

## Article

# Tipping Point: Perceptions of Diversity in Black and White

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**Abstract:** By 2044, the USA is projected to be a majority-minority nation. Research suggests that when people of color reach 40–60% of the population, a tipping point occurs in which white individuals experience a collective existential threat and threat to their status and resources, resulting in more negative attitudes toward diversity. Institutions of higher education are microcosms of society. We were interested in how perceptions of diversity might differ across two universities—one that had reached the tipping point of only 50% white Americans; 543 black and white undergraduates completed items from the Diverse Learning Environment Core Survey measuring perceptions of belonging, diversity, and discrimination. We found that white students in the more diverse context were less satisfied with diversity on campus than their white counterparts (at the less diverse university); moreover, these students reported the highest level of discrimination in the study—even higher than that of black students in the less diverse context. These findings highlight the ways in which increasing representation and enfranchisement of racially and culturally different others may result in feelings of disenfranchisement for white Americans. With implications for the larger society, we argue that centering and deconstructing whiteness and white racial socialization is essential for the next era of equity and diversity aimed at redressing structural inequality.

**Keywords:** white institutional presence; predominantly white institutions; perceptions of discrimination; belonging; satisfaction with diversity; institutional commitment to diversity; white college students



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## 1. Introduction

At the start of the new millennium, the United States, and most of the developed world, found itself ushering in a new era of transnational collaboration, participation in a global marketplace, and engaging in a new era of multicultural coexistence. Fast forward to the current moment, and the United States finds itself engulfed in a state of disarray. At the onset of this year, American democracy was threatened as political extremists stormed the United States Capitol building, inspired by divisive rhetoric and general discontent regarding the condition of the country. This all came not even a year after widespread civil unrest and heightened racial tensions shook the country to its core in the wake of the death of George Floyd, a black man who was killed when a police officer knelt into his neck for 9 min. Between these two watershed moments in American history, a contentious presidential campaign and dangerous denial of its outcome further divided the country along political lines. Nearly two decades after a promising start to the new millennium, the United States is a deeply divided nation, where the seeds of polarization have taken root and are bearing fruit. Increasing racial diversity in the country seems to be moving the U.S. toward a tipping point, where white Americans are more likely to reject multiculturalism and feel disenfranchised, e.g., “stop the steal” [1]. Higher education is not exempt from these racial dynamics, and in the current paper, we explore what happens as universities near the tipping point.

The idea of continued peaceful multicultural coexistence in the U.S. is challenged by changing demographics, whereby in 2044, the country is projected to be a majority-minority

nation [2]. This expected demographic shift is defined by Craig and Richeson [3] as the “tipping point”, which refers to the moment racial minorities in society comprise 40–60% of the population. Once the tipping point is reached, according to Craig and Richeson, white Americans experience a sense of system and group status threat. System threat is an attitudinal variable connected to fear and uncertainty about the future direction of society [3]. Group status threat involves the belief that a racial group’s societal status and resources are in peril [3]. One could argue that rioters at the capitol on 6 January 2021 were operating from both levels of threat and thereby sought to overturn an election and secure victory for the presidential candidate whom they saw as a champion for their group or electorate, particularly with respect to maintaining their status and resources in society.

Researchers have found that white individuals made aware of the projected increase in numbers of people of color in the U.S. experience their group status to be threatened and subsequently express greater political conservatism [4]. Previous scholarship has suggested that white Americans who perceive a decline in the size of their ingroup population experience a collective existential threat that elicits defensive reactions such as the endorsement of greater conservatism and negative racial bias [5]. An opinion poll in the United States generated during the 2016 presidential election season indicated that 71% of white individuals thought the country was going in the wrong direction [6]. This poll was conducted at the end of the second term of President Barack Obama, who was the first black President of the United States. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the same poll indicated that a majority of black individuals (59%) thought the country was moving in the right direction [6]. This discrepancy between black and white perceptions is noteworthy, providing evidence of system threat that may foreshadow feelings of disenfranchisement and negative racial bias.

Institutions of higher education are microcosms of society [7–9]. As such, many of the prejudices of the larger society have been found in students’ experiences on college campuses [7]. For example, Punti and Dingel [10] pointed out some of the ways polarization, or an us/them mentality, was demonstrated by white students on one predominantly white campus, along with the ways seeds of negative racial bias and feelings of disenfranchisement sprang forth from the university’s investment in resources to diversify its student body. Given that higher education in the U.S. is not exempt from a tipping point in which the United States becomes a majority-minority nation [2], we seek to more fully understand and shed light on the racial dynamics at play with implications for reconsidering the priorities and foci of work in equity and diversity.

#### *White Institutional Presence (WIP)*

American sociologist Joe Feagin [11] describes U.S. society as steeped in a white racial frame or grand social narrative that tends to uphold whiteness while discriminating against people of color. The equivalent to Feagin’s white racial frame at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education is white institutional presence (WIP), which is characterized by four attributes: colorblindness; monoculturalism; white estrangement or distance from people of color, and white ascendancy (i.e., the idea that white people are a superior group) [12]. In practice, the four attributes of WIP contribute to creating a hostile environment and negative campus climate for people of color [12].

The first attribute, colorblindness, is described as “not seeing color” or minimizing race as an important aspect of identity. White individuals have been found to consistently endorse colorblindness more than black individuals [13]. An ideology of colorblindness that ignores race makes it nearly impossible to address racism, consequently functioning to maintain racial inequities and a racial status quo based on white supremacy [14]. According to the literature, colorblind reasoning is commonly used by those racialized as white to make meaning of race [15–20], and those who strongly endorse colorblindness also engage in more stereotypic thinking [13].

Ironically, even offices for equity and diversity at PWIs may advance WIP by adopting and utilizing tools based on one of its cornerstones—colorblind reasoning. For example, Punti and Dingel [10] provide a detailed discussion of colorblind reasoning embedded

within the popular Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) used to measure cultural competence in their student body. Despite the lack of validity for racially diverse individuals, this tool is heralded by the university's diversity office to advance cultural competence with little to no recognition that the trajectory and expression of cultural competence may differ across those who belong to the dominant racial group in society and those who do not [10].

This lack of awareness and appreciation for how the development and lived experiences of racially minoritized individuals may differ significantly from those of white individuals speaks to the second cornerstone of WIP, monoculturalism, which underscores the universality of white norms to which all others are expected to assimilate [12]. This may explain in part why black students on predominantly white campuses experience more racial conflict, more pressure to conform to stereotypes, and more difficulty coping than their white counterparts [21,22]. As discussed by Grier-Reed et al. [23], monoculturalism at PWIs contributes to antiblackness and increases pressures to assimilate to white norms for students who are not white, resulting in hostile campus climates, where black students generally perceive more discrimination than their white counterparts [12,22,24–29] including inequitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants [21,22,30–34].

Physical and social distancing from people of color, or white estrangement [12], is the third cornerstone of WIP that can be challenged or harder to enact when campus environments become more racially diverse. In fact, high levels of diversity on campus may challenge what feels normal or natural for some white students [10,16]. Bonilla-Silva and Embrick [35] noted that white spaces in which white individuals have little to no interaction with people of color have been so prevalent in the United States that, for many, it just seems normal. Interestingly, even at the turn of the century, despite increasing racial diversity, the U.S. remained a largely segregated nation [36]. When the physical and social distance between ethno-racial groups is diminished by an increasing number of people of color in white spaces, the racial attitudes of white individuals can become increasingly hostile to diversity [37]. As discussed earlier, the phenomenon seems most evident when people of color reach 40–60% of the population, where 50% has been described as a potential tipping point when white people begin to perceive a threat to their status and resources [3]. This phenomenon even seems evident on college campuses.

For example, one study of 103 college students across two ethnically diverse universities found that negative reactions to multicultural contexts were most often voiced by white students; specifically, feeling discriminated against was a stronger theme for white students than for any of the other groups in the study, e.g., African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx [38]. The researchers concluded that: "For many White students, encountering a diverse campus environment was disconcerting and engendered a sense of unease and disconnect with the university" [38] (p. 109). Similar sentiments were highlighted by Punti and Dingel [10], who also shared white students' unease in the context of heightened diversity on campus.

The connection between heightened diversity and discrimination or disenfranchisement is worth noting and is related to the fourth cornerstone of WIP, white ascendancy, or the superior status of whiteness as the natural order [12]. In the context of white ascendancy, increasing diversity in the campus environment may be viewed as taking away from better qualified, more deserving white students [12], e.g., diverting resources away from where they belong. The sentiment of being disenfranchised or feeling excluded by all the resources being invested in a diverse learning community on campus was a strong theme in the Punti and Dingel report [10]. This finding seems to underscore the idea that racially and ethnically diverse contexts that challenge the three cornerstones of monoculturalism, estrangement, and colorblindness, ultimately threaten the final cornerstone of WIP, white ascendancy. Threat to the ascendant or superior position of whiteness in society is also known as group status threat which, as previously discussed, can ultimately lead to a rejection of multiculturalism [1,3–5].

There is a need for more empirical investigations that examine the attitudes of white students in diverse and diversifying contexts, especially given that institutions of higher education are microcosms of society. To contribute to this understudied area, we explored the attitudes of white students across two campuses—one had reached the tipping point, and one had not. We used the pseudonyms Midwestern and Regency to mask the identities of the two institutions, where the student body of Midwestern University was 67% white American and the student body of Regency University was only 50% white American [39]. Our research question was: Do students' perceptions of belonging, diversity, and discrimination differ significantly across the more diverse context of Regency University and the less diverse context of Midwestern University? As a point of comparison, we also included the perceptions of black students on each campus to better illuminate how the racial dynamics that underlie a tipping point may manifest in higher education and inform the work of equity and diversity in this new decade.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Our research participants were 543 black and white undergraduates—61% from Midwestern University and 39% from Regency University. At Midwestern U, 42% of our sample self-identified as white, and 56% of the sample were women; 28% were 1st-year students, 20% were sophomores, 30% were juniors, and 22% were seniors. The mean age of Midwestern University students was 21.21. At Regency University, 47% of the sample self-identified as white, and 62% were women; 26% were 1st-year students, 36% were sophomores, 28% were juniors, and 10% unknown. Seniors were not sampled at Regency University due to practical constraints regarding the need to complete other surveys; the mean age of Regency University students was 19.54.

### 2.2. Settings

Midwestern University was a large public institution with over 60,000 students (44,332 undergraduate and 19,870 graduate) located in the Midwestern United States; Regency University was a midsize private institution with over 17,000 students (7299 undergraduate and 10,340 graduate) located in the Southeastern United States. Across both institutions most undergraduates were aged 24 and under, there was a relatively equal gender distribution, and white students comprised the largest racial group. The institutions differed in terms of student diversity. As previously discussed, Regency University was more racially and culturally diverse than Midwestern University (refer to Table 1) [39].

**Table 1.** Student demographics for Midwestern U and Regency U.

	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic	International
Midwestern U	67%	3%	8%	3%	12%
Regency U	50%	7%	14%	5%	18%

### 2.3. Instruments

As part of a larger research study, we developed an electronic survey that included four sections focused on: students' future plans, social networks, college experience, and background characteristics. The current research is based on responses to the college experience section of the survey that included items from the Diverse Learning Environment (DLE) Core Survey, which has been used nationally to ascertain student perceptions of institutional climate, faculty, staff, and peers. The DLE was developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) [40] and is sensitive to diverse student populations [41]. We used DLE items to measure students' sense of belonging, satisfaction with diversity on campus, perceptions of institutional commitment to diversity, and observed and experienced discrimination on campus.

### 2.3.1. Perceptions of Belonging

We used 14 DLE items to measure students' sense of belonging on a scale of 1–4, where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 4 indicates strong agreement. These items focused on the extent to which students saw themselves as part of the campus community, felt supported and encouraged on campus, and would recommend their school to others [42–45]. On the DLE, these items are associated with the General Interpersonal Validation factor, and Hurtado et al. [41] have reported internal consistency reliability for this factor at 0.862. Our data yielded internal consistency reliability estimates of 0.90 for both sites in our study.

### 2.3.2. Satisfaction with Diversity

We included 10 DLE items to measure students' satisfaction with diversity on campus using a scale of 1–5, where 1 indicates strong dissatisfaction and 5 indicates strong satisfaction. In line with Park [25], these items included a focus on satisfaction with racial and ethnic diversity on campus. We also measured satisfaction with university responses to discrimination, overall sense of community, and respect for diverse beliefs, along with respect for political, religious, and sexual orientation differences on campus. Hurtado et al. [41] have reported internal consistency reliability at 0.873 for DLE items related to satisfaction with diverse perspectives on campus. Our dataset yielded an internal consistency reliability of 0.81 for Midwestern U and 0.80 for Regency U.

### 2.3.3. Institutional Commitment to Diversity

We included six DLE items to measure students' perceptions of institutional commitment to diversity on a scale of 1–4, where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 4 indicates strong agreement. Aligned with assertions by Rankin and Reason [26], these items included a focus on administrators articulating the importance of diversity on campus as well as students' perceptions of the institution's "longstanding commitment to diversity". Hurtado et al. [41] have reported internal consistency reliability at 0.857 for DLE items related to an institutional commitment to diversity. Our dataset yielded an internal consistency reliability of 0.78 for Midwestern U and 0.79 for Regency U.

### 2.3.4. Perceptions of Discrimination

Our DLE measures of discrimination focused on observed and experienced discrimination. Although there was some overlap, 7 items focused on the frequency of observed/reported discrimination, and 8 items focused on the frequency of experienced discrimination using a scale of 1–5, where 1 indicates never, and 5 indicates very often. Hurtado et al. [41] have reported internal consistencies ranging from 0.889 to 0.917 for DLE items measuring racial microaggressions, reported discrimination, and harassment. With respect to "observed" discrimination items, our dataset yielded internal consistency reliabilities of 0.84 for Midwestern University students and 0.86 for Regency University students. For "experienced" discrimination items, our internal consistency reliabilities were 0.87 for Midwestern University students and 0.86 for Regency University students.

## 2.4. Procedures

We obtained permission from the institutional review boards at each participating university to conduct this study, and we obtained permission from HERI to include DLE items. We collected data in the spring semester of 2014, and we included research incentives, where students at Midwestern U received a \$10 Amazon gift card and students at Regency U were entered into a drawing to win an iPad. The varying research incentives were designed to reflect what we thought might best motivate students to participate in our research within each context.

The survey took approximately 15–20 min to complete, and we included two reminder emails for Regency University students and four reminder emails for Midwestern University students. We worked in collaboration with the offices of institutional research at



each university to recruit black and white students based on institutional data. We emailed a link for our survey to the population of black undergraduates ( $N = 1132$  students) at Midwestern U, and to all of the black 1st years, sophomores, and juniors ( $N = 562$ ) at Regency U. We also surveyed a random sample of 600 white students from Midwestern U and 562 white students from Regency U. (Note: This research stemmed from a larger study focused on the experiences of black college students; hence, black students were oversampled in our research). The response rate was 19%.

## 2.5. Analysis

We used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedures to analyze our data. We coded our data such that higher numbers were indicative of higher levels of belongingness, satisfaction with diversity, commitment to diversity, and discrimination. We initially included two independent variables—race and institutional context, where there were two levels of race (black and white) and two levels of institutional context (Midwestern University and Regency University).

### 2.5.1. Preliminary Analysis

To determine whether it was appropriate to collapse black men and black women into one group and white men and white women into another group within each institution, we conducted a preliminary MANOVA by gender. Within each institution, we found no significant difference in responses from black men and black women or white men and white women; in short, there were no significant intra-racial gender differences within each context. Hence, we aggregated responses by race within institution. We also checked for preliminary differences by year in school, especially given that we had no seniors from Regency University. We found significant differences by year in school and added year in school as an additional independent variable where we included two levels—upper class students (i.e., juniors and seniors) and underclass students (i.e., 1st years and sophomores). Our final analysis included three independent variables (race, institutional context, and year in school) and five dependent variables (belonging, satisfaction with diversity, institutional commitment to diversity, observed discrimination, and experienced discrimination).

### 2.5.2. Power Analysis

To ensure that our sample size had sufficient power to find significant differences, we conducted a power analysis for a MANOVA with 7 levels (3 independent variables and 4 interactions) and 5 dependent variables. We used G-POWER\*3 to determine a sufficient sample size based on an alpha of 0.05, power of 0.80, and a small effect size ( $f^2 = 0.0625$ ). This analysis yielded a minimum sample size of 297 for our analysis.

## 3. Results

In the full multivariate model, we found significant main effects for institutional context and year in school. We also found significant interactions between race and institutional context. Refer to Table 2.

**Table 2.** Overall MANOVA results.

Variable	Pillai's Trace	F	p
Race	0.022	2.04	0.071
Institution	0.104	10.299	<0.001
Year in School	0.080	7.759	<0.001
Race by Institution	0.144	14.985	<0.001
Race by Year in School	0.013	1.188	0.314
Institution by Year in School	0.015	1.359	0.238
Race by Institution by Year in school	0.011	0.947	0.450

Note: Df (5,444)

Follow-up univariate analyses exploring sense of belonging revealed significant main effects for institutional context ( $F(1,448) = 38.23, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.08$ ) and year in school ( $F(1,448) = 8.63, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.02$ ). Overall, Regency University students reported a higher sense of belonging ( $\bar{x} = 37.63$ ; s.d. = 5.32) than Midwestern University students ( $\bar{x} = 34.43$ ; s.d. = 4.33), and underclass students reported a higher sense of belonging ( $\bar{x} = 36.63$ ; s.d. = 5.74) than upper class students ( $\bar{x} = 34.51$ ; s.d. = 5.61). Importantly, there was also a significant interaction between race and institution ( $F(1,448) = 4.33, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ ), where white students at Regency University reported a lower sense of belonging than their black counterparts (refer to Table 3).

**Table 3.** Means and standard deviations for reported sense of belonging by campus and race.

	Institution	
	Midwestern U	Regency U
Race		
Black	34.23 (6.31)	38.74 (5.22)
White	34.72 (4.96)	36.66 (5.46)

Note: Maximum score possible is 50. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Follow-up univariate analyses for satisfaction with diversity on campus revealed significant main effects for race ( $F(1,448) = 3.9, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ ) and year in school ( $F(1,448) = 31.99, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.06$ ). Black students at Regency University expressed the highest satisfaction with diversity on campus in the study (refer to Table 4), and underclass students were generally more satisfied with diversity on campus ( $\bar{x} = 35.20$ ; s.d. = 5.52) than upper class students ( $\bar{x} = 32.26$ ; s.d. = 5.52). Interestingly, we also found a significant interaction between year in school and institutional context ( $F(1,448) = 5.34, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ ). Upper class students at Regency University were less satisfied with diversity on campus than their counterparts at Midwestern University, but this was not the case for 1st- and 2nd-year students whose scores were comparable across school settings. Finally, there was a significant interaction between race and institutional context ( $F(1,448) = 50.17, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.09$ ). White students at Midwestern U were more satisfied with diversity on campus than black students. In contrast, white students at Regency U were less satisfied with diversity on campus than black students (refer to Table 4).

**Table 4.** Means and standard deviations for satisfaction with diversity by institution and race.

	Institution	
	Midwestern U	Regency U
Race		
Black	32 (5.97)	36.51 (4.92)
White	35.91 (4.42)	32.35 (5.99)

Note: Maximum score possible is 50. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

There were no significant racial differences in perceptions of institutional commitment to diversity, but there was a significant main effect for institutional context ( $F(1,448) = 17.12, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.04$ ) and a significant interaction between institutional context and year in school ( $F(1,448) = 3.95, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ ). On average, students at Regency University perceived more institutional commitment to diversity ( $\bar{x} = 19$ ; s.d. = 2.99) than students at Midwestern University ( $\bar{x} = 17.83$ ; s.d. = 3.22). The mean score for institutional commitment to diversity was highest for underclass Regency University students ( $\bar{x} = 19.39$ ; s.d. = 2.89). Upper class students at Midwestern University had the lowest perceptions of institutional commitment to diversity ( $\bar{x} = 17.67$ ; s.d. = 2.96).

Finally, there were significant interactions between race and institutional context on both “observed” ( $F(1,448) = 12.55, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.03$ ) and “experienced” ( $F(1,448) = 10.49, p < 0.01,$

$\eta^2 = 0.02$ ) discrimination: At Regency University, white students reported higher levels of discrimination than black students, but at Midwestern University, black students reported higher levels of discrimination than white students. Interestingly, the white students at Regency University reported the highest levels of discrimination in the study. Only the interaction was significant. There were no significant main effects. Refer to Table 5.

**Table 5.** Means and standard deviations for discrimination by campus and race.

Race	Institution			
	Midwestern U		Regency U	
	Witnessed	Experienced	Witnessed	Experienced
Black	11.68 (4.77)	11.64 (4.80)	10.9 (3.29)	11 (2.90)
White	10.37 (3.52)	10.96 (4.41)	12.66 (4.99)	13.34 (5.87)

Note: Maximum possible score is 35 and 40, respectively. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

#### 4. Discussion

Our research explored whether perceptions of diversity, discrimination, and belonging differed for white students across a more diverse student body at Regency University and a less diverse student body at Midwestern University, and as a point of comparison, we also included the perceptions of black students. Regency University had reached the tipping point, where prior research indicates that when people of color comprise about 50% of the population, white individuals may have more negative reactions to diversity [3]. Our research findings seemed to support this dynamic.

In our study, white students in the more diverse context (of Regency University) reported less satisfaction with diversity on campus than those at Midwestern University, even though upper class Midwestern University students perceived the lowest level of institutional commitment to diversity in the study. This finding is noteworthy and can be interpreted in the context of white institutional presence (WIP). As discussed in the introduction, increasing diversity on campus can challenge the four cornerstones of WIP. For instance, high levels of racial and cultural diversity on campus may make it harder to distance oneself physically and/or socially, interfering with the cornerstone of white estrangement. Moreover, students of color may not subscribe to the tenet of colorblindness and instead view their race and/or ethnicity as important aspects of identity. In turn, these students may demand spaces on campus that support, value, and even celebrate their racial cultural identities which further undermines monoculturalism in favor of multiculturalism. Institutional investment of resources in celebrating and uplifting people of color can then challenge the final cornerstone of WIP, white ascendancy, or the superior status of whiteness on campus, which is, of course, part of the goal of equity work; that is, to level the playing field.

At Midwestern University, where there were fewer students of color and potentially less of an institutional commitment to diversity, white students may have experienced less group status threat leading to more satisfaction with the level of diversity on campus. In contrast, white students in the more diverse context that had reached a tipping point experienced less satisfaction with diversity on campus and even seemed to feel disenfranchised. This feeling of disenfranchisement underlies another major finding in our study.

Importantly, in the more diverse context of Regency University, white students reported the highest levels of discrimination in the study, even higher than that of the black students at Midwestern University. This finding aligns with the work of Santos et al. [38], who also found that white students across ethnically diverse institutions perceive higher levels of discrimination than students of color. Punti and Dingel [10] describe the sentiment as “reverse discrimination.” More deeply understanding and fully addressing this sentiment seems central to the work of equity and diversity in this new decade, where



there is a growing sense of persecution of the “straight, white, male” along with sentiments of “stop the steal” [1] and “take back our country” that reverberate throughout society.

As Chris Boeskool, a contributor to the Huffington Post writes: “When you are accustomed to privilege, equality can feel like oppression” [46]. This dynamic must be addressed and underscores the importance of understanding structural racism and oppression. Feagin [11] criticizes the predominant paradigm of addressing racism by focusing on bias or individual prejudices because this approach gives rise to the idea that racism is primarily an individual problem that can be solved by not being a racist. Furthermore, as noted by Grier-Reed et al. [23], this individualistic approach is heavily based in Eurocentrism. These Eurocentric ideas are perpetuated when diversity efforts emphasize tools like the IDI, where the goal is to develop individual competence [10]. Once one has attained such competence, presumably the problem is solved. Given this line of reasoning, the problem of racism is a problem of individual bias and does not necessarily require diverting resources or investing in underserved populations. Consequently, structural and systemic interventions that do divert resources or invest in people of color to advance equity are perceived as taking away resources or “reverse discrimination” for white students.

This dynamic is laid bare in our research. At Regency University, where it had reached a tipping point of only 50% white American students, black students reported the highest level of satisfaction with diversity even as white students on that campus reported the highest level of discrimination. The mirror image racial dynamics across institutional contexts were striking. In the more white context, it was the black students who reported more discrimination and the white students who were more satisfied with diversity.

Although more racial and ethnic diversity seemed to be associated with positive perceptions of the campus environment for black students, such diversity was associated with more negative perceptions of the campus environment for white students. In fact, in the context with lower perceived institutional commitment to diversity, white students were more satisfied with diversity on campus. As previously mentioned, one possible interpretation of these findings is that white institutional presence (WIP) facilitates a normative and comfortable environment for white students, but increasing racial and cultural diversity is antagonistic to essential elements of WIP and thereby precipitates negative reactions. For example, being on a racially diverse campus with others for whom race is an important aspect of identity can make race salient and challenge the preference for colorblindness while also raising the specter of racism. Moreover, racially diverse campuses can bring white students into close proximity with people of color, countering white estrangement and resulting in a kind of culture shock or potential resentment at having to share the space.

An interesting secondary set of findings relates to differences across years in school, where 1st- and 2nd-year students were generally more positive than their upper class counterparts. First- and 2nd-year students generally endorsed a higher sense of belonging, more satisfaction with diversity on campus, and more institutional commitment to diversity than upper class students. Given our cross-sectional design, it is unclear whether this finding is simply reflective of cohort differences or whether it may reflect changes over time. It is worth noting that universities tend to invest a great deal in first-year programming that integrates diversity, where this kind of programming wanes after the first year and continues to wane as students progress further into their majors [47]. The current study indicates a need for a sustained focus on diversity at the upper class level.

Additionally, we found that students at the more diverse school generally reported a higher sense of belonging and more institutional commitment to diversity than students at the less diverse school, but perhaps unsurprisingly, these findings were nuanced by race. White students at the more diverse school reported a lower sense of belonging than their black counterparts. This was not the case at the school with more white students. These findings seem to align with previous research indicating that white students at racially and culturally diverse universities may feel a sense of “unease” and “disconnect” from their university that may potentially diminish their sense of belonging [10,38]. Considered

in the context of white estrangement, this sentiment makes sense. As Bonilla-Silva and Embrick [35] point out, white spaces that include little to no people of color just feel normal to many white Americans, given U.S. segregation patterns. In contrast, being in spaces that have reached the tipping point with people of color may not feel normal. In fact, these may be the spaces that racial socialization messages tell white students they do not belong in.

#### 4.1. Implications

Our research supports existing scholarship [3,38] and reflects larger societal trends, where we found higher levels of diversity were associated with more negative perceptions of the environment for white students. In our study, students seemed to represent a microcosm of society, wherein more diversity leads to more discontent. Put another way, when people who are not white Americans took up more space on campus or were equally enfranchised in terms of numerical representation (e.g., 50%), the white American students tended to feel more disenfranchised, which resulted in heightened perceptions of discrimination and lower satisfaction with diversity.

These findings have implications for understanding how the seeds of polarization can be planted or exacerbated by diversity efforts. In many ways, this seemed to play out on the larger stage of U.S. politics that culminated in a siege of the Capitol in an attempt to overturn the most recent presidential election. People of color have accounted for more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the growth in the U.S. electorate since the year 2000 [48]. This recent uprising based on feelings of discontent and disenfranchisement provides a stark illustration of one response to a changing, more diverse electorate. Though less stark, our study and others [10,38] echo the underlying dynamic, suggesting that as people of color become more prevalent and enfranchised, white individuals may feel less so. This raises an important and deep conundrum for advancing equity and diversity.

One crucial implication of these findings is that equity and diversity work, in this new decade of this new century, must include a structural approach to racism that also examines whiteness. Feagin [11] argues that identifying and naming the white racial frame that undergirds U.S. society is the first step to understanding, analyzing, and ultimately dismantling it. We argue that the same is true for white institutional presence (WIP). By identifying and naming how the four cornerstones of WIP are embedded in an institution, offices for equity and diversity on campus can more effectively work to address and dismantle WIP.

For too long, a hallmark of diversity work has included a focus on people of color to the near exclusion of white individuals. For example, when I (the first author) trained as a graduate student, the multicultural courses tended to focus almost exclusively on learning about people of color to advance an understanding of diversity in the field. Consequently, this type of training tended to otherize people of color, as if people of color were the only ones with a race or culture and white individuals were just normal; that is, the invisible standard to which all others were implicitly compared. In Feagin's [11] white racial frame, white individuals are the standard for what it means to be human, virtuous, intelligent, and good, and all others are assigned a race connoting that they are relatively less human, less virtuous, less intelligent, and less good.

When the white race is left out of diversity work, whiteness as the invisible standard is implicitly reified and validated, and the narrative comprising the white racial frame remains intact rather than interrupted. This is problematic because, essentially, the white racial frame is a narrative of white ascendancy that positions whiteness at the top of the social order in a way that is natural and justified. In other words, the narrative suggests that white people have more resources in society because they are more capable and hardworking. In contrast, anti-black subframes of the white racial frame cast black individuals as less hardworking or lazy and less virtuous or criminal [11,49]. Consequently, the "just world" [50] reasoning provides a narrative that people generally get what they deserve, and white people have more because they deserve more.

In our opinion, failure to center and deconstruct this narrative as part of diversity work leads to failure to provide white individuals with sufficient tools for understanding systemic and structural interventions aimed at equity. For example, Punti and Dingel [10] noted that only the students in a diverse learning community were targeted for learning activities focused on diversity and wished their white counterparts could have received the training as well. Moreover, there was tension on the campus because white students did not understand why they (the students of color) were receiving so many resources, resulting in a feeling of “reverse discrimination” [10].

Operating from a white racial frame, it is easy to see how equity work can be framed as “reverse discrimination” or even “reverse racism”, when in a very literal sense, the work of equity is often trying to reverse the inequities caused by racism. However, if the prevailing ideology is that people generally get what they deserve (as it tends to be in the white racial frame), then targeting resources to those who have less and, by virtue of their race and culture, are actually considered inferior, seems unfair. In short, from this point of view, equity work can just seem like taking away resources from those who deserve it and giving those resources to those who do not, i.e., a handout that is ultimately unjust rather than just.

Hence, we contend that without centering and deconstructing whiteness in diversity and equity work, it will be impossible to effectively address the negative dynamics that accompany increasing levels of diversity in society and on predominantly white college campuses. A structural lens for oppression that analyzes not only lived experiences of the oppressed but also the conceptual frames of those positioned as oppressors is in order, and the time is ripe for this next era for diversity and equity in higher education. This past year after the killing of George Floyd, Robin DeAngelo’s *White Fragility* [51] flew off the bookshelves, as did Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist* [52]. Now it is not enough to simply say, “I am not racist”, as there is a call to better understand how to act against racism, requiring a more complete understanding of race, including and especially white racial socialization.

Implications for research and practice include work that continues to address whiteness in education as well as white racial socialization. There is a growing field of critical whiteness studies (CWS) that can be invaluable to this effort. Interestingly, research has indicated that white individuals are less likely to flourish in the face of social inequality than black individuals [53], and this may be connected with aspects of white fragility [51]. Hence, resources and practices are needed to not only dismantle whiteness but to also support cultural health or “a sense of pride and resilience in one’s background” [23] (p. 1), counteracting white fragility while simultaneously uprooting white supremacy.

#### 4.2. Limitations

Caution is warranted when interpreting these results due to the limitations of our study. For instance, our cross-sectional snapshot of these universities does not capture changes over time. Moreover, the response rate to our survey was only 19%. Hence, the students who completed the survey or opted to participate in our research may have differed in significant ways from those who did not.

#### 5. Conclusions

With implications for research, policy, and practice, this study draws attention to the social strain that ensues from increasing diversity in higher education, where increased racial and ethnic diversity was associated with more positive perceptions for black students and more negative perceptions for white students. These findings highlight the tensions that can occur as predominantly white spaces become increasingly diverse and the need for diversity work to directly address white institutional presence (WIP) and white racial socialization, particularly the feelings of disenfranchisement that can occur for white individuals as people of color become more equally enfranchised in society. Higher education as a microcosm of society may be uniquely positioned to lead on this front. With

the potential for ameliorating social tensions and improving social cohesion writ large, it is our hope that this line of scholarship can generate lessons for the next era of diversity and equity in higher education and beyond.

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