

Racial Microaggressions

@ University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign



Stacy Anne Harwood | Shinwoo Choi | Moises Orozco | Margaret Browne Hunt | Ruby Mendenhall

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Executive Summary



This report presents research findings about racial microaggressions that occur in learning environments at the University of Illinois Urbana campus. The research team invited all domestic students of color attending the university during the 2011- 2012 academic year to participate in the survey. Over 4,800 students of color completed the online survey, yielding a 45% response rate.

Thirty-nine percent (39%) of the students of color who responded to the survey reported feeling uncomfortable on campus because of their race. The most frequently cited uncomfortable locations for students of color were “fraternity and sorority certified housing,” “Green Street,” “on the bus” and “classrooms and labs.”

Over half of participants (51 percent) reported experiences of stereotyping in the classroom. About a third (27 percent) of the students of color reported feeling that their contributions in different learning contexts were minimized and that they were made to feel inferior because of the way they spoke. Additionally, a quarter (25 percent) of students of color reported feeling that they were not taken seriously in class because of their race. This report provides quantitative data and uses quotes from students of color to describe racial microaggressions in the classroom and how students respond to them.

This report ends with a list of recommendations for campus leadership. The presence of racial microaggressions negatively affects campus climate, especially for students of color. The campus leadership must intentionally work to improve the racial and cultural climate of the university.

Introduction

Campus diversity can enrich higher education by developing critical thinking, increasing intellectual engagement, broadening cultural awareness, expanding democratic sensibilities, and practicing perspective taking; (Chang, 2002; Engberg & Mayhew, 2007; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, 2005; Lopez, 2004). At the same time, however, the racial minority students who contribute to diversity often perceive their campus climate as unwelcoming and unsupportive (González, 2002; Villalpando, 2003).

Previous research has found that racial discrimination occurs in various university contexts. Many students of color have provided accounts of being harassed and mistreated by their classmates, as well as by faculty and university staff (Booker, 2007; D'augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Jay & D'augelli, 1991). A study by Milkman, Akinola, & Chugh (2014) demonstrated the prevalence of racial bias among professors. For example, their findings showed that White male students were favored as advisees, while racial minority and female students had a more difficult time finding professors to advise them. According to Harwood, Browne Hunt, Mendenhall, and Lewis (2012), students of color living in the residence halls endured both explicit racial slurs and subtle racial jokes.

The discrimination experienced by people of color has harmful psychological and physiological effects such as fear, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, isolation, stress and exhaustion (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). As Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011) assert, chronic exposure to discrimination causes racial battle fatigue and undermines psychological and physiological well-being. In addition, students have reported physical symptoms such as, headaches, high blood pressure, and fatigue.

In higher education, as racial minority students perceive more negative racial campus climates, rates of academic persistence and retention fall (Chang, 1999; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008). Conversely, a positive

racial environment contributes to a strong sense of belonging and is associated with higher grades and graduation rates for students of color (Booker, 2007; Brown, 2000; Goodenow 1993; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Strayhorn, 2008).

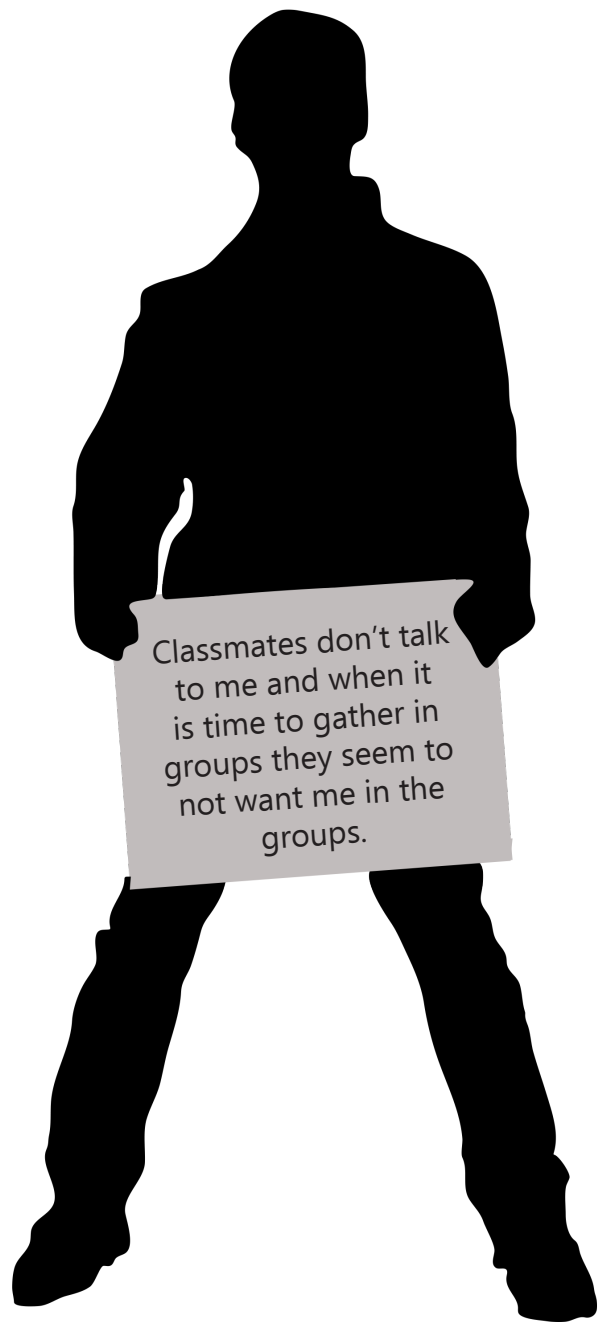
Explicit racism exists on many college campuses. This project, however, exposes the arguably more prevalent, though less apparent, everyday racist practices called racial microaggressions. The term "racial microaggression" was coined by Chester Pierce (1978) after the Civil Rights era to bring attention to the shift in racial relations and less-recognized racist behaviors that are "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges, which are 'put downs' of Blacks by offenders." More recently, Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues (2007) refined the definition to "commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults" (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder & Nadal, 2007, p. 278). For over a decade, scholars have examined these contemporary forms of racism targeting different racial and ethnic groups in all aspects of United States society (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996; McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988; Smith, 1995; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Thompson & Neville, 1999). Increasingly, researchers have emphasized the subtle, everyday and micro forms of racism endured by students of color, to explain some of the educational differentials between students of color and Whites.

Sue et al. (2007) identified a variety of racial microaggressions: microinsults, microinvalidations and microassaults. Sue et al. (2007) defined microinsults as "behaviors/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a persons' racial heritage or identity" (p. 278). For example, an academic advisor's obvious surprise that an Asian student is struggling in a math class is a microinsult because it assumes that mental abilities are an attribute of race. A store employee asks only Latinos to check their bags when entering assumes

criminality based on race. Assuming that an African American student was admitted to a predominantly or traditionally White institution simply because of Affirmative Action rather than merit is another example of a racial microinsult. Perpetrators of such microaggressions may be unaware of their actions, since they are often prompted by unconscious assumptions about race.

Seemingly innocuous questions such as “Where are you from?” and “Where were you born?” are sometimes offensive because they assume that a person of color is foreign-born or not a United States citizen even when they are not. Color-blind remarks, such as “When I look at you, I don’t see color” are demeaning refusals to acknowledge a person’s race. According to Sue et al. (2007) these statements are examples of microinvalidations, which are “verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feeling or experiential reality of a person of color” (p. 278). More broadly, the denial that racism or White privilege exists (or the insistence that a perceived racial microaggression is nonexistent) invalidates an actual experience of a person of color. Like microinsults, racial microinvalidations may also be unconscious.

In a more overt category, using the N-word and other explicit racial epithets, as well as actions of purposeful discrimination are racial microassaults. Sue et al. (2007) state “microassaults are explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions” (p. 278). Unlike the “old fashioned” racism, that was public yet unchallenged, microassaults often occur anonymously or in a more private setting. An example of this is demonstrated when non-Asian students begin to speak in a pretend Asian language and laugh as an Asian student walks by.



Research Methodology

Our interdisciplinary research team developed a web-based survey instrument to better understand the extent of racial microaggressions on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus. The survey included questions about the 1) racial experiences of students of color, 2) situations in which a student of color felt uncomfortable, insulted or invalidated because of his or her race, and 3) how students coped with racial microaggressions and feelings of marginalization. The research team invited all students of color attending the University during the 2011-2012 academic year to participate in the Racial Microaggressions Web Survey. Over 4,800 students of color from a total of over 10,800 completed the online survey yielding a 45% response. The response rate was high for an online survey.¹

The team developed a Racial Microaggression Scale based on the types of racial microaggressions that students reported in focus groups in 2008 and 2009. The team also reviewed the research literature on racial microaggressions, perceived racism, and race-related stress and adapted some items from the Schedule of Racist Events, the Index of Race-related Stress, and the Racial Life Experiences Scale (Sue, 2010; Hurtado et al., 2008). While most of the survey questions were quantitative, the team included three qualitative questions asking student to describe situations: 1) when they felt uncomfortable, insulted, invalidated or disrespected by a comment that had racial overtones, 2) when others subtly expressed stereotypical beliefs about race/ethnicity, and 3) when others have suggested that they do not belong at the Urbana campus because of their race or ethnicity.

The racial and ethnic background of the survey participants include: American Indian or Native American (less than 1 %)², Asian (35%), Biracial or Multiracial (27%), Black or African American (19%), Hispanic or Latino (19%). Fifty-three percent (53%) of the sample was female. Undergraduate students made up 68% of the sample. A majority of the participants were from Humanities and Social Sciences majors (63%). Most (86%) of the participants had graduated from public high schools before enrolling at the university.



¹ Since online surveys generally have lower response rates than paper surveys (an average response rate of 11% according to Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Haas & Vehovr, 2008), our rate was unusually high. We attribute the high response rate to holding the online survey open much longer than the average time period so that more students of color could participate (Ilieva, Baron & Healey, 2002). Issue salience also is an important factor in a high response rate (Sheehan, 2006; Sheehan and McMillan, 1999).

² Only 7 students identified themselves as only Native American or American Indian, and approximately 35 more identified themselves as Biracial or Multiracial.

Overview: Racial Climate in the Learning Environment

Although the online survey covered many aspects of university life, this report focuses on the learning environment at the Urbana campus, given that education is part of its central mission. Following is a quantitative summary of what was discovered. The summary is then followed by students of color describing their experiences with racial microaggressions in their own voices.

Thirty-nine percent (39%) of the students of color who responded to the survey reported feeling uncomfortable on campus because of their race.

The survey asked students to identify the relevant locations, and many did. The most frequently cited uncomfortable locations for students of color were “fraternity and sorority certified housing” and “Green Street.” The next most frequently named uncomfortable locations were “on the bus” followed by “classrooms and labs.” Other locations that created discomfort included “Residence Halls” and “Academic Departments.” Table 1 ranks the 15 uncomfortable

locations students cited most frequently and the number of responses for each location.

Students reported avoiding walking by fraternity houses or spending time on Green Street. However, they also remarked that unlike other campus destinations, the learning environment cannot be avoided. In order to learn the material and get good grades, they must attend lectures or meet with other students for group projects.

The survey also asked students to indicate whether or not they had experienced specific racial microaggressions in their classrooms (summarized in Table 2). Over half of participants (51 percent) reported experiences of stereotyping in the classroom. Examples include stereotyping assumptions about intelligence, criminality, country of origin, citizenship status, preferential admittance, ability to speak English, economic background, work ethic, body type and hair style, likes and dislikes, and sexual promiscuity.

Table 1
Campus Locations where Students of Color Report Feeling Uncomfortable Because of their Race

Rank	Locations	#Responses
1	Fraternity/Sorority Certified Housing	731
2	Green Street	402
3	On the Bus/Transportation	344
4	Classrooms and Labs	324
5	Residence Halls	299
6	Academic Departments	299
7	Libraries	228
8	The Quads (Engineering, South, Main)	211
9	The Illini Union	204
10	Financial Aid Office	181
11	Memorial Stadium	161
12	Admissions office	152
13	Instructor’s office	151
14	Assembly hall	138
15	McKinley Health Center	135

Table 2
Racial Microaggressions in the Classroom

	% Yes
I have had stereotypes made about me in the classroom because of my race.	51
I have had my contributions minimized in the classroom because of my race.	27
I have been made to feel the way I speak is inferior in the classroom because of my race.	27
I have experienced not being taken seriously in my classes because of my race.	25

About a third (27 percent) of the students of color reported feeling that their contributions in the classroom were minimized and made to feel inferior about the way they spoke. Additionally, a quarter of the survey respondents reported feeling that they were not taken seriously in class because of their race.

Analysis of the responses to those questions by race, gender, and major revealed important differences and similarities. For all the questions, Black students reported the highest percentages of racial microaggressions among the racial and ethnic groups. Men of color reported experiencing slightly more racial microaggressions in the classroom than women of color. STEM and non-STEM majors reported experiences of stereotyping in the classroom to an equal degree.

The qualitative survey data paints a more detailed picture of the various situations where racial microaggressions occur. The survey asked participants three open-ended questions: 1) describe when you felt uncomfortable, insulted, invalidated or disrespected by a comment that had racial overtones, 2) describe when others subtly expressed stereotypical beliefs about your race/ethnicity, and 3) describe when people suggested that you do not belong at the University of Illinois because of your race/ethnicity. Students welcomed the opportunity to discuss these challenges and their experiences with racial microaggressions. We received over 2,500 examples for each question (over 8,000 in total).

Reading through the students' responses to the questions revealed over 800 examples of racial

microaggressions occurring in the learning environment. The following are some of the most commonly described:

- Being the only student of color in the classroom
- Hearing stereotypes in the content of lecture and other course materials
- Being dismissed or ignored by the instructor before or after class
- Hearing inappropriate comments made by instructors before or after class
- Listening to the perpetuation of unaddressed stereotypes during classroom discussion
- Being called on in the classroom to offer the “student of color perspective”
- Receiving hostile reactions to participation in the classroom discussion
- Being excluded from participating in a group project
- Experiencing racial jokes and teasing in the labs
- Being discouraged during meetings with one’s academic advisor
- Overhearing racist conversations between students in the classroom

The quantitative and qualitative responses of the students of color suggest that racial microaggressions are not isolated incidents. They appear to be deeply and systematically engrained in the campus culture. The next section of this report reveals students of color perceived racial microaggressions experiences and their emotional and educational impact.

Students of Color Tell Their Stories

Sitting Unwelcome in the Classroom

Students of color reported feeling uncomfortable and unwelcomed just walking into or sitting in the classroom, especially if they were the only person of color, or one of a few.

People do not necessarily say I do not belong, but I feel as if I do not when I am in a classroom and I am the one non-White person. (Latina, Female)

I get stares when I walk into classrooms as if to say, 'What the hell are you doing here?' Classmates don't talk to me and when it is time to gather in groups they seem to not want me in the groups. (African American, Female)

Additionally, students of color noted that White students avoid sitting next to them in the classroom. Male students of color experienced this more than females.

I've been in classes where people avoided sitting around me. That happened when there were a lot of assaults on campus. Students would fill the other seats in the classroom, while the ones next to me or around me would remain empty. It happened to me so many times. (African American, Male)

African American male students commented that campus alert emails and text messages with descriptions of assault suspects perpetuate a stereotype about Black men as criminals. Some believe that is why students, particularly White students have frequently avoided sitting beside them in the classroom.

Racist Conversations, Direct or Overheard

Many of the students of color reported overhearing racist comments between classmates before and after class. As reported in the qualitative survey responses, in these informal spaces students have overheard comments about Middle Eastern students and

terrorism, the citizenship status of Latino/a students, Asians students not being able to speak English, and a long list of other negative stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups.

I was [in] my freshman year sitting next to a group of Caucasian males when I overheard them say something along the lines of, 'This school continues to get more and more Mexican.' This was a bit offensive to me, considering that they said it not too long after I sat down. (Latino, Male)

In the classroom setting, someone behind me was discussing how [he or she] did not feel that African Americans deserve to be here, and that we only got in because the school has to let 'them' in. (African American, Female)

Although the students of color shared experiences of overtly offensive comments, since the comments were made in informal conversations they usually did not respond to them.

In a large lecture hall, I was going for a seat and overheard a group of students commenting that I should be cleaning the classroom after, not during, referring to the stereotype that Hispanics are janitors. I was shocked by the comment because I would have thought that this wouldn't happen on a diverse campus. I just ignored it and continued listening to the lecture. (Latino, Male)

I was in class and a Black person was speaking. I overheard someone else's conversation in which a comment was made that 'you know they don't know how to talk.' (Black, Male)

They often think that it's a joke, or funny, or not a big deal. I've been approached and asked in a very condescending tone 'DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?' I've been told to go back to running a Laundromat (Asian stereotype). This happens all the time, in and out of the classroom, any time of day. It makes me angry. It's very disrespectful. Most of the time, I just tried to ignore it and shrug it off. (Asian, Male)

Such conversations take place all over campus, not just in the classroom, for example in the student union, the residence halls, and in the library.

I was sitting in the library and I overheard other White students discussing admissions and laughing about how the only reason stupid Mexicans could get into this school was due to Affirmative Action. As a student of color, I found it extremely offensive to invalidate the hard work and intelligence of students because of their race. It also made me sad that this view seemed to have been readily accepted by all of the other people in the group, implying that racism is entrenched in many of the students that attend this school. (Multiracial, Female)

The range of settings where students of color are exposed to these comments shed light on the extent to which racism is a problem on the Urbana campus.

Offensive Lecture Content

Students of color provided many examples of racial microaggressions in lecture content, specifically instructors' inaccurate statements about a particular racial or ethnic group, outdated terminology, and other types of offensive comments. Commonly heard racial microaggressions are generalizations about an entire racial or ethnic group during a lecture.

A professor announced in class that Native Americans practiced cannibalism. He learned this from a documentary the night before, but wasn't able to name the tribe. It may be true, but there are hundreds of tribal traditions in what is now the US, with different languages. It is a real flattening of complexity to make such a statement. (Multiracial, Male)

A Caucasian professor was talking about how to encourage children to accomplish goals. At some point he said, 'Imagine a Latino boy who wants to work at Burger King to contribute to his family. How would you encourage him?' But before this example, he mentioned encouraging a White kid [to go to] college... It made me feel offended. But it wasn't the first time he did this and he did it with all minorities. (Latino, Male)

Students provided many more examples about how instructors have depicted racial or ethnic groups in stereotypical or inaccurate ways in their lectures. One

student described his effort to address such an issue. *A professor displayed a map of the Mediterranean. While the map showed demarcations of various nation states in Eurasia, northern Africa was just labeled 'Africa'... When I expressed concern with the exclusion of Africa, the professor more or less just ignored my comments. (African American, Male)*

Even after the student had raised these concerns to the instructor, the lecture content remained unchanged. The professor's refusal to change the lecture content invalidated the student's concern, creating another racial microaggression.

The use of the "N-word" came up a number of times in the survey's qualitative responses. In the following example, African American students felt offended by the use of the word, but the instructor continued to use it even after students met with the instructor privately. One of the students enrolled in the class described her experience.

I experienced a professor using the N-word to help elaborate a point he was trying to make for the benefit of international students who might not be familiar with the word. Throughout this class, he made and allowed others in the class to make several racist and sexist remarks based entirely off of stereotypes. It got so bad that several students met with the professor to speak directly to him about the use of his offensive language and he continued the use of this offensive language during the meeting. As the only Black student in the entire program, it then became my responsibility to educate him on how the use of this word is so offensive and simply demonstrated that he had no idea how to acknowledge inappropriate language as he continued to use it himself.

The student continued to explain how the professor's failure to personally acknowledge his mistake in front of the class, further invalidated the students' concerns raised during the meeting.

He said that he would later address the racist and sexist issues in class, but then he addressed all the issues except the fact that he had inappropriately used the N-word on several occasions and it was wrong and he will never use it again. This entire experience made me feel marginalized, hurt, upset, and [I] wonder how in the world a professor in the field that I am in is allowed to

continue up the ranks when he inherently holds so many racist and sexist beliefs. Overall, this experience truly made me re-evaluate how far this university states they have come related to race relations and the reality that at the implicit level, things are much the same. (African American, Female)

Students of color reported that instructors would offer jokes to engage other students in the classroom lecture, but often the jokes were inappropriate and insensitive. These classroom dynamics often targeted students of color and created a hostile learning environment, representing an ineffective pedagogy.

I didn't understand one of the concepts [the instructor] was talking about and asked him to slow down. He made fun of me and said, 'Hey everyone, I guess I have to slow down for the Chinese girl.' The entire class did not react very well with it; no one thought it was funny. (Asian, Female)

That example describes an instructor attempting to amuse the class with an ironic joke about Asian students being academically superior. Asian students also frequently mentioned being complimented on their good English and assumptions that they had not grown up in the United States.

Students of color also shared incidents that occurred before or after lectures during casual conversations between instructors and other students. Students of color provided examples of inappropriate offensive remarks made in these informal conversations, as well as racialized jokes that emerged there.

A professor made a disparaging remark about the relatively high number of Asian Americans in a specific class. It happened after normal class hours in the hallways. I did nothing about it. (Multiracial, Male)

I was in a class and mentioned that I had visited South Asia a few months back. After I mentioned that, the professor immediately asked me if I had ever ridden an elephant only because I was from South Asia. I was not necessarily insulted, but I did feel it was a really stereotypical question to ask and she asked me in front of the entire class. I thought it was rude. (Asian, Female)

Here, a seemingly casual conversation between the instructor and a student has a negative effect through

a comment based on a stereotype. Other students shared similar experiences.

The way instructors talk to students and the content of their lectures signal to the class the appropriate ways of talking about race. When supposedly informed academics perpetuate stereotypes, many students internalize them as “the truth.” These events often marginalize students of color and make it difficult to approach instructors for assistance with class content and other resources, limiting their ability to develop human capital while attending the state’s flagship university.

Classroom Participation: Ignored, Invalidated or Expected to Perform

Students of color struggle to be taken seriously in the classroom. They want to be treated as intellectual equals, but find that their contributions are welcomed only within conversations that overly relate to racial and ethnic perspectives. An African American student told us that he felt that the instructor never called on him to speak, even when he raised his hand.

When I raise my hand, I am often not called upon. After a while, I found myself refraining from asking questions. (African American, Male)

Similarly, contributions by students of color are treated dismissively in the classroom as invalidated by their backgrounds.

My Native perspectives are often not granted validity or even a chance for discussion because they assume my ideas stem from my heritage and not scientific insights... when the value of life or the environment is discussed my Native beliefs are often viewed as primitive. (Native American, Male)

Students of color wrote about how some peers sitting nearby, often White students, made faces or stared in disbelief when they spoke in class.

Anytime I would speak or contribute to discussion, this White guy would glare at me and roll his eyes, as though I didn't have the right to add my comment.

Being the only mixed student in class, and being the only one he openly showed contempt towards made

me feel as though it had to have been because of my ethnicity. (Multiracial, Male)

I have noticed that being a man of my race and stature, many of my White peers in classrooms will have expressions or comments of disbelief towards me when I make an intellectual remark or if I get a concept that they may be struggling with. (African American, Male)

The looks and comments made by White students suggest that they do not expect African Americans to be able to contribute anything of value in the classroom. Such intimidating behaviors signal to other students that the contributions of students of color are not to be taken seriously.

At the same time, students of color mentioned that they are often called on to speak for or “perform” their race. For example, when the instructor asks an African American student to “give the Black perspective.” Moreover, if students do not fit the racial or ethnic stereotype, their “authenticity” is questioned.

I have been in a classroom when students, even teachers, look at me to find out the ‘Latino perspective.’ It’s interesting to see how one labels a Latino: dark hair, brown skin, dark eyes. (Latina, Female)

Since I do not have dark skin, people often assume that I am not a real Native American and that I am not a ‘real minority.’ It is hurtful and makes me feel disenfranchised from both the racial minority community, as well as the White community. (Multiracial, Male)

In one of my lecture classes, we were talking about something related to the Latino community. The TA called on me to explain what Latinos think of the issue since I am Latina, as if I am the voice of all Latinos. (Latina, Female)

Both classmates and instructors either directly ask students of color to “Give the [racial or ethnic group] perspective,” or they stare, consciously or unconsciously, at students of color to put pressure on them to speak to provide a particular perspective. This could also be seen in classroom discussions.

Stereotypes in Class Discussions

Students of color identified many racial microaggressions that had occurred during class discussions. Some are similar to the incidents described in the section on lecture, such as the use of offensive stereotypes. In addition, students of color reported experiencing racial microaggressions in discussion topics about Affirmative Action, immigration policy, poverty, and the University’s former sports mascot as personally offensive and not well facilitated by instructors. The following examples describe such instances.

While in class, we were talking about ethnic groups who have cultivated in Chicago. A fellow student said, ‘Native Americans are unworthy of their distinction in Chicago.’ (Native American, Female)

The discussion was about terrorism and I was insulted because many people associate all people of my race as terrorists. The actions of a few have caused problems for all members of my race. (Multiracial, Male)

One White female student in the discussion inferred that certain stereotypes are true. She gave an example of how some Latina students in her high school were pregnant and seemed to infer that all Latina women get pregnant at an early age. Although I was aware that this was an open discussion and students were encouraged to not be politically correct and express how they feel, I felt as if it was a wrong assumption to make. I then challenged the student’s view and asked her if she thought that all Latina women get pregnant at an early age. She responded, ‘No, not all of them, but the majority of them, yea.’ (Latino, Male)

In some cases, when students of color corrected or challenged a comment made in the classroom, their challenges prompted another racial microaggression. Classmates responded by telling students of color that they are “overreacting,” “defensive,” or “angry.” These comments further invalidated the students of color in front of the entire classroom.

I have also witnessed and felt that when a minority student tries to correct the comment (whether made by the instructor or by other students) they are then viewed as angry or defensive when in reality they are simply trying to inform others of what is true and appropriate

when approaching certain topics. Situations like this happen every semester. (African American, Female)

Some students understandably had a hard time naming and speaking out about the stereotypes being thrown around in the classroom. They sat uncomfortably in silence, reflecting their marginalization on campus.

Instructors are responsible for creating an environment where all students feel comfortable speaking candidly, but open discussions often privilege perspectives that leave students of color feeling marginalized and unheard. Similarly, when discussing the mascot in the classroom, students of color were offended by the persistent defense of “the Chief.” In the following example, an African American student shared her experience of discussing the issue in her class.

When we discussed how the Chief was offensive, there were students wearing Chief shirts. During the discussion, there were people who were defending the use of the Chief as a mascot. I was just surprised that after having people explain why they were offended by the mascot that students would still try to condone it. It pissed me off. I did nothing because I realized I went to a racist school. (African American, Female)

Students described many examples when the instructor was unable to constructively facilitate classroom discussion around sensitive topics related to race. They wanted to see more critical thought encouraged in classroom discussions, and particularly explanation of underlying structural factors in inequalities, rather than faculty tolerating blame-the-victim perspectives and negative stereotypes.

In a class discussion about race, White students truly believed and explicitly expressed their beliefs that minorities are somehow innately unwilling to work to become successful, without critical thought of the history of race relations in our country or how society has failed many minorities in countless ways. Minorities’ response to being pushed to the margins of society are evaluated in ethnocentric ways that blame the individual rather than address the system in which she tries to function. (African American, Female)

In on-line discussion forums, similar patterns of racial microaggressions took place.

In several online classes—negative comments were made in regards to my race or culture by the dominant students within the classroom/online setting. (Asian, Male)

In an online class, classmates spent a lot of time trying to convince me that ‘the N-word’ was once an OK word to use and not an insult. This was in spring of 2010. I tried to explain that it was always insulting and that African Americans had no power to express their anger. It was very frustrating that they could not hear my point of view and really wanted me to be OK with this. The instructor did not get involved in the conversation. (African American, Female)

What stood out about these classroom comments was the instructor’s passivity in such charged conversations. Worse, many students of color were surprised to see faculty complacent or even laughing about hurtful stereotypes. The examples above show a desire for the authority figure in the class to provide responsible and non-biased facilitation, and the desperately needed factual guidance on sensitive subjects. These dynamics reflect the core of critical thinking skills that students should learn in higher education.

Stereotypes in Small Group Discussions

Small group discussion is intended to foster interactions and engagement with the course content. Of course, though, many of the painful interactions described in the classroom discussions occur in the small groups as well. In the following example, a White student assumes that students of color do not get scholarships based on merit, as well as assuming that students of color will flunk out of college and waste the scholarship money.

It was me and three White males in a group. We were working and the issue of the price of tuition came up. Then one of the students expressed that he could not get any scholarship money because he was a White male and that all the money was going the Black and Latino students. Then [he] expressed how this was ridiculous because he was smarter and that scholarships should be based on merit not skin color. Also, it was a waste

of resources because a majority of these students would end up flunking out of school. The other three students agreed and continued with the discussion. (Latina, Female)

Other types of racial microaggressions that alienate or silence students of color in small group discussions include dismissing comments, not acknowledging contributions, or not asking for opinions.

I felt really uncomfortable to even speak, as I was the only Asian kid in that group. The only conversation I had with the group members is regarding the work. I was 'invisible' to them when they were talking to each other. (Asian, Male)

While instructors often think of small group discussion as a way to expand opportunities for participation in the classroom, the group dynamics can silence students of color and reinforce pervasive racial stereotypes.

Exclusion and Harassment in Group Projects

Egregious racial microaggressions occurred when students were asked to form a team for a group project. Though not usually explicit, racial exclusion appears to shape group formation. African American and Latino/a students found it most problematic to be invited into a group or to find partners because of the perceived operation of negative racial stereotypes about intelligence and work ethic. Moreover, Asian students felt this occurred more often if the project involved much writing, because they were viewed as foreigners unable to speak or write well in English.

At my lab, I've had incidents where people doubt my intelligence or believe my education is not as good as theirs [because I] earned my bachelor's in Puerto Rico. They don't believe I can be intellectually at their same level. (Latino, Male)

...when it's time to separate into groups it seems the Black student is always the last person to find a group. It makes me feel invisible as if I don't, or shouldn't, exist here. (African American, Male)

Whenever we had to pick lab partners, I would always ask a person if they wanted to be my partner. Most of them would look at me and say no or that they

already have one and go look for someone else. (African American, Female)

Once groups formed, other types of racial microaggression occurred as the group members worked together. Many of those types have been identified previously--for example, racial jokes and stereotyped comments were common.

Freshmen year in lab, my two lab partners, one White and one Middle Eastern, kept telling terrible jokes about Chinese people, thinking that I was Chinese. When they finally asked, I told them I was half Japanese, so the jokes changed to ones about Japanese culture. I kept telling them they were being very racist and offensive and to stop saying those things around me, and they NEVER quit. I told them I was half White, to which the Caucasian one replied, 'White is a very good thing to be.' I didn't feel mad, just sick. The time this happened was second semester of my freshmen year. (Multiracial, Female)

Another area where racial microaggressions occur is in the way group work is divided. Students of color believed that race was taken as an indicator of intelligence, and so they were given easier tasks.

When working in groups with my classmates, I was always given the easy portion of the project because they assumed that I was not capable of doing the harder parts. (African American, Female)

Similarly, students of color perceived that their contributions were minimized and not taken seriously.

Sometimes in class when a teacher asks us to work in groups, I feel as though what I have to say often doesn't matter to the rest of the group members and that I am ignored overall. (Asian, Male)

Students of color also reported feeling that the group members were excluding them or discussing the project without them.

An in-class group-mate accidentally sent me an email about not trusting the assignment 'the Black girl' in the group had completed. (African American, Female)

These examples illustrate the challenges students of color face in addition to the work assigned for the

group to complete. They have to aggressively assert themselves to be heard, and they struggle to be treated as legitimate members of the group.

Racial Steering in Advising about Courses and Major Selection

Students of color felt that they were discouraged from enrolling in challenging classes or majors. While usually not made explicit, stereotypes about their race as less intelligent or less able to handle certain courses or majors were perceived in the advisors' behavior and counsel.

When I was a freshman, I went in to see my academic adviser to help schedule my classes for next semester. When I walked into her office her expression immediately changed. Throughout the meeting, she kept questioning me on whether I could stay in the major. It seemed like after she realized I was African American, in her mind, I wasn't able to successfully complete the major. I felt insulted and disrespected by that meeting and every other meeting I had with her. (African American, Female)

My freshman year adviser kept trying to convince me to drop my major and instead take on a different major [one of the ethnic studies majors] and a minor in [a language]. I voiced my anger to him and the department head and got a new adviser who was very supportive of me. (Asian, Male)

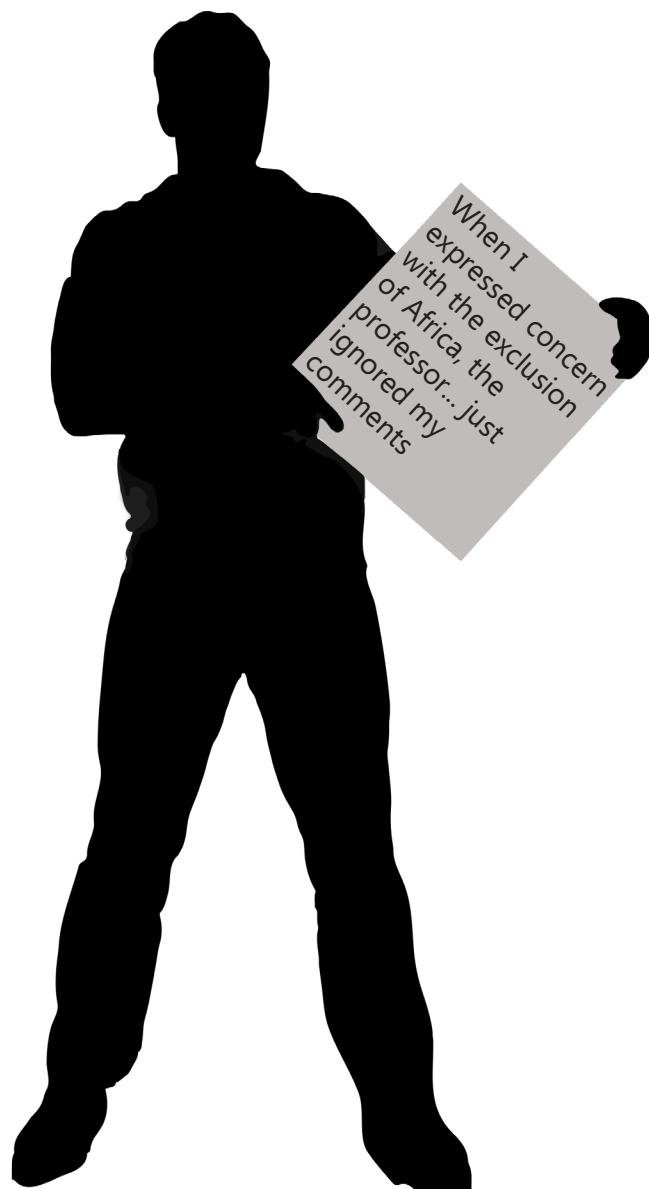
In the first semester of my freshman year, I had trouble adjusting and being successful. So, I went to the academic department to meet with an advisor to discuss possibly dropping a class or two because I was taking 17 or 18 hours and I was feeling overwhelmed. The professor told me I should change my major because the major was too hard for me. I was completely shocked.

He didn't try to help me out, he didn't make any suggestions to help me improve my situation or my study habits, he offered NO encouragement AT ALL! I felt like he was looking down on me because of my race and socioeconomic background. So, I just looked at him with a stale face, nodded, said thanks and left. (African American, Male)

An advisor suggested I change my major all together and made me feel as if I shouldn't have chosen the major

because she said it's just 'Not for some people.' (African American, Female)

The assumption about intelligence was not always as overtly expressed by the advisor as in the final example, but was implicit in urging the student to change majors rather than counseling about how to handle the work better. As a result of such implicit racial bias, students of color believed they were more often steered away from challenging courses or majors. Racial steering of students is a racial microaggression. Since many of the examples occurred during students' first year on campus, these racial microaggressions may provide insight into why certain majors have low numbers of students of color.



Students' Coping Strategies against Racial Microaggressions

While the focus of this report is on racial microaggressions in the learning environment, the research team also wanted to point out the ways that many of the students of color who participated in the survey described as how they cope with racism on campus. The coping strategies used depend on the situation and the contextual factors (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne Hunt, 2013).

Students responded to a quantitative question about coping with race-related incidents on campus and also provided qualitative information describing racial microaggressions. The survey respondents indicated a range of coping strategies that students used to deal with racial microaggressions. Table 3 displays the results.

The most common response was to assume that the person was ignorant and/or to ignore the incident.

I've felt uncomfortable in class when people were talking about how Hispanics have an easier time than Caucasians getting into college because universities need to fill their quota. It's a common conversation that comes up a few times a year. I usually didn't say much about it. (Latina, Female)

In some situations, students became desensitized as a way to escape the situation. At other times, they relied on their support network, and in some cases they chose to pick their battles. Students described examples of actively addressing the issue by confronting the person.

Once in class people were making fun of the Hispanic community, primarily Mexicans, and it was hurtful. Happened in a classroom and involved mostly White students. It made me feel angry. I told the professor and the TA via email and confronted several of the students involved. I'm not sure it made a difference. (Latino, Male)

Table 3
Coping Strategies: How Students Respond to Incidents Related to Race on Campus

	% Yes
Assumed that the person(s) were ignorant	83
Dismissed or ignored the incident	73
Decided to pick my battles (when to respond verbally)	42
Tried to dispel racial stereotypes	32
Blamed the media	33
Built a support network of friends/allies/supporters	33
Responded verbally to the person	33
Relied on my faith or religious beliefs	27
Got involved in campus activities	22
Took on leadership roles in student organizations	19
Used the cultural centers	13
Made use of campus resources	10
Thought about leaving the university	8
Cried about the incident	8
Responded physically to the person	4

I have had other classmates suggest that I am inadequately qualified for a class because I do not fit the requirement, i.e. I am only good at math and virtually nothing else. I confronted these comments and often pointed out that they would be marked as a racist if they do not cease all further insults. (Asian, Male)

Many students of color may not have responded directly to the perpetrator of the racial microaggression, but instead responded by doing well in the class, proving that they are intelligent and deserve to be on campus as much as anyone.

There are times when I feel like students do not want to work with me because they assume I am not as smart as they are because I am a Black girl. I usually prove them wrong. (African American, Female)

I express [my specialization interest] to other students in my program they look surprised and tell me 'It's hard.' I get offended because I don't think it's said to other students (Caucasians or Asians or males). But it makes me work harder to not quit or do bad in the class to prove everyone wrong and empower myself. (Multiracial, Female)

I have been told that as a Hispanic, I received special treatment by the university so as to diversify the school. I told these individuals that I did not work so vigorously in high school to be dismissed by ignorant comments in college. I have earned my spot here and maintained good grades to prove it. I was disappointed by this disregard but I was prompted to continue striving to do my best to prove myself. (Latina, Female)

The classroom is often not a safe space to discuss or process racial microaggressions because the instructor is not able to facilitate such conversations. However, supportive conversations are happening in safe spaces with friends, inside the cultural houses, and through social media. Based on the survey responses, these spaces gave students of color a sense of belonging and validated the mixed emotions they experienced as a person of color on the campus.

I felt undermined quite often at the beginning of my career at the U of I. Cultural houses made me feel welcomed and gave me a sense of belonging. (Asian, Male)

One of the girls at the table with me said the only thing she knew about Native Americans is that they live on reservations and drink. I didn't really know what to say, so I didn't say anything. I steered the conversation away from that by making a comment about something random. But it made me honestly really upset. I talked with people at Native American House later and they were obviously really supportive of my view that that was a very rude thing to say. I don't think she would have said it if she knew I was so involved at Native American House, or if she had any Native American friends. (Multiracial, Female)

Some students of color chose to remove themselves from situations where racial microaggressions were occurring. For example, some dropped a class after facing racial microaggressions.

In class, the professor demonstrated ignorance of the Muslim religion. One of his slides literally said: 'Summary: Muslim women = oppressed = no democracy.' This was outrageous to me because not only was it false, but also it was such a generalization. I asked a couple of people whether I should talk about it, but concluded that it was pointless. I ended up dropping his class. (Asian, Female)

About 8 percent of the students of color who participated in the survey reported that they have thought about leaving the university because of the racial microaggressions that they had experienced. Although there is no way to track those students to find out whether they have left the university, their consideration of leaving illustrates one of the serious consequences of racial microaggressions.

Campus Recommendations

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's mission is to "be inclusive, treat each other with dignity and respect and promote citizenship" (University of Illinois Mission & Vision, n.d.). The students of color responses raise questions about the success of campus efforts to make systemic change in pursuit of that mission. Given the declining numbers of students of color, particularly African American and Native American students, the University must ask itself if the campus racial climate contributes to the decline. We urge the University President, Chancellor and Provost to take the following steps to change the culture of the university:

Train Faculty about Racial Microaggressions:

- Regularly put racial microaggressions on the agenda of the annual teaching retreat.
- Give instructors the tools to address racial microaggressions, such as how to facilitate dialogue in the classroom, defuse rancor in heated conversations, challenge stereotypes about racial groups, and increase awareness of personal biases. In addition, identify appropriate incentives to encourage participation in training.
- Require at least one question about the racial climate or general sense of belonging in the classroom on ICES forms. Make it the third general question.
- Incorporate diversity engagement into the promotion and tenure review process.

Train all Staff (especially those providing direct services to students) about Racial Microaggressions:

- Require training and workshops for academic advisors so that they can respond usefully and with sensitivity to students of color.
- Require mandatory training about racial campus climate for all new hires in all service delivery points (i.e., Health Services, Financial Aid, Counseling Center, and Student Affairs).
- Incorporate diversity competency and engagement in annual reviews.

Evaluate Campus Leadership:

- Include diversity competency and engagement as a component of the annual reviews for deans, department heads, and other campus leadership positions.

Educate and Empower Students:

- Require all students to complete a General Education requirement about race, White privilege, and inequality in the United States. The Cultural Studies General Education requirement should be changed so that students must take both a non-Western culture and a US people of color cultural course.
- Include diversity and inclusion in a third of the curriculum of all college 101 classes.
- Expand existing opportunities for intergroup dialogue, team building, multicultural advocacy, and cultural competency through workshops and training (such as the Tolerance Program, Living Learning Communities, iConnect)
- Create a supportive mechanism for students to report perceived racial microaggressions that does not create more stress for the student, but constitutes a record of the campus environment. Identify steps in the process and a timeline for when students will get a response from administration.
- Develop workshops and training sessions and create brochures about racial microaggressions to help students identify when racial microaggressions are occurring, and to enable them to "nail" the aggressions, thus reduce their reoccurrence. For example, create a slogan or language to be use throughout campus. For example, "Racism Alert", "Watch it! Racism", "That is racially insensitive", or "That makes me uncomfortable."
- Support the work of students who are documenting their experiences on campus such as Being Black at Illinois (web link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDJR_DuNIus).

Address the Decline of African American and Native American students:

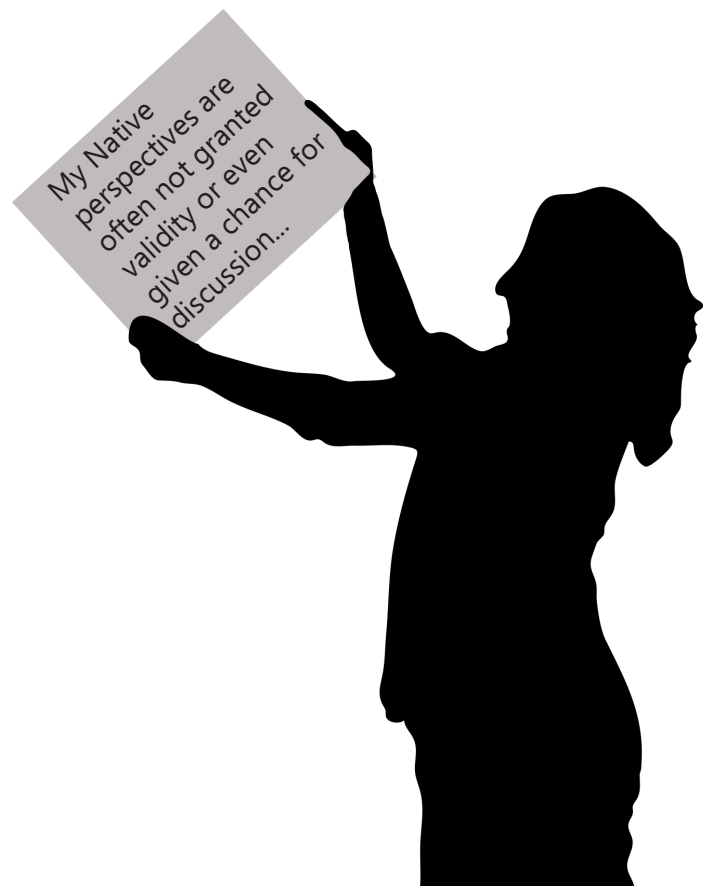
- Keep detailed records of possible “sundown majors,” those with very low numbers of students of color.
- Keep detailed records of possible “racial steering” out of certain majors. Track how many students of color enter a major, how many transfer out of the major, how many graduate in four years and in six years.
- Establish another Project 500 to address the decline in African American and Native American student enrollment.

Encourage Campus Dialogue:

- Develop a campus-wide campaign to heighten awareness about racism.
- To have a more informed student body, disseminate accurate information about how, or if, Affirmative Action plays a role in admitting students of color.
- Annual presentations, open to campus community, about Acts of Intolerance reported to the university, including the number of reports submitted, campus response, and trends over time.
- Mandate that all units discuss and implement ways to improve the racial climate in their units.
- The Chancellor should hold annual campus-wide meetings to discuss the racial climate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The presence of racial microaggressions on campus affects everyone – including international and White American students. The campus leadership must intentionally work to change the racial and cultural climate of the university. Valuing diversity is more than numbers, it is how we interact with and treat each other. Training for citizenship in a diverse society should be part of the general education requirements. Furthermore, instructors are unlikely to be able to create more welcoming and culturally sensitive classroom environments for students of color unless they are equipped with the relevant skills and learn how to recognize their own biases. Multicultural teacher training and education has been widely called for in the 21st century due to increasing numbers of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse student populations (Sue et al., 2010; Gay & Howard, 2010).

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign must move to offer opportunities that can develop cultural competency, particularly comfort with intergroup dialogue. That means, to begin with, reprioritizing funding for student programming and asking every department to evaluate its curriculum. Although some of these opportunities are in place, they will be more effective if the administration commits additional resources to them. The campus leadership must signal to the entire campus that racism, whether implicit or explicit, is unacceptable at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The university’s commitment to teaching students must reflect a climate that is inclusive and celebrates the brilliance of all young scholars.



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