introduce the findings of this study. First, I present one of Spelman’s verbal artifacts, its mission statement, which captures the school’s purpose and goals. Following the mission statement, I provide each participant’s profile, including a short synopsis of what shaped her decision to become a Spelman student. Finally, a discussion of the emergent themes of sisterhood, rituals and traditions, values, and race and gender issues are reviewed.

**Spelman College Mission Statement**

The mission statement of Spelman College articulates what the school hopes to represent and share with the world. It speaks to the global leaders that it helps develop through the process of a nurturing higher education experience.

Spelman College, a historically Black college and a global leader in the education of women of African descent, is dedicated to academic excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and the intellectual, creative, ethical, and leadership development of its students. Spelman empowers the whole person to engage the many cultures of the world and inspires a commitment to positive social change. (Spelman College, 2018)

**Participant Profiles**

The interview participants of this study are all Spelman alumnae and came from diverse backgrounds at the time of their college entry. Some were solidly middle class, accustomed to
city living with a family history that included a college education. Others were from small towns and were the first in their family to attend college. One participant, a first-generation student, entered college as a mature adult and completed her degree 10 years later.

The alumnae graduated between the years 1969 and 2012 and range in age from 28 to 72. They are/were educators, attorneys, scientists, politicians, and businesswomen. They are currently living in the South, Midwest, or on the East Coast. I asked each participant to select the pseudonym she wished to use to provide additional personal engagement with the study. Below are brief introductions to each participant. (See Table 1 for a quick glance at participant profiles.)
Table 1

*Participant Profiles At-A-Glance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Year Graduated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annabett</td>
<td>Annabett</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Attorney and Legislator</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Bureau chief and law student</td>
<td>1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Retired social worker</td>
<td>1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bongo</td>
<td>Bongo</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Retired teacher and media specialist</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bubbles</td>
<td>Bubbles</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Retired non-profit hiring administrator</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coreen</td>
<td>Coreen</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Spelman College administrator</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Retired literacy facilitator</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Research associate</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Public health scientist</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Adjunct professor and retired academic advisor</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy</td>
<td>Legacy</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Executive in the food industry</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lillye</td>
<td>Lillye</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>AME minister and retired educator</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Msdlc</td>
<td>Msdlc</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Retired director of the Women’s Bureau</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Annabett**

Annabett graduated from Spelman in 1969. She left Spelman to earn a master’s degree in social work at Boston College, and then she returned to Spelman to work. After seven years, she entered law school. Upon graduation, she practiced law across the country while her husband was an Air Force Chaplain. Now, living in a southern city, Annabett is a two-term legislator and
has served as a Superior Court judge. She retired as a Deputy District Attorney and operated a private law practice for six or seven years before retiring again. She spends a good deal of her time in volunteer service.

She reflected that she had always heard of Spelman through her parents and their friends’ and their friend’s children. Additionally, several of her teachers were Spelman graduates, and she looked up to these women, saying, “Huh, I’d kind of like to be like them” (Annabett, personal communication, October 30, 2017).

Athena

Athena is a 1982 graduate of Spelman who lives in the Midwest. She works full-time as a Bureau Chief and attends law school part-time as an evening student. She is married with one son. To Athena’s delight, her son graduated from Morehouse College [the historically Black men’s college across the street from Spelman]. Athena’s father was accepted to Morehouse, but because of the racial tension in the South in the mid-50s, his mother would not allow him to go to college in the South. Nonetheless, her father earned a bachelor’s degree, an MBA, and became a Certified Public Accountant. Her mother opted not to attend college even though her family begged her to do so. She wanted to be a wife and mother first and foremost. However, when Athena turned 12, her mother told her “she was raising her to be a woman.”

Although Athena recognized the name Morehouse, she knew nothing about Spelman until she was watching television one day with her mother. Athena recalled,

The news came on; Walter Cronkite was talking about the students at Spelman College and referring to it as the Radcliffe of the South. I didn’t know what Radcliffe was at the time. The Spelman students had locked up the trustees because they wanted a woman president, and I remember seeing all these Black women with Afros. This was 1968 or 1969. I’m eight, nine years old. I looked at my mother and said, “That’s where I’m going to college.” I never forgot it, and that’s where I went to college.
Beverly

Beverly graduated from Spelman in 1976 and earned a master’s degree in social work. Currently retired, she forged a career in various social work arenas, such as foster care, working with developmentally disabled adults within independent living programs, and working with homeless families in transitional housing. She believes her calling is working with people. For now, she is enjoying her family and grandchildren, but she may go back to work one day because she misses the interaction.

Beverly’s sister attended Spelman, and when she went for a visit, she fell in love with the school. When she received scholarship money to attend Fisk University, she turned it down to the dismay of her parents, saying to them, “No, no, no to Fisk; Spelman is where I want to be.”

Bongo

Bongo finished Spelman in 1969. Married, she retired as a teacher and media specialist after earning a Master of Library Science degree. She enjoys spending time with her family and activities involving her church, sorority, and Spelman.

She had hoped to attend either Spelman College or Howard University, but Spelman offered a partial scholarship. She recalled wanting to major in architecture, but women were not welcomed into the field at the time; therefore, she majored in art at Spelman. Additionally, as a native of Atlanta, she had been immersed in Spelman all her life. She even took dance classes there and worked as a demonstrator for children’s ballet classes. Spelman was a comfortable fit.

Bubbles

Bubbles left Spelman in 1969 and went on to pursue a master’s degree in higher education administration from Harvard College. Currently retired, she worked as a non-profit hiring administrator as well holding executive positions at Spelman and other institutions. She
believes her Spelman education and her master’s degree have enabled her to experience a myriad of opportunities over the years.

Bubbles acknowledged that Spelman was always a part of her life; she even attended its kindergarten when it was on campus. Her father graduated from Morehouse College, and her parents decided she would attend Spelman. Her personal desire was to leave Atlanta because she was accepted at a variety of schools. However, she stated, “I lived in a world where my parents made this decision. I didn’t get to make it.”

Coreen

Coreen is the first person in her family to graduate from college and is a 2010 alumna of Spelman. She is a native of Atlanta and has lived there her entire life. Her father worked for the railroad, and her mother was a stay-at-home mom until they separated. When Coreen graduated from high school, she attended a junior college for a while. She worked for years in corporate America in various clerical and technical positions and at an Historically Black College (HBCU) in the city. When she was laid off from the college, an environment she loved, she applied to staffing agencies and ultimately received a call from Spelman to work on their campus.

A friend from her childhood recognized her. As they renewed their friendship, her friend encouraged her to enroll in Spelman’s Pauline E. Drake Scholar Program (a program for mature women students). Ironically, Coreen had been thinking about college and her life’s purpose after seeing the documentary, The Three Doctors, which she described as a documentary that chronicled the story of three African American male friends with challenged backgrounds who went to college and medical school to improve their lives and inspire others.

At age 47, Coreen enrolled in the Pauline E. Drake Scholars program and graduated with a bachelor’s degree 10 years later while working full-time, caring for her family, as well as her
aging and ill parents. She moved them into her home, despite the fact they were still separated (though never divorced). Coreen continues to work at Spelman College; now in a position that requires a bachelor’s degree.

**Delta**

Delta became a Spelman alumna in 1969. After graduation, she accepted teaching positions on the East Coast. In Connecticut, she earned a master’s degree in urban education and retired as a literacy facilitator in 2005. She and her husband returned to the South in 2006.

Delta learned about Spelman at a young age because her mother graduated from Spelman, and her father graduated from Morehouse. She shared, “I had cousins who attended Morehouse as well. I grew up in Birmingham and there was a large Morehouse–Spelman contingency there. And so, it was almost breathed into me—Spelman.”

**Diana**

Diana is a 2012 alumna of Spelman. Since departing Spelman’s gates, she has earned a Master of Education degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is making plans to pursue a doctorate in strategic management. She lives on the East Coast and is employed as a research associate for the American Institutes for Research. Since her college graduation, Diana has explored diverse experiences. She was an AmeriCorps Site Coordinator at one of their education campuses managing the daily operations of a literacy center. Prior to that, she worked as an English teacher through the Center for Teaching and Learning in Shenzhen, China, for one year.

Diana learned about Spelman through one of her teachers who graduated from Morehouse College. He had noticed her leadership skills and student advocacy throughout high school, and he suggested she look at Spelman in her senior year. Diana had never heard of
Spelman. Her teacher also introduced her to a faculty member who had graduated from Spelman. Diana had applied at several top colleges but agreed to take a closer look at Spelman after talking with the alumna. She applied and was accepted (as she was to all the colleges to which she applied) but was really sold when she attended Spelman’s weekend for accepted students. Even then, she recalled,

The emphasis was on your well-being from a holistic perspective. I liked that they were concerned about my growth as a woman as well as the academic progression. I felt really special that weekend, like that is where I belonged.

Harmony

Harmony became a Spelman alumna in 2012. Since graduation, she has earned a master’s degree in public health, and she is employed as a public health scientist. She disclosed that because her parents were first-generation college graduates, they really impressed upon their children that college is critical in their life journey. Her father, who was a college professor, earned his doctorate, and her mother, a school principal, earned a master’s degree.

Harmony and her siblings were not pressured to attend a Historically Black College; however, they were required to attend college. Her father graduated from Morehouse; therefore, the Spelman connection had always been a part of her upbringing. Her first memory of Spelman is when she was five at her sister’s Spelman graduation; however, she cherishes pictures of herself as an infant on the campus when her sister was a first-year student. Her sister continued to law school, and her brother is currently finishing up his PhD. Harmony is now researching which medical route she will pursue. She recounted how her parents instilled in her and her siblings, “To whom much is given, much is required.”

Ivy

Ivy graduated from Spelman in 1969. Married, with adult children, she retired as an academic advisor after 21 years in higher education. She loves being an adult educator and has
taught as an adjunct professor at two universities for the past 8 to 10 years. Ivy holds a master’s degree in adult education with a concentration in U.S. history. She is actively involved in her community, sorority, and Spelman alumnae activities.

Ivy fondly recalled that she wanted to attend Fisk University; however, her mother who attended Spelman as a first-year student, would not allow her to attend college with men. Ivy married her college sweetheart, a graduate of Morehouse College, which is the men’s college across the street from Spelman.

Legacy

Legacy graduated from Spelman in 2005. Since then, she has earned an MBA from Duke. She has worked in various business arenas: including, Wall Street, banking, casinos, and video companies. Currently, she works in her family’s food industry business.

Legacy’s great-grandmother graduated from Spelman in 1918. Her mother graduated from Spelman, and her father graduated from Morehouse College, as did numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins. She said she grew up in the arms of Spelman. However, she almost attended another Historically Black College, but she changed her mind after spending a summer in Spelman’s Early College Program between her junior and senior year of high school. She made wonderful friendships, and they all decided to return to Spelman. She proudly stated, “In my lifetime, I’ve probably missed maybe three Homecomings—mostly in my adult life, because I was either out of the country or preparing for graduate school.”

Lillye

Lillye graduated from Spelman in 1969. She was an educator for 37 years in various capacities: a senior high school English teacher, a library media specialist and library coordinator for an urban district, as well as president of the Georgia National Education Association (NEA)
for four years. Currently, she is minister on staff at an AME Zion Church serving on the leadership team and as minister of congregational care. Lillye’s academic accomplishments include master’s degrees in teaching, library science, and divinity. Additionally, she holds a PhD in instructional technology.

She had never heard of Spelman College until a Spelman recruiter visited her school district in her small Texas town, and she fell in love with the Spelman story. When she applied to Spelman, no one in her family had gone to college, and her parents did not have high school educations. The recruiter told her that she had never recruited anyone from Lillye’s home town, and she would help her to attend. Even though Lillye had a scholarship to another college, she chose Spelman.

Msdlc

Msdlc graduated from Spelman in 1969. In 1972 she earned a master’s degree in guidance and counseling from Atlanta University. Msdlc is pleased that her entire career has been focused on working with women. One of her first jobs was working at Spelman with the dean of students, and then she became the director of the Minority Women’s Employment Program, which was a pilot project to help professional Black women get jobs in the corporate world. From there, she moved on to selling AVON, a company that has championed women in the workforce and through its philanthropic pursuits. Msdlc concluded her professional life while working with the Women’s Bureau in Washington as the director and deputy director after succeeding in Atlanta as field operations manager for the Bureau. Widowed and now retired, she enjoys community-oriented activities.

Growing up in Daytona Beach, it was assumed that if she went to college she would attend Bethune Cookman College; however, her spirit told her that wasn’t what she wanted to
do. She wanted to get out of Florida. When a Spelman recruiter visited her high school to speak to the top students about the Spelman story, she knew that’s where she needed to be. Msdle shared, “It was the only school I applied to. So, it was either go to Spelman, or not go to college. And I happened to have gotten a scholarship, so I ended up going to Spelman, on the bus, by myself, from Daytona Beach, Florida.”

**Unpacking the Themes**

After the participant interviews were completed, a third-party agency conducted the transcription process. I then verified the transcripts for accuracy. Thematic analysis of the participant interviews and archival information found in the Spelman Messenger revealed sisterhood to be the most powerful and enduring force for the Spelman women in this study. Additionally, interwoven within the sisterhood are themes of rituals and traditions, values, and racial and gender issues.

**The Sisterhood**

According to a proverb of unknown origin: “Two are better than one because together they can work more effectively. If one of them falls, the other can lift her up” (Pearson, 2009, p. 1). The Merriam-Webster online dictionary offered one definition of sisterhood as “the solidarity of women based on shared conditions, experiences, or concerns” (Sisterhood, n.d.).

Both statements aptly describe the origin of sisterhood at Spelman College: the bond between Spelman founders, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles. Inspired by Packard’s vision of a school for Black women, the two women worked tirelessly to keep Spelman afloat, during threats to its existence because of financial hardships or during threats to its identity by efforts to change it to a coed institution. When Packard became ill and died in 1891, after 10
years as Spelman’s president, Harriet Giles assumed the role of president for her sister colleague (Read, 1961).

Nelson (2015) noted that women are members of the sacred sisterhood from which all women are born. However, societal mores have often pitted women against each other through race and class. Case (2017) asserted that students at the (female) Lucy Cobb Institute in Athens, Georgia, were trained to continue Southern White racial and class superiority through courses which “encouraged them to think about themselves and their place and their obligations to society” (p. 42). Moreover, even though Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles were filled with good intentions, Case (2017) detected a sense of superiority; she noted, “Although the Spelman founders did not publicly voice racist views, they nonetheless felt that ‘African American students needed the help of Christian White women for their moral and behavioral uplift’” (p. 88). Accordingly, while Spelmanites’ education was industrial and academic, they also learned character virtues, chastity, and respectability from their White New England founders.

**Sisterhood is not perfect.** It is like a family, which experiences its share of love, joy, sadness, triumph, defeat, and eternal growing pains. Allen (2015) acknowledged, women whom we embrace as sisters are sometimes closer than family members. They defend us, wipe away our tears, take care of us when we are ill, encourage us in troublesome times, and support our dreams. However, our sisters will not hesitate to scold us, push us, even provoke anger to protect us. Athena offered an example:

You know, sisters could really tell you about yourself, saying to you, “I can say this to you because I’m your sister.” I had Spelman sisters that are like that. They could verbally beat you up, and you’d say, “Wow, that was harsh,” and maybe in some instances it was harsh, and it didn’t need to be said, and in others it needed to be said. Just like in the family.

The sisterhood at Spelman cannot be defined as one thing. It is the culture of the daily lives of the women within it. The women are family members with distinct attributes who
mutually navigate the commonalities and the differences of the lives their parents provided for them. Diana reflected, “Without a doubt, Spelman developed a culture of sisterhood. Each one of us was different in our own special way, but we were there to support each other. We do not have to be alike or think alike to be bonded.” Harmony added:

The Spelman sisterhood is enduring. It’s forever; it doesn’t matter where you are. You can connect with a woman because we attended the same institution, and we share the spot in sisterhood. So, I kind of see the Spelman sisterhood as a scientific project. You go into the lab and say, “Hey, I want to make this product, and I need this element, and this element, and this element, and it’s going to take four years,” and by the end of the four years, there is a product. Spelman is lab that transforms you from a girl into a young woman. You graduate having learned so many things, educationally, personally, and spiritually. Spelman is a producer of African American sisters who want to change the world. We leave with the understanding that the way we see the world is different, and the way we see the world won’t be the same as other people see it. But that’s what’s needed to change the world.

Women from classes who have alumnae status of 50 years are recognized as Golden Girls. Many of the participants in this study graduated in 1969 and are Golden Girls. In May 2019, they will celebrate their 50th anniversary as alumnae and 54 years as sisters. Lillye reflected on her experience of 54 years of sisterhood, saying,

The sisterhood is classic because it stands the test of time. Through years. Through deaths. Through divorces. Though other hardships. The sisterhood has remained. And it’s not just generic to the Class of ‘69. My daughter’s reunion and my reunion are 20 years apart, and in the Class of ‘89 I see the same thing. They are there for one another. For the birthdays, the weddings, the babies, the installations, for whatever it is.

Delta added:

To me the sisterhood is a bond. A bond that, wherever I go, if I see a Spelman sister, there is always some type of tie. And I think it’s the intimacy that we had on the campus because we were very small. Now, I’m not going to try and make it all rosy because we did have problems. There were relationship problems in my dorm sometimes, but I think we kind of worked around them or my dorm advisor would try to find some way to ease the tension or problems that may have existed between certain of the young women in our class. But, basically, I don’t remember any terrible situations while I was there.

Bongo shared:
We were assigned Big Sisters during our first week. They were like mentors. They didn’t stick with us the whole time we were there because they graduated, but they really had an interest in us, and we learned from them how to be Big Sisters. Everywhere we went sisterhood was just instilled in us, unlike at some schools where the relationships begin with the sorority membership. But Spelman was a blue and white sorority. We were very close, and I appreciate that a whole lot.

Ivy expressed relief:

I went to boarding school in the 10th grade, and it was very difficult for me. I expected that same lack of friendliness when I got to Spelman. However, on the first day, as soon as I got out of my car, I started meeting folks. It was altogether different, thank God. I became part of the sisterhood from the first day I started on the campus. I met my Big Sister the very first day. She was the editor of the newspaper and was involved in a lot of campus activity. I was impressed. I finally felt like I belonged. It was not my unhappy boarding school experience.

Delta shared a comparison:

I have a friend who went to a White all-girls school in North Carolina. When she sees me, and we talk about certain things, she will say, “Oh I know it’s through Spelman. You and those Spelman ladies!” She says it like that because she doesn’t have the bond, and she often says how much she misses that bond, and how she admires Spelman women. Because, there’s a connection there, you know? It goes beyond classes, beyond ages. It’s a bond that just brings us together.

The participants believed another aspect of sisterhood is to witness and experience the same things, to be in the presence of women who are like you and not like you. It is to realize how much you are alike and how bonded you are, and that difference doesn’t matter. Sisterhood means having certain shared values, in terms of success and supporting each other. Sisterhood means working together without the interference of men and knowing there are no limitations on what can be accomplished. Lillye expressed her receptiveness to Spelman’s single gender environment:

I think the advantage I had being in a sisterhood is I didn’t have to worry about what a male thought about me. I didn’t have to be self-conscious because a male was in the room. I was with women just like me, maybe different in several ways, but still we were focused on the same thing. And so, it was an easier experience. There was no man for me to have a crush on, that didn’t make me focus on my professor. It was my sisters who challenged me with their astuteness about something that made me want to do better.
“I am my sister’s keeper” is an unspoken paradigm at Spelman. Coreen, the Pauline E. Drake scholar (PED), feels that

Sisterhood is a natural bond between females who have each other’s best interest at heart. When my childhood friend reached out to me to enroll in college, in the PED program, she reached out in sisterhood. She had [her degree], but she wanted to be a catalyst for me to enrich my life and circumstances. Now, I do the same for other sisters and potential sisters.

The Spelman sisterhood and sorority life. Legacy, class of 2005, shared,

I definitely have a sisterhood experience, but I was at Spelman during the era of sororities, and I think that made it a bit more competitive because there were only so many sorority slots in each sorority, and a lot of girls were focused on that. I joined a sorority, but it was not what I hoped would be one of the highlights of my college experience. I did not have a Big Sister experience, but yes, the Spelman bond across generations and classes is very real, and I feel that.

Msdlc, class of 1969 related:

I appreciated that we didn’t have sororities. The tradition at Spelman was sisterhood during the time I was there. We did not have sororities because the statement was made often to us, that we are all a sisterhood. Now they do have sororities, and I’m sure that they have divided sisterhoods as a result of that.

Athena, class of 1982, elaborated,

I have Spelman sisters who love me and are my friends, even when you really don’t deserve to have a friend. Maybe you’ve done something that would provoke someone else to rip you apart, but your Spelman sister is going to say, “Now, you know that was wrong. However, I love you, and I’m going to help you work through this.” It’s very nurturing; it’s supportive; it’s strong; it’s encouraging.

Spelman’s sisterhood paradigm of unwavering support and collaboration not only forges lifelong connections for alumnae but is also foundational to the school’s mission to “[inspire] a commitment to positive social change” (Spelman College, 2018).

Spelman’s fourth president, Florence Read, believed strongly that a Spelman woman had a responsibility not only to develop her talent to the best of her ability but also to improve the lives of those around her. She advocated that only when a young woman gave back could she reach her full potential. She wrote:
It is not enough that a woman shall become a self-contained, economically, independent, and completely rounded individual. Neither is it sufficient that she will have developed her taste for the good things of life and acquired skills in the arts. If the college has succeeded in its purpose, she will be not only willing, but eager to share her gifts and use her newly acquired skills to better the lives of all those within her reach to her influence. And by that strange paradox which is the profoundest truth yet discovered, it is thus, that her own life will reach its richest fulfillment. (1937, p. 270)

The sisterhood is as much about achieving individual success as it is about supporting each other to meet personal and professional goals. The alumnae in the study are part of a sisterhood of free-thinking women who have the confidence to lead, the spirit to inspire change, and the tenacity to rise above challenge. The sisterhood lasts a lifetime because the women share friendships, academic interests, and professional ties that become platforms for success and infinite opportunities.

When former First Lady Michelle Obama delivered the commencement address to the Class of 2011, she reminded them that her personal assistant is a 2003 alumna, noting the value and diverse options of a Spelman education. She closed her address saluting the sisterhood: “You are part of a glorious sisterhood—past, present, and future. You have a diploma that will take you places you’ve never even dreamed of” (Obama, 2011).

Rituals and Traditions

Sisters Chapel

It would be a major breach in Spelman cultural protocol to launch a discussion about rituals and traditions without first recognizing Sisters Chapel; it is the backdrop to life at Spelman. Sisters Chapel is where a clear majority of the participants experienced some of their most poignant memories surrounding rituals and traditions and other events. The chapel is an integral part of their cultural experience. It is a place where the bond of sisterhood is further validated and strengthened.
Sisters Chapel is a physical cultural artifact that serves as a gathering place for the expression of cultural verbal artifacts, including Spelman’s Christ-centered founding. President Florence Read, who became president of Spelman in 1927 said, “The chapel assisted in keeping central the life of the campus, the ultimate purpose of Christian education” (Watson & Gregory, 2005, p. 93).

Kuh and Whitt (1988) maintained that a campus’s architectural environment reflects the unique values and aspirations of those who live or work at the college. In the United States, a college campus is expected to be “a distinctive place whose architecture is at once historic and monumental, a source of pride and affiliation” (p. 65). Whatever the age or setting or spread, college campuses tell the story and settlement of a region. They are composed of a sequence of emblematic spaces that can read like books.

The legendary Sisters Chapel was dedicated in 1927. It was named for benefactor John D. Rockefeller’s mother, Laura Spelman Rockefeller and her sister Lucy Spelman, as it was funded with money from their estates. The Spelmans were abolitionists who migrated from Massachusetts to Ohio. They were active in the Ohio Underground Railroad. Read (1961) painted a picture of Laura and Lucy’s parent’s home:

The home of Mr. and Mrs. John Spelman was a station on the Underground Railroad, and they helped many slaves get to Canada and freedom. Mrs. Spelman, at the Seminary (Spelman) on April 11, 1884, told the assembly that the only dinners she ever cooked on the Sabbath were for the slaves on their journey northward. (p. 176)

Read (1961) wanted to underscore that the large part the Spelman family played in Spelman’s history was by no means confined to gifts of money. They were concerned about the “state of the Negroes” (p. 176). Additionally, Laura Spelman, even as a very young woman, was an advocate of women’s rights (Watson & Gregory, 2005), which was evidenced by her high school essay, entitled, “I Can Paddle My Own Canoe” (Read, 1961, p. 176).
According to Rates (2010), when John D. Rockefeller dedicated the chapel, he did not praise the chapel’s aesthetic beauty or the monetary value of the building, but instead, he recognized the character of his mother and aunt. He stated,

And so, girls of Spelman, the mantle of these sisters falls upon you, their younger sisters. May you justify their high hopes for you, follow loyally the ideals they have set up, and develop in your own lives that beauty of spirit, that simple nobility of womanhood they have so beautifully exemplified. May the spirit of these sisters and the lofty ideals they typify ever pervade this building in benediction and inspiration for all who enters its doors. (Rates, 2010, p. 25)

2012 alumna Diana recalled how she felt when she entered the chapel’s doors:

During student orientation, which is inclusive of parents, there is a segment of the weekend called “When and Where I Enter” in Sisters Chapel. During this ceremony, we were officially welcomed into the college community. We learned the school’s history, traditions, standards of excellence, and about the accomplishments of the women who had come before us. I found it very moving, and I knew I was someplace special and had to live up to the history.

Sisters Chapel was constructed to be used for the spiritual, intellectual, and social well-being of Spelman and the community (Gregory & Watson, 2005). The Reverend Dr. Norman M. Rates (2010), the dean emeritus of Sisters Chapel, noted that the chapel means different things to different generations of students and even to students within the same generation. Dr. Rates observed that in his 48-year tenure, students experienced different ministries under his administration and other deans of chapel. Some attended chapel five days a week and Sunday vesper services if they lived on campus. The women who attended five to six times a week had a different relationship with the chapel than those who went less frequently. Nonetheless, he noted,

The Sisters Chapel, throughout the years, has played a significant role in the lives of Spelman women who entered it with pride, respect, and reverence. . . . The chapel is also a venue where the voices and talents and speakers, actors, musicians, and singers have resounded gloriously. (Rates, 2010, p. 7)
When asked about the chapel, the participants shared their reminiscences. Bubbles indicated:

Generally, nobody liked chapel. At least not being made to get up in the morning and go when you wanted to sleep. But one of the enduring memories from chapel, for me is, it’s still one of the few things that brings me to tears . . . and that is, to sit in Sisters Chapel and hear women’s voices together in song. It is just amazing. There’s something about the group singing that is just magical. The sopranos. The altos. The harmony. And you do get a lot of that in the Christmas Carol Concert. But you also heard it just in chapel. That, I think, was special.

Harmony shared:

Sisters Chapel is a grounding place. We started there in orientation, and we have our last ceremony there before graduation, which is now held off campus to accommodate families. You know, there are moments when you are there, and you are asking yourself, “How is this happening? How am I a junior? How am I a senior? I just got here.” So, Sisters Chapel is so grounding because you start there and you end there, and it’s just a really sacred place whose aura can’t be found anywhere else in the world. Sadly, I also remember the funeral of my sister classmates there.

Delta responded:

One thing I enjoyed about going to chapel was the speakers. Spelman was generous in bringing people who showed you how to be the best you could be and [model] leadership for women. They presented opportunities, and they brought in people who were in leadership positions.

Ivy described the vespers:

We had to go to vespers on Sundays. We got called at 3 o’clock. The one thing I loved about vespers was when Mr. Allison turned around, and we all sang that Negro spiritual together. He directed the whole choir, and the whole audience in the Negro spiritual. Now, being in the church, now that I’m a preacher’s wife, nobody knows Negro spirituals anymore. I try to sing them in my church when I got home in Florida because I know that the kids are not exposed to Negro spirituals.

Msdlc explained, “We used to have to dress for vespers. We had to wear Sunday clothes and gloves,” and Bongo recollected, “I have very clear memories of my assigned seat in Sisters Chapel. Everybody had an assigned seat. I sat in row three in seat three. I’ll never forget how beautifully the chapel was decorated at Christmastime.”
Sisters Chapel became more nationally known during the period following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rates (2010) wrote, “The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 was one of the pivotal events in the history of Sisters Chapel” (p. 139). President Manley invited the King family to have total use of Sisters Chapel in any way they wished. It was agreed that Dr. King’s body would lie in repose at Sisters Chapel for general public viewing on Saturday, April 6 (Rates, 2010).

Sisters Chapel was the largest auditorium in the Atlanta University Center at that time, holding approximately 1,250 people. However, noted Dr. Rates (2010), it was more than a spacious building. It “possessed the beauty, the solemnity, and the dignity befitting the occasion” (p. 141).

A graduate of Morehouse College, Dr. King, had a connection to Sisters Chapel. As a child, he had come there to hear vesper services by his father and other great preachers. As an adult, he himself, thrilled audiences in the chapel with his “mellifluous voice” (Rates, 2010, p. 141). Sisters Chapel was the sanctuary where Dr. King’s spirit could be best be felt (Rates, 2010).

Members of the Golden Girl Class of 1969 were active participants as marshals during the public viewing. Bubbles remembered seeing famous people at the viewing:

One of my enduring Spelman memories was being a marshal at Martin Luther King’s viewing. It was the most incredible experience. I had never seen so many movie stars. Harry Belafonte and Diana Ross and the Kennedy’s. I mean, everybody was here: Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and Muhammad Ali.

Delta recalled, “We were wearing our white dresses,” and Bubbles described how during the ceremony,

They asked student groups to be marshals at the funeral from Spelman and Morehouse. We were to form a [boy–girl] ring around the VIP seats so they would be held for the dignitaries when they came in. Well, people started showing up the day before, and it was incredible. Those people came and just pushed us aside and took the seats.
Administration and security had to tell them to move. People were even climbing in the trees to view the event.

Annabett expressed her memories about that time:

Dr. King was a gifted man; he spoke at our vespers. His death was a special bonding experience for us because I think it was a life changing moment. We had students who were able to leave school and fly up to finish the Memphis March. My parents came to get me to make sure I wasn’t going anywhere. The fact that this could happen to us as juniors in college was monumental. So, what did that mean for us in terms of life? Because we had seen Kennedy die. We had seen Malcolm die. We had seen so many people die, and then finally King. And I had just seen him on Fourth Street just two weeks before, not knowing that that would be the last time I would see him.

Twenty years later, Dr. Rates with then President Johnetta B. Cole, hosted a ceremony memorializing the 48 hours that Dr. King lay in repose at Sisters Chapel. With Mrs. King in attendance, Dr. Rates placed a copper memorial plate on the Sisters Chapel stage floor, just beyond the pulpit, marking the spot where Dr. King’s coffin had been. The memorial plate reads, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. April 8, 1968. They came to Sisters Chapel by the Thousands, to Pay Tribute to Him. Dedicated April 8, 1988” (Rates, 2010, p. 141).

A culture steeped in rituals and traditions provides meaning and relevance to campus life while simultaneously affording a connection to the past. For the 13 participants in this study, rituals and traditions, whether they liked them at the time or not, also fostered strong bonds of sisterhood that constitute an unbroken chain to this day. According to Manning (2000), rituals and traditions are a vital part of the culture of a women’s college, including rituals of incorporation and of entering and exiting. Rituals of incorporation focus on bringing new members into the culture and welcoming them after they have gone through a series of activities or rites of passage, such as the “When and Where I Enter” tradition that alumna Diana described, and Sisters Chapel was a crucial gathering space that housed these types of rituals.

Sisters Chapel is only one example of the various Spelman artifacts that illustrate the school’s rich history of ritual. The very first tradition Spelman women learn about upon
admission is the white dress, or white attire, tradition. Each student is required to have a crisp white outfit and black shoes to wear during her matriculation, graduation, and at alumnae events.

The White Dress Tradition

Rituals of entering and exiting symbolize the act of crossing a threshold, whether into a marriage, entering a new house, or embarking on a new stage of life, and have traditionally been endowed with considerable meaning (Manning, 2000). Some colleges have special symbols or artifacts that are dedicated to the exiting and entrance of students. At Spelman, one of the enduring physical artifacts that symbolizes the rites of passage into the college, graduation from the college, and life beyond the college is the white dress tradition, now called the white attire tradition. The administration maintains its position on the white attire tradition through this historically inspired communication:

The wearing of white attire on designated official occasions is among the most well-respected and treasured of the College’s traditions. The obligatory commitment for each Spelman student to have a “respectable and conservative” white dress was established around 1900. During this period, a white dress was the attire most often used for formal occasions. This tradition established a uniformed appearance among those present and denoted the significance of the occasion or event. Prior to the 1940s the white dress was worn with hosiery made of cotton. However, with the invention of nylons came beige and tan colored stockings. These stockings, referred to as “flesh-toned,” were worn with black shoes. Black shoes were a part of the basic clothing requirements, which also consisted of having a pair of “sensible black shoes,” for Spelman students. This recommendation was made in an effort to avoid overwhelming students and parents with the cost of having to provide more than one pair of shoes.

In the spirit of this tradition, all first-year students are required to wear this “traditional white dress ensemble” for the New Student Orientation Induction Ceremony. All students are required to wear it when attending the Founders Day Convocation, and graduating seniors are required to wear this same attire underneath the academic regalia for Founders Day, Class Day, Baccalaureate and Commencement. Additionally, it is requested that alumnae wear this attire when attending the Founders Day Convocation, related Founders Day activities hosted by alumnae and chapters of the Alumnae Association around the country, and for the March through the Alumnae Arch held during Reunion. (Spelman College, “The White Attire Tradition,” 2018)
The alumnae reflected on the white dress tradition and how it contributed to the culture of Spelman. Bubbles did not find the tradition to be the core of her connections to Spelman. She said,

I’m one of those who doesn’t care about traditions: the white dress, walking through the arch, and all that we did for tradition’s sake. What I remember is the friendships. That is what keeps me connected to Spelman. It’s the relationship with my sisters: watching our relationships evolve over time.

Annabett saw the white dress tradition within the context of the college history. She noted,

If you think about it, white dresses go back to the founding of Spelman. We had our first freed slaves. So, that was how they could be in uniform. It’s the thread that runs through our generations if you look back to original Founders Day, original Commencement on our campus. You see African American women in white dresses. So, that’s a symbolic thing. When we came to Spelman, we couldn’t even wear pants.

Delta recognized the practical aspects of the white dress tradition, “Not only did it mean purity, but the white cotton dress was cheap. It was a fabric that was easily affordable.” Coreen held the traditions close and was honored to be part of them. She shared,

I’m proud of the traditions of Spelman. I like the white dress, natural hose, and black shoe tradition. I am a descendant of a race of women who were denied an education, and to me the white dress symbolizes progress. It symbolizes perseverance to my family. They watched me work toward a degree for 10 years to become the first in my family to earn a bachelor’s degree when I was over 50 years old. They watched me cross the graduation stage wearing the white dress under my robe as all Spelman women do.

The White Dress Tradition plays a prominent role in Spelman traditions because it not only marks a young woman’s entry in the school but also heralds her entrance into society at the time of her graduation.

March Through the Alumnae Arch Tradition

The alumnae arch is an institutional cultural physical artifact that plays host to a cultural behavioral artifact: the ceremonial marching through the alumnae arch on Class Day. Kuh and Whitt (1988) maintained that ceremonials, rites, and rituals on a college campus give form to communal life. “They enrich the campus ethos and allow interpretations and meanings to be
made of special events, and they show how artifactual forms are blended to communicate important aspects of the institution’s culture” (p. 67).

The alumnae arch is located with the campus oval, and it is made from ivy. The arch is symbolic of graduating seniors leaving Spelman and moving into the role of alumnae. Students are told at orientation that it is bad luck for them to walk under the arch until it is time for them to do so (Collins & Lewis, 2008).

Class Day opens Spelman’s formal Commencement festivities. It begins with a special afternoon graduate service in Sisters Chapel, which celebrates the senior class. The students wear their graduation robes over their white dresses. The Class Day convocation is unique in that it is the only formal commencement event in which peers directly address the senior class. The senior class president presides over the ceremony, and the class valedictorian delivers the Ivy Oration, an address in which she compares the characteristics of the ivy plant to the class in a unique way. She will also plant ivy beside one of the campus buildings later in the day. Other Class Day traditions include the passing of the Senior Bench and Mortar Board to the junior class, the passing of the class emblem to the incoming first-year class, and presentation of the class history.

After the conclusion of the Class Day program, seniors join the alumnae on the oval for the processional through the alumnae arch, which is symbolic of seniors leaving the College and entering into greater service in the world beyond the Spelman gates. Spelman alumnae, wearing, white dresses, lead the procession, starting with the oldest first. Each graduating senior then goes through the arch and is greeted by the President and their family as they exit the college and enter greater service (Spelman College, “Commencement Schedule of Events,” 2018).

For Harmony, the arch represented hope:
Spelman is such a beautiful campus with the alumnae arch in the oval. We learned about the arch ritual during our first week, and even then, I was filled with anticipation and hope. For me, the arch also provided comfort. There would be times when I would walk past the arch feeling low: maybe I failed a test or had broken up with the boyfriend I thought I was going to marry. A walk by the arch revived me. I remember when I received the phone call that my father had passed away, I spent time by the arch. In this devastating moment, I had hope. I knew I would graduate. I am going to finish this. I felt regardless of how tough times got, I would walk under that arch one day. So now, I go back to Reunion with the greatest joy: taking pictures with my sisters and cheering on the graduating sisters who are passing through the arch for the first time. You know, I’ve taken pictures with my sister and my niece in front of the arch. I’m so excited to think that my niece will walk through the arch like her mother and I did.

Lillye shared a collective sisterhood experience:

I remember an experience at our 45th-year reunion. We were wearing our white dresses and marching through the arch behind all the classes before us. When the seniors came through, all the older classmates reached back in time. They started singing some of the songs like “When a Spelman Girl Walks Down the Street” and congratulating the girls. And they were weeping. They were weeping because they realized that all of us had that first experience of going through the arch as a senior in your cap and gown. It means that I have arrived because it’s just a matter of days you know you will be graduating. I have arrived. I’ve made it. This is a milestone that feels so good.

In 2012, the March through the Alumnae Arch made national news. NBC’s Brian Williams shared:

On Senior Class Day at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, the young women march through the Alumnae Arch, while they are cheered on by a gauntlet of beaming alumnae all dressed in white. It’s an emotional event that symbolizes the seniors leaving the college and entering into greater service in the world beyond the gates of Spelman. (NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams, 2012.)

In his study of college environments and student learning, Kuh (1990) used tradition as a measurement of a strong institutional culture. When an organization obtains strong traditions, the culture was found to be richer (Kuh, 1990). Communities with strong traditions, having spanned multiple years, refine their traditions to represent the core values of their culture. Through the refinement, individuals take ownership of the tradition, and an individual’s sense of belonging is important in building community morale and retaining members. Because of this
importance, traditions “have a pervasive, far-reaching influence on institutional life” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 5).

Moreover, when school traditions prevail, returning alumni maintain a strong connection to the campus culture. Often, parents and prospective students recognize the prestige of an institution through its most recognizable traditions, and other outside constituents are more likely to become involved on a campus that they perceive as having a vibrant culture and sound values.

**Values**

Spelman College mirrors colleges across the world by instituting standards and a code of conduct for its students. Spelman’s standards represent the core values of integrity, fairness, respect, community, and responsibility. The college issued this statement, including a description of the core values, to ensure students and families understand the value system:

> Students are encouraged to be reflective of the college values and behavioral expectations as they engage in their academic studies and co-curricular activities. Research has demonstrated that students who are active participants in the college and surrounding communities are more likely to uphold college policies and maintain a positive community environment. Conduct occurs in the context of a community of scholars dedicated to seeking excellence in academics, personal learning, and leadership. (Spelman College, “Code of Conduct,” 2018)

Spelman has clear institutional values and expectations within its culture, which are formally and informally learned through the socialization process. Socialization is defined as a process through which individuals acquire the values, norms, knowledge, and skills needed to exist in a given society (Watson & Gregory, 2005). The daily habits or “ethos” are how values and beliefs are transmitted to students (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). It is also important for students to understand and believe in the school’s history, mission, and philosophy (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

Early women’s colleges in the mind of many may have been compared to or thought of as finishing schools for young women without the rigor of college work. Spelman women, from the school’s inception, were holistically educated and became accustomed to rigorous daily
routines. A schedule from the 1885 Spelman Messenger describes a typical week as, “Every day of the week is filled full, from six in the morning until nine at night. Satan finds few idle hands to supply with mischief in the institution” (Spelman Messenger, p. 17).

Case (2017) asserted that the early Spelman seminary method of ensuring respectability was industrial education that served as moral instruction meant to prepare African American women to become race leaders. Founders Packard and Giles believed that by instilling middle-class values of thrift, sobriety, discipline, self-reliance, and industry, as well as sexual purity, Black women would be able to work on “racial uplift as mothers, nurses, teachers, and community leaders” (Case, p. 127).

In 1923, Spelman was formally incorporated as a college, but the industrial and vocational curriculum was the Spelman standard until fourth president, Florence Read took the helm in 1927. A graduate of Mount Holyoke, and a former employee of the Rockefeller Foundation and Reed College in Oregon, Florence Read made it her mission to transform Spelman into a true liberal arts college, which it is today. Read’s vision of a liberal arts curriculum was the catalyst for the expansive, evolving curriculum and programming Spelman offers. The evolution of Spelman into a liberal arts college not only offered a rigorous academic experience but also has built upon and advanced the school’s foundational values.

Watson and Gregory (2005) identified three values, or ideals, that shape the modern Spelman woman: training of the heads (nurturing academic and intellectual environment); training of the hands (activism, civic engagement, leadership, community service); and training of the heart (Christian character, sisterhood, mentoring, and Black female social consciousness) (p. 134).
Training of the Heads

Johnetta B. Cole, Spelman’s seventh president and the first female African American president, asserted, “The truly well-educated person has a knowledge and a sensitivity about others. She is familiar with her people’s history, literature, art, politics and economy, but she knows about other human conditions that make up our world” (Cole, 2003, p.168).

In contrast to the 1885 schedule described above or the focus on industrial and vocational education, modern Spelman women are prepared to read and think critically, as well as travel nationally and globally to enrich and broaden their educational lens. Study participant experiences varied; however, each endeavor was a learning experience.

Diana reflected:

The first-year experience in the African Diaspora and the World (ADW) course embodies the idea of training women for the common good. The ADW course challenges misconceptions about the African Diaspora, race, and gender and encourages students to think critically about what it means to engage with the world. Personally, the experience in the ADW course compelled me to examine the way in which I engaged in school, careers, and relationships as an African-American woman. I felt empowered by understanding the history of survival, trauma, and resilience of the African Diaspora and equipped to make my own mark on the world.

Life at Vassar. 1982 Spelman alumna Athena spent a year at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. She shared,

I was an exchange student at Vassar my junior year. I wish I could say that I loved it. It is a fancy school with physical buildings and grounds that Spelman could only dream of. At that time in my life, even the food could be described as gourmet. Vassar has an impressive history, and any woman would love to have its name on her resume. But all I wanted to do was get back to Spelman where I was treated like I mattered. At Vassar, I felt ostracized. It was not a sisterhood I could belong to - even before they went coed. Even the adult professors came across as racist.

Life in China. Diana, who graduated from Spelman in 2012, did not spend a year abroad during her tenure at Spelman but decided to spend time in China afterward.

I didn’t study abroad as an undergraduate student, which I regretted when graduation rolled around. I felt my sisters who studied abroad returned to campus with a layer of
knowledge that I didn’t have. I achieved the GPA I strived for, but I was missing something. So, I applied to teach in China and was accepted in a program. It changed my life. I realized I was meant to be an educator. I not only fell in love with the classroom, but I also recognized how important it is for students to experience and determine their role in the world. It inspired me to develop a summer reading program where I took parents and children on educational trips around my hometown.

According to Watson and Gregory (2005), research on women’s colleges has consistently reported that alumnae of women’s colleges are more focused on education, involved in more leadership activities, and more self-confident. The climate tends to be “more favorable and warmer, which often results in women having greater involvement inside and outside of the classroom” (p. 138).

**Training of the Hands**

Spelman has always instilled the value of giving back to one’s community and to society in general. Ivy elaborated on giving back,

So, that whole idea of giving back to the community is not just attitude towards life, it’s attitude towards what your life can be and what it can mean to others in the community, and how you can go back and change that community and inspire and educate others.

In the March 2012, *Profiles of Diversity Journal*, Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, founding director of the Women’s Research and Resource Center and the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women’s Studies at Spelman, informed readers, “From our vantage point, we see ourselves as producing particular kinds of leaders. We are focused on activism leadership as opposed to a generic idea of producing women leaders” (p.1). Spelman is dedicated to developing students who see themselves as transformational leaders, not just leaders who get good jobs and earn big incomes (Austin, 2012).

Seventy-five years earlier, in 1937, fourth president Florence Read wrote an article in *Opportunity* magazine describing the role of a women’s college:

One learns to lead by leading. In the same way, the young woman who has had full opportunity to develop her dramatic talents, to appreciate and understand good music and
literature, and to engage freely in games and sports will carry back with her a full measure of her talents to her people, and if she is worth her salt, will in one way or another, share her gifts and enthusiasm with those with whom she lives and works. (p. 270)

Cole (1993) posited that African American women needed to be empowered, and that can only occur when history and circumstances are acknowledged and analyzed through “an education that conditions us to know ourselves. People without knowledge of who they are cannot successfully participate in determining the direction in which they wish to go” (p. 169).

Spelman women protested over the hiring of Dr. Cole’s predecessor, Dr. Donald Steward, because “consistent with the historical leadership of the College, as well as the students’ socialization that women were empowered to serve in the highest leadership positions,” they felt a woman should serve as the leader of Spelman College (Watson & Gregory, 2005, p. 142). One study participant reflected on her involvement with the protest against Dr. Steward and the many emotions of empowerment:

Confidence and the ability to stand up for what I believe are two of the many things that I took away from Spelman. Our class was the last class that had a male president. When Dr. Manley retired, he said it was important for the Board to select a female for an all-women’s college. Our class locked in the Board of Directors that year. I was a senior, and I remember thinking, “Lord, have mercy, if I get put out of Spelman, my mother and father are going to have a fit.” And I remember having a conversation with my peers, and my friends, and people on our floor about participating . . . Because SGA] [Student Government Association] had just organized this sit-in. I remember thinking, “You know, I believe in what they’re saying.” And I thought, “Okay. If enough of us go, I was safe. If it’s two or three, it’s going to be a problem.”

There were enough of us who did go, so no one got put out, and no one had detention or anything like that. And I remember that even though Donald Stewart was chosen, and I felt that he did well by Spelman, I wanted a female, and I personally felt good in taking that stand. That was during a time when I was pretty quiet. I wasn’t a real outgoing person then. I remember thinking it’s important to take a stand, and I did it. I had found my voice. I have used that event as a platform. If there’s something important to me, I’m going to say it. And let the consequences be what they may.
Training of the Hearts

Watson and Gregory (2005) listed Black female social consciousness as one of the attributes for the training of hearts. Cole (1997) acknowledged that Spelman women “have their basic necessities cared for, live in a relatively safe environment, and are not haunted on campus by racism or sexism” (p. 150). This quality of life allows them to focus on their studies. Nonetheless, the college requires each student to take a course, “African Diaspora of the World,” to better understand her place as a Black woman in the world. In the past two years, the curriculum has extended its reach to the dance and choreography department to further develop Black female social consciousness; a consciousness that will prompt students to become more aware of and/or reflective about problems they may face. The college leadership is ensuring the students of Spelman College understand the full spectrum of their heritage.

In 2018, I conducted a study, Arts Meets Theory, and had the opportunity to interview the chair of Spelman’s dance and choreography department who shared, “We emphasize Black feminist theory because we want our students to be well informed about their identities and have an anchor about who they are as women of the African Diaspora,” (Mebane, 2018).

Diana noted:

While Spelman imbued me with the confidence in my abilities as a Black woman—my experience in majority White professional spaces tested that confidence. My work experiences have shown me that the larger society is not intentionally bent on preserving your physical, mental, or emotional health. Therefore, I now understand with urgency the need advocate for my own self-care particularly as a Black woman.

Mebane (2018) shared how Carolyn, a professor in the department acknowledged their student body needs to know about Black feminism because:

They’re Black women, and Black feminist theory is about empowerment, not just of Black women, but of all people. Therefore, it’s really important for Spelman women to know the theory because Spelman is all about creating change agents; Spelman students need to be able to challenge some of the beliefs that are embedded in patriarchal, White supremacist thinking. And that a lot of times, we just accept things just because that’s
what we’ve heard and learned from so many realms; it could be our families, it could be our churches, certainly the media and the news, and entertainment and all of that. We participate in our own oppression unless we keep our eyes open and come to recognize oppression and learn that there are different ways of being that allow us to live with greater freedom and a greater sense of ourselves and our capacities, and Black feminist theory really does that.

Intersection of Race and Gender

Renowned, professor of history, Howard Zinn, was fired from Spelman College in 1963 for supporting student activism dealing with civil rights and the campus’s paternalistic social restrictions (Cohen, 2018). Author, Alice Walker, had just completed a semester under his tutelage. She addressed the issue in Robert Cohen’s book:

I thought this manner of ejecting a controversial teacher extremely cowardly and could not bear to seem to condone or accept. I wrote a letter of protest that was published in our student newspaper, a letter that led inevitably to my own exit from a school that I struggled with, but I loved deeply. (2018, p. ix)

In a 1960 article, Finishing School for Pickets, Zinn gave the backdrop to what would lead to his termination:

One afternoon some weeks ago, with the dogwood on the Spelman College campus newly bloomed and the grass close-cropped and fragrant, an attractive, tawny-skinned girl crossed the lawn to her dormitory to put a notice on the bulletin board. It read:

Young Ladies Who Can Picket Please Sign Below.

The notice revealed, in its own quaint language, that within the dramatic revolt of Negro college students in the South today another phenomenon has been developing. This is the upsurge of the young, educated Negro woman against the generations-old advice of her elders: be nice, be well-mannered and ladylike, don’t speak loudly, and don’t get into trouble. On the campus of the nation’s leading college for Negro young women—pious, sedate, encrusted with the traditions of gentility and moderation—these exhortations, for the first time, are being firmly rejected. (p. 520)

Times and, more importantly, attitudes were changing at Spelman. The 1969 participants of this study arrived at Spelman in 1965, two years after Zinn’s firing and in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and budding gender awareness.

Bubbles described the experience saying,
I think Spelman’s rhetoric was always that women were empowered, but as in most of America back then, we were in a sexist patriarchy. The [Spelman] presidents were . . . I mean, after the White women, the presidents were all male. And that was a big issue while we were there. We began to question, “Why have there only been male presidents?” And there was a certain level of deference to Morehouse [the male college across the street]. There was this sort of nonverbal thing that really what most parents wanted was for you to go to Spelman and find some Morehouse man to marry and have a couple of kids and live happily ever after. It’s a fairy tale. It’s a fairy tale.

Delta shared,

I hope we will be able to continue the legacy of what Spelman has done so far. As I look back on the year 2018, I do hope it will be a safe place for women. There have been issues at Spelman that have been brought to the light, and some of them have been kind of undercover as far as safety for women. The relationship between Morehouse and Spelman needs to be talked about. Especially the #Me Too Movement because there have been incidences where some of our more hostile Morehouse brothers have taken advantage of our Spelman sisters. And what about the lesbian, gay, and transgender students who are coming to our campus? There are so many transgender terms now; I can’t go through all of those, but I’m trying to learn about them, and I’m hoping that we will be open and accepting.

Bubbles reflected,

When I look back on the time at Spelman, that I spent, which was ‘65 through ‘69, I think, it was one of the most exciting times in world history, and we had a ringside seat. We were right here, in the middle of all of it. All of the people that have changed the world came through Spelman and Morehouse during the time we were there.

Bongo remembered,

The Civil Rights Act was implemented during our time, and so more equal employment opportunities. The Class of ’69 was the first class that even the placement office invited corporate executives, even graduate school opportunities coming to recruit us. Not just to recruit Blacks - but the idea to recruit Black women.

Lillye described,

We were taught, whether it was said outright or intimated, that we could do anything, and that we were going to do something, and the end product was value to society. But, when you look across the history, the women and the outstanding things that women have done, you know that there’s been academic excellence. You know that people met their fullest potential. You know that they were empowered, especially those women before desegregation. They made history because they were responsible for social change.

Bubbles reflected,
This was the period in which women’s rights and feminism were really taking shape. The pill came out, which gave women reproductive control and freedom. That was a life-changer for everybody in our era. Roe vs. Wade gave us abortion rights if we chose to do that. So, it was a time at which women’s roles were being defined in society and as well as the roles of African Americans. That made for a really dynamic period. And I think that when we look back, the classes ahead of us at Spelman, the mid-60s classes, they’re the ones who took the freedom ride. By the time we graduated, the doors had been kicked wide open. And all we had to do was walk through and get jobs. It was just amazing. And so, in that sense many people in our class were the first in a workplace or the first in a program or some opportunity. And I don’t think we’ve done a very good job of capturing that because we know about the people who have titles and notoriety. But we have no idea about the other classmates who’ve done the same thing and who will never tell us. We’ll just never know.

Ivy stated,

We had the protests, and that is how I learned to be a leader—as a student government member who had to organize and lead forums. I had no idea what I had in me until I did that. It woke me up to the potential that was in me that I hadn’t been using. I mean, I had been involved in leadership roles and lots of stuff on campus, all kinds of stuff. But that particular experience was crucial for me.

Annabett recognized,

When I entered law school, seven years after graduation at Spelman, interestingly enough, six members of the Class of 1969 also entered law school. And we were a support group for each other, because that was also the year in which the largest number of women in the country entered law school. And by-and-large we were older and had come through an era which women had not been encouraged to go to law school.

In the spirit of continued activism, in the spring of 2004, Spelman women ignited controversy when they protested the presence of rapper Nelly at a bone marrow drive on campus. A group of students declared the content of Nelly’s music videos misogynistic, and upon hearing news of the protest, the rapper decided not to appear at the drive to register students as bone marrow donors (Howard University News Service, n.d.).

Feminists today might consider Howard Zinn’s insight that his “nice, well-mannered, and ladylike” students did not so much abandon respectability as redefine it. They recognized a moment when virtue required acting out, not leaning in, and when the corrective for stifling
mores were not displays of unfettered individual behavior that reinforced dangerous stereotypes (Giddings, 2015).

**Fleshing Out Feminist Theories**

In this section, I re-introduce the founders of Spelman College and a few of the study participants under the umbrella in which they reside theoretically. With the exception of feminist standpoint theory, which is the historical starting point for Spelman women, Black feminist theory and critical race feminism offer a glimpse into the diversity that resides among the study participants and illustrates a principle(s) of a given theory.

I begin with a brief overview of standpoint theory as it relates to the Spelman founders. That section is followed by the study participants’ recollection of oppression as it relates to their culture or personal lives, and the two closing sections illustrate Black feminist theory and critical race theory through the lens of the participants.

**Before Our Time: Spelman Founders as Standpoint Feminists**

When Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles collaborated on opening a school for Black women, they had previously taught together for years at various new England institutions, and Packard had been working as secretary for the Woman’s American Baptist home Mission Society (WabhMS) in Boston. Their personal history included having been pushed aside from leadership at a prestigious academy after conflict with a new male head of school; therefore, according to Robbins (2017), their motivation for opening the then Atlanta Baptist Seminary (Spelman) stemmed in part from an altruistic sense of duty, as well as seeking self-advancement at a time when women’s administrative and leadership skills were easy to dismiss.

Their concerted effort to open the Atlanta Baptist Seminary, established a feminist standpoint to counter the unjust social order not only for themselves but also for the Black
women they were educating. Harding (1991) posited, these types of struggles make the injustices women suffer visible. The struggle “emphasizes the fact that a feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement. A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective, which anyone can have simply “by opening one’s eyes” (Harding, 1991, p. 127).

Acknowledging Oppression

There are various strands of feminist theories; all place women at the center of a given study, thought process or, analysis. Most importantly, the theories emphasize that the experience and oppressions of women in society are not the same as that of men. Specifically, Black women’s experiences do not mirror those of White women in every instance. Here, the study’s participants identify and articulate areas in their lives or culture where oppression resided.

Diana has an interesting cultural background and heritage that complements her experience at a women’s college. She is a Liberian American who lives and was educated stateside. However, in Liberia, the cultural norm is to educate boys – not girls. Diana visited her Liberian family for the first time three years ago. She was anxious to meet her father’s family and learn more about her paternal grandmother of whom she had never even seen a picture. However, she said she saw her grandmother’s reflection in the faces of those who remembered her inspirational work in education. Diana reflected,

A Monrovian tailor reminisced that my grandmother was a gift. She helped him to bring his daughters from the interior and send them to the proper schools. A taxi driver shared his memory of my grandmother taking him on his first trip to the city, which later in life gave him the confidence to take his daughters to the city. An aunt told me that my grandmother was so proud of her Congolese roots that she made the children, both girls and boys, study the family tree for hours. A life-long learner herself, my grandmother even began to learn Swahili a few years before her death and kept a language journal.

Diana came to realize that her Liberian grandmother expanded educational opportunity in an oppressive male-dominated culture long before she was born, acknowledging, “I proudly
stand on the shoulders of a female ancestor who defied societal constructs to promote learning.”

Inspired, Diana’s commitment as a graduate student includes a desire to study Swahili in her grandmother’s honor and build upon her legacy by globalizing public education for girls. Additionally, she hopes to design high school volunteer travel that introduces minorities in high school to the African continent.

Moreover, the study participants who graduated from Spelman in 1969 clearly remembered the struggles of the civil rights movement and Spelman’s activist stance and the overt oppression felt by Blacks in Atlanta. They arrived on campus in 1965 as first-year students amid the turmoil of that era.

Bubbles recalled that it was a conflict beyond race:

Spelman as a liberal arts college believes that knowledge is of value as to the extent that it is put to use. Additionally, Spelman believes in the long arm of community service and uplift. In those two ways, action was fine and okay. However, Spelman also had a traditional non-political stance. Spelman did not challenge the justice system in such an active way. So, this was a BIG deal. Plus, protesting went against the public image of Spelman; you know, the whole white glove prim and proper young lady thing. Men did the protesting, and on the flip side, Professor Zinn got fired for it. Not even a White man could protest at Spelman.

Bonnie added,

And our Spelman sister, Ruby Doris Smith, died while working for SNCC [The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. But we know now that women were behind the big-name activists like Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy. They were doing a lot of the grunt work and had important ideas. I was long out of college when I learned about the women behind the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks did so much more than get on the bus that day—and yes, it was monumental and started a revolution.

Harding (2004) also explained that it is important for the researcher to begin with learning about the lives of the marginalized to better understand their circumstances and issues. As such, I initiated each interview with inquiries about the participant’s life before Spelman—leading up to what factors guided her decision to attend Spelman.
Exploring the backgrounds of the study participants provided the opportunity to learn what they individually brought to Spelman as young women and scholars, as well their expectations of Spelman. It also provided the backdrop for what was the beginning of the sisterhood for them: a diverse group of women with parallel and non-parallel family, socio-economic, and life experiences; for example, one study participant began Spelman at 47. Yet, a commonality among them was achievement. In academic life before Spelman, the participants shared they were accustomed to being superlative in their academic studies and/or in their extracurricular and cultural pursuits - which in some cases, Spelman challenged. Many were valedictorians and salutatorians of their high school class. They were surprised and taken aback to be in an environment chock full of the same kind of student. Moreover, they, or their parents in some cases, had intentionally selected a Black women’s college when there were other options available to them at the time of their enrollment.

Msdlc related,

I got to Spelman, and everyone else was a valedictorian and salutatorian. I also expected to be the best ballet dancer. So, everything I expected just was not realized. I recognized that everybody was a star, and so I had to pull it together, and rise above it. It took me awhile, but I did manage to do that. I was humbled quite a bit.

Lillye added,

My parents dream for me was to finish high school without a receiving blanket. They would have been fine with me being a stock clerk in anybody’s store, as long as I was a decent citizen. I applied to Spelman, although all of my family had not gone to college, and my parents did not have high school educations.

Bubbles reflected:

We had to take a reading class back then, and I was surprised when Spelman flunked me at reading. And I had to take Ms. Farris’ class. Now wait a minute, I have been through nuns. Those nuns were relentless! In high school, they taught me at a level I’ve never been taught before. So, it wasn’t like I was a chump. I was shocked!

Coreen recalled,
When my childhood friend reached out to me to enroll in college, in the Pauline E. Drake program for mature students, I was 47 years old with a very full plate raising a family. She reached out in sisterhood. She had hers (degree), but she wanted to be a catalyst for me to enrich my life and circumstances. I was inspired. My expectation was that I would graduate.

Annabett shared,

We were probably the first class that had the opportunity to go to an integrated college. Because, in 1965–66, admissions opened up, and so all of us had that option. I think we were the first generation, the first students that intentionally selected a Black women’s college.

Harmony reflected:

Spelman just felt like the place where I could learn about me and not have to worry about being the representative for my entire race. I do think Spelman met those expectations, and at orientation it was exactly that. They pour Spelman into you; they teach you about your heritage, and the history of Black women, of Spelman women, so I think it probably overly exceeded my expectations.

Ivy stated,

I went to the boarding school when I was in the 10th grade. The boarding school started in the 7th grade. So, by the time I got to the boarding school all the cliques had formed. So, it was difficult there for a few months, but I did make friends. So, I kind of expected that same experience at Spelman, but it wasn’t. I became part of the sisterhood from the first day I started on the campus. I met my Big Sister the very first day. She was the editor of the newspaper and was involved in a lot of campus activity. I was impressed. I finally felt like I belonged. It was not my unhappy boarding school experience.

Ivy voiced her pleasure in feeling that she belonged – not an outsider. Harmony expressed her relief to be in a space that did not require her to be anything but her authentic self.

The pre-college lived experiences of the study participants negated stereotypes that only middle and upper middle-class Black attended Spelman, and/or that Black women are low achievers. Athena shared, announcing oneself as a Spelman student or graduate, at least among college-educated Blacks, is impressive. But, on the other hand, it can cause a somewhat negative judgment because the college developed a reputation as a haven for upper-crust, stiff-lipped, proper Black women of a certain class and skin tone.
Their stories also negated the stereotypical images of Black women as: “mammy, welfare queen, tragic mulatto, sex siren, or athlete” (Wing, 1997, p. 1). Additionally, their stories confirmed that a sense of belonging is important for a sense of well-being. Harmony, for example, felt the need to be nurtured as a Black woman and not a representation of her race.

**Black Feminist Theory: Exploring Difference**

According to Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall: “Black feminists come to feminism through the experiences of our debilitating culture racism, classism and sexism. Since the experiences of Black women are distinct from those of White women and Black men, Black women must struggle for equality both as women and as African-Americans, and it is this consciousness of our multiple jeopardy in the world that stimulates a Black feminist sensibility” (McFall, p. 9).

Harmony, a 2012 alumna, entered Spelman with a sense of exhaustion from being the only minority or one of few minorities in her academic world. She explained,

> I felt like Spelman was a safe place for a young Black girl to grow into herself and chase her dreams. I had always experienced being the only, if not a few Blacks in school, and I adapted to that, but I’ve never felt like I truly got to know myself or my culture outside of feeling the pressure of needing to represent my whole race using White Midwest standards, and I am not White. I think my parents may have been doing the same thing as a Black college professor and Black school principal living in a small, predominately White college town. It was not a healthy or authentic existence for me. It was microscopic, unfair, sometimes painful, and was the breeding ground for my insecurities about how smart I am as Black woman contemplating being a medical doctor.

Harmony’s socio-economic status of a solidly upper middle-class family did not shield her from having to defend her worth as Black woman on a daily basis. Additionally, she felt the need to carry the burden of the entire race on her young shoulders. From my own experience, minority children are often told, you have to work twice as hard to get half as far.

In 1981, six years prior to Dr. Johnetta B. Cole becoming the first African American woman president of Spelman, Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall founded the Women’s Resource and
Research Center on Spelman’s campus: the first historically Black college to establish a women’s center (McFall, 2006).

This meant Spelman women attending a Black college, built especially for them, could immerse themselves into Black feminist issues and literature in an environment that is nourishing and not mocking and or punitive. Archival data in the 2006 Winter/Spring edition of the Spelman Messenger revealed,

Spelman’s Women’s Research and Resource Center established an explicitly feminist presence on the campus that would set the stage for helping to shape the national dialogue on women of color and women’s studies. The Women’s Center challenged the academy with its ground breaking and historic foray into the deepest chasms of race and gender, creating a model program firmly rooted in intellectual innovation and rigor. (McFall, 2006, p. 9).

**Critical Race Feminism and Educational Experiences**

Evans Winters and Esposito (2010) posited, “critical race feminism as a theoretical lens and movement purports that women of color’s educational experiences, thus perspectives, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of White women. Scholars of critical race feminism focus on the lives of women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to race, gender, and class” (p. 21).

In her junior year, Athena, a 1982 alumna, participated in a one-year college exchange program between Spelman and Vassar, which was founded as a women’s college in Poughkeepsie, New York. The program, she said, was designed in the late 50’s or early 60’s to broaden students’ understanding of race and culture on both sides of the racial divide. She attended a well-integrated high school in the Midwest; therefore, she was not overly concerned about mixing with White students and faculty. In fact, she recalled, my entry into Spelman may have been more of a culture shock because I had not been in an all-Black educational setting, but that was what I wanted. Here she described her year at Vassar,
I recognized that when some of my professors looked at me, they saw color and not me. If I asked about a grade on an assignment, I would not get a direct answer to my question. One professor had a standard reply of, “You just didn’t get it”. And I think rather than have me ask questions in the future, she just gave me top grades – not that my work was crap … but still … what did I learn? I learned and felt the frosty hostility of racism. The experience was so unlike Spelman which is in the business of educating Black women. Nonetheless, I did what Spelman taught me to do – my best.

She recounted that she assumed that because Vassar was created for women, it retained a focus for women’s empowerment, and after all, it was 1981, and society supposedly was in a better place in terms of race relations. Additionally, she said some of the professors did not even feel the need to mask their racial insolence. She concluded that it was a good lesson about making assumptions about race – or anything else.

Critical race feminism in education is beneficial to the investigation of and theory building around educational issues impacting Black female students in the following way:

Within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression; critical race feminism asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color (i.e., anti-essentialist); Critical race feminism is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth; and critical race feminism calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression. (Evans-Winter & Esposito, 2010 p. 21).

In that respect, Spelman students began to feel oppressed by its leadership. Spelman College presidents, prior to 1987, were four White women and two Black men. It took 106 years for a Black woman to lead a school built for Black women. Students, however, had been lobbying for a Black woman to lead them for over a decade. Even after a planned protest, the next selection for a president was male.

Participant, Msdlc recalled,

Confidence and the ability to stand up for what I believe are two of the many things that I took away from Spelman. Our class was the last class that had a male president. When Dr. Manley retired, he said it was important for the Board to select a female for an all-women’s college. Our class locked in the Board of Directors that year to make our point.
Additionally, CRF uses CRT’s method of storytelling to understand the lives of Black women, and the study’s participants were able to tell authentic stories about their educational experience at Spelman. The practice of storytelling allows traditionally marginalized and disempowered groups, such as women and people of color, to reclaim their voices.

In addition, by laying claim to personal stories, oppressed peoples are able to create their own sphere of theorized existence, and thus remove themselves from the marginalized position to which the dominant society has relegated them. The lessons of life are learned faster and told better by those who have experienced the (Amoah, p. 85). Stories reconfigure the past, endowing it with meaning and continuity, and also project a sense of what will or should happen in the future (Davis, 2002).

Coreen began college at Spelman at age 47, and a decade later she had earned a bachelor’s degree. Her story brings the pursuit of education, and higher education in particular for Blacks, full circle.

Both my parents came from a family of 16; they each had 15 siblings. I was most inspired by my grandfather on my father’s side. However, I never met him because he died two years before I was born. But it is his story that motivated me. He owned 200 acres of land in a small town in Georgia, and from everyone that I have talked to, I learned that he had a prosperous mind set. He was one of the first Black men in that small community to have electricity and to own an automobile. He was a perceptive business man, but he could not read or write, and he was cheated out of the first 100 acres of land he purchased because of it. He purchased more land, and he lost that, too. He had a mind set for abundance, but education would have given him abundance of another kind – one that couldn’t be stolen or taken away.

As the first in her family to graduate from college, Coreen has set the parameters for her family of what could and should be. Her grandfather’s abundant, but marginalized life, and repeated loss of fortune, symbolized to her the importance of education and the mental wealth it provides. It is through his story that she motivates her children. She shared that she asked each
of them to write their life purpose, inclusive of education, in her Bible as a commitment to God and themselves.

Chapter 4 Summary

In this chapter, I have shared the findings derived from the accounts of 13 Spelman alumnae along with data gathered through archival research and connections to the literature.

The sisterhood emerged as the most powerful and enduring force for the Spelman women in this study. Additionally, interwoven within the sisterhood are themes of rituals and traditions, values, and racial and gender issues.

Using thick descriptions, I have communicated their experiences based on the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of their personal interviews: sisterhood, rituals and traditions, values, and race and gender. These findings provide the analytical backdrop for the discussion in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine and gain a better understanding of the institutional culture of Spelman College for women through the reflections and perspectives of a select group of Spelman Alumna and archival data. Generally, women who attend a women’s college have made a specific choice because the culture of an educational institution has an obvious and covert influence on a woman’s learning. The major benefit of this type of experience is that the woman is in the center of the learning environment. Johnson-Bailey (2001) posited that women of color are more likely to feel like outsiders in Predominately White Institutions because their numbers remain relatively small. However, at Spelman, students attend a school designed specifically for Black women and devoted to their success.

The Spelman College administration issued a description of what a 21st Century student would experience:

A Spelman student will come to campus with diverse aspirations, goals and interests. Throughout her time here, she will follow an academic, social, and cultural path uniquely hers—rooted in a tradition of excellence where she is mentored and supported by an extraordinary team of faculty, staff, alumnae, and her Spelman sisters. She will travel abroad—whether it’s to participate in a service project for two weeks in Ghana or spend an entire semester in Japan. She will have an opportunity to experience the professional world she aspires to join through research or an internship opportunity. She will develop a leadership style that will distinguish her in graduate or professional school, corporate board rooms, or community service. (Spelman College, Website, 2018)

Thus, the purpose of this case study was to investigate the culture within Spelman College, a Historically Black Women’s College (HBWC), and to gain an in-depth understanding of how its institutional culture makes it a unique learning space for African American women in the 21st century.
Spelman’s educational focus has changed numerous times over the school’s history; however, the main emphasis has remained constant: “to educate and inspire young Black women to take full advantage of opportunities and to attain positions of leadership” (Guy-Sheftall, 1981, p. 30).

With more than 9,000 applications (for approximately 500 seats) for Fall 2019 first-year admission, Spelman has set a record for the most applicants in its history, underscoring the relevance and importance of a Spelman liberal arts education (Campbell, 2018). Spelman is a distinctive learning space for women because it holistically addresses the needs of each student as a scholar, a leader, a change agent, and as a Black woman. Within Spelman’s milieu, the Black woman is elevated and celebrated. This space does not allow room for Black women to feel less than because of their history of oppression. In this revered space, everyone belongs.

The data revealed sisterhood to be the tie that binds Spelman’s culture. It is a powerful element that is also entwined with rituals and traditions, values, and race and gender issues. In this chapter, I present a discussion of the study’s findings. First, I present a discussion of four themes that emerged from the data analysis: (a) sisterhood, (b) rituals and traditions, (c) values, and (d) the intersection of race and gender, which were used to explore the study’s research questions:

(RQ1): What are the components that shape Spelman’s institutional culture?

(RQ2): What makes Spelman a unique learning space for Black women?

The discussion is followed by my recommendations for further research and explain possible limitations of this study.

Through the sharing of their experiences, the research participants confirmed that Spelman College has realized and surpassed the dreams of its White, New England missionary
founders, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles. Actually, the founders, themselves, were the first models for sisterhood and remain the compass that guides and fosters the institutional culture of Spelman College. Packard and Giles fought to keep Spelman’s doors open only to women when faced with the challenge of turning co-ed by joining with Morehouse College for men. The founders were steadfast in their mission to educate Black women to create leaders of their race.

In the truest sense of sisterhood, when Sophia Packard died unexpectedly, Harriet Giles took on the mantle of presidency to further establishing the legacy of what would become Spelman College.

**Sisterhood**

The Spelman women in this study represent a span of 43 years between their graduations: a kaleidoscope of different times and different experiences. However, collectively, they concurred their Spelman education could not be found anywhere else in the world. It is a positive and safe environment where Black women can flourish. It is not just the absence of men and White students that cause Spelman graduates to feel empowered and become successful; it is the bonding of Black women: the sisterhood.

**Affirmation**

Sisterhood is the overarching theme that shapes the Spelman culture. The sisterhood encompasses the rituals and traditions, values, and race and gender issues: other elements that define Spelman’s culture. According to the study participants, sisterhood and Spelman are synonymous. Harmony recalled, “I am Spelman College, and Spelman College is me.”

The Spelman alumnae participants professed a love and a support system for each other (and Spelman) that is comparable only to the love within a family: unconditional, eternal, and inclusive. Unlike the students in Perkins (1998) account of 19th century Black women who were
either rejected or slighted at Seven Sister Colleges; Spelman women were openly welcomed, supported, nurtured and affirmed.

For women of African American descent, because of a history of oppression, humiliation, and degradation, affirmation is critical to a healthy self-esteem. Even the well-meaning and visionary founders of Spelman centered their holistic curriculum around their perceived notion of the oppressed Black woman. To that end, the early Spelman seminary women learned character virtues, chastity, and respectability because as Case (2017) noted they had to overcome an image of being “sexually aggressive and generally uncouth” as former slaves or daughters of former slaves (p. 13).

Collins (1995) argued these images have plagued Black women through centuries and stressed that Black epistemology should be consistently advocated as validation of the belief that Black women can think independently and provide a different view of who they are; one that contradicts the view society has painted for them.

Fortunately, there are educators, who like Collins, believe that young women should be consistently and intentionally exposed to race and gender issues before college. Troutman and Jiménez (2016) use the work of bell hooks as a foundation for designing and implementing feminist pedagogies and practices for teaching Black feminism in both high school and in undergraduate classes. As feminist educators, they are inspired by hooks’ radical vision of releasing schools from the grip of “Imperialist, White supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (Troutman & Jiménez, 2016, p. 8). Not only are their students immersed in various literacy paradigms in which they find voice, they also weigh in on movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. Their program demonstrates the importance of women
of color feminisms both in and outside of the classroom, as content and as practice, to promote critical self-awareness and growing political consciousness.

**Spelman Mystique**

More than one participant noted the totality of their sisterhood is often hard to explain because of the way it *feels*: It is safe to say the Spelman sisterhood has a certain mystique. However, I do know it is the polar opposite of the feminine mystique Betty Friedan espoused and of which Black feminists such as hooks (1982) and Collins (1995) decried. Both authors noted in Friedan’s theorizing about the rights and feelings of unrest among women in the 1960’s, she completely ignored the existence of all non-White women, which, incidentally, is the reason for Spelman’s founding: exclusion.

The Spelman mystique harbors the safe space that allows Black women to connect with their heritage as well as have mainstem opportunities. However, it is not an environment that disregards the humane aspects of life. The participants were adamant about being taught how to treat each other as sisters the first week of orientation. The lesson could be reflective of Spelman’s Christian founding and of the idea of racial uplift: a charge to early Spelman Seminary students. Participants shared, they were told their rise could not come at the expense of another sister’s downfall.

In a similar vein, hooks (1986), wrote the empowerment and health of the sisterhood among Black women depends upon trusting each other. Because of the patriarchal society in which we live, women are taught that relationships with each other diminish their experience rather than enrich it. Thus, women come to believe that they are natural enemies. hooks (2006) argued those thought processes must be unlearned. The Spelman participants stories indicated
that even if a student arrived at Spelman with less than positive feelings about her new sisters, it was soon eradicated.

**Imperfect Sisterhood**

Spelman is often described as a safe space, but like within any family, life in the Spelman sisterhood is not perfect. As Athena recalled, her Spelman sisters were supportive and loving but were not above “telling you about yourself” when it needed to be done. Heidi Brown (2009) noted students should not enter into a single gender institution with the idea of it being paradise because women’s colleges have the same types of personalities of people at co-ed institutions. One may still be in class with women who are overbearing, intent on leading conversations, or interrupting conversations. The difference being in a women’s college it is considered to be the way women operate and not so much about them being out of their place or acting like men.

In the novel, *The Color Purple*, former Spelman student, Alice Walker, depicted the perfect example of sisterhood in the midst of a dysfunctional patriarchal household. Sisterhood afforded the women, but it was Celie’s, the main character, relationship with her sister, Nettie, that best illustrated the “I’ve got your back” principle of sisterhood. When Celie is first introduced to the reader, she is in the role of mother/protector/mentor to Nettie against the backdrop of the brutal, oppressive, patriarchal reality of their lives. Moreover, when the sisters are separated on a global scale, they maintain a deep and abiding love for each in their hearts. Even when their communication is interrupted by the patriarchal mean-spiritedness of Celie’s husband. His action is reflective of hooks’ observation that men feel women should not bond with one another.
Rituals and Traditions

Rituals are an essential part of the culture of higher education. Institutions use rituals to bring new members into the campus’s cultures and introduce and influence them with artifacts and symbols, which are socializing agents (Collins & Lewis, 2008).

Spelman College has a wealth of rituals and traditions, which to the study participants are meaningful, and in which they continue to participate as alumna. Yet, one participant stated she did not care about the rituals and traditions, per se, but she valued the friendships: the sisterhood. However, as Collins and Lewis (2009) asserted, the rituals and traditions are the socialization process through which friendships and the sisterhood are strengthened.

Through my interpretative framework of archival photographs and through my discussion with study participants, I have concluded that part of Spelman’s cultural mystique is its unyielding, but relevant, homage to its past through rituals and traditions to fortify its mission to each generation of women who grace its campus. One of the rituals, *When and Where I Enter*, is centered around the legacy of Anna Julia Cooper. Her advocacy for Black women in the early 19th century is an influential hallmark on Spelman’s culture.

Even though the White Spelman founders are highly revered and various campus buildings bear the names of the White Rockefeller and Spelman philanthropists, the spirit of a Black woman, Anna Julia Cooper, also helps to usher in each new class of Spelman sisters with her story. Her story is illustrative to the new students of the work that has been done and of the work that lies before them. Kuh and Whitt (1988) asserted stories are cultural vehicles because they aid in undergirding and reinforcing other artifacts of culture; and connecting faculty and students with the institution’s past and present (p. 21).
Anna Julia Cooper as an Influence

So, who is Anna Julia Cooper? During the early nineteenth century there was a body of Black race women (or club women) who were advocating for the empowerment of Black women in daily life as equal citizens. Cooper (2017) defined race women as Black women thinkers on matters of Black women’s lives. One such race woman was Anna Julia Cooper who was described by (Cooper, 2017) as “a nineteenth-century southern Black woman who found the courage and the audacity to challenge the thinking of Black male preachers, White male philosophers, and early White women feminists” (p. 1). Extra (2018), described Cooper as, “The Black feminist who argued for intersectionality before the term existed” (p. 18).

Beverly Guy-Sheftall in (May, 2012) shared, Cooper’s insightful and original pronouncement was written long before there was a discourse that scholars would later identify as Black feminist theory: “The Colored woman today occupies a unique position in this country. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and as yet, an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both” (p. xii).

Anna Julia Cooper was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, the daughter of a slave and her White master. She published the first book on feminist text, A Voice from the South in 1892, eleven years after the birth of Spelman Seminary. From an early age, she developed a passion for teaching and learning. She attended St. Augustine’s Normal School and eventually became a teacher. According to Guy-Sheftall (1995), it was at St Augustine’s where an “early manifestation of the sensitivity to sexism was her protesting female exclusion from Greek classes which were open only to male theology students (p. 8). She appealed to the principal and was finally granted permission to enroll in the class as the lone female. Her experiences with respect
to male privilege at St. Augustine’s awakened in her a sensitivity to the urgent need for gender equality in the educational arena (Guy-Sheftall, 1995).

Her ambition led her to earn a doctorate at the Sorbonne in 1925 (in her sixties) and hold several leadership roles at educational institutions. Like many women activists and reformers of the 19th century, she was a part of the club movement and worked with other Black women such as Mary Church Terrell to address issues such as domestic violence and educational inequality (Exit, 2018).

However, Lemert and Bhan (1998) shed light on another side of Cooper’s credibility. Their research revealed one of the most frequently held reservations toward Cooper was she “all too comfortably accepted the White pieties of the true womanhood ideal, especially those emphasizing a woman’s duty to establish the domestic circle (p. 3). The authors quote her writing:

The very next year (1888), I planted my little North Carolina colony on Seventeenth Street where I immediately began like the proverbial beaver to build a home, not to merely a house to shelter the body, but a home to sustain and refresh the mind, a home where friends gather for interchange of ideas and association of sympathetic spirits (p. 310).

Lemert and Bhan (1998) concluded,

The life Anna Julia Cooper built and lived until her death in 1964 was centered deeply in the virtues of home, religion, and proper public conduct. How, indeed, could a woman of such classically southern virtues have become one of the most widely recognized symbols of the new Black woman (p. 4)?

Nonetheless, in her 1892 collection of essays, *A Voice from the South*, Cooper sent out a radical call for a version of racial uplift that centered Black women and girls. She made a “plea for the Colored Girls of the South” in which she argued, “There is material in them well worth your while, the hope in germ of a staunch, helpful, regenerating womanhood on which, primarily, rests the foundation stones of our future as a race” (Extra, 2018, p. 28).
Because Spelman was created in a historical culture of feminism combined with the virtues of home, religion, and proper public conduct, Cooper’s duality mirrors early Spelman Seminary values.

 Appropriately, the title of Spelman’s *When and Where I Enter* orientation ceremony for new students stems from a quote in a speech Cooper delivered in 1886 (just two years out of Oberlin College) to a meeting of the solely male Black clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Her talk: “Womanhood a Vital Element in Regeneration and Progress of Race” (Lemert & Bahn, 1998). Karenga (2012) provided the quotation in its full context:

“We too often mistake individual honor for race development” she said, “and so are ready to substitute petty accomplishments for sound sense and purpose.” But “a stream cannot rise higher than its source.” And this source is the people themselves and the families and persons, female and male that compose it. Likewise, “the race cannot be effectively lifted up till its women are truly elevated.” Thus, she says, “only the Black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me” (Karenga, 2012, p. 1).

Key to this self-assertion is the Black woman’s self-understanding of her meaning and role in life and struggle (Karenga, 2012). Thus, begins the Spelman woman’s entry into the sisterhood. She enters with the knowledge of intersectionality through an educational ancestor, but she has at her finger tips access to 21st century women activists such as Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who first used the term *intersectionality* in her 1989 paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. Another contemporary source, Katherine Wing has addressed the overt discrimination she has on the one or more levels of who she is as a woman.
Ivy, who volunteers in the new student orientation process, shared [in perhaps a conscious or unconscious affirmation of history] in 1992, Spelman’s Board of Trustees named Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, the founding director of the Women’s Research and Resource Center, the first incumbent of the endowed Anna Julia Cooper Professoriate.

Values

Spelman’s White missionary founders, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles, opened Spelman based on their belief in the value of the human condition. According to Jones (2004), slavery had been a form of intellectual as well as physical bondage. Among the many tenets held by the founders, was the belief that their efforts to educate the women and girls would be in vain unless the knowledge was shared with those who could not attend school. This belief led to Spelman’s nurturing environment and mentoring.

Nurturing

The study participants recalled having both men and women and both Black and White professors who conducted the class in a nurturing, engaging but respectful manner. The professors were caring but not at all coddling. Some remembered being addressed as “Miss.” Even the graduates beyond 1982 agreed that acceptable dress was always expected. If you were absent, professors asked, “Where were you?” “We missed you yesterday.” “Is everything all right?” “Did you ask one of your classmates for the notes?” It was a positive approach designed to show care but keep you on task.

Participants said they never felt humiliated and always supported, and the assumption was they could and would do the work required to produce excellence – even if it meant doing it over and over. One participant shared she learned persistence as a result of doing a calculus assignment three times. Participants across the generations agreed, their professors stressed that
grades were a symbol of achievement, but real achievement came from gained and demonstrated knowledge.

Extending the view of a nurturing environment, hooks (1999) posited liberation derives from encouraging “students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid of see themselves at risk” (p. 82). Her goal, as should be the goal of every teacher, is “to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion” (p. 82).

Another participant noted the professors felt a sense of responsibility to them as students and to their parents. They took the role of in loco parentis seriously. They would say something to the effect of, “You are not going to come here and waste your parents’ money. I know they are sacrificing to send you here.”

About Spelman’s, nurturing yet challenging, environment, former president Johnetta Cole (1993) noted,

There is no assumption that Black folks don’t like math, and women cannot do science; there is no assumption that women aren’t as bright as men; the realities of African Americans and women are mainstreamed into the entire curriculum; in this atmosphere where teachers care and expect the very best, parents kinfolk are and involved, and the curriculum and those around the students reflect in positive ways who the students are, there are no limits to what students can learn and who they can become. (p. 191)

**Mentoring**

Spelman purposefully initiates creating a welcoming atmosphere of sisterhood, nurturing, and belonging for its students. Because of the historical status of Black women in America, Spelman recognizes the need to affirm, empower, validate and build self-worth, self-esteem, and self-pride in the students. According to a study participant, Spelman women received positive infusions of their worth from the administration, from their professors and curriculum, alumnae,
national and local leaders, and from each other. As such, mentoring was a staple on the Spelman campus.

Sisterhood and mentoring on women’s college campus appears to go hand-in-hand. In addition to fostering pride, inspiration, and encouragement, mentors expand hope and confidence by student’s association with achievers (Hale, 2006). Diana recalled that Spelman did not take mentorship lightly. The mentoring first began in the classroom. The faculty, both men and women, challenged the students in a way that was specific to each individual. The small class environment allowed their professors to really get to know them, and the professors were encouraging, frank and open with them.

However, it cannot be assumed that everyone who is a mentor is equipped to be a mentor. If an institution does not take the proper steps to ensure the well-being of students, mentorship isn’t effective. There are several issues that could make mentoring less than appealing and not beneficial to the student or the mentor. First, there exists a bias toward male experience, negating the experience of women; second, there is the potential of patriarchal dominance when men are mentors to women, and third, women mentors, themselves, may feel like outsiders because of the way women have been marginalized (Stalker, 1994). To that end, institutions must take strides to create training programs to increase the pool of women mentors.

Beyond that, the needs of Black women and other women of color need to be explored. bell hooks (1994) emphasized the importance of being able to confront issues of race and gender in a Black context by “providing meaningful answers to problematic questions as well as appropriate accessible ways to communicate them” (p. 112). I would add that a mentor needs to be able to provide resources if he or she does not have an answer. Juanita Johnson Bailey shared her 1997 study revealed that women students engaged in mentoring more when they were
mentored by someone “who looked like me” (p. 34). Additionally, in a time of openly diverse gender options, mentors should be trained to acknowledge his or her bias and simultaneously respect the mentee as a human being. Finally, both mentor and mentee should be aware of proactively practicing behavior that cannot be interpreted as sexually motivated.

Based on Diana’s Spelman experience, it could be determined the mentoring relationships students have with professors will determine their satisfaction with their college experience and sense of belonging at their college or university. If a student feels connected, she will matriculate to graduation.

**Intersection of Race and Gender**

When the Spelman founders were faced with opposition from the Women’s American Baptist Home Mission Society about opening the school, they used as an argument the fact that while the Baptist denomination had established schools for Blacks (mostly males) in every Southern state, no provision had yet been made for the education of women and girls in the state of Georgia (Watson & Gregory, 2005).

Moreover, for as much as W.E.B. DuBois believed in the uplift and education of Blacks, he resided in a place of negativity about smart Black women it appears. He had the power and the means to publish Anna Julia Cooper’s essays in his paper. However, he rejected every entry she submitted (Lemert & Bhan, 1998).

On this subject, hooks (2015) explained, “Although Black women and men had struggled equally for liberation during slavery and the Reconstruction era, Black male political leaders upheld patriarchal values” (p. 4). To that end, Anna Julia Cooper made a plea in *The Higher Education of Women*, writing, “I ask [for] the chance for growth and self-development, the
permission to be true to the aspirations of my soul without incurring the blight of your censure and ridicule” (Cooper, 1892/2016, p. 21).

Making a Standpoint

Likewise, the Spelman study participants also experienced challenges in which their race and gender were factors in their academic or professional lives. Of course, common to all of them is Spelman’s history as a school created for Black women: a race and gender creation which prompted them to question, after having four White women and two Black men as presidents, why a Black woman could not be president of a Black women’s college?

Feeling oppressed, they made a standpoint of sorts by lobbying, for over a decade, for a Black woman to lead them. Study participants who graduated in 1969 recalled being part of a protest that locked the trustees in a boardroom. They described the simultaneous feelings of fear (expulsion and parental ire) and exhilaration they felt at finding their voice, but they knew they had to act. Even after the planned protest, the next selection for a president was a man. They lost, so to speak, in that respect, but they gained voice.

This bit of defiance was much like Collins’ (1995) description of the Black woman who cleaned toilets at a White mill, but she could not use the toilets. She had to walk a distance to use the one designated Colored. Finally, one day, she decided to use the White toilet, and this act was the impetus for her joining the civil rights movement. She had created her own self-defined standpoint.

Challenges

The participants, as Black women in America, encountered numerous challenges regarding race and gender. As noted, one participant experienced racism as an exchange student at Vassar and longed for the nurturing Spelman environment while there. Participants who
graduated in 1969 assumed careers in education or social work, which was typical at that time for women; and they earned masters and Ph.D. degrees in mainly the same disciplines. One participant mentioned she wanted to be an architect but was told that women were not welcome in the field. Another enrolled in law school seven years after her Spelman graduation, noting that women were not encouraged to attend law school. The 1969 alumna applauded the strides in career choices Spelman women are now making, especially in STEM fields. One participant is working as a scientist and plans to pursue a medical degree. They all were elated that a Spelmanite was running for governor of Georgia and rallied and volunteered for her campaign. While Diana, six years out of Spelman, confirmed that opportunities are better for Black women now, she expressed that there is still work to do. She shared:

> While Spelman imbued me with the confidence in my abilities as a Black woman—my experience in majority White professional spaces tested that confidence. My work experiences have shown me that the larger society is not intentionally bent on preserving your physical, mental, or emotional health. Therefore, I now understand, with urgency, the need to advocate for my own self-care, particularly as a Black woman.

**A Positive Intersection**

One hundred and six years after its founding, the intersection of race and gender came as a positive element through the appointment of Dr. Johnetta B. Cole as the seventh president of Spelman College in 1987. She was the first Black woman to lead the College that was founded specifically for the education of women of African descent.

In *Conversations* (1993), she wrote,

> When my appointment was made, it was clearly an historic moment for Spelman College, and when I moved across the country speaking as Spelman’s “Sister President,” I came to see that this appointment belonged to all Black women. This school, which originated in 1881 as the Atlanta Female Seminary for the express purpose of educating African American women, had been led by four White women and two African American men. For years, Spelman students, faculty, and alumnae had been calling for a president who reflected the student body. Indeed, one does not have to work all that hard to see the deferment of this dream as a metaphor for history of African American women and their struggle against racism and sexism. (p. 38)
The Spelman alumna in the study, who graduated before Dr. Cole’s appointment, were ecstatic about this accomplishment for Spelman women. Those alumnae who came after her appointment have only witnessed women presidents and expressed appreciation for their female leadership experience. All the participants remembered engaging in rituals and traditions, engaging in community service, attending chapel services, and finding their voice through activism; but most of all, they cherish the joy of being wrapped in the arms of the Spelman sisterhood.

Conclusion

What Has Been Attempted?

The purpose of this study has been to explore the culture of Spelman College, a Historically Black Women’s College, and examine how its institutional culture makes it a unique learning space for African American women in the 21st century. Through my research, I have attempted to dispel myths that often plague the validity of single-gender colleges—such as they are boarding schools or finishing schools—and illustrate that women’s colleges continue to play a vital role in educating Black women who, in the 21st century, have diverse options.

What Was Learned?

Through data analysis, I observed a consensus among the study’s participants that a major benefit of attending Spelman College was the school’s learning environment, which allowed Black women to thrive throughout their academic experiences. Additionally, Spelman is deliberate in its position of maintaining the founder’s initial mission of leadership and outreach.

I further concluded that Spelman’s institutional culture could be defined as a sisterhood intertwined with rituals and traditions, values, and the intersection of race and gender. For all intents and purposes, Spelman women are not in competition with one another; they are
motivated by one another. Moreover, every aspect of the Spelman woman’s experience is affirmed and nurtured by a dedicated administration, faculty, and staff.

Additionally, I found that Spelman’s institutional culture, as a framework, is not specific to Spelman; however, the college’s cultural artifacts and behaviors are specific to its single-gender student body. Moreover, as I explored the research findings, I learned the Spelman story from a feminist standpoint, a Black woman’s standpoint, and an educator’s standpoint, though not necessarily in that order.

This study’s conclusions have also coincided with Johnetta Cole’s statement that “at HBCU’s a student’s humanity is never challenged” (Georgetown, 2018, p. 29). Since its inception, Spelman has made humanitarianism part of its unwritten curriculum’s mission.  

*Humane* means showing compassion and empathy. *Humane* means treating people well (as if no one else were watching) as part of a daily routine or ritual. *Humane* means yielding uncompromised respect to all people at all times. *Humane* means helping others to be the best they can be.

**What New Questions Have Been Raised?**

As intended, this study was limited to a small population of Spelman’s alumnae, though I attempted to have representation from multiple decades beginning with the civil rights movement through the 21st century. The women in this study dearly loved Spelman. However, students, like Alice Walker, did not find it a good fit. An exploration through the lens of those who did not find it conducive would be thought-provoking to obtain contrasting viewpoints.

I would also be interested in hearing the voices of faculty and administrators who continue to uphold (yet modify) Spelman’s traditions. For example, the study’s participants
were concerned (though not necessarily in a negative manner) about the implications the transgender movement would have on the college’s traditional image.

Another area I would like to investigate is that of philanthropy through an administrative and student lens. Spelman has a healthy (not wealthy) endowment (and recently received a 30-million-dollar donation from a trustee). In contrast, at this writing, Bennett College, another Historically Black Women’s College in Greensboro, North Carolina, faces the loss of its accreditation and needs five million dollars to remain open.

The 1969 Alumna in the study discussed their enthusiasm about philanthropy toward the school and how students learn to give back. For example, when study participants, Diana and Harmony graduated in 2012, their class was asked to donate $12 dollars for which they would receive a pin to wear on graduation day. To that end, how does the college sustain the philanthropic task of motivating students to donate immediately after graduation and what are the results?

Finally, what additional avenues do students have for passing on the acquired knowledge about Black feminism to the next generation?

**Educational Implications**

By conducting this study, I hope to contribute to the gap in the literature about Black women attending a women’s college. The research has enabled me to paint a picture of the attributes that have sustained Spelman for 138 years and make it a viable option for students considering a single-gender college environment.

**Further Study**

This study centered on alumnae participants voices from a single-gender college who remain connected to their institution. They painted a picture of love and loyalty in word, deed,
and philanthropic efforts. Their alumnae associations are active nation-wide. To that end, future researchers might consider exploring the importance of alumni, how to engage them or better engage them. Other questions to consider might be: Are alumni sending their children (legacies)? Are they referring students or writing references? Are they donating to their alma mater? In reflection, how do they view the education they received from a personal and career perspective? In essence, what are the benefits of active, engaged alumni, and if challenges exist, how can they be reconciled?

In conducting this study, I used both a focus group and conducted individual interviews. In some instances, members of the focus group, were later interviewed during a single session. Further study might revolve around the pros and cons of this process. For example, one pro for me using a focus group was hearing a number of voices during one trip to Atlanta; therefore, it certainly saved money as I prefer personal interviews over phone or SKYPE interviews.

However, occasionally during the session, everyone would talk at once in excitement which made it difficult to glean what was important and would make transcription impossible. Thus, I had to stop the group chatter and ask for clarification. The focus group also made it easy for some participants not to engage as much. On the other hand, I found individual interviews created the space for more probing and clarification. Looking at the process through another lens, one might consider what an interviewee who has done both see as pros and cons.

On another level, researchers need to take a more comprehensive look at the experiences of Black (faculty) women in higher education who are not working in an environment that celebrates their ethnicity like Spelman does. A Black female Spelman professor noted:

And I bring my “A” game to my teaching and my other duties, because I haven’t had to justify my research interest or try to be something I’m not. And, I think that’s also good for students because they can maybe pick up on that and recognize that their faculty can be more of who they are—more authentic. The more we each can be who we are in the
world, the greater we can be to offer our gifts to the world. (Carolyn, personal communication, March 26, 2018)

Questions might include: What concerns need to be addressed? And, how can institutions implement change to create a more welcoming environment?

An additional avenue for future studies could be an in-depth study of the first Black woman president of Spelman as well as the first woman alumna president of Spelman. What affect did these firsts have upon the college?

Finally, Father Frank Quarles was the African American pastor who supported the Spelman founders and opened Friendship Baptist Church for the initial Spelman Seminary students. Further historical research into his participation in the founding of Spelman would be beneficial for exploration of collaboration between race and gender in the 1800’s.

Recommendations

In light of Spelman’s policy to admit transgender students, and some of the negativity that surrounds it, the student body would benefit from focused support and guidance on how to support their transgender sisters. Through campus book study, forums, lecture series, or other avenues, such as through the Women’s Resource and Research Center, students need to explore and understand their own attitudes about while simultaneously educating themselves about transgender issues before making assumptions.

Study participants mentioned their concern about students being involved #MeTooMovement because of the alleged sexual misconduct by a Morehouse student on a Spelman student. The Spelman administration needs to create learning spaces that are designed to help students avoid sexual assault and how to handle it if it does happen. Topics could include: the importance of remaining with friends, the effects of excessive drinking or other stimulants, speaking up; steps to take to report violations; as well as martial arts for self-defense.
Study Limitations

This study is limited because it is a case study focused on a single institution from a select group of 13 women who are alumna, graduating between 1969-2012. Their shared recollections reflect the culture of their time at Spelman. Therefore, the study does not reflect all issues or cultural changes that may have been instituted since 2012, nor can the data findings be universalized to other institutions. The study is also limited to a single researcher which may be perceived as biased in the data collection process.

Reflection

This study was illuminating and thought provoking on many levels because of my position as researcher, student, and parent of a Spelman alumna. I experienced warmth and genuine willingness to assist with this project from my study participants. In that respect, they were illustrative of Spelman’s propensity to help, and no doubt being the mother of an alumna was an extra incentive.

The archival experience was my first as a researcher, and the first lesson I learned was to schedule two or more days instead of one. However, the archivist, Holly Smith, was an exceptional resource and answered my questions in person and via email.

While researching the culture of a women’s college, as a student, I have learned more about feminist thought and Black feminist thought than I, as a Black woman, have ever known. Beyond theory, I was able to contrast my own experience at a coed Historically Black College with Spelman. My experience was nurturing, but the lack of emphasis on womanhood is clearly felt in retrospect. The indoctrination of culture and tradition were absent in my experience as well. To that end, I have a much clearer understanding of why the Spelman women hold it dear. Additionally, I was amazed that Spelman has maintained the core spirit of its White founders.
Summary

In this chapter, I have presented discussion of the findings from the study to support previous literature on the history and mores of women’s colleges, and Spelman in particular. First, I offered a brief historical overview of the development of women’s colleges. Next, I discussed the four themes that emerged from the data, followed by educational implications and recommendations for further research. Next, I explained possible limitations of this study, and finally, I offered my reflections.
References


doi: 10.4135/9781412964517.n401


Jackson, K., & Leyte, L. (2014). Realigning the crooked room: Spelman claims a space for African American women in STEM. *Peer Review: Association of American Colleges and


www.spelman.edu/alumnae/alumnae-engagement/the-white-dress-tradition


http://www.blackpast.org/aah/spelman-college-1881


Appendix A

A List of Definitions that Distinguish Frequently Studied Cultural Forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rite</td>
<td>Relatively elaborate, dramatic, planned sets of activities that consolidate various forms of cultural expressions into one event, which is carried out through social interactions, usually for the benefit of an audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceremonial</td>
<td>A system of several rites connected with a single occasion or event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>A standardized, detailed set of techniques and behaviors that manage anxieties, but seldom produce intended, technical consequences of practical importance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth</td>
<td>A dramatic narrative of imagined events, usually used to explain origins or transformations of something. Also, an unquestioned belief about the practical benefits of certain techniques and behaviors that is not supported by demonstrated facts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saga</td>
<td>An historical narrative describing the unique accomplishments of a group and its leaders usually in heroic terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legend</td>
<td>A handed-down narrative of some wonderful event that is based in history but has been embellished with fictional details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story</td>
<td>A narrative based on true events—often a combination of truth and fiction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folktale</td>
<td>A completely fictional narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>Any object, act, event, quality, or relation that serves as a vehicle for conveying meaning, usually by representing another thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>A particular form or manner in which members of a group use vocal sounds and written signs to convey meanings to each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesture</td>
<td>Movements of parts of the body used to express meanings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical setting</td>
<td>Those things that surround people physically and provide them with immediate sensory stimuli as they carry out culturally expressive activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifact</td>
<td>Material objects manufactured by people to facilitate culturally expressive activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Trice and Beyer (1984)
IRB Approval Notification

To: Michelle Glowacki-Dudka, Barbara Mebane

Please note that Ball State University IRB has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Project Title: [1285811-1] The Sisterhood Is Alive and Well at Spelman College: A Feminist Standpoint Case Study
Principal Investigator: Barbara Mebane, MA

Submission Type: New Project
Date Submitted: July 13, 2018

Action: APPROVED
Effective Date: July 16, 2018
Review Type: Exempt Review

Should you have any questions you may contact Sandra Currie at slcurrie@bsu.edu.

Thank you,
The IRBNet Support Team
Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Spelman Alumna,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Barbara Mebane, and I am pursuing a doctoral degree in the Adult, Higher, and Community Education program at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. I am also the mother of a 2012 Spelman alumna. Additionally, I had the honor as serving as a Co-coordinator for the Great Lakes Region of the Parent Association during my daughter’s matriculation. It was her intensely positive experience that led me to tailor my research around women’s education and the unique culture of Spelman College. After graduation, she attended Georgetown Law Center and is now a practicing corporate attorney in Atlanta.

To that end, as a Spelman alumna, I would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation study, The Sisterhood Is Alive and Well at Spelman College: A Feminist Standpoint Case Study. This study is important because it will showcase a community that has focused on the needs of Black women: a double underserved population (Black and female) from 1881 through the present. Specifically, the purpose of this case study research seeks answers to the questions, (RQ1) What are the components that shape Spelman’s institutional culture, and (RQ2) What makes it a unique learning space for Black women?

If you agree to participate, your involvement in this study will be during the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. Specifically, I will ask you to participate in one 60-minute interview by October 20, 2018. As an invested member of Spelman College, I hope you will be interested in sharing your undergraduate experiences.

Please let me know of your interest and/ or any questions you may have by September 1, 2018 (bamebane@bsu.edu). I very much appreciate your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Barbara Mebane
Appendix D

The Sisterhood Is Alive and Well at Spelman College:  
A Feminist Standpoint Case Study

Participant Informed Consent Form

I would like to invite you to participate in a study of the culture of women’s colleges. The purpose of this Feminist Standpoint study is to gain an in-depth understanding of your experiences and perspectives about what makes Spelman College a unique learning space for women.

My interest in this topic stems from the positive experience that many women benefit from in the single-gender learning environment. It also stems from the realization that scholars have not written about the college experiences of Black women. Your story would contribute significantly to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the culture within Spelman and how it has evolved yet sustained its legacy throughout the years.

The potential participants will consist of Spelman female students who identify as female, are of African descent, and who are 18 years or older. They must be either current or alumna re-entry women (Pauline E. Drake Scholars) or alumna from the undergraduate program. Male participants are excluded from the study.

If you agree to participate, your involvement in this study will be during the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. Specifically, I will ask you to participate in one 60-90 minute interview. As an invested member of Spelman College, I hope you will be interested in sharing your women’s gender experiences within the context of culture at Spelman.

The interview will be recorded, and so that I may better understand your perspectives about Spelman, I will have prepared a set of semi-structured interview questions that will guide our conversation. I will also send you a copy of the questions prior to the discussion. Prior to conducting the interview, I will ask your permission to record the interview. Following the interview, I will transcribe the recording. However, your name or other identifying information will not be included on the transcriptions. Any information you provide will be confidential as it relates to your identity.
The data will also be entered into a software program and stored on my password-protected computer. Please note that the data will be retained indefinitely so that I can include all or portions of the findings in my doctoral dissertation or subsequent publications or presentations. The data will then be deleted, and all paper copies will be shredded. My dissertation advisor, Dr. Michelle Glowacki-Dudka, will have access to the interview recordings and transcriptions.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your permission at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from me (the researcher). There are no perceived risks for participating in this study. There are no perceived benefits for participating in this study. However, I hope that you will find intrinsic reward in sharing your experiences and perceptions about a single-gender campus. Your views will contribute to generating a more comprehensive understanding of women’s colleges.

If you do not understand any portion of your role in the research study process, or the contents of this form, my professor and I are available to provide a complete explanation. Your questions are welcome at any time during the study. I can be reached at 317-332-0912, bamebane@bsu.edu, and Dr. Michelle Glowacki-Dudka, 765-702-4789, mdudka@bsu.edu.

Finally, for questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070 or at irb@bsu.edu.

The Sisterhood Is Alive and Well at Spelman College: A Feminist Standpoint Case Study

I, __________________, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "The Sisterhood Is Alive and Well at Spelman College: A Feminist Standpoint Case Study".

I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.
To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

_________________________________________   _________________
Participant’s Signature                      Date

**Researcher Contact Information**

Principal Investigator:  Faculty Supervisor:
Barbara Mebane, Doctoral Candidate  Dr. Michelle Glowacki-Dudka
Educational Studies  Educational Studies
Ball State University  Ball State University
Muncie, IN  47306  Muncie, IN  47306
Telephone: (317) 332-0912  Telephone: (765) 702-4789
Email: bamebane@bsu.edu  Email: mdudka@bsu.edu
Appendix E

THE SISTERHOOD IS ALIVE AND WELL AT SPELMAN COLLEGE:
A FEMINIST STANDPOINT CASE STUDY

Script and Sample Questions

The script and set of questions below guided my interactions with the participant during the course of each interview.

Welcome, and thank you again for participating in my study! As I shared with you during our preliminary phone meeting, this study fulfills the requirements for my doctoral dissertation. I am taking this opportunity to become a more well-versed and well-rounded educator with respect to the diversity of options available to students in higher education.

Again, I would like your permission to record our interview in order to accurately capture our conversation during the transcription process. Your identity will be anonymous. You will be given a pseudonym, and all of your responses will be confidential. They will be used only for the purpose of our study: to develop a better understanding of how you experienced life at a women’s college. If at any time you wish to stop the recording or the interview, please feel free to say so. Your participation is this interview is completely voluntary.

I will also take this time to ask if you have any questions about the Informed Consent Form that we electronically signed during the preliminary meeting. My copy will be kept in my password generated computer file separate from your responses. Once the interview is in progress, do not hesitate to let me know if you need to take a break. Now, do you have any questions for me? Today, I would like to learn about your personal and educational background, as well as explore your perspective about some of the cultural characteristics of women’s colleges.
1) Tell me about your immediate family and their perspective(s) about higher education. 
(Are you the first in your family to graduate from college?)

2) How would you describe your racial and ethnic background?

3) How did you learn about Spelman College? Had you previously thought about attending a Historically Black Women’s College?

4) Tell me about the Pauline E Drake Scholars Program (PED). Did the program influence you to apply to Spelman? (If applicable)

5) Did you visit the campus before applying?

6) After learning of your admission, what were your expectations? What surprised you about your orientation to this environment?

7) What was the most challenging aspect of orientation?

8) At what point) during the four years at Spelman did you begin to feel “at home” and why?

9) How has the PED Program been a support for you?

10) What is your definition of the Spelman Sisterhood?

11) What was the average class size? How did your professors build relationships? Were most of your professors women?

12) How were you encouraged to “be all that you can be”? Describe the support system.

13) Was there study abroad opportunities? If so, did you participate? Why or why not?

14) What was the college’s posture on leadership for women? The sciences?

15) What makes you feel that you are more empowered by having attended a same-gender institution? What growth have you seen within yourself?

16) What aspect(s) about your attendance about Spelman make you feel the proudest?
17) Did you have experiences, positive or negative, that prompted you to ever think about race or your racial identity? Please explain.

18) How have your ideas about race and your racial identity changed (or not) since experiencing Spelman? Who/what was influential in shifting the way you think about race? Are there any moments that particularly stand out?

19) Did you have any White professors? If so what, how were they influential in your development?

20) Who or what provided the greatest sources of support for you (academically, socially, etc.) within the college environment? (Name specific people, programs, etc.)

21) What were your leadership roles during your matriculation?

22) What did you learn at Spelman that you have been able to apply to the world of work?

23) Tell me a bit about the extra-curricular and social activities on campus when you were there?

24) Share with me a bit about Spelman’s history/heritage/ traditions. How does reflecting about it make you feel?

25) I have learned in my research that a part of Spelman’s legacy is inclusive of training women for the common good. In your thought process, how do the values and perspectives of Spelman embody this idea.

26) Alumna, Marian Wright Edelman, stated that Spelman is a safe haven for women. Explain why you feel this statement is true (or not).

27) Based on your experiences, do you believe Spelman accomplishes its mission? Explain.

28) What would you say to a student contemplating attending (to convince her to apply)?

29) Is there anything else you wish to share that has not been covered?
Appendix F

Spelman Archival Appointment Correspondence

From: ”Mebane, Barbara A” <bamebane@bsu.edu>
To: ”hsmith12@spelman.edu” <hsmith12@spelman.edu>
Cc: ”Kassandra Ware” <kware@spelman.edu>
Date: 10/16/2018 09:12 AM
Subject: Confirming Appointment for Wednesday, Oct 17

Good Morning,

I hope this finds you doing well and happy! This comes to confirm again that I will explore the archives tomorrow (Wednesday, October 17). My flight arrives in Atlanta at 7:30 AM, and I plan to be at the archives by 10:30 or so (after dropping my luggage at my daughter’s in Midtown).

Take care, and I am looking forward to the appointment!

Sincerely,
Barbara Mebane
Doctoral Candidate
Adult, Higher, and Community Education
Ball State University

Hi Barbara,

Thank you so much for your email. We look forward to seeing you tomorrow! Claiming and praying for safe travels,

Take care,
Holly A. Smith
(My pronouns: She, Her, Hers)
College Archivist
Women’s Research & Resource Center
Spelman College
350 Spelman Ln., S.W., Box 321
Atlanta, GA 30314-4399
Office: 404-270-5533
hsmith12@spelman.edu
http://www.spelman.edu/about-us/archives

Dear Ms. Mebane,
Thank you for your email, and Kassandra thank you for your kind response. I was out of the office at the HBCU Library Alliance meeting and am just seeing this message. You are welcome to come to the Archives on Tuesday October 16th. The Archives are open from 10:00am to 4:30pm. Please feel free to let me know if you would like me to schedule you for the whole day.

Take care,
Holly A. Smith
College Archivist
Spelman College
350 Spelman Ln, S.W., Box 321
Atlanta, GA 30314-4399
Direct: 404-270-5533
Fax: 404-270-5980
hsmith12@spelman.edu
http://www.spelman.edu/about-us/archives

-----”Mebane, Barbara A” <bamebane@bsu.edu> wrote: -----

To: “Kassandra Ware” <kware@spelman.edu>
From: “Mebane, Barbara A” <bamebane@bsu.edu>
Date: 10/09/2018 11:53AM
Cc: “hsmith12@spelman.edu“ <hsmith12@spelman.edu>
Subject: Re: Request for Archives Appointment

Ms. Ware,

Thank you for your prompt response to my request. This comes to ask if there is any availability on Wednesday, October 16 in the event Friday does not work out for Ms. Smith. My time in Atlanta is limited, so I am looking at alternate days as well.

Kind regards,

Barbara

Barbara Mebane
Doctoral Candidate
Adult, Higher, and Community Education
Ball State University
Hi Barbara Mebane:

Thank you for your email and your desire to visit the Spelman Archives. I will be out of the office on October 19, and Holly Smith, College Archivist, has a meeting scheduled for that morning from 10:00 a.m. - 12 noon away from the office. Please email her directly at hsmith12@spelman.edu for an appointment in October that will be convenient with her so she can put you on the calendar. You do not need to submit the registration form ahead of time. You can give it to Holly once you come to the Archives. Please have a picture i.d. with you.

All the collections you mentioned below are open and available for research.

Thank you.

Kassandra

_______________________________
Kassandra A. Ware
Spelman College
Archives Assistant
Archives Department, Cosby Room 200
350 Spelman Lane, Campus Box 321
Atlanta, GA 30314
404-270-5535
404-270-5980 (fax)
kware@spelman.edu

“Mebane, Barbara A” ---10/08/2018 05:23:08 PM---Greetings, Ms. Ware, My name is Barbara Mebane, and I am a doctoral candidate at Ball State University

From: “Mebane, Barbara A” <bamebane@bsu.edu>
To: “kware@spelman.edu“ <kware@spelman.edu>
Date: 10/08/2018 05:23 PM
Subject: Request for Archives Appointment
Greetings, Ms. Ware,

My name is Barbara Mebane, and I am a doctoral candidate at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. I live in Indianapolis and will be in Atlanta next week conducting interviews for my dissertation which is a feminist standpoint case study on women’s education. To that end, I would like to make an appointment for Friday, October 19 to visit the archives.

Specifically, I would like to peruse the collections of Spelman College founders, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles, the Florence M. Read Collection, and the Audre Lorde Collection. The collections are representative of works cited in my dissertation study.

I did note the researcher form online. Should that form be submitted prior to my visit or at the time of my appointment. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Barbara Mebane
Doctoral Candidate
Adult, Higher, and Community Education
Ball State University