

Chrystal A. George Mwangi and Sharon Fries-Britt disrupt the idea of a monolithic experience among Black students by reporting on Black within-group diversity and the perceptions and experiences of Black immigrants in higher education.

By Chrystal A. George Mwangi and Sharon Fries-Britt

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# Black Within Black: The Perceptions of Black Immigrant Collegians and Their U.S. College Experience

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**T**HE TOPIC OF DIVERSITY PERMEATES all aspects of American culture, particularly as it relates to the changing demographics of our nation and the impact that these changes are having on every sector in society. In higher education, the topic of diversity extends across multiple domains (e.g., students, faculty, staff, alumni, policy making, administrative issues, and governance). Discussions about student diversity are central to every campus, especially as they relate to who is admitted, the nature of their academic experience, and who ultimately completes a degree. In the 21st century, more scholars are studying diverse communities of students, which adds to our understanding of underrepresented students' experiences in U.S. higher education. Moreover, definitions of diversity

have become more inclusive, expanding beyond considerations of gender and race to include socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual identity, immigrant status, disabilities, athletes, and more. Notwithstanding this expansion, the issues of race and ethnicity continue to pose unique challenges and opportunities in our larger society and on our campuses.

Research on racial and ethnic issues often focuses on differences across groups (e.g., Blacks and Whites; Latino/as and Whites; Asians and Whites). Yet, scholars increasingly call for examination of within-group differences, which challenge us to move beyond a monolithic understanding of groups as simply Asians, Latinos, Blacks, and Whites. Within-group research adds to the complexity and understanding of the many

factors that shape all students' experiences. Thus we better understand how factors like educational opportunities, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, and place of birth impact students.

This article adds to the call for examining diversity within a group by focusing on the diversity of Black college students, specifically relating to ethnicity and nativity. As the Black immigrant population expands in the United States, we have seen more college enrollment and workforce participation of this population. While Black Americans and Black immigrants may share similar experiences, it is important to attend to the differences between their perceptions and experiences as well. We describe this as "Black within Black" to call attention directly to this within-group diversity and to intentionally draw closer to this examination.

The growing diversity within the Black student community on our campuses is eliciting greater dialogue by key campus stakeholders and scholars asking more questions about their demographic composition. Our research team at the University of Maryland became involved in this dialogue when we launched a research project with the National Society of Black Physicists (NSBP) with the intention of studying Black students majoring in physics. However, over the course of our data collection with NSBP, we found that of the Black students we interviewed during small focus groups, 18 percent were born outside of the United States or were the children of immigrants. Often their experiences were vastly different than their native-born Black peers, particularly regarding issues of race and racism. The increasing diversity of Black students in our database prompted our team to add additional

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questions to the interview protocol in the third year of the study so that we could begin to capture data on these diverse within-group experiences.

The data revealed nuanced understandings of the experiences of "Black" college students. In several of our focus groups, immigrant Black students described U.S. born Blacks as too quick to assume that negative incidents occurring on campus and/or in their interactions with faculty, staff, and classmates were based on race or racism. Generally, they felt that U.S. born Blacks were more inclined to see issues from a racial lens. U.S. born Black students expressed significant frustration with these perceptions and felt that their immigrant peers' inability to see the manifestation of race and racism created within-group tensions. Some Black American students felt misunderstood by their immigrant peers or that their peers were ignoring important campus climate issues because they had not been in the United States long enough to understand the legacy of racism and therefore could not accurately identify U.S. racism.

Our research findings have many implications to consider, including how Blackness is defined in America; whether being Black should be viewed in the same manner for Black immigrants as it is for Black Americans in gaining access to higher education; or whether, as Chrystal A. George Mwangi discusses in her article "Complicating Blackness: Black Immigrants and Racial Positioning in U.S. Higher Education," race should be defined through a historical context of "redressing past wrongs" or through a contemporary lens of "diversity and inclusion" in higher education policy and practice. The answers to these and other questions will be debated over the ensuing decades. No doubt there will be disagreements on future policy and programs that seek to make distinctions within the Black student community. As scholars and practitioners examine the merits of these issues, what we know for certain is that the growing diversity within the Black community will continue to expand exponentially. Those who work in higher education can expect the 21st century to be a time when there will be greater exploration of what it means to be a Black immigrant within the racial constructs of Blackness in the United States, or *Black within Black*.

## Is There Really an Increasing Black Immigrant Population in the United States and Will It Impact Higher Education?

Most images of the growing immigrant population in the United States focus on Latino and Asian populations. Relatively few reports point to the ways in which

immigrants from predominantly Black countries (e.g., Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa) are also endeavoring to make the United States a temporary or permanent home. Despite the limited attention, reports by Donald J. Hernandez published by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and Mary M. Kent published by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) show that this population has more than doubled within the past two decades, and today approximately 3.6 million Black immigrants live in the United States. In higher education, we know little about the experiences and challenges encountered by Black immigrants engaged in the U.S. educational pipeline. Yet, over 12 percent of all Black children are immigrants (first generation immigrants) or have at least one parent who is an immigrant (second and 2.5 generation immigrants). In addition to their presence at the K–12 level, Black immigrants represent a significant and growing proportion of Black college students as emphasized in a 2007 article by Douglas S. Massey, Margarita Mooney, Kimberly C. Torres, and Camille Z. Charles stating that Black immigrants comprise 12 percent of all Black undergraduates, 27 percent of Black undergraduates at selective colleges, and 41 percent of Black undergraduates at Ivy League institutions.

Like other immigrant groups, Black immigrants encounter economic, social, and cultural challenges in adjusting to life in the United States. However, unique to their immigrant experience is being Black in a highly racialized U.S. society. Thus in addition to traditional adjustment experiences, Black immigrants often experience issues of race, racism, and discrimination in ways different from Black Americans and non-Black immigrants.

## What Factors Shape the Racial Experiences of Black Immigrant Collegians?

Black immigrants have to make a number of cultural adjustments academically and socially on campus. Although many described their U.S. colleges and universities as diverse, they had different ways of processing race in the United States relative to their Black American peers. Our findings led us to publish an emergent framework on racial identity development for this student population entitled *Learning Race in a U.S. Context: Perceptions of race among foreign-born students of color (LRUSC Framework)* as well as an article, “The Acculturation Experiences of Foreign-Born Students of Color in Physics”, that takes an asset-based approach to examining the acculturation experiences of these students. In this article we discuss three key themes from our data: (1) adjusting to a

racial minority status, (2) encounters with racial and ethnic otherness, and (3) learning in a community of diverse peers.

## Adjusting to a Racial Minority Status

“So to come to America and—first of all, to... be considered a minority was weird... to come up here and be a minority is a little awkward”—Robert, Trinidad and Tobago

The college transition requires a number of adjustments as students learn new academic expectations and engage in new social networks. For students coming to the United States to attend college, this transition includes additional factors and challenges including adjustment to a new cultural context, language barriers, and cross-cultural engagement with peers, faculty, and campus staff. Yet, for the foreign-born, Black students in our study, becoming a college student in the United States also meant adjusting to a new status as a racial minority. Students were perplexed at the notion of their racial status in the United States as most came from predominantly Black countries in Africa and the Caribbean where social constructions of race were not the same.

Robert’s quote above illustrates his disorientation in coming to the United States where people who look like him are in the minority. This is in contrast to his country of origin, where his racial group is in the majority, “I am an international student, so the whole race issue is completely different for me because I’m from Trinidad and Tobago, and we’re 50 percent Black.” Yet, for Robert it was not solely the structural makeup of America that was an adjustment challenge, but also the racial tensions and otherness that existed for Blacks in America. He explained that Trinidad is multicultural and “in Trinidad we are Trinidadians and it doesn’t matter if you’re Indian, Chinese, White, whatever. Once you’re from Trinidad, you’re from Trinidad.” From his perspective, national pride and identity brought people of different races and ethnicities together in Trinidad, but in the United States he did not perceive a single unifier across racial lines.

Many Black immigrant and international collegians in our study at first did not recognize or tried to ignore their racial minority status in the United States. Some explained that they “don’t see color” or “didn’t even know what it [race] really meant.” As foreigners, their nativity and ethnicity were more salient aspects of their identity as compared to race. In instances where they were aware of the historical issues impacting racial climate in the United States, some students expressed that focusing on race and rac-

ism were a disruption to their academic pursuits. Students noted “I try not to get distracted but it’s really hard to be from another race and succeed” and race “involves emotions and sometimes gets you out of your focus.” During the focus group Robert explained, “I don’t pay much attention to it [being a racial minority], because you’re here for a purpose and you just stay on that track.” Attempting to distance oneself from issues of race and racism was a way for students to remain focused on their ultimate goal of attaining a college degree.

Still, even as Robert and other students intentionally sought avoidance as a strategy, they were consistently confronted with the racial dynamics and structures of college campuses in the United States. For example, Robert explained his trepidation about working in a university laboratory where he is the only Black person,

Being around everybody that’s White, predominantly, and you’re the only person of some type of color in there ... I mean, I’ve been around different races, but to be all of one race concentrated like that, I’ve never really done it, so that’s one thing I’ll be kinda nervous about.

Although in his daily college life Robert sought to ignore issues of race, he was aware that there are spaces on his campus where he would be the only Black person and he worried about how this would affect his experience. As he sought to exclude his Black racial identity from his campus experience, he was at the same time adjusting to this new racial minority status in the United States and being consistently confronted with it.

## Encounters with Racial and Ethnic Otherness

“In undergrad *The Bell Curve* was put right on my [desk]...I was the only Black person and one day I found that book right on top of my desk... I mean I acted a fool and just tried to find out who put it there ’cause I knew about that book and I ended up just ripping it in front of everybody”—Manuel, Senegal

While most students in our study found racial issues as a distraction to academic pursuits, they did describe encountering racism or feelings of difference because of being Black in the United States. Manuel’s experience with finding *The Bell Curve* placed anonymously on his desk, a book that argues the intellectual inferiority of Blacks, is one of a number of prejudicial

incidents that he and other students in our study experienced. When Manuel went to the administrators to report the incident, he explained that he was told, “No, this is nothing. I’m sure it was a mistake,” leaving him to feel both wronged and powerless. Manuel also described times when working with his peers he would offer a suggestion that would be immediately dismissed. However, when a White student mentioned his same suggestion, the suggestion was accepted. Native-born Black students affirmed these experiences with their own similar ones.

Although the foreign-born students may not have previously considered how others perceived their race, consistent experiences with racial microaggressions or more overt acts of racism on their campuses led some to reflect on race as a factor in their academic and social isolation, as Manuel described about his classmates, “nobody wants to work with you ... then you realize maybe it’s because of my race.” In addition to experiencing marginalization due to race, students also experienced prejudice due to their ethnicity and nationality. For example, participants described being ignored or feeling unwelcome because of their accent or due to dressing differently than their American peers. Most students in our study were from developing nations in Africa and the Caribbean, which drew stereotypes from American peers who felt that participants would be underprepared academically. This was untrue, as many of the participants had actually experienced more advanced academic preparation in mathematics and science than their American classmates. When Manuel arrived in the United States, his academic preparation in Senegal allowed him to test out of advanced math and science courses. However, he struggled with language barriers because he was not fluent in English and thus had to take English as a Second Language classes. Because of an accent or inability to verbalize one’s thoughts in English, these students were considered to be academically inferior, when in fact they had much to offer academically.

Some participants went on to say that they used their experiences with racial and ethnic otherness as further motivation to succeed academically. Manuel explained that in Senegal he had never considered race or racism, but in the United States over time he was “pushed to be that person” and although he, “didn’t want race to be there ’cause at some point I became really emotional about it and it hits you really hard if you’ve never experienced racism,” eventually, “your race becomes your motivation ... it becomes your focus like pride.” However, these multiple and intersecting forms of marginality regarding Blackness and a foreign-status also adversely impact students’ experience and can lead to negative college outcomes.

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### Learning in a Community of Diverse Peers

“Coming from Haiti and going to a predominantly Black school, so even though Haiti's mostly Black but still, as a foreigner, the school didn't accept me, even though I was Black ... So I used that as a motivation to succeed ... But it was a culture shock, I had to adapt myself”—Marshall, Haiti

While many of our participants attended predominantly White institutions (PWIs), there were also some who attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). These students also expressed having difficulty adjusting and could still be considered outsiders although they were in a predominantly Black university setting. Marshall's narrative illustrates some of these challenges. Initially he had difficulty processing what it means to be Black and a foreigner in the United States. It was surprising for this student to be at an HBCU and be treated differently from his native Black peers. Being made to feel like the outsider was not an experience he ever had in Haiti. Being an immigrant Black attending a historically Black college illuminated his within-group difference. Although Marshall experienced the challenge of being an outsider, he used these experiences as motivation and to build networks with others. This example illustrates that the growing diversity of the Black student population can create challenges as well as

opportunities for learning and engagement on any type of campus and is not necessarily restricted to PWIs.

The students in our study described being pleasantly surprised by the diversity they encountered in U.S. colleges and universities. Much of their observations focused on the structural diversity of the campus and interacting with a wide range of diverse students. However, it is important to note that they talked about diversity in terms of ethnicity and culture and not just race. Students discussed their interactions with international students from other countries as well as with American students.

Many of the students were very comfortable interacting with diverse individuals and with peers who had similar experiences traveling outside of the country. They also described feeling generally accepted by American students and noted that many of their American peers would share that they had relatives from a particular island or country in Africa. Even for Marshall, who initially struggled with acceptance at his institution stated, “Some of my friends who were African American, they help[ed] me in that transition and that was really great.” Engaging in these diverse contexts, students were able to learn about different cultural values and practices as well as share their own culture with others.

While generally the cross-cultural experiences of Black immigrant students in our study were positive, our findings illustrated that both foreign-born and native-born students came to campus pre-socialized with assumptions and stereotypes about one another's work ethic and academic abilities. Thus, although interacting with Americans was important to students' transition, these relationships were often more difficult to establish, requiring students to “prove” their academic worth or to make the initial move. Yet, the students in our study were persistent in trying to build diverse networks as illustrated by one student who explained, “I try to relate to everyone, to be a global student.”

Additionally, because Black immigrant and Black American students had vastly differing perspectives on issues of race, they did not naturally develop relationships around a shared Black experience. As aforementioned, during focus groups, while Black American students talked extensively about their racialized experiences on campus, Black immigrant students were not as apt to initially name race as a reason for feelings of academic or social isolation. These differences in experiences and perspectives around race can lead to confusion or misunderstanding among students who share the same race, but have differing nationalities/ethnicities.

Students also discussed their interactions within non-native peers. Marshall was initially surprised at how many international students were in his classes,

Three-fourths of the students that are in the physics department are foreign students. That was really a big shock for me. I guess we have only one African American student at the physics department. It's like most of us are from Zaire, Congo, Bahamas, Haiti, and Nigeria.

Engaging with international peers provided students with a sense of belonging on campus and mutual support in the college transition as one student explained “talking to other international students about it [challenges in the college transition] helped because they're going through the same thing.” While American peers did not always initially accept students in our study, other international students helped to alleviate the challenges in adjusting to the U.S. college environment.

## **What Can Campuses Do to Respond to the Needs of This Population?**

### Learn More about the Diversity of the Black Student Community on Your Campus

A first step is simply to understand the profile of Black students enrolled on your campus. Work with key departments such as institutional research and admissions to identify demographic factors for this population. The data that are available may vary and each campus will likely have particular dynamics that shape the experience of Black students. For example, is the majority of the Black students recruited from within the state or a particular region of the country? Are there large numbers of Black immigrants from diverse nations or are they concentrated geographically in a few countries? What percentage of Black Americans and Black immigrants is first generation? What is their parents' level of education? These data are important to understand and provide insight into effective ways to better serve Black students on campus. Our data suggest that this assessment is important for all institutions. It would be easy to assume that only PWIs need to understand the within-group diversity of Black students but this diversity is very important to understand at HBCUs as well.

### Connecting and Serving the Within-Group Diversity of the Black Student Population

With an understanding of the Black student data, your campus will be poised to develop effective programs to better serve the within-group diversity of

the Black student population. However, being poised to serve this population is different from effectively designing programs to address their needs. Our ability to meet students' needs is tied to how well we know and develop relationships with them.

An obvious way to connect with a large number of students on any campus is through traditional student organizations. However, these well-established groups are often already empowered on campus and are the organizations most familiar to campus administrators. This is particularly true for traditional organizations established to address the needs of Black students (e.g., Black Student Union, Greek Organizations, African and Caribbean Student Associations). Focusing primarily on these traditional campus organizations will likely empower the same community of Black student leaders. While these traditional organizations are important, they may not represent the outlets that many other Black students utilize to make connections on campus. Including student leaders from less traditional groups and groups that intersect other aspects of identity (e.g., LGBTQ groups, religious organizations and academic societies) invites a wider range of Black students who can help the campus identify needed programs and services. Often these groups emerge to address specific needs that are unmet. Many of these new organizations can be viewed as being on the margins and not central to campus administration. They may not even identify with the “administration” or traditional organizations, but their goal is to develop relationships and connections so that the campus can become more familiar with the students participating in these organizations. It may be a challenge to include a wide range of student organizations for every campus program; nevertheless, it is important to invite different student representatives throughout the year to empower more groups and individuals to be involved in shaping the campus community.

It is also important to consider how diverse groups of Black students are engaging on your campus. Acknowledge the diversity of national origins, religions, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses, and other characteristics of Black students on your campus in order to build community, instead of assuming the existence of community, among this student population. We specifically encourage administrators to be intentional in providing opportunities for foreign-born Black students and native-born Black American students to interact with and learn from each other. Without this interaction, stereotypes and tensions between native-born and foreign-born Black students will likely persist. Examples of ways in which universities can increase cross-cultural communication would be for foreign-born Black students to

have a Black American student “buddy” or to provide formal events where both groups can discuss student issues and intragroup dynamics. Curricula focusing on Black issues and history should also be representative of diverse perspectives. Another recommendation is for collaboration between Black Diaspora student organizations (e.g., Black Student Union, Caribbean Student Association, and African Student Association) on events that can create greater dialogue and learning from each other.

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As HBCUs become more diverse and serve an increasing number of White and Latino students they must also realize that the “typical” Black student population on their campus is likely changing, resulting in a more complex campus racial and cultural environment. Like other Blacks who attend HBCUs, Black immigrants may expect a more welcoming and supportive environment on an HBCU campus. It will be important for administrators to be aware of how Black immigrants are experiencing the campus socially and academically.

On PWI campuses, when administrators work with Black students they need to see these relationships as reciprocal. Students must be encouraged to express their creative ideas, utilize their talent, and address their distinct needs. Finally, we encourage greater collaborations between multicultural student services and international student services. By developing partnerships and greater collaborations, these

two areas of student affairs can play a large role in leading efforts to understand how the intersections of race, ethnicity, and nativity status can impact the experiences of students who are both racial minorities and international/immigrant students.

## Educating Faculty and Campus Administrators on Black Student Diversity

Educational research supports the important connections that Black faculty and administrators have as role models and mentors to Black students. Like all students, Black students look for indicators from faculty and staff that they matter and that there is a genuine interest in their needs. Faculty and staff must recognize the unique experience that Black immigrants have in the U.S. educational context. While they may share similar experiences of Black Americans in the United States when it comes to racial encounters and stereotypes, they may have different reactions to these encounters and express different coping strategies, feelings, and priorities about how to resolve these issues. Understanding these differences is important but we must be careful not to consider them better or worse than the Black American experience; rather, each group must be understood as distinct and unique across a number of different national and international contexts.

A challenge for Black American faculty and administrators is that their own experiences in the United States with race may likely vary from foreign-born Blacks, so they may have a more challenging time connecting to Black immigrant students who do not relate to the U.S. racial experience. Our emerging framework suggests that as immigrant students have racial encounters over time, they begin to develop an understanding and knowledge of racial issues in the U.S. context. It is important for minority faculty and administrators to be supportive of their growth and development around issues of race and racial identity. Assuming that all Black faculty and administrators will be effective role models and mentors may be short sighted if they do not understand the complexity of experiences within the Black student community. We are in an exciting and yet complex time in our nation where there are complex racial dynamics and differing experiences even in interactions between U.S. born Black students and faculty. Generational experiences with racial encounters have created very different racial understandings and realities in the United States, making it difficult to characterize how Black students and Black administrators will view race and issues of diversity in the United States.

## Implications for Future Research

Our research supports the need to examine the within-group diversity of Black students born in the United States and those who are Black immigrants. We see evidence in national trends and educational data that indicate a continued increase in Black immigrant populations. It is important to understand more about the factors that shape their motivations and successes in education and how these are similar to, and different from, Black Americans. We need to examine their encounters with race and racism and learn how they process these issues and the influence that their home country context and family have on their perception of race in the United States. Future research should seek to understand more about the peer relationships between Blacks born in the United States and those who are immigrants. What perceptions do they have of each other and how do they fortify relationships over time? Do they see connections across their academic experiences and if so what are they? Are Black immigrants' views on race influenced by their Black peers born in the United States, and if so, how? Research must continue to uncover the barriers and challenges that Black students encounter and also broaden our understanding of the multitude of factors (e.g., academic ability, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, social class, first generation, international, immigrant) that shape their experience on college

campuses. We must ask more penetrating questions about this population to better understand the different academic, social, and racial experiences that Black students report on our college campuses.

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