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Article Title: The Impact of Campus Climate on Widening Achievement Gaps

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“A key takeaway from the study is that such measures are needed for through-school assurance, especially in climates known to have contentious histories, exclusionary infrastructures, and a lack of diversity at executive levels.”

– Ken Coopwood, Ph.D., CDE, CDROI Professional

We have heard so much about the importance of campus climate over recent months. Its overall impact on any type of institution can be both staggering and complex. “Climate” is what cultivates the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual experiences of all students at a college or university. Its effects begin the moment they set foot on campus and can end suddenly or last indefinitely. It is the foundation for trust, excitement, enthusiasm, energy, and expectations of all experiences during a student’s journey to the commencement stage. And a negative climate has psychological, emotional, social, and physical effects and can take its toll daily until graduation is either no longer an option or is in question.

Psychological and behavioral components of climate are among those within universities’ control and can affect the academic performance of any student, especially when requisite supports are absent during adverse experiences. One category of academic performance affected by climate is graduation achievement. Yet campus climate is rarely correlated with student achievement, let alone viewed as the cause of certain students’ failure to graduate even when descriptive climate studies consistently reveal patterns to this effect. Nonetheless, studies show that if left unaddressed, psychological and behavioral issues can wreak havoc on any college student’s academic success. Research also shows an unprecedented effect on graduation achievement for African American students, regardless of how many members of this group are present during the time the research is conducted.

One can better understand how climate impacts achievement by reviewing the law of cause and effect, which is rooted in common sense science and causality. Put simply, one cause can produce one or more effects. However, when human subjects at a university are being considered, one cause can create a world of significant effects with no expiration date, including — but not limited to — failure to graduate.

An example that illustrates this and provides reasoning for examining correlations between climate and academic achievement is a study conducted by The Education Trust (ET). This 2016 study revealed that more students from underrepresented groups are attending college than in previous years; however, this increase has not had a positive effect on degrees conferred to African Americans compared to their white counterparts. This is indicative of a problem, and whatever it is, is pervasive and provokes an untold number of adverse emotional, psychological, physical, and even spiritual responses that deter these students from graduating. The result is simply that although more underrepresented students make it *to* school, the same numbers of black students are not getting *through* school, which broadens the achievement gap.

The study further reveals that more than two-thirds of four-year public colleges and universities have increased graduation rates [for all students] in the past decade. “But overall improvements often mask different outcomes for specific groups of students, and nowhere do we see this more clearly than for black students,” the study states.

One does not have to be a scholar to understand that on many campuses the experience afforded to African American students is inadequate for increasing their graduation rates. Yet, what we do need more education about is why some climates serve these students better than others. Authors and scholars Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal attribute this deficiency to “preconceived notions [that] determine what we see, what we do, and what we accomplish.” This statement suggests that “failing” climates permeate how black students should be seen, engaged, and graduated. Thus, it becomes necessary to revisit perceptions of what is best for them to counter antiquated and inadequate climate circumstances.

The ET study frames how alarming this situation is and should be enough to prompt steps toward finding an answer to the fundamental question: “What is the most likely cause affecting any student population’s graduation achievement?” The answer lies in a component of campus life big enough, broad enough, and yet definitive enough to consistently affect students’ ability to navigate adversity — however frequent or infrequent — while persisting to graduation. For any student, the cause is likely the campus climate.

The study supports this reasoning and even provides a listing of colleges and universities with widening graduation gaps despite increased overall graduation rates. The list is not limited to institutions from one geographic area or type, but is populated by 4-year, liberal arts, comprehensive, and research institutions alike. All are among those with graduation gaps between black and white students widening from 8.3 to 23 percent in the face of increased enrollment of more African American students in recent years than ever before.

The authors of the ET study suggest targeted program content to lessen adverse achievement when graduation gaps begin to widen. They also recommend mentoring programs for support and monitoring, as well as “continuous” programs that lead up to graduation. A key takeaway from the study is that such measures are needed for through-school assurance, especially in climates known to have contentious histories, exclusionary infrastructures, and a lack of diversity at executive levels. The study also encouraged institutions to see the improvement of co-curricular and curricular experiences of certain student populations as an investment in tangible outcomes and returns (i.e., to intentionally become a *cause* in pursuit of an *effect* — a closed graduation gap).

In terms of investments and actions to make campus climates conducive for turning out more graduates of any background, race, or ethnicity, a set of guidelines should be in place. These should include concepts with a focus on intrusive attention and climate transformation and promote salient encounters between students, faculty, and staff, as well as metrics that connect campus climate to graduation.

Below are several guidelines for improving campus climate while establishing a framework for accountability and graduation achievement; they permeate campus leadership responsibility, curriculum, imagery, and representation.

1. Clear expectations, investment in human and fiscal resources, and accountability must be demonstrated through the words and actions of campus leaders.
2. The principles of multiculturalism, pluralism, equity, and diversity must be adequately incorporated into the curriculum and the way in which it is taught.

3. Learning experiences between faculty and underrepresented students must be reciprocal.
4. The degree to which the events, messages, symbols, and values around the university community make the campus a welcoming and inclusive environment must be intentional.
5. The degree to which the campus and community attracts, retains, and develops professionals of color as part of its mission, as well as service agendas, must be an ongoing and strategic investment.
6. Intentional effort to conduct a diversity audit or climate study must determine where/how the present diversity infrastructure and the overall environment is impacting students, faculty, and staff as well as graduation and turnover rates.

My experience in higher education has shown me that when these guidelines are genuinely and equitably employed, perceptions of trust, safety, respect, and reward, as well as graduation gaps, can be improved. Applying these effectively means going beyond overall statistics and addressing the impact campus climate can have. The ET study also noted that are “working to change the narrative” about African American student graduation rates (i.e., they are paying attention to climate data). These schools likely employ some of the guidelines listed above for demonstrated leadership and commitment, cultivated diverse methods of teaching and learning, intentional learning communities among diverse populations, and comprehensive climate studies.

The effect campus climate has on daily student life, let alone graduation, is essential knowledge for transforming colleges of all types. It informs the urgency of the above guidelines and the *esprit de corps* of various student groups. Remember, students’ experiences — from when they first step foot on campus to the celebratory toss of the mortarboard — are causes that fuse together as the climate. It is critical to know what experiences cause certain students to advance to the toss or lead to widening achievement gaps despite increased enrollment. Those who seriously want to know the most about their campus climate, use a resource like CoopLew Transformer® Surveys for results that identify to the behaviors of campus infrastructure.