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Historically White Universities Should Give Access to Counterspaces to Help Minority Students Feel Belonging on Campus and Finish School, Study Says

CHICAGO (January 16, 2020) - Historically White colleges and universities in the U.S. need to do more to provide counterspaces or “safe spaces” for Black, Latinx, and other marginalized students to help them create a sense of campus belonging and connection.

Findings from a study by University of Chicago Associate Professor Micere Keels was recently published in the book [*Campus Counterspaces: Black and Latinx Students’ Search for Community at Historically White Universities*](#). She argues that counterspaces are essential to the psychological and emotional well-being of students from historically marginalized groups, especially in easing their first-year college transition.

On college campuses, counterspaces, also referred to as “safe spaces,” enable students who are members of historically marginalized groups to connect and learn from their shared struggles. Counterspaces develop in response to feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and alienation. These spaces can be formal or informal, and can have social, political, or academic goals. Counterspaces often welcome students from majority groups so long as those individuals demonstrate support and respect for the needs of marginalized students.

Although Black and Latinx student [enrollment in degree granting colleges has dramatically increased](#) over the last 20 years—by 230 percent among Latinx youth and 71 percent among Black youth, compared to 15 percent among White youth—there has been little improvement in reducing the number who leave without obtaining their degree.

According to the [National Center for Educational Statistics](#), about 55 percent of Black and 42 percent of Latinx college students enrolling at a non-profit, public institution will not obtain their degree within six years, compared to 34 percent of White college students. “The statistics are alarming, especially when we consider the large sums of debt that students incur,” Keels said.

Keels’ study indicates that higher education institutions have succeeded in increasing student diversity but struggle to create the type of inclusive campus climate that would enable minority students to fully open up to the learning environment.

College administrators have primarily placed the blame on minority students’ academic preparation for college, without also acknowledging that their institutional culture and traditions can make some students from historically marginalized groups feel alienated and invalidated, thus creating more barriers to their success, Keels added.

“The college success of students from historically marginalized groups is also undermined by having to pay higher costs, especially psychological costs, which may include anxiety, stress, depression, and self-doubt,” Keels said. “These psychological costs of college are highest for students who don’t see themselves reflected in the larger student body and faculty, whose

cultural practices are less integrated into general campus life, and who juggle between school and work and still struggle financially.”

Keels’ study tracked over 500 Black and Latinx first-year college students who enrolled at five historically White institutions in Illinois in the fall of 2013. Keels and her team of researchers interviewed 70 of them each summer.

The safe spaces debate

Keels noted that when she began this study in 2013, the terms safe spaces and counterspaces were interchangeable. However, the term safe spaces is now polarized and often used to reference hypothetical spaces that cause division on campuses, and used to ridicule students who ask for them. For instance, in a 2016 [op-ed](#) published in *The Washington Post*, George Will, a conservative columnist, described historically marginalized students as “fragile and perpetually vulnerable to victimization.”

Keels said that Mr. Will and other critics’ opinions on safe spaces don’t represent the views of the students she and her team interviewed, and don’t concur with her study’s findings. “Students were not asking to be protected from new ideas. There is nothing new about xenophobia, prejudice, and discrimination. They relished exposure to truly new ideas,” Keels argued.

Research shows that student participation in counterspaces can foster greater campus integration by increasing their sense of campus belonging and strengthening their coping skills. Counterspaces ensure that students from historically marginalized groups don’t have to struggle alone and allows them to share empathy as well as information.

‘Colleges will need to be courageous’

“We need to turn away from hysteria and myths of self-segregation, and engage in discussions about historically marginalized students’ needs for identity-affirming supports,” Keels said. “These students need to gather together in counterspaces that offer a breather from the negative effects of marginalization.” [Research shows that](#) minority students who spend time with same-race peers and participating in minority student organizations are no less likely to have interracial friendships.

With this book, Keels urges college administrators to go beyond tolerance and consider their position and action towards the full inclusion of all students. “Colleges will need to be courageous in their support for counterspaces,” Keels added.

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