

University Climate and Psychological Adjustment: African American Women's Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions in the United States

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Abstract : A major concern of university leaders worldwide is how to create environments where students from diverse racial/ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds can thrive. Over the past decade or so in the United States, African American women have done exceedingly well in terms of college enrollment, academic performance, and completion. However, the relative academic successes of African American women in higher education has in some ways overshadowed social challenges many Black women continue to encounter on college campuses in the United States. Within predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in particular, there is consistent evidence that many Black students experience racially hostile climates. However, research studies on racial climates within PWIs have mostly focused on cross-sectional comparisons of minority and majority group experiences, and few studies have examined campus racial climate in relation to short- and longer-term well-being. One longitudinal study reported that African American women's psychological well-being was positively related to their comfort in cross-racial interactions (a concept closely related to campus climate). Thus, our primary research question was: Do African American women's perceptions of campus climate (tension and positive association) during their freshman year predict their reports of psychological distress and well-being (self-acceptance) during their sophomore year? Participants were part of a longitudinal survey examining African American college students' academic identity development, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. The final subsample included 134 self-identified African American/Black women enrolled in PWIs. Accounting for background characteristics (mother's education, family income, interracial contact, and prior levels of outcomes), we employed hierarchical regression to examine relationships between campus racial climate during freshman year and psychological adjustment one year later. Both regression models significantly predicted African American women's psychological outcomes (for distress, $F(7,91) = 4.34, p < .001$; and for self-acceptance, $F(7,90) = 4.92, p < .001$). Although none of the controls were significant predictors, perceptions of racial tension on campus were associated with both distress and self-acceptance. More perceptions of tension were related to African American women's greater psychological distress the following year ($B = 0.22, p = .01$). Additionally, racial tension predicted later self-acceptance in the expected direction: Higher first-year reports of racial tension were related to less positive attitudes toward the self during the sophomore year ($B = -0.16, p = .04$). However, perceptions that it was normative for Black and White students to socialize on campus (or positive association scores) were unrelated to psychological distress or self-acceptance. Findings highlight the relevance of examining multiple facets of campus racial climate in relation to psychological adjustment, with possible emphasis on the import of racial tension on African American women's psychological adjustment. Results suggest that negative dimensions of campus racial climate may have lingering effects on psychological well-being, over and above more positive aspects of climate. Thus, programs targeted toward improving student relations on campus should consider addressing cross-racial tensions.

Keywords : higher education, psychological adjustment, university climate, university students

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