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The Climate for Underrepresented Groups and Diversity on Campus

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With the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, there has been some debate about whether the nation is now in a postracial era in which race no longer influences Americans' thinking and experiences.¹ However, surveys of college students indicate that race is still a significant issue and that the underrepresentation of Black, Latina/o, and Native American students only serves to reinforce stereotyping and discrimination in college environments. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey data indicate that 25% of all entering freshmen at four-year colleges and universities currently believe that racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America.² At the same time, a number of highly publicized race-related incidents were recently reported across college campuses, ranging from the appearance of nooses hanging from campus trees, symbolically reflecting lynching of Blacks, to verbal comments and other acts of harassment directed at specific individuals.³ These data and incidents indicate that the "postracial" era brings new challenges with changing

demographics, and that low representation on college campuses continues to be problematic. If one of the key purposes of higher education is to prepare students for engagement in a diverse democracy,⁴ educators and policymakers must understand the conditions under which students' academic and civic learning can be facilitated or hindered. Low representation creates a detrimental effect on campus climate.

Current college student survey data illustrate the conditions apparent for underrepresented groups on campuses with variation in Black, Latina/o, and Native American undergraduate enrollment. Previous work on women's presence in corporations indicated that stereotyping and discrimination were heightened in organizations that had skewed ratios, and that such effects began to diminish in organizations that had achieved a range of 30–35% representation of women.⁵ In reviewing campus climate data on diverse learning environments, we saw similar effects when tracking student reports of harassment, bias, and discrimination.

¹ See Bonilla-Silva, E., & Dietrich, D. (2011). The sweet enchantment of color-blind racism in Obamerica. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 634(1), 190–206.

² Pryor, J. H., DeAngelo, L., Palucki Blake, L., Hurtado, S., & Tran, S. (2011). *The American freshman: National norms for Fall 2011*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute.

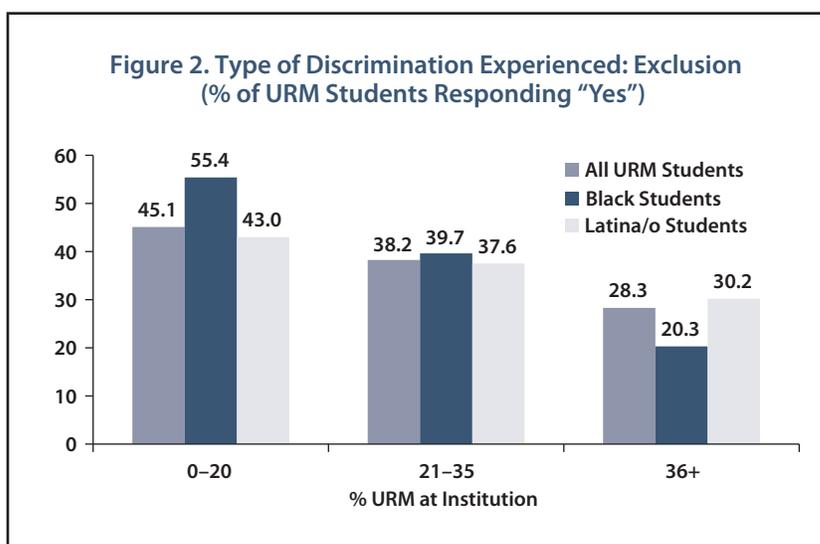
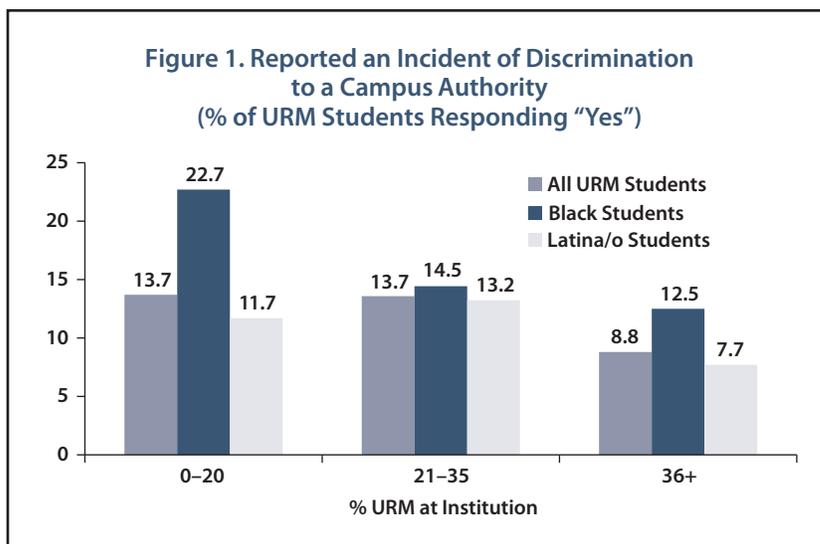
³ For racial incident reports by campus, see *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* at www.jbhe.com/incidents.

⁴ Gurin, P., Dey, E. L., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (Fall 2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(3), 330–366; Hurtado, S. (2007). ASHE Presidential Address: Linking Diversity with the Educational and Civic Missions of Higher Education. *Review of Higher Education*, 30(2), 185–196.

⁵ Kanter, R. M. (1977). Some effects of proportions on group life: Skewed sex ratios and responses to token women. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, 965–989.

The graphs accompanying this brief illustrate the experiences reported by 4,037 Underrepresented Minority (URM) students (59 Native Americans, 490 African Americans, and 3,488 Latina/os) on 31 campuses that took part in the launch of the *Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey*,⁶ a national survey designed to assist campuses in evaluating their campus climate, institutional practices, and outcomes. The sample includes a variety of public and private institutions that vary in terms of URM enrollment, including public campuses in Texas and California that no longer use race in admissions decisions, but does not include historically black institutions or community colleges for this analysis.

Many campuses are unaware of the magnitude of the problems faced by racial/ethnic groups in environments where they are underrepresented. Nationally, many incidents of stereotyping or harassment go unreported. Only about 13% of all students report racial incidents to a campus authority. Figure 1 shows that although such reports are rare, they are significantly more likely to



⁶ Survey methodology: The data came from the first two administrations of the *DLE survey* at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. The DLE was designed to provide insight into students' campus life experiences by assessing campus climate, practices, and a set of outcomes focused on retention and skills for a multicultural society. Institutions were selected in the first year based on IPEDS data that indicated differences in student diversity, retention data, and information from websites on campus diversity efforts. In the second year, institutions registered to participate in the national launch. Data were collected between December 2009 and May 2010 for year one and between October 2010 and June 2011 for year two, resulting in 13 public four-year, and 18 private four-year institutions across the United States. (Community colleges were removed for this analysis). The 31 institutions varied in compositional diversity, including both broad access and selective institutions. The DLE was administered online, resulting in a 34% average response rate for students who accessed the website. Of the 27,819 respondents, this report is based primarily on the responses of 59 Native American, 490 Black students, and 3,488 Latina/os on these campuses.

be reported by African American students (22.7%) at low-diversity institutions.

Although such incidents also occur on more diverse campuses, they occur at a significantly lower rate at the most diverse institutions. Reported incidents are only the tip of the iceberg, as the survey captures specific accounts of campus racial climate, including experiences of various types of discrimination or harassment.

Figure 2 shows that feelings of exclusion from campus events and activities in peer environments are more prevalent in low-diversity institutions among URM students, with significant declines as the campus URM student enrollment increases. Among Black students, more than half (55.4%) feel some level of

exclusion in low-diversity institutions, and a significant decline occurs when URM representation on a campus exceeds 20%. It is important to note that Black students feel more included on more diverse campuses even when they are not the predominant minority on a campus. Still, one in five Black students experiences some level of exclusion, and 30% of Latina/os feel some level of exclusion on the most diverse campuses. The results underscore the need to monitor the climate for URM students even as campuses become more diverse, as there is still considerable residential segregation that students experience prior to college entry.

Figure 3 shows that by far the most prevalent form of discrimination or stereotyping comes in the form of

verbal comments made by others on campus. Almost two thirds (60.4%) of URM students on low-diversity campuses reported being the target of verbal comments, and this is higher among Black students (67.2%). Significant declines occur on campuses with URM enrollment between 21 and 35%, but reports are still above half for all URM groups on moderately diverse campuses. Black student reports of verbal comments as a form of discrimination are lowest on the most diverse campuses (37.5%), as are reports by Latina/os (47.9%). These types of encounters are not likely to be reported and appear disturbingly high.

Figure 4 reflects responses of the proportion of URM students who report they have witnessed offensive

visual images as a form of discrimination. While 40.2% of African American students report this form of discrimination at low-diversity institutions, significantly fewer (16.4%) report this on campuses with over 35% URM enrollment. Latina/os witness offensive visual images at similar rates on low- and moderate-diversity institutions, but significantly less often on campuses with the most diversity (23.3%).

A primary question arises as to whether we are adequately preparing students to participate in a diverse democracy, given potential racial climate problems on some campuses. Figure 5 illustrates responses on a scale measuring students' social and cognitive skills for participation in a diverse workforce, called pluralistic orientation. Using the entire sample of 27,819 students in comparison with the number of URM students, the figure shows the average score for all students by the campus percentage of URM enrollment. The pattern shows that students in the most diverse college environments score significantly higher on the scale than students at

Figure 3. Type of Discrimination Experienced: Verbal Comments
(% of URM Students Responding "Yes")

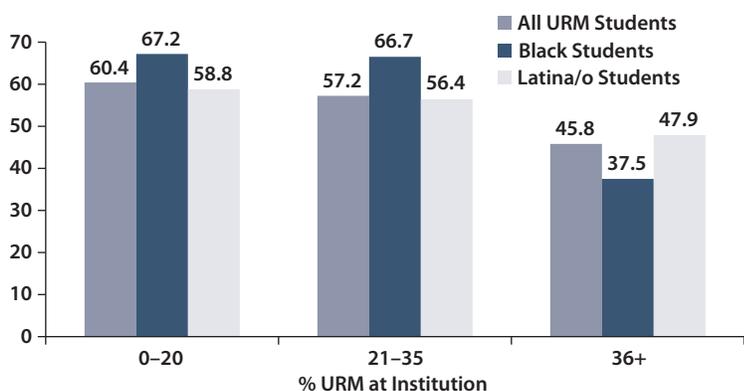


Figure 4. Type of Discrimination Experienced: Offensive Visual Images
(% of URM Students Responding "Yes")

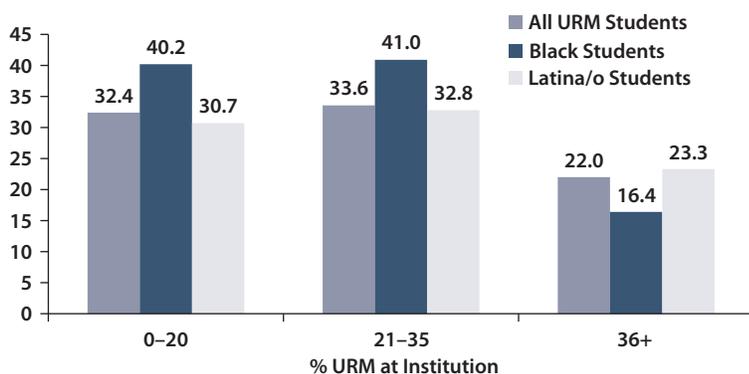
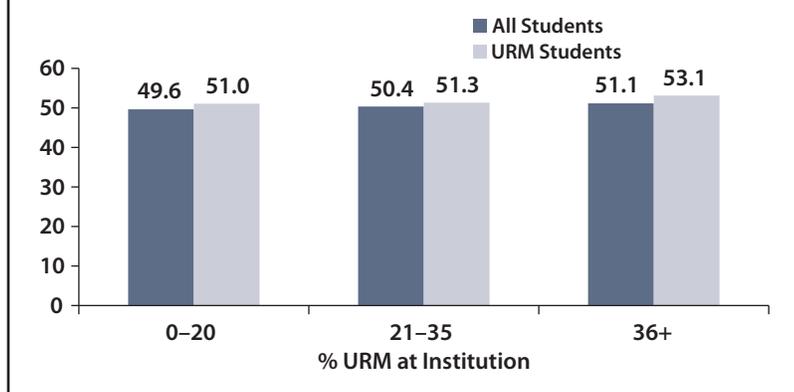


Figure 5. Mean Score on the Pluralistic Orientation Scale



low-diversity institutions. Campuses are encouraged to use DLE data along with data from the CIRP Freshman Survey to assess changes in individual students across time, and to assess campus practices that contribute to growth on the scale.

CONCLUSION

College is an ideal environment for students to encounter racial/ethnic differences, build awareness and appreciation of difference, and learn how to treat each other as equal citizens.⁷ This is best accomplished

in racially and ethnically diverse learning environments. Overall, the survey data indicate more hospitable racial climates on the most diverse campuses and suggest that campuses must continue to work to improve intergroup relations even as enrollments begin to change. In order to realize the benefits of diversity on a campus, students need opportunities in classrooms and co-curricular experiences to interact with others from different backgrounds, perspectives, and beliefs. Previous research

has established a link between campus climates and a variety of student outcomes.⁸ Continued attention is necessary in order to improve degree attainments and students' skills for citizenship in a multicultural society.

⁷ Gutmann, A. (2004). Unity and diversity in democratic multicultural education: Creative and destructive tensions. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Diversity and citizenship education: Global perspectives* (pp. 71-96). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁸ Hurtado, S., Alvarez, C. L., Guillermo-Wann, C., Cuellar, M., & Arellano, L. (2012). A model for diverse learning environments: The scholarship on creating and assessing conditions for student success. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 27, 41-122.



The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is based in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies and research training in postsecondary education.



The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) is administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. CIRP is the oldest and most established study of American higher education, consisting of data on over 15 million students from more than 1,900 colleges and universities. CIRP continues to advance understanding of student learning and development in college through numerous books and publications and is the most comprehensive source of information on college students.

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