



How to Create Inclusive Environments for Black Students on Predominantly White College Campuses

Bedelia Nicola Richards, University of Richmond

Predominantly white institutions of higher education in the United States routinely point to rising enrollments of students of color as evidence of their commitment to racial diversity and inclusion. Indeed, from 1996 to 2012, college enrollments of minority students have increased exponentially. Across all types of institutions, the percentage of white college students enrolled in the United States fell from 84 percent in 1976 to 58 percent in 2015. Even so, Black enrollments in selective colleges and universities have remained consistently low for the past two decades. Regardless of shifting percentages, however, enrollment numbers are poor metrics for inclusivity. They say very little about the social integration of Black students once they arrive on predominantly white college campuses.

Inclusivity depends on more than enrollment rates, it is about enrolled students coming to feel that they really belong in campus communities where they are valued and accepted. The prevalence of anti-Black incidents and the growing presence of white supremacist groups on college campuses suggest that America has not achieved true inclusivity for Black college students — and may be losing ground in some places. The U.S. Department of Education reports that the number of reported campus hate crimes increased by 25 percent from 2015 to 2016, right after the election of Donald Trump. Further, there have been high profile media reports of white students or college staff people who call the police on Black students and staff for engaging in routine activities such as sleeping in a residence hall common area or eating lunch on campus.

Predominantly white institutions can cultivate more inclusive environments for Black students by moving beyond just numerical diversity. They should focus instead on subtle dynamics of campus exclusion, and the extent to which students feel they belong and are well mentored and supported.

Mechanisms of Anti-Black Exclusion on Predominantly White Campuses

Sociological research points to discriminatory dynamics for Black students on predominantly white campuses:

Segregated white socialization. Anti-Black prejudice in the United States has long been reinforced by racially segregated neighborhoods, schools, and churches that make it possible for white students to arrive on college campuses without ever having interacted meaningfully with Black peers. With academic tracking, many white students can also be educated in predominantly white classrooms even in racially diverse public schools. As a result, many white students and faculty arrive on college campuses holding unchallenged racist myths and misconceptions about Black people.

Hostile racial climates. Scholars find that a hostile racial climate leads to feelings of marginalization and isolation that harm achievement and retention for minority students. Greater numbers of minority enrollees

do not necessarily lead to cross-racial interactions, or necessarily challenge dominant racial ideologies and master narratives. Black students experience hostile campus climates through everyday racial slights and the failure of faculty and administrators at historically white institutions to enact policies to counter racial and ethnic harassment.

Assumptions flowing from college admissions policies. College admissions policies can contribute to the marginalization of Black students by creating presumptions that many of them may be less meritorious than their white and Asian peers. The Black-white SAT test score gap feeds into racist notions of Black intellectual inferiority and informs false narratives of affirmative action programs as discriminatory towards white and Asian applicants. Yet research confirms that GPAs are a better predictor of college performance than SAT scores; and many test scores have been found to rest on racially biased assumptions. Apart from assumptions spread by admissions rules, recent scholarship also suggests that some admissions officers discriminate against prospective Black students who are oriented towards social justice.

How to Fight Black Exclusion on College Campuses

Providing supportive and inclusive spaces for Black students is particularly important in the current social context. The following are suggestions that can be used by predominantly white institutions.

- **Develop new metrics for success.** Stop using only numeral diversity in admissions or graduation rates as the primary metrics for progress. Instead, focus as well on measuring the racial climate on campus and student feelings of belonging and attachment to the institution.
- **Train people in how to discuss racial issues.** Provide professional training for faculty on how to lead effective conversations about racism in their classrooms and as advisors. Provide similar training to administrators, staff, and student leaders.
- **Establish both safe spaces and brave spaces:** Recognize that Black students need safe spaces on predominantly white campuses where they can have a reprieve from anti-Black racism. Simultaneously, create cross-racial "brave spaces" for all students to develop authentic and sustained interracial interactions, while providing them with tools and support to do so effectively.
- **Spread anti-racist narratives:** Find multiple ways to counter harmful anti-Black stereotypes. For example, Test Optional College Admissions policies are already being used at many of the most competitive schools in the United States. And classroom curricula can also be used to further deepen students' racial literacy. Additionally, universities should forcefully identify antiracist values as a core feature of their institution's identity.
- **Anti-discrimination and harassment policies:** Develop clear policies and procedures that outline consequences for discriminatory treatment on the basis of race, ethnicity, and other social identities. These policies provide accountability that is critical for combating hostile racial climates.

Read more in Bedelia Nicola Richards, "Faculty Assessments as Tools of Oppression: A Black Woman's Reflections on (Colorblind) Racism in the Academy" in *Intersectionality and Higher Education: Identity and Inequality on College Campuses*, edited by W. Carson Byrd, Sarah Ovink, and Rachelle J. Brunn-Bevel (Rutgers University Press, 2019).