

The Atlantic

The Cost of Balancing Academia and Racism

Researchers say that discrimination at colleges and universities may have negative impacts on black students' mental health.



Students at the University of Colorado gather in support of protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, during a demonstration in Boulder.

Rick Wilking / Reuters

ADRIENNE GREEN | 8:00 AM ET | EDUCATION

Amid a [surge](#) in student-led protests around the country, many colleges have been struggling to make their campuses more accommodating for minorities. Last semester, student-activist groups nationwide issued [demands](#) to their universities seeking everything from mandatory sensitivity-and-racial-bias

training to the development of safe spaces on campus for people of color.

During a protest at Princeton last semester, students [confronted](#) university President Christopher Eisgruber, explaining the emotional reasons behind their demand that the school remove Woodrow Wilson's name from university buildings. A female protester was shown in a video saying:

I don't think [racism] is just one or two evils. I don't think it's just a flaw, and I don't think that you as a white person understand what it's like to walk past a building or to be studying in a school or to have it on your diploma from a school that was built on the backs of and by your people. I don't want to see that. I do not want to sit in Wilcox hall and enjoy my meal and look at Woodrow Wilson, who would not have wanted me here.

At schools across the country, from the University of Missouri to Ithaca College to Stanford, students of color are showing that they feel disconnected from their respective schools, that implicit yet institutionalized racism creates emotional distance between them and their white peers and faculty. Being a black student on a predominantly white campus certainly doesn't guarantee that the student will develop mental-health issues. However, various studies suggest that perceived or actual discrimination can make it hard for students of color to engage with their campus in the way that their white peers do. In his 1992 article in *The Atlantic*, "[Race and the Schooling of Black Americans](#)," Claude M. Steele explains:

The basic assimilationist offer that schools make to blacks: You can be valued and rewarded in school (and society), the schools say to these students, but you must first master the culture and ways of the

American mainstream, and since that mainstream (as it is represented) is essentially white, this means you must give up many particulars of being black—styles of speech and appearance, value priorities, preferences—at least in mainstream settings. This is asking a lot ... For too many black students school is simply the place where, more concerted, persistently, and authoritatively than anywhere else in society, they learn how little valued they are.

For minority students, surviving and thriving academically despite multiple encounters with racism or stereotyping may require a different type of resolve than do typical college-student struggles like balancing work and class, or overcoming difficult assignments. W.E.B. Du Bois coined the concept of “double consciousness,” whereby a black people are essentially forced to have two identities and pressured to view themselves as they’re perceived by their non-black peers. That psychology can create a unique circumstance for black students today—a psychology some researchers argue may even lead to mental-health problems that go unnoticed.

This month, the JED Foundation and the Steve Fund, two leading mental-health organizations, conducted a [national survey](#) of about 1,500 first-year college students at various two- and four-year institutions. It found that 50 percent of white students felt more academically prepared than their peers, versus 36 percent of black students; white students were also more likely to feel emotionally prepared for college. Meanwhile, 57 percent of black students said that college wasn’t “living up to their expectations,” compared to 47 percent of white students. Students of color were more likely than white students to say that “everyone has college figured out but them,” and 75 percent of black college students responded that they tend to keep their feelings about the difficulty of college to themselves, versus 61 percent of white students.

By recognizing that uncomfortable campus climates can take a toll on black

students' mental health, perhaps colleges and universities will better understand the root causes behind the protests—unrest that some falsely interpret as responses to campus-specific controversies. Throughout these protests and subsequent discussions, a common thread appeared: College campuses haven't shielded students of color from the effects of societal racism—and at times they have exacerbated it. I remember being a college student, hearing about the deaths of young black people like Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown and feeling pressured to process these instances of racial injustice while also combating the racism that was directed toward me and other students of color on my campus. I had to confront all of this while also trying to achieve in the classroom. My solution: endurance.

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Many students of color not only have to battle institutional racism, they also have to engage in academic environments that condone microaggressions and stereotyping. This can make these students feel like they have to outshine their peers in the classroom to disprove the notion that they are academically inferior. Last month, during the [opening arguments](#) for the latest Supreme Court case over the University of Texas's affirmative-action program, Justice Antonin Scalia made headlines after he [cited a theory](#) suggesting that black student might be better off attending “a slower-track school where they do well” rather than elite schools. That principle, the “mismatch theory,” holds that race-conscious policies like affirmative action actually harm minority students in the long run because the students learn less and fare worse than they would if they were at a

less competitive school. Some experts suggest that black students who strive to simultaneously excel in the classroom and disprove the mismatch theory might ultimately overwork themselves to the point of illness—all just to prove their intellectual worth.

Resilience has long been glorified as integral to being a successful student. But research has shown that the higher-education experience often requires that black students employ even more grit than their white peers if they want to achieve both in the classroom and outside of it, where they have to [overcome stereotype threat](#) and straight-up racism. In a piece published last December with *The Atlantic*, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*'s Aisha Sultan [explains](#) how teaching and emphasizing grit as a means of encouraging student success doesn't account for how culture affects learning. Suggesting that students of color who struggle academically don't have as much grit, she notes, ignores the social resilience that they are already employing simply by being present at school. Tyrone C. Howard, the associate dean for equity and inclusion at UCLA, who was referenced in *The Atlantic* piece, states that it's “irresponsible” and “unfair” to talk about grit without the context of social challenges.

RELATED STORY



[Do Historically Black Colleges Provide the Safe Spaces Students Are After?](#)

Amid the protests of the last several months, the conversation about racism on campuses has prompted debates about free speech, political correctness, and the utility of students being uncomfortable. But do students of color face a more tangible risk than their white peers? Is navigating these complex environments challenging their mental-emotional well-being?

“Weathering the cumulative effects of living in a society characterized by white dominance and privilege produces a kind of physical and mental wear-and-tear that contributes to a host of psychological and physical ailments,” explains

Ebony McGee, an assistant professor of diversity and urban schooling at Vanderbilt and co-author of a recent [study](#) on black students and mental health, in a post on the university's [research blog](#). The study, whose analysis is based on critical race theory, explores how racism affects the ability of high-achieving black students to have healthy mental attitudes toward their work and college experiences. “We have documented alarming occurrences of anxiety, stress, depression and thoughts of suicide, as well as a host of physical ailments like hair loss, diabetes and heart disease,” she writes.

McGee and her co-author David Stovall, an associate professor of African American studies and educational policy at University of Illinois at Chicago, discuss how the discourse around the academic survival of black students and their experiences on predominantly white campuses often fails to analyze the effects of societal racism on their mental health. “We have grown accustomed to talking about grit, perseverance, and mental toughness without properly acknowledging the multiple forms of suffering [black students] have confronted (and still confront) as part of that story,” write the researchers, neither of whom are mental-health professionals. Colleges rely on all the positive aspects of grit to define the “college experience” by paying attention only to its static definition: courage, resolve, the innate ability to bounce back from obstacles. But history, the researchers argue, has shown that the types of institutional biases that are at play in the U.S. education system are structured to devalue the work of students of color, which can't be fixed with an extra dose of mental toughness:

While it is debatable whether pushing oneself to the limit to outwork the next person is an admirable quality, we have witnessed black students work themselves to the point of extreme illness in attempting to escape the constant threat (treadmill) of perceived intellectual inferiority. However, what grit researchers do not adequately examine is the role that race plays in producing anxiety, trauma, and general unpleasantness in students of color engaging in high-pressure

academic work. The psychological and emotional energy required to manage stress in academic and social contexts as well as systemic and everyday racism can be overwhelming and taxing.

Worsening these challenges, students of color are less likely than their white counterparts to seek and undergo psychological treatment—a disparity that *The Wall Street Journal* has [reported](#) is widespread on elite college campuses. Barriers to seeking care—such as cost, lack of availability, and the stigmas associated with therapy—combined with a mistrust of the health-care system and racism contribute to the gap, according to a [supplement](#) to the surgeon general’s 1999 report on mental health. That black students utilize mental-health services much less may also reflect a cultural mistrust of the universities, according to some research. The racism that students experience on their campuses suggests that colleges and universities are systems that perpetuate their pain. “So going to a counseling center within a university that perpetuates institutional racism is just kind of like a conflict of interest for many students,” McGee says.

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Some new initiatives are even cropping up to address the mental-health issue on campuses. For example, a collaboration between the aforementioned [Steve Fund](#), one of few organizations dedicated to the mental and emotional well-being of young people of color, and [7cups.com](#) is looking to offer online emotional support to college students. Similar to a hotline, users can talk with

and seek encouragement from one of the 1,500 volunteers who have already signed up as listeners.

A few months ago I [wrote](#) about how it's incumbent on colleges and universities to avoid placing the same burdens—discrimination and racism—on students of color that they are bound to face in society at large once they graduate. As McGee and Stovall assert, it's not a new concept that the biases that exist within the country's education system—from achievement gaps in the K-12 system to the lack of faculty diversity on college campuses—are designed to limit black academic opportunities and devalue their intellect.

Framing the protests that have happened—and are likely to continue—on campuses as reflective in part of black student's mental health raises at least one question about colleges' handling of the racial tensions: Should colleges ask historically marginalized students to become grittier and more resilient, or should their focus be directed toward achieving greater racial justice so that black students do not have to compromise their mental and physical well-being by being resilient?

The former Yale lecturer Erika Christakis reinforced McGee's point last fall in the controversial Halloween [email](#) she sent to students asking if college environments have lost the ability to be “provocative” or “offensive.” “Have we lost faith in young people's capacity—in your capacity—to exercise self-censure, through social norming, and also in your capacity to ignore or reject things that trouble you?” Christakis asked. There's a sad irony in the fact that the solutions offered by those confused by student aggression often expect black students to utilize more grit, more resilience, more endurance to deal with experiences of injustice that they shouldn't face at all. The critics who imply that students of color should endure a little discomfort—racism, microaggression, cultural appropriation—in the name of free speech, for the edification of other students, or just for the sake of good-spirited debate? They're really contributing to a mental-health problem.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ADRIENNE GREEN is an editorial fellow at The Atlantic.
