Messaging and Action around Race and Inclusion at a Predominantly White Institution: Perceived Dissonance of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Students

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Abstract

As college has increasingly become part of emerging adulthood for United States youth, Predominantly White and Historically White Institutions (PWI/HWIs) have faced pressures to diversify and address problematic racial/ethnic campus climates. Within the rich and evolving literature, there is room for better understanding how Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) emerging adults experience institutional messaging. This report draws on environmental press and meaning making to explore this experience for 21 BIPOC students at an urban, Midwestern PWI/HWI. In focus groups, students highlighted the role of the university's messaging around race/ethnicity and inclusion as problematic: negative descriptions about the urban context surrounding the university held implicit messages about

BIPOC students on campus, while positive messaging about inclusion and diversity efforts was dissonant with the lack of perceived action. The findings speak to the importance of emerging adults' perception and interpretation of messaging and institutional action to promote diversity.

In the United States, college has increasingly become a central experience for emerging adults, with postsecondary education contexts influencing identity development, well-being, and life outcomes (e.g., Murray, 2018). In college, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) individuals face unique stressors to their academic success, mental health, and identities (e.g., Hope et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2014). As racial/ethnic demographics of college goers shift, predominantly White and Historically White Institutions (PWI/HWIs) face economic, social, and internal pressures to diversify their campuses and address exclusionary racial/ethnic campus climates that impede success of BIPOC people (e.g., Koo, 2021). Increasingly, postsecondary institutions are focusing resources on anti-racism initiatives through research, anti-racism education, institutional diversity strategic plans, and other strategies (Belay, 2020).

Given changing demographics and institutional actions concerning racial/ethnic issues on campus, there is a gap in current literature as to how emerging-adult BIPOC college students interpret and respond to institutional messaging. This research report offers insight into this area through focus groups with first-generation and BIPOC students at a Midwestern PWI/HWI. Our analyses illustrate a disconnect students may experience between the espoused goal of creating an inclusive environment and the enacted reality of racialized messages and hostility on campus. The findings demonstrate an area for further research and intervention to promote BIPOC emerging adults' psychosocial well-being and thriving on college campuses and to offer insights for official university messaging around racial/ethnic issues on campus and in society.

Literature Review

Emerging adulthood is marked by finding belonging and laying groundwork for one's place and opportunities as an adult (Wood et al., 2018). These developmental processes are rooted in connections between one's sense of self and belonging built through coherence with social roles and expectations in salient contexts (Meca et al., 2021). On college campuses, feelings of belonging are critical to identity development, academic success, and future trajectories, and are formed through interpersonal experiences as well as broader campus climates (e.g., Tinto, 1993). For BIPOC students, there may be greater challenges to building belonging on their college campuses due to microaggressions from peers and institutional personnel, as well as feelings of exclusion, alienation, and inadequacy tied to lack of representation and other cultural and structural factors (e.g., Keels et al., 2017; Meeuwisse et al., 2010). Within this literature, however, there is a dearth of attention to how institutional messaging may factor into these campus climates, and particularly how BIPOC emerging adults experience these messages. From a developmental perspective, as emerging adults attend college, their interpretation of this institutional messaging can shape their response, belonging, and identities in relation to education, which may impact their developmental trajectories (Hope et al., 2015). To this end, we explored the growing discourse about and focus on diversity and inclusion at colleges and universities, including efforts to diversify campuses, and the relationship between BIPOC students' perceptions of the racial/ethnic climate and student success.

Growing Discourse About and Focus on Diversity and Inclusion

A commonality across many United States colleges and universities is a desire to create inclusive campus environments where students (the majority of whom are emerging adults) feel welcomed, engaged, and able to contribute to the community (Griffin, 2017; Strange & Banning, 2015). For over 50 years, postsecondary education has been deemed a great equalizer to springboard young people into the middle class and enhances opportunities for civic mindedness, engagement, and economic prosperity (Hrabowski, 2019). Indeed, there have been many successes in widening access to postsecondary education, such as the increase in the percentage of Americans over age 25 who have earned a bachelor's degree from 9.7% in 1960 to 33.7% in 2017 (McFarland et al., 2018). Despite the increase in the overall number of bachelor's degree recipients, inequities across demographic groups persist. These inequities are evident when looking at racial and ethnic demographics of bachelor's degree recipients. Of students who start a bachelor's degree, Asian Americans over age 25 have a 6-year graduation rate of 55.4%, whites 38.1%, Black and/or African Americans 23.3%, American Indian/Alaska Natives 20.2%, and Latinx/Hispanics 17.2% (NCES, 2018).

Postsecondary institutions are increasingly aware of racial/ethnic gaps. In addition to changing costs and financial aid models (Goldrick-Rab, 2016), many campus leaders have undertaken efforts to address climate issues. Despite increased attention to the racial/ethnic environment, students' experiences of racism by peers, faculty, and staff alike continue to permeate social media, national news outlets, and public discourse (e.g., Taylor et al., 2020). These experiences illustrate how far postsecondary institutions are from creating truly equitable environments and the need to understand more about lived experiences of BIPOC student.

Efforts to Diversify Campuses and Address Racism

Early efforts to address racial/ethnic inequity in the 1970's and 80's focused on increasing compositional diversity, or the number of students from different demographic groups (Griffin, 2017). Prevailing wisdom assumed a critical mass of BIPOC students would help them feel less isolated and tokenized (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Later initiatives were more comprehensive, often framing efforts to understand and tackle racial/ethnic inequities holistically by targeting legacies of inclusion and exclusion, psychological climate (e.g., students' perceptions of hostility and racism), and behavioral climate (e.g., interactions across racial demographic groups; Hurtado et al., 1999). As institutions sought to address racial/ethnic inequity, they concurrently developed programming to meet the needs of first-generation students, whose graduation rates lagged peers whose parents had attended college. BIPOC first-generation students were identified as at particularly high risk for departure, thus were a group that warranted focused attention (Saenz et al., 2007). Campus climate surveys became a common way to understand the experiences of first-generation students as well as BIPOC faculty, staff, and students and then act to make the campus more inclusive. These studies helped to illustrate students' perceptions of the racial/ethnic climate and how these perceptions connected to student success.

Perceptions of Racial/Ethnic Climates and Student Success

As the number of BIPOC students on campus grew, research on their experiences expanded as well. BIPOC students at HWIs/PWIs describe experiencing racism, feeling excluded in and outside the classroom, and being subject to harassment and unfair treatment (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Contributing to their difficulty navigating an often-hostile climate, these students are frequently the targets of microaggressions: unconscious, subtle forms of racism "that ultimately affect the academic and psychological wellbeing of affected students" (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 60). Empirical work has documented negative effects of the campus environment, and particularly experiences of racism, harassment, and exclusion on BIPOC students' psychological and academic success (Belay, 2020).

Less attention has been paid, however, to the role of the university's messaging about race/ethnicity and inclusion in potentially mitigating or exacerbating that negative effect. Our research sought to address this gap, given the developmental implications that such experiences could have for large numbers of emerging adults in the United States.

Conceptual Framework

The current study focuses on university messaging about race/ethnicity and inclusion and its role in mitigating or exacerbating the experiences of Black and Latino/a students on campus. To capture the phenomenological nature of this objective, the study was framed by an integration of environmental press theory from sociology and meaning making from psychology. The press of an environment is defined as "the characteristic demands or features of the environment as perceived by those who live in that particular environment" (Walsh, 1973, p. 114). Similarly, developmental meaning making theories highlight that individuals' coping responses emerge from interpretations and processing of environmental factors in line with their understandings of self and social worlds (Spencer et al., 1997). These theories can be understood as complementary in that contextual factors on college campuses are perceived, processed, and responded to as a process of active meaning making by young people, with the resulting consonance or dissonance having implications for emerging-adult students' engagement and belonging. To this end, our study explored the question, how do these emerging-adult Black and Latino/a students make meaning of university messaging in relation to the racial/ethnic climate they experience on campus? We investigated whether there would be congruence in the environmental press of a PWI toward supporting the needs of BIPOC students, with these young people thereby interpreting the messaging as facilitating belonging. Alternatively, meaning students make of their environment could tacitly convey messages of marginality and exclusion.

Methods

To explore perceptions of efforts to change school messaging around inclusivity and diversity, we conducted focus groups with students from underrepresented backgrounds at CU,[1] a PWI located in a Midwestern city. CU has historically served students from suburban, White, and middle- and upper-class backgrounds. In 2016, for example, the undergraduate student population was 75.4% white students, and 24.6% students of color, with Latinx students having the largest representation of minoritized students at 10.6%, followed by Asian students at 6.1%, and Black students at 3.9%. Recently, CU engaged in numerous initiatives to increase student diversity and make its campus more inclusive, including campus climate surveys and working groups, increased scholarships for low-income students and those from communities of color, and incorporating into its mission the goal of becoming a Hispanic Serving Institution. These efforts are showing some success, as illustrated by a shift in demographic trends toward greater racial and ethnic diversity. In 2020, the percentage of

undergraduate students of color had risen to 28.5% (+3.9%), with a 3.4% increase in Latinx, .4% Asian, and .2% Black students.

Focus group participants were recruited in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 by working with CU's diversity and inclusion office to invite potential participants to talk about student success and campus climate. Only students who were identified in institutional records as first-generation, Black, and/or Latinx were invited to participate. Focus groups were run virtually (ranging from 55 to 70 minutes) via Microsoft Teams by two trained graduate student research assistants (GRAs) who identified as BIPOC. These facilitators were chosen and trained to encourage an open and supportive environment (Vaughn et al., 1996). Questions were grouped into three areas: barriers to student success, racial/ethnic climate on campus, and experiences of the urban context. All procedures were approved by the IRB.

Importantly, the two lead researchers on the project are tenure-track and tenured faculty, identifying as biracial (white/Latino) and white respectively, who have been at CU for 3 and 13 years. They are both engaged in institutional efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as participating in student success initiatives. To address how their positionalities could inform the research, they relied on the BIPOC GRAs to craft the focus group protocol, lead the conversations, and provide summaries of the focus groups and feedback on findings.

In total, two focus groups were held in November 2020 and three in March 2021 with 21 participants total: 8 first-year students, 5 sophomores, 3 juniors, and 5 seniors. Five identified as male, 14 as female, and two did not provide this information. Eight participants identified as Black/African American, ten as Latino/a, and 3 as biracial. All were first-generation. Codebook thematic analysis was used the two lead researchers to analyze the data, informed by facilitators' summary reports. The researchers each read over transcripts multiple times before independently coding them through an inductive process to construct themes through active engagement with the data. The researchers then shared and discussed codes, resolving any discrepancies collaboratively by returning to the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A codebook was thus created in an iterative-inductive analytical process (Cascio et al., 2019). Finally, from these codes, the researchers discussed emerging themes in relation to various research questions, including response to institutional messaging that is the focus of this paper.

To support the validity of analyses, the primary researchers shared preliminary findings with the GRAs who conducted focus groups, with CU staff working directly with BIPOC students, and with select BIPOC students themselves. A draft of the manuscript was also shared with CU faculty engaged in diversity and inclusion on campus (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Findings

Two themes were constructed from the data during analyses. First, participants were sensitive to implicit and explicit negative messaging by CU and its representatives, which were laden with stereotypes and promoted a climate of hostility across campus. Second, participants noted a disconnect between institutional discussion of diversity and inclusion and inaction or incomplete efforts in this area. While these themes were present in multiple focus groups and across Black and Latino/a participants, specific examples and experiences varied.

Negative Messaging and Stereotypes

A first pattern across focus groups was how CU and its representatives (e.g., faculty, instructors, staff) conveyed stereotypes or problematic attitudes about race/ethnicity. The experiences described were often, though not exclusively, implicit. A primary example was the way that orientation programming, tour guides, police officers and others talked about the surrounding community. The institution is situated next to a predominantly Black, urban neighborhood with elevated rates of community violence. Various university representatives recommended students avoid these areas, discussed questions of safety, and conveyed a tacit racialized message about BIPOC people by the ways they painted the surrounding context. One participant said, "I think it's dangerous that CU does that…because when you look at the people that populate these areas, they look like me, right?…they look like other Black and Brown people walking around campus. So, when [they]'re saying these neighborhoods are dangerous, they're also saying these people are dangerous." As noted by this participant, the rhetoric about the surrounding community was described by participants as supporting negative stereotypes about students on campus. Others noted that such descriptions reified the problematic racial/ethnic attitudes that many White students already brought with them to campus.

Choices about space were also identified as a way CU also conveyed subtle, yet exclusionary messages on campus. In relation to physical spaces being demarcated specifically for BIPOC affinity groups, one student detailed:

Our school should be a Black space…it should be comfortable for Black people, Brown people, minorities…We shouldn't have to have spaces…that's problematic in my mind, because it's kind of like, okay, go, y'all go talk over there, y'all going to do and we're going keep the main central parts of campus to ourselves.

This participant affirmed it is important to have these spaces, but noted that the need for them, and designation by the institution, constructs ideas about who belongs and where on campus.

Beyond implicit negative messaging, multiple students described being the target of racist stereotypes from university representatives, including professors and instructors. Though some did note feeling that professors created inclusive classroom environments, more agreed that these actors contributed to the general hostile climate predicated on problematic notions of racial/ethnic minority groups. One participant detailed how the lack of diversity in their academic program was deepened by racial/ethnic microaggressions, and even overt racism: "I've already had, like, so many racial incidents [from] professors. One of the ones that happened was he said, I was like innately violent. And I'm like, I'm not a violent person at all. So, you know, just like things like that. I feel like I have to fly under the radar or something." Overall, participants detailed how these negative messages—whether explicit or implicit—led to general feelings of discomfort, fatigue, and struggles to develop a sense of belonging on campus.

Disconnect Between Messaging and Action

Connected to these negative experiences, a second theme was the lack of substantive, effective action by CU, particularly in relation to the university's social justice mission. Across multiple focus groups, students expressed feeling CU's efforts to address race/ethnicity were ineffectual at best, and often lacked care for BIPOC students or were detrimental to the campus racial/ethnic climate. While some students acknowledged CU may be authentically committed to change, there was general agreement

that these efforts fell short of actual change. One fourth year student expressed frustration at the "cycle" of incidents and ineffective action: "It's been happening and occurring since my freshman year—racial incidents. And it's crazy that it's still happening. It seems like every single time it's the same. It's a cycle, it's okay, let's host a town hall meeting. Let's talk about it. And then pretty much there's no follow up." In one focus group, students explicitly connected the lack of actual change to a lack of genuine concern for these students. These participants agreed that any type of response to racial/ethnic incidents or climate only came when "it hurts their reputation…because if they cared more in such situations…more situations like that would be handled quickly and with care."

Extending this critique, participants in various focus groups discussed how inaction was discordant with the university's messaging about inclusion and campus racial/ethnic climate. One participant stated: "It's just surprising to see that [CU] says, Oh, it's an inclusive institution, and we accept every single race, and we are, we're trying to change but they don't really change." This discrepancy extended beyond responses to specific incidents, including the lack of scholarships for minority students and overwhelmingly White spaces and faces across campus. One student cited the topics covered in new student orientation as an example of the mismatch between the espoused values of the university and their actions. The student explained that among the mandatory topics covered were Title IX training and alcohol use and abuse. Absent, however, was any mandated training related to social justice, equity, or inclusion. As these examples demonstrate, students across focus groups believed the university had to be more proactive in addressing racial and ethnic conflict. They recognized the institution was talking about these issues, but noted a lack of genuine motivation, sustained action, and change.

Discussion

These analyses demonstrate that these Black and Latino/a students experienced aspects of the PWI's institutional messaging (i.e., the environmental press) as alienating and contributing to problematic stereotypes. In line with a focus on their meaning making, there was also a perceived dissonance between the desire to increase the number of Black and Latino/a students on campus and the messaging conveyed to these students. The findings shed light on the reality that BIPOC students are impacted not only by daily interactions, but also by institutional messaging and how their perspectives and daily experiences relate to this messaging (in other words, how their meaning making creates dissonance or consonance with the environmental press). Importantly, when this messaging occurs in orientation–an opening socialization experience—future actions may be read through a lens that has already been shaped by experiences of microaggressions and racism (Solorzano et al., 2000), whether implicit or explicit. Participants indicated CU's orientation messaging—for example, lack of authentic diversity training and warnings about the surrounding community—laid groundwork for interpreting with suspicion the institution's motivation and care about inclusion and diversity, as well as difficult racial/ethnic interpersonal experiences on campus.

In the current literature, there is awareness that institutional commitment to racial and ethnic equity is an integral element of positive campus climates. Much of the research base, however, focuses on links between experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination (e.g., interpersonal microaggressions) and structural diversity and equity (e.g., representation; e.g., Hurtado et al., 2008). The current study demonstrates the value in greater exploration of how institutional messaging is received by students as

part of their experience of the racial/ethnic climate and their development of belonging and engagement on campus. While making PWIs/HWIs welcoming and supportive places for diverse emerging adults may require more than just changing messaging, the current study demonstrates that without attending to messaging feelings of alienation and racial/ethnic hostility may be deepened.

This study represents a first step and exploratory approach to these questions. It is important to note that there were several limitations, including the fact that the sample is not representative of those who graduate with a bachelor's degree. Additionally, we choose to hold groups with Black and Latinx students together, but recognize that these groups may have different experiences they would feel less comfortable sharing in such a mixed setting and also that there are other groups within the umbrella of BIPOC whose voices we did not include (such as continuing generation students and other racial/ethnic groups). Finally, the positionality of the two lead researchers (e.g., older faculty) may have informed our engagement with the research process. We strove to incorporate student voice through BIPOC graduate student assistants at several places, but still acknowledge that even more participatory work should be done on the focus of this study.

Implications and Future Directions

These findings point toward the need to consider more deeply how implicit messaging, gaps between espoused mission and action, and orientation communications may lay a critical groundwork for students' experiences of campus climate and ultimately their success and psychosocial well-being (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Koo, 2021). The study demonstrates the need for these institutions to focus on action that connects with messaging to promote more inclusive campus climates. The approach also demonstrates the value in soliciting and addressing the lived experiences of BIPOC students in these efforts. Further routes for exploration could be broader samples and longitudinal analyses, studying emerging adults' experiences as they transition to and become seasoned students on HWI/PWI campuses. Additionally, while many HWI/PWIs are still unwelcoming environments for BIPOC young people, further work could explore case studies of institutions taking effective action and how these students interpret and respond to institutional messaging on those campuses.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Footnote

1. To mask the institution's name, CU is used as a pseudonym.

Data availability statement

The data for this study is not openly available, as it was collected as part of an internal institutional process of addressing student success and used for research purposes. It is available upon request to

the corresponding author. The list of questions is attached to the submission as an Appendix, and no other materials were used in this study. The study did not include any preregistration plan.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

Framing:

To get us thinking about our goal, please mull over what roadblocks you've faced at CU since you've been an undergraduate here. What's gotten in your way of your academic progress generally, or things like graduating when you planned to, declaring or changing your major or minor, getting into the classes you need, getting your work done, participating in activities, or anything else related to living your student life at CU successfully or as you planned to. These could be policies, processes or procedures that are university-wide, college-specific, or even just within certain offices here at CU. They could be about academics, res life, student activities, financial aid, really anything related to your life as a student at CU.

1. Could you please talk about a time when a CU policy, process, or procedure has stopped you or someone you know at CU from doing something?
    a. Follow up: What issues did you face in these experiences (either what was prevented or in how it was responded to)?
2. Have any of you talked to anyone at CU about your experience or the policies and procedures that impacted you?
    a. Follow up for yes: How did they respond when you asked about the policy or procedure you discussed with them?
    b. Follow up for no: If you feel comfortable sharing, would you talk about why you didn't?
3. Have you ever seen policies, processes, or procedures at CU that have been surprising or confusing to you?
    a. Follow up: Did these policies cause any problems for you? Follow up: Is there anything you avoided doing because you were confused about what the policy or procedure was?
4. If you could change any one policy or procedure so that it would work better for future students, what would you change and why?
5. How, if at all, do you believe that your status as a first-generation student has affected your experience at CU?
6. Is there anything else you believe is important for someone examining barriers to student success at CU to consider or know?

Biographies

Gabriel Velez Ph.D. is an assistant professor in Educational Policy and Leadership in the College of Education at Marquette University. He also serves as the Faculty Director of the Black and Latino/a Ecosystem and Support Transition (BLEST) Hub at Marquette, and the Chair of the Faculty Research Team for the Center for Peacemaking. Dr. Velez studies identity development in adolescents, particularly in relation to citizenship, human rights, restorative justice, and peace.

Jody Jessup-Anger Ph.D. is professor of higher education and program coordinator of the Student Affairs in Higher Education master's program at Marquette University. Her research explores how the collegiate environment can facilitate or impede student learning and development.