

Are College Professors Less Supportive Of Black Students?

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About 150 people, mainly students, marched at the Emporia State University (Kansas) campus to ... [+]
Corbis via Getty Images

The Gallup organization, perhaps America’s most respected surveyor of public opinion, recently conducted its annual Alumni Survey of nearly 20,000 adults who attended college, slightly more than 1,600 of whom graduated between 2010 and 2019. Presumably most of these respondents are in their twenties or early thirties. When asked, 63% of white or Hispanic students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My professors at [University name] cared about me as a person,” compared with only 44% of Black students.

This seems broadly consistent with other evidence, including news accounts of campus protest demonstrations, that suggest that Black students feel less satisfied with their college experience than other students. I would note, however, that those truly *most* dissatisfied with their treatment by professors are those who explicitly *disagree* with the statement above—not believing their university’s professors “cared about me as a person.” Here, the racial differences are far less apparent. Only 19% of Blacks, compared with 16%

of whites (and 14% of Hispanics), disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement Gallup posed to respondents. Among students who seem likely to be most dissatisfied with the way they are treated by professors, the racial differences are not very large, indeed possibly not even statistically significantly different at a high level of confidence (I did not see that information).

As a social scientist aware of pitfalls of making generalizations about phenomena based on very limited data, I have grave reservations about concluding “survey results show that Blacks are treated significantly different than whites by their professors.” There are *other* factors that the Gallup survey did not evaluate, as lead author Jessica Harlan acknowledged during a brief interview. For example, incomes of Black Americans on average are significantly lower than that of whites. Do professors tend on average to show less empathy and concern for lower income students, *independent of their race*? Numerous studies show that, probably because of affirmative action policies, Black students have lower average admission test scores than white students. If these tests measure something useful, as many believe, might the closer rapport observed between professors and white students be a function of differences in prior educational preparation and performance rather than race?

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Richard Sander and Stuart Taylor asserted nearly a decade ago that well intended policies designed to narrow racial disparities often have undesirable academic consequences, leading to a mismatch of students with the institution that they attend. Sander and Taylor claimed, with considerable evidence supporting them, that some Black students are much worse off attending prestigious schools to which they are admitted rather than very good but somewhat less selective admission schools for which they had comparable qualifications relative to other students.

One of the advantages of teaching for well over a half a century is that one gets some sense of attitudinal change over time. If asked in, say, 1970, “Do you think some professors are not particularly cordial to Black students because of preconceived opinions about their likely performance simply based on race?” I probably would have answered “yes.”

Since then, however, universities have devoted huge resources to reducing racial disparities. Universities have high level administrators responsible for “diversity and inclusion.” If asked today the same question as stated above, I would answer “rarely, and,

in fact, some professors sympathetic to Black resentment of racial disparities would probably show special encouragement and attention to Black students.” Perhaps those perceptions are wrong, but they nonetheless make me suspicious of blanket claims that “Professors care less about Black students.”

Gallup is providing a useful service with its alumni surveys, originally started in partnership with Purdue University. I think the information that Gallup has gleaned should encourage more high quality research where racial factors are evaluated along with a host of other considerations influencing professorial reaction to students.

Putting racial disparities aside, roughly 40% of full time students seeking bachelor’s degrees do not graduate from college in six years. Arguably, this is a national scandal, wasting vast human resources and causing much needless despair for college dropouts. The issue, however, probably goes far beyond race, and involves, for example, in some cases general faculty indifference to students in an era of Publish or Perish. More research is needed.

My latest book is Restoring the Promise: Higher Education in America.



Richard Vedder

I am a graduate of Northwestern University and the University of Illinois, and am an economic historian who has turned my attention to the economics of higher education.

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