USC Race and Equity Center

The State of Racial Climate

Across California's Community Colleges

A Baseline Assessment of Student Experiences, 2020–21

Royel M. Johnson, Jihye Kwon, Rodolfo Andy Nuñez, and Minh C. Tran

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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ABOUT

This report draws on responses from 50,219 students attending 52 California Community Colleges who completed the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climate (NACCC). It examines four dimensions of campus racial climate: mattering and affirmation, racialized experiences, racial learning, and students' appraisals of institutional commitment.

The data come from the 2020–21 academic year, a period during which California Community Colleges were making significant investments in racial equity. We publish them now, as those investments face fiscal and political pressures, because they establish an important baseline.

The NACCC is a web-based survey administered by the USC Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California. Grounded in more than 15 years of qualitative and quantitative research, the survey helps campus leaders assess racial climate, identify disparities in students' experiences, and inform institutional strategies for advancing equity.

> *"This report does not evaluate the success or failure of specific equity initiatives. Instead, it documents students' experiences during a period of significant institutional commitment, providing a benchmark against which future progress, or the effects of retrenchment, can be assessed."*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the 50,219 students who participated in the survey and to the 52 California Community Colleges whose commitment to examining campus racial climate made this report possible. We also thank Dr. Adrian Trinidad, Kaitlyn Lange, and Jenise Evans for their contributions to this project.

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Executive Summary

The California Community Colleges educate more than 2.2 million students and serve as the primary access portal to higher education for racially minoritized communities in the state. Over the past decade, the system has focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in policy and practice: guided pathways reform, the redesign of developmental education, expanded basic-needs supports, and a sharper focus on racial equity.

> *Institutional investments do not necessarily translate into students' day-to-day experiences on campus. Campus leaders must follow through on their commitments to ensure they reach the classrooms, student services, curriculum, and hiring.*

Drawing on responses from 50,219 students attending 52 colleges during the 2020–21 academic year, this report presents one of the most comprehensive assessments of racial climate conducted across the California Community Colleges. The findings describe a system that invested substantially in equity and still shows disparities in mattering, racialized experiences, racial learning, and confidence in campus leadership. The report does not judge whether particular initiatives succeeded. It sets a baseline for how students experienced those commitments during this period.

KEY FINDINGS

1

Faculty representation shapes students' sense of mattering.

- Fewer than four in ten students feel they strongly matter in courses taught by White faculty, compared with almost half in courses taught by non-White faculty.
- More than half of Black students feel they strongly matter in courses taught by non-White faculty.
- White students feel a similar sense of mattering regardless of their faculty member's race.

2

Racialized stress falls unevenly across student groups.

- About 13% of students report experiencing racism at least occasionally in classes taught by White faculty; among Black students, almost one in four.
- About 9% experience racism in courses taught by non-White faculty.
- Beyond classrooms, about one in nine Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander, Black, and multiracial students experience race-based verbal attacks on campus.
- Among those experiencing such events, about half feel frustrated or angry, one in four feel lonely or isolated, and one in eight report a decline in their academic performance.

KEY FINDINGS (continued)

3 Racial learning remains inconsistent and largely informal.

- 46% of students learn about race and racism through classroom discussions, and 39% through reading materials assigned in class.
- Only 14% learn through multicultural or student advocacy programs.
- More than a third (36%) learn nothing about race and racism anywhere on campus, a share that runs higher among Middle Eastern, Arab or Arab American, and Black or African American students.

4 Students have only modest confidence in how institutions respond to racism.

- On average, students rate their colleges as addressing racism "slightly effectively" and "slightly transparently."
- About 30% see their college as lacking commitment to hiring staff of color.
- Half see leaders as strongly committed to sponsoring racial-diversity activities; substantial proportions see partial or little commitment.
- Around a third to two-fifths of students express neutrality when assessing the effectiveness, transparency, and promptness of responses to racism; a small number see responses as ineffective, secretive, or delayed.

5 Representation is the strongest signal of institutional commitment students recognize.

Across measures, students point to visible structural diversity, especially among faculty and staff, as the clearest sign that an institution takes racial equity seriously. They judge its values less by what is stated than by what they can see: who teaches them, who supports them, and whose presence the campus affirms.

Taken together, the findings show a system of colleges that has created equity infrastructure that is experienced inconsistently by students. Faculty diversity serves as climate infrastructure instead of just being a decorative measure. Racial literacy is imparted to students via individual faculty members. A passive approach towards dealing with instances of racism creates distrust among them. Moreover, the anxiety created due to racial harassment influences the academic performance of students. The message is not that there is no need for making equity investments but that investment alone is not sufficient. This commitment is met by students through actual practice in the classroom, curriculum, advising, recruitment, and leadership and not in written policies.

Introduction

> *A college can adopt ambitious equity policies and still feel, to the students inside it, like a place that was not built for them.*

Campus racial climate captures that gap. Indeed, it reflects the essence of students' day-to-day experiences: whether they feel they matter in their classrooms, how often they encounter racism, what they learn about race while in college, and whether they trust institutional leaders to respond when racial harm occurs.

The campus climate is important because it tends to change before results begin to manifest. Mattering, racial stress, and trust in leadership tend to differ among students even before differences appear in retention rates, transfers, and success. The climate helps us know how much the institution's intentions have been fulfilled.

In California Community Colleges, where more than 2.2 million students enroll annually, and where most racial minorities enter higher education through this system of colleges, the stakes are especially high. The experiences of these students affect not just their success in transfer, completion, and employment, but also the general public's trust in higher education to fulfill its promise of equity and opportunity.

The data analyzed in this report pertain to the 2020–21 academic year, a time when California Community Colleges were making major efforts towards racial equity in conjunction with the response to the coronavirus outbreak and the nation's struggle with issues of race (Johnson & Harper, 2024). These colleges increased racial equity capacity, launched new projects, and reaffirmed their commitment to racial equity publicly. This report is not meant to judge how successful these measures were. It is rather intended to explore another important question:

How did students experience those institutional commitments?

This distinction matters. Investments in policy and programs create the conditions for change, but they do not automatically reach students' daily lives (Johnson et al., 2022). What makes a policy real is how it is carried out in classrooms, in advising, and in hiring. That is the heart of campus racial climate.

> *Without a clear understanding of students' experiences during this earlier period of institutional investment, it becomes difficult to assess whether future changes reflect progress, stagnation, or retrenchment.*

The timing of these data also makes them an important baseline. Equity efforts now operate in a substantially different fiscal, legal, and political environment (López et al., 2021; Briscoe et al., 2025). The findings presented here provide that benchmark.

Drawing on responses from 50,219 students enrolled at 52 California Community Colleges, this report focuses on four major dimensions of campus racial climate:

1. **Mattering and affirmation**
2. **Race-based experiences**
3. **Racial learning**
4. **Appraisals of institutional commitment**

Each chapter presents key findings, analyzes differences across racial groups, and considers their implications for institutional policy and practice.

Study Design and Data Sources

The National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climate (NACCC) is a web-based survey administered by the USC Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California. Grounded in more than 15 years of campus climate research, the survey helps colleges and universities assess racial climate and use the findings to inform institutional strategy and equity efforts.

The NACCC measures six dimensions of campus climate: mattering and affirmation, cross-racial engagement, racial learning and literacy, racialized experiences, students' appraisals of institutional commitment, and the influence of external environments. This report focuses on four of these domains: mattering and affirmation, racialized experiences, racial learning, and institutional commitment. The survey also collects detailed demographic information, allowing analyses to be disaggregated across intersecting identities, including race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, citizenship status, enrollment status, and age.

The analyses draw on responses from 50,219 students attending 52 California Community Colleges during the 2020–21 academic year (Table 1), representing approximately 45% of the system's 116 colleges. Many participating institutions were members of the California Community College Racial Equity Leadership Alliance (CCCRELA), a consortium engaged in shared professional learning and campus climate assessment.

TABLE 1 · CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES (N = 52)

CATEGORY	INSTITUTIONS	%
ENROLLMENT SIZE		
1,000–4,999	4	7.7
5,000–9,999	13	25.0
10,000–19,999	23	44.2
20,000 and above	12	23.1
DEGREE OF URBANIZATION		
City	23	44.2
Suburb	22	42.3
Town	2	3.8
Rural	5	9.6
MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTION ELIGIBILITY*		
Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)[a]	49	94.2
AANAPISIs[b]	17	32.7

* Only HSI and AANAPISI distinctions are reported, due to the small number of institutions (n < 5) in other categories and related concerns of institutional identifiability. [a] Institutions meeting the enrollment criteria for federal HSI grant programs (undergraduate enrollment at least 25% Hispanic students). [b] Institutions meeting the enrollment criteria for federal AANAPISI grant programs (undergraduate enrollment at least 10% Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander students).

Respondents were predominantly Hispanic or Latino/a/x (44%), followed by White (18%), Asian or Asian American (15%), multiracial (13%), and Black or African American (6%) students, with smaller numbers of Middle Eastern, Arab or Arab American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Native American or Alaska Native students (Table 2). Approximately two-thirds (68%) identified as cisgender women, 28% as cisgender men, and 5% as gender-diverse. Nearly one in five respondents (19%) identified as LGBQA+.

RACIAL / ETHNIC IDENTITY

	STUDENTS	%
Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Chicano/a/x	21,883	43.6
White or European American	8,788	17.5
Asian or Asian American	7,308	14.6
Two or More Races	6,570	13.1
Black or African American	2,759	5.5
Another racial group	1,035	2.1
Middle Eastern	713	1.4
Arab or Arab American	602	1.2
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	287	0.6
Native American / Alaska Native	274	0.5

GENDER IDENTITY[A]

	STUDENTS	%
Cisgender Woman	33,881	67.5
Cisgender Man	13,900	27.7
Gender-Diverse	2,430	4.8
Non-response	8	<0.1

U.S. CITIZENSHIP STATUS

	STUDENTS	%
United States citizen	36,873	73.4
Lawful permanent resident / other non-citizen	4,280	8.5
Undocumented, DACA, or TPS	1,036	2.1
Student visa (F, J, or M)	860	1.7
Non-response	7,170	13.6

AGE

	STUDENTS	%
18–21 years	21,507	42.8
22–34 years	18,498	36.8
35–49 years	7,207	14.4
50 years and older	2,984	5.9
Non-response	23	<0.1

ENROLLMENT CATEGORY

	STUDENTS	%
Full-time	29,836	59.4
Part-time	19,108	38.0
Other	1,269	2.5
Non-response	6	<0.1

SEXUAL ORIENTATION[B]

	STUDENTS	%
Strictly Heterosexual	40,638	80.9
LGBQA+	9,537	19.0
Non-response	44	<0.1

[a] Gender-diverse includes transgender woman, transgender man, non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, and other gender identities. [b] LGBQA+ includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, asexual, pansexual, demisexual, and other sexual identities.

Analyses rely primarily on descriptive statistics to identify patterns and disparities across racial and demographic groups. Comparisons are presented where they help illuminate differences in students' experiences across instructional and institutional contexts.

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CHAPTER ONE

Mattering & Affirmation

How much do students feel they matter, and how often do faculty affirm them, across racial and ethnic groups?

Feeling noticed, respected, and valued is a key component of campus racial climate. Students who feel noticed and valued become more involved in their learning and more engaged with the institution, building a sense of belonging and persistence (Johnson, 2022). Those who feel invisible or marginalized, or who experience stereotyping, may lose that sense of belonging and become alienated from their studies and the institution (Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado et al., 1996; Davis et al., 2004). Racist experiences can pose a further obstacle to academic success, particularly for Black and Hispanic or Latinx students (Museus et al., 2008; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

The involvement of faculty is critical in the experiences of students. Good interactions between the instructors and the students result in increased motivation, satisfaction, and persistence as exhibited through specific practices including high expectation levels, timely feedback, value for students' contributions, and care (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Cole, 2010; Hurtado et al., 2012; Johnson, Kwon, & Trinidad, 2025; Rosenthal et al., 2000; Barnett, 2010). Out-of-class interactions increase motivation and commitment (Thompson, 2001; McDowell & Westman, 2005).

This chapter examines how mattering and faculty affirmation vary across racial and ethnic groups.

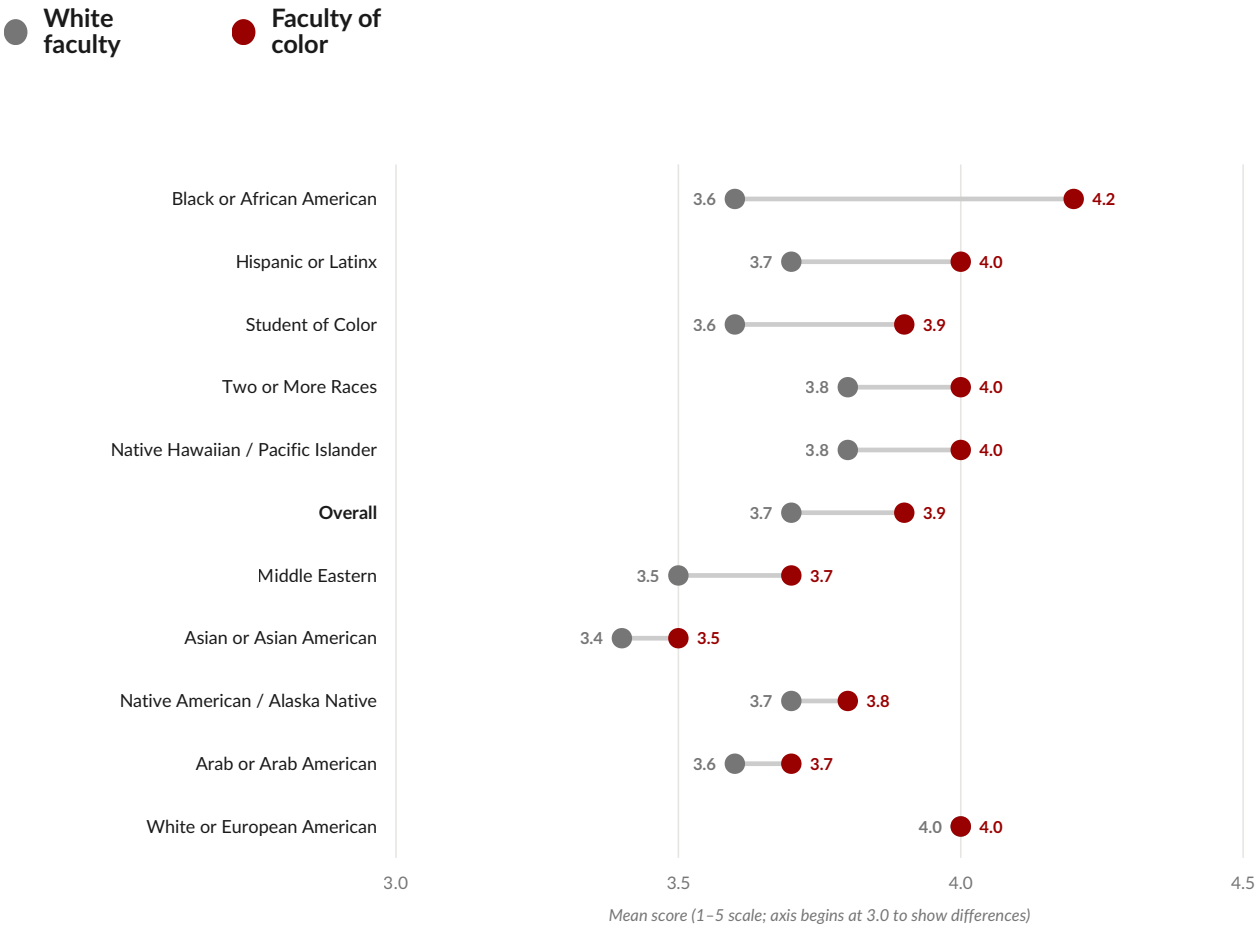
A. MATTERING IN THE CLASSROOM

Because many community college students spend relatively little time on campus outside the classroom, classroom experiences carry disproportionate weight in shaping whether students feel they matter. This section asks whether students' sense of mattering differs by the faculty member's racial identity.

Students report greater mattering in classes taught by non-White faculty than by White faculty (Figure 1.1). The difference is most pronounced for Black or African American and Hispanic or Latinx students. White students' sense of mattering does not differ by faculty race.

FIGURE 1.1

Mean Levels of Classroom Mattering by Faculty Race and Student Race/ Ethnicity

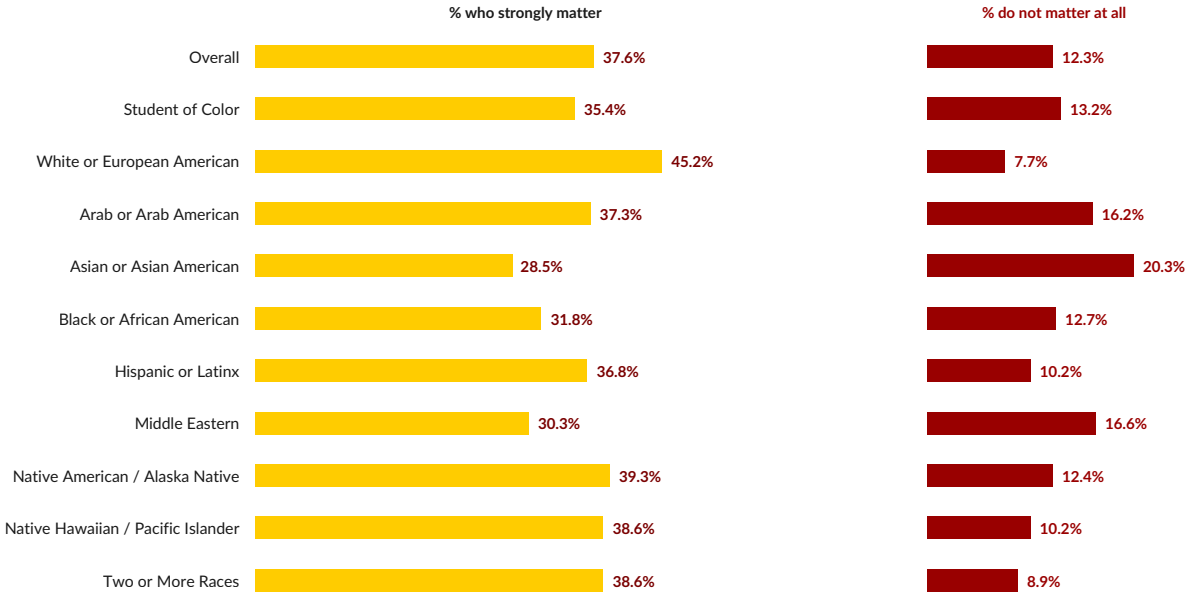


Scale: 1 = Do not matter at all; 5 = Strongly matter.

The mean differences mask considerable variability. Counting only students who say they strongly matter, fewer than four in ten do so in courses taught by White faculty (Figure 1.2). Among Asian or Asian American students the share is even lower, fewer than three in ten, and one in five say they do not matter at all. A similar pattern appears among Middle Eastern students.

FIGURE 1.2

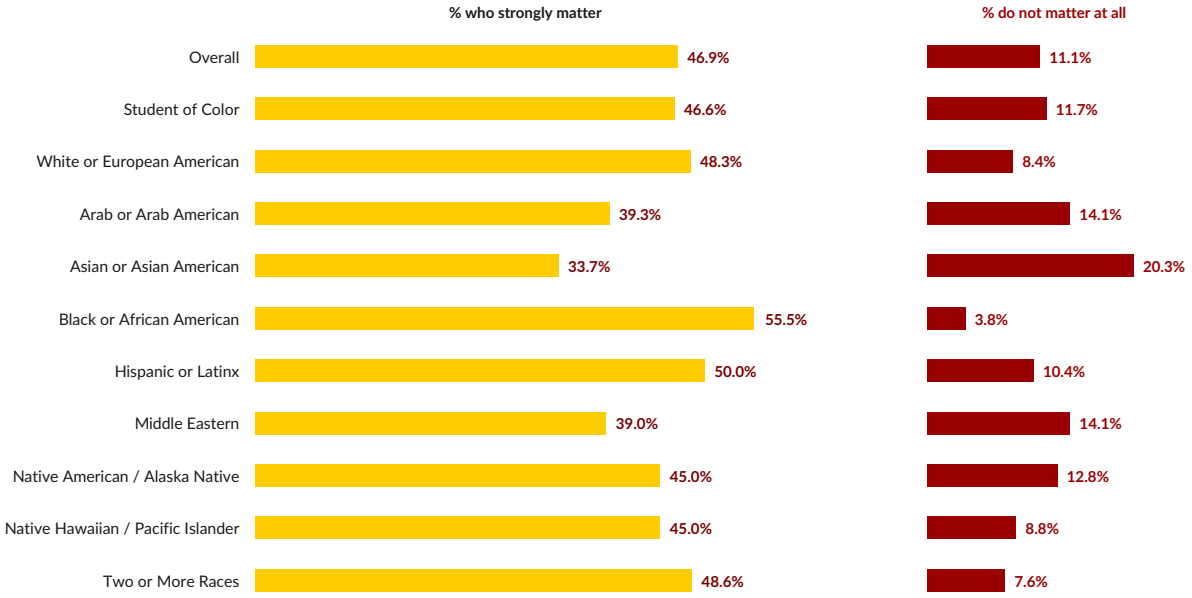
Percentage of Students Reporting They "Strongly Matter" in Classes Taught by White Faculty



The presence of diverse faculty changes the scenario for nearly all racial groups (Figure 1.3). Nearly half of all students matter a lot, while more than half of all Black students matter a lot, followed closely by Hispanic/Latinx students. However, the gaps remain: the percentage of Asian/Asian American students that matter a lot is still very low, even with the presence of diverse faculty. Diverse faculty members have been associated with a greater level of mattering among all racial groups, except for Asian/Asian Americans.

FIGURE 1.3

Percentage of Students Reporting They "Strongly Matter" in Classes Taught by Faculty of Color



B. MATTERING IN CAMPUS SPACES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Mattering extends beyond the classroom. Students feel their strongest sense of mattering within campus organizations and clubs (mean = 3.9 out of 5), with Black or African American students reporting the highest of any group (mean = 4.2). Culturally grounded spaces do real affirming work.

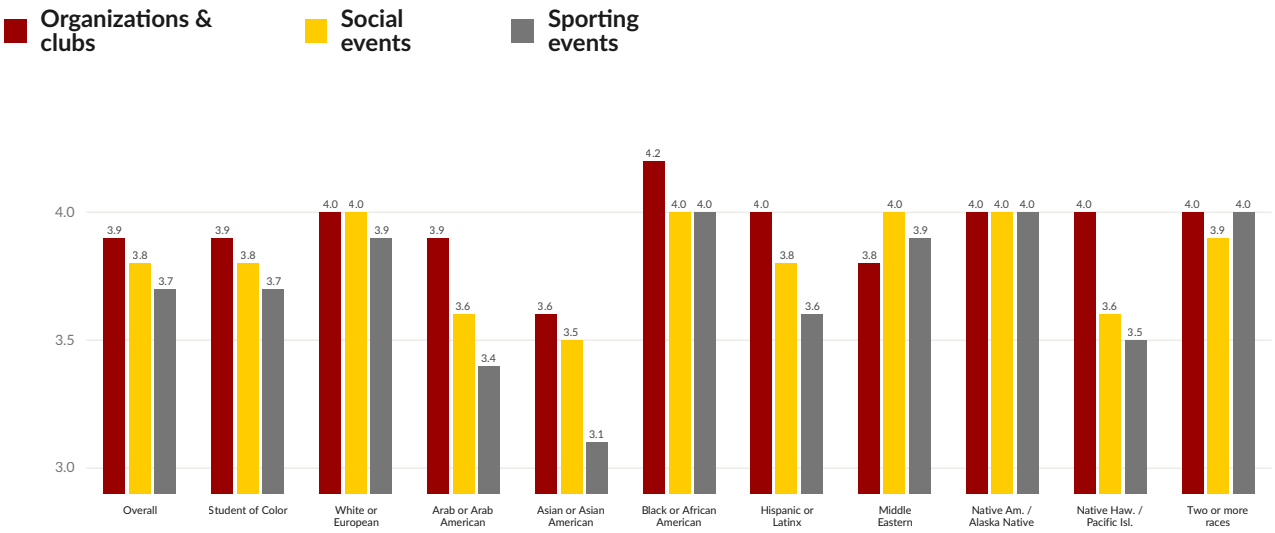
Less structured settings show more varied results. Asian or Asian American students report the lowest mattering at college sporting events (mean = 3.1), as do Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander students across both social and athletic events. For example:

- 1 in 9 Asian or Asian American students say they do not matter at all at social events.
- 1 in 3 Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander students say the same of sporting events.
- 1 in 4 Arab or Arab American and Asian or Asian American students say the same of sporting events.

Co-curricular spaces serve as affirming environments for some students while remaining unwelcoming to others. And while co-curricular life matters, the classroom remains the primary setting through which most community college students experience institutional climate.

FIGURE 1.4

Mean Levels of Mattering Across Campus Social Settings



Scale: 1 = Do not matter at all; 5 = Strongly matter.

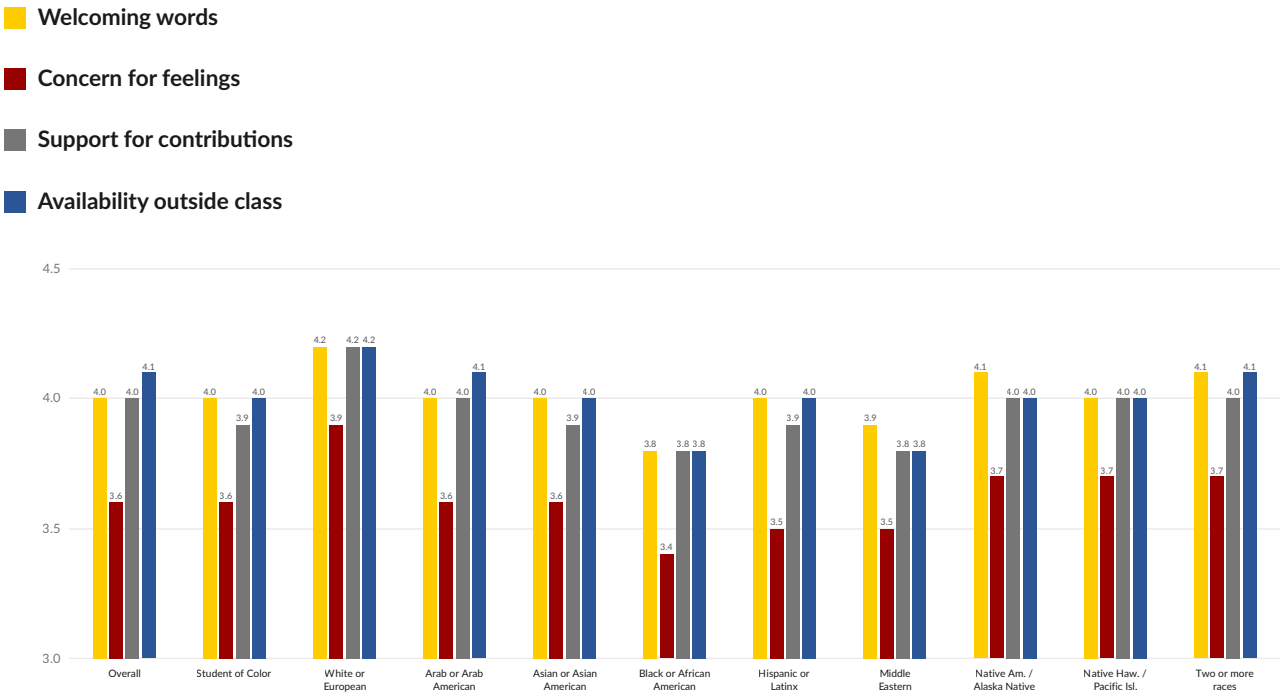
C. FACULTY AFFIRMATION PRACTICES

Mattering is whether students feel valued; affirmation is how often faculty do the things that signal it: welcoming students, valuing their contributions, caring about their feelings, and being available outside class.

From White faculty, students report frequent affirmation overall (means around 4.0–4.1), but not evenly (Figure 1.5). White students report the most across nearly every behavior, while Arab or Arab American and Asian or Asian American students report less concern for their feelings and less availability outside class.

FIGURE 1.5

Frequency of Affirmation Behaviors from White Faculty

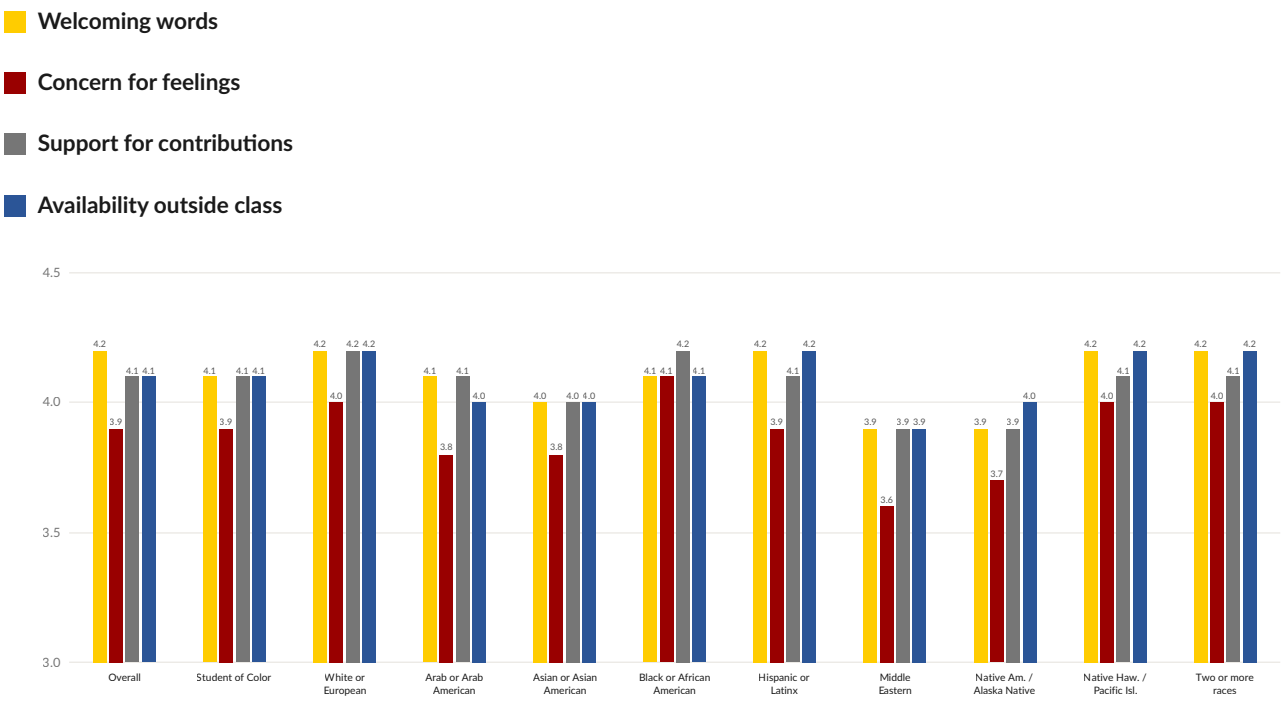


Mean score (1 = never; 5 = very often). Value labels shown on every bar.

From faculty of color, affirmation runs slightly higher across all behaviors (means between 4.1 and 4.2), and highest of all for Students of Color, particularly Black or African American students (Figure 1.6). Still, the same pattern persists: Asian or Asian American students report less attention to their feelings even with faculty of color. Faculty diversity is linked to higher affirmation, but meaningful differences remain. Representation matters; it is not a substitute for strong teaching.

FIGURE 1.6

Frequency of Affirmation Behaviors from Faculty of Color



Mean score (1 = never; 5 = very often). Value labels shown on every bar.

Implications

Mattering is not spread evenly across groups or settings. In community colleges, where the classroom is the main point of contact, that unevenness carries unusual weight.

In the classroom

- Faculty diversity is associated with higher levels of mattering, particularly among Black and Hispanic or Latinx students.
- Representation alone is insufficient. Meaningful disparities remain even in courses taught by faculty of color, suggesting that representation alone must be matched by inclusive classroom practices.
- White students report relatively stable levels of mattering regardless of faculty race, suggesting that classroom climate is experienced differently across racial groups.

Beyond the classroom

- Campus organizations affirm, especially for Black students.
- Social and athletic spaces divide, especially for Asian or Asian American and Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander students.

> *Mattering is not simply an individual feeling; it is shaped by institutional conditions. It emerges through who teaches students, how they teach, and the spaces campuses build for learning. Faculty diversity strengthens students' sense of mattering, but representation alone is not enough. Students encounter a college's commitments in everyday interactions, in classrooms and campus spaces; turning equity goals into lived experience depends as much on daily practice as on intention.*

The next chapter turns from affirmation to adversity, examining how students encounter racism and racial harm across the California Community Colleges, and what those encounters reveal about campus racial climate.

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CHAPTER TWO

Racialized Experiences

How often do students encounter racism on campus, and what does it cost them?

In Chapter 1, we saw that students matter to one another and to their institutions to varying degrees. This chapter turns to another dimension of campus racial climate: the racism, discrimination, and exclusion students encounter, and the academic and psychological costs that follow.

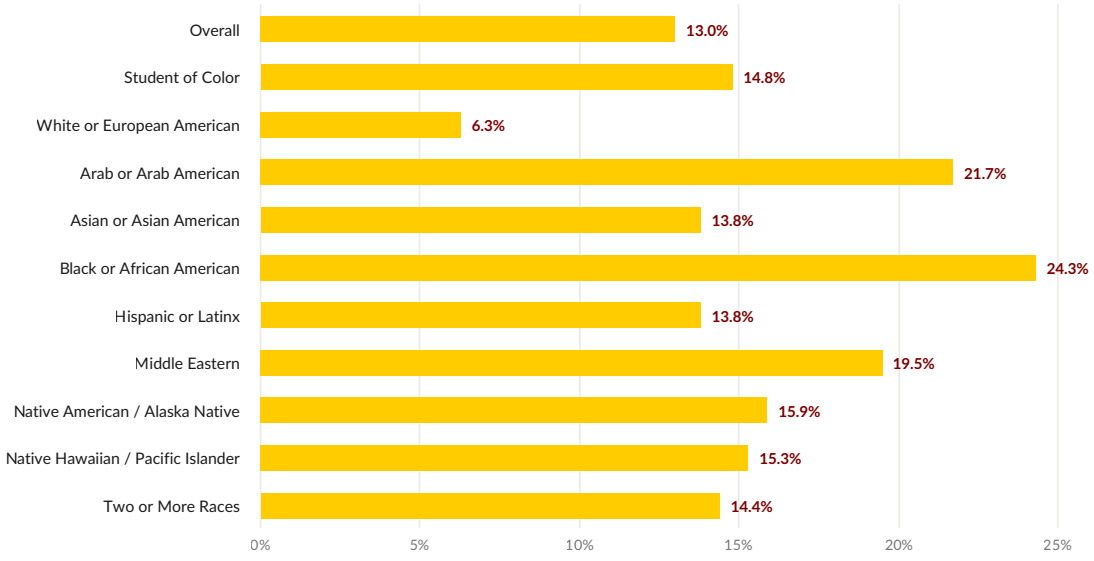
Racial discrimination in educational settings is associated with lower engagement, reduced persistence, and poorer psychological well-being (Godsil et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2007; Taylor & Walton, 2011), and it contributes to stress, isolation, and diminished academic performance (Hwang & Goto, 2008). In open-access institutions such as community colleges, these experiences matter not only for individual students but for institutional effectiveness. This chapter examines how often students encounter racial harm, what forms it takes, what it costs, and how those experiences relate to students' broader perceptions of inclusion.

A. EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE CLASSROOM

About 13% of students report experiencing racism from White faculty in the classroom at least occasionally (Figure 2.1). The rate is higher among Black or African American students, about one in four. When faculty of color teach the course, the share falls to 9% (Figure 2.2).

FIGURE 2.1

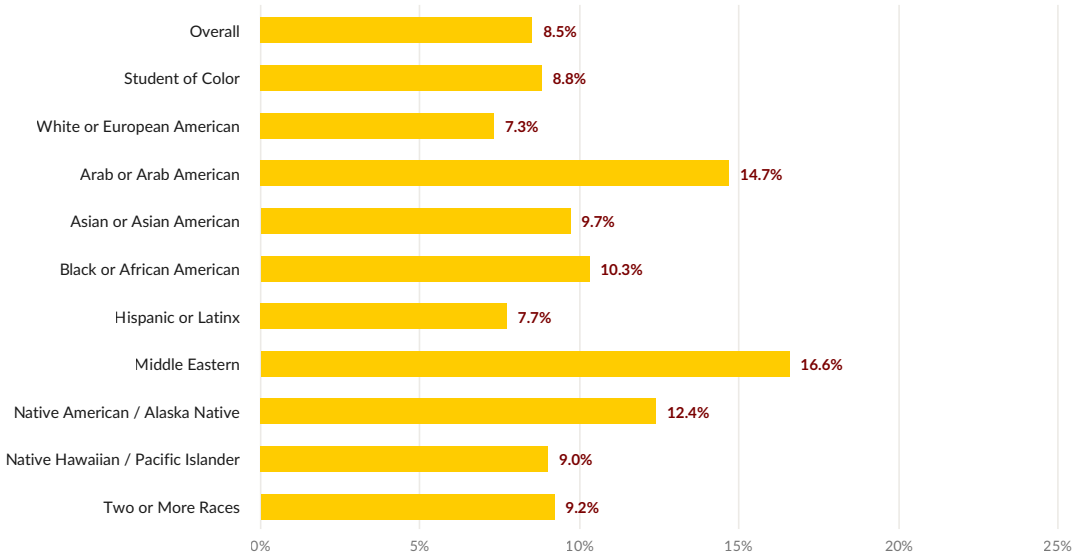
Prevalence of Racial Discrimination in Classes Taught by White Faculty



Share of students reporting they experienced racism at least occasionally.

FIGURE 2.2

Prevalence of Racial Discrimination in Classes Taught by Faculty of Color



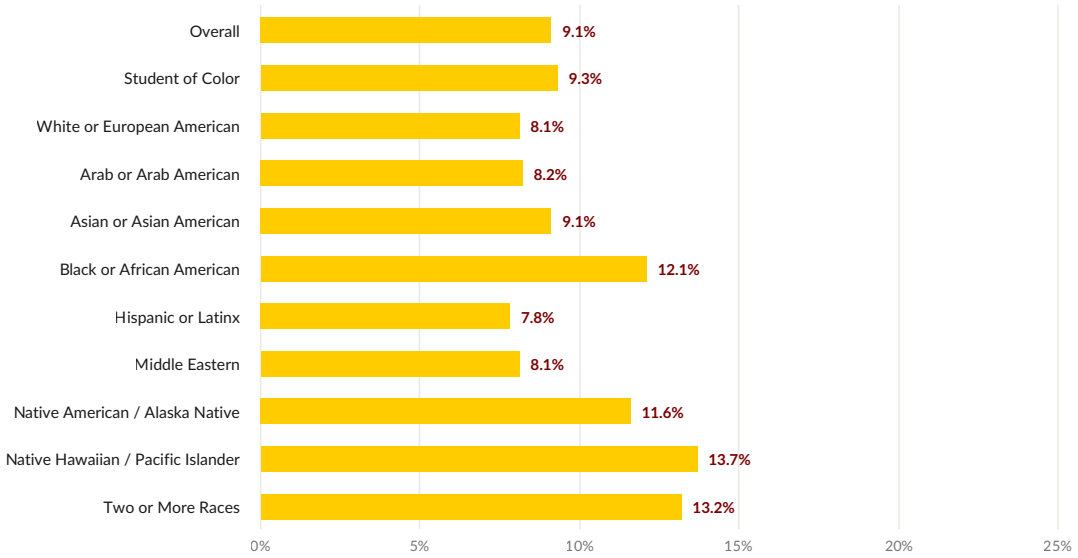
Share of students reporting they experienced racism at least occasionally.

B. RACE-BASED VERBAL ATTACKS

Racism extends beyond the classroom. Nine percent of students report experiencing or witnessing a race-based verbal attack on campus, a rate that rises to about one in nine among Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black or African American, and multiracial students (Figure 2.3). The harm runs through campus life, not only instruction.

FIGURE 2.3

Prevalence of Race-Based Verbal Attacks on Campus



Share of students reporting they experienced or witnessed a race-based verbal attack on campus.

C. WHAT RACISM COSTS

The consequences are concrete. Among students who experience a racist incident, more than half feel frustrated or angry, a quarter feel lonely or isolated, and one in eight report a decline in their academic performance (Figure 2.4). Racial harm here is not only interpersonal; it is academic.

FIGURE 2.4

Emotional and Academic Consequences of Racist Incidents

1 in 2
feel frustrated or angry

1 in 4
feel lonely or isolated

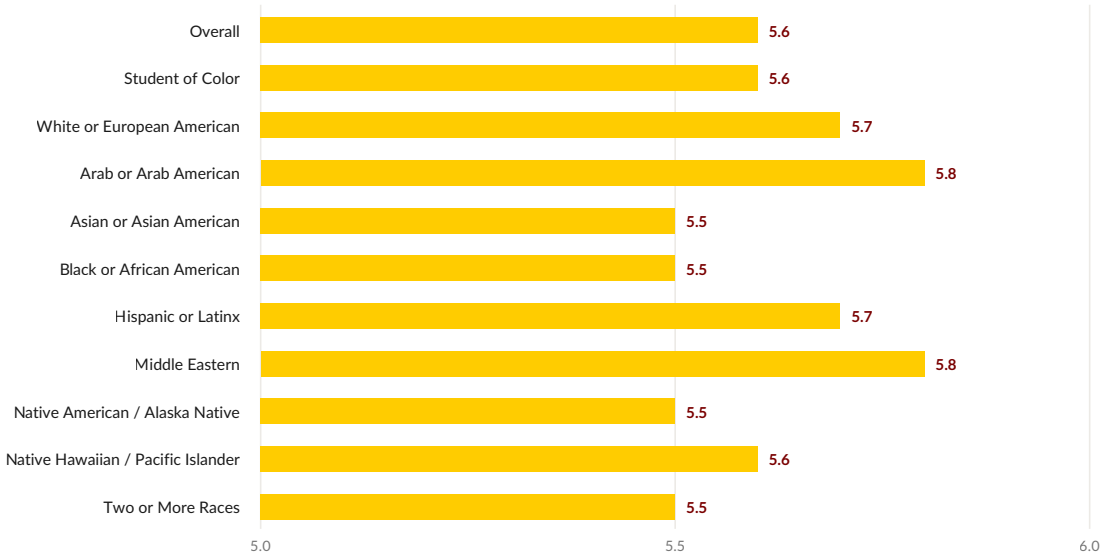
1 in 8
report a decline in academic performance

D. THE INCLUSION PARADOX

And yet students rate their campuses as fairly inclusive. On a six-point scale (1 = completely excluded; 6 = completely included), the average is 5.6, and the spread across groups is narrow: Arab or Arab American and Middle Eastern students sit slightly higher (5.8), with White or European American and Hispanic or Latinx students close behind (5.7), while Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Native American or Alaska Native, and multiracial students sit slightly lower (5.5) (Figure 2.5). High average inclusion and persistent racial harm coexist, a reminder of the limits of aggregate measures. A campus can read as broadly welcoming while particular groups still shoulder disproportionate racism.

FIGURE 2.5

Mean Perceived Institutional Inclusion by Student Race/Ethnicity

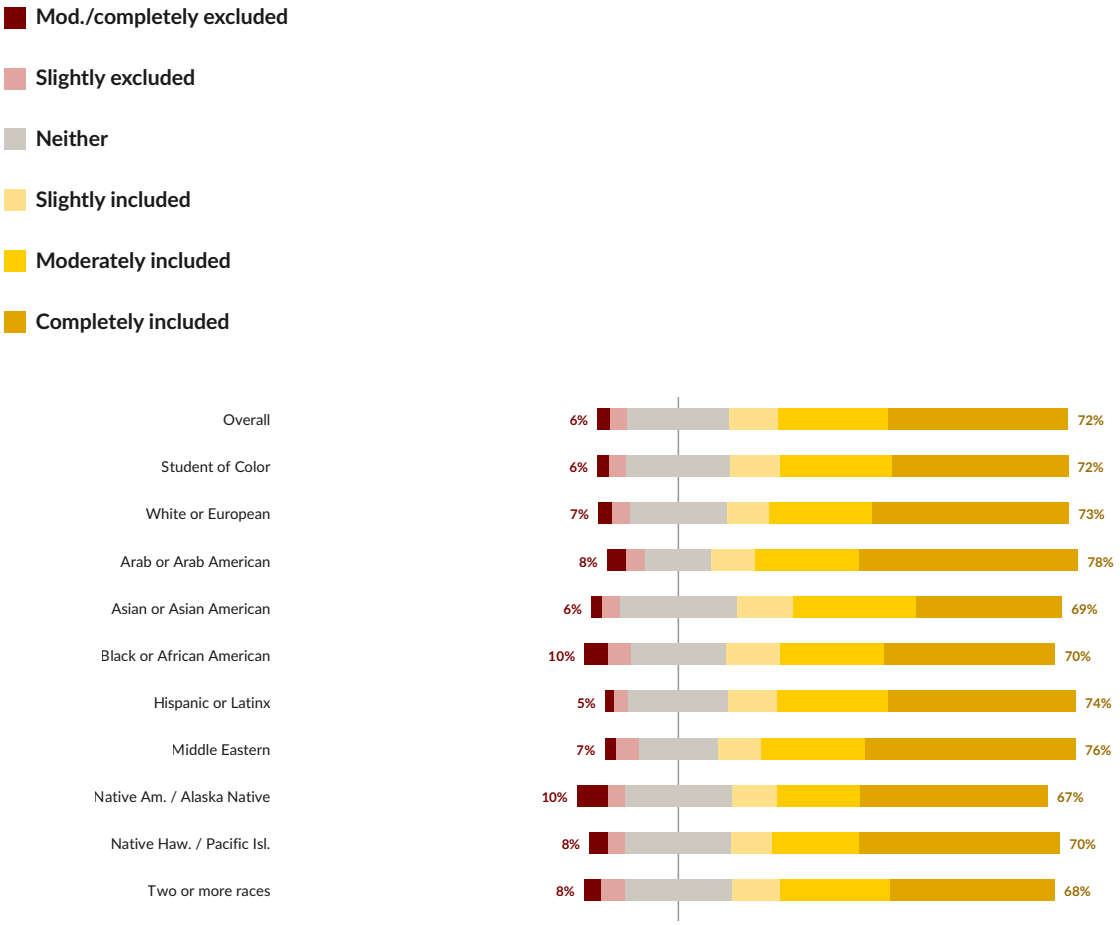


Mean score (1 = completely excluded; 6 = completely included; axis begins at 5.0 to show differences).

Averages do not represent the individuals within them. Even where average inclusion is high, a real share of students report feeling excluded to some degree (Figure 2.6). The coexistence of high inclusion and documented racism shows that inclusion is not the same as the absence of harm.

FIGURE 2.6

Distribution of Perceived Institutional Inclusion by Student Race/Ethnicity



Left % = any degree of exclusion; right % = any degree of inclusion. Even where inclusion is high overall, a real share of students in every group report some exclusion.

Implications

Racism is a persistent feature of these campuses, and it is not evenly borne. In the aggregate it can look modest; disaggregated, it falls hardest on Black or African American students.

- Discrimination is patterned, not episodic. Black students report markedly higher exposure in the classroom, especially with White faculty.
- Students report lower classroom racism in courses taught by faculty of color (Johnson, Kwon, & Trinidad, 2025), suggesting that representation and classroom practice may both shape students' experiences.
- Racial harm carries educational consequences. Frustration, isolation, and declines in academic performance follow experiences of racism, making campus climate a core educational concern.
- Inclusion can mask harm. High average inclusion sits alongside real exclusion for a subset of students in every group.

> *Racialized experiences are not peripheral to student success; they shape engagement, well-being, and academic outcomes. Campus climate must be read through disaggregated student experiences, not institutional averages: a campus can look broadly inclusive while particular groups still face disproportionate racial harm. That distinction is what turns equity commitments into equitable experiences.*

If Chapter 2 shows where students encounter racial harm, the next question is how institutions prepare students to understand race itself. Chapter 3 examines where racial learning occurs, who carries responsibility for it, and whether community colleges are preparing students for an increasingly diverse society.

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CHAPTER THREE

Racial Learning

Where do students learn about race and racism, and does it prepare them for a diverse world?

Community colleges do more than enroll diverse students. They also prepare students to live, learn, and work in an increasingly diverse society by helping them understand how race and racism shape history, institutions, and systems of inequality (McFarland et al., 2018; Merolla & Jackson, 2019; Adams et al., 2022). The NACCC conceptualizes racial learning as students' opportunities to develop that understanding.

There is both an educational and an institutional dimension to the issue. As racial literacy does not permeate all aspects of faculty, staff, and the curriculum, teachers and students of color carry the extra burden through cultural taxation and racial battle fatigue (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022; Franklin, 2016). Meanwhile, with the United States becoming more diverse (Colby & Ortman, 2014), the ability to connect across race is a basic component of education and no longer something to be added on top of it (Abrica & Dorsten, 2020).

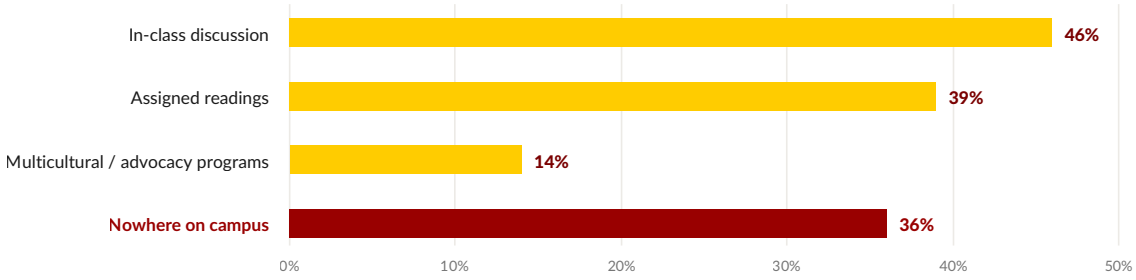
This chapter asks three related questions: Where do students learn about race? Who bears responsibility for that learning? And does it leave students prepared to live and work in a diverse society?

A. WHERE STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT RACE

Racial learning happens mostly in class. Students most often point to in-class discussion (46%) and assigned readings (39%); multiracial and Hispanic or Latinx students report the highest classroom-based learning. Campus programming reaches far fewer: only 14% cite multicultural or advocacy programs.

FIGURE 3.1A

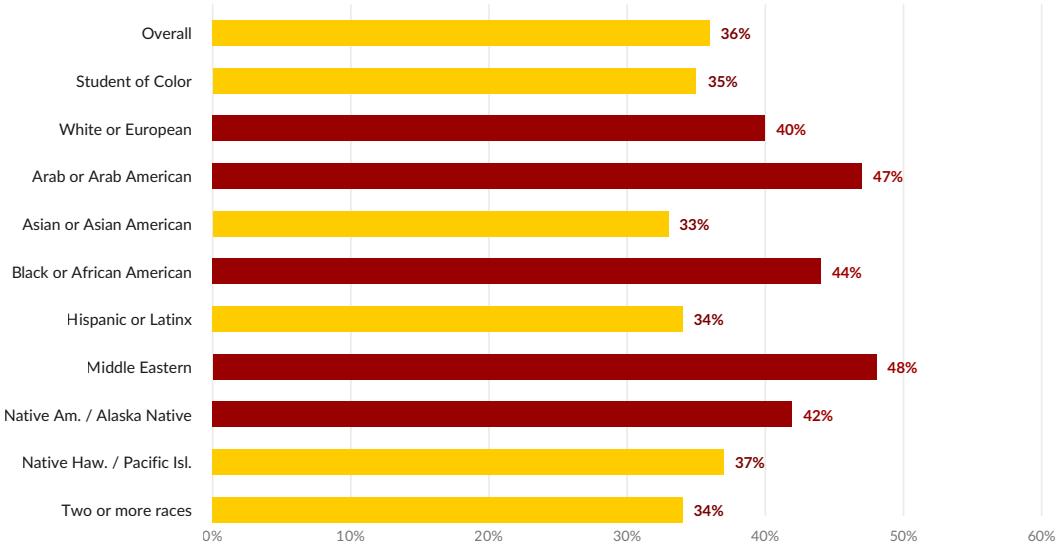
Sources of Racial Learning



The bigger story is absence. More than a third of students (36%) report learning about race and racism nowhere on campus, a share that climbs among Middle Eastern, Arab or Arab American, and Black or African American students (Figure 3.1B). For many, what they learn about race turns less on any institutional plan than on the particular classrooms they happen to enter.

FIGURE 3.1B

Students Reporting No Racial Learning on Campus, by Group



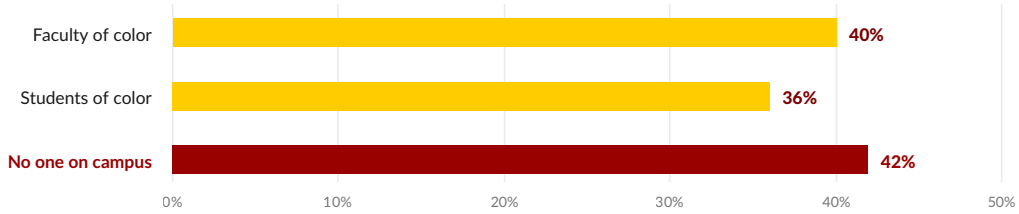
Share reporting they learned about race and racism nowhere on campus. Bars at or above 40% shown in cardinal.

B. WHO TEACHES IT

When students do learn about race, it is mostly from people of color. They most often name faculty of color (40%) and students of color (36%). For Black students the faculty gap is stark: 35% learn about race from faculty of color, only 19% from White faculty, the widest such gap of any group. Meanwhile, 42% say they learn about race from no one on campus at all. The teaching of race falls to faculty and students of color; it is not built into the institution.

FIGURE 3.2

Who Facilitates Racial Learning

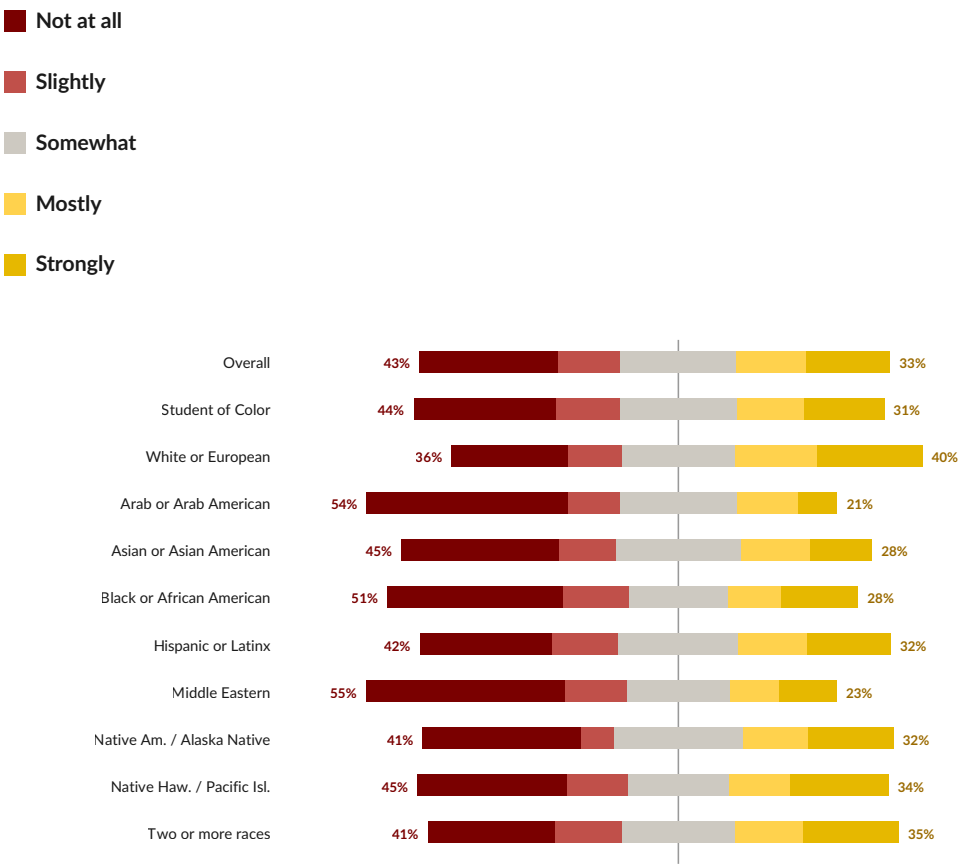


C. WHAT THE CURRICULUM CARRIES

Course content is only partly representative. On average, students rate the authors they are assigned and the topics they discuss as slightly to somewhat reflective of racial diversity, and more than one in four say their course materials are not racially diverse at all (Figures 3.3A–3.3B). Representation shows up in some classrooms; it is not built into the curriculum.

FIGURE 3.3A

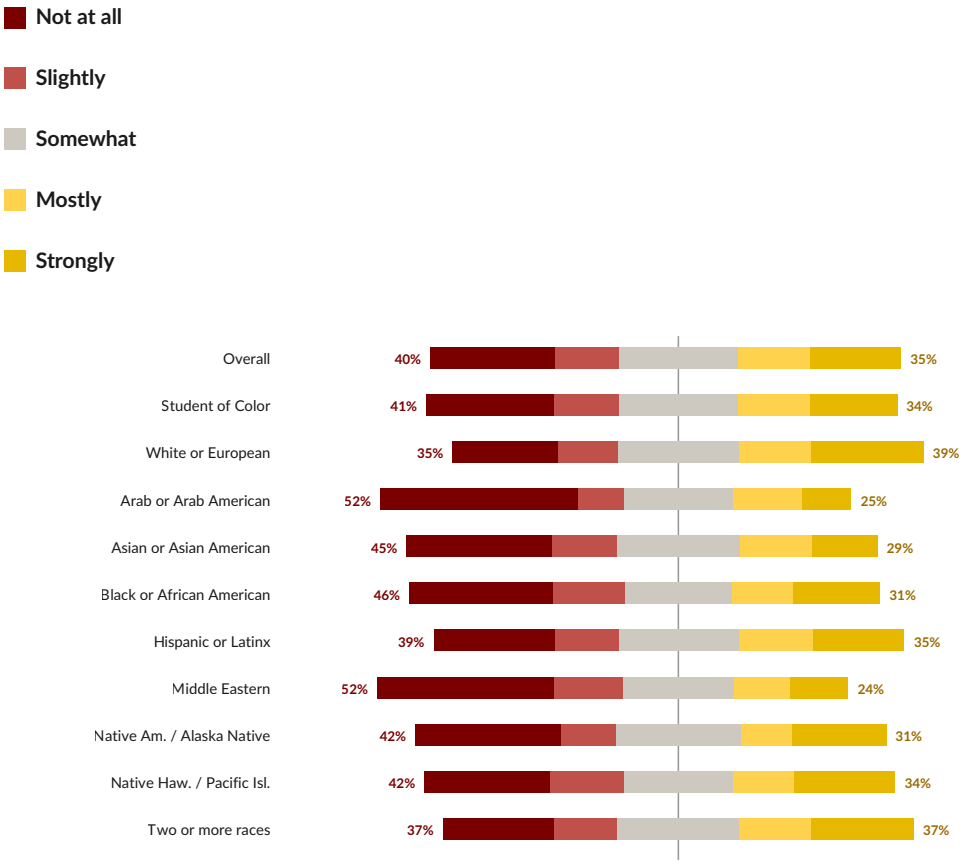
Perceived Racial Diversity of Assigned Authors



Left % = not at all / slightly; right % = mostly / strongly reflective of racial diversity. Somewhat (neutral) straddles center.

FIGURE 3.3B

Perceived Racial Diversity of Discussion Topics



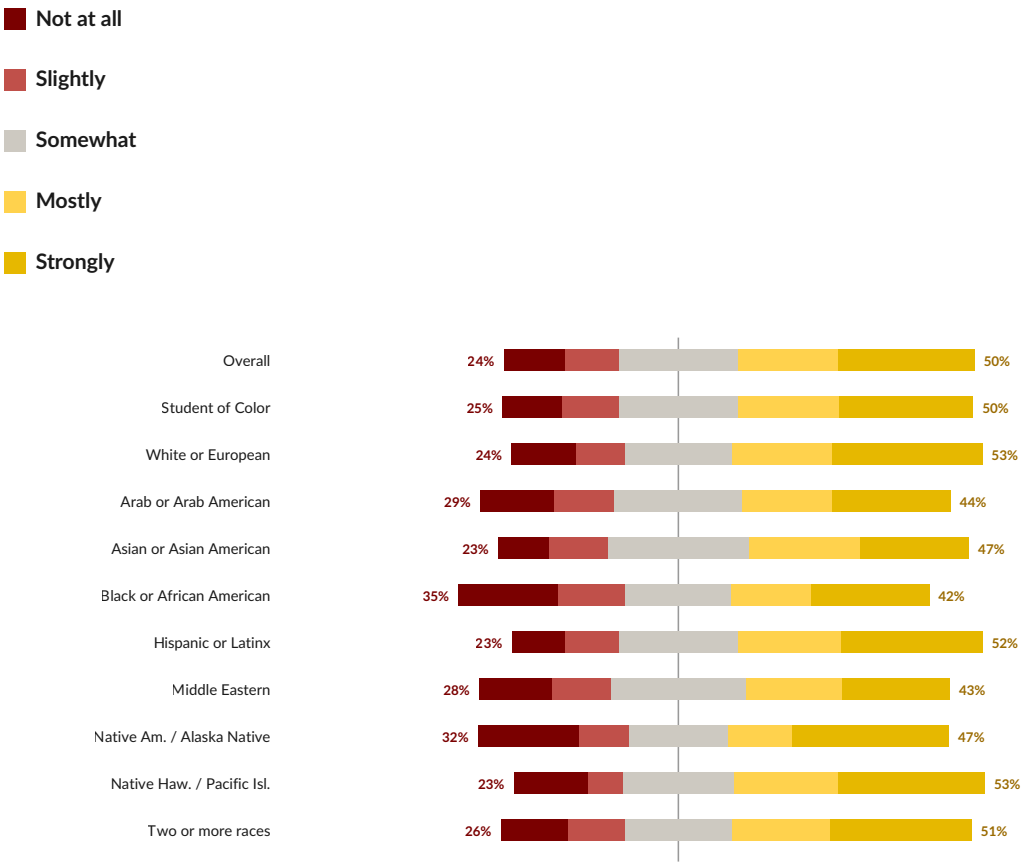
Left % = not at all / slightly; right % = mostly / strongly.

D. PREPARATION FOR A DIVERSE WORLD

Does any of this prepare students? Only somewhat, by their own account. More than one in five Black or African American (21%) and Native American or Alaska Native (21%) students say their college is not preparing them at all to work across racial difference, with similar numbers for interacting across it (Figures 3.4–3.5). Students report only moderate confidence overall, with Black and Native American students reporting the lowest levels. Diversity in enrollment, by itself, does not guarantee racial competence.

FIGURE 3.4

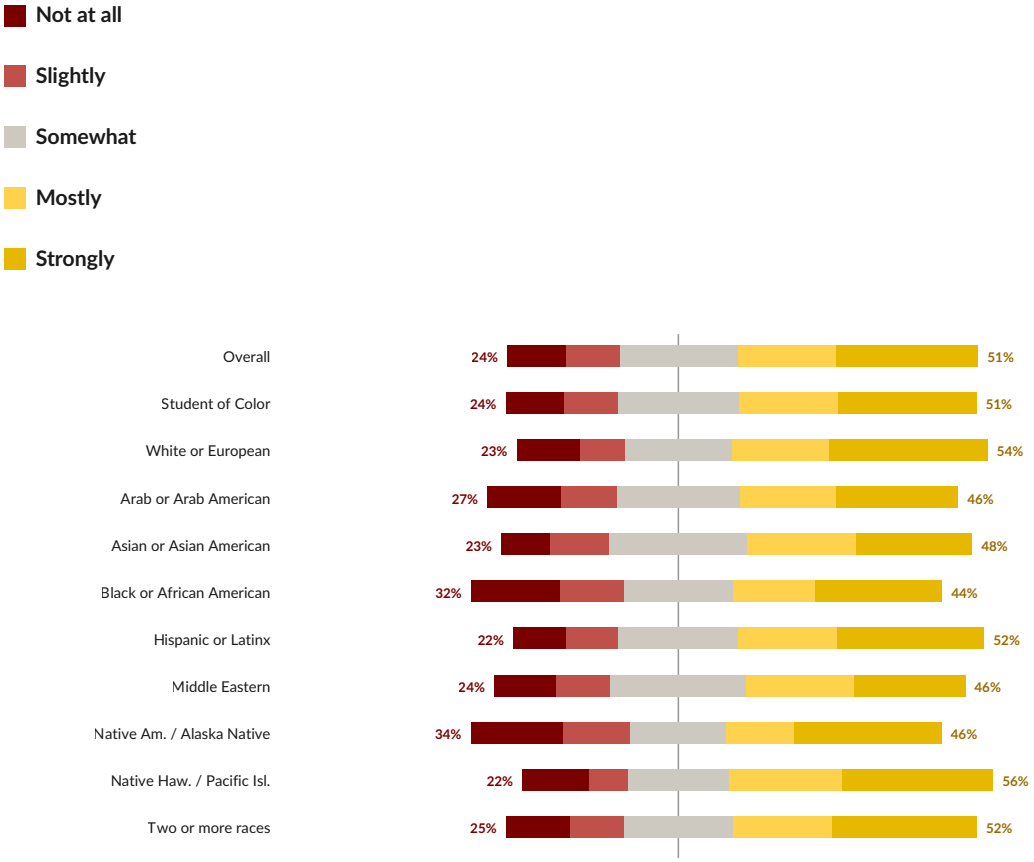
Preparation for Working in a Racially Diverse Setting



Left % = not preparing at all / slightly; right % = mostly / strongly preparing.

FIGURE 3.5

Preparation for Interacting Across Racial Difference



Left % = not at all / slightly; right % = mostly / strongly.

Implications

Racial learning happens in these colleges, but it is not built in. It rises or falls on individual instructors rather than on anything the institution structures.

- Racial learning remains largely contingent rather than institutionalized. More than a third of students learn about race nowhere on campus.
- The labor is uneven. Faculty of color and students of color do most of the teaching about race, concentrating the work, and its cost, on the people already carrying it.
- The curriculum lags. More than one in four students see no racial diversity in the materials of their own major.
- Exposure alone is insufficient. Attending a racially diverse institution does not ensure students leave prepared to engage thoughtfully across racial difference.

> *Racial learning is better understood as an uneven institutional experience than as a guaranteed educational outcome. Institutional commitments to equity become educational realities only when racial learning is designed into the student experience rather than left to individual instructors or chance.*

If Chapter 3 asks how institutions prepare students to understand race, Chapter 4 asks whether students believe those same institutions are genuinely committed to racial equity.

USC Race and Equity Center

04

CHAPTER FOUR

Institutional Commitment

Do students see genuine institutional commitment to racial equity, and do they trust how leaders respond when racism occurs?

A. Visible Commitment: Hiring & Programming

B. How Leaders Respond to Racism

Chapter 3 examined whether institutions intentionally build opportunities for racial learning into students' educational experiences. This chapter turns to a broader question: Do students believe their institutions are genuinely committed to racial equity, and do they trust institutional leaders to respond when racism occurs?

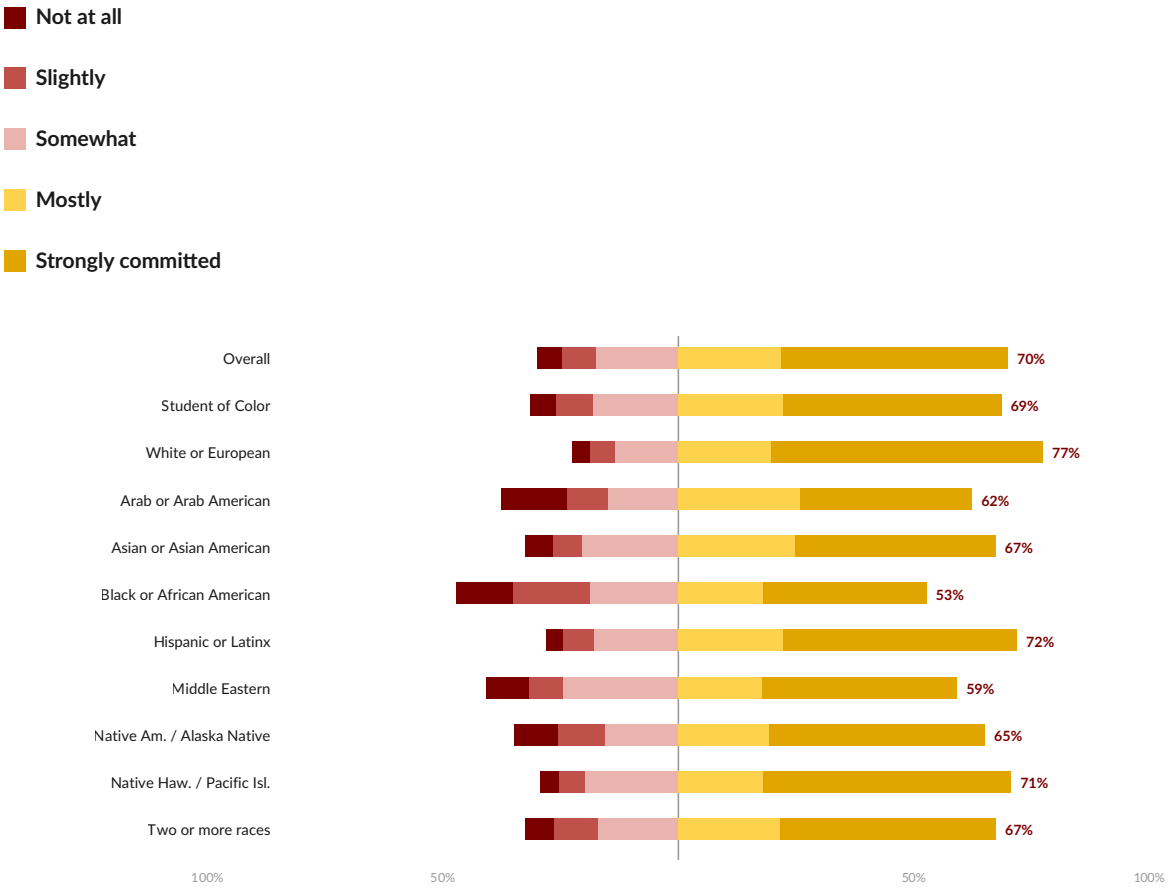
This has become one of the most exposed parts of campus life. Institutions face intense scrutiny over how they handle racially charged incidents and protests (Moody, 2024; Davis et al., 2023; Garces et al., 2021); repeated "identity predicaments" wear down students' trust (Steele, 2019); and while statements and action signal seriousness (Briscoe, 2023; Cole & Harper, 2017), students are often unconvinced by the response (HERI, 2018; Kenney & Johnson, 2024) and leaders often unprepared to give one (Liera, 2023; Nietzel, 2019). This chapter examines how students judge both the visibility of institutional commitment and leaders' responses when racism occurs.

A. VISIBLE COMMITMENT: HIRING AND PROGRAMMING

Students treat hiring as a barometer. Across the system, most see leaders as mostly or strongly committed to hiring staff of color, but about 30% see them as less than fully committed, and the doubt runs much higher among Black or African American students, nearly half of whom report low confidence (Figures 4.1–4.2). Arab or Arab American and Middle Eastern students also doubt more than average. For students who feel racial marginalization most directly, who gets hired reads as a signal of institutional priorities, not merely workforce diversity.

FIGURE 4.1

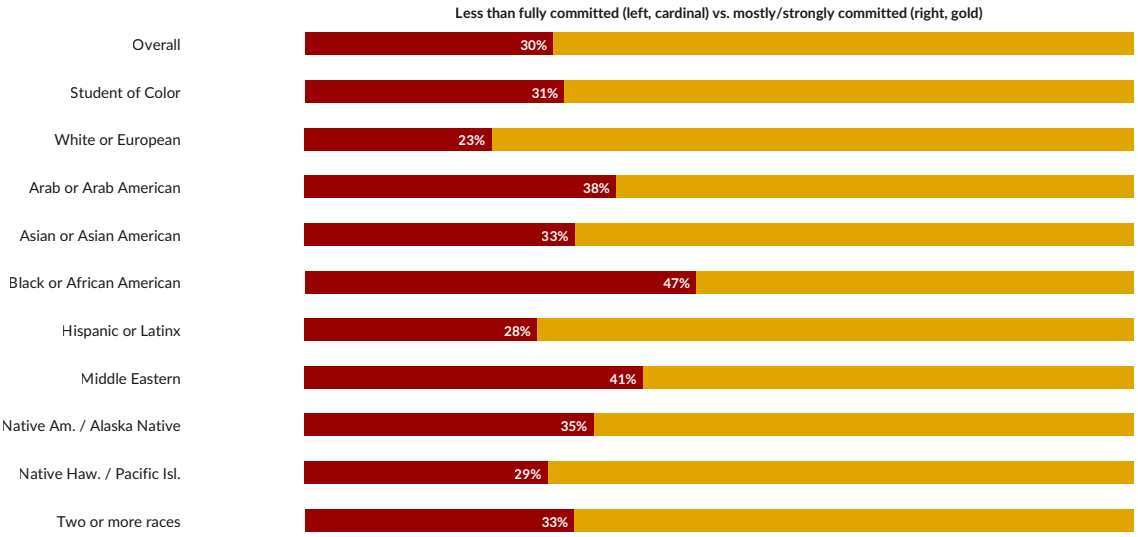
Institutional Commitment to Hiring Staff of Color



Share at each level of perceived commitment, diverging from the not-committed / committed boundary. Percent committed (mostly or strongly) shown at right.

FIGURE 4.2

Hiring Staff of Color: Committed vs. Not (Collapsed)

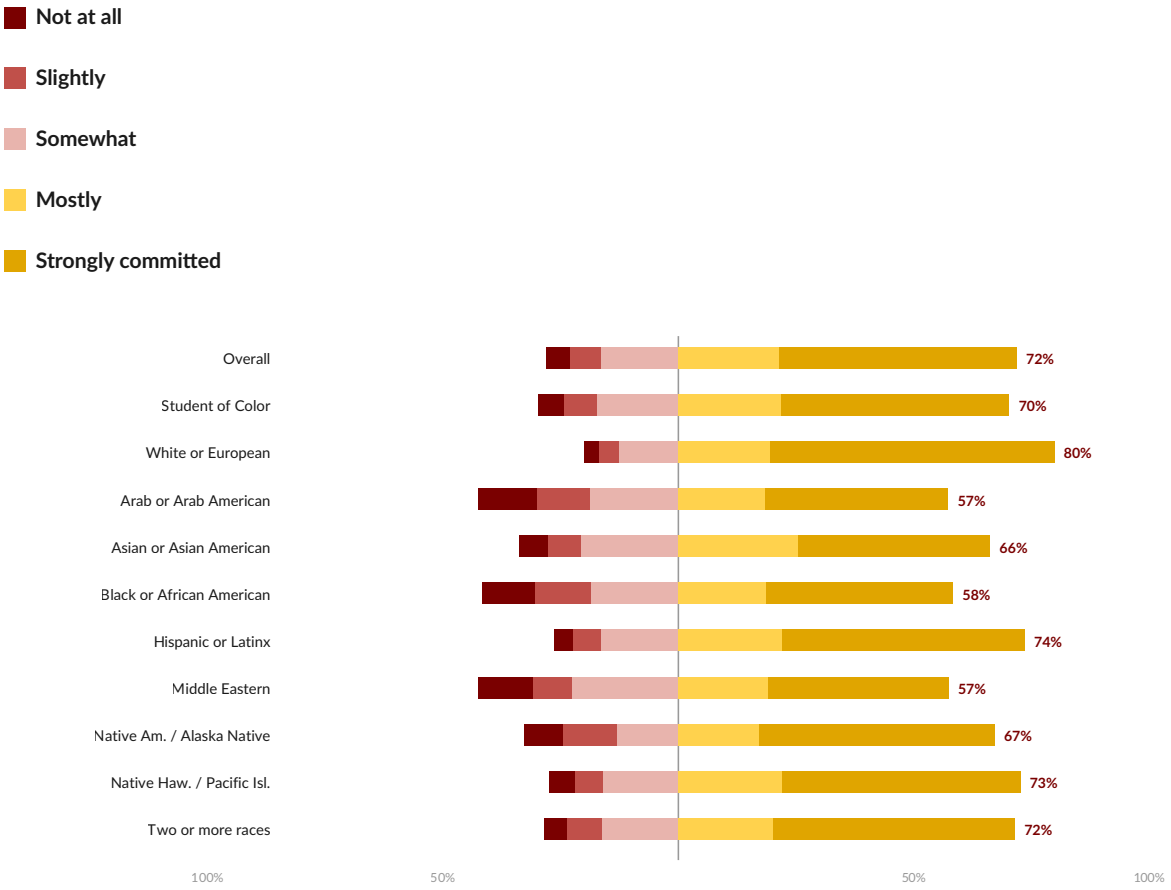


"Less than fully committed" combines not-at-all, slightly, and somewhat committed.

The same pattern appears around sponsoring activities about racial diversity. Roughly half see leaders as strongly committed; sizable shares see only partial or limited commitment, again concentrated among Arab or Arab American, Middle Eastern, and Black or African American students (Figure 4.3). Students recognize visible institutional effort, but a meaningful minority remain unconvinced that those commitments run deep (Johnson, Oduro, & Duran, 2025).

FIGURE 4.3

Institutional Commitment to Sponsoring Activities About Racial Diversity



Percent committed (mostly or strongly) shown at right.

B. HOW LEADERS RESPOND TO RACISM

When racism occurs, students judge the response on three things: whether it is effective, open, and timely. On all three, the answer clusters in the middle. On a seven-point scale, mean ratings sit between 5.0 and 5.4: only slightly effective, slightly open, and slightly timely (Figure 4.4). Students don't see responses as failures, but they don't see them as strong, transparent, or prompt either.

FIGURE 4.4

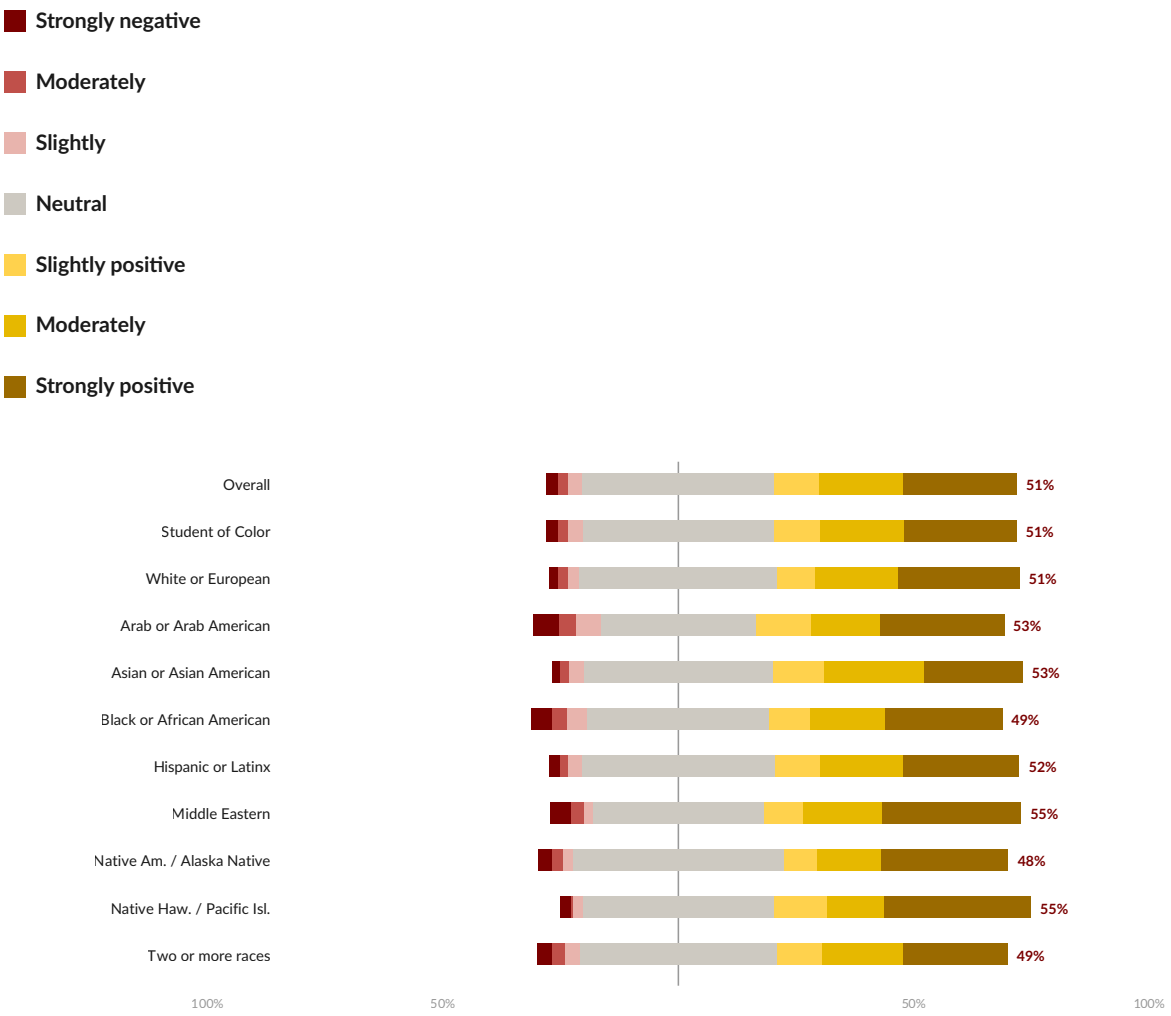
Institutional Responses to Racist Incidents: Mean Ratings

Mean ratings: effectiveness 5.28, openness 5.03, timeliness 5.22 on a 7-point scale (4 = neutral). About a third to two-fifths chose the exact midpoint.

The neutrality is the story. On all three dimensions, a third to two-fifths of students choose the exact midpoint, neither approving nor condemning, and only small shares call responses ineffective, secretive, or delayed (Figures 4.5–4.7). Black or African American, Arab or Arab American, and Middle Eastern students rate slightly lower across the board, though the gaps are modest. This reads less as dissatisfaction than as reserved judgment: students withhold trust rather than withdraw it.

FIGURE 4.5

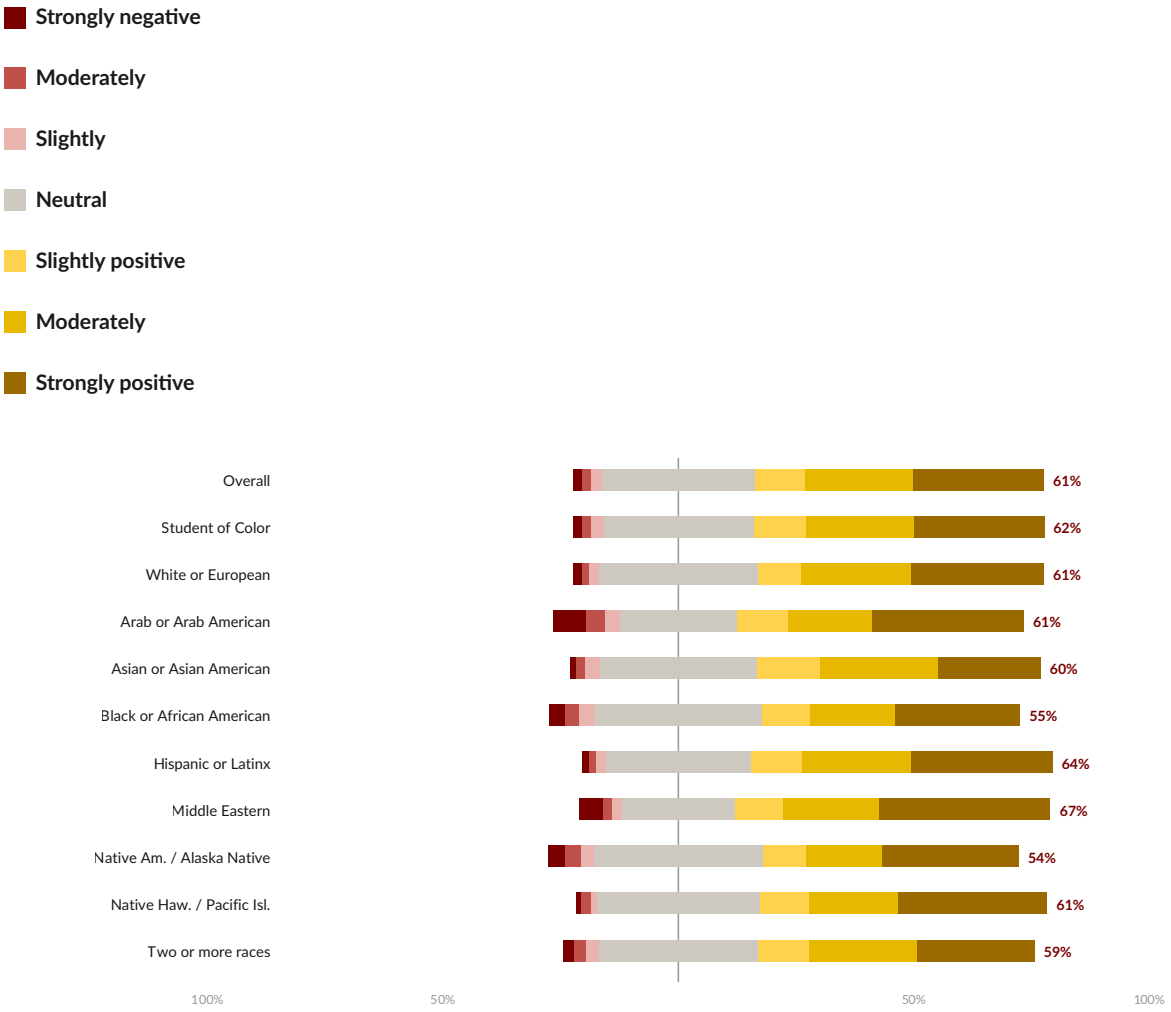
Openness of Institutional Responses to Racist Incidents



In secret (left) to in the open (right); 4 = neutral. Percent positive shown at right.

FIGURE 4.6

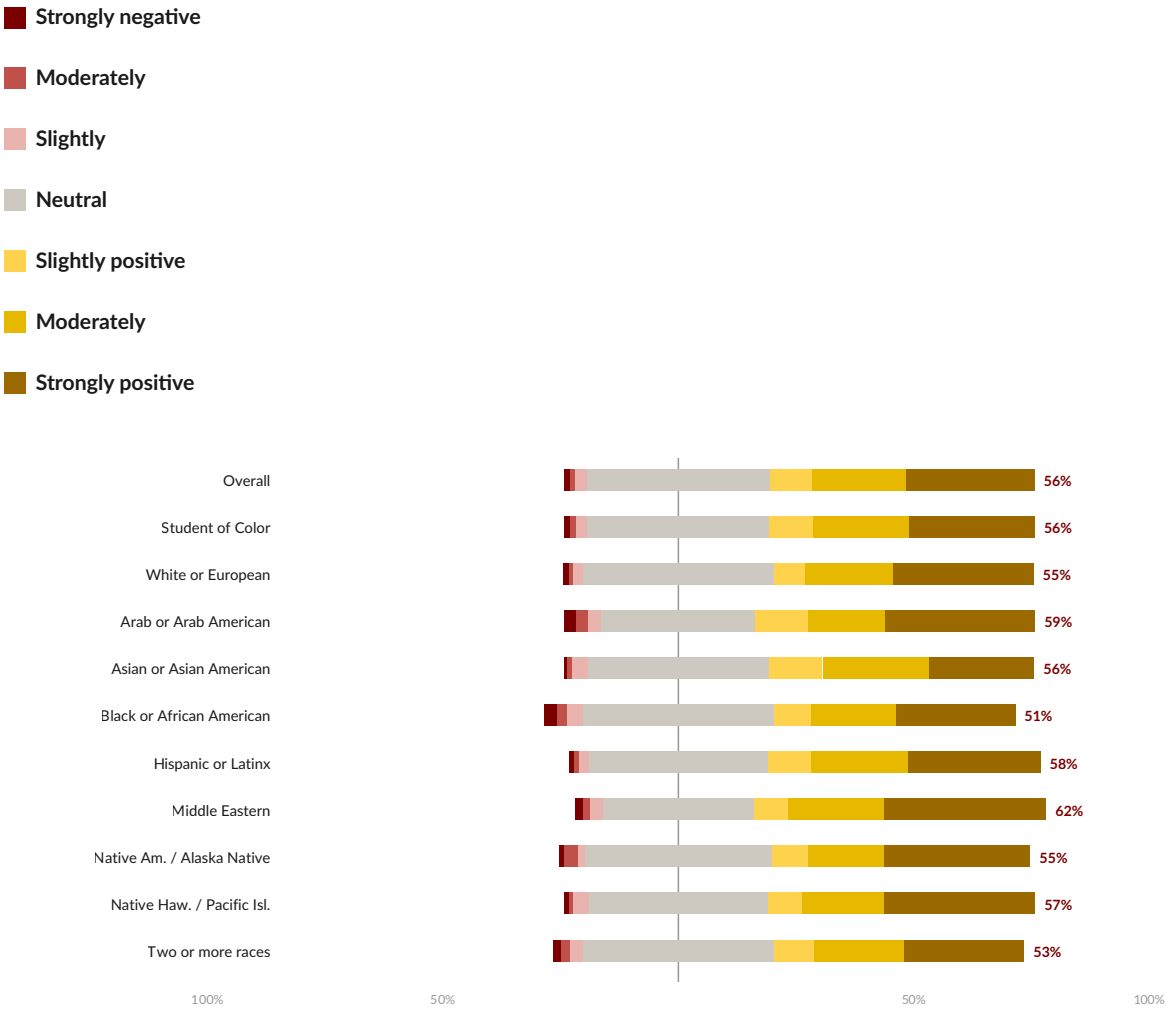
Effectiveness of Institutional Responses to Racist Incidents



Ineffective (left) to effective (right); 4 = neutral.

FIGURE 4.7

Timeliness of Institutional Responses to Racist Incidents



Delayed (left) to timely (right); 4 = neutral.

Implications

Racial equity investments are evident here, but they are not entirely trusted. The students see the hiring and the program; their trust in it, and in leadership's response to racism is conditional.

- Visible effort isn't automatically persuasive. Majorities see commitment, but nearly a third question its depth, most of all Black, Arab or Arab American, and Middle Eastern students.
- Representation functions as a visible signal of commitment. Hiring staff of color stands in, for many students, as proof of seriousness; where it is thin, they infer the commitment is too.
- Neutrality is the dominant verdict on response. Large shares sit at the scale's midpoint, which reads as restrained confidence, not endorsement.
- Trust tracks racialized experience. The students who report the most racial stress and the least affirmation are the same ones least confident in leadership, a thread that runs through every chapter.

Taken together, the four chapters tell a consistent story. Students meet institutional commitment not mainly in policies or public statements, but in everyday encounters: with faculty, the curriculum, campus climate, and leadership. Equity initiatives set the conditions for change; whether they become real for students turns on how consistently they reach daily practice.

Recommendations

The previous chapters tell a consistent story. California Community Colleges have made meaningful investments in racial equity, yet students continue to experience those commitments unevenly. Across the report, one finding appears repeatedly: institutional commitments create the conditions for change, but students experience them through classrooms, curricula, student services, hiring, and institutional leadership.

Students who learned with faculty of color often reported stronger affirmation, but representation alone did not eliminate disparities. Racism remained an uneven feature of campus life, carrying measurable emotional and academic consequences. Opportunities for racial learning depended heavily on individual instructors rather than institutional design. Although many students recognized visible commitments to equity, their confidence in campus leadership stayed conditional, shaped less by public statements than by how leaders responded when racism occurred.

The recommendations that follow focus on strengthening the institutional practices through which students experience equity. Most are within the authority of campus leaders; the final recommendation addresses the statewide policies and investments that can support this work across the system.

1

Recommendation 1. Strengthen Representation Among Faculty and Staff

Students, especially those from racially minoritized groups, report stronger mattering and affirmation in courses taught by faculty of color, and prior research links shared racial or ethnic backgrounds with stronger belonging and student success (Cole, 2010). Representation matters, and students recognize it directly. Make hiring processes transparent, include students on search committees, and prioritize diverse candidate pools across instructional faculty, counselors, advisors, and other student-facing positions.

2

Recommendation 2. Invest in Inclusive Teaching Practices

The differences in reported racism between classrooms taught by White faculty and faculty of color point to the importance of equipping every instructor to build inclusive learning environments. Hiring diverse faculty is an important step, but it should not create the expectation that faculty of color alone carry responsibility for equity work. The experiences students report with faculty of color reflect practices that can be learned, supported, and expected across all faculty. Professional learning should focus on inclusive pedagogy, recognizing bias, affirming students, and creating classroom environments where every student feels they matter.

3

Recommendation 3. Strengthen Faculty–Student Relationships

Encourage faculty to engage students both inside and outside the classroom through timely feedback, accessible office hours, meaningful mentoring, and participation in learning communities. Higher-quality faculty–student interaction is associated with stronger engagement, persistence, academic achievement, and skill development (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Kuh et al., 2006; McClenney, 2007; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). These practices require institutional support as well as faculty development.

4

Recommendation 4. Expand Affirming Spaces for Students

Campus organizations emerged as some of the strongest sites of affirmation, particularly for Black students, while less structured social spaces remained uneven across racial groups. Build and sustain spaces, programs, and staffing that affirm racially minoritized students and create opportunities for meaningful connection. Schedule activities in ways that recognize the realities of commuting, employment, and family responsibilities, and involve students, faculty, and staff in shaping those spaces.

5

Recommendation 5. Institutionalize Racial Learning

A diverse student body does not produce racial learning on its own. Racial learning often depends on individual faculty and students of color rather than institutional design. It should become part of institutional infrastructure rather than individual initiative. Expand faculty development around facilitating conversations about race, diversify course materials across disciplines, and embed racial learning throughout the curriculum rather than concentrating it in isolated courses or programs.

6

Recommendation 6. Build Trust Through Institutional Response

Students judge institutional commitment not only by visible investments but also by how leaders respond when racism occurs. Responses should be timely, transparent, and centered on those affected. Students consistently report wanting to be heard, taken seriously, and supported. Clear communication, thoughtful investigation, visible accountability, and appropriate support services strengthen institutional credibility far more than symbolic statements alone.

7

Recommendation 7. Make Climate Assessment Part of Institutional Improvement

Regular campus climate assessment helps institutions understand how students experience their commitments to equity. Climate data should inform strategic planning, departmental decision-making, professional development, and resource allocation. Assessment should be ongoing and used to guide continuous improvement rather than one-time reporting.

8

Recommendation 8. Support Students Who Experience Racial Harm

Among students who experienced racist incidents, many reported frustration, isolation, and declines in academic performance. Institutions should connect incident response with accessible counseling, advising, faculty support, and other interventions that help students remain academically engaged. The educational consequences of racial harm should be addressed as educational concerns, not simply personal ones.

9

Recommendation 9. Sustain Equity Through Systemwide Leadership

The patterns documented in this report extend across the California Community College system and require system-level leadership. The Chancellor's Office and statewide governance can establish shared expectations for faculty and staff diversity, expand professional learning opportunities, support regular campus climate assessment, and incorporate disaggregated climate indicators alongside traditional measures of student success. What individual colleges can pursue independently, the system can scale, sustain, and hold accountable.

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