

Creating Positive College Campus Racial Climates for Students of Color

By Jessie Hernandez-Reyes

The term “[campus racial climate](#)” is used to describe the “current attitudes, behaviors, and practices of faculty and students at a higher education institution toward students based on their race/ethnicity.” So, how does a college’s campus racial climate affect college students of color?

Getting into college is one accomplishment. However, what happens once a student arrives on campus? How are they treated? How do they feel? Students of color often experience college differently than their White peers because of the negative attitudes, behavior, and practices some peers and faculty have toward students of color due to their race and/or ethnicity. The long-term effects of college students’ experiences on campus severely affect the academic experiences and social well-being of students of color, namely — their college access and success.

That’s why colleges and universities need to ensure that their students, faculty, and campus communities are welcoming, supportive, and attuned to the unique experiences of students of color on their campus. Research has shown that college students of color who receive continuous, tailored support have positive student social and academic outcomes, including increased campus participation, persistence, and graduation rates. What’s more, a college’s commitment to increasing the cultural competency of all its students, faculty, and surrounding campus communities has been shown to better prepare students of all racial backgrounds to participate in a diverse democracy.

As such, it is imperative that policies at the institutional, state, and federal levels expand college access and success for all students and ensures students of color are supported through positive campus racial climates that will lead to their social and academic success throughout and beyond college. In the wake of the Supreme Court’s limitation on the use of affirmative action, some colleges are doing away with their efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) on campus; but we argue that there needs to be even greater efforts on college campuses to support the belonging and success of students of color, not fewer.

“This report underscores the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in higher education and challenges PWIs to take concrete actions to improve their campus racial climate and foster a sense of belonging to all students,” says Ivory Toldson, the Director of Education Innovation and Research and Professor at Howard

University. “I urge all higher education leaders to read this report and take action to make their campuses more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. By doing so, they will not only benefit their students and faculty of color, but also enhance the quality and impact of their institutions.”

“I know that we have diversity courses professors must take as part of their diversity training and professors can opt out of those courses. How do you opt out of diversity?”

–Jessica, Latina student

To find out how campus racial climates affect students of color, Ed Trust went straight to the source: From September 2022 to May 2023, researchers interviewed 32 Black, Latino, and Asian American college students enrolled at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in 15 states to learn about their experiences on campus. Their answers revealed many common themes, such as

Underrepresentation of students of color and faculty on campus

“I’ve had one professor that was Black and this is my fifth semester here.”

–Andrew, Black student

“I usually am the only Black person, or there’s one more if I’m lucky, in the class. And I think that’s the case with faculty as well. It’s just overwhelmingly a White population at this university.”

–Alina, Black student

“I’m just like, yo, we got to prove everyone around you wrong. We got to become a role model and become a leader for those who might not have those people. I feel like going to a PWI really forces this idea and makes you really think about, do you belong here all the time? And it just sucks.”

–Kevin, Latino student

“It’s 62% White, 4% Black, which actually, there’s this big problem. The Black Student Union here has been doing a campaign since the Black Power movement to get enrollment past more than 4%, at least 10%. And we are still at... 4%.”

–Ellen, Asian American student

Limited support from their college for students of color

“There’s been a lot of incidents in classes on campus where White teachers or non-students of color have created this racial issue. And [my campus] has continued to really just look over and continue on with their day.”

–Kevin, Latino student

“[My campus] police department is not super great with dealing with minority students. They shut down the majority Black parties way earlier and with a lot more force than they do the White frat parties.”

–Tina, Black student

“Sometimes in class, I will say something about the Black identity or the distinction between African American, African and Afro-Caribbean and I’ve had professors that just say, ‘Wow, that’s so powerful. Let’s move to page 47.’”

–Sabrina, Black student

Lack of student knowledge about college policies and procedures to report incidents of racial/ethnic discrimination

“I don’t know where to report incidents of racism. But if I needed to report a racial incident, I think I would most likely go to one of the organizations on campus that caters to students of color. A lot of times, though, with racial incidents that happen on campus, they just get brushed under the rug. So even with reporting, much doesn’t happen. There’s just a formal report filed, but action isn’t necessarily taken.”

–Sabrina, Black student

“We really don’t have a formal process for reporting racial incidents, and I don’t know if incidents would be better resolved if there was. So, I don’t feel confident that if a professor were to discriminate against me, that the professor would be held responsible.”

–Adriana, Latina student

Lack of mental health supports that provide care specifically to students of color

“I tried the counseling center on campus. Unfortunately, there’s only one Black person. She’s able to connect with me and see things that I’m telling her in a different perspective. But it sucks on her end, too, that she’s the only Black therapist; so many people of color are coming to her.”

–Ava, Black student

“[My campus] does offer counseling services, but all the counselors are White. So I don’t know how much they would help me with my Black experience.”

–Alina, Black student

On Being the Only One

“My first class, I was in a big 300 people lecture. Five minutes before class and I’m seeing [that] not a single of them was Black and I was like, ‘Oh my God.’ I just felt so out of place.”

–Andrew, Black student

“Going to predominantly White institution is super hard. I’m a sophomore, but my first semester. I was such a hermit until I joined multicultural orgs, and that’s the problem. There’s just not enough of us on this campus.”

–Beata, Black student

“The pressure of being one of the few Hispanics here, I have to represent for not just me, but my whole community, and that pressure’s kind of heavy.”

–Brian, Latino student

“Even in courses on African American studies or courses on the South, you walk into the room and be the only Black person sitting in that room and it’s just like, ‘Wow.’”

–Sabrina, Black student

On the Lack of Faculty of Color

“At my school, we’re about 10,000 undergrad and it’s about 8% to 10% Black student population. And for faculty, it’s definitely less than that. Thinking back, I don’t think I’ve ever had a Black teacher, and I’m a senior.”

–Regina, Black student

“I remember my first year, when I realized there was no Black person or a Black professor in the STEM field at my school, I was like, ‘I can’t do this.’ It was really heartbreaking, because I really felt like I really wanted somebody to look up to.”

–Kara, Black student

“There are no business teachers that are Latino or even just people of color. [The school] claims racial diversity in terms of students, but you’ve got to have a racially diverse group of teachers to really facilitate and promote racial diversity in classrooms.”

–Kevin, Latino student

On Experiencing Racism and Microaggressions

“I’m in a sociology class, a White student told my friend, “Oh, my God, I didn’t know there were 4% of Black students on campus. I see you people everywhere.”

–Ellen, Asian American student

“I’m a resident assistant. Occasionally, you’ll go and do a room check and there’s a big Trump flag or a Blue Lives Matter flag. So it just puts you on edge.”

–Regina, Black student

“On a study abroad, my professor said, ‘There’s this area between France and Germany that’s disputed.’ Then she looked at me and said, ‘Faye, you would know what it’s like to be from a war-torn area, right?’ Then, she

commented how a Black student didn't need sunscreen because she was Black, but the rest of us did. The same student had an asthma attack and the teacher said she was faking it, so she didn't help her get medical attention."

–Faye, Asian American

"Once, some people dressed up as ICE agents for Halloween and went to this huge student gathering. We have a pretty decent size of undocumented students on campus. So when they arrived, it was a really big commotion. Especially with our campus being so close to the border, it's not funny. It's a real danger for a lot of students."

–Diana, Latina student

"There's a tacit kind of, 'Oh, of course you do well,' just the stereotype of East Asian, I think South Asians too, that you excel academically, like the model minority."

–Sung, Asian American student

On Student Well-Being and Mental Health

"My imposter syndrome has gone through the roof. I've worked hard to get into my university and now that I'm here, it's so hard to feel like I belong here and I feel like sometimes, the professors make that worse."

–Sabrina, Black student

"A lot of my friends who are people of color feel very unsafe, because, given what's been happening in America, they feel very insecure being around the campus security, because you never know when they might shoot."

–Pravin, Asian American student

Our conversations with students led to various recommendations by students that could hold colleges and universities accountable for ensuring positive campus racial climates. Some suggestions:

- Have frequent meetings around racialized issues between racial/ethnic student organizations and Board of Trustees
- Increase the percentage of faculty of color
- Require frequent campus racial climate assessments
- Have more efficient systems for students to report racial/ethnic incidents, including updating students on the progress on the resolution of such incidents
- Create social, academic, and economic supports for students of color, including faculty mentoring, more mental health resources for students of color (and continuous financial aid to students)
- Require higher education institutions to have cultural centers, funded with substantial resources
- Address educational inequities by race and/or ethnicity in public K-12 schools

This [framework, developed by Dr. Sylvia Hurtado, Alma Clayton-Pedersen, Walter Allen, and Jeffrey Milem](#), measures campus racial climate for higher education institutions based on four dimensions. In this framework, a student's race/ethnicity is defined as a student's race, color, national origin, ethnicity, or ancestry, actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, including membership in a religion that may be perceived to exhibit such characteristics (as defined by the [U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights](#)). We use this definition to acknowledge that race and ethnicity are complex, and students themselves have intersecting identities including that of race and ethnicity. Students also experience their college campus based on the way their peers, professors, and others perceive the student's identity, including race/ethnicity. For example, there may be a male student who self identifies as Afro-Latino, is a practicing Muslim, and is also a student parent. Professors and peers who are not familiar with this student may only perceive this student as being a Black male and are unaware of his religion or that he has a child.

The researchers identify four dimensions of campus racial climate. We've created a chart to illustrate how the dimensions work together. These include an institution's:

a) Historical Legacy of Inclusion/Exclusion: How has a college or university historically included or excluded students of color in admission and campus policies?

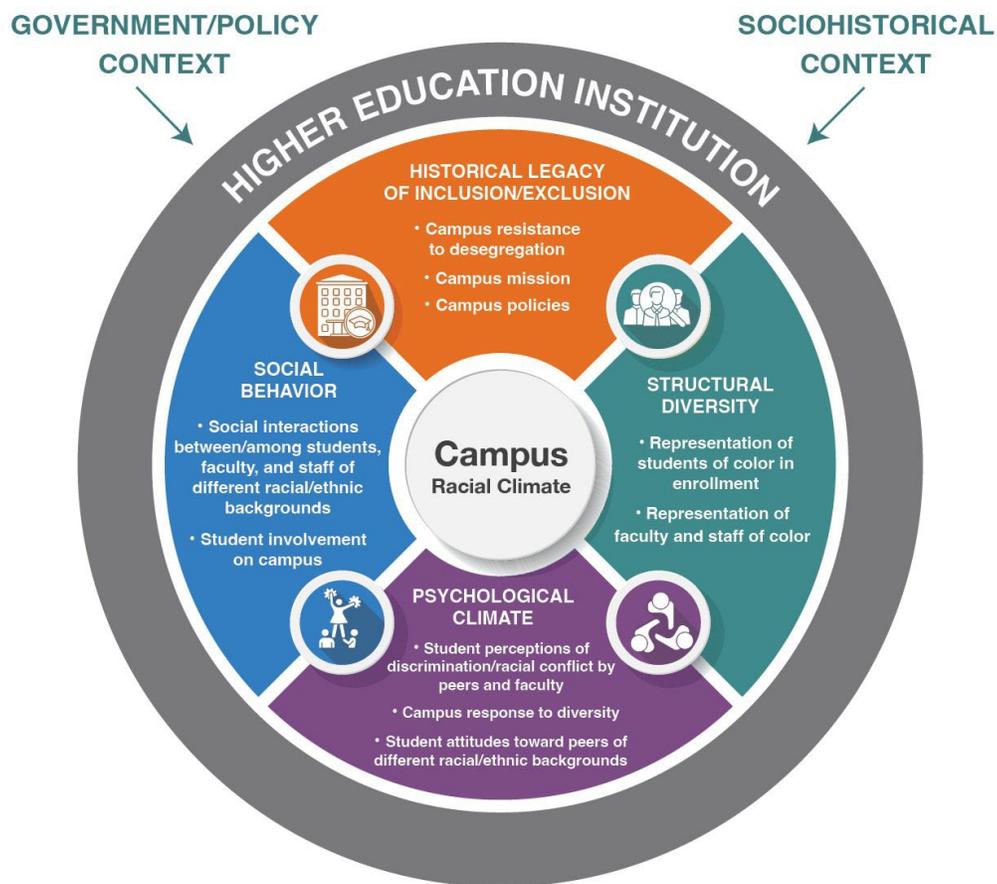
b) Structural Diversity: How many students of color are enrolled on campus and how many faculty of color are there at the college or university?

c) Psychological Climate: What are the experiences of students of color on campus and how do they affect their mental health? Do students of color on campus perceive themselves as likely to experience discrimination or racial conflict by their peers or

faculty? And how do they perceive conflict or discrimination will be addressed by their college?

d) Social Behavior: How do students on campus interact with each other and faculty, especially among peers and faculty from different racial/ethnic backgrounds?

The framework also acknowledges that the campus racial climate of higher education institutions are influenced by a) governmental policy, programs, and initiatives, such as state and federal policy on affirmative action; and b) sociohistorical contexts, events, or issues in the larger society that influence how people view racial diversity in society.



DIMENSION 1: Historical Legacy of Inclusion/Exclusion

Unfortunately, most higher education institutions have a history of limited access and exclusion toward students of color. A college's historical legacy of exclusion can determine the prevailing campus racial climate and influence current practices on campus toward students of color. Higher education institutions should acknowledge

their past history of exclusion and the detrimental impact that this history has had on the campus and students of color. By doing so, colleges can garner broader student and faculty support for their efforts to improve the campus climate for diversity. Moreover, acknowledging a past history of exclusion implies an institutional willingness to actively shed its exclusionary past. Such efforts may be even more effective if they are coupled with a clearly articulated vision for a more inclusive future.

What higher education institutions can do

Higher education leaders must consider whether “embedded benefits” may still exist on their campus for some students over others, namely White students over students of color. Colleges with a history of exclusion toward students of color are likely to have evolved in ways that disproportionately benefit some groups. For example, at many colleges, White fraternities and sororities have been a part of campus life much longer than people of color have been attending universities. Similarly, legacy admissions at various higher education institutions has and continues to disproportionately benefit White students, who are more likely to be the children of alumni of selective colleges. Higher education institutions must examine how their current policies and practices may disproportionately harm college access and success for students of color, acknowledge the impact of these practices on students, and remedy them.

DIMENSION 2: Structural Diversity

Structural diversity refers to the structure of student enrollments and faculty on campus, and specifically, racial/ethnic representation within student enrollments and faculty. Research supports the concept that increasing the college’s structural diversity is an important step toward improving the campus racial climate. Here are three scenarios:

Environments with highly skewed distributions of students shape the dynamics of social interaction:

- In environments that lack diverse populations, underrepresented groups are viewed as tokens.
- A college’s stance on increasing the representation of diverse racial/ethnic groups communicates whether maintaining a multicultural environment is a high institutional priority.

However, the racial/ethnic restructuring of student enrollments can also trigger conflict and resistance among groups. When there is an increase in the numbers of students of color on campus, a college must also encourage maximizing cross-racial interaction and encouraging ongoing discussions about race. Research has shown that at colleges and universities where there has been an increase in the numbers of students of color on campus without implementing cross-racial interaction and ongoing discussions about race, students of color reported less overall satisfaction with their college experience.

What higher education institutions can do

- One way to improve the college campus racial climate is to increase the representation of people of color (students and faculty) on campus. College admissions practices and financial aid policies are two areas in which changes can be made that will increase the representation of students of color on campus. Colleges can also adopt specific targets for [increasing faculty of color](#) on their campus and create faculty diversity initiatives.
- Any institutional, state, or federal financial aid policies to increase the representation of people of color on campus should involve substantial increases in student need-based funding, rather than an increased emphasis on loans. Moreover, additional investment in financial aid programs makes good fiscal sense. Funding federal and state financial aid programs provides a substantial return on investment of public funds.
- As colleges and universities work to increase the representation of people of color on campus, they must also take charge of facilitating cross-racial interactions among students and faculty. One way to do this is by making peer groups a deliberate and positive part of the educational process and providing formal mentoring programs where students are matched with faculty who will support them and their work as emerging scholars.

DIMENSION 3: Psychological Climate

The psychological dimension of the campus racial climate involves individuals' views of group relations, institutional responses to diversity, perceptions of discrimination or racial conflict, and attitudes toward racial/ethnic backgrounds different than one's own. It's important to note that more recent studies show that racially and ethnically diverse administrators, students, and faculty tend to view the campus climate differently than their White peers.

Introducing ways for students to report and seek redress for negative experiences is important, but campuses must also be aware that many psychological aspects of the college climate go unreported. A [study](#) of California State institutions revealed that Asian Pacific Americans often do not use formal grievance procedures when they experience discrimination or harassment.

What higher education institutions can do

- Colleges and universities must address negative perceptions peers and faculty have toward students of color through ongoing measurement of student perceptions via campus racial climate assessments, implementation of educational programs to combat negative racial/ethnic bias, and implementation

of clear and anonymous reporting systems for students of color to report incidents of racial discrimination.

- Colleges should design and implement systematic and comprehensive educational programs to help all members of the campus community (students, faculty, and staff) identify and confront the stereotypes and myths that people have about those who are different from them.
- Colleges should also create clearly stated [policies and procedures](#) to help the campus community confront and resolve incidents of racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination. These policies and procedures should include formal processes for resolving conflicts or disputes that involve representatives from all members of the campus community (students, faculty, staff).
- Colleges must also implement regular and ongoing [assessments of the campus climate](#) that include students, faculty, and staff.

DIMENSION 4: Faculty/Student Social Behavior

The behavioral dimension of the campus racial climate consists of (a) actual reports of general social interaction between and among students and faculty of different racial/ethnic backgrounds and (b) the nature of intergroup relations on campus.

The absence of interracial contact clearly influences students' views toward others, support for campus initiatives, and educational outcomes. [Research](#) has shown that White students who have had little social interaction with individuals of different racial backgrounds on campus are less likely to hold positive attitudes toward multiculturalism on campus. Conversely, White students who have socialized with someone of another race, have discussed racial and ethnic issues with other students, or have attended racial/cultural awareness workshops are more likely to value the goal of promoting racial understanding.

What higher education institutions can do

- Colleges and universities should clearly convey to all members of the community the expectation that interracial dialogue and interaction are highly valued on campus. They should work to provide students with opportunities for cross-racial interaction whenever possible — both in and out of the classroom.
- Contact and communication should also be regular, ongoing, and viewed as equal in status by all participants.
- Contact should occur in an environment characterized by cooperation and not competition. Given the important role of faculty-student relationships, colleges should also provide abundant opportunities for faculty-student contact in and out of the classroom. Cross-race interactions can be also enhanced by the programs and activities of multicultural centers.