

COMMENTARY

Class or Race

How Does Socioeconomic Diversity Affect Cross-Racial Interactions?

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Questions concerning class diversity in higher education generally focus on the point of enrollment (for instance, can class-based affirmative action lead to sufficient racial diversity? What can universities do to boost enrollment for low-income students?) versus what actually happens once students get there. In a recent research study, [Julie J. Park](#) (University of Maryland, College Park), [Nida Denson](#) (University of Western Sydney), and [Nicholas Bowman](#) (Public Policy Center) consider whether any educational benefits are associated with *attending* a socioeconomically diverse institution.

The primary outcome of interest is cross-racial interaction, a term that describes whether students are interacting with students of other races. Positive cross-racial interaction is associated with numerous educational and civic benefits. [The study](#) investigates whether positive racial diversity-related outcomes can be achieved via class diversity in a student body, a topic with significant policy implications given the ban on affirmative action in California and the continued national controversy over race-conscious admissions policies.

The authors found that class diversity in a student body had an indirect effect on cross-racial interaction. Students who interacted more across class lines also interacted more across racial groups, and interacting across class lines was positively associated with an institution having more class diversity. The authors point out that unlike the indirect effect of class diversity, the effect associated with racial diversity on cross-racial interaction is direct. This suggests that class diversity alone will not result in a high level of student engagement with racial diversity. They note that the two variables measuring race and class diversity in a student body have distinct effects and that while class and race are related, the two are not interchangeable. Furthermore, the effect of racial diversity was not wiped out by the effect of class diversity in the analysis, indicating that racial diversity has a distinct and independent effect on cross-racial interaction that cannot be explained by the socioeconomic diversity of a student body.

Park, Denson, and Bowman provide several suggestions for why class diversity appears to enhance the effects of racial diversity. For instance, low-income White students generally attend more racially diverse high schools because of the segregation of K–12 public schools. Thus, a university with greater class diversity would have more students with more experience with racial diversity prior to college, as other studies have shown. Also, they suggest that class diversity, combined with racial diversity, challenges the “consolidation of privilege” along racial lines. They note that racial barriers on campus are harder to cross when they are paired with class divides (i.e., when a White student population is not only White, but White and affluent). The authors also invoke [Gordon Allport’s contact theory](#) to suggest that having greater class diversity can enhance equal status between students, creating more positive conditions for interracial contact.

California public higher education institutions are historically known for enrolling high numbers of Pell Grant recipients. However, limited state funding and increases in out-of-state enrollments at certain institutions are key threats to diversity and equity. Racial

diversity also continues to be limited, as noted by [amicus briefs filed](#) in *Fisher v. University of Texas* on behalf of [Attorney General Kamala Harris](#) and the [President and Chancellors of the University of California system](#). This study by Park, Denson, and Bowman is compelling evidence of the significance of both class and racial diversity to higher education institutions, especially as they prepare students to engage in a diverse democracy and work for the civic good.

The [full study](#) (ungated) can be found in Julie J. Park, Nida Denson and Nicholas A. Bowman, *Does Socioeconomic Diversity Make a Difference? Examining the Effects of Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity on the Campus Climate for Diversity*, *American Educational Research Journal*, June 2013, vol. 50, no. 3, 466–496.

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