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## Thinking About Race: The Salience of Racial Identity at Two- and Four-Year Colleges and the Climate for Diversity

*Racial identity salience is an important component of identity development that is associated with a number of educational outcomes. Using the Diverse Learning Environments Survey, this study identifies precollege and college experiences that contribute to a heightened salience of racial identity, and its relationship to perceptions of campus climate.*

*Keywords: race, identity, campus climate*

Some contend that the 2008 election of President Barack Obama ushered the nation into a postracial, colorblind era in which race is no longer salient to discussions about problems in society (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). Just as campuses are becoming more diverse, trend data indicate that approximately one quarter of all entering freshmen at four-year institutions currently believe that racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America, which is the highest it has been in over 20 years (Pryor, DeAngelo, Palucki-Blake, Hurtado, & Tran, 2011). At the same time, a number of highly publicized race-related incidents,

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ranging from anonymous symbols (e.g. a noose hanging from a tree on campus) to verbal comments and other acts of harassment directed at specific individuals, continue to be reported on college campuses (see *Campus Racial Incidents*, 2013). These periodic incidents demonstrate that race and racism remain perennial issues on college campuses. Much educational activity directed at intergroup dynamics and climate assessment can address racial issues in the aftermath of these campus conflicts. Identity-based educational approaches have proven to be successful in addressing racial conflict and developing students' understanding of structural inequality, intergroup empathy, communication skills, collaboration, and action (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). Implementing more proactive climate approaches requires information about students' time thinking about their own racial background and if different contexts and practices are associated with this behavior, as it is critical to their identity development and relations with others.

### **Identity Salience Defined**

Cameron (2004) poses that social identity can be represented in terms of three dimensions: cognitive centrality, ingroup affect, and ingroup ties. The "salience" of a social identity (e.g. race, gender, sexuality) refers to the frequency with which individuals think about their group membership and is one of the two components, along with the level of importance of the social identity in an individual's self-concept, that comprise the cognitive centrality of that identity (Cameron, 2004; Sellers, Chavous, & Cook, 1998). In terms of racial identity, racial centrality then refers to having a high level of salience that is "cross-situationally stable" and significant to the definition of self (Sellers et al., 1998, p.13). Though research has begun to address the influence of racial centrality on college outcomes and experiences (Chavous, 2000; Sellers et al., 1998) the individual components of centrality need to be better understood.

Studies have begun to emphasize the importance of thinking about one's own racial background. For instance, identity salience is a significant and recurring component in racial identity development theories of diverse populations. Specifically, having a high salience of racial identity is necessary in order to move through the stages of various racial identity development models (Cross, 1995; Kim, 2001). This movement is critical because the more advanced stages of these models indicate a well-established core identity which is associated with an array of positive outcomes including increased self-esteem (Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001), moral reasoning (Moreland & Leach, 2001), institutional

commitment (Dovidio, Gaertner, Niemann, & Snider, 2001), intercultural competence and maturity (King & Baxter-Magolda, 2005), and academic achievement (Ortiz & Santos, 2009).

While having high racial identity salience can help individuals develop the aforementioned outcomes, it is also important to note that frequently thinking about race may be an indication of students' awareness of status differences (Tajfel, 1981). Research focusing on the effects of racial centrality has found it to be predictive of perceptions of group-based discrimination and disadvantage because it increases one's likelihood of responding as a member of the identity group (Cameron, 2004). On the other hand, having low racial centrality has been associated with lower perceptions of fit between African Americans and their college environment (Chavous, 2000). Racial identity salience, as one component of centrality, indicates that race may be at the forefront of students' minds because they have become more aware of racial differences and it therefore may shape intergroup relations and campus climate experiences among college students.

Identity development is typically a personal and long-term process, but focusing on salient identities and the early socialization and subsequent educational experiences that contribute to that saliency can help student affairs professionals and faculty better support student development and work through conflicts that arise on campus. Because racial identity salience, in particular, is important in the identity development of diverse populations (Cross, 1995; Kim, 2001; Sue & Sue, 1990), institutions need to understand how it is fostered or diminished during the college years. However, relatively little research has been conducted on racial identity salience as an outcome. The common thinking is that the more diverse the campus, the more comfortable the climate and perhaps the less salient race may be among the student body. But compositional diversity or representation in the student body is only one component contributing to how students experience race and the campus racial climate (S. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999) and we still know little about racial salience in different educational contexts or about distinctions between students at diverse community colleges and four-year institutions. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the precollege socialization factors and college experiences associated with a heightened salience of racial identity for college students at both two- and four-year institutions where age, career priorities, and diversity experiences may differ.

In light of the recent racial conflicts on college campuses, this study paves the way to understanding the relationship between the salience of racial identity and campus climate. This is an important connection to

make given that previous research shows students of color have more negative perceptions of campus climate than White students (Guillermo-Wann, 2013; S. Hurtado, 1992; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Os-eguera, 2008; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005). These studies have focused on disaggregated racial groups to show differences in climate perceptions based on predetermined racial categories, but such categories do not capture whether students actually spend time thinking about their race. Because there is variability in terms of racial salience within racial group categories, it is important to explicitly show a link between racial identity salience and multiple dimensions of the climate for diverse campuses.

### **Relevant Theory and Literature**

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981) poses that individuals' behaviors are influenced by their different social identity group memberships, including race. The theory suggests that there are important distinctions between social (group-based) and personal identities, and that context plays a significant role in creating collective psychological processes that are part of a social identity. In their Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, Jones and McEwen (2000) built upon the idea of distinguishing between social and personal identities, concluding that the more salient a social identity is to an individual, the more integral that identity becomes to the core sense of self. They also address the importance of context in making different identities salient. Additional research indicates that social identities that are more targeted in society are the ones that are most psychologically powerful (A. Hurtado, Gurin, & Peng, 1994; Tatum, 1992). These identities tend to be salient across situations and serve as social scripts that guide behaviors and perceptions (A. Hurtado et al., 1994).

#### ***Racial Identity Development and Salience***

Racial identity development models for Blacks (Cross, 1995), Asian Americans (Kim, 2001), and Whites (Helms, 1995) all involve fluid developmental stages, while the racial identity of Latina/os (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001) and Multiracial individuals (Renn, 2004; Wijeyesinghe, 2001) has been examined in terms of orientations and factors that contribute to their identity. These differences reflect different researchers' conceptualizations of process or stages versus topologies, not differences across racial groups. Though the various identity development models differ in their structure, they tend to involve similar processes and developmental tasks (Adams, 2001), and they all reach a transition

in which individuals have developed both a certain level of awareness about themselves and an understanding of other racial groups (Sue & Sue, 1990). The salience of racial identity is not the end point of any of the models, but rather is a pivotal transition point in the developmental process.

Most models include an early stage where individuals lack awareness of racial identity and either experience internalized or unconscious racism (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995; Kim, 2001). Remaining in this stage can delay psychological development, making it harder to accomplish personal and academic goals (Taub & McEwen, 1992). Movement away from this early stage depends on the social environment and whether it provides individuals the opportunities to experience difference, since dissonance can create initial awareness of racial differences and increases the salience of racial identity. Because the early stages in the models reflect an unquestioned acceptance of dominant culture, rather than being colorblind, it is necessary for individuals to become color conscious in order to critically engage in a diverse society marked by unequal power relations and status differences.

As individuals begin to more frequently think about race, they enter a period of confusion where they question the dominant racial paradigm that maintains racial inequalities and they explore their own racial identity (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995; Kim, 2001). The dissonance caused by racial identity salience during this period requires individuals to reconstruct social knowledge and promotes cognitive development (Torres & Baxter-Magolda, 2004). According to King and Baxter-Magolda (2005), by the time individuals reach the complex final stage in any of the racial identity development models, they have integrated intercultural maturity into a sense of self. Intercultural maturity is composed of three dimensions (cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal) and involves understanding, accepting, and being able to positively interact with diverse others; needless to say, this is a desirable outcome for graduates who will become leaders and professionals in a diverse society.

### *Empirical Research on Racial Identity Salience*

In one of few studies that explored the salience of racial identity as an outcome on a college campus, Steck, Heckert, and Heckert (2003) examined differences in racial identity salience between Black students at a Historically Black College (HBCU), Black students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), White students at a PWI, and White students at an HBCU. The study found that, regardless of setting, White students thought about race less often than Black students. Institutional type was also significant in that racial identity was more salient for both

groups at PWIs. Although the study is limited in that it only included Black and White students and controlled for few variables, the findings suggest an association between college contexts and racial identity salience.

Sanders-Thompson (1999) also examined variables that affect the racial identity salience of African Americans. A sample of 409 participants between the ages of 14 and 92 took a survey that examined age, sex, education, income, racial socialization, interaction with other African Americans, positive and negative interactions with non-African Americans, experience of discrimination, and political activism. Experiencing discrimination was positively correlated with racial identity salience but was not a significant predictor in the final regression model. Sanders-Thompson suggests this may be an artifact of the sample, which reported low levels of integration and discrimination, and that discrimination may have a significant relationship with identity salience for African Americans in more integrated contexts where they might also be exposed to different groups and more discrimination.

Additional studies have looked at racial identity salience by manipulating environmental conditions. One such study explored the underlying factors that heightened racial identity salience in Asian American and White undergraduate students from two west coast universities (Forehand, Deshpandé, & Reed, 2002) and found momentary salience is influenced by both an identity primer that directs attention to a person's racial identity and by social distinctiveness in terms of a person's race becoming unique in the immediate environment. While experiments are useful, it is also important to examine the salience of racial identity in environments where underrepresentation and racial targeting naturally occur and across multiple settings and racial groups, which this study aims to do.

### *Linking Campus Climate, Practices, and Racial Identity Salience*

The Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) (S. Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012) postulates that students' identity is at the center of educational processes that occur in the classroom and in extracurricular contexts. Within these contexts, faculty use pedagogy and course content that may or may not be resonant with student identities. Similarly, staff members shape the cocurricular environment through structured programming and practices, providing "safe spaces" for students to engage in explorations of self and others. Both contexts are influenced by larger organizational climate dimensions, including the compositional diver-



sity of the campus, organizational structures, and historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, as well as individual perceptions of the environment and interracial experiences. Thus, any of the features of the climate, and engagement with diversity-related classroom and extracurricular practices are likely to ignite awareness of racial differences, and increase salience of racial identity. It should also be noted that students enter college already influenced by previous socialization associated with precollege experiences that also must be taken into account in the education process. The MMDLE guided the development of the survey administered for this study, and is a first attempt to use the survey to study students in diverse learning environments and empirically link aspects of student identity with experiences of diversity on campus.

In sum, the salience of racial identity has not often been studied in higher education, and even less so as an outcome of contextual factors within the college environment. Research has examined elements that create dissonance and can lead to initial racial awareness for students who may be at the early stages of racial identity development (Chesler, Peet, & Sevig, 2003; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003), but racial salience captures not simply awareness of racial differences but rather whether students are actively thinking about their own racial identity. This signals readiness to have conversations about race in classrooms and among peers as the identity process unfolds within dynamic social interactions on campus.

## **Methodology**

### *Data Source and Sample*

This study examines differences in the salience of racial identity across racial groups, and identifies factors associated with a heightened salience of racial identity for college students at two- and four-year institutions. The data for this study came from the pilot administration of the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey. The DLE was designed to provide insight into students' academic and campus life experiences by assessing campus climate, practices, and a set of outcomes focused on citizenship in a multicultural society. A draft of the survey was administered and discussed with students in focus groups at two and four-year colleges, and was subsequently revised. A range of broad access institutions and structurally diverse selective universities were chosen based on IPEDS data that indicated differences in student diversity, part-time and full-time enrollments, and retention. Data were collected between December 2009 and May 2010 at three community

colleges, six public four-year, and five private four-year institutions across the United States.

We provided guidelines to each of the participating institutions for targeting a specific sample, but we also allowed campuses to survey a broader spectrum of students if they expressed doing so would aid their climate assessment and planning efforts. Thus the DLE administration targeted, but was not limited to, students who were in their second year or higher at four-year institutions, and community college students who had at least 24 credit hours (as a proxy for one academic year) in order to ensure familiarity with the campus. Campuses that surveyed first-year students administered the survey in late spring when students were nearing the completion of one full academic year and had spent enough time on the campus to assess the climate.

The DLE was administered online, resulting in average response rate of 37% at the community colleges and 33% at four-year institutions, based on students who accessed the survey from notification emails. The sample is inclusive of students beyond the historically “traditional” college-going population, which allows this study to examine racial identity salience for a broader scope of college students. The final sample size was 4,981 after removing cases with missing values on the dependent variable. First-year students comprised 9.4% of the sample, sophomores 31.8%, juniors 28.4%, seniors 20.8%, and community college students who met the time requirement for familiarity with the campus but indicated their class standing as “other” 9.7%. The racial composition of participants was 0.7% American Indian, 0.7% Arab American/Arab, 14.7% Asian American/Asian, 4.4% Black, 19.2% Latina/o, 41.3% White/Caucasian, 0.7% Other, and 18.3% students who indicated two or more racial/ethnic backgrounds. About half the sample (51.7%) indicated family incomes below \$50,000 per year. One-third of students were age 25 or older. Accordingly, this study used student age group rather than class standing to control in part for previous development, as the sample included students well beyond the traditional college age. Approximately one quarter (27.2%) had no parent with any college-level education and 45.7% had at least one parent that earned a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Descriptive statistics by institution type on the variables included in our regression model are presented in Table 1. These data indicate that there appears to be no significant difference in racial identity salience across the students by institution type, despite a significant difference in a number of their experiences. As expected, there are significant differences between two and four-year institutions in terms of students’ age, parental education, and income; students at community colleges

TABLE 1  
Sample Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Two-Year ( <i>N</i> = 1,973)		Four-Year ( <i>N</i> = 3,008)		Mean
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Diff. (2-4)
<i>Dependent Variable</i>					
Racial identity salience	2.99	1.21	3.06	1.21	-0.07
<i>Demographics</i>					
Age	2.85	1.48	1.94	1.22	0.91 ***
Parent education	4.12	1.93	5.12	1.73	-1.00 ***
Income	5.87	3.40	7.79	3.76	-1.92 ***
Sex: Female	1.68	0.47	1.69	0.46	-0.01
Native English speaker	1.65	0.48	1.81	0.39	-0.17 ***
Race: American Indian	1.01	0.08	1.01	0.08	0.00
Race: Arab American	1.01	0.09	1.01	0.08	0.00
Race: Asian American	1.14	0.35	1.14	0.34	0.01
Race: Black	1.04	0.19	1.05	0.21	-0.01
Race: Latina/o	1.30	0.46	1.13	0.33	0.17 ***
Race: Multiracial	1.14	0.35	1.21	0.41	-0.07 ***
Race: White	1.36	0.48	1.46	0.50	-0.10 ***
<i>Precollege Socialization</i>					
Knowledge of race: Classroom	2.86	0.87	2.95	0.80	-0.09 ***
Knowledge of race: Student clubs	2.08	1.00	2.26	1.01	-0.18 ***
Knowledge of race: Family, friends	3.28	0.80	3.37	0.74	-0.09 ***
<i>Campus Facilitated Experiences</i>					
Curriculum of inclusion	48.70	9.85	50.93	9.91	-2.23 ***
Cocurricular diversity activities	48.37	8.97	51.08	10.41	-2.72 ***
<i>Campus Climate</i>					
Conversations re: Race	1.84	0.69	2.00	0.69	-0.16 ***
Positive cross racial interaction	47.42	10.14	51.70	9.62	-4.27 ***
Discrimination and bias	48.16	9.52	51.32	10.05	-3.16 ***
<i>Compositional Diversity</i>					
Percent students of color	1.65	0.48	1.48	0.50	0.17 ***

\*\*\**p* < .001.

are older and typically come from lower income and parental education backgrounds. In terms of college experiences, there are more positive cross-racial interactions as well as experiences with discrimination and bias reported by students in the sample at four-year institutions than at two-year institutions, despite higher levels of reported participation in a curriculum of inclusion or cocurricular diversity activities. The community colleges in the sample also have a significantly larger percentage of students of color in their student body.

### *Measures*

**Dependent Variable: Racial Identity Salience.** The salience of any social identity is the “frequency with which the group comes to mind” (Cameron, 2004, p. 242). Researchers have taken different approaches to measuring racial salience. Steck, Heckert, and Heckert (2003) asked students to write 20 statements in response to the question “Who am I?” If the student mentioned race, it was considered to be salient. Forehand et al. (2002) used a similar approach, priming participants and then giving them an open-ended question that asked them to describe themselves. If participants mentioned race, it was considered to be salient. Studies that have used a multi-item factor have focused on relatively homogeneous populations (Black and White), incorporating an “agree to disagree” or “important to not very important” response on specific in-group statements (Cameron, 2004; Sanders-Thompson, 1999). The DLE was intended to be administered to diverse populations and to assess how often students think about multiple social identities. None of these previously used approaches were feasible for a large scale survey that addresses multiple social identities, and so we opted for a simple and direct measure to tap into the frequency of students’ thinking about each of their social identities. Students are asked about several specific social identities (race, class, gender, disability and sexual orientation) on the survey. Among these social identities, the dependent variable was chosen as a single item measuring the salience of racial identity, asking “How often do you think about your race/ethnicity?” Item responses were on a 5-point Likert scale from Never to Very Often.

The choice to use a single-item measure was led by our interest in simplicity, brevity to avoid respondent fatigue, and ease of use in practice. Racial salience has been measured with a similar single-item in previous research on intergroup relations (Gurin et al., 2013; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003) with great practical utility for gaining insight into students’ thinking over the course of changing racial dynamics in a classroom. Some researchers are also challenging the idea of whether multi-item measures are always necessary in behavioral research, contending

that single-item measures can have equally reliable correlations and predictive validity as multi-item measures (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007), multi-item scales with semantically similar items lead to mindless response behavior, and scales with more items sometimes pick up other domains, diminishing construct validity (see Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2009 for a review). Further, one of the conditions under which a single-item may be more appropriate is when a sample is diverse, because it can be flexibly used across groups (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2009); this was the case with the DLE sample and the attempt to assess salience across multiple social identity groups. Tests of reliability and validity of the single-item vs. a multi-item construct can be conducted with additional cohorts of students at multiple types of institutions in the future.

**Independent Variables.** The independent variables reflect concepts from the MMDLE framework and the literature reviewed. They include measures of demographics, precollege socialization, campus facilitated experiences, campus climate, and compositional diversity. Many of the independent measures are factors created with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) that have been validated previously for their structure and reliability (S. Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013). All variables and factors are listed in Appendix A.

White students were selected as the reference group for this study, as research suggests that marginalized groups tend to think about race more often (A. Hurtado et al., 1994). In addition to the key variable of one's race, other demographic measures include age, parent education, income, gender, and whether the student is a native English speaker. Racial socialization has been tied to racial identity salience in previous literature (Sanders-Thompson, 1999) and is accounted for in this study with measures of precollege socialization that include how much of the students' knowledge of racial/ethnic groups came from the classroom, student clubs, and from family members, friends, or coworkers.

Since the salience of racial identity is also influenced by individuals' contexts (Forehand et al., 2002; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Steck et al., 2003), we included measures of campus facilitated curricular and cocurricular activities. Of particular interest is the extent to which students have taken courses that reflect a curriculum of inclusion and have participated in cocurricular diversity activities. These are new factors in the DLE that help measure faculty and staff practices that represent formal diversity educational opportunities. As research continues to show how they may be positively related to various outcomes, institutions may be equipped with growing evidence needed to support diversity and equity related curricula and programs.

A specific interest of this study was to understand how racial identity salience is related to perceptions of campus climate and whether climate operates differently on students' racial salience at community colleges than at four-year institutions. For this reason, we used multiple measures representing individual dimensions of the climate model, including factors reflecting the extent of positive cross-racial interactions and experiences of discrimination and bias, which measures forms of discrimination that often go unreported to campus authorities. Research reveals mixed results regarding the effects of negative racial experiences on identity salience, and this study presents another opportunity to explore that relationship on a more diverse set of campuses.

In examining racial identity salience among students of several racial groups at community colleges and four-year institutions with varying levels of compositional diversity, this study builds on previous literature exploring salience among Black and White students at PWIs and HBCUs (Steck et al., 2003). However, sites in the study tended to have either high or low percentages of students of color, with very few reflecting a balance in their student populations. More importantly, previous research suggests that stereotyping and changes in the climate for underrepresented groups occur when their numbers exceed a threshold of 30–35% (Kanter, 1977). Therefore, a dichotomous variable was created that indicates whether or not institutions have over 30% students of color, which reflects the bimodal distribution of the data.

### *Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics were used to identify outliers and examine the proportions of missing data. Since all measures had less than 5% missing cases, we utilized the Expectation Maximization (EM) algorithm to replace missing data with imputed values for all variables except the outcome and demographic measures. EM uses maximum likelihood techniques and is considered a more robust method than other approaches such as listwise deletion or mean replacement (McLachlan & Krishnan, 1997). In preparing the data for analysis, we also examined bivariate Pearson correlations and later consulted the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values to detect any possible multicollinearity. All VIF values were below the conservative cutoff of 5 and tolerance values were above 0.10 (Stine, 1995).

All of the factors that served as independent variables were created using their factor loadings from CFA as weights, and were rescaled with a range of 0 to 100 and a mean of 50, which is an easier scale for practitioners within institutions to understand (each participating campus received a full report of DLE measures for their own students and

other participating campuses). Next, Dunnett T3 post hoc tests were employed to examine racial group differences in how often students think about their racial identity.

For the primary analysis, we employed multiple linear regression with racial identity salience as the outcome. We first ran an unconditional model to determine if multilevel modeling was necessary. The resulting intraclass correlation (ICC) was only 2.6%, indicating that it was not warranted. To ensure that we accounted for institutional differences, we preceded with two separate models by institution type, one for the community college students and the second for the four-year institution students in the case that this would be informative for scholars and educators who work with these different institutions. For each model, independent variables were force entered in temporal order (background and precollege socialization experiences, followed by college experiences), with *p*-values set at .05. Subsequently, a test of the equality of regression coefficients was conducted (Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 1998) to compare each of the predictors across institution types. These tests revealed only two significantly different predictors, with all other variables operating similarly. Lastly, post hoc tests were used to further examine significant mean differences in discrimination and bias reported by racial group to extend climate implications.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations are apparent in this study. First, the data derived from a single survey administration and are therefore cross-sectional. This limits the interpretation of results in that they can only be understood in correlational terms, rather than assuming causality in students' racial identity salience during college. Only measures that preexisted prior to college entry can assume a temporal order, representing important controls for background and precollege socialization experiences that may have predisposed students to priming on race issues. Moreover, our dependent variable only measured how often a student thinks about race and did not reflect the qualitative nature of those thoughts nor did it capture the specific situational context at the particular moment of the survey administration. Also, students who indicated two or more racial backgrounds were grouped into a separate category, and were not counted in their respective monoracial categories. This may or may not reflect students' preferred racial identity (see Renn, 2004), and is only one of several ways to categorize multiracial data (Inkelas, Soldner, & Szelényi, 2009; Morning, 2005). Finally, the sample sizes for American Indian and Arab American were very small. Caution should be used in interpreting results for these three groups. Despite these limitations, this

study offers important contributions in understanding factors related to racial identity salience in college through a relatively new survey that places the experiences of diverse students at the center of analysis.

## Results

### *Racial Group Differences in Racial Identity Salience*

Table 2 shows how often students think about their race in college in the “post-racial” era. Although there is a great deal of variability within each race category, it is clear that specific groups who are often targets or face severe underrepresentation on campus spend more time thinking about their race. Arab Americans, who have faced post-9/11 backlash, report the highest levels of often/very often thinking about their background (61.1%). The table also shows that about half of all Asians (50.8%) and Latina/os (48.9%), the fastest growing groups on college campuses, also think often about their race. Similarly, nearly half of American Indians (48.6%) and more than half of African Americans (59%) think often or very often about their own racial backgrounds. Multiracial students are about equally divided regarding frequency of thinking about race, with 35.7% thinking about it often or very often. In contrast, even in these diverse campuses, more than half of White students (52.8%) never or seldom think about their race. Further analyses show that these racial group differences are evident within each institution type (four-year:  $\chi^2 = 344.180$ ,  $p < .000$ ; two-year:  $\chi^2 = 302.970$ ,  $p < .000$ ), and that racial groups are not significantly different at four-year

TABLE 2  
How Often College Students Think about Their Race/Ethnicity,  $n = 4,981$

Racial Group	<i>n</i>	Never/Seldom	Sometimes	Often/Very Often
American Indian	35	31.4%	20.0%	48.6%
Arab American	36	13.9%	25.0%	61.1%
Asian American	733	17.3%	31.9%	50.8%
Black	217	16.6%	24.4%	59.0%
Latina/o	958	23.0%	28.2%	48.9%
White*	2090	52.8%	28.0%	19.1%
Multiracial**	912	33.4%	30.8%	35.7%

\*Difference between Whites and American Indians,  $p < .05$ . Difference between Whites and all other racial groups,  $p < .001$ . \*\*Difference between Multiracial students and Asian Americans, Blacks, Latina/os, and Whites,  $p < .001$ . Difference between Multiracial students and Arab Americans,  $p < .05$ .



colleges compared with students at community colleges, with one exception. White students tend to think more often about their race at four-year colleges (22.1%,  $n = 1378$ ) than at community colleges (13.5%,  $n = 712$ ), but even so, they are least likely to think about their race. In sum, students from Arab American, Asian American, American Indian, Black, Latina/o, and Multiracial backgrounds are spending more time thinking about race than their White peers regardless of institution type.

### *Differences by Institution Type*

Table 3 shows the unstandardized regression coefficients from the regression models for two- and four-year colleges, with the final community college model accounting for 22.7% and the final four-year model accounting for 25.6% of the variance in the dependent variable. It appears that there are remarkably similar experiences associated with higher levels of salience across groups of students at both institution types. The tests of equality of regression coefficients demonstrate that there are only two significant differences in the final coefficients across the models. Higher racial salience is associated with precollege socialization in terms of students' knowledge about race that comes primarily from the school classroom for community college students, whereas it is more likely to be associated with knowledge about race that comes from family and friends for students at four-year colleges. These differences will be discussed in a subsequent section on precollege socialization.

### *Demographic Characteristics*

The regression analyses confirmed initial bivariate relationships, showing significantly stronger and positive relationships between race and racial identity salience for all racial groups compared to the White reference group (see Table 3 for all regression results). Results for American Indian students at community colleges were not significant likely due to small sample sizes. In addition, the strength of the relationship between the race of the student and racial identity salience increased from that of the initial correlation when other characteristics were controlled. Younger students at community colleges, and low income and first generation students in both environments were more likely to think about race. However, these other social identities were no longer significant once accounting for precollege sources of socialization. There was one exception, however; being a native English speaker was significant in the final model and was negatively related to students' racial identity salience at both two-year ( $\beta = -.083$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and four-year ( $\beta = -.053$ ,  $p < .001$ ) institutions. This suggests that students who use languages other than English tend to think more about

TABLE 3  
Unstandardized Results of Final Regression Model Predicting Racial Identity Salience, by Institution Type

Variables	Two-Year			Four-Year			Equality of Coefficients <sup>a</sup>
	<i>r</i>	Final <i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>r</i>	Final <i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	
<i>Demographics</i>							
Age	-.090 ***	-.003	.018	-.007	.018	.018	0.83
Parent education	-.141 ***	-.002	.016	-.135 ***	-.019	.013	-0.82
Income	-.142 ***	-.009	.008	-.102 ***	-.003	.006	0.60
Sex: Female	.007	.036	.054	.035 *	.071	.043	0.52
Native English speaker	-.274 ***	-.210 **	.072	-.201 ***	-.165 **	.061	0.48
Race: American Indian	-.017	.434	.327	.027	.491 *	.238	0.14
Race: Arab American	.050 **	.772 **	.285	.051 **	.958 ***	.240	0.50
Race: Asian American	.128 ***	.516 ***	.100	.161 ***	.747 ***	.069	1.90
Race: Black	.104 ***	1.063 ***	.137	.147 ***	1.042 ***	.100	-0.12
Race: Latina/o	.212 ***	.710 ***	.092	.153 ***	.702 ***	.073	-0.07
Race: Multiracial	.008	.434 ***	.081	.043 *	.357 ***	.053	-0.79
<i>Precollege Socialization</i>							
Knowledge of race: Classroom	.182 ***	.132 ***	.031	.063 ***	.047	.026	-2.10 *
Knowledge of race: Student clubs	.145 ***	-.003	.028	.118 ***	-.020	.022	-0.46
Knowledge of race: Family, friends	.025	.024	.032	.143 ***	.148 ***	.028	2.90 **
<i>Campus Facilitated Experiences</i>							
Curriculum of inclusion	.196 ***	.009 **	.003	.137 ***	.009 ***	.002	-0.07
Cocurricular diversity activities	.251 ***	.008 *	.003	.242 ***	.008 ***	.002	0.21
<i>Campus Climate</i>							
Conversations re: Race	.242 ***	.220 ***	.043	.268 ***	.249 ***	.034	0.53
Positive cross racial interaction	.170 ***	-.003	.003	.195 ***	.002	.002	1.15
Discrimination and bias	.247 ***	.018 ***	.003	.293 ***	.024 ***	.002	1.61
<i>Compositional Diversity</i>							
Percent students of color	.202 ***	-.057	.066	.048 **	.080	.044	1.72
<i>R-Squared</i>		$r^2 = .227$			$r^2 = .256$		

Note. <sup>a</sup>Statistical test of equality of regression coefficients (see equation four in Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 1998). \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

their race than native English speakers regardless of context. This may be due to social distinctiveness, or being unique in terms of one's language background in the college environment, and the fact that language oppression and discrimination based on race and ethnicity coexist (Schniedewind & Davidson, 2000). The results here suggest that lan-

guage background is a cultural marker that has a unique role in racial identity salience, irrespective of experiences of discrimination and bias in college.

### *Precollege Socialization in Social and Academic Contexts*

The key difference in how racial identity salience operates at community colleges and four-year institutions has to do with how students are socialized before they actually set foot on campus. Two precollege socialization factors were significantly related to college students' racial identity salience in the models. For community college students, the extent to which students' knowledge about racial/ethnic groups came from classrooms, including teachers and curriculum ( $\beta = .095, p < .001$ ), was positively associated with higher levels of racial identity salience. This suggests that formal K–12 education increases students' racial identity salience before college and can support racial identity development as students learn about their own group(s) and other racial groups. Whether K–12 classroom education helps students form positive or negative understandings of their own and others' group(s) is not discernable in this study. Once student background was taken into account, socialization in the formal classroom environment was not significantly associated with salience for students at four-year colleges and universities. However, the extent to which these students' knowledge about racial/ethnic groups came from family members, friends, or coworkers ( $\beta = .090, p < .001$ ) was a central source of early socialization that shapes how individuals think about their own and others' race (Sanders-Thompson, 1999; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). A structural explanation for the differences across institution type would suggest this has much to do with classroom diversity at the different types of schools that channel students to two- as opposed to four-year colleges (e.g. segregation, tracking, diversity content). Regardless of explanation, colleges engaging students in learning about race should be aware that students obtain prior knowledge from different sources in formal (curriculum) and informal (friends and family) ways that may present challenges for altering preconceived views about race in college.

### *Diversity Curricular and Cocurricular Activities*

After controls for demographic and precollege socialization were taken into account, aspects of students' curricular and cocurricular activities were strongly related to college students' racial identity salience. Taking more classes that contain material and pedagogy focused on issues of diversity and equity, characterized as a curriculum of inclusion, was positively related to racial identity salience in college for both com-

munity college students ( $\beta = .076, p < .001$ ) and students at four-year institutions ( $\beta = .074, p < .001$ ).

Participating more frequently in campus-facilitated cocurricular diversity activities also reflected higher racial identity salience for students at two-year institutions ( $\beta = .056, p < .05$ ) and four-year institutions ( $\beta = .072, p < .001$ ), controlling for demographic and precollege dispositions towards such activity. In addition, engaging more frequently in in-depth conversations outside of class about issues regarding racial diversity also had a strong relationship to racial identity salience in college for both two-year students ( $\beta = .145, p < .001$ ) and four-year students ( $\beta = .141, p < .001$ ). This relationship is rather intuitive, as talking more frequently about race should be correlated with how often students think about their race. The strength of the relationship suggests that whether students are talking about these issues in informal settings or in campus-facilitated setting, processing race-related issues with peers is related to higher racial identity salience and may serve to facilitate students' identity development. At the same time, it is possible that students who already have relatively higher levels of racial identity salience are the ones seeking opportunities where they can have formal and informal conversations about race.

### *Campus Racial Climate: Racial Group Differences in Discrimination/Bias*

In terms of the climate for diversity in the college environment, being subject to incidents of discrimination and bias is the experience most strongly associated with how often students think about their race at both community colleges ( $\beta = .141, p < .001$ ) and four-year colleges and universities ( $\beta = .198, p < .001$ ). This finding may indicate that students who reflect more on race may be primed to identify racism and discrimination, but may also suggest that such personal incidents serve to increase students' thinking about their own racial identity. Positive interactions across race have an initial positive correlation with higher racial salience for two- and four year students ( $r = .170, p < .01$ ;  $r = .195, p < .001$  respectively) but no significant direct effect was found after prior socialization and campus-facilitated practices were controlled. Such positive interactions occur through conversations, in an inclusive curriculum, and in cocurricular diversity activities that have strong direct effects. In terms of other dimensions of the climate, compositional diversity was also initially significantly related to racial identity salience in community colleges ( $r = .202, p < .001$ ) and four year colleges ( $r = .048, p < .01$ ) but also was not a unique contributor to students' racial identity salience when other forms of engagement were accounted

for in the model. The implications of these findings are addressed in the conclusion.

Given that the relationship between campus climate and racial identity salience was of key interest in this study, and that discrimination and bias was not only significant in both of the institutional models but also had the largest final coefficient ( $\beta = .141, p < .001, t = 5.91$  at two-year;  $\beta = .198, p < .001, t = 10.69$  at four-year), we proceeded to investigate mean differences in the factor by racial group using post hoc tests. Table 4 indicates that Asian American students on average report significantly more discrimination and bias than their White, Black and Latina/o peers. Multiracially identifying students also report significantly more discrimination and bias than White and Latina/o students. For these students, it is likely that discrimination takes the form of

TABLE 4  
Dunnett T3 Post-Hoc Tests for Mean Group Differences in Discrimination and Bias

1 <sup>st</sup> Group	Mean	2 <sup>nd</sup> Group	Mean	Mean Diff. (1 <sup>st</sup> – 2 <sup>nd</sup> )
American Indian	53.51	Arab American	53.37	0.14
		Asian American	53.09	0.42
		Black	50.15	3.37
		Latina/o	48.76	4.75
		Multiracial	51.47	2.04
		White	48.92	4.59
Arab American	53.37	Asian American	53.09	0.28
		Black	50.15	3.23
		Latina/o	48.76	4.61
		Multiracial	51.47	1.90
		White	48.92	4.45
Asian American	53.09	Black	50.15	2.94*
		Latina/o	48.76	4.33 ***
		Multiracial	51.47	1.62
		White	48.92	4.17 ***
Black	50.15	Latina/o	48.76	1.39
		Multiracial	51.47	-1.33
		White	48.92	1.22
Latina/o	48.76	Multiracial	51.47	-2.71 ***
		White	48.92	-0.16
Multiracial	51.47	White	48.92	2.55 ***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

both multiracial microaggressions (Johnston & Nadal, 2010) and bias targeting their respective monoracial groups (Nadal et al., 2011). Relatively less attention has been given to these groups in past climate research, and they are growing in numbers on campuses. Racial dynamics are more complex in more diverse and broad access environments, with subtle forms of discrimination now similarly reported by Whites, Blacks, and Latina/os, while more overt forms of harassment are still experienced by historically targeted groups particularly in less diverse institutions (S. Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

In an era of changing demographics and racial discourse, this study presented several findings that characterize this as a more complex “postracial” era in which to study and educate students. At the same time that we see members of underrepresented groups in leadership positions, we continue to witness increasing levels of inequality that result in racial stratification in higher education institutions (Fry, 2013). Yet, we found that race continues to be a salient identity among today’s college students, even in more diverse college environments. Rather than simply examining static racial categories as proxies for racial identity, our study recognizes racial salience as a measure that may help to understand variability within and across racial group categories and can be used in research and educational practice. We first used previous research to establish racial salience as an indicator of racial centrality and movement along a continuum of racial identity. We proceeded to identify precollege and college experiences associated with higher racial salience that have implications for educational practice and outcomes. By focusing on diverse two- and four-year environments, we extend current climate research to understand both racial dynamics and the salience of racial identity in these contexts.

Despite the differences in student background and experiences in the two- and four-year samples, the models associated with higher racial salience were surprisingly similar. This suggests some stability in the relationship between racial salience and its predictors across institutions. Thus, the mechanisms for heightened racial awareness at the individual level may be the same as it relates to college experiences. Only one difference suggests structural differences in sources of precollege knowledge about race as it affects racial salience (high school classrooms for community college students and family and friends for four-year college students) that signals a potential link between high school classroom diversity (or lack thereof) and college access. Increas-

ing racial stratification in higher education has been documented in the last decade (Fry, 2013), suggesting further research on the distinct racial experiences, identity and awareness of students attending more diverse as well as less diverse institutions. Previous research has summarized the educational benefits of interactions with diverse peers in terms of student outcomes, but further work is needed in placing students' racial/ethnic identity at the center of research and practices that ensure student success (S. Hurtado et al., 2012).

The racial dynamics change as the number of particular racial/ethnic groups grows on college campuses that are becoming compositionally diverse. While we expect Blacks, Latina/os, and American Indians to have high racial salience, and the results confirm this is the case, other groups are often erringly overlooked in the racial dynamics on campus. Asian American ethnic groups, for example, also report relatively high racial identity salience. It was also particularly revealing that Asian and Multiracial students report relatively higher levels of discrimination and bias on diverse campuses. Institutions need to consider the unique needs of these students in diversity initiatives and researchers should further our understanding of how these different racial/ethnic identity groups experience the campus racial climate.

At the same time that heightened racial identity salience is prevalent among groups that have been historically underrepresented, White peers are less likely to think about their own race—an attribute of White privilege (Wildman & Davis, 2000) that apparently exists even in environments where they are no longer the majority. In diverse environments, White students are equally likely to say they have experienced some form of discrimination as historically underrepresented groups but they tend to have the lowest racial salience of all groups. The pervasiveness of privilege, particularly White racial privilege, is critical to address in improving the racial climate (Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; S. Hurtado et al., 2012). Increasing awareness of White racial identity and racial privilege encourages White students to understand their role in improving the campus climate and increases their potential to become allies in social justice activities beyond campus (Cabrera, 2012).

Early socialization processes associated with school, family, and social life play a role in knowledge about race and individual racial identity salience across all groups. Work on intergroup relations suggests that the first step in the process of creating greater understanding is to create awareness about socialization processes that reinforce internalized stereotypes. The second step is to increase awareness of racial commonalities and differences, the ingroup and outgroup dynamics of social identity groups (Dovidio et al., 2004), and sources of oppression

and structural inequality. Some campuses have created race awareness workshops, but intergroup relations models suggest a sustained dialogue is necessary in order to break down stereotypes and work through historical and contemporary conflict among specific groups (Gurin et al., 2013; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). One of the key strategies of these programs is to help students understand their own multiple social identities that become salient in different contexts to help students understand how group-based identity shapes their own and others' behavior, relationships, decisions, and opportunities.

Talking about race in informal settings as well as formal student participation in an inclusive curriculum and diversity cocurricular activities are associated with higher racial identity salience regardless of the racial background of the student. This study not only supports the value of dialogue as an educational activity but also supports faculty members' inclination to provide opportunities to talk about race and racial identity to advance learning objectives in diverse classrooms (Tatum, 1992). Faculty and staff can employ identity-based educational practices that include opportunities for content knowledge and engagement with diverse peers to create more inclusive learning environments. Student affairs professionals are in positions to support student development outside the classroom, and can help students move further along the continuum of identity development and learn how to deal with racial issues in their daily lives through special events, workshops, and programming.

Although we controlled for background and prior socialization, the current study cannot rule out the potential for a selection effect in choosing to enroll in an inclusive curriculum or to attend a diversity cocurricular activity. Students are often attracted to such initiatives because of their interest in learning and furthering their own knowledge about their own and others' racial/ethnic background. However, a randomized, longitudinal study using control groups conducted on multiple campuses was able to establish the impact of intergroup dialogue programs on 20 outcomes including students' understanding of structural inequality, intergroup empathy, communication skills, collaboration, and action (Gurin et al., 2013). Understanding how race is salient in students' lives is the first step in enabling educators to work toward dismantling racial divides in personal and public life, and to work together to help students achieve their dreams and aspirations with competencies that will be important in an increasingly diverse workplace. Future research should explore other identity-based practices to understand dynamics in diverse classrooms, which can lead to validation and other processes and that prepare students for lifelong achievement.



Linking findings on campus climate and student identity with actual campus practices and outcomes, as we have begun to do in this study, is necessary to evaluate current initiatives and also benchmark progress in creating more inclusive learning environments. Moreover, it is important that campuses disseminate information from climate assessments widely and partner with academic and student affairs staff across campus to use the information to further develop curricula and cocurricular programming to assist students in becoming personally and socially responsible citizens. In sum, a proactive approach is necessary to avert campus racial conflict and empower individuals to assume responsibility for changing the racial dynamics on campus to advance students' knowledge, values, and skills necessary for a diverse workplace and society.

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APPENDIX A

Variable Definitions, Coding Schemes, and Factor Reliabilities and Loadings

Variable	Scale	Factor Reliability/ Loading
<u>Dependent Variable</u>		
How often do you think about your race/ethnicity?	1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Very often	
<u>Demographics</u>		
Age group	Open ended, rescaled: 1 = 0–20; 2 = 21–24; 3 = 25–29; 4 = 30–39; 5 = 40–45; 6 = 55+	
Parent education (Highest of either parent)	1 = No college, 2 = Some college, 3 = Bachelor's or higher	
Estimated total family income last year	1 = Less than \$10,000; 2 = \$10,000–14,999; 3 = \$15,000–19,999; 4 = \$20,000–24,999; 5 = \$25,000–29,999; 6 = \$30,000–39,999; 7 = \$40,000–49,999; 8 = \$50,000–59,999; 9 = \$60,000–74,999; 10 = \$75,000–99,999; 11 = \$100,000–149,999; 12 = \$150,000–199,999; 13 = \$200,000–249,999; 14 = \$250,000 or more	
Sex	1 = Male; 2 = Female	
Native English speaker	1 = No, 2 = Yes	
Race: American Indian	1 = No, 2 = Yes	
Race: Arab American	1 = No, 2 = Yes	
Race: Asian American	1 = No, 2 = Yes	
Race: Black/African American	1 = No, 2 = Yes	
Race: Latina/o	1 = No, 2 = Yes	
Race: White	1 = No, 2 = Yes	
Race: Marked two or more of the above	1 = No, 2 = Yes	

(Continued)

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Variable Definitions, Coding Schemes, and Factor Reliabilities and Loadings

Variable	Scale	Factor Reliability/ Loading
<u>Precollege Socialization</u>		
How much of your knowledge about racial/ethnic groups came from:	1 = Not at all, 2 = Very little, 3 = Somewhat, 4 = To a great extent (for each item)	
Classroom		
Student clubs		
Family members, friends, coworkers		
Campus Facilitated Experiences		
<i>Curriculum of Inclusion</i>	Rescaled 0–100, Mean of 50. Original item scales: 1–None, 2 = One, 3 = 2–4, 4 = 5 or more	$\alpha = .854$
Material/readings on race and ethnicity issues		.824
Materials/readings on issues of oppression as a system of power and dominance		.775
Materials/readings on gender issues		.715
Materials/readings on issues of privilege		.705
Opportunities for intensive dialogue between students with different backgrounds and beliefs		.635
Serving communities in need (e.g. service learning)		.578
<i>Cocurricular Diversity Activities Factor (Campus Facilitated)</i>	Rescaled 0–100, Mean of 50. Original item scales: 1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Very often	$\alpha = .903$
Participated in ongoing campus-organized discussions on racial/ethnic issues (e.g. intergroup dialogue)		.866
Participated in the Ethnic or Cultural Center activities		.848
Attended debates or panels about diversity issues		.810
Participated in the Women's/Men's Center activities		.782
At least one faculty member has taken an interest in my development		.773
Participated in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Center activities		.729
Staff recognize my achievements		.721
Attended presentations, performances, and art exhibits on diversity		.649

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Variable Definitions, Coding Schemes, and Factor Reliabilities and Loadings

Variable	Scale	Factor Reliability/ Loading
<u>Campus Climate</u>		
In-depth conversations outside of class on issues related to racial or ethnic diversity	1 = Not at all, 2 = Occasionally, 3 = Frequently	
<i>Positive Cross Racial Interactions</i>	Rescaled 0–100, Mean of 50. Original item scales: 1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Very often	$\alpha = .882$
Had intellectual discussions outside of class		.839
Dined or shared a meal		.783
Had meaningful and honest discussions about race/ethnic relations outside of class		.780
Shared personal feelings and problems		.779
Socialized or partied		.729
Studied or prepared for class		.629
Attended events sponsored by other racial/ethnic groups		.543
<i>Discrimination and Bias</i>	Rescaled 0–100, Mean of 50. Original item scales: 1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Very often	$\alpha = .889$
Types of microaggressions: Verbal comments		.792
Types of microaggressions: Written comments (e.g. emails, texts, writing on walls, etc.)		.762
Witnessed discrimination		.750
Types of microaggressions: Exclusion (e.g. from gatherings, events, etc.)		.746
Types of microaggressions: Offensive visual images or items		.733
Heard insensitive or disparaging racial remarks from: Faculty		.677
Heard insensitive or disparaging racial remarks from: Staff		.664
Heard insensitive or disparaging racial remarks from: Students		.644
Been mistaken as a member of a racial/ethnic group that is not your own		.444
<u>Compositional Diversity</u>		
Percent Students of Color	1 = Less than 30%, 2 = More than 30%	