



The Crisis of Race in Higher Education: A Day of Discovery and Dialogue

Retaining Students of Color in Higher Education: Expanding Our Focus to Psychosocial Adjustment and Mental Health

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RETAINING STUDENTS OF COLOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPANDING OUR FOCUS TO PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Juliette M. Iacovino and Sherman A. James



“Educators: ... don’t be afraid to acknowledge the relevance of race to course material, even if it’s not your area of expertise. If you’ve experienced a microaggression, you may have 6 degrees but you still have a lot to learn.”

Christian Gordon
Senior in Psychology

Image: Illustration, Race & Ethnicity: A Day of Discovery and Dialogue – 2015.

Source: Leslie Ding, Washington University in St. Louis Class of 2015.

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, scholars and universities have made efforts to increase the retention of students in higher education, but graduation rates remain low. Whereas two-thirds of high school graduates attend college, fewer than half graduate. The likelihood of graduation decreases even more for Black, Latino, American Indian, and low-income students, who have a 12–15% lower chance of earning their degree. The importance of psychosocial adjustment to student persistence has received relatively less attention than academic and social integration. Racial/ethnic minority students face unique challenges to psychosocial adjustment in college, including prejudice and discrimination, unwelcoming campus environments, underrepresentation, and a lack of culturally appropriate counseling resources. The current chapter will discuss the impact of these challenges on the persistence, academic success, and health of racial/ethnic minority students, and strategies that universities can employ to create inclusive policies, resources and campus environments that empower students of color and maximize their success.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of retaining students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups in higher education has gained increasing attention over the past decade as racial gaps in postsecondary enrollment have diminished. In 2000, 29.2% of enrollees in undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs identified as racial/ethnic minorities (i.e., African American, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, Alaska Native, or two or more races). By 2012, this number had increased to 39.7% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2013). The racial breakdown of just undergraduates reveals similar results, with 40.7% of college students identifying as a racial/ethnic minority.

Despite these gains in enrollment, however, significant racial gaps remain in college graduation rates. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), African American students have the lowest overall four-year college graduation rate (20.8%) for cohorts starting in 2007, followed by Native American/Alaska Natives (23%), Pacific Islanders (25.8%), Hispanics (29.8%), Whites (43.3%), Asians (46.7%), and students identifying as two or more races (49.1%). Graduation rates at private institutions rank slightly higher but remain low, particularly for students of color, with

rates for African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and Native American/Alaska Native students all under 50% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Despite concerted efforts by universities to improve retention, racial/ethnic inequities in graduation rates have remained stable or increased over time (Aud, Fox, & Kewal Ramani, 2010). Racial inequities in graduation rates translate to inequities in educational attainment and associated outcomes, such as employment, income, wealth, and health (Aud et al., 2010; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Thus, institutions of higher education must take innovative steps to improve the retention of students of color.

Researchers have studied college retention for decades. Tinto (1975) introduced the first comprehensive model of retention, and he posited that academic and social integration are central to whether a student persists or drops out (Tinto, 1975). Academic integration refers to factors such as grade performance and intellectual development, whereas social integration refers to positive peer and faculty interactions. Pre-college characteristics (e.g., family background, schooling), as well as student and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975) influence both forms of integration. When insufficient integration exists in any of these areas, dropout occurs more often (Tinto, 1975). Indeed, studies relate low retention to both academic unpreparedness *and* poor social adjustment (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Jensen, 2011; Lee & Barnes, 2015).

Scholars have extended Tinto's theory by including a discussion of cultural integration, which emphasizes academic and social integration while allowing students to maintain their cultural identity (Jensen, 2011; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Specifically, they contend that universities must recognize the importance of ensuring educational settings that provide students access to the cultural capital (e.g., knowledge of language(s), national histories) of the broad range of cultural and demographic groups typically represented on college campuses so that all students may have meaningful intergroup interactions. Studies demonstrate that access to spaces where students can celebrate their cultural identity improves student satisfaction and persistence, particularly at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008). In addition, fostering positive intergroup contact in formal and informal ways can reduce stereotyping and improve race relations (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011; Geronimus et al., 2016; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

In addition to cultural, academic and social integration, psychosocial adjustment to college, especially in the first two years, proves essential to

success (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009; Swail et al., 2003). Psychosocial adjustment refers to the maintenance of emotional well-being, supported by the development of adaptive techniques for coping with change or other difficult experiences and feelings (Lazarus, 1991). Studies have associated deficient emotional and social adjustment with poorer academic performance in a sample of African American women at a Historically Black University (Schwartz & Washington, 2007); and depression and anxiety with dropout, lower GPA, and more interruptions in education in multiethnic samples (Arria et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2009).

Negative social experiences, such as feeling marginalized (McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2005), uncomfortable academic interactions, observing racism on campus (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014), and faculty incivility (Alt & Itzkovich, 2015) have contributed to poorer adjustment and less persistence. Effectively coping with these experiences may positively impact student outcomes. Indeed, coping resources like caregiver and community support, supportive social networks with peers and faculty, and self-confidence about coping with educational difficulties, have been positively associated with persistence among racial/ethnic minority students (Newman & Newman, 1999; Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, & Nitzarim, 2013). Counseling, focused on issues ranging from academic support to mental health concerns, provides an important resource in helping students adjust to the demands of college and ultimately to excel. Research shows that racial/ethnic minority students are less likely to use counseling resources (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Gollust, 2007); and, unfortunately, current university counseling resources may not effectively address the specific needs of students of color (Brinson & Kottler, 1995).

This research suggests that psychosocial factors, such as social and emotional adjustment, comfort with the campus environment, coping abilities, and social support relate to college persistence among students of color. Universities, however, need to conduct more research to better characterize psychosocial risk for, and protective factors against dropout among minority students. For example, we found no studies focused on the impact of psychological distress on persistence specifically among students of color. How racial/ethnic inequities in the use of counseling services in the face of real need impacts racial/ethnic minority student retention remains an important topic for future research.

In this chapter, we posit that students of color face barriers to psychosocial adjustment that often go unrecognized, or inadequately addressed by university programs and policies, and that this may contribute to poor retention of

racial/ethnic minority students in higher education. We believe these barriers can be mitigated, if not eliminated altogether, by enhancing culturally appropriate institutional resources and policies that empower students of color and adequately support their emotional and psychological well-being.

WHAT ARE THE UNIQUE STRESSES ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES BY STUDENTS OF COLOR?

All students must adjust to college life and all students have difficulties transitioning. However, racial/ethnic minority students face unique barriers to psychosocial adjustment not faced by their white peers. For example, students of color often experience discrimination, prejudice (e.g., microaggressions), underrepresentation, and a lower sense of school belonging, all of which have a negative impact on persistence (Geronimus et al., 2016; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Sue et al., 2009; Swail et al., 2003). The barriers to psychosocial adjustment in college that we will address in this chapter fall into several arenas: The campus environment, discrimination and prejudice, sense of belonging, racial/ethnic identity development, and coping resources.

The Campus Environment

At Yale University, in anticipation of Halloween 2015, Dean Burgwell Howard and the Intercultural Affairs Council sent an email to students suggesting that they “actively avoid those circumstances that threaten our sense of community or disrespects, alienates or ridicules segments of our population based on race, nationality, religious belief or gender expression.” This communication referred to the not uncommon Halloween practice of dressing in culturally offensive or appropriative costumes, such as blackface or American Indian headdresses (Cronin, 2015). In response, Erika Christakis, an Associate Master at Silliman College, one of Yale’s student dorms, penned an email encouraging students not to be so sensitive and worried that there exists “no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious ... a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive” (Christakis, 2015). She stated that she did not want to trivialize students’ concerns about “challenges to our lived experience in a plural community” but encouraged students offended by a costume to

“look away, or tell them you are offended” (Christakis, 2015). By publishing this letter, Christakis, perhaps unknowingly, elevated the needs of historically privileged Yale students to be offensive above the needs of historically marginalized students to be able to live and study in a welcoming campus environment.

Christakis may have been unaware of the research suggesting that environmental cues that devalue students’ social identities and activate stereotypes can have adverse physical and mental health consequences (Geronimus et al., 2016), in addition to negative impacts on academic functioning (Geronimus et al., 2016; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Christakis failed to understand that when African American students encounter a White student in blackface at a party, it cues them to remember that society does not value their racial/ethnic identity as much as the White students’ – at Yale, or in the United States as a whole. The historical meaning of blackface in perpetuating and normalizing racist stereotypes of African Americans as lazy, dumb buffoons, among other characterizations, will remind African American students of the stereotypes they must subvert. These cues bring hyperawareness of one’s own behavior, and that of others, increased psychological and physiological distress (e.g., elevated blood pressure), and impaired performance on important cognitive tasks (e.g., working memory) (Geronimus et al., 2016; Schmader et al., 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The campus environment serves as an important mediator of student success. Experiences such as observing racism on campus and negative feelings about the campus environment have a negative impact on persistence, specifically among students of color (Johnson et al., 2014; Wei, Ku, & Liao, 2011). Research links perceptions of the campus environment with race-related stress. One study found that the campus environment mediated relationships between minority status stress (e.g., low expectations, racial tension, pressure not to fulfill stereotypes) and persistence, causing students who experienced less minority status stress to be more likely to persist (Wei et al., 2011). Similarly, alienation from college life has been shown to predict dropout among Native American (Thompson et al., 2013) and Hispanic students (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990).

Racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs report unwelcoming and hostile environments (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). Studies of African American students at PWIs find that they report more discrimination, less satisfaction, more psychological distress, and less belonging (Lee & Barnes, 2015) than White students. Other research suggests that African American students seem more engaged and more satisfied at Historically Black

Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) than at PWIs (Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007; Swail et al., 2003). However, graduation rates and grades among racial/ethnic minority students increase with increasing selectivity of a university (many of the most selective being PWIs), and minority students at highly selective universities have been shown to have better occupational outcomes and to report greater satisfaction than students at less selective schools (Brief of Experimental Psychologists, 2012). Data also suggest that Hispanic students appear just as engaged and satisfied at PWIs as at Hispanic Serving Institutions (Laird et al., 2007). Differences among different types of universities notwithstanding, college retention rates remain low for students of color, especially African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and Native American/Alaskan students.

The surround constitutes an essential aspect of the campus environment (Geronimus et al., 2016). Researchers define *the surround* as the “subtle and pervasive features” of the social and physical environment that signal how much others value persons with different social identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, religion, social class). Viewing a student in blackface on Halloween represents one such cue. The predominance of Eurocentric art in classrooms represents another. The concept of *the surround* relies on understanding the impact on people’s social identities, the value placed on their identities by the dominant culture, and the sensitivity displayed by institutions to marginalized identities (Geronimus et al., 2016). Depending on the context, positive, neutral, or negative responses can be cued by stimuli in the environment. When one holds several marginalized identities, it cues the frequency and severity of the devaluation of those marginalized identities. Researchers define this as social identity threat (Geronimus et al., 2016; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In explicating connections between *the surround* and social identity threat, Geronimus et al. (2016) focused on the largely unappreciated negative health sequelae. After Steele and Aronson (1995) and Schmader et al. (2008), they (Geronimus et al., 2016) posited that social identity threat triggers psychological and physiological distress responses, which with repetition, leads to excessive exposure to stress hormones and increased wear and tear (“allostatic load”) on multiple biological systems over time. Researchers increasingly implicate this psychophysiological stress process as a major risk factor for the early onset of a number of chronic diseases (McEwen, 1998). Social identity threats also require sustained psychological effort to resist, mitigate, or undo, increasing cognitive load and damaging emotional well-being (Geronimus et al., 2016; James, 1994). Hence, a

mismatch between the needs of marginalized students and available resources in the college environment might further tax students' biological and cognitive systems. In sum, unequal environments with embedded social identity threats cause these "structurally rooted biopsychosocial processes" (Geronimus et al., 2016, p. 106).

People can experience the exact same setting very differently, depending on their collection of social identities. Universities can choose to create "welcoming" environments or ones that signal devaluation and disempowerment of marginalized groups. Some universities have begun to take steps in the former direction, such as Harvard's decision to change the term *House Master* to *Dean* (M.D. Smith, personal communication, 2016), and the announcement that the University would acknowledge its role in slavery by installing a plaque commemorating the slaves who worked on the campus in the 1700s (Malone, 2016). These small steps serve to empower, rather than devalue, the social identities of a growing percentage of minority students on campus. Universities, however, must think through these proposed changes carefully and assess their actual impact on students. For example, as the term *House Master* did, a plaque commemorating slaves may potentially serve as a reminder of slavery, creating a negative social identity cue rather than one that empowers. Hence, university officials should include students, faculty, and staff of color, as well as expert social scientists in decisions to improve *the surround*.

Discrimination

Every day on campus, students engage in social interactions with their peers, professors, and university staff. From time to time, all students experience negative social interactions during college, but students of color may also be subject to racial discrimination and prejudice from both peers and persons in authority positions. These experiences range from overt racist confrontations to more covert forms of prejudice, such as microaggressions. Microaggressions refer to subtle verbal, nonverbal, or behavioral slights that signal hostility, disrespect, or insensitivity toward a marginalized group, whether intentional or not (Sue et al., 2007, 2009). Microaggressions can take on many forms, and in educational settings often convey to the recipient that the peer or authority figure consider them intellectually inferior, abnormal, that they do not belong, or they fit into a negative stereotype (Sue et al., 2007, 2009). Examples of microaggressions include the implication that the institution accepted African American or Hispanic students

only because of affirmative action, the assumption that such students come from a disadvantaged economic background because of their race or ethnicity, or the use of the term “well-spoken” or “speaks English well” despite their race or ethnicity about an African American, Hispanic, or Asian student. Microaggressions and other forms of discrimination are associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Lewis, Cogburn, & Williams, 2015), hostile and unwelcoming campus environments (Lee & Barnes, 2015; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), reduced productivity and problem-solving abilities (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007), and poorer college adjustment (Eimers & Pike, 1997).

In samples of African American students, discrimination has been shown to increase academic disengagement, psychological distress, mistrust, perceived mistreatment, and feelings of invisibility and marginalization, and to reduce academic performance, well-being, and sense of belonging (Lee & Barnes, 2015). Research associates lifetime discrimination with increased alcohol problems among African American students attending an HBCU (Boynton, O’Hara, Covault, Scott, & Tennen, 2014). Among Hispanic college students, studies have associated discrimination with poorer subjective well-being (Villegas-Gold & Yoo, 2014), as well as increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol use disorders (Cheng & Mallinckrodt, 2015). Researchers found that perceived discrimination predicted lower persistence in college among Hispanic and Asian students (Witkow, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2015).

The activation of stereotype threat mediates many of these outcomes. Stereotype threat and social identity threat function in similar ways. Both result from negative environmental and social cues, and both have negative physiological, cognitive, and psychological impacts (Geronimus et al., 2016). Social identity threat reminds individuals about the low value placed on their social identity(ies). Stereotype threat, a form of social identity threat, reminds individuals specifically about the negative stereotypes associated with their particular social group. The typical response to stereotype threat causes hyper-vigilance to one’s appearance, behavior, and performance in order to avoid fulfilling negative stereotypes (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Research shows that, ironically, stereotype threat actually impedes an individual’s ability to monitor his/her social behavior, make decisions, perform on academic tasks, and suppress negative emotional reactions (Schmader et al., 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Other studies show that African American students who fear fulfilling a negative stereotype may internalize such stereotypes, leading them to invest minimal effort into

academics to avoid attributing failure to personal characteristics (Massey & Owens, 2014). Alternatively, students may externalize stereotypes, leading them to expect prejudice from instructors and peers, causing anxiety, poorer performance, lower confidence, and academic disengagement (Massey & Owens, 2014). Furthermore, stereotype threat reduces an individual's sense of belonging, increasing the likelihood that they will withdraw from the setting (Spencer et al., 2016). All of these findings have important implications for student psychosocial adjustment, persistence, and graduation.

In sum, perceived discrimination, microaggressions, and other cues of marginalization on campus can activate social identity threat and stereotype threat. These phenomena have pervasive negative cognitive effects and cause physiological and psychological stress, leading to poorer educational and health outcomes among students with historically marginalized social identities. These threats to college success seem unique to students of color and students from other marginalized groups, and if left unaddressed, will likely exert pernicious, racialized effects on higher education outcomes.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging refers to students' perceptions of being accepted, respected, and included by important individuals in the social environment, such as peers and faculty (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2015). Threatening social identity cues remind students of their outsider-status, of their undervalued identities, and of their marginalized cultural values, leading to less attachment to their school. Sense of belonging generates a range of psychosocial and academic outcomes among students of color. In a sample of racial/ethnic minority students, sense of belonging showed a positive association with psychological adjustment, composed of academic achievement, self-worth, social acceptance, and depression (Gummadam et al., 2015). In a sample of African American students, "belonging uncertainty" produced higher stress and dissatisfaction, less motivation to succeed, and lower GPA (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Racial/ethnic minority students' sense of belonging can be enhanced in various ways. Improving *the surround* so that it empowers marginalized social identities represents one strategy for increasing belonging (Geronimus et al., 2016). Increasing the representation of ethnic minority students, faculty and staff on campus represents another (Cabrera, Amaury, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999). Currently, there remains a lack of student racial/ethnic diversity on college campuses, especially at private non-profit PWIs. An even

more pressing diversity problem exists at the faculty level. In 2013, only 21% of full-time faculty in degree-granting institutions were African American (6%), Hispanic (5%), Asian/Pacific Islander (10%), Native American/Alaskan or multiracial (both <1%). For full-time professors, statistics reveal an even more serious problem, with only 16% ethnic minority faculty (Kena et al., 2015). These numbers do not reflect the U.S. population as a whole; nor do they come close to reflecting current college student demographics.

Because of the lack of student and faculty racial/ethnic diversity on college campuses and the privileging of Euro-American cultural values, students of color often find it challenging to fit into a space where Euro-American cultural norms almost exclusively define social and intellectual success, and their own cultural values remain marginalized. This may be especially true for students who identify strongly with their ethnic group. Also, students of color more likely become victims of microaggressions and discrimination inside and outside of the classroom, while having access to fewer healing, empowerment, and identity-building spaces. All of these factors contribute to greater alienation from the broader campus community, and the perception of the campus environment as unwelcoming, hence eroding students' sense of belonging and reducing their likelihood to persist (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Schwartz & Washington, 2007; Wei et al., 2011).

Coping

Even if a university takes steps to improve diversity and the campus environment, many students of color may continue to have negative experiences on campus and in the environments surrounding college campuses. Universities can play a crucial role in supporting racial/ethnic minority students' emotional well-being by providing resources that foster adaptive skills for coping with stressors that students of color uniquely face. Coping strategies have been shown to be important mediators of well-being, as well as academic and social adjustment in college (Katz & Somers, 2015; Quan, Zhen, Yao, & Zhou, 2014). Supportive resources, such as ethnic student groups, same-ethnicity faculty and peer mentoring, and peer support groups have been shown to improve student outcomes among racial/ethnic minorities (Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000; Museus, 2008). These resources should be extended and adequately supported by universities so that all students can more fully realize their potential.

In addition to peer and faculty support, students should have access to appropriate professional support. At most universities, students can enroll in affordable health insurance and access several low-cost and/or free counseling appointments. Thus, for the majority of students, financial access does not create a barrier to the use of mental health services. Yet, considerable evidence suggests the lower likelihood that racial/ethnic minority students will access mental health care (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Eisenberg et al., 2007).

A mismatch between the typical individualistic approach of psychotherapy and approaches that may be more suited to the worldview of racial/ethnic minority students may also influence treatment-seeking (Brinson & Kottler, 1995). Many minority cultures ascribe to a worldview of *collectivism*, whereby they consider the good of the group central. This contrasts the dominant culture of *individualism* in the United States. Psychotherapy typically employs an individualist approach, whereby the therapist expects the clients to take responsibility for and to change the personal factors that adversely affect their functioning. People from other ethnic backgrounds may take less of an individualist or personal responsibility worldview, believing that individuals often have limited control over their circumstances (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Norris & Alegria, 2005). Furthermore, psychotherapy typically focuses on the individual to the exclusion of focusing on the systemic and environmental factors that negatively impact mental health and psychological well-being (Brinson & Kottler, 1995).

The lack of clinicians of color presents a barrier to treatment-seeking among students of color (Brinson & Kottler, 1995). When students do not have the option of seeing a provider from a similar racial/ethnic background (or a non-white provider), they may be less likely to seek counseling. Research shows that cultural mistrust (i.e., mistrust of the dominant culture) has a negative impact on counseling-related attitudes (e.g., expectations for therapy) among African Americans (Whaley, 2001). For some students, cultural mistrust may impact the initiation and continuation of psychotherapy, as well as its effectiveness.

Clinicians remain susceptible to the same foibles as any other person, including perpetrating microaggressions and reacting based on unconscious biases toward their clients (Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2006; Sue et al., 2007). During a clinical encounter, all of the societal and cultural forces that shape both the clinician and patient come into play. Therefore, clinician-patient cultural differences, discrimination, stigma, and perceptions of mental health care must be addressed to create a comfortable, healing atmosphere. Students should feel comfortable discussing how these forces

impact their psychological well-being and the therapeutic relationship. For this to occur, clinicians must develop an understanding of the importance of culture in mental health, knowledge about their patients' specific culture(s), and skills for addressing the contribution of culture to symptomatology, diagnosis, treatment, and the therapeutic relationship. Mental health professionals often refer to this constellation of awareness and skills as *cultural competence* (Coleman, 2004; Kirmayer, 2012; Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992).

Cultural competence requires the ability to balance generalized, group-specific cultural knowledge with an understanding of how individual patients connect with their culture and how it then impacts their psychological health (Sue et al., 1992). Flexibility, perspective-taking, and genuine curiosity, grounded in cultural awareness and knowledge prove essential in this regard. Theoretically, clinicians believe cultural competence meets patients' needs by improving rapport and enhancing treatment outcomes. Without cultural competence, bias and prejudice can damage the therapeutic process. These problems become particularly salient in mental health care because clinicians must process a great deal of information (some of which may be conflicting), while simultaneously deciding what additional information to collect – this during a novel interpersonal interaction. When a salient (and possibly anxiety-provoking) cultural difference between the clinician and patient also exists, the resulting cognitive load can subtly activate unconscious biases and stereotypes. If, as a consequence, the student perceives bias or misunderstanding from the therapist, the chances that he or she will return to therapy will diminish.

Furthermore, research demonstrates connections among discrimination, stigma, and treatment-seeking among racial/ethnic minorities (Burgess, Ding, Hargreaves, van Ryn, & Phelan, 2008; Copeland & Butler, 2007; Thompson, Noel, Campbell, & Jeffrey, 2004). Institutional discrimination outside of health care influences decisions about engaging with mental health care systems (Burgess et al., 2008). In addition, discrimination-related stress associated with less satisfaction with mental health services (Thompson et al., 2004).

Researchers define stigma as affixing someone with a label associated with a stereotype that engenders discrimination and social exclusion (Link & Phelan, 2001). Most cultures of the world stigmatize mental illness (Thornicroft, 2008). Researchers have posited that stigma contributes to the high rates of unmet mental health needs (Corrigan, 2004; Thompson et al., 2004; Thornicroft, 2008). Racial/ethnic minorities will more likely opt to delay or fail to make initial treatment contact (Thornicroft, 2008;

Wang et al., 2005). One reason for this may be that individuals do not want to be affixed with a stigmatizing label in addition to that already associated with their racial/ethnic group (Corrigan, 2004; Thompson et al., 2004; Thornicroft, 2008). Findings from Thompson et al. (2004) suggest that for those with a previously stigmatized identity, the addition of the label “mentally ill” can exacerbate psychological distress (Thompson et al., 2004).

Mismatch in race/ethnicity, worldview, or therapeutic focus, discrimination and stigma, and unconscious bias represent factors that can discourage students of color from seeking professional treatment. The findings summarized above speak to the importance of addressing these issues at institutional (e.g., cultural competency training, increasing clinician diversity), therapeutic (e.g., by expanding and adapting therapeutic worldviews), and interpersonal (i.e., by addressing cultural background early on in therapy, maintaining awareness of bias) levels. Experiences both inside and outside of therapy have a significant impact on patients’ perceptions of treatment and their likelihood of remaining in treatment. Addressing the factors described above could enhance both the effectiveness and attractiveness of counseling for students of color.

Cultural Identity

Fostering positive identity development, particularly of marginalized or stigmatized racial/ethnic identities, can have a positive impact on coping and mental health. A strong ethnic identity provides positive outcomes among college students, including increased self-worth and self-esteem (Gummadam et al., 2015), subjective and psychological well-being (Brittian, Umaña-Taylor, & Lee, 2013; Nguyen, Wong, Juang, & Park, 2015; Schmidt, Piontkowski, Raque-Bogdan, & Ziemer, 2014; Sheldon, Oliver, & Balaghi, 2015), less alcohol-related harm (Skewes & Blume, 2015), less depression (Brittian et al., 2015; Lantrip et al., 2015), and lower eating and weight concerns (Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2014). In a multi-ethnic sample of college students, Gummadam et al. (2015) found that a strong ethnic identity protected self-worth even in the absence of a strong sense of school belonging (Gummadam et al., 2015). Another study found that as racism-related stress increased, African American college students with a stronger ethnic identity had stronger career aspirations and achievement orientation than those with a weaker ethnic identity (Tovar-Murray, Jenifer, & Andrusyk, 2012).

Some studies have found a negative impact of certain types of racial identity development on psychosocial outcomes. One study found a positive association between depression and immersion and dissonance stages of racial identity development (Sanchez & Awad, 2016). The immersion stage means an individual fully accepts minority-held views and totally rejects dominant cultural views. The dissonance stage includes a racial/ethnic minority individual whose attitude toward his or her racial/ethnic group is dominated by internalized racism, then she or he encounters an individual who is proud of their race/ethnicity.

These findings suggest that ethnic identity affects a range of mental health and behavioral outcomes, and may buffer the impact of negative life experiences. Universities should seek to effectively harness the benefits of ethnic identity development on the success of students of color. With proper training, faculty and university counseling staff would be better positioned to help students of color benefit from a strong positive sense of racial/ethnic identity. However, counseling staff needs a nuanced understanding of the link between racial/ethnic identity and psychosocial health during the college years, and how best to support students in the development of a healthy racial/ethnic identity.

WHAT CAN UNIVERSITIES DO?

Dumas-Hines, Cochran, and Williams (2001) described effective University retention programs as composed of “counseling, tutoring, academic support, career planning and placement services, as well as work to improve the social and racial climate on campus and the cultural competency skills of academic advisors and faculty members” (Dumas-Hines et al., 2001). Indeed, universities have implemented a wide range of programs aimed at helping students persist, graduate, and achieve occupational success. But graduation rates remain too low across the board, especially for students of color, for whom as few as one-fifth graduate (Aud et al., 2010). In this chapter, we posited that a lack of attention to the unique barriers to psychosocial adjustment experienced by many students of color creates a significant roadblock to improving graduation rates among racial/ethnic minority students. Improving the social and racial climate of universities and the cultural competency skills of faculty and staff represent essential components in addressing the specific needs of college students of color; they require greater consideration in university retention efforts.

In their comprehensive examination of *the surround* and its impact on racial health disparities, Geronimus et al. (2016) introduced the concept of *Jedi Public Health* (JPH). Researchers designed this initiative to improve *the surround* by identifying and eliminating cues known to trigger social identity threat. Replacing negative cues with “identity safe” cues can signal to students that others value their social identity (Geronimus et al., 2016). JPH also involves efforts to reduce stereotype threat, especially in integrated settings, which may improve student performance, well-being, and sense of belonging. Studies have shown that interventions ranging from simple alterations like putting demographics questions at the end of tests, to deeper structural changes such as fostering a growth model of learning (i.e., practice develops ability, learning, and effort, and has malleability) rather than one of fixed ability, can reduce stereotype threat in educational settings (Geronimus et al., 2016). In addition, JPH stresses the importance of significantly reducing Euro-American cultural oppression in policies and interventions and creating a healthier balance with the cultural values of historically marginalized groups. For example, instead of attempting to change students from marginalized groups so that they fit into the dominant Euro-American cultural paradigm, universities should work to change *the surround* so that it better serves the increasingly diverse student bodies of the twenty-first century.

Universities need not try to create a “color-blind” environment; rather they should find ways to acknowledge and embrace the rich cultural backgrounds of all students, not just the historically privileged. By doing so, different social identities will not play unequal roles in students’ performances or in their responses to the environment. Needless to say, universities must remain adamant in including students, faculty, and staff in these efforts to improve *the surround*, with social scientists, university counseling staff, and the Diversity Office playing key roles.

The above institutional level interventions should also focus on the following: educating racial majority and minority students (perhaps separately) about issues of privilege, oppression, discrimination, and inclusiveness; the training of faculty to effectively lead racially charged discussions, as well as to recognize microaggressions in the classroom; developing interventions like intergroup dialogues (Dovidio et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2009); and training effective cultural competence of faculty and counseling staff (Kirmayer, 2012; Sue et al., 1992).

Fostering a deep understanding of the meaning of diversity and inclusion will cultivate a higher level of awareness and respect among members of the entire campus population. This initiative might take different forms,

including pre-academic year orientation workshops, regular seminars, or semester- or year-long courses. Topics may be presented in same-race/ethnicity or mixed-race/ethnicity groups, depending on the topic, preference of attendees, and empirical research on the relative effectiveness of one versus the other.

In addition to empowering students with marginalized social identities, universities should continue efforts to increase faculty and student diversity, as well as diversity among the counseling staff. Universities can increase the diversity of their faculty, staff, and students in a number of ways, including by expanding networks for recruitment of faculty and future faculty (i.e., graduate and professional students) to include HBCUs, Hispanic Serving Institutions, other minority-serving institutions, and minority student scholarship programs; hiring an administrator tasked with increasing diversity of students and faculty; designating “diversity advocates” for every faculty search and student recruitment committee; training members of search committees in how to be more innovative in appealing to racially and ethnically diverse applicants during recruitment and interviewing; and expanding the concept of what represents outstanding experience and potential (Jensen, 2011; June, 2010; Patel, 2015). Such steps, among others, have enabled universities to increase faculty diversity. For example, at Skidmore College, the inclusion of a “diversity advocate” on search committees, faculty training, expanding the meaning of “teaching excellence”, and accountability to the dean led to an 11% increase in faculty of color between 2011 and 2015 (Patel, 2015). Universities must take concrete and meaningful steps toward increasing diversity on their campuses, even in the face of increased competition for the most outstanding students and faculty.

As previously noted, effective counseling services constitute an essential component to fostering a healthy and successful student body. In addition to increasing the diversity and cultural competence of counseling staff, counseling services should be expanded to include broader options for counseling and support. Supportive peer groups for students from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds can serve as a space for emotional support and growth (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Museus, 2008). Offering informal and flexible “drop-in” counseling hours represents another way in which counseling can be expanded. This allows students to seek professional support when they feel a need, rather than being required to set up an appointment days or weeks in advance, which might serve as a barrier in some cases. This option should be widely advertised as well as accessible in terms of locations and hours (Brinson & Kottler, 1995).

Students must be aware of resources and be comfortable accessing them. Counseling staff must reach out early in this regard (Brinson & Kottler, 1995). Proactive contact of counseling staff with students has been shown to increase graduation rates and engagement with counseling services (Brinson & Kottler, 1995). Outreach across the campus community, not just within the counseling center, can normalize counseling and foster a reputation of accessibility and approachability. For example, counseling services can expand their reach by conducting presentations in classrooms, for student groups, or in other settings on topics relevant to students of color in particular (ideas for which could be collected from surveys of the student body), as well as topics like mental health, and effectively coping with stress, race-related or otherwise. Engage students early on by providing them with a faculty advisor tasked with helping them to navigate the college experience; and as necessary, take advantage of counseling services along with other personal growth campus resources (Brinson & Kottler, 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite improvements in the representation of historically marginalized racial/ethnic groups on college campuses, significant racial/ethnic gaps in college retention remain. We posited that insufficient attention by many universities to the unique psychosocial challenges facing students of color creates an important, but overlooked barrier to retaining racial/ethnic minority students. Negative social identity cues in the campus environment, discrimination and prejudice, lack of a sense of school belonging, and inadequately staffed counseling services serve as major impediments to psychosocial adjustment facing students of color. These impediments require increased attention.

In light of recent uprisings on college campuses, ranging from flagship state universities like the University of Missouri to prestigious private institutions like Yale, universities have a stake in creating campus environments that embrace and empower the multiple social identities of students. Doing so will increase students' sense of school belonging, academic engagement, persistence, school loyalty, and post-graduate success. It will also foster good physical and mental health for all students. Finally, creating an inclusive campus and maximizing positive student outcomes will enhance a university's ability to recruit the best and brightest students. In an increasingly diverse America, universities should seize this opportunity.

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