



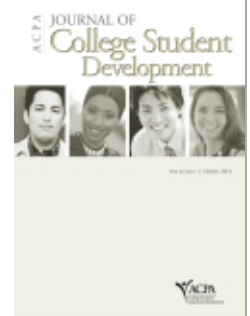
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Interracial Friendships Across the College Years: Evidence from a Longitudinal Case Study

Nathan D. Martin William Tobin Kenneth I. Spenner

Today, the student bodies of our leading colleges and universities are more diverse than ever. However, college students are increasingly self-segregating by race or ethnicity (Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007). A burgeoning literature documents the benefits of campus diversity and shows that having friends of a different race predicts greater acceptance and awareness of other groups as well as higher levels of academic self-confidence and learning outcomes (e.g., Antonio, 2004; Hu & Kuh, 2003). For many young adults, the college years serve as the first opportunity to interact with a large number of peers from different backgrounds. Yet, in order to fully realize the benefits of structural diversity on campus, it is important to understand how interracial friendships are formed and maintained across the college years.

In this study we explored factors that influence the degree to which students' campus friends are of a different race or ethnicity. We focused on relationships that are more sustained and involve greater trust than routine interactions on campus (e.g., Chang, Denson, Sáenz, & Misa, 2006), but are less intimate than best or closest friends (e.g., Antonio, 2004). Recent studies show that high school experiences are associated with having friendships that cross racial-ethnic boundaries in college (Fischer, 2008), and that having a different-race roommate can provide opportunities to form interracial friendships

(Camargo, Stinebrickner, & Stinebrickner, 2010; Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009). Additionally, Stearns and colleagues (2009) found that fraternity or sorority membership is associated with fewer interracial friendships for White students. These studies make a valuable contribution to our understanding of interracial friendship formation, although the existing literature has been limited by focusing attention on the early college years or by considering White and Black students only.

Using survey data from the Campus Life & Learning Project—a prospective panel study of students at a selective, private university in the Southeastern United States—we extend the existing literature by considering the experiences of White, Black, Latino, and Asian students, and by examining a broad range of college activities. Our results indicate that students' friendships become less diverse from the first to the fourth years, and that aspects of the residential environment, interactions with faculty, types of extracurricular participation, and the presence of alcohol at social events are significant predictors of having interracial campus friendships.

DATA AND METHODS

The Campus Life & Learning Project (CLL) followed the incoming classes of 2001 and 2002 with four survey waves administered in

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the summer prior to matriculation and in the spring of the first, second, and fourth college years. Importantly, the CLL was not intended to be representative of all postsecondary institutions, but it can be considered as characteristic of other elite private and many highly rated public universities in terms of admissions rate and yield, cost of attendance, student–faculty ratio, SAT scores of incoming students, and student retention rate.

Among all incoming students in the two CLL cohorts ($N = 3,254$), about 60% were White, 11% were Black, 8% were Latino, 15% were Asian, and 7% were multiracial or some other race. The CLL design randomly selected one third of White students, two thirds of Asian students, and one third of multiracial students in each cohort, as well as all Black

and Latino students. The full sample included 1,536 students, and 79% of sample members completed the precollege survey. Of these precollege respondents, 77% also responded to the first-year survey, 75% to the second-year survey, and 67% to the fourth-year survey. For this study, the analytic sample ($n = 996$) is restricted to precollege respondents who completed at least one in-college survey and excludes multiracial students.

The dependent variable in the analysis to follow is from an item collected in each in-college wave that asked students: “What best describes your friends on campus?”; with response choices: *all or nearly all your race*, *mostly your race*, *half your race and half not your race*, *mostly not your race*, and *all or nearly all not your race* (see Table 1). In general, Latino

TABLE 1.
Responses (% n) to “What best describes your friends on campus?”

| Group | n | All or Nearly All Your Race | Mostly Your Race | Half Your Race and Half Not Your Race | Mostly Not Your Race | All or Nearly All Not Your Race |
|-------------|-----|-----------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| White | | | | | | |
| First Year | 393 | 17.3 | 34.9 | 20.6 | 14.8 | 12.5 |
| Second Year | 378 | 34.1 | 43.9 | 15.3 | 3.2 | 3.4 |
| Fourth Year | 339 | 26.8 | 48.1 | 14.8 | 3.5 | 6.8 |
| Black | | | | | | |
| First Year | 162 | 14.8 | 21.0 | 22.2 | 21.0 | 21.0 |
| Second Year | 146 | 32.4 | 31.1 | 16.9 | 12.2 | 7.4 |
| Fourth Year | 139 | 37.4 | 28.1 | 14.4 | 10.8 | 9.4 |
| Latino | | | | | | |
| First Year | 144 | 9.0 | 12.5 | 31.3 | 31.3 | 16.0 |
| Second Year | 142 | 9.9 | 23.2 | 21.1 | 20.4 | 25.4 |
| Fourth Year | 122 | 17.2 | 18.0 | 18.9 | 22.1 | 23.8 |
| Asian | | | | | | |
| First Year | 161 | 4.4 | 13.7 | 29.2 | 30.4 | 22.4 |
| Second Year | 148 | 10.1 | 21.6 | 25.0 | 25.0 | 18.2 |
| Fourth Year | 131 | 14.5 | 17.6 | 25.2 | 26.7 | 16.0 |

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

and Asian students were more likely to have friends from a different race than were White or Black students. Across all groups, campus friendship networks become less diverse as students continued along their college career and especially between the first and second years. For example, the percent of White and Black students reporting mostly same-race friends increases between the first and second years from 52% to 78% and from 36% to 64%, respectively.

One time-invariant independent variable collected from the precollege survey describes the percent of students' closest friends from a different race or ethnicity. Other variables were collected in each in-college survey, including: opportunities to interact with students from different backgrounds in the campus residence (responses from *never* to *always*), having a roommate of a different race (*yes* or *no*), hours per week spent interacting with faculty outside of class, reports of being treated by instructors more as a group representative than as an individual (from *never* to *always*), and membership in various extracurricular activities (*member* or *nonmember*). Additionally, students were asked to describe how important alcohol was to their enjoyment of campus life (from *not at all important* to *extremely important*), and how often alcohol was present at the campus social events they attended (from *never* to *always*).

With multiple observations for each student, our strategy is to treat within-unit variation as a random effect or disturbance to account for unmeasured characteristics that may influence the propensity to form interracial friendships. Given the unbalanced panel and measurement of the dependent variable, we estimated generalized linear latent and mixed models with an ordinal logit link function. We addressed longitudinal dependence across observations by including a student-specific random intercept in the proportional odds model:

$$\text{logit}\{\text{Pr}(y_{ij} > s / X_{ij}, \zeta_{1j})\} = \beta X_{ij} + \zeta_{1j} - \kappa_s$$

In this equation, the log odds of the *i*th student in the *j*th year being in a higher response category of the outcome variable (*y*) than *s* is a function of measured student characteristics (βX_{ij}) and an overall intercept (ζ_{1j}) that varies across students. All analyses were conducted with Stata (version 12.0).

RESULTS

Table 2 presents models of the effects of selected college contacts and activities on interracial campus friendships. Due to different structural opportunities to interact with students from different backgrounds by racial/ethnic group, our strategy was to conduct analysis separately for White, Black, Latino, and Asian students. An indicator for year captures how friendship networks change as students continue along the college career. For White, Black, and Asian students campus friendships become significantly less diverse after the first year. More precisely, the odds of reporting a higher category of the dependent variable (e.g., *all or nearly all not your race* versus *mostly not your race*) decline from the first to the second year by 12% for White students and 27% for Black and Asian students.

For White, Black, and Asian students, the proportion of precollege friends of a different race or ethnicity has a positive effect on interracial campus friendships. Additionally, an alternative specification that includes a dummy variable for living in a segregated neighborhood (i.e., nearly all non-White) during high school yields a negative coefficient for Black students (OR = .59; $z = -2.03$). These results suggest that the propensity to engage in interracial friendships while in college can be encouraged by opportunities during the high school years, and that the qualities that enable a student to cooperate

TABLE 2.
Generalized Linear Latent and Mixed Ordinal Logit Models Predicting
Interracial Campus Friendships

| | Model 1 White | Model 2 Black | Model 3 Latino | Model 4 Asian |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| College Year | 0.88 * (-2.14) | 0.73 *** (-3.74) | 0.97 (-0.27) | 0.73 *** (-3.73) |
| High School Years | | | | |
| Percent of closest friends from a different racial/ethnic background | 1.01 * (1.98) | 1.02 *** (5.47) | 0.98 *** (-3.23) | 1.02 *** (3.92) |
| College Contacts and Activities | | | | |
| Opportunities in college residence to interact with students from different backgrounds | 1.42 *** (5.75) | 1.22 * (2.23) | 1.45 *** (3.46) | 1.28 * (2.34) |
| Any roommate from a different racial/ethnic background | 2.50 *** (5.62) | 2.27 *** (3.66) | 0.85 (-0.38) | 2.48 *** (3.72) |
| No roommate | 1.01 (0.06) | 2.85 *** (3.62) | 0.92 (-0.16) | 3.57 *** (3.74) |
| Hours per week spent interacting or meeting with faculty outside of class | 1.07 * (2.19) | 1.02 (0.55) | 1.18 *** (3.30) | 1.09 (1.50) |
| Viewed stereotypically by instructors in the past year | 0.98 (-0.32) | 0.82 * (-2.17) | 0.91 (-0.75) | 1.01 (0.11) |
| Fraternity/sorority membership | 0.61 *** (-3.43) | 0.80 (-0.76) | 0.43 ** (-2.99) | 2.20 * (2.34) |
| Cultural or ethnic club membership | 1.42 (1.20) | 0.46 *** (-3.89) | 0.96 (-0.12) | 0.45 *** (-3.28) |
| Community service club membership | 1.36 * (1.98) | 0.85 (-0.78) | 0.78 (-0.91) | 1.13 (0.47) |
| Sports team membership | 1.18 (1.20) | 1.62 * (2.16) | 1.05 (0.19) | 2.02 ** (2.58) |
| Other club or group membership | 0.98 (-0.14) | 0.67 * (-2.01) | 1.92 * (2.40) | 1.27 (0.95) |
| Presence of alcohol at campus social events student attends | 0.86 ** (-2.81) | 1.04 (0.43) | 0.92 (-0.97) | 1.18 ** (2.06) |
| Importance of alcohol to student's enjoyment of college life | 0.82 *** (-3.38) | 0.92 (-0.88) | 1.11 (0.96) | 1.35 ** (2.64) |
| Observations | 1,110 | 449 | 408 | 440 |
| Students | 454 | 190 | 173 | 179 |

Note. Displaying odds-ratios (z scores in parentheses).

* $p < .05$, two-tailed. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

and compete in an inclusive setting may be considered as a skill or capacity that is acquired experientially and developed over time.

Features of the residential environment are relatively strong predictors of interracial friendships for students of all racial/ethnic groups. For White, Black, and Asian students, having a different-race roommate is associated with having more interracial campus friendships. Additionally, for Black and Asian students, not having a roommate is associated with more diverse friendship networks; a plausible interpretation of this effect is that students without roommates are more likely to seek out friends in their residence hall and thus come into contact with more students of different backgrounds (Stearns et al., 2009, p. 190).

Previous studies have noted the many benefits of faculty interactions on college student development. To add to this literature, we find that interacting with faculty outside of class has a positive effect on friendship diversity for White and Latino students. Conversely, when Black students perceive that instructors treat them stereotypically, they are less likely to have interracial friendships. Favorable interactions with faculty can encourage students' personal growth and reaffirm their shared status as a member of the campus community. As a result, students may place less emphasis on peers' racial/ethnic background when building social relationships.

Students at this university were highly involved in campus life, although patterns of extracurricular membership varied considerably by race and ethnicity. In the first year, 43% of White and 42% of Latino students were members of a fraternity or sorority, compared to 12% of Asian and 6% of Black students. About 60% of Black, 50% of Asian and 36% of Latino students were members of a cultural or ethnic club, compared to 3% of White students. Activities that emphasize

common goals are associated with having more interracial campus friendships, namely community service clubs for White students and intramural or varsity sports teams for Black and Asian students. However, other activities tend to encourage same-race friendships: fraternity or sorority membership had a negative effect on interracial friendships for White and Latino students, but a positive effect for Asian students (who comprise only 6% of fraternity or sorority members). Similarly, membership in a cultural or ethnic club was associated with fewer interracial friendships for Black and Asian students.

For many students, alcohol featured prominently in their relationship to campus social life. We find that the routine presence of alcohol at campus social events can serve as an obstacle to forming interracial friendships. In line with patterns for fraternity or sorority membership, during the first year 77% of White and 88% of Latino students reported that alcohol was often present at the social events they attended, compared to 39% of Black and Asian students. Additionally, 24% of White and 28% of Latino students reported that alcohol was important to their enjoyment of campus life, compared to 7% of Black and Asian students. A more prominent role of alcohol to campus life is associated with fewer interracial friendships for White students but more interracial friendships for Asian students.

DISCUSSION

The students in this study were part of a diverse campus community, yet more than three fifths of students reported that their campus friends were mostly from their same race by the fourth year. The trend towards increasingly segregated social networks is discouraging, given the benefits of interracial friendships and interactions for a range of student development outcomes. At the same time, it is important

to note that active involvement in cultural or ethnic clubs can play an important role in the development of a student's racial/ethnic identity (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Further, marginalized student populations may rely on same-race friendships as a coping strategy in response to experiences of discrimination and perceptions of a hostile environment (Beasley, 2011). Our finding that Black students who reported stereotypical treatment by instructors had fewer interracial friendships is consistent with this explanation.

What can be done to address the decline in friendship diversity across the college years? Our results suggest several policies that could promote interracial friendships and interactions on campus. Among the most feasible would be to ensure that residence halls contain substantial diversity across buildings and floors. Instituting random roommate assignment after the first year would likely result in more frequent interracial interactions in the residential environment. Additionally, the university could provide more support for students to meet with faculty outside of class and to participate in activities that emphasize common goals, such as community service organizations and sports teams. Currently, the most popular extracurricular activities on campus reinforce homophilous social

networks. Finally, given the significant racial/ethnic differences in the role of alcohol to campus life, curbing campus drinking overall or supporting alternative social events that do not include alcohol could result in more diverse friendships on campus.

Admissions committees at selective universities consider a range of characteristics beyond academic merit, including underrepresented minority status, athletic ability, and alumni connections. To fully realize the benefits of a diverse student body may require extending preferences to students who demonstrate a commitment to diversity as well. There are a number of advantages to considering students' propensity to seek out interracial friendships in admissions. An ability to work cooperatively in an inclusive setting is a skill that is directly transferable to the college years and beyond. Further, providing a signal to students, parents, and guidance counselors that a commitment to diversity is a valued resource could provide incentives for voluntary, creative ways to promote integration at the primary and secondary school levels.

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