**Getting to Know: Kiara Summerville**
Written by: Maureen A. Flint (Ph.D. student in Educational Research)

Can you talk a little bit about yourself and your research?
I am a PhD Student in the Higher Education Administration program in the College of Education, and I am also in the qualitative certificate program. I technically just started the certificate in terms of application and being accepted, but I am a little farther along because I took some classes prior to submitting the application.

In terms of my research interests, right now I'm still in coursework, so I haven't totally defined where I'll go in terms of my dissertation. I’m particularly interested in Black women undergraduate students, and I also have some interest in teaching and learning through the lens of Black Feminist pedagogy. My interests include faith and moral development of undergraduate students, classroom management strategies of faculty women of color and contingent faculty members, and the idea of diversity as a required component of general education core curriculum. The last one is a new interest of mine, because it is a trend right now. It seems as though many colleges and universities are moving towards a diversity component as part of the core curriculum education. I am specifically interested in the purpose of a core curriculum and student attitudes about it, and what implementing the diversity component might look like at The University of Alabama.

How has working on campus informed your research trajectories?​
​Yes, I recently just transitioned into a new role in the Division of Student Life on campus. Prior to this transition, I worked in Academic Affairs as an Academic Advisor. I functioned in a student affairs capacity in the academic affairs role, because I worked in the student services department of the academic college. I think I took a bit of a student development lens to my academic advising practice. My research interests about how students feel about core curriculum requirements is an extension of that role as an academic advisor. Going through course requirements and scheduling, I would hear a spectrum of thoughts about core classes from students. Some students would be interested in core curriculum classes and learning about humanities courses and social behavioral sciences, but there were also students on the other end of the continuum who felt the core curriculum requirements were unnecessary, or would ask why they could not just take their major courses. I found myself often having to explain the purpose of general education requirements and the idea of creating a holistic student. Those conversations got me thinking about student attitudes towards core curriculum in terms of a research interest.

Then, recently I moved back into Student Life, and now I am the Assistant Director in the Office of First Year Experience and Retention Initiatives. The transition was exciting for me, but it was a little tough because I hated leaving my students and my colleagues in my old office. However, the new office aligns more with my research interests and my career trajectory. In this new role, I am working with students of underrepresented and underserved populations. Specifically, I focus on programming for transfer students, first generation students, and women undergraduate students. I have also proposed some ideas of working with students of color and figuring out ways to get them more engaged at the University.

I feel fulfilled in this role right now and find that it aligns with my interest in qualitative research. For example, in this role I am able to do work that centers the voices of students who feel as if they have been historically not heard on this campus.

So you talked a little about how qualitative methods have allowed you to center student's voices who have been historically silenced or erased, can you speak more about what qualitative research affords or your interest in qualitative methods?
I think my interest in qualitative research directly extends from my identity as a Black woman. Thinking in terms of that student voice, and faculty members and administrators and other staff members, as well – qualitative research allows me to tell these stories of historically erased or silenced voices. Doing this is important to me and is why I oriented to qualitative research. I think I am on my fifth or sixth class now. It has been a phenomenal experience learning from the faculty members. They have been super supportive, even if I have not had them in class. I feel like there is a community where they are cheering me on in this program and really supporting my interests. For example, if there's a theoretical perspective that I haven't considered or we haven't learned in class but they feel it aligns with my research interest or just who I am as a person, they're really good about providing resources or giving me opportunities to dig deeper.

What theories specifically have interested you thus far?
The theories that I am currently using are Black Feminist Thought and Womanism. My thinking about these theories has changed somewhat recently, as I was doing some research on my own and found an article by Lindsey-Dennis (2015) that advocated for viewing these theories collectively. She came up with Black Feminist Womanism as a research paradigm and said this is more culturally relevant to Black women's experiences. We should think of Black Feminist Thought in terms of how we view the world as Black women and the nuances based on our different intersecting identities, as well as with a social justice lens - that is where Womanism comes in. In other words, we should tell our stories, absolutely, but we should be looking at ways to improve the lives of all who are oppressed, not just Black women. Black womanhood is the entry point for doing that work.

How do those theories influence your practice?
I did not mention Black Feminist Pedagogy - that is another theory that I look at, and it focuses on this ethic of care with Black women teaching their students. As part of my role, I teach a class, and I've noticed that when I read the literature I’m like, yeah, that's me! So I definitely think about Black Feminist Pedagogy in my teaching, when I am in front of the classroom or even advising students. I think about theory in terms of not only the experience for me but also for my students: what is this experience like for them? In terms of Black Feminist Thought, Womanism, and Black Feminist Womanism, it is interesting because, I love all of my students that I work with, but I have a particular student program where there are many Black women. These Black women are peer educators in first-year courses, and I have thought about connections to Black Feminist Pedagogy and how they experience teaching their peers. For example, I wonder if even though they are not in a formal teaching capacity, do they take on some of these components that Black Feminist Pedagogy says Black women experience when they teach or when they are teaching others?

In terms of myself, going back to Black Feminist Pedagogy with an ethic of care, I think that there was one point in my life where I was apologetic about being so caring as a Black woman. I think there is a persona sometimes that is certainly a stereotype of the angry Black woman or the mean Black woman. I felt apologetic about being caring, but then the research and the theories affirmed that it is okay that this is how I practice. In fact, the theories affirmed that I need to use my identities as being Black and being woman to teach students and provide this ethic of care. I guess I saw myself reflected in the literature, which has been nice.

Thinking about your higher education and your qualitative classes, what differing perspectives have your qualitative classes offered?
I really enjoy my research classes. Even right now, I am taking all research classes, and I think the qualitative classes supplement the higher education classes. I think I am able to ask questions and interrogate my reading more from what I know from qualitative research classes. Especially thinking about who am I in relation to what we are learning in this class right now, whether that be history or organizational change or even student development theory. I have become more reflective and reflexive, thinking about who am I in relation to what we are learning here. In addition, I think that I have been able to synthesize my research interests more having the qualitative background. I can go into a class and think - organizational change okay, what is a question that I have about organizational change and how can my qualitative research classes help me make this study or research interest more robust or defined?

​What are practices that you have adopted throughout the program that have helped you in coursework?
I think the biggest thing; especially because I work full time, are the relationships I have built with my professors. As a student affairs professional, I am always telling my students to build relationships with their faculty members, and I think sometimes as doctoral students we do not do that. I have found connecting with my faculty members has been integral for me. At one point, I thought that because I am in a doctoral program I have to know it all, but I have learned how important it is to ask questions.

I have also learned how to ask questions of articles and annotate them, and really interrogate the reading, and come prepared to class with questions. This has come particularly from my qualitative classes because we talk about these multiple truths and what I believe to be something may not be what the author is suggesting. Learning to annotate articles, be critical, and ask questions, I learned that in my research classes. That has carried into my core classes, I can think with a more critical lens rather than just discussing what the author said.

What are some of the challenges of being in the qualitative certificate?
One thing is the course schedule. Qualitative III is only offered in the fall so ideally, I would have liked to take it in the spring, this coming spring, but I knew it was not going to be offered until Fall 2019. The classes in the certificate are phenomenal. I would encourage people who are putting it off to apply. I put it off and once I was able to do a little research on my own about how having the certificate would make me more marketable and would supplement what I was learning in my core program that helped me make the switch.

One example of how it has been helpful for me is in my professional role, my director is quantitative, she thinks in numbers. When I was applying for this position, I told her I am not a quantitative scholar, I love qualitative research, and I love those stories. If anything I think this will make the studies that we do in our office stronger because there are two lenses. I think that absolutely even if someone is not considering the faculty route, if they are a full-time staff member like me and want to continue down that road, qualitative research helps you think about knowing the story. You can find the gaps in those numbers that we are so focused on you can find the gaps in the stories of those numbers even in your personal and professional practice.

If you had to articulate the importance of the qualitative certificate, how would you? For someone who was on the fence?
I would say particularly if they are passionate about a population of people, then I think qualitative research is a great way to consider how to make the world that we live in better for those people. Now - the certificate certainly makes you more marketable on the job. Also, building relationships with the qualitative faculty if you want a community of scholars. I have definitely found my community in the qualitative program, as well. I am not there, yet, but I think in the dissertation process, when I get to chapter three, having the certificate is going to help me tremendously - just being able to navigate writing that chapter and asking for help if I need it.