

Shifting Contexts and Shifting Identities: Campus Race-related Experiences, Racial Identity, and Achievement Motivation among Black College Students during the Transition to College

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Abstract : There has been recent renewed attention to Black students' experiences at predominantly White U.S. universities (PWIs), e.g., the #BBUM ("Being Black at the University of Michigan"), "I too am Harvard" social media campaigns, and subsequent student protest activities nationwide. These campaigns illuminate how many minority students encounter challenges to their racial/ethnic identities as they enter PWI contexts. Students routinely report experiences such as being ignored or treated as a token in classes, receiving messages of low academic expectations by faculty and peers, being questioned about their academic qualifications or belonging, being excluded from academic and social activities, and being racially profiled and harassed in the broader campus community due to race. Researchers have linked such racial marginalization and stigma experiences to student motivation and achievement. One potential mechanism is through the impact of college experiences on students' identities, given the relevance of the college context for students' personal identity development, including personal beliefs systems around social identities salient in this context. However, little research examines the impact of the college context on Black students' racial identities. This study examined change in Black college students' (N=329) racial identity beliefs over the freshman year at three predominantly White U.S. universities. Using cluster analyses, we identified profile groups reflecting different patterns of stability and change in students' racial centrality (importance of race to overall self-concept), private regard (personal group affect/group pride), and public regard (perceptions of societal views of Blacks) from beginning of year (Time 1) to end of year (Time 2). Multinomial logit regression analyses indicated that the racial identity change clusters were predicted by pre-college background (racial composition of high school and neighborhood), as well as college-based experiences (racial discrimination, interracial friendships, and perceived campus racial climate). In particular, experiencing campus racial discrimination related to high, stable centrality, and decreases in private regard and public regard. Perceiving racial climates norms of institutional support for intergroup interactions on campus related to maintaining low and decreasing in private and public regard. Multivariate Analyses of Variance results showed change cluster effects on achievement motivation outcomes at the end of students' academic year. Having high, stable centrality and high private regard related to more positive outcomes overall (academic competence, positive academic affect, academic curiosity and persistence). Students decreasing in private regard and public regard were particularly vulnerable to negative motivation outcomes. Findings support scholarship indicating both stability in racial identity beliefs and the importance of critical context transitions in racial identity development and adjustment outcomes among emerging adults. Findings also are consistent with research suggesting promotive effects of a strong, positive racial identity on student motivation, as well as research linking awareness of racial stigma to decreased academic engagement.

Keywords : diversity, motivation, learning, ethnic minority achievement, higher education

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