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Carly Offidani-Bertrand

Gabriel Velez

Claudia Benz

Micere Keels

Education Faculty Research and Publications/College of Education

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Carly Offidani-Bertrand
Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, IL, USA
Department of Human Development at California State University, San Marco

Gabriel Velez
Department of Educational Policy and Leadership, College of Education, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

Claudia Benz
CICS Basil in Englewood, Chicago, IL, USA

Micere Keels
Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, IL, USA

Abstract

For emerging adults transitioning to college, normative social and contextual shifts present challenges that are largely a productive aspect of development. But not all students have the same experiences, nor do all students manage similar experiences in similar ways. Black and Latinx emerging adults transitioning to Historically White

Institutions must adjust not only to college life but also to feeling different and, sometimes, isolated. There is a dearth of qualitative work examining how students of color make meaning of their racial-ethnic experiences on campus. Our article draws on a mixed-methods study of Black and Latinx emerging adults' transition to college to investigate how high school racial-ethnic contexts shape students' interpretations of experiences of difference on college campuses. There was substantial variation in how Black and Latinx students interpreted experiences of difference on campus and coped with their feelings of otherness, and this variation was predicted by racial-ethnic high school context.

As the "college for all" narrative has become increasingly normalized and more emerging adults enroll in college, the college experience has become increasingly central in shaping young Americans' development (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). The college-going years represent a period marked by broad and often intense change, as students must both manage the developmental challenges of emerging adulthood[1] and adjust to different responsibilities and expectations that accompany their transition to a new social and institutional environment (Arnett, 2000, 2016). For the majority of emerging adults, transitioning to college involves navigating social and contextual shifts, which can present developmentally productive challenges and foster maturation. How students manage these shifts have consequences for their trajectories, and short- and long-term well-being (Arnett, 2000; Keels, Burdick-Will & Keene, 2013). But not all students have the same experiences, nor do all manage similar experiences in similar ways. Black and Latinx students are two historically marginalized subgroups that experience disproportionate and unique psychological stress during the transition to Historically White Institutions (HWIs; Hope, Velez, Bertrand, Keels, & Durkee, 2018; Keels et al., 2013; Taylor, Doane, & Eisenberg 2014). These emerging adults must not simply adjust to being college students but also face additional challenges, some of which are based in racial-ethnic campus climates (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Walton & Cohen, 2011). These challenges can have negative effects on psychological well-being and college persistence (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Indeed, Black and Latinx students' disproportionately higher rate of "stopping out" has sparked concerns about barriers to their success (Harper et al., 2011; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007).

Some scholars have suggested that beyond academic preparation, social and emotional factors are a major cause of attrition. They argue that feelings of not belonging negatively impact adjustment and persistence (Keels, Durkee, & Hope, 2017; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). These arguments could be developed further by investigating how Black and Latinx students draw from personal histories to make meaning of social obstacles as they assess their fit at college. In particular, there is not enough qualitative work examining how these students make meaning of social experiences on campus that may make them feel different from normative White, middle-class college students. We suggest that in order to provide better supports for Black and Latinx students' success and persistence, scholars must be attentive both to how social encounters on campus are shaped by race-ethnicity and to the ways that previous social experiences and interactions with other racial-ethnic groups shape interpretive processes of these encounters.

This study investigates the dynamic processes of belonging and inclusion for Black and Latinx students enrolled at HWIs in Illinois. Our analysis focuses on the first year of data from a larger longitudinal study, the Minority College Cohort Study (MCCS), to examine how students' experiences of the college transition relate to interracial social interactions and perceptions of campus diversity during their first year, with particular attention to differences based on the racial-ethnic composition of students' high schools. Our study addresses: What is the range of within-group variation in how students perceive adjustment to life at an HWI, particularly in forming a sense of campus belonging, and how does the adjustment process differ for those who came from primarily

same race high schools (PSRHS), compared with those who came from predominantly White high schools (PWHS)? These questions can lead to deeper understandings of how the relative experience of diversity on college campuses (i.e., in relation to high school contexts) plays a role in students' adjustment and formation of belonging. The answers matter both for furthering theoretical understandings of how Black and Latinx college students make meaning of their experiences and for addressing college attrition among students of color.

Adjustment to College for Black and Latinx Students

As part of the normative processes of this life stage, emerging adults are continuing to develop their sense of self by interpreting how their own attributes and experiences fit within particular social roles and expectations. This process is heavily influenced by feelings of contextual belonging (Meca et al., 2018; Tinto, 1993). Feelings of belonging during college—built daily with peers, as well as through interactions with institutional representatives and the broader cultural climate—are important not only for emerging adults' identity development but also for their academic success (Tinto, 1993). Longitudinal findings demonstrate that students who feel socially connected to peers and teachers are more motivated in school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Strayhorn, 2012). In addition, students' concerns about belonging in school settings have been shown to contribute to group disparities in academic motivation and achievement (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007).

Members of historically marginalized racial-ethnic groups may be at a disadvantage in building belonging and integrating into college campuses because they are more likely to experience exclusion, intimidation, and alienation (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2005). These feelings are rooted in meaningful differences in their microcampus experiences of racial-ethnic stereotyping, socioeconomic marginalization, and varying cultural expectations in their home and campus communities (Hope et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2014). Young people from historically marginalized groups are also vulnerable to perceptions that their talents and abilities are doubted and to struggle making friends (Keels, Durkee, & Hope, 2017; Lambert, Herman, Bynum, & Ialongo, 2009).

Several researchers have argued that Black and Latinx American youth are members of stigmatized groups (e.g., Burgess, Molina, Bhandari, & Dibartolo, 2018; Vue, Haslerig, & Allen, 2017). Stigmatization has been argued to generate belonging uncertainty: A psychological state tied to feelings of anxiety about social bonds in academic and professional domains (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Within this framework, members of stigmatized groups may believe that "people like me do not belong here" and thus seek out hypothesis-relevant information and notice otherwise overlooked threatening cues (Kleck & Strenta, 1980; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak , 2002; Weary & Jacobson, 1997). These individuals may also be more likely to attribute hypothesis-consistent events, such as having few friends, to their racial identity and conclude that their racial group is not welcome (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Belonging uncertainty can contribute to racial disparities in achievement, yet there has been relatively little research examining the factors that contribute to its development or why some members of a stigmatized group experience it more strongly than others.

Students' perceptions of diversity and feelings of belonging are influenced not only by statistical diversity but also by interactional diversity: How students from various backgrounds racial-ethnic backgrounds interact on campus (Park & Chang, 2015; Pike & Kuh, 2006). Historically marginalized students' feelings of inclusion and belonging have been shown to be strongly related to social experiences outside of the classroom such as extracurricular activities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Yet the literature is conflicting regarding how interactions in extracurricular spaces shape inclusion and belonging. On the one hand, engagement in cocurricular activities has been found to promote involvement and connections on campus (Maestas et al., 2007; Sidanius, van

Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2004). More involvement in cocurricular spaces is associated with stronger friendships and lower feelings of social isolation, especially when students participate in organizations oriented toward their racial-ethnic groups (Bohnert, Aikins, & Edidin, 2007). These groups can also provide counterspaces: Social spaces where students of color feel they are not othered (Case & Hunter, 2012; Keels, in press; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). On the other hand, research also indicates that participation in such organizations can increase senses of racial-ethnic victimization and decrease feelings of common identity (Sidanius et al., 2004; Wittrup & Hurd, 2019). Overall, research indicates some Black and Latinx students need peers of their race-ethnicity to feel belonging, while others need to form connections with students of other racial-ethnic groups. Still, we must better understand what factors generate these different needs in order to develop better supports.

In sum, Black and Latinx students often experience racial-ethnic-based social stressors that create significant challenges to their transition and adjustment to college life beyond the normative ones that are a productive part of maturation for college-going emerging adults. Following theory on belonging uncertainty, these students may be primed to interpret social experiences that generate feelings of insecurity or discomfort as connected to their race-ethnicity, further challenging their development of campus belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011; Walton & Brady, 2017). With our data, we are able to examine within-group differences of these phenomenon based on high school racial-ethnic composition.

Role of Precollege Experiences in Shaping Transition to College

Much of the research detailed above has assumed that students of a given racial-ethnic group will have similar experiences and perceptions of campus diversity, integration, and belonging. Yet within-group variation can provide insights about the varying factors that shape the ways people interpret and experience social interactions (Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado 2007; Walton & Brady, 2017). One source of within-group variation is how precollege experiences with predominantly White educational contexts shape belonging and adjustment to life at HWIs for students of color (Benner, Graham, & Mistry, 2008). Variation in previous experience may make some students more likely to interpret negative or ambiguous social interactions as alienating.

Some scholars have attended to precollege experiences of first-generation students by investigating how cultural differences shape adjustment to college life. These studies found that campus cultural norms tend to be in line with majority, middle- and upper-class expectations in American society (Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2016; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). First-generation students thus experience cultural mismatch with institutional norms, which can decrease their comfort, increase their stress, and undermine their academic performance (Phillips et al. 2016; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Much of the empirical work in this area has focused on students from lower resource backgrounds. Conceptually, we can infer that race-ethnicity also shape socialization processes that in turn guide students' expectations and thus their perceptions of whether they "fit in" on college campuses. However, the link between cultural mismatch due to differences in SES and race-ethnicity has not been explored empirically.

Race-ethnicity has been highlighted as important in experiences of inclusion and belonging during educational transitions. Benner and Graham (2007) found that students transitioning to high schools with fewer ethnically similar students than in their middle schools reported declining feelings of school belonging. The authors proposed that ethnic congruence—similar numerical representation across transition settings—was associated with better adjustment because there is less disconnection between the school social contexts. But no existing research has involved a phenomenological examination of the experiences and perceptions that make racial-ethnic incongruence and cultural mismatch salient for Black and Latinx students as they develop campus belonging. These phenomena matter because students' well-being and college persistence are affected by the

way they make meaning of perceptions that they are ethnically and/or culturally out of place. This contributes to the literature by attending to patterns in Black and Latinx students' perceptions of campus diversity and college belonging in relation to their high school's racial-ethnic composition.

Method

Data for the current study come from the MCCS, a mixed-methods, longitudinal investigation of Black (N = 221) and Latinx (N = 312) students who began college in the fall of 2013. Our analysis focuses on data from a subsample of 70 students who participated in the first wave of in-depth interviews and surveys for this project, conducted during the summer after their first year of college. Participants (mean age at recruitment was 18.2, SD = 0.47) came from five HWIs in Illinois: two urban private institutions (24% of respondents), one urban public institution (35%), one rural public institution (28%), and one suburban public institution (13%). Eleven to thirty-five percentage of all eligible first-time first-year students were recruited at each institution. At all institutions except the urban public one, White students made up over half the undergraduate student population (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Although Urban State U was not majority White, it is a historically White school, and its racial diversity is relatively new. Urban State U was 8% Black and 24% Latinx; Urban Private U-South was 8% Black and 17% Latinx; Urban PrivateU-North was 3% Black and 13% Latinx; Rural State U was 5% Black and 8% Latinx; Suburban State U was 17% Black and 13% Latinx.

All institutions had significant ongoing diversity initiatives focusing on recruitment and retention of students of color. Researchers connected with an administrative representative of the diversity initiatives from each campus. Each representative first distributed an e-mail describing the research study and a link to the online survey during September of the 2013–2014 academic year. After following the link, participants provided informed consent and completed a screening questionnaire. First-time, first-year students who identified as African American/Black or Hispanic/Latinx qualified for the study. Students were followed across their first 4 years after graduation from high school. The host institutional review board approved all study procedures.

For the interview portion of the study, a stratified random subsample of 70 participants was chosen to be representative from four groups: Black men, Black women, Latinx men, and Latinx women. Data analysis for this article focused on this qualitative subsample. These students were interviewed following their first year of college and were asked about a wide range of topics related to their aspirations and thoughts about college while in high school, what it was like to transition to college, and their first-year experiences at college. The protocol specifically asked about students' motivation to go to college, enrollment decision-making, financial factors, and peer and racial-ethnic related experiences during the first year.

Sample

All subsample participants self-identified as African American/Black, Latinx, or Multiracial and were first-time, first-year college students. Approximately 75% of Black and 56% of Latinx participants were female, which is reflective of the gender imbalance in college enrollment (Keels et al., 2013). Forty-nine percentage of Black students and 71% of Latinx students were first-generation college students.

Analyses

Our analysis focuses on students' reports of their transition experiences during the in-depth interviews. Relevant parts of interview protocol are included in the Appendix. As part of the broader MCCS, interview responses were first coded by a team of trained study personnel using Dedoose qualitative analysis software version 8.0.35 (Keels, in press). In this first stage, broad thematic categories were identified inductively from the transcripts, with some categories added deductively based on primary themes in the interview protocol (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). These categories included "college-going support," "reasons for going to college," and

"freshman year transition/adjustment" and had more detailed subcodes. For example, freshman year transition/adjustment included subcodes for "experience of diversity," "isolation," and "social activities," among others. These codes and subcodes were determined through an iterative process in which the researchers coded the same set of randomly selected interviews and then discussed their findings. Once an agreed upon set of codes was established, all interviews were coded by a first researcher. A second researcher also reviewed the transcript and flagged coding disagreements, and the two researchers then resolved coding disputes.

After the first wave of coding, researchers met to discuss preliminary findings. Following the approach in other studies based on the MCCS, we implemented a second wave of focused coding to explore two research questions: What is the range of within-group variation in how students perceive adjustment to life at an HWI, particularly in relation to forming a sense of campus belonging, and how does the adjustment process differ for those who came from PSRHS, compared with those who came from PWHS? The second wave moved from broad themes across interviews to focusing on experiences of adjustment and belonging. We employed an open coding approach to examine responses related to social engagement, participation, and psychosocial adaptation to campus (Katsiaficas, Suarez-Orozco, & Dias, 2015). Selected excerpts were sorted by three categories related to high school racial-ethnic composition (primarily White high school, mixed race-ethnicity high school, primarily same race-ethnicity high school).[2] There were relatively few students who came from a mixed high school, in comparison to PWHS or PSRHS, and for this reason, this group is not highly salient in our analysis. Transcripts were then subcoded for topics in discussions of adjustment and belonging (for list, see Table 1), and these codes were analyzed for themes by high school composition group. In this process, codes were refined, clarified, and examples were chosen based on discussions between the authors about the meaning and patterns across codes (Mattis, Grayman, Cowie, Winston, Watson, & Jackson, 2008). Each transcript was coded by two coders, with an intercoder reliability of 91% (see Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, themes from each high school demographic category were compared for similarities and differences to explore how adjustment and belonging differed according to precollege context.

Table 1. Subcodes.

Code	Description
College adjustment	Specific reference to experiences or feelings of adjusting to life as college student
Stress	Discussion of feeling stressed and overwhelmed at college
Support	Discussion of feeling like they needed support (i.e., emotional, social)
Experience of diversity	Discussion of exposure to new experiences and perspectives and/or interacting with diverse populations
Fitting expectations	Discussion of feeling like there are expectations for how they should act or who they should be on campus
Supportive relationships	Discussion of importance of developing and building relationships in friendships, find community/network of support, and cope with difficulties in transition
Belonging	Explicit mention of feeling connected or comfortable on campus
Isolation	Discussion of feeling isolated or invisible on campus
Identity development	Discussion of feeling like on campus they have developed new parts of themselves or come to new understandings of who they are
Social activity	Discussion of spending time with friends, developing social relationships
Extracurricular activity	Engagement in an extracurricular activity but not specifically related to race/ ethnicity

Involvement in racial/ethnic extracurricular	Engagement in an extracurricular specifically oriented to race/ethnicity
Race/ethnic environment	Discussion of racial/ethnic environment on campus

Note. HS = High School.

Results

In our results, we first illustrate how the vast majority of our participants, regardless of high school background, described experiencing exceptional challenges as they transitioned to life as college students because of difficult social interactions that they attributed to racial-ethnic factors. Second, we show that high school racial-ethnic composition was associated with differences in who students believed to be responsible for their difficulties building inter-racial connections with other college students. Finally, we illustrate how racial-ethnic high school composition also shaped variance in the ways participants engaged with cocurricular social spaces in order to connect with peers and form a sense of campus belonging. For detailed information about the demographic characteristics of selected cases, please see Table 2.

Table 2. Pseudonyms and Key Demographic Information of Interview Subjects.

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	First-Generation Student Status (Yes/No)	College Attended	High School Demographics
Elena	Female	Latinx	Yes	Suburban State U	Primarily same race
Derrick	Male	African American/Black	No	Urban State U	Primarily same race
Julie	Female	African American/Black	No	Rural State U	Primarily White
Rosa	Female	Latinx	Yes	Suburban State U	Primarily same race
Irene	Female	Latinx	Yes	Suburban State U	Primarily same race
Ana	Female	Latinx	Yes	Urban State U	Primarily same race
Cari	Female	African American/Black	Yes	Urban Private U-North	Primarily White
Nailah	Female	African American/Black	No	Rural State U	Primarily White
Melanie	Female	Biracial and identity as African American/Black	No	Urban Private U-South	Mixed demographics
Alicia	Female	Latinx	No	Urban PrivateU-South	Primarily White
Maribel	Female	Latinx	Yes	Urban PrivateU-South	Primarily same race
Leonard	Male	African American/Black	Yes	Suburban State U	Primarily same race
Jeni	Female	Latinx	Yes	Urban Private U-North	Primarily White

Initial Shock and Feelings of Difference

The overwhelming majority (87.1%) described how their transition to college life felt shocking, overwhelming, or more difficult than expected. Students described how they had known adjusting to college and making friends

would be challenging but had underestimated how overwhelmingly foreign the environment would feel. Regardless of high school racial-ethnic composition, students noted feelings of isolation upon arriving to college as they struggled to connect with peers and encountered unexpected tensions during interracial social interactions. These findings were consistent across all colleges in the sample.[3]

Some students shared their sense of shock in feeling that they stood out on campus and described how the resulting isolation made it hard to adjust to their new life. Elena, a Latinx woman at Suburban State U where Latinx students were 8.7% of the student body, described how being part of a small minority made her feel like the lone representative of her racial-ethnic group:

> I didn't like it. I didn't know anybody and it was so huge. And all that I saw was White people. I just didn't like it at all. Especially cause I felt like I was the only Hispanic person there. You wouldn't really see many Hispanic people.

Elena specified that her discomfort stemmed directly from feelings of social isolation: "It's not that I didn't like the campus, it was just cause like I didn't know anybody, I didn't fit in. I felt really lonely, and it made me miss my mom. So I would just come home." Being surrounded by people Elena identified as culturally different stoked fears that she did not belong. Rather than lingering in a place she felt unwelcome, Elena made frequent trips home, where she did feel comfortable. Yet this coping strategy closed off opportunities to build the campus connections she sought, as she retreated from campus life.

Elena, like many of the students interviewed, was aware before college that she would be in the minority. Still, she hadn't realized how taxing it would be to manage the daily realities of feeling like an outsider without empathetic and supportive relationships. Elena described how she came to college motivated to serve as an example of upward mobility: "The main reason why I wanted to is because I always hear how its most just Caucasian people who go, and then also cause I know that if you don't go to school, you can't really get far." Still, Elena was overwhelmed by her experiences of marginalization in a primarily White environment.

For other students, entering an environment with many racially ethnically dissimilar others was not immediately alienating. They described initial excitement at the opportunity to form diverse friendships. But as these students found themselves unable to form interacial–ethnic relationships over time they felt frustrated. Derrick was a Black student at Urban State U, the most diverse university in our sample. Despite the fact that his institution was not primarily White, he still described his adjustment as "slow." "I wasn't expecting the diversity. Like, there's really a mixing pot of races, cultures, and backgrounds here at Urban State U. And, where I went to high school, it was mostly Black people." He did not feel overwhelmed by whiteness as Elena described. Yet the transition to an educational context that was so divergent from the one he left behind was more socially challenging than he anticipated. While Derrick did not describe campus diversity negatively, he and others mentioned feelings of discomfort, surprise, and loneliness when they encountered unexpected difficulties integrating across racial-ethnic groups.

Julie, a Black student attending Rural State U, also shared how she struggled to connect with students of other racial-ethnic groups in the campus environment:

> You don't really see [cross-racial interactions] a lot, because it's like majority White, and then the Blacks, they all hang together, and same for other races. It would only be like maybe two or three Black people in a class. So that was kinda hard for me. Being so used to being in an environment with mostly Blacks or Latinas…it was kinda hard going into a class with majority White…People just don't really talk to you.

Julie finally found a group of friends after attending a multicultural student orientation; however, she emphasized her continued difficulties in moving beyond racial-ethnic boundaries on a campus where everyone "hangs together" with their group.

The experiences of students like Elena, Derrick, and Julie are representative of how these Black and Latinx students had to manage challenges of marginalization while also attempting to navigate normal adjustment to college. Although the vast majority of students stated that they did not find the diversity they had expected on campus, a small group (7% of the sample) described fitting into campus life from the start and did not express any challenges with feelings of campus belonging. We did not find any reliable characteristics that indicated why this minority of participants had a transition that they perceived to be free of social interaction challenges.

Self- Versus Structural Attributions Based on High School Experiences

While our participants expressed feeling shock and difference regardless of high school background, the ways they interpreted and coped with these feelings varied based on high school contexts. Students from PSRHS often shared an awareness of having taken for granted their embeddedness within their ethnic-racial group and described how new feelings of difference stoked fears of being unprepared or unfit to be a college student. In contrast, students from PWHS were disappointed at what they perceived as a lack of diversity but did not express as much self-doubt in response to experiences of difference. These students tended to contextualize experiences of difference as part of broader racial-ethnic inequalities that normalize White speech and behavior while characterizing Black and Latinx students' differences as deficiency. They were less likely to perceive cultural misunderstandings as indicators of personal inadequacy.

Students who left high schools and communities in which they were surrounded by others like themselves noted surprise at their discomfort upon being surrounded by people who were not just of a different racial-ethnic group but also grew up in a dramatically different cultural community. One case of this pattern was Rosa who came from a PSRHS, where 10% of the student body was White. She shared her struggles adjusting to her new social environment:

> Because all my life every school I went to was Hispanics and so I feel more comfortable around Hispanic people. I don't know why, but I feel like that's why because I was never really in a school where it's just White people or any place where it's just White people.

Rosa described experiencing stress at encountering feelings of difference that made her feel self-conscious:

> Last year, I didn't really have friends in my classes…So, I still felt uncomfortable. Most of the time I wouldn't even want to talk just because I know I'm not dumb, but I feel like they would probably judge the way I talk cause most White people…I don't know. Words that they use is better than how I would talk. So, it would just make me feel like I would rather not talk. But when I'm walking around I don't feel like that.

Rosa's perception that she looked and spoke differently than her White classmates was not neutral; her feelings of difference fed fears that White students and faculty would doubt her academic abilities. This stemmed from her recognition that her White peers spoke in ways that matched the norm on campus, and her linguistic patterns might not only be judged as different but also deficient. Many other students from PSRHS described similar anxieties, and concerns that others assumed they were accepted to college primarily because of "diversity requirements."

Students' own uncertainty, coupled with feeling scrutinized by White classmates and faculty, heightened anxiety and self-consciousness in the classroom. The difficulties of managing normative adjustments to college life were

further complicated by this additional strain. Irene, a first-generation Latina student, came from a 95% Latinx high school to a 59% White college.

> It's just different from anything I've ever experienced. Going from my high school, everybody was Latino, 99% were Latinos. So going to a college where I was the minority, there was a different experience for me. The diversity—it was intimidating at first not being in a room full of Latinos.

After sharing high school with similar peers, Irene and others like her detailed how the stress of feeling different inhibited a sense of belonging and integration on campus. Irene added:

> I just didn't feel as comfortable there. I just felt like I was in a slump all the time…I had opportunities and stuff, but the school was so big that they weren't like, being offered to me the correct way, and I felt I couldn't take advantage of them. And, I don't know, it just made me dislike the school a bit.

Many students from PSRHS emphasized how they coped with feelings of difference by retreating from social interactions and classroom participation, out of fears of being judged to be inadequate. Irene, for example, recognized that her feelings of discomfort motivated her disengagement from college life. Similarly, Ana, a Latina student at Urban State U, transitioned from a high school in which 95% of students shared her race-ethnicity to a university in which only 24% of students did. Being in the minority for the first time inspired her to doubt herself:

> When you go and see people of a certain race, you think it's everybody. You get kind of timid and shy. You don't want to approach them cause you don't know what to expect…you don't wanna be judgmental but you kinda judge. Like I don't wanna mess with them or they're gonna think I'm stupid. Since my school was mostly Hispanics, like 99% it was really hard to go up to someone and be like, "Oh, hi, my name's this" because you're not used to it. You feel you can't. You don't know how to do it. That was tough.

Students like Rosa, Irene, and Ana encountered an entirely new sociocultural environment, while experiencing the identity-threatening effects of being in the minority for the first time. These students felt intimidated and self-conscious about feeling different, rather than identifying societal inequalities that frame White students' speech and behavior as the norm.

Although many students from PWHS also expressed disappointment that statistical and interactional diversity at college did not match their expectations, this disappointment was directed at the university rather than internalized. Students who had already navigated primarily White spaces demonstrated an awareness of how structural inequalities motivated the ways they were treated and thus did not express feelings of self-consciousness when considering their own experiences of difference. For example, Cari's transition from a high school that was 77.6% White to a university that was 61% White was not altogether a smooth one. A first-generation Black college student, she noted difficulty managing the college workload and scored highly on measures of financial distress. Cari also described the campus as an unwelcoming racial-ethnic environment but stated this was not a new or shocking experience to her:

> College is a bit more segregated. People are adults now, so they're fully brought up in their ways. I've seen a lot of people that have been blatantly disrespectful or racist to me. At work, in school, and classes. Someone will say, "I don't want to work with her cause she's Black"…But it doesn't really get under my skin or affect me. I don't care…screw her, take it or leave it. I can blend with any type of race or culture, I don't mind.

Cari noticed Urban Private U-North did not live up to its promise of being a welcoming place for all, but her previous experience with other racial-ethnic groups helped her feel confident in her ability to interact with

diverse groups. She ultimately interpreted her social difficulties to be the result of other student's prejudices, rather than her own shortcomings.

Other respondents from PWHS noted that their university was inauthentic in depicting racial tolerance on campus. These students directly criticized the very idea of their campus as diverse, rather than blaming themselves for difficulties integrating. For example, Nailah, a Black student from a 70% White high school who attended 65% White Rural State U, described feeling impressed at first by the racial-ethnic diversity on campus. However, over time, she discovered deeper challenges to building relationships across racial-ethnic lines: "Seeing so many people from different backgrounds was interesting because everyone comes from like different experiences. And developing a wider net of friends from different places was interesting as well." As the year continued deeper critiques emerged: "At first, I thought that everyone was like kumbaya, doesn't matter, and then I realized that there actually is a lot of tension at Rural State U because it's like very segregated. So that was a shock." Nailah became increasingly aware of the limited interactions and lack of understanding between racial-ethnic groups on campus over time, though she noted she still felt able to take advantage of new experiences.

Students who came from PWHS were more likely to identify their institution's responsibility in failing to create an inclusive and tolerant environment. They expressed how universities engaged in "false advertising," playing up diversity in superficial ways. One example was Melanie, a biracial female who identified as Black, came from a high school that was 45% White and transitioned to a college that was 55% White. She shared how both the institutional discourses and the ways that many students talked about race-ethnicity felt false and out of place:

> It is just like a bunch of White kids who don't really understand, at the very least, the historical aspect of race in America. They think it's so diverse at Urban PrivateU-North. It's like 90 percent White. Ok, that's an exaggeration. But it's a lot of White kids. They're like, "It's so diverse here, I love it, I love the diversity." And you're just like, "This is nothing, what are you talking about?" The administration also definitely plays up like their diverse aspects, as well. They would be like, "We have this and we have this, and we're so tolerant of everyone" and blah. It's just so strange.

Melanie took direct issue with the disconnect between discourses about race-ethnicity on campus and her actual experiences. She described having difficulty understanding the rationale behind how race-ethnicity was treated on campus, especially because these experiences diverged from dominant, "kumbaya" discourses. During her first week on campus, she encountered a Confederate flag decorating another student's door. Melanie was struck by the act itself and then felt even more shocked when the housing director declined to admonish the students responsible. Students like Nailah and Melanie expected diversity to operate differently in college, but over time perceived campus diversity to be superficial, hiding racial tensions that inhibited interaction between different racial-ethnic groups. They were not only upset by the microaggressions themselves but also their institutions' failure to acknowledge these tensions.

In summary, many of our participants expressed disappointment that the diversity on their campuses did not match their expectations and were surprised to discover a lack of open acceptance and engaged diversity. But students coming from PWHS were able to recognize structural barriers to healthy racial-ethnic interactions rather than blaming themselves. Students with little to no experience navigating a primarily White space were much more likely to feel self-doubt when they perceived they were not fitting in on campus and typically described greater struggles in developing a sense of belonging within the campus climate.

Race-Ethnicity Focused Cocurricular Spaces as Sources of Support and Coping
Our participants from high schools with different racial-ethnic composition varied not only in their perceptions of their struggles to fit in but also in how they used university resources to cope. On the whole, when participants had difficulties fitting in socially, many sought out structured supports through clubs, student

centers, tutoring groups, or informal social groups. At the same time, participants from PSRHS sought out others with similar racial-ethnic backgrounds to process their shared challenges and to find belonging, while those from PWHS tended to use campus clubs and activities as tools to facilitate their engagement with diverse others who shared common interests. Students rarely indicated that they intentionally sought out these spaces in order to cope with racial-ethnic tensions on campus. Still, many participants expressed how important their engagement in cocurricular activities was for their ability to build connections with other students and develop a sense of belonging on campus.

Students from PSRHS described how they sought out groups of same race-ethnicity peers because in these spaces they felt more comfortable accepting and celebrating their racial-ethnic background. These groups also provided them with emotional support as they managed shared feelings of exclusion and discomfort interacting with White students on campus. These students shared their need to be around similar others in order to "be themselves." For example, Maribel arrived at Urban PrivateU-South as a first-generation college student and an immigrant. From a PSRHS where 96% of the student body was Latinx, she shared how she sought out others like her when she realized she would have difficulties connecting with White students:

> I joined every Latino organization when I got to Urban PrivateU-South because I don't know how to talk to White people. Coming from where I come from, I did not know how. Like I was trying to talk to people, and I'd make a joke, and sometimes I wanted to use the Spanish words to make it funnier but I'm like—yeah. They were all nice to me, but they would talk about things that I knew nothing about. Online shopping or that kind of thing, and I was like, ahhh, this is all privilege. So I looked at every Latino organization, and I got really involved with one. That's when I started to get really into college.

Maribel noted that her discomfort with White peers was not about how people treated her but rather about a gap between their backgrounds, interests, and lived experiences. But ultimately, she did not feel like she belonged on campus until she found a space where she was able to connect with others who shared her cultural background.

Other participants from PSRHS described how participation in same race-ethnicity spaces helped them process feelings of difference and get more comfortable managing the campus climate. They shared how it was only when they began to talk to others like them that they realized they were not alone in struggling to fit in. For some, groups that celebrated racial-ethnic minority status also provided opportunities to push back on the problematic racial-ethnic climate. For example, Leonard, a Black, first-generation student who attended Suburban State U, came from a PSRHS where 89% of students shared his racial-ethnic background. When he got to college, he was bothered by stereotypes White students had about his race; he "had a hard time dealing with it." Several months into his freshman year, he found a club called the Black Men's Initiative. He shared that this helped him cope with negative stereotypes about his race:

> What we do is we image bust. When some other people see a black man in a suit, they think of them as going to a funeral or like an interview or something. We cut that stereotypical thing. We dress up just to look nice. And we have a 100% graduation rate. You don't have no choice but to graduate because we stay on top of our work and we hold each other accountable for our actions…The BMI really helped me start off right.

Through the Black Men's Initiative, Leonard benefited from a space to express pride in his racial-ethnic identity and opportunities to fight hurtful stereotypes. Leonard further noted that his engagement in this group supported his professional and academic growth, while helping him form a sense of belonging as a college student despite negative stereotypes about his race.

Students from PWHS also described being involved in cocurricular activities but often focused on how these spaces demonstrated diversity and helped them build connections with others within a diverse environment. Jeni, a Latinx female from a PWHS (91% White), talked about joining a Latinx student association because it demonstrated that the university "embraces diversity and accepts everybody no matter what: religious, ethnic, sexual orientation, whatever. It's just everybody there really embraces everybody. Not just co-existing but recognizing those people and embracing them." Jeni later described how she also joined a campus theater group so she could "talk to people with common interests, it helped me make friends." Other students from PWHS detailed participate in campus sports, arts clubs, or professional-development organizations as a way to build friendships through exploring mutual interests. They described their engagement with campus organizations and activities as a tool to motivate diverse interactions they had hoped would come more naturally within social life at college. They did not frame these clubs as spaces for coping with racial-ethnic tension, as students from PSRHS did.

Our analyses show how cocurricular spaces provided our participants support in managing feelings of isolation, difference, and lack of belonging. Students noted appreciating how cocurricular activities helped them connect with others and pursue their interests. Yet, how students engaged with these activities differed in relation to their high school racial-ethnic composition. Students from PSRHS connected with a critical mass of like others who were facing similar challenges through cocurricular activities, helping them contextualize their experiences and feel less alone while managing the challenges of navigating their first year. They also described how joining cocurricular spaces focused on their racial-ethnic group allowed them to celebrate and embrace their own identity and mitigate feelings of self-consciousness. Students from PWHS also discussed how these activities facilitated connecting with others over common interests and developing a sense of belonging on campus. These students, however, already tended to identify their experiences with racial-ethnic tension as a symptom of structural inequalities. These students did not need to find peers like them to confirm that struggles to fit in were structural rather than personal. Importantly, they still described the central role of these cocurricular spaces to overcome the structural barriers that inhibited their feelings of belonging.

Discussion

It has been reported that Black and Latinx students transitioning to HWIs often experience a rude awakening when their university environment is not as diverse or integrated as they hoped. They may initially buy into the image of diversity as it is depicted on university fliers: integrated groups of smiling white, brown, and black faces (Pike & Kuh 2006; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). But during their first year on campus, they are confronted with feelings of racial-ethnic isolation or tension that generates dissonance between their hopes and reality. Understanding and addressing this dissonance is critical to directly increasing belonging and indirectly increasing academic achievement, persistence, and better psychosocial well-being (Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele, 2009; Murphy et al., 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Our findings show that students coming from PWHS were much more likely to identify racial-ethnic inequalities as motivating their discomfort, rather than internalizing the responsibility for their feelings of discomfort due to difference. In contrast, students from PSRHS often described feelings of personal responsibility for the social-adjustment difficulties they faced, as they managed disappointment with campus life while also learning to cope with feelings of "otherness" in their immediate educational context for the first time. Students from different high schools also used campus organizations and social groups differently to cope with these racial-ethnic tensions on campus; students from PSRHS sought out groups of others like them to find solidarity and support, while students from PWHS used organized social activities as opportunities to find common ground with diverse students.

Our results contribute to understandings of the college transition for Black and Latinx emerging adults in two ways. First, our findings reinforce that experiences of social belonging are crucial as students cope with the stress of the college transition (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2011). As emerging adults, students are faced with strengthening their sense of self and place in society, which develops through their interactions with others in their social contexts (Arnett, 2000; Spencer, 2006). Our evidence illustrates how Black and Latinx students' meaning-making processes in the face of cultural mismatch and racial-ethnic incongruence shape their sense of belonging, and especially illustrates the importance of previous experiences in guiding interpretations of new social circumstances. When students interpreted experiences of racial-ethnic tension as evidence of their inadequacies—internalizing responsibility for these issues—they were more likely to experience belonging uncertainty and to conclude there was no place for them on campus, which ultimately motivated their retreat from college life. In contrast, when students interpreted experiences of racial-ethnic tension as evidence of persistent racial-ethnic inequality on campus—externalizing responsibility for these problems—they became critical of their institution but were less likely to experience belonging uncertainty and to express concerns about their own abilities to succeed in the college environment.

Second, this study demonstrates that students' perceptions of ethnic incongruence and cultural mismatch overlap to shape Black and Latinx emerging adults' transition to college. This nexus is evident in broader meanings that students draw from these experiences and their interpretations about their (lack of) fit within the college environment. Racial-ethnic incongruence was salient when students felt that "people here don't look like me." As Elena stated, "all I saw was White people." Cultural mismatch was experienced in moments when students observed that "people here don't act like me," like Maribel, who said, "I don't know how to talk to White people." The way students develop a sense of belonging on campus was not as linked to the distinctions between these perceptions—that is, whether they were due to cultural misunderstandings or racial-ethnic stereotypes—as to the interpretation of who was at fault for these experiences of difference. Students from PSRHS were more likely to internalize responsibility for feelings of difference, taking negative experiences as indicators that they personally did not fit in among other college students. This processing triggered feelings of belonging uncertainty: that "people like me do not belong here." In contrast, students from PWHS tended to externalize responsibility for feelings of difference and to criticize their educational institutions for creating environments where racial-ethnic tensions went unchecked.

Our findings have implications for universities in supporting Black and Latinx emerging adults through their transition. Universities need to take within racial-ethnic group diversity into account when providing resources and supports. While the majority of Black and Latinx students in our study benefited from their participation in cocurricular activities to help them connect with peers, students' previous experiences with diversity shaped how they interpreted and took advantage of the social resources available to them. Students coming from PSRHS might need targeted emotional support and resources to help contextualize and cope with feelings of difference. These students can benefit from the availability of counterspaces—often created through clubs and cocurricular activities oriented specifically toward issues of race-ethnicity—because these spaces can help these students to cope with their experiences as part of a collective and allow them to share coping strategies and resources with like others, expanding their supports beyond individual coping resources.

Our data also speak to the need for universities to make a concerted effort to match discourses with institutionally facilitated opportunities for interactional diversity. Idealized representations of college diversity are pervasive within popular media, social discourses, and university marketing; the modern university is often presented as welcoming, inclusive, and diverse (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Iverson, 2007). Our results indicate students' expectations influence how they interpret challenges. Idealized portrayals are not only disconnected from many students' actual experiences but may create expectations that may lead to disappointment when college life is not experienced as inclusive as was advertised. It is important that universities acknowledge

challenges that Black and Latinx students face. Students in our sample seemed particularly upset by the institutional *denial* of the dissonance they felt between discourse and reality, which only exacerbated feelings of frustration and marginalization. Universities must also ensure they are creating conditions that foster interactional diversity, rather than simply increasing statistical diversity. In this regard, it would be helpful for university administrations to facilitate open and honest conversations about how issues of race-ethnicity shape student relationships. Overall, we recommend that universities pay closer attention to the ways that historically marginalized students make meaning of the social–interactional challenges they face in order to develop supports that are rooted in students' experiences.

Limitations

While our study highlights certain aspects of Black and Latinx students' experiences of belonging in their transition to college, it identifies two areas where further research is needed. First, our sample came from Midwestern universities and focused on Black and Latinx students. Our results do not fully represent the experiences of other students of color or Black and Latinx students attending primarily White Institutions in other parts of the country. Second, our analysis focused on participants' experiences during the first year of college—we did not observe how students' perceptions of belonging changed over the course of their college trajectory, and their recollection of their high school experiences were retrospective. Future studies would do well to incorporate a longitudinal perspective, observing how differing high school contexts are experienced in the moment, and then observing how these experiences play a role in adjustment and persistence throughout students' college trajectories.

Conclusion

As our results demonstrate, Black and Latinx college students arrive on campus with substantial variation in their precollege experience in managing complex racial-ethnic climates and developing relationships with students of other racial-ethnic backgrounds. High school experiences with other racial-ethnic groups matter for the way that these Black and Latinx emerging adults perceive and interpret experiences of cultural and racial-ethnic mismatch. This is important because the ways these students differentially interpret and cope with experiences of difference shapes how these emerging adults explore new aspects of themselves, try out new roles, and form a sense of campus belonging. Those who have not had the opportunity to develop coping strategies to manage difficult racial-ethnic interactions in high school appear to be most in need of institutionally facilitated opportunities to help develop these skills.

Appendix

Selected Parts of Interview Protocol

Transition to college

1. Please tell me a little bit more about yourself and what college was like for you.
2. How would you describe your initial transition to college?
3. How would you describe your experience during your first semester?
4. During your second and third semesters?
5. How was freshman year different from what you expected?
6. How did you manage the freedom and independence of being a college student?

Social experiences on campus

1. Tell me a little bit about the friends that you made on campus.
2. What types of activities or events did you participate in on campus?
3. Did you go to any other events that they had hosted or anything like that?

4. How would you describe like the racial interactions on campus?
5. Tell me a little bit about your interactions with your professors.

Overall impressions
1. What were your most positive college experiences over the last year?
2. What were your most negative college experiences over the last year?
3. What was the most stressful part of college during your first year?
4. Thinking about that most stressful period, can you tell me the people who helped you through that?
5. What advice would you give a high school student like yourself?
6. What advice would you give to a University administrator trying to help a student like yourself?

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Notes

1. Emerging adulthood is a life stage characterized by identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and processing broad possibilities for the future (Arnett, 2000, 2016; Katsiaficas, Suárez-Orozco, & Dias, 2015).
2. At Wave 1, participants provided the name and location of their high school. Demographic information was obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data. Schools were grouped into three categories to facilitate comparison within and between students with similar high school racial-ethnic experiences.
3. Despite the fact that Urban State U had the most diverse student population in the sample (only 38% White), close analysis of students' experiences revealed that students from this school characterized the difficulties they experienced during their transition similarly to students from other colleges in the sample.

Open Practices

Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered. The raw data are not openly available for download. The analysis code and materials used in this study are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author. No aspects of the study were preregistered.

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