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Revisiting the College Choice Process for African Americans:  
The Role of Racial Microaggressions

by

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Abstract

This study examines the ways in which race and racial microaggressions are manifested in high-stakes college admissions, the debate over affirmative action, and the college choice behavior of Black high school students. Students of color must grapple with, process, and cope with their perception of where they belong in higher education, which creates added stress and anxiety that can alter dreams, aspirations, and choices. While racial microaggressions in the college choice process can be daunting and oppressive, it is important to recognize the ways in which students of color create counter-spaces to respond to racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions in the college choice process needs to be better understood if colleges and universities want to create and/or maintain a positive, welcoming climate for students of color.

A decade ago, November 1996, the state of California adopted Proposition 209, an amendment to the California state constitution that proposed to eliminate discriminatory practices in public employment, government contracting, and public institutions of education. Affirmative action programs, the bill's proponents argued, gave unfair preferences to underrepresented minorities and women, misrepresenting the spirit and intent of the Civil Rights Act. While the legislation impacted all public agencies in the state, the consequences for public universities, and the University of California (UC) particularly, were immediate and dramatic. Black student enrollment declined precipitously at California's most selective flagship institutions such as UC Berkeley and UCLA. For example, in the year following the enactment of Proposition 209, Blacks made up 2.6% of the first-time students at the UCLA Law School, down from 7.4% in 1995 (Karabel, 1999). That same year, only a single Black student enrolled at UCB's School of Law (JBHE, 1999).

Recent research has demonstrated the extent to which these policy changes have limited African American eligibility for and enrollment at selective institutions (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Teranishi, 2001; Karabel, 1999; Martin, Karabel and Jaquez, 2005). A common assumption is that the decline in minority enrollment is a direct result of the normalization of standards for admissions. In other words, the elimination of race-based affirmative action coupled with increasing standards for admission meant that fewer Black students would have the grades or test scores to be competitive for admissions.

We suggest in this study, however, that the dismantling of affirmative action in California, and the associated public discussions about race and student achievement, have depressed Black student *aspirations* to apply or attend a UC institution. Specifically, the

racial discourse in the affirmative action debate and the associated discussions about race, academic credentials, and university standards, created a climate that produced uneasiness in the minds of Black students about their own academic competence and the extent to which they were qualified to attend a UC campus. Additionally, the racially-charged public debates about affirmative action, widely publicized racist incidents on campuses, and the declining number of minority enrollees at California's selective public institutions portrayed the UC system as a hostile environment for people of color (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1998; LA Times, 1998; New York Times, 1997). This study examines the extent to which the college choice process of Black students in California was affected by the racially charged Proposition 209 climate.

The following questions guided this study:

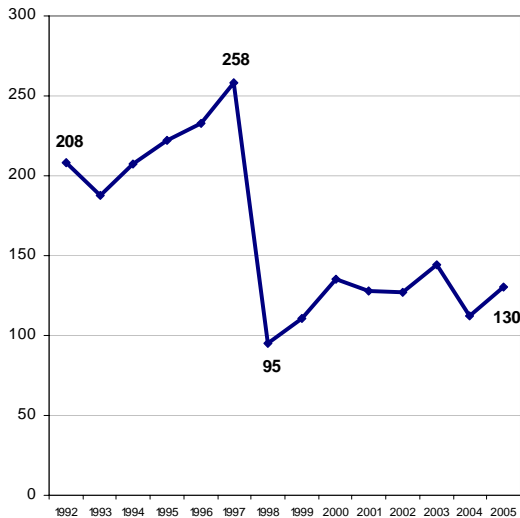
1. In what ways, if at all, are Black students' perceptions of admissions to the University of California influenced by Proposition 209 in California?
2. How, if at all, are Black students' decisions about college influenced by their perceptions of racial discourse related to affirmative action following Proposition 209 in California?
3. What coping mechanisms, if any, do Black students employ to combat any perceived notions they have about the climate and threat to their welcomeness and success in college?

This study explores the ways in which racial ideology, racism, and racial stereotypes play a role in how Black high school students shape their perceptions of opportunity in higher education during an era of high-stakes admissions and the highly-charged affirmative action debates. We draw on interviews with Black students following the widely-publicized 1997 decision to eliminate affirmative action in California to discern the extent to which Black students' aspirations were affected by the proposition 209 debates.

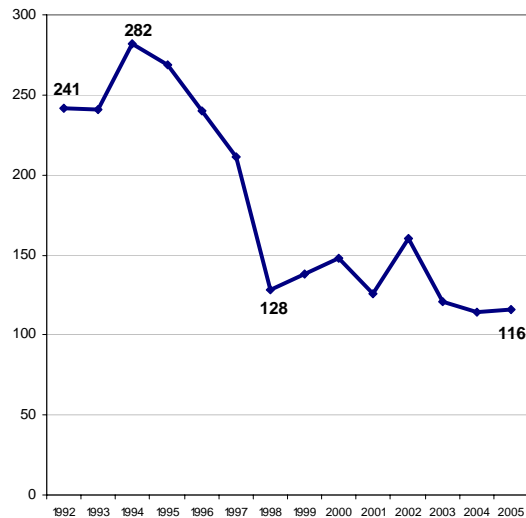
The State of Black Access to Highly Selective Public Universities in California

Few would argue that the end of Affirmative Action in California has had a tremendous negative effect on Black enrollment to the states most selective public institutions, UC Berkeley and UCLA. Following the enactment of Proposition 209, in a single year, between 1997 and 1998, Black first-time freshmen enrollment decreased 43 percent at UCLA and 38 percent at UC Berkeley (UC Office of the President, 1999). At the height of Black access to UC Berkeley in 1997, for example, there were 258 Black first-time freshmen. This number dropped precipitously to 95 in the year Proposition 209 was enacted (see Figure 1). UCLA found similar results. In 1998, UCLA had only 128 Black first-time freshmen, down from 282 at its height (see Figure 2). In 2006, the numbers have recovered slightly for UC Berkeley and have declined for UCLA.

**Figure 1:  
UC Berkeley First-Time Freshman  
Enrollment, 1992-2006**



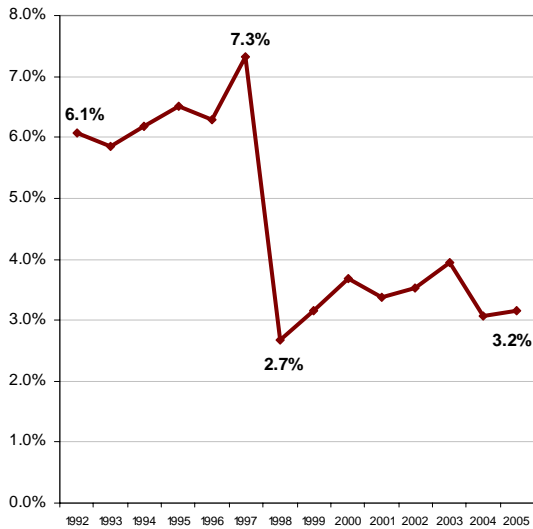
**Figure 2:  
UCLA First-Time Freshman Enrollment,  
1992-2006**



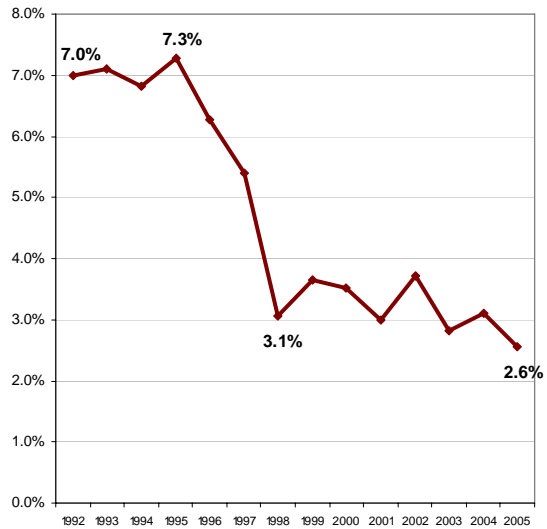
Source: UC Office of the President, 2006

The numerical decline in the number of Black first-time freshmen at UC Berkeley and UCLA since Proposition 209 has had a notable impact on the presence of Blacks on these campuses. At UC Berkeley's height of Black access, Black enrollment constituted 7.3% of the incoming freshmen class (see Figure 3). For UC Berkeley, the representation of Blacks was reduced to 2.7% and maintained a low percentage until the present day. UCLA experienced a similar trend where a steady decline in Black freshmen has reduced the proportion of Blacks from 7.3% to 2.6% (see Figure 4). The decreases in numerical and proportional representation of Black Freshmen at UC Berkeley and UCLA have largely been attributed to admissions standards and the poor academic preparation of Black students in the state.

**Figure 3:**  
**UC Berkeley Black Percentage of Total First-Time Freshmen, 1992-2006**



**Figure 4:**  
**UCLA Black Percentage of Total First-Time Freshmen, 1992-2006**



Source: UC Office of the President, 2006

We assert that there exists another set of data on the affects of affirmative action that has been overlooked, yet needs to be better understood. Specifically, what explains

the sharp decrease in African American applications following the enactment of Proposition 209? The behavior that is the focus of this study is focused on the decrease in Black *applicants* following the enactment of Proposition 209. Consider that during the period following Proposition 209, UCLA experienced a 66 percent decrease in Black applicants (UC Office of the President, 1999). UC Berkeley experienced a 48 percent decrease in Black applicants the same year (UC Office of the President, 1999). At the same time, African American applications to Claremont McKenna College, a private institution in Southern California, had an unexplainable increase from 83 to 117. Pomona College, a private institution, also saw an increase in Black applicants from 105 to 128 (JBHE, 1999). Overall, applications from Black students to private California colleges and universities were 27% higher in the two years following Proposition 209 than they had been in the year prior (JBHE, 1999).

Researchers at the Journal for Blacks in Higher Education concluded that strong Black students, who might otherwise have been accepted to UCLA or Berkeley, chose instead to apply to competitive private colleges, such as Stanford and CalTech where the debate about affirmative action was less acrid and where they perceived a more welcoming environment. Black students who might have otherwise applied to UC campuses were also choosing to apply to and attend California State Universities, local community colleges, or out-of-state colleges including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (CPEC, 1999). In essence, California created a climate that heightened the awareness of the public over selective admissions and the debate over affirmative action. We examine in this study whether or not there is a relationship between the racially charged climate of Proposition 209 and the college decision-making process of Black high school students.

The College Choice Process For Black Students

While research has demonstrated differences in postsecondary aspirations and outcomes for students from different racial backgrounds, most are limited in their ability to assess *why* and *how* race and racism influences individual student choice (Stage and Hossler, 1989; McDonough and Antonio, 1996; Perna, 2000) with a notable exception of a few studies (Allen, 1985; Freeman, 1997, Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, and Rhee, 1997). Freeman (1997) examined the ways in which Black students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds perceive and interpret barriers to attending college. The barriers Black students face include, but are not limited to the “intimidation factor”, which is the extent to which being a minority on an all-white campus is perceived as a negative experience. Freeman (1997) found that Black students had a fear of feeling isolated on White campuses, which was a substantial barrier to college access, particularly for students who had been raised in racially segregated neighborhoods. In an earlier study, Allen (1985) had similar results where Black students on White campuses experience alienation, perceive hostility and racial discrimination, and have difficulty integrating themselves into the mainstream campus culture. These results are consistent with other research that has examined the impact of a negative campus racial climate on Black students (Duster, 1992; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Penderson, Allen, 1998; Steele and Aronson, 1995).

One explanation for the influence of race on college aspirations is that institutional policies and practices at the high school and college level are themselves discriminatory. The term, “institutionalized racism,” which first appeared in Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton’s (1967) *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (pp.4-5), refers to the systematic discrimination against minorities through institutional policies,



systems and mechanisms, rather than through deliberate individual actions (Knowles and Prewitt, 1969; JBHE, 1999; Piliawsky, 1984). According to Piliawsky (1984), institutionalized racism “involves policies which appear to be neutral in their intent, but which have a decidedly discriminatory impact,” such as school finance plans that severely underfund schools in urban areas and housing policies that resist neighborhood integration (pp. 141). The immediate and sharp decline in enrollments of Black students as a result of the elimination of affirmative action at the University of California could certainly constitute a form of institutionalized racism.

However, while the theory of institutionalized racism certainly informs this study, it failed to acknowledge what the interviews with the students so clearly revealed – that the *individual* attitudes and behaviors of classmates, teachers, counselors, and others were complicit in creating an environment of “unwelcomeness” and in lowering student expectations for college success. By focusing on institutional practices, the theory of institutionalized racism fails to identify the role that individuals play in shaping, supporting and perpetuating institutional policy. Rather, we believe the following framework is a particularly useful lens for examining the ways in which race, racism, and stereotypes affect the college choice process for Black students.

#### Racial Microaggressions

Chester Pierce (1974) coined the phrase “racial microaggressions” to describe the frequent, subtle verbal or non-verbal racist insults directed at minorities. These incidents of racism, he claimed, while neither overt nor obvious, can cause high levels of stress and psychological dysfunction when suffered over a long period of time. Classic examples of

racial microaggressions include assumptions about guilt or innocence/criminal intent based on a person's race, the denial of service in a restaurant or store, or the assumption that one person's viewpoint is representative of what a larger racial or ethnic community thinks about an issue. According to Pierce, racial microaggressions "stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" and "in and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence". Additional research has demonstrated that racial microaggressions can cause significant psychological damage (Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2001; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) found that racial microaggressions on college campuses undermine interracial relationships between students of color and their White peers and professors. Racial microaggressions ultimately induce feelings of inadequacy and failure in many minority students. Solorzano et al. (2000) believe that these subtle, yet constant reminders of the racial hierarchy on campus are a key factor in how students of color perceive their campus climate. In their study, Solorzano et al. (2000) illuminate the many forms that racial microaggressions can take on a college campus: a professor's low expectations for academic achievement, undue scrutiny of minority social events by campus police, a feeling of exclusion during the formation of study groups and inaction on the part of authority figures when racial injustices occur are a few of the incidents described by students in interviews.

This study builds on previous research and adapts the theory of racial microaggressions to examine its effect on high school students in their college planning

and choice processes. The media frenzy around affirmative action surely sent signals to high school students of color about their academic promise and their place in the higher education hierarchy. These signals were reinforced by the reactions of guidance counselors, college admissions officers, policy makers, and higher education administrators. How students received, interpreted and internalized these messages should be of great importance to those of us interested in improving access to higher education for minority students. The results of this qualitative study are demonstrative of the ways that racial microaggressions affect minority college decision-making processes, particularly in an era where diversity and affirmative action have taken on negative connotations.

#### Data Source And Methodology

This study was a qualitative inquiry utilizing a purposeful sample of individual and group interviews with 36 Black students in their junior and senior years, and six counselors at two large predominately black public high schools in Los Angeles, California. The interviews were conducted in the fall of 1998, which coincides with the first admissions cycle in the UC system after affirmative action had been abolished. Through the voices of these students and counselors, we explored the ways in which Black students described their college choice process during this time of rising admission standards and the loss of affirmative action.

The interview and focus group data were a subset of a larger research project of students, parents, and counselors at over 20 high schools in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The purpose of the larger study was to examine Black and Latino students' perceptions of access, equity, and opportunity in California public higher education

following Proposition 209. The interviews with students and counselors followed a semi-structured interview protocol and were conducted at a number of public high schools in Southern California. Additional data for the current study includes a survey to collect background information on the respondents and ethnographic fieldwork that consisted of participant observations.

The students in this study included 16 juniors and 20 seniors. Twice as many female students were interviewed than male students. More than half (61.9%) of the respondents did not live with both parents. Nearly all of the students' parents had at least a high school diploma, with 22 of the students having at least one parent who attended a four-year college and eight students having parents with a graduate degree.

The respondents included in this study could all be considered college-bound. The students had academic qualifications that met the minimum requirements to attend a UC campus and all participants had aspirations of attending a four-year college. The average GPA for these students was 3.45. Nearly all of the students indicated that they had taken at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course while 19 students reported taking at least five honors courses and eight students had taken more than ten. Only two students reported not taking any at all. Almost all (86%) of the students reported taking the PSAT. At the time of the interviews, just over half (52%) had taken the SAT I exam and a third of the students reported taking the ACT exam. Three quarters of the students took a preparatory course or used a study guide for the SAT/ACT exam(s).

Both the interviews and participant observation notes were taped and written up on-site during the duration of the data collection. Interview transcripts were systematically coded in order to manage and analyze the interviews and focus groups. The first set of

codes explored themes that were classified into broad descriptive categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We then collapsed and saturated categories until the themes within different categories fit together coherently, yet retained distinctions between categories (Cooper & Kemper, 1993). Data interpretation was performed through summarization of themes that emerged from the data. These interpretations were recorded through “analytic memos” (Creswell, 1994). All analytic memos were reviewed, compared and analyzed to serve as the basis for the data interpretation.

### Results

The results focus on three ways that racial microaggressions play a role in how African American high school students in California perceived and pursued higher education following the end of affirmative action. First, we discuss how racial microaggressions are manifested in high-stakes college admissions and the affirmative action debate. Second, we examine how the climate of racial microaggressions in college admissions and affirmative action played a role in student perceptions of college opportunities. Finally, we describe the coping mechanisms that students employed to combat the negative climate and perceived threat to their welcomeness and success in college.

#### Racial Microaggressions, Selective Admissions, and Affirmative Action

As described earlier, racial microaggressions take various forms. For states where affirmative action has been under fire, such as California, the climate in which Black students pursue college has a unique racial dimension that can impact the college-choice

process. Based on interviews with Black high school juniors and seniors, we found that the debate over affirmative action created a climate in which racial microaggressions exist as forms of racist ideology and racial stereotypes. However, before we discuss the nature of these microaggressions, it is important to place them in a larger context of selective admissions.

It is important to note that respondents tended to believe that access to the UC system was extremely limited. However, when discussing admissions to the UC system, in all of the student interviews, the only two campuses mentioned were UC Berkeley and UCLA. UC Berkeley and UCLA are among the most selective institutions in the nation; however, they only represent two of the nine campuses in the UC system. Unfortunately, because the discussions of the UC system focused on these two campuses, students believed that the whole system “is real hard to get into,” or “you need to be perfect,” and “you need to have to have a 4.0 even to get your application looked at - that’s not saying that you might even get in.” One student summed it up by saying, “all I hear about UCLA and Berkeley is how many people got denied last year.”

While students indicated the UC system was extremely competitive, this was only part of their concerns about being admitted to a campus. Respondents were acutely aware of the largely publicized public debates about affirmative action. For these students, the debate over affirmative action added another dimension to their choice process. Rather than a focus on “how many people were denied” to UCs generally, they were particularly concerned about how *Black* students would be denied to UCs following Proposition 209. One student characterized this perception by stating:

You can see the differences between before they got rid of affirmative action and when they did get rid of affirmative action. The percentage is almost down to zero, really, when you look at it. There's like almost no African American students. I don't know, it's horrible to me. It makes me feel like they don't want people like me.

Student respondents also discussed their feelings about how the debate over affirmative action has made them reflect on their own academic abilities. At the crux of the argument against affirmative action is that students of color admitted under affirmative action policies are less qualified for and less deserving of admissions to selective universities. This translates into the perception that students admitted to colleges under affirmative action are taking a place of more qualified White students who are more deserving because of their academic abilities. One student explained,

I don't want to go to a college where everyone is going to look at me and think that I got in because of affirmative action and that I am not qualified to be there. All I hear about is that Black students are not qualified and they are taking the place of other students that deserve to be in their place.

There was a general perception that tokenism was a big part of affirmative action. Students were frustrated by the lack of acknowledgement of their achievements and hard work, which were overshadowed by a perception that affirmative action is the only vehicle for getting Black students into the UC system. A student explained, "I'm not a statistic. All the stuff I hear about affirmative action makes me feel like I'm just a number." In general, students did not perceive the UC system as a welcoming place. For many students, it is as if Black students, as a group, are not welcome or wanted. A female, in her

junior year said, “when you’re a minority as well as a woman, you just have like two major strikes against you.”

The climate, or the ways in which this message is delivered to students, is important to understand. Students described a number of ways that the unwelcomeness of the UC system is apparent. This included various forms of media (newspapers, magazines, and television), people in their school environment (teachers, counselors, and peers), and their family and close relatives. One student even said, “I hear about all of this on the streets.” In talking to students about the information and knowledge that was acquired from various sources, we found that there were inconsistencies about the UC admissions process and how affirmative action really works in college admissions. One student explained, “I don’t know what to think anymore. I hear so many different things from different people about applying to college. I don’t know who to believe.”

At one of the schools where this study was conducted, the college counselor was open about her opinion of the UC system and the affirmative action debate. Students would say, “the college lady, she told us it’s really hard to get into a UC” or “the college counselor told me the UC system is really difficult to get into because the UC’s standards are going up.” In some cases, students said the college counselor was discouraging them from attending a UC campus. One student said, “the counselor told me that the UC system is not welcoming for Black students because they want to get rid of affirmative action.” This guidance was often coupled with advice about other colleges to consider that do not have the same climate.

Parents and extended family were also important sources for students to discuss some of their anxiety about applying to college. Students went to parents to help them



untangle the various things they heard about affirmative action. Interestingly, this was one of the only ways for students to understand the historical context of affirmative action, which seemed to be much more salient among the older generation of African Americans. Students indicated that they felt better about what they were hearing about affirmative action when it was placed in a broader historical context by their family. One student said, “If I went to a UC, I was worried that I would be looked at badly. My mom told me about what affirmative action is and it made me feel better about it.”

#### Creating Counter-Spaces To Respond To Racial Microaggressions

Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) assert that microaggressions have real consequences. Experiencing racial microaggressions in the college choice process has an effect on how students perceive access to the UC system, and whether or not they will plan for and pursue a place in the UC system. In effect, students engage coping mechanisms to counteract microaggressions in the college choice process. Solorzano and Villalpando (1998) assert that there exist academic counter-spaces, “which allow African American students to foster their own learning and to nurture a supportive environment wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge” (p. 70).

Based on students’ perceptions of the UC system, where a UC campus may have been their first choice in the past, it was now on their “wish list.” For many students, there was evidence of the aspirations to attend a UC campus that were shattered when it came time to apply to college. For example, one student indicated that the elimination of affirmative action has changed his mind about going to a UC campus. He said, “at first I was thinking about applying but ever since the law passed I’ve seen a lot of my friends get

rejected. I'm still going to apply, but I have a higher thought in my mind that I'll be rejected than accepted." Another student said, "I don't want to go to a college where nobody wants me... so, you know, I'm going somewhere where I'm appreciated."

The perception of not being welcome at a UC because of the elimination of affirmative action was confounded by competitive admissions as well as other aspects of the choice process – particularly cost and financial aid. One student explained, "I can go to another college that will take me, you know, even give me a full scholarship or what have you." The choice process shifted for students from UC campuses to other postsecondary options. As one student explained, "it's hard to do all that just to get into college, I can go on to the next college and see what I can do over there."

Many students said that they were more focused on attending a community college or California State University campuses, rather than trying to get into a UC campus. Other students indicated that they were steering toward an HBCU or an out-of-state college. During the interviews, students mentioned 15 alternative out-of-state colleges and universities, many of which are HBCUs. One student in her junior year said that, "I prefer to go to an HBCU, where it's all minority, where they wanted me then, and they're going to want me now... It's a women's college and an HBCU. Two things in one!" When asked how she decided on going out of state, they indicated "the college lady told them it was a good thing."

Coincidentally, as the debate over affirmative action increased in California, recruitment efforts by private institutions, out-of-state colleges, and HBCUs increased according to the college counselor. The counselor explained that these were tangible options in the wake of this hostile environment for Black students pursuing college in

California. Parents and extended family also provided information about college that influenced students' choice to attend an HBCU or out-of-state college. One student talked about how family legacy played a role in choosing an HBCU to attend in the fall. He explained that "my whole family attended Black colleges and I guess I'm just attached to attending a Black college." In our study, HBCUs and other colleges became the "counter-space" for highly qualified, Black students pursuing college.

### Conclusion and Implications

This study challenges the traditional econometric, rational choice model, particularly for Black students, which is often applied to understanding the college choice process. The respondents in this study described the ways in which race and racial microaggressions are manifested in high-stakes college admissions, the debate over affirmative action, and college choice behavior. In the highly contentious college admissions game – a phenomenon in our society that has become a pinnacle for racial debates – racial microaggressions transmit racially charged meaning that become a process by which stereotype threat exists in the lives of the students of color pursuing college. More specifically, the anti-affirmative action meritocracy rhetoric, which argues that less intellectually competent students of color cannot compete with whites, constantly reminds students of color that they do not belong in highly selective institutions.

Racial microaggressions in the college choice process causes students to struggle with self-doubt and feel frustrated in a process that is otherwise difficult in itself. In essence, student respondents in this study felt the process was defeating and discouraging. Students of color must constantly grapple with, process, and cope with their perception of

where they belong in higher education. The stress associated with these microaggressions in the college choice process can alter the aspirations, choices, and dreams of students of color.

While racial microaggressions in the college choice process can be daunting and oppressive, it is important to recognize the ways in which students of color create counter-spaces to respond to racial microaggressions. Pierce (1974) asserts that each Black person “must be taught to recognize microaggressions and construct his future by taking appropriate action at each instance of recognition” (p. 520). In the college choice process, this may translate into students altering their planning or search process to include campuses that more welcoming and non-threatening. This needs to be better understood if colleges and universities want to create and/or maintain a positive, welcoming climate for students of color.

While this study was conducted with a specific context of time (following the enactment of Proposition 209) and place (California), it is important to speculate how the results have implications for college choice behavior for students of color in other contexts. For example, research should be conducted to examine if the elimination of affirmative action in other states, such as Washington, Texas, or Florida, have the same effect on Black student college choice behavior? What would be the message if the Supreme Court ended affirmative action for the entire nation?

Perhaps microaggressions, which may exist in other forms, such as gender, ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation, or religion, have similar effects on the college decision-making process of students. For example, students in this study were clearly misinformed about the cost of tuition at a UC campus and the perceived cost of

attending a UC campus was daunting. One student felt that UCs were a place for “rich people” and he worried that he would be perceived as being poor and not belonging. For some students, this could result in the choice to pursue a college that is perceived to be less costly, or less selective college. Indeed there is much to learn about how a climate of difference continues to permeate the fabric of our society.

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