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How Black Students Cope With Racism on White Campuses

On many predominantly white campuses, black students increasingly are instituting a self-imposed segregation. These practices serve a number of purposes. In the main, self-segregation appears to be a defense mechanism to insulate black students from the harsh realities of institutional racism.

by Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes

MOST ASSESSMENTS OF the state of African-American students in predominantly white colleges and universities have relied heavily on numbers, such as enrollment rates, grade point averages, and graduation rates. Yet a deeper examination of the experiences of black students in these places requires something more than numbers gathered in school records and surveys or in classroom testing. We need to listen closely to what black American students tell us about what happens to them and how they feel, act, and think.

On entering predominantly white colleges and universities black students soon become aware of an essentially white campus culture. An honors student at a university in the Southwest discussed her feelings about being a black person in a predominantly white institution: "Everything, everywhere I look, everywhere I turn, right, left, is white."

Black students are pressured to give up their identities and to adapt to the surrounding white culture with its distinctive white middle-class ways of talking, dressing, and acting — to become, as another black student put it, "Afro-Saxon." This student also reported on her trip to an Ivy League university as part of the process of choosing a college:

I applied to a lot of different schools besides here, and I got accepted to this Ivy League school. And I went up there, checked it out. One reason I didn't go was because it reeked of whiteness. I was only there for two days, and after one day I wanted to leave. And I mean, really, it just reeked, everywhere I went, reeked of old white men, just lily-whiteness, oozing from the corners! I wanted to

leave. And I knew that socially I would just be miserable. I talked to other black students; I talked to all of them because there aren't a lot. I said, "Do you like it here?" And they said, "No, we're miserable." I asked, "Well then, why are you here?" And they said, "Because I'm black; it's Ivy League. I need everything I possibly could get." So, I said, "You're willing to be miserable for this?" They said, "Yes." Then they asked me where else I was going. One black female told me to go to the state university, "Don't come here." She was dead serious!

The students reported being alienated and miserable, yet because an Ivy League degree would give them a boost in the outside white world, they were resigned to the indignities of that milieu. One reason for this alienating environment is that college desegregation since the 1960s has not brought fundamental changes in the character and cultural norms of white institutions. For the most part, white regents, administrators, faculty members, staff, and students have shown little willingness to incorporate black values, interests, or history into the core of campus culture.

At predominantly white colleges most campus activities reflect white student and faculty interests and traditions. In a study of black students at predominantly black and predominantly white colleges Walter Allen found that 62 percent of black students on white campuses, but just one third on black campuses, felt that the campus activities there did not relate to their interests. This situation encourages black students to congregate in their own groups and plan their own activities, a reaction that often brings white condemnation. An undergraduate explained how this can be problematic:

It's a constant battle dealing with racism. It is so much a part of everything. To integrate means simply to be white. It doesn't mean fusing the two cultures; it simply means to be white. They have no reason to know our culture. But we must, in order to survive, know everything about their culture. Racism is simply preferring straight hair to an Afro; that's certainly more acceptable in our

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society today. Black vernacular, it's not seen as a cultural expression, it's seen as a speech problem. When you look at something as simple as just a group of people talking, black people are given much more, a much higher, regard if they are seen in an all-white group than they would if they were to be seen in an all-black group. If you're seen in an all-white group laughing and talking, you're seen as respectable, and probably taking care of something important. You're not wasting time. You're all right. But if you're in an all-black group, regardless if they can even hear your conversation, white people think you're congregated to take over the world.

For some first-year students the encounter with a white campus brings significant culture shock. A black community leader who speaks at first-year student orientations charged that many black parents do not prepare their children adequately for what a white college setting will be like:

Kids come to this university with blinders on, that their parents put on them. They've been through the university, they've been through corporate America, because a lot of the kids who've made it to the university are coming from middle-class America, suburbia, from racist, white suburban high schools, which is minor league compared to what they're going to face on these campuses.

Why do some black parents fail to prepare their children fully for racism in the outside world? Some blacks suggest that it is because black parents, like white parents, try to protect their children from pain and particularly from the pain that they have experienced themselves. Perhaps too some black parents keep hoping that the situation has improved since they were in college.

Problems With White Students

The pervasiveness of white culture on campus brings not only subtle pressures to conform to white standards of dress, language, and group behavior but also blatant discrimination. Several respondents discussed how they became fully aware of what it meant to be black in the United States when they encountered flagrant hostility and discrimination on campus. One young woman, a college graduate now working in administration for a state agency, reported on racist joking:

I have to say that I've gotten bitter. Last summer, I can remember people telling jokes. Every day there was a racial joke. Supposedly, some of them are your friends. How can they not mean any harm?

White students may not realize how offensive and troubling racist jokes can be; others may tell such jokes intentionally because they know the jokes cause pain. For the

latter, racist humor may be an outlet for passive aggression. Half a century ago Gunnar Myrdal pointed out that white jokes, stories, and popular fiction about blacks act as a "sounding board for and as a magnifier of popular prejudices" about black inferiority.

Many white college students hold firmly to negative stereotypes about black youngsters, views they probably learned before they came to college. An administrator at a western university discussed the attitudes of some white students about "dirty" black high school students who came there for summer college preparation and athletic programs:

Somebody will have the idea that the dorm is exclusively theirs, so therefore we can't have these "germy, diseasey, dirty, filthy" black kids live in their dormitory. So that's one obstacle that we have to deal with every year, that our kids don't belong there. The dorms rent rooms out all summer to all different kinds of groups. But, if anything goes wrong, our group gets blamed for it. If anything gets broken, it's always our group. Black kids are seen as a gang. They must be on drugs, or crazy or something. When the kids eat food in the cafeteria, at first, until the college kids get used to them being there, they say, "What are they doing here? Why don't they have a separate time and sit somewhere else? We don't want to mix and mingle with them."

A student at a university in the South also reported encountering stereotypical assumptions about black students:

That's the first question they'll ask you: "Are you an athlete?" Professors, students, everybody here will ask you, "Are you an athlete?" When you say, "No," they respond, "Oh!" And it's like you got here because you're black.

Subtle Discrimination

Much of the discrimination we have seen discussed so far seems blatant and motivated by malevolent intentions. However, middle-class African Americans also encounter what John Calmore has termed "subtle discrimination" resulting from a tendency to relate most easily to people like ourselves. There is an "unconscious failure to extend to a minority the same recognition of humanity, and hence the same sympathy and care, given as a matter of course to one's own group." A college student gave a common example:

Here in my dorm, there are four black girls. Me and my roommates look nothing alike. And the other two are short, and I'm tall. White students called me by my roommate's name the whole semester. It's like they put their shutters on when they see a black person coming. And the few black people that do get along with the other students, they seem to sort of put on a facade. They pretend to be something they're not.

Whether the differential treatment is subtle or unconscious discrimination does not matter; it is still painful and enervating. One reaction is to confront it verbally. Another is to be resigned to it and to put on a mask that hides one's true feelings.

"They put their shutters on when they see a black person coming."

A young lawyer in an eastern city noted some of the other assumptions white students make about black students:

In law school, there were some whites who were offended because I was smart. The teacher would ask the question and point to me, and they didn't think I should have an answer. And I would have a correct answer. But then they started to respect me for it, and they would tell me that: "Hey, you beat us on that; we knew you would have known that," or "What happened? Did you study all night?"

Like others in our study this respondent spoke about the personal testing, competency testing, that black Americans must pass to receive any degree of white acceptance. Once accepted, moreover, a new problem may kick in. Certain black students may be put in a bind if they become the measuring rods for other black students. Because black students are often in a small statistical minority on historically white campuses, some of them may come to accept white views of their accomplishments and even white views of how they should see themselves in regard to other black Americans.

A graduate student at a predominantly white university in the South recently noted the pain of accomplishment in a discussion with the senior author:

One problem that you often face as a smart black person is that whites have a tendency to overemphasize their admiration of your success, as if you are a strange bird among your own people.

And, as always, black students have to face the assumption that they have momentous advantages over comparable white students because of government programs like "affirmative action." Many whites question whether middle-class blacks should even be credited with their achievements. The stereotypical notion about blacks' unfair advantages is widespread. In a 1990 National Opinion Research Center nationwide survey, 69 percent of white Americans said it was likely that today "a white person won't get a job or promotion while an equally or less qualified black person gets

one instead." Conservative commentators often cite the stigma of affirmative action programs in both educational and job settings as the reason why such programs should be abolished, yet they miss the essential point that the stigma is not in the programs themselves but in the prejudices of the whites making the evaluations. This white stigmatization of black achievements causes black Americans much pain and frustration.

Professors as Obstacles

Analyses of the difficulties of black students in white colleges and universities have often neglected the role of white faculty members and administrators. Many observers would expect a university setting, in the North, South, Midwest, or West, to be a cosmopolitan place generally free of overt racial discrimination. The fact that professors in a particular university are drawn from many different graduate schools and regions of the country reinforces this assumption of cosmopolitanism. Yet the reality in all parts of the country seems to be that some white and other nonblack professors can create major hurdles. A student at a western university commented on her graduate school:

I had a professor who treated me so badly during this particular quarter in school that several white students came to the assumption that the professor was a racist, because it had been so obvious that the treatment that I had received in the class was unfair.

"Whites tend to overemphasize their admiration of your success, as if you are a strange bird among your own people."

One frustrating aspect of being black on a predominantly white campus is the chronic inability of many white faculty members and administrators to see black students as individuals rather than as representatives of their racial group, thereby failing to give them the kind of academic and professional advice they are due as students. One graduate student described a black undergraduate's experiences with the chair of her department:

A black undergraduate in my department is doing some research on black and white achievement in college. One of her advisers was once the head of a rather prestigious organization in my field, not to mention chair of the

department. Apparently she assumed that this one undergraduate somehow spoke for all black people. And this professor would ask her things like, "Well, I don't know what you people want. First you want to be called Negro, then you want to be called black. Now you want to be called African American. What do you people want anyway? And why don't black people show up in class more? Why is it that I can't get enough blacks to sit in on my classes?" So every now and then that sort of racist mentality comes out.

Even in graduate school, a black student's work often has to be better than average to head off the assumption of incompetence, particularly in writing, as a recent Ph.D. from a northeastern university noted:

I would say that occasionally with individual professors that I've had along the way there are racist assumptions. They're surprised if you've done a good piece of work, especially when it comes to writing. I think there are a lot of stereotypes about blacks not being good writers.

Such stereotyping can lead to action, as a teacher in a northern school system reported:

So, what happened one time in graduate school, I had this professor, and I didn't talk much in class, so when I did a paper, a final paper, he refused to accept the fact that I did the paper on my own ability. So, what he told me in essence, he would not accept the paper, and I wouldn't get another grade until I redid the paper, which I refused to do. I thought that was basically a discriminatory act. What he was saying was that black folks can't write. He didn't know my ability, what I was capable of.

The pervasive whiteness of the historically white college environment is conspicuous in the role models typically encountered by black students. Few, if any, of their professors will be black or provide a black perspective. A talented student at a predominantly white university in the Southwest described how an English professor evaluated her essays about the black experience:

He told me that if a white person, for example, picked up one of my stories he would not understand what the hell was going on. So therefore I shouldn't write about these things. I should write about things that appeal to the human heart, that everybody can appeal to and can relate to.

Similarly, in a study at an eastern university, one black student observed a bias in white professors' reactions to papers on black or African issues, explaining, "it can get kind of bad when you bring up certain issues," and giving as an example a paper he wrote in an English class about how African civilization antedated other civilizations:

If it's controversial, it's not good. I mean you can see it when you get, you know, Bs, B+s, As, and then all of a sudden you write this paper on Africa and you get a C-.

In his experience and that of other students, some white professors do not respond well to papers on such topics of concern to the black students and do not grade them fairly.

Some white teachers of black students have difficulty not only with the substance of their writing but also with their language and style. In an eastern city a young male banker reported an experience he had:

Instead of helping you and educating you, certain white institutions will browbeat you and downplay the educational level that you have. I turned in a paper one time at a college, and I had an instructor tell me that I was speaking black English. I was the only black in the class, and it was a freshman writing class. In one sense, it made me not want to be black.

Another aspect of being black in a white institution can be seen in the sense of inferiority the student felt when a white teacher stereotyped his writing as black English. The teacher's harsh evaluation of his work hurt and embarrassed him but also made him determined to become more expert in the English language and to prove himself. With his "made me not want to be black" statement this young man revealed the life-crisis character of these events. One of the most serious reactions to white insensitivity and misunderstanding is the rejection of one's own group, and thus of one's self.

"The instructor told me that I was speaking black English. I was the only black in the freshman writing class. In one sense, it made me not want to be black."

Professors' discomfort with black students can be caused by the difficult questions they sometimes ask, as an accounting officer recalled:

Looking back over the last five years of my attendance in college, I feel very strongly that I have not been given an equal opportunity in seeking my educational goals. I faced constant discrimination by white students and the all-white faculty members. Once it is known that you have the knowledge they have, or your knowledge surpasses theirs, then you are watched, feared, and kept back. The students have no real control, but the professors will see to it that you fail or are given a low passing grade. Three summers ago I took a writing class. The instructor was white. From the start she did not like me because I kept questioning the things that she was teaching. She also could not give answers to some of the questions that the students would ask. To make things worse, my own style of writing was very different from what she was used to. I made a D+ on my final paper and was told

I would get a C for my final grade. After a long and nasty conversation between us, and no resolution, I got my grade report in the mail with a C+ for my final grade. Other instructors have tried to lower my self-esteem, but after experiencing a few episodes of what is outright discrimination I have learned to “play the game.”

Some readers might consider this respondent’s sense of persecution to be exaggerated, for she is quite strong in her view of her college years as a struggle against constant discrimination. Yet if her sense of persecution is more acute or dramatically stated than some other students’, it nonetheless communicates well the embattled character of the black student’s experience at mostly white universities.

Cultural Bias

At the core of most predominantly white colleges is the Euro-American bias in courses, curricula, and research agendas. Several students explained that some white professors call on black students primarily to give the “black side of the story” or, conversely, avoid calling on black students who have questioned a professor’s excessively Eurocentric viewpoint. One black student, noting the bias in classroom discussions on non-European cultures, described her Jamaican roommate’s reaction to their American studies professor in a class on cultural and mental disorders:

She becomes really irritated because he’ll talk about a Jamaican medium. She tried to explain to him that some of the things that he thought were abnormal were very normal for her culture. He just dismissed everything. Now I have to push her to go to the class. She usually doesn’t say anything anymore, and she is very intelligent. She has a lot to contribute to the class.

The white professor’s harsh normative judgments of an Afro-Caribbean culture not only irritate a Jamaican student and her black roommate but also alienate them from the class. Such incidents suggest that much in the traditionally white university environment condones stereotyped interpretations of non-European cultures.

The subject of U.S. racial history is such a charged one for many black students that some professors avoid candid presentations of the worst abuses that occurred. One college student commented on this dilemma:

A friend of mine was telling me that he’s taking a history class. He was telling me that he was talking to some of the things that went on during slavery. His professor said that there are certain things that he simply cannot talk about in class because black people would get upset. I have to blame the education system on that, because that

is such an example of self-denial, of shame. What I hate so much is that if this was taught on the junior high level, on the high school level, we wouldn’t be running from that kind of education. We could sit through it. My friend was saying how he used to talk about the rape of black women in slavery. And he said black women would leave his class, they would be so upset they wouldn’t want to hear about it.

This interview excerpt raises the issue of how African-American history has been transmitted in this country. Much African-American experience, past and present, has been carried as oral history in black families and communities because most white authors have written only from their own narrow or unenlightened perspectives, and because black scholars have rarely been able to get major white publishers to print unexpurgated accounts of that history. Often white editors see critical black writings as “too emotional” or “too pessimistic.” Moreover, some black writers cannot write the true history of the black experience because it is too emotionally draining. In the account above we have evidence of how that history arouses intense emotion in African Americans. When an accurate version of Afro-American history is presented, many vicariously relive the experience, including the accompanying pain and rage.

“The professor said that there are certain things he simply could not talk about in class because black people would get upset.”

Another important aspect of the whiteness of the traditionally white campus world is the assumption about what is valid and serious research. Like members of white immigrant groups in the early 1900s, black students often see the university as a place for learning and research that can be of help to their struggling communities. A graduate student at a southwestern university noted that he has had to go outside the university to pursue his research goals; then he commented on the experiences of some friends:

I know of people who have been in my department who have left. I can think of a black woman, who I never actually met, who left the year before I got there, who felt that the department was so constricting in terms of not only the types of research that she could do, but in terms of attitudes. Apparently, she was told at one point that she wasn’t thought of as a black person, largely because she was doing so well. She was outperforming the white students in a class. And apparently a faculty member told her something like, “Well, we don’t think of you as one of them anymore.”

One reason for the black attrition at many historically white graduate schools is the attitude of some white professors to many black students' concern with research that will benefit black communities.

"There seems to be an attitude that things are well enough now for blacks and that there's no need to rock the boat."

An assistant professor recounted her recent experience at a major West Coast graduate school. Her white adviser pressured her to specialize in a certain period of white literature, not in Afro-American literature, because she would thus be doing something he didn't consider most black people did. And that job offers would come in for that reason. And, further, that doing Afro-American literature was not in and of itself important intellectual work. Well, I insisted and he finally gave in and gave me permission. He never stopped thinking that it was important for me not to do Afro-American literature. You couldn't do Afro-American lit and be a real scholar at the same time. And I ran into that attitude when I was on the job market.

One signal that historically white college cultures are not racially integrated is in the downplaying of humanities and social science research on African Americans, not only at the undergraduate and graduate levels, but also in college hiring practices.

Black Support Groups

One black counter to obstacles on mostly white campuses has been to organize black support groups. Although such organizing may be necessary for survival, it can result in black students being labeled as separatists or militants by white students, faculty members, and administrators. Discussing effective ways to deal with discrimination, one graduate student commented:

When I was involved in efforts to integrate the department more fully, I did receive a rather cold reception from several faculty members. We set up a meeting of grad students to discuss the recruitment and retention of minorities in the department. And a few of the faculty members there who were pretty much of the old school. We had agreed that the meeting would be open and candid. Their idea of open and candid was that it would be closed to everyone else except those who had been invited to be part of the discussion. So, in that sense, the department has been quite reactionary. It seems to be acting in good faith now in terms of recruitment, but only because it has been pressured to do so. But it is frustrating to realize how not only insensitive,

but ignorant, a lot of supposedly intelligent white people are. There seems to be an attitude that things are well enough now for blacks and other minorities that there's no need to rock the boat.

Whether as undergraduates, graduate students, or professional students, blacks have organized both for protective purposes and for larger protest and political objectives. A physician in a northern city described his medical school days:

For me it's been a very, very hard struggle. First, to begin with, I was the first one of seven, as a group of black students entering medical school. The whites at this university were very opposed to the seven of us being admitted into medical school. There was a lot of strife around that. I don't think at any point, during our education, we were accepted. It was always fight hard to make the grade.

Most black parents work hard for their children to succeed, and many see advanced education as a way up for their children. Racial barriers are not discussed by black parents just to be argumentative, for such obstacles are at the heart of an agonizing dilemma many black parents and students face: that of choosing between a predominantly white and a predominantly black college. Black parents themselves talked about this choice for their children specifically as a "dilemma":

I have a seventeen-year-old daughter who's looking at college now. She was very set on a major black university, where many members of my family have gone. And I wanted her to go there. But I also knew that she was going to make connections in college that will last for her life. And at a white university the people you spend your undergrad with very often are the CEOs of tomorrow. So it was a dilemma. Do I want her to identify with who she is ethnically, or do I want her to start the groundwork for her future career?

In choosing a college, few white parents or students must consider racial discrimination, the loss of faculty and other social support, or the greater difficulty of participating in campus life that the choice of a white college frequently involves for black parents and students.

Once in a predominantly white university, many black students consider dropping out, often because of the constant questioning of their capabilities. In our national middle-class sample a business executive commented on his daughter's experience at two predominantly white universities and at a black university:

My daughter, who graduated from a predominantly black southern university, initially began her college training at a white midwestern university. Later she moved back to the southern city to be with us and went to a white uni-

versity there. She then decided she needed a little more exposure and went to the black university. The thing that was so interesting to her was that at the midwestern university and the white southern university, both good schools, there was a night and day difference in how you were treated by the faculty. The faculty at the black southern university were interested in you as a person, wanted to ensure that you were successful in completing courses and getting your degree. And at the midwestern university and the white southern university they could care less about you as an individual; you're more or less a number. She decided in a number of instances that there were some assumptions made by her faculty at these universities that she would not be able to comprehend some of the information they were giving her. Just on an assumption! Of course, she had no problem. But it was just that "Well, I know the university is here, and black students are competing with the white students, and we're really not going to expect you to do too well."

Many white commentators on the crisis in black education blame the victim in their assessments of elementary and secondary education, and especially of higher education. George Keller has argued that middle-class blacks bear the greatest responsibility for the problems of black youth, arguing that "educators and do-gooders outside academe must move beyond their naive pieties onto the treacherous, unknown ground of new realities. Petulant and accusatory black spokespersons will need to climb off their soapboxes and walk through the unpleasant brambles of their young people's new preferences and look at their young honestly. They will need to encourage, lift up, and argue with those youths who do not see the urgency of education in a scientific, international, and information-choked world. Critics will need to stop the fashionable practices of lambasting the colleges as if they were the central problem."

Window Into Whites' Minds

In this analysis Keller provides a window into the mind of many influential whites including policymakers as we approach the twenty-first century. Many whites feel that the burden is on middle-class black leaders to quit being "accusatory" and to work harder to encourage black youth to view education as the main way to overcome poverty and inferiority.

These white critics are oblivious to the influence of the contemporary racial climate at traditionally white schools and colleges and fail to see white-run institutions as a source of serious problems for black students. Yet life for black students in mostly white schools often means daily struggle and recurring crises. They struggle to find out what

the rules of the game are, officially and unofficially. When black students say "whiteness" is an omnipresent problem, they are not just talking about color or racial identification. They are reporting being at sea in a hostile environment. Painful difficulties with teachers, fellow students, and curricula not only accumulate year after year for black children as individuals and as a group but also regularly bring to mind the collective memory of past discrimination.

"Black students are constantly in a state of stress. There's not a time when they feel they can afford to let down. And when they let down they are hurt."

Life perspectives and identities are challenged constantly, and some students seem to walk on the edge of denial of their own blackness. Yet most maintain their balance and meet the recurring pain and anger with a determination to excel and conquer. The array of responses to discrimination that becomes part of one's repertoire is great, ranging from resignation to open confrontation. A black professor who has worked in various parts of the country eloquently summed up the impact of white racism in creating a defensive lifestyle and life perspective:

When a black student walks into a predominantly white environment, that student gets the same feeling that I get when I walk into a predominantly white situation. I immediately become fearful and defensive: fearful that someone will openly show hostility, that someone will openly show that I'm not wanted there; defensive, trying to set myself up so that if I face that I can deal with it. Students don't have all of the kinds of coping mechanisms held by adults and professional adults; therefore this is more difficult for them. I still find myself uncomfortable if I walk into a strange environment where there are only whites and I'm the only black. And unfortunately, usually someone, at least one person in that environment or in that situation will say or do something that's negative, if it's no more than just ignore you.

So, you come in defensive. Your fear is reinforced. That's what happens to so many of these youngsters on these campuses, they're dealing with kids who are sons and daughters of bigots. And as soon as they find a friend who accepts them, and they feel real good and start to relax, they run into this young bigot who brings back all the pain, all of the hurt, and it almost erases all of the good that's there. So they're constantly in a state of stress. There's not a time when they feel that they can afford to let down. And when they let down, they're hurt. □