

# A Critical Race Case Analysis of Black Undergraduate Student Success at an Urban University

Urban Education  
2018, Vol. 53(1) 3–25  
© The Author(s) 2016  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0042085916668956  
journals.sagepub.com/home/uex



Shaun R. Harper<sup>1</sup>, Edward J. Smith<sup>2</sup>,  
and Charles H. F. Davis III<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Presented in this article is a case study of Black students' enrollment, persistence, and graduation at Cityville University, an urban commuter institution. We combine quantitative data from the University's Office of Institutional Research and the U.S. Department of Education with qualitative insights gathered in interviews with students, faculty, and administrators. We then use tenets, theses, and propositions from Critical Race Theory to analyze structural problems that undermine persistence and degree completion, sense of belonging, and academic achievement for Cityville's Black undergraduates.

## Keywords

urban education, higher education, Black students, critical race theory

Since the publication of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Critical Race Theory (CRT) has proven useful in examining various phenomena in higher education such as recurrent racial inequities in postsecondary policy making

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Southern California, CA, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of Pennsylvania, PA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Shaun R. Harper, Clifford and Betty Allen Professor, USC Race and Equity Center, University of Southern California, 3470 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA.

Email: sharper@usc.edu

(e.g., Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Taylor, 1999; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004), the racialized experiences of minoritized<sup>1</sup> students and faculty (e.g., Harper, 2009a; Harper et al., 2011; Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Patton, 2006; Patton & Catching, 2009; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009), and the racialization of student development theories and topics related to college student success (e.g., Harper, 2012; Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015; Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). The burgeoning use of CRT in education research over the past 20 years has resulted in deeper, more sophisticated understandings of these and other problems associated with race and racism in postsecondary contexts.

In this article, we use select CRT tenets, theses, and propositions to interpret data collected for a case study pertaining to Black undergraduate students at a racially diverse public, 4-year postsecondary institution located in one of the most populous U.S. cities. Our rationale for this focus and approach is threefold. First, despite many noteworthy efforts to increase college access, minoritized students in general and Blacks in particular remain at the bottom of most statistical metrics of success in higher education (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Harper et al., 2009). Explanations almost always attribute such problems to student underpreparedness for the rigors of college-level academic work, to their disengagement and lack of academic effort, and occasionally to stereotype threat and encounters with racial microaggressions (Harper, 2013, 2015; Harper & Newman, 2016). Rarely do studies critically examine a particular campus context to offer more nuanced insights into how racist institutional structures, policies, and practices undermine Black student achievement (Harper, 2012). Instead, emphasis is placed on what students lack and how their deficits contribute to their troubled status. Several scholars (e.g., Brown & Donnor, 2011; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Harper, 2009a, 2015; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005) have critiqued the popularity of one-sided studies that repeatedly reinforce deficits about minoritized students. Critical race and structural analyses of postsecondary institutions could complicate often taken-for-granted, ahistoricized assumptions about Black students' underachievement, disengagement, and low rates of college completion.

Second, thousands of studies have been published about college student success (Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna & Thomas, 2008), and the condition of Black students in U.S. postsecondary education has been extensively written about for more than 40 years (Harper, 2013; Sedlacek, 1987; Willie & Cunnigen, 1981). While several studies have focused on racial identity development, minoritized

students' experiences with racial microaggressions, and the documentation of racial inequities in college access and assorted outcomes (e.g., grade point averages and 6-year graduation rates), few have been explicitly concerned with racism and racist institutional structures, policies, and practices (Harper, 2012; Patton et al., 2015). Furthermore, in his analysis of 255 race-related articles published over a decade in seven top peer-reviewed higher education, student affairs, and community college journals, Harper found that only five used CRT as an analytic framework to interpret their findings. He therefore argued the following:

Researchers who wish to critically examine the race effects of higher education policy and practice and better understand why longstanding racial inequities appear so inextricable, need to invite voices from minoritized populations concerning our experiential realities and explore contradictions regarding espoused and enacted institutional values concerning racial diversity. In achieving these aims, scholars would likely find CRT a useful lens for analysis. (Harper, 2012, pp. 24-25)

Patton, Haynes, Harris, and Ivery (2014) also note that CRT is underutilized in research on race in U.S. higher education. In our attempt to understand Black student success in a particular campus context (an urban commuter university), we believe CRT will offer a more expansive set of explanations beyond those that have been repeatedly documented for more than four decades. The use of CRT also allows us to more critically racialize widely held assumptions about why some students succeed and others do not.

Jacoby's (2015) observations about research on commuter students provide a third justification for our study:

Although approximately 85% of today's college students live off campus and more than 60% attend part time or part of the academic school year, little is known about their engagement patterns and college experiences. Even less is known about differences that exist within this diverse student population, because much of the existing research treats commuter students as homogenous and ignores the need to examine within-group differences. (p. 289)

In addition to the homogeneous nature of research on commuter students, studies tend to be de-racialized and mostly concerned with challenges associated with balancing academic, employment, and familial commitments (Jacoby, 2000, 2015; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001; Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009). Consequently, far too little is known about racial dynamics at 4-year colleges and universities that exclusively enroll commuter students. While Black undergraduates have been

included alongside others in diverse samples, their racial realities and experiences as urban commuters have not received adequate attention in the literature. Hence, in this article, we present a case study about Black student success at an urban postsecondary institution, and then use CRT to interpret our findings.

## Method

We pursued one decidedly broad research question in this case study:

**Research Question 1:** What are the explanatory undercurrents of Black students' stagnant enrollment patterns, academic underperformance, and high attrition rates at an urban commuter institution?

In this section, we describe the site at which our study was conducted, data sources we utilized, and procedures systematically used to make sense of data we collected.

### Research Context

Cityville University<sup>2</sup> is located in a large, racially segregated U.S. city. Blacks comprise nearly one third of the city's population. This 4-year, public university enrolls more than 8,400 undergraduates, 10% of whom are Black.<sup>3</sup> Because Latinos comprise 32% of its undergraduate student population, the federal government has designated Cityville an Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).<sup>4</sup> Its main campus is situated in a residential community approximately 10 miles north of downtown, the city's central business district. Every Cityville student commutes to campus; there are no residence halls. In addition to its main campus, the University also has two satellite sites that are located in parts of the city where high concentrations of Black and Latino people reside. Henceforth, the "Urban Institute" is what we call the satellite site on the predominantly Black west side of the city.<sup>5</sup> Urban affairs is the only academic major offered at the Urban Institute. Students who major in Urban affairs are required to take several courses on the main campus.

Fifty-six percent of undergraduates attend full-time; nearly two thirds (63%) receive Pell Grants, and 45% are above the age of 25. Fifty-seven percent of students who applied to Cityville in 2014 (one of 2 years in which data were collected for this study) were offered admission; slightly more than one quarter (27%) of those applicants ultimately enrolled. Approximately 22% of Cityville students graduate within 6 years.<sup>6</sup> Blacks have the lowest 6-year completion rate of all racial/ethnic groups on campus; thus, the

University created a task force in 2014 focused on improving Black students success. Although only 39% of Cityville undergraduates are White, approximately 60% of its full-time faculty members are White. Its president, provost, vice president for student affairs, and the majority of its senior-level administrators and trustees are also White. As a point of contrast, Black professors comprise 8.3% of the total tenured and tenure-track instructional faculty at Cityville. At the time this study was conducted, there were only two Black full professors.

### *Data Sources*

Consistent with case study methods that Yin (2014) describes, we relied on multiple data sources for this project. First, staff in Cityville's Office of Institutional Research and Multicultural Affairs gave us confidential quantitative data files; we combined these with publicly available descriptive statistics on the Office of Institutional Research website and in the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The confidential files included data disaggregated by race on students' entering characteristics (e.g., standardized test scores, high school grades, and high school location), assorted indicators of educational progress (e.g., college grade point averages and credit accumulation disaggregated by race), as well as longitudinal first- to second-year persistence and 4-, 5-, 6-, and 8-year graduation rates. We corroborated these with IPEDS data, which also offered more insights into Cityville's selectivity and student characteristics (e.g., percentages of Pell Grant recipients).

Our second data source includes a set of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews we conducted with 23 Black undergraduates and 20 members of the Black Student Success Task Force in November 2013 and April 2014. The task force included Black undergraduate students, faculty, and staff representing a variety of academic departments, programs, and student affairs and academic affairs units on campus, including a full-time employee from the Office of Institutional Research. Mostly Black faculty and staff comprised the task force membership; it included only a few Whites. On average, interviews with students and task force members lasted 90 min; each was audio recorded. Our final data source includes an expansive array of documentary materials (e.g., reports, official statements, media correspondence, student newspaper articles, University-wide emails, websites, pamphlets from the Multicultural Affairs Office, photographs used for marketing campaigns, billboards, and fliers from events and campus activities). These materials offered more insights into the culture and priorities of the institution, as well as how Black students were positioned on campus. We also visited the

Urban Institute, which is located in a predominantly Black neighborhood, to get a sense of its structural, architectural, and cultural features; we juxtaposed this with what we saw on the main campus.

### ***Analytic Strategy***

Several steps were followed to analyze all the data collected for this case study. As previously mentioned, our data sources included statistical reports from Cityville's Office of Institutional Research as well as publicly available data from IPEDS. We first read every report and sorted the data into four categories that emerged from our interviews and document analyses: (a) admissions and student entry, (b) grades and academic performance, (c) persistence and completion, and (d) faculty and staff diversity characteristics. Each category included quantitative data that tell a story about the status and success of Black undergraduates at the University. We engaged in a process of searching for what Yin (2014) calls "rival explanations"—possible explanations that extend beyond typical, often taken-for-granted hypotheses. We juxtaposed quantitative data presented in the statistical reports with qualitative insights offered in our interviews with Black undergraduates and members of the Black Student Success Task Force, fieldnotes from our visit to the Urban Institute, and discoveries gleaned from the student newspaper, the Cityville University website, and a range of publications from the Multicultural Affairs Office. Tenets, theses, and propositions from CRT were used to search for explanations that rival, or at least expand and complicate, meanings commonly reached from statistical reports (e.g., "Black students' GPAs are so low because they don't study hard enough").

### **Findings**

Presented in this section are three categories of findings that separately and collectively offer insights into the undercurrents of Black students' stagnant enrollment patterns, academic underperformance, and high attrition rates at Cityville University.

#### ***Black Student Outreach and Recruitment***

Cityville consistently enrolls diverse student populations and admits graduates from its local public K-12 school system. According to data from the Office of Institutional Research, 100% of the 80 Blacks who were first-time, first-year students at Cityville in 2013 were graduates of the local public

**Table 1.** Black Cityville Graduates of Local Urban Public Schools.

Year	<i>n</i>	%
Fall 2010	86	75
Fall 2011	64	79
Fall 2012	97	81
Fall 2013	80	100

school system.<sup>7</sup> As shown in Table 1, the percentage of Black graduates from local public schools steadily increased over a 4-year period.

“We keep going to the same high schools over and over again to get our African American students. That’s part of the reason we keep getting the same results,” one administrator serving on the task force asserted. She and other members felt the stagnation of Black students could be attributed, at least in part, to the limited array of high schools from which Cityville consistently recruited. They not only felt these schools should remain sites for student outreach and partnership, but also believed Cityville would benefit greatly from intentionally recruiting Black students from suburban public high schools that are located closer to campus.

Black undergraduates told us stories about how they and their same-race peers had to commute 90 min to sometimes more than 2 hr on public transportation, one way, to get to the University. These students said the length of the commutes, as well as occasional bus and train delays, often undermined their efforts to make it to campus on time (if at all). Put differently, many wanted to attend each of their classes every day, but did not because their commutes were too far and sometimes too complicated. These problems were exacerbated by rain and snowfall, students said.

Close proximity to the Urban Institute seemed to be one solution to the long commute to Cityville’s main campus. However, it became clear during our site visits that there was a common misconception about the Institute. A returning adult learner offered this reflection in our interview with her:

When I tell people how long it takes me to get to school, they are like “girl, it is right around the corner.” They think the Urban Institute is the whole university. They don’t even know there’s a campus out here.

Other students, as well as task force members, reported that people in the predominantly Black west side community in which the Institute is located believed the site was the entire University. It was suggested to us that many Black students, their families, and other west side residents knew nothing

about the main Cityville campus. Because of its location and curricular offerings, the Urban Institute seems to have amassed a reputation among Blacks for being “the real Cityville.” Given that we heard this from students and others during our April 2014 visit, we imagined the Urban Institute to be a branch campus with multiple buildings housing an array of academic departments and programs, a freestanding library, and other amenities. We were surprised, however, to find a single building with none of those traditional campus characteristics.

As previously noted, task force members told us the University did not recruit aggressively from suburban public schools, even those located nearby. Perhaps there was an assumption that Black students who attend those high schools likely have a range of postsecondary options and are therefore unlikely to choose Cityville. This assumption could be somewhat, but not universally accurate. There in fact could be students who might find the option of staying at home appealing, but know nothing about Cityville. When we asked how they found out about Cityville, Black undergraduates typically said they stumbled upon information about the University or knew someone (e.g., a church member or high school teacher) who told them about it. Few said they had long aspired to attend Cityville because of its excellent reputation in any particular discipline or academic field besides Urban Affairs. In fact, some said the University was not on the lists of colleges and universities to which they originally applied. They were either rejected from those other places or there were unforeseen hiccups just prior to their enrollment elsewhere. They therefore applied to Cityville at the last minute. These students also suggested that other Blacks only picked the University as a fallback when other options fell through. Here is an excerpt from an interview that powerfully illuminates this phenomenon:

Participant: Until like two weeks before school started, I thought I was going to [a Historically Black University in the South], but my financial aid got messed up. So I came here.

Interviewer: Was Cityville originally your second choice? Had you thought seriously about coming here before you chose the other university?

Participant: No. I hadn't even applied to Cityville until right before I started. This was after my financial aid fell through at the last minute at [the other university].

Interviewer: Had you at least visited Cityville when you were in high school, as you were trying to decide which colleges you were applying to?

Participant: No. I had never been here.



To more deeply understand why so few Black students we interviewed—almost all of whom graduated from local high schools—did not consider Cityville as an option for college, we analyzed the University’s admissions website. Our findings revealed that Cityville did little to signal to prospective Black students and their families that the University was a culturally affirming place, one at which they were likely to interact with others from their same racial background. Only one photograph on the entire website included a Black student. During our visit to the Urban Institute, we saw a billboard nearby on which only Cityville’s Urban Affairs program was advertised; it included no other majors or mention of the University’s main campus.

### *First-Year Adjustment, Academic Performance, and Persistence*

According to survey data from the Multicultural Affairs Office, 81.2% of Black undergraduates reported a commitment to persisting from 1 year to the next. Similarly, 84.9% indicated they were committed to completing their degree programs at Cityville. Across five racial groups surveyed, Black students reported the highest levels of commitment to persistence and completion. Notwithstanding, only 15.4% of those who entered in fall 2003 earned bachelor’s degrees within a decade. The 6-year completion rate for students who began in fall 2007 was 7.6%—roughly four of the 79 Black students in that cohort who had not graduated within 6 years continued onward to a seventh year (the point here is that 6-year rates are not necessarily skewed because large numbers of students are enrolled beyond the sixth year). As is the case at the majority of postsecondary institutions in the United States (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012), most students who discontinue enrollment at Cityville do so after the first year. Across three cohorts (fall 2010, fall 2011, and fall 2012), only 43% of Blacks who started as first-time, first-year students returned for a second year. When the fall 2013 cohort is taken into consideration, the four-cohort trend decreases to 41%. Students’ explanations for these trends were fourfold.

First, they suggested their peers were not sufficiently prepared for the academic rigors of college. Data from the Office of Institutional Research support this perspective. Accordingly, 79% of first-time, first-year Black students in fall 2013 entered the University with high school grade point averages (GPAs) below 3.0. Second, it was repeatedly expressed to us in conversations with undergraduates during the April 2014 visit, as well as in the November 2013 meeting with the task force, that Black students do not have sufficient academic support, especially during the first college year. The average fall semester GPA for the 2013 entering cohort of Black undergraduates was 1.71. For some reason, the fall semester GPA gradually declined from fall 2010

(2.09) to fall 2011 (1.97) to fall 2012 (1.77), with fall 2013 being lowest. One explanation could be that low high school GPAs are reliable explanations for poor academic performance in college. Black Cityville students said academic support services were not aggressively targeted toward them, especially in the first college year.

The third set of explanations students offered for the poor academic performance of their peers is attributable to their cultural capital (knowledge of what to expect, what is required for success, how Cityville University works, etc.), as well as their socioeconomic backgrounds. These perspectives are corroborated by data from the Office of Institutional Research. In the fall 2013 cohort, 69% of Black students were first in their families to enroll in college, and 99% were Pell Grant recipients. And as mentioned earlier, 100% of these students came from the city's public high schools. Undergraduates who enter college with these characteristics are commonly labeled "at risk"—meaning, they are perceivably at risk of failure. The final explanation is related to a trend we noted earlier: students selecting Cityville at the last minute and for no clear reasons. Similar to the Black woman quoted earlier, others said they chose Cityville within 2 to 4 weeks before the start of their first year. The following announcement was posted to the University's admissions website on June 26, 2014:

It is not too late to apply and register for Fall 2014 classes. Cityville will be accepting applications until July 25 . . . applicants who apply by the deadline will have until August 4 to submit any missing documents.

This discovery coincides with students' stories about them and their peers deciding to attend Cityville on a whim. Understandably, one who applies on July 25, submits missing materials by August 4, receives an admission decision within a week, and begins courses 2 weeks later is extremely vulnerable for a turbulent first-year adjustment.

### *Racialized Classroom and Out-of-Class Experiences*

"If you are White they treat you with more respect, they expect you to succeed. But if you're Black, they don't expect much at all from you." When one student shared these sentiments in a focus group conversation, others affirmatively nodded their heads and followed up with confirmatory examples of their own. One woman talked about a chemistry professor calling her stupid in front of the whole class and shaking his walking cane in her face. "I was afraid he was literally going to hit me with his cane." She added, "But this didn't shock any of the Blacks in the class because we already knew that he

thought we were all stupid. In one way or another, he expresses that to us every class session.” The interaction was described as traumatic, as she reported being afraid the professor might physically strike her. Unfortunately, other Black undergraduates in the focus group were unsurprised by this story, as they too had horrifying encounters with this same faculty member. But they made clear that he was not the only problematic professor.

Accordingly, having their intelligence questioned and invalidated in classrooms was commonplace. Many gave numerous examples of microaggressions—subtle, seemingly harmless racial insults that occur in everyday interactions between Whites and people of color (see Harper, 2015; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, 2010; Yosso et al., 2009). For example, one student had been repeatedly accused of plagiarism because she writes well. “They don’t expect Black students to be good writers,” she concluded. Another person suggested, “They think that everybody Black came from subpar high schools; I didn’t.” Whether blatant or more covert, these experiences powerfully conveyed to students that Cityville faculty members did not respect them or expect them to succeed academically. It is possible that certain professors’ low opinions of Blacks were shaped by these students’ persistent patterns of underpreparedness and poor academic performance. This may have been one consequence of the University’s failure to recruit and enroll a more diverse array of Black undergraduates. Despite this, at least one student made clear that she perceived the climate to be racist, where perceptions of Black students as uneducable and inferior were endemic to the University.

In addition to being stereotyped, invalidated, and disrespected, these five quotes from Black students we interviewed reveal much about their sense of belonging and feelings of importance at Cityville:

Unless you’re in urban affairs, which I am not, you don’t learn anything about Black anything in any courses. Period. I am pretty sure I have never read anything from anybody Black in any class I’ve taken here, and I’m a junior.

This place isn’t really for Black students. I mean, there are quite a few of us here, but there’s nothing for us here besides that one room, in the Multicultural Affairs Office, I believe. But I’ve never been there.

There is nothing here to make us feel like the campus cares about us. I am not saying it’s like in-your-face racist; it’s not like that. But I just feel that I don’t belong here.

I’ve never had a Black professor. What does that tell you?

This is a Hispanic-Serving Institution. They care about Hispanic students. They do not care about us.

This is just a sampling of perspectives we heard in our conversations with Cityville undergraduates. Similar to the third student, no one explicitly characterized the campus environment as racist. However, like the second student, several others suggested that the Black Cultural Center is the only place on campus where Black culture is acknowledged, celebrated, and affirmed. The fourth quote captures a phenomenon about which we also repeatedly heard: the relative shortage of professors of color, particularly Black faculty.

With regard to curriculum, Black students consistently reported seeing very little of themselves in course readings and classroom discussions. The exception, not surprisingly, were courses in urban affairs. Furthermore, several students said they had not taken a single course a Black professor taught—not because they were opposed to doing so, but because there were so few same-race faculty members across academic programs and departments. Data from the Office of Institutional Research report that only 22 of 265 tenured and tenure-track faculty at Cityville in fall 2014 were Black. Striking to us is that the School of Business had only one Black professor, particularly being that the University is located in a large, ethnically diverse city with hundreds (perhaps thousands) of thriving businesses. We found in none of the materials we were given or anywhere on the website a total number of Black professors who taught primarily or exclusively at the Urban Institute.

Undergraduates we interviewed made clear there was a significant shortage of spaces in which Black culture was acknowledged, celebrated, and affirmed. That is, Black students felt there were no spaces on campus they could call their own. Although some mentioned a single room in the Multicultural Affairs Office, few had actually been there. Students commented on Cityville being an HSI. They gave specific examples of how the University demonstrated care for Latino students and how Hispanic culture predominated the shared Multicultural Affairs Office space. This signaled to Black students that their culture was unimportant and therefore geographically confined to the off-campus Urban Institute rather than integrated into the main campus life. Coincidentally, our April 2014 visit was the same week the campus newspaper published a large photo and attention-grabbing headline on its front page about the new off-campus institute for Latino Studies. Several students mentioned this article in our conversations with them. They believed it not only showcased the new campus facility, but also reflected something they had long felt: that the University cares more about Latinos than it does Blacks. “If you’re Black you’re at the

bottom of the totem pole. Cityville caters so much more to Hispanics, just look at that new building they are building for them. They don't care about us. They don't invest in us."

## **Critical Race Analysis of Cityville**

Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) identify these six defining properties and functions of CRT:

1. CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. CRT expresses skepticism toward dominant claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.
3. CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of [structures].
4. CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color.
5. CRT is interdisciplinary.
6. CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

In this section, we use the first four of these, along with Bell's (1980, 2000) interest convergence principle and Harris's (1993) Whiteness as Property concept, to critically interpret findings reported in the previous section. We use these elements of CRT in an integrated, as opposed to a one-at-a-time, checklist fashion to make sense of and comment on the quantitative and qualitative data we collected for this case study of Black undergraduate student success at Cityville.

### ***Longstanding Patterns of Residential Racism***

Explanations for the condition of Black undergraduates at Cityville are traceable to racist residential policies that long predate our visits there in 2013 and 2014. The city in which the University is located has a well-documented history of "redlining," a practice the Federal Housing Administration concealed in formal policy for more than 30 years (Massey & Denton, 1998). The Federal Housing Act of 1968 made it illegal for financial institutions to refuse a loan or housing insurance to applicants because they lived (or intended to live) in areas perceived to be financially risky (e.g., neighborhoods with lots of Black families). Furthermore, the city government maintained protective housing and tax policies that discouraged Blacks from investing, developing, scaling, and occupying multifamily dwellings in

affluent White neighborhoods in the city. Also noteworthy are the housing subsidies and mortgage breaks the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development afforded to Whites, which ultimately funded the rapid increase of single-family houses in the city's White suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s.

Together, these three policies legally excluded Blacks from accessing the public and private resources that would improve the physical infrastructure of their homes and the fiscal condition of their communities. They also effectively ensured that most Black residents in the city were place bound as city ordinances restricted the expansion of housing options that would enhance their mobility. White families were surely advantaged by the government's goal to develop suburbs in the metropolitan area in which Cityville is situated. We argue the condition of Black undergraduates at the University should be analyzed against this historical backdrop. The origins of these circumstances were created by the effects of the government-endorsed housing segregation policies that made it nearly impossible for Black people to move to other parts of the city. This partly explains why Black students live so far away and have such cumbersome commutes. This is tantamount to saying that "white flight" from the city that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s was a natural expression of preference. Both phenomena were skillfully engineered by the White supremacist presumptions about who was deemed fit to occupy and access the benefits of residential wealth accumulation and community development resources.

Ahistoricism would have contemporary analysts erroneously attribute the long distances that Black Cityville students commute (usually 90-120 min on public transportation, both ways) to residential preferences. That is, a presumption that these students prefer to live in a part of town that is more than 90% Black, mostly low-income, and outrageously far from the main campus. Or that they cannot afford to move closer to campus because their families irresponsibly invest all their money into crack cocaine, sneakers, hair weaves, and so on. Most Black Cityville students are place bound because redlining policies and practices deprived previous generations of their families opportunities to purchase real estate closer to the main campus. The effects of such policies are likely permanent. Even if Whites suddenly choose to claim and gentrify the west side of the city, generations of Black families (including present and future Cityville University students) would be displaced, and therefore still disadvantaged by the residual effects of racist housing policies. This has and will continue to shape racialized opportunity gaps between them and their White, wealthier classmates. Bell's (1991, 1992) permanence of racism thesis persuades us to believe that Black achievement will forever lag because of slavery and Jim Crow and the city's longstanding racist housing policies.

## *Black Students Versus White Statistics*

Cityville statistics are clear: Black undergraduates are at the bottom of most metrics of educational progress and performance. Oftentimes, analysts and campus agents (presidents, deans, faculty, etc.) allow data reports such as those the Office of Institutional Research and the Multicultural Affairs Office gave us to speak for themselves. That is, statistics are commonly used to tell the story, and explanations for them are typically derived from deficit-oriented theorizing. For example, the average GPA for Black Cityville first-year students was 1.71 in fall 2013. Most analysts would agree that this is a clear indication that Black students are underprepared for college-level work and therefore should not have been offered admission to the University. Furthermore, the continuous decline in GPAs for 4 continuous years would also confirm for some that the high schools from which Black undergraduates are being recruited are worsening from year to year. Although these explanations may indeed be true, they offer no insights into how institutional forces affect Black students' academic performance in the first college year.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) emphasize the importance of centering the experiential knowledge of people of color in CRT analyses. While some Black undergraduates we interviewed agreed that underpreparedness was a contributing factor in theirs and other Black students' academic performance, they also said that racist encounters with White professors in classrooms and elsewhere made academic achievement difficult. Longer commutes than peers from other racial groups, the persistent underrepresentation of same-race faculty role models and advocates, culturally irrelevant curricula and culturally unresponsive pedagogies, and a lack of targeted academic support resources on campus were other factors participants named. They felt the following message was powerfully and consistently conveyed in myriad ways: Cityville University does not care about Black people. "Why else would they show us such disregard day after day after day," one participant asked.

One-sided ways of knowing do not offer deeper, more complex insights into how racist institutional norms, cultures, and policies cyclically reproduce racial inequities reflected in quantitative data reports. Harris's (1993) Whiteness as Property propositions are useful for making sense of the privileging of certain forms of data over others. Compared with Whites (and to a lesser extent Asians and Asian Americans), disproportionately fewer Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans work in institutional research offices on predominantly White campuses. Moreover, people of color are grossly underrepresented among executives at campus and system levels as well as among trustees, postsecondary policy makers, and accreditors. These actors, the overwhelming majority of whom are White, determine which data are valid,

what questions are worthy of pursuit, the raceless manner in which survey items are framed, and how best to interpret what numbers say about racial inequity, minoritized students, and institutional quality. In this way, statistics are almost always the architectural, interpretational, and actionable property of Whites. In the next section, we combine Whiteness as Property with other CRT concepts and tenets.

### *White Overseers of a Racially Diverse University*

Beyond maintaining the right to select survey questions and variables in quantitative data sets, Whites also maintain other property rights at Cityville. Its mostly White admissions staff determines where to recruit Black students, how much to advertise to Blacks on the west side and across other parts of the city, the criteria by which applicants are evaluated, and how many minoritized students are ultimately offered access to the University. Its mostly White academic deans, department chairs, and faculty maintain ownership rights of Cityville's professoriate. Therefore, they determine how many colleagues of color they want and the degrees to which those scholars remain minoritized. Its mostly White Board of Trustees picked a White president to lead a so-called HSI. Like her predecessors, the president chose to exercise her right to select a majority White executive cabinet. A White administrator determined the appropriate time to construct a Black student success task force, for what reasons, and with what resources and parameters. In all these ways, Cityville and the success of its Black students are property of its mostly White institutional overseers.

"People of color don't want to live here," is one popular excuse White institutional agents use to justify shortages of students, faculty, and administrators, especially in rural, predominantly White college towns. Cityville is located in one of the largest, most ethnically diverse cities in the United States, so how then might its underrepresentation of Blacks at all levels except custodial, grounds keeping, and food service work be explained? As noted previously, CRT critiques claims of liberalism, color blindness, and meritocracy (Matsuda et al., 1993). Perceivably colorblind recruitment practices and access policies are likely used to explain why so few minoritized persons seek admission to and tenure-track professorships at Cityville. It is also plausible that shortages are being attributed to a lack of Blacks who are qualified to attend or teach at the University. Both possibilities would presume that Cityville is doing all it can to enact the commitments to diversity espoused in its mission statement, in its admissions materials, and on its website. We found insufficient evidence of this level of institutional strategy and seriousness. Undoubtedly, there are highly qualified Blacks beyond the small



set of local public high schools where Cityville recruits, and there are Blacks with PhD degrees who would happily teach at a university in one of the nation's most vibrant cities.

Ahistoricisim, along with colorblind and meritocratic ideologies, would compel White overseers at Cityville University and elsewhere to ask questions like the following about Black student success:

1. Why would not their parents send their children to higher quality P-12 schools that better prepare them for admission to and success at the University?
2. Why do not Black students who enroll at Cityville take fuller advantage of this opportunity to pull themselves and their families out of poverty? Why do so many of these students forfeit this opportunity by failing to persist through baccalaureate degree attainment?
3. Given that commuting back-and-forth to campus is reportedly too strenuous, why would not Black students simply move closer to campus? Instead of buying iPhones and expensive headphones, why would not they save up enough money to purchase cars, thereby shortening the length of their commutes on public transportation?

These are just three of numerous examples of what Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi (2008) call "white logic" in the interpretation of statistics and observable social phenomena. Queries such as these also mirror raceless, decontextualized ways in which courts have attempted to make sense of crime in Black communities without considering the corresponding effects of the permanent residuals of slavery and Jim Crow, inequitable schooling, joblessness and poverty, racial profiling and assorted acts of police misconduct (including murder without consequence), and other social forces for which powerful Whites are directly responsible. Data we collected for this critical race case study reveal numerous structural forces that explain, at least in part, Black students' troubling enrollment, achievement, and completion rates.

### *Economic Exploitation of Black Students and the Federal Government*

Cityville does not have intercollegiate sports teams. Therefore, what incentive does it have to expansively and aggressively recruit Black students if they are not packing a football stadium or basketball arena, bringing in millions of dollars through corporate sponsorships and television contracts, and putting Cityville on a national stage? In his interest convergence principle,

Bell (1980, 2000) masterfully argues that Whites rarely invest in Blacks and efforts that ensure racial remedies for minoritized persons unless the benefits for Whites are apparent. In fact, Whites almost always benefit more from their racial justice actions and activities investments than do people of color, Bell posited. Donnor (2005) and Harper (2009b) argue that predominately White institutions and their overseers seem to care more about Black undergraduate men as long as they are eligible to play on revenue-generating sports teams. This was not possible at Cityville. But here is where interests seemingly converged: Black students, most of them from low-income families, brought Pell Grants to the University. Cityville profited financially from the federal dollars it got for enrolling Black students it ultimately failed to graduate. Also, the University benefitted cosmetically from the ways in which Black students bolstered the appearance of diversity in its student body.

It could be argued that Black undergraduates benefitted from having the opportunity to enroll at this university—but the majority left Cityville without having earned their degrees, so who profited more? Arguably, Cityville exploited the federal government by accepting Pell Grants, federal student loans, and work study dollars on behalf of Blacks and other minoritized students it effectively failed to retain and graduate year after year. These students and their federal financial aid helped sustain Cityville's operations, which resulted in an imbalanced convergence of interests. Blacks undergraduates wanted a chance to earn degrees and improve their economic circumstances—the University gave them this chance, but without sufficient orientation and support during the first year and beyond. More than 92% of Blacks who start at Cityville do not complete degrees there within 6 years; 100% of them were Pell Grant recipients in the year we conducted this case study. An overwhelming majority of them will leave the University empty-handed, but Cityville will get to keep the federal dollars allocated for each student.

## **Conclusion**

Ladson-Billings (1998) famously asked what is CRT “doing in a ‘nice’ field like education” (p. 7). Specifically concerning higher education, Patton (2016) offers three propositions: (a) the U.S. higher education system has a White supremacist history that continually affects contemporary postsecondary institutions, (b) imperialism and capitalism reproduce racial oppression and assorted inequities at U.S. colleges and universities, and (c) postsecondary institutions are places at which racist and White supremacist conceptions of knowledge are produced and rewarded. Patton then uses tenets, theses, and propositions from CRT to critique commonly held

assumptions about the composition of the student body and the professoriate, the devaluing of minoritized people's perspectives and realities, and a host of other issues that are usually mishandled in raceless ways. The use of CRT in our case study of Cityville University allowed us to offer what Yin (2014) calls "rival explanations" and complicate longstanding, oftentimes, narrow (mis)interpretations of factors that affect Black students' access, academic performance, persistence, and degree completion at postsecondary institutions in the United States.

Our case study findings suggest that Black student success is considerably more complex than theorists, researchers, and administrators often acknowledge. Theory advancement demands fuller considerations of the historical and current racialization of policies, practices, and institutional cultures. Tenets, propositions, and theses from CRT could necessarily deepen analyses of structures that ultimately shape the condition of Black students attending a range of postsecondary institutions, including commuter universities like Cityville. Continually relying on a narrow, raceless set of variables will continually yield incomplete and inaccurate understandings of minoritized students' experiences and outcomes. Racism encountered in classrooms and elsewhere must be explored alongside other commonly investigated factors concerning access and achievement. Professors, institutional leaders, trustees and policy makers, and practitioners who serve on task forces like the one at Cityville University cannot improve Black student success until their actions are grounded in more complete qualitative truths and more critical interpretations of statistics.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. "Minoritized" is used instead of "minority" throughout this article to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social milieu (e.g., their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of religious worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of whiteness.

2. Cityville University is a pseudonym for the urban postsecondary institution at which data for this study were collected.
3. Data presented in this section are from the fall 2014 Common Data Set Report provided by Cityville's Office of Institutional Research.
4. Hispanic-Serving Institutions are defined in Title IV of the Higher Education Act as not-for-profit institutions of higher education with a full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate student enrollment that is at least 25% Hispanic or Latino.
5. To maintain institutional anonymity, Urban Institute is a pseudonym for the official title of the satellite site located on the west side.
6. Six-year graduation rates are a standard metric used to track and document degree completion in U.S. higher education.
7. Data presented in this section are from the fall 2013, the point at which this case study commenced.

## References

- Bell, D. A. (1980). *Brown v. Board of Education and the interest convergence dilemma*. *Harvard Law Review*, 93, 518-533.
- Bell, D. A. (1991). Racism is here to stay: Now what? *Howard Law Journal*, 35, 79-93.
- Bell, D.A. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bell, D. A. (2000). *Brown vs. Board of Education: Forty-five years after the fact*. *Ohio Northern Law Review*, 26(1), 1-171.
- Bonilla-Silva, E., & Zuberi, T. (2008). Toward a definition of white logic and white methods. In T. Zuberi & E. Bonilla-Silva (Eds.), *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology* (pp. 3-30). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Brown, A. L., & Donnor, J. K. (2011). Toward a new narrative on Black males, education, and public policy. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 14, 17-32.
- Carnevale, A. P., & Strohl, J. (2013). *Separate & unequal: How higher education reinforces the intergenerational reproduction of white racial privilege*. Washington, DC: Center for Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: New York University Press.
- Donnor, J. K. (2005). Towards an interest-convergence in the education of African American football student-athletes in major college sports. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8, 45-67.
- Dowd, A. C., & Bensimon, E. M. (2015). *Engaging the race question: Accountability and equity in U.S. higher education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Harper, S. R. (2009a). Niggers no more: A critical race counternarrative on Black male student achievement at predominantly white colleges and universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22, 697-712.
- Harper, S. R. (2009b). Race, interest convergence, and transfer outcomes for Black male student-athletes. In L. S. Hagedorn & D. Horton (Eds.), *Student athletes and athletics: New directions for community colleges* (No. 147, pp. 29-37). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Harper, S. R. (2012). Race without racism: How higher education researchers minimize racist institutional norms. *The Review of Higher Education, 36*, 9-29.
- Harper, S. R. (2013). Am I my brother's teacher? Black undergraduates, peer pedagogies, and racial socialization in predominantly white postsecondary contexts. *Review of Research in Education, 37*, 183-211.
- Harper, S. R. (2015). Black male college achievers and resistant responses to racist stereotypes at predominantly white colleges and universities. *Harvard Educational Review, 85*, 646-674.
- Harper, S. R., Davis, R. J., Jones, D. E., McGowan, B. L., Ingram, T. N., & Platt, C. S. (2011). Race and racism in the experiences of Black male resident assistants at predominantly white universities. *Journal of College Student Development, 52*, 180-200.
- Harper, S. R., & Newman, C. B. (2016). Surprise, sensemaking, and success in the first college year: Black undergraduate men's academic adjustment experiences. *Teachers College Record, 118*(6), 1-30.
- Harper, S. R., Patton, L. D., & Wooden, O. S. (2009). Access and equity for African American students in higher education: A critical race historical analysis of policy efforts. *Journal of Higher Education, 80*, 389-414.
- Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review, 106*, 1709-1791.
- Jacoby, B. (Ed.). (2000). *Involving commuter students in learning: New directions for higher education* (No. 109). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jacoby, B. (2015). Engaging commuter and part-time students. In S. J. Quaye & S. R. Harper (Eds.), *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations*. (2nd ed., pp. 289-305). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jacoby, B., & Garland, J. (2004). Strategies for enhancing commuter student success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 6*, 61-79.
- Jayakumar, U. M., Howard, T. C., Allen, W. R., & Han, J. C. (2009). Racial privilege in the professoriate: An exploration of campus climate, retention, and satisfaction. *The Journal of Higher Education, 80*, 538-563.
- Johnson-Bailey, J., Valentine, T., Cervero, R. M., & Bowles, T. M. (2009). Rooted in the soil: The social experiences of Black graduate students at a southern research university. *The Journal of Higher Education, 80*, 178-203.
- Kuh, G. D., Gonyea, R. M., & Palmer, M. (2001). The disengaged commuter student: Fact or fiction. *Commuter Perspectives, 27*(1), 2-5.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a "nice" field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11*(1), 7-24.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*, 47-69.
- Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1998). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Matsuda, M. J., Lawrence, C. R., III, Delgado, R., & Crenshaw, K. W. (1993). *Words that wound: Critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the first amendment*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

- Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., Wolniak, G. C., Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. Y. (2016). *How college affects students (Vol. 3): 21st century evidence that higher education works*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- McGee, E. O., & Stovall, D. (2015). Reimagining critical race theory in education: Mental health, healing, and the pathway to liberatory praxis. *Educational Theory, 65*, 491-511.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students, Volume 2: A third decade of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, L. D. (2006). The voice of reason: A qualitative examination of Black student perceptions of black culture centers. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*, 628-646.
- Patton, L. D. (2016). Disrupting postsecondary prose: Toward a critical race theory of higher education. *Urban Education, 51*, 315-342.
- Patton, L. D., & Catching, C. (2009). "Teaching while Black": Narratives of African American student affairs faculty. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 22*, 713-728.
- Patton, L. D., Harper, S. R., & Harris, J. (2015). Using critical race theory to (re) interpret widely-studied topics related to students in U.S. higher education. In A. M. Martínez Alemán, E. M. Bensimon, & B. Pusser (Eds.), *Critical approaches to the study of higher education* (pp. 193-219). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Patton, L. D., Haynes, C. M., Harris, J. C., & Ivery, S. M. (2014). Perhaps the field of education isn't so nice after all: An examination of critical race research in higher education. *NASAP Journal, 15*, 135-148.
- Patton, L. D., McEwen, M. K., Rendón, L. I., & Howard-Hamilton, M. F. (2007). Critical race perspectives on theory in student affairs. In S. R. Harper & L. D. Patton (Eds.), *Responding to the realities of race on campus: New directions for student services* (No. 120, pp. 39-53). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Perna, L. W., & Thomas, S. L. (2008). *Theoretical perspectives on student success: Understanding the contributions of the disciplines: ASHE Higher Education Report, Volume 34, Number 1*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sedlacek, W. E. (1987). Black students on White campuses: 20 years of research. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 28*, 484-495.
- Silverman, S. C., Aliabadi, S., & Stiles, M. R. (2009). Meeting the needs of commuter, part-time, transfer, and returning students. In S. R. Harper & S. J. Quayle (Eds.), *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations* (1st ed., pp. 223-241). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Smith, W. A., Yosso, T. J., & Solórzano, D. G. (2006). Challenging racial battle fatigue on historically white campuses: A critical race examination of race-related stress. In C. A. Stanley (Ed.), *Faculty of color teaching in predominantly white colleges and universities* (pp. 299-327). Bolton, MA: Anker.
- Solórzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, racial and gender microaggressions, and the experiences of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11*, 121-136.

- Solórzano, D. G., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. J. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education, 69*, 60-73.
- Solórzano, D. G., Villalpando, O., & Oseguera, L. (2005). Educational inequities and Latina/o undergraduate students in the United States: A critical race analysis of their educational progress. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 4*, 272-294.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
- Taylor, E. (1999). Critical race theory and interest convergence in the desegregation of higher education. In L. Parker, D. Deyhle, & S. Villenas (Eds.), *Race is. . . race isn't: Critical race theory and qualitative studies in education* (pp. 181-204). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Willie, C. V., & Cunnigen, D. (1981). Black students in higher education: A review of studies, 1965-1980. *Annual Review of Sociology, 7*, 177-198.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*, 69-91.
- Yosso, T. J., Parker, L., Solórzano, D. G., & Lynn, M. (2004). From Jim Crow to affirmative action and back again: A critical race discussion of racialized rationales and access to higher education. *Review of Research in Education, 28*, 1-25.
- Yosso, T. J., Smith, W. A., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. G. (2009). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review, 79*, 659-690.

## Author Biographies

**Shaun R. Harper**, PhD, is the Clifford and Betty Allen professor in Urban Leadership at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education. He also is founder and executive director of the USC Race and Equity Center.

**Edward J. Smith** is a PhD candidate in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Charles H. F. Davis III**, PhD, is an assistant professor of clinical education at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education. He also is director of research in the USC Race and Equity Center.