

# Unlocking opportunity

The importance of student–faculty interactions in promoting Black students’ academic identity

- There is a lingering racial gap in US college student graduations.
- Dr Kevin Cokley of the University of Michigan studies the impact of racial and ethnic identity on academic achievement.
- Together with fellow psychologists and graduate students, he examined the importance of student–faculty interactions in promoting Black students’ academic identity.
- The researchers surveyed students at historically Black and historically White colleges and universities.
- What they learned clarifies what encourages Black students to persist in school.

On 29th June this year, the United States Supreme Court sent a shockwave through higher education when it outlawed race-conscious admissions. The practice, which gained momentum after the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, encouraged greater diversity at historically and/or predominantly White institutions (H/ PWIs). As a result of the judgement, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are expecting an influx of new applicants. HBCUs punch above their weight in terms of the output of Black graduates and offer a more inclusive environment. So, could the Supreme Court judgement trigger a significant shift in Black student enrolment, and what can H/PWIs do to attract more Black students?

Dr Kevin Cokley is part of a corps of leading researchers shaping our understanding of the experience of Black students in the United States. It’s a rapidly evolving area of study contesting historical assumptions. As a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, Cokley’s research critically re-examines the impact of racial and ethnic identity on academic achievement. What he has learned challenges the notion that Black students are anti-intellectual, yet the underachievement of Black students is, in his words, ‘one of the most pressing educational issues of our time’. His latest work with fellow psychology researchers has uncovered fresh insights into what Black students value in tertiary education and, importantly, what encourages their intention to persist in school.

## The lingering racial gap

According to the US Department of Education, college graduation rates have a lingering racial gap. While nearly 68% of all White students graduate within six years, only 45.7% of Black students do. HBCUs are a potent force in Black tertiary education in the United States. They serve only 0.1% of the overall student population but enrol 10% of the country’s Black students. Furthermore, HBCUs produce 20% of Black graduates overall and 27% of graduates in STEM subjects. However, H/PWIs, by virtue of their pure number, still enrol most Black students. Therefore, there is significant value in research that guides educators and policymakers to encourage Black students at both HBCUs and H/PWIs to persist in school.

## Historically Black colleges and universities are a potent force in Black tertiary education.

For Cokley and fellow researchers, the university environment is crucial in Black college students’ academic attitudes. However, ‘university environment’ is a broad term, and there are research areas needing further understanding. In their latest study, the team focused on one of those – the importance of interactions with faculty in promoting Black students’ academic identity, especially interactions that respect their cultural experiences and background. The researchers hypothesised that universities providing culturally sensitive environments and supportive engagement with faculty encourage Black students to persist in school. The question was to what degree this was true for HBCUs and H/PWIs.

## Expectations of caring

The researchers surveyed 413 Black college students across multiple HBCUs and H/PWIs, at different years of study. Through an online survey, they asked the students to rate the quality of student–professor interactions, including the perception of caring and respect by the professors; the students’ attitudes towards academic progress and disengagement, and their intention to persist in their studies; and their overall impression of how welcoming they perceived the university environment.



Interactions with faculty are essential in promoting Black students' academic identity, especially interactions that respect their cultural experiences and background.



The university environment is crucial in Black college students' academic attitudes.



H/PWIs have a moral and ethical imperative to make their campus environments more culturally welcoming for Black students.



For Cokley, the underachievement of Black students is 'one of the most pressing educational issues of our time'.

It became clear that students who felt their teachers were caring and respectful also tended to see their college as a positive and supportive place; notably, they were more likely to see academic success as important. This was true for students at HBCUs and H/PWIs. Interestingly, a positive college atmosphere and respectful teacher–student interactions played a more crucial role in shaping the academic attitudes of HBCU students than H/PWI students. Cokley and his colleagues suggest one plausible explanation is that Black students attending H/PWIs are less likely to *expect* explicitly caring and encouraging behaviours from faculty and are more inclined to distance their most vulnerable selves – their academic self-evaluations – from the university environment as a coping mechanism.

### A competitive advantage?

The standout insight from this research is the importance Black students place on a humanised education environment on campus – one with positive psychological, social, and cultural support – in developing a healthy attitude towards academics and their own academic identity. Cokley and his colleagues point to the value of culturally validating environments, caring student–faculty interactions, and culturally affirming curricula that are more likely

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to be evident at HBCUs. However, their research suggests a caveat: Black students are more likely to *expect* this kind of environment at HBCUs. Such campuses should be aware of this and not rely on their historical roots for student recruitment.

Unless there is a dramatic shift in the numbers of Black students to HBCUs in light of the Supreme Court judgement, most in the US will still attend H/PWIs. It is, therefore, incumbent upon H/PWIs to make their campus environments more culturally welcoming for Black students and their faculty more caring and respectful. If Cokley and his colleagues are correct that many of those students have low expectations for a welcoming H/PWI environment, imagine the positive impact if H/PWIs made a more concerted effort of changing those expectations by cultivating culturally sensitive and supportive university environments conducive to Black student success. They have a moral and ethical imperative to do so, and a financial one, too – the US Supreme Court may have handed HBCUs, especially those with excess capacity, something of a competitive advantage in attracting fee-paying students and funders.

## Personal response

**What is the most straightforward and impactful way that H/PWIs can make their campuses more culturally welcoming for Black students?**

Given the negative attention placed on Black students during debates about affirmative action, H/PWIs should create spaces on campus that celebrate Black culture and affirm the presence of Black students. These spaces could serve multiple purposes, including holding formal and informal social gatherings, as well as allowing Black students to study together. Additionally, H/PWIs could implement departmental trainings that emphasise the importance of faculty cultivating warm and positive relationships with Black students.

**What are the most common reasons for the inertia to do so?**

Racist incidents at H/PWIs are well-documented, with Black students being disproportionately the targets. For example, affirmative action bake sales, a form of campus protest that charges students different prices based on race and gender, have been organised at many schools across the United States. This type of protest is especially harmful to Black students as they are charged the lowest amount, essentially communicating that they have unfair benefits because they are Black. Being called a racial epithet is one of the most commonly experienced racist incidents among Black students. H/PWIs have a responsibility to proactively create a welcoming environment for Black students and to send strong messages

that anti-blackness and targeting of Black students will not be tolerated.

**Where are further research opportunities to contribute to what you learned in this study?**

One area for which there is virtually no research is examining the impact on Black students of being called a racial epithet in an educational environment, especially when there is a tepid response by the school. We understand the general negative impact of racial microaggressions, but being called a racial epithet is a racial macroaggression as it is not subtle or ambiguous. Black students appear to be more likely to be on the receiving end of racial epithets compared to other students, so it is important to better understand how this experience (along with other examples of anti-Blackness) in a university environment specifically impact Black students.

**How do you think the US Supreme Court's outlawing of race-conscious admissions will ultimately impact opportunities for Black students?**

Obviously the number of Black students on college campuses, especially at elite schools, will likely decrease. Degrees from elite schools typically provide the best return on your college investment. Thus, having fewer Black students at elite schools will result in Black students having less access to top internships, less access to top jobs, and being less likely to achieve higher salaries. These reduced opportunities will exacerbate the existing racial disparities in income and wealth.

## Details



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## Bio

Kevin Cokley, PhD, is the University Diversity and Social Transformation Professor and Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan and serves as Associate Chair for Diversity Initiatives. He studies the psychosocial experiences of African American students and is currently exploring the impostor phenomenon and its relationship to academic outcomes.

## Collaborators

- Dr Ramya Garba
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## Further reading

Cokley, K, et al, (2023) [Student-faculty interactions, university environment, and academic attitudes among Black college students: the role of school racial composition](#), *The Journal of Higher Education*, 94(4), 444–472.

