How to Tell Whether a College Supports Students of Color

By Ciera Graham, Ph.D.
Published on September 18, 2020

From the horrific and untimely murders of Black and brown people at the hands of police, to racist monuments that pervade college campuses and incidents of campus hate crimes, higher education has been forced to reckon with how to make campuses a safe and inclusive space for students of color.

Our current administration has waged cruel attacks on vulnerable students, including a recent attempt to overthrow the DACA program, which supports young undocumented immigrants.

In addition to a hostile political climate, many students report experiencing hate crimes on campus. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 77% of campus hate crimes reported in 2017 "were motivated by race, religion, or sexual orientation." Race was the motivation behind nearly half of these crimes.

Seventy-seven percent of campus hate crimes reported in 2017 "were motivated by race, religion, or sexual orientation." Race was the motivation behind nearly half of these crimes.

Some recent and publicized campus hate crimes include a University of Illinois student setting up a noose in a campus residence hall, and a viral video of University of Connecticut students spewing racist language.

Hate crimes have profound impacts on students of color, contributing to increased isolation and trauma, as well as impacting their academic performance.

While a postsecondary education is a key indicator for social mobility, there are distinct and unique benefits of completing college for traditionally underserved students. In response to the diversification of the U.S., colleges are forming task forces and proposing strategic plans to address how to recruit and retain students of color, even in the midst of social unrest.

Safe and inclusive campuses provide environments in which students of color can thrive, both personally and academically, and learn how to compete in a globally competitive economy. For

diverse prospective students and families navigating the [college selection process](#), finding a campus that supports students of color is of chief importance.

Racism and Microaggressions in Higher Education

[Racial microaggressions are defined](#) as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color."

One example of a racial microaggression includes asking an Asian American or Latino/a American, "Where are you from?" In this case, the perpetrator assumes that the person they're talking to is foreign-born.

Microaggressions occur inside and outside the classroom and impede one's ability to successfully integrate into the academic and social realm of college life at predominantly white campuses.

Microaggressions occur inside and outside the classroom and impede one's ability to successfully integrate into … college life at predominantly white campuses.

In the classroom, students of color may experience bias and assumptions about their intelligence and academic capabilities. [Asian students report intense pressure](#) to overperform in math due to the societal belief that they're inherently better at technical subjects. Many students of color report being referenced or outed as the expert when race or cultural matters come up in class discussions.

Racial microaggressions are personally, emotionally, and psychologically harmful for students of color. These experiences can lead to academic underperformance, social exclusion on campus, and stress; they can also impact students' confidence in their academic capabilities.

The inability to feel safe in a learning environment can ultimately result in attrition and precludes many students of color from meeting their academic and professional goals.

Recruiting and Retaining Students of Color Is Critical

With many schools issuing statements of solidarity for the [Black Lives Matter movement](#), the true sign of success of many institutions will be how they recruit and retain students of color.

According to [NCES data](#), "the overall college enrollment rate for 18-to-24-year-olds increased from 35% in 2000 to 41% in 2018." At that time, the college enrollment rate was higher for students who were Asian than it was for students who were white, Black, and/or Hispanic.

However, college enrollment is never the best indicator for how colleges are supporting students of color, as it fails to tell us whether students feel a sense of belonging on campus or whether they stay enrolled each year. Retention data for students of color is fairly mixed and dependent on the type of institution.

Retaining and graduating students of color is advantageous to the learning environment and our global economy. Classroom diversity encourages increased critical thinking and reflection.

Retaining and graduating students of color is advantageous to the learning environment and our global economy. [Classroom diversity](#) encourages increased critical thinking and reflection. Hearing and listening to diverse perspectives can broaden students' understanding of social and [political issues](#). For students who've grown up in mostly homogeneous environments, a diverse college environment can enhance their own personal and professional growth.

Diverse learning environments also play an integral role in [career preparation](#). When students engage in cross-cultural learning in the classroom, they learn to collaborate and communicate with people of diverse backgrounds. Creativity, innovation, and being able to work with cross-functional teams are [critical skills students need for careers](#), regardless of their industry.

Diversity also offers many benefits in the workplace, often leading to higher employee engagement, reduced employee turnover, better company reputation, and increased profits.

3 Ways to Determine Whether a College Supports Students of Color

It's not hard to believe that many incidents of hate crimes and discrimination go unreported. Students of color may distrust university personnel and lack confidence in their college's ability to effectively and justly resolve the incident. Moreover, some cases remain unreported because students don't want to have to retell their story or relive any associated trauma.

In order to acquire an understanding of how colleges investigate hate crimes, visit your school's Office of Student Conduct or Title IX website.

If a college allows students to submit reports in multiple ways — by phone, over email, and in person — this is ideal.

It's important to first understand how cases are reported. If a college allows students to submit reports in multiple ways — by phone, over email, and in person — this is ideal, as it can help students who may fear discussing the incident face to face. Email reporting is also beneficial for students who aren't completely fluent in English.

Confidential reporting is critical as well. All colleges should provide a statement on how they will do their best to ensure the confidentiality of the reporter/victim.

A college with a comprehensive reporting and disciplinary process should address the following:

1. What happens when a report is received?
2. How will the investigation be conducted?
3. How will the case be wrapped up and concluded?
4. What support or resources will be offered to the victim?

Colleges and universities should offer ample victim-assistance resources, such as counseling centers, health services, cultural diversity clubs, advocacy groups, academic advisors, affirmative action offices, employee assistance programs, and faculty and student membership programs.

Finally, many institutions maintain partnerships with external organizations that can support students through racist incidents and crimes, like local law enforcement, churches and religious groups, temporary housing shelters, civic groups, hate crimes working groups, and the NAACP.

As campus hate crimes continue to rise, colleges must be transparent about their disciplinary processes. For any school, having multiple modalities of communicating this process to prospective and current students remains critical.

Join Cultural Clubs and Student Organizations

Students get involved in organizations and extracurricular activities for numerous reasons, such as leisure, academics, and the desire to build relationships with like-minded peers.

Cultural clubs can provide a respite from a racially hostile campus.

For students of color, cultural clubs can provide a respite from a racially hostile campus. These groups allow students to meet others who've experienced similar challenges, provide assistance with organizing responses to hate crimes, offer avenues for advocacy, and supply academic help and tutoring.

Students of color should investigate the landscape of their college's multicultural student services. Here are some important questions to consider:

1. Are there organizations that fit your cultural needs?
2. What type of academic, personal, and professional support do these organizations offer?

Requesting an informational interview with your college's director of its multicultural or diversity services office can help you better evaluate the school and how it supports students of color. Be sure to ask about how accommodating the campus climate is for students of color, how safe students feel, and how the office can help students graduate and secure employment.

Furthermore, because many cultural clubs fit under the umbrella of student engagement, you should ask your diversity services director how well these organizations are supported by the campus, and what kinds of support and resources the school devotes to cultural groups.

Check out [BestColleges' list of the 25 most diverse colleges](#) to see which schools are committed to diversity and inclusion.

Seek Out Success Stories of Students of Color

Hearing stories about the professional success of students of color is an important motivational tool. After all, prospective and current students want to learn about the career tracks graduates are pursuing.

Job placements are indicative of a college's ability to appropriately and effectively prepare their graduates for the job market.

Job placements are indicative of a college's ability to appropriately and effectively prepare their graduates for the job market and for the competitiveness of their field. While it's not always customary for colleges to collect the racial demographics of students who've successfully placed into a job, some small or private colleges might have this data readily accessible.

The first place to check is your school's diversity or equity office. There, you can ask whether they have any data on student job placements stratified by race, or if they can share stories or testimonies of where graduates of color have been placed.

Additionally, your school's career services office or academic departments may conduct an annual placement survey of graduates, which could be posted online. If you're a student of color and have already decided on your major, ask your academic advisor for any career or job placement data, as well as any connections they may have to local industries.

Higher Education Must Embrace Diversity

Colleges and universities possess an enormous responsibility to support and graduate students of color. In addition to considering things like majors, extracurricular activities, clubs, and sports, many prospective students are prioritizing colleges that support students of color and actively promote diversity and inclusion.

Diversity isn't just a buzzword — it gives students and the workforce a competitive advantage. And colleges must embrace this truth.