ACTIVATING DIVERSITY: The Impact of Student Race on Contributions to Course Discussions

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Racial diversity is understood to play an important role for all students on the college campus. In recent years, much effort has gone into documenting the positive effects of this diversity. However, few studies have focused on how diversity impacts student interactions in the classroom, and even fewer studies attempt to quantify contributions from students of different races. Using Web blog discussions about race and religion, the authors uncover the differences in contributions black and white students make to those discussions. The implications of these findings are important for scholars interested in how diversity impacts student learning, and for policymakers advocating on behalf of affirmative action legislation.

The national debate surrounding affirmative action policies in higher education has prompted numerous examinations of the effects of diversity in higher education. These studies have overwhelmingly concluded that when diversity is actively attended to, a diverse campus will lead to increased educational and social outcomes for all students (Appel et al. 1996). This research has been at the heart of two U.S. Supreme Court decisions regarding university affirmative action policies. In the initial case, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the Supreme Court identified diversity in higher education as a compelling national interest. More recently, Justice O'Connor cited the social science research directly in her majority opinion upholding the University of Michigan Law School's affirmative action plan (*Gratz v. Bollinger* et al. 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger* 2003).

Current research on diversity in higher education has demonstrated the benefits that accrue from diverse campuses: increased retention and overall satisfaction (Astin 1993; Chang 1999; Umbach and Kuh 2006), gains in cultural awareness (Chang 2002; Pike 2002), intellectual motivation and engagement (Maruyama and Moreno 2000; Gurin et al. 2002), ability to solve problems and evaluate arguments (Pascarella et al. 2001; Terenzini et al. 2001; Antonio et al. 2004), intellectual and personal self-confidence (Hu and Kuh 2003), and ability to integrate multiple perspectives (Marin 2000; Pike, Kuh, and Gonyea 2007).

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Researchers have focused their energies on establishing the existence of significant positive benefits, but these studies have largely neglected to examine exactly *how* these benefits are gained (Alger et al. 2000). Pascarella (2006) has called on researchers to uncover the processes responsible for producing the links found between campus diversity and student learning. There is a simple assumption that undergirds these findings: a diverse student body yields a broader collection of thoughts and opinions. Exposure to this wider range of perspectives leads to the kind of intellectual advancement and cognitive complexity observed in the empirical analyses (Sleeter and Grant 1994; Chang et al. 2006).

Chang (1999) and others (Smith et al. 1997; Gurin et al. 2002; Nagda, Kim, and Truelove 2004) have repeatedly asserted that the interactions that lead to this exposure cannot be assumed, but rather must be actively attended to. While sheer numbers can be counted on to increase the likelihood that informal interactions between different racial groups can happen, existing research suggests that key learning outcomes are more likely to result from intentional efforts to expose students to different backgrounds and opinions.

We concur with their assessment and believe that the college classroom offers an ideal setting to activate this diversity, that is, to make these differences salient in meaningful and observable ways. Understanding if and, ultimately, how diversity manifests itself in the classroom becomes a necessary step in fully making sense of the link between diversity and learning on college campuses. With this in mind, we sought to determine what differences could be observed in the contributions of black and white students to class discussions. We conclude by drawing on existing literature about diversity and educational outcomes to suggest ways that these demonstrated differences in course contributions might contribute to both general and specific educational outcomes.

EXPOSING STUDENTS TO DIVERSITY

In order for students' different backgrounds and viewpoints to have any effect on the educational experience of their peers, they must be present. Having a racially diverse society means very little if campuses remain racially homogenous and, more importantly, if there is little interaction among students of different races. Researchers have demonstrated the benefits of exposure to racially different peers across a broad spectrum of outcomes (see Pike et al. 2007 for a review). But how does this exposure happen? Following Gurin et al.'s (2002) approach to categorizing how students are exposed to diversity, we organize campus diversity into three types: structural diversity, informal interactional diversity, and curricular or classroom diversity.

The first category, s*tructural diversity*, is achieved when the student body is diverse numerically or proportionally (Terenzini et al. 2001). Efforts to achieve structurally diverse campuses have been the catalysts for the aforementioned court cases. Structural diversity is a necessary condition for the impact that diversity has on campus, but it is not a sufficient one. A structurally diverse campus does not guarantee interactions

between racially different peers, but it does increase the opportunities for them to occur; the effects on learning outcomes are likely indirect ones.

In an effort to demonstrate how and where the impacts of structural diversity might be felt, researchers have also looked at *diverse informal interactions* students have in residences, dining halls, and social events (Pike 2002; Hu and Kuh 2003). These scholars separately measure the self-reported frequency of students' interactions with peers who may be racially different from themselves. They argue that a campus's racial heterogeneity naturally creates informal opportunities for students to not only encounter people who are different from themselves, but to engage them as well. As students situate themselves in integrated dormitories, dining halls, and organizations, informal interactions have two kinds of outcomes: democracy outcomes and learning outcomes.

The first of these—democracy outcomes—were advocated for by early proponents of diverse campuses. They argued that interacting with racially different peers would prepare graduates for participation in a racially diverse society (Pascarella et al. 2001; Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez 2004). While valuable, that outcome was viewed by courts as a nonacceptable reason for pursuing the controversial tactics administrators used to diversify their campuses. In response, scholars began to turn to analyses of informal interactions' effects on more explicitly scholarly outcomes, such as critical thinking (Pascarella et al. 2001) and preferences for complex explanations (Gurin et al. 2002). Scholars find fairly consistent support for the relationship between these learning outcomes, and both the number and nature of students' informal interactions with diverse peers. But even these interactions cannot be guaranteed. For example, some argue that institutional conditions (e.g., being a commuter campus) hamper some possibilities for informal interactions that a structurally diverse campus might be expected to elicit (Pike 2002; Hu and Kuh 2003; Umbach and Kuh 2006). Chang (1999) has demonstrated that diversity on campus must be actively managed in order for benefits to be fully realized. Gurin et al. support this assertion, concluding that "[b]oth the theory and findings indicate that individual students benefit when they are engaged with diverse peers; however, as a society we have provided no template for interaction across racial/ethnic groups and such interaction cannot be taken for granted in the college environment" (Gurin et al. 2002:362). In other words, positive outcomes are not guaranteed simply by locating different groups of people in physical proximity to one another. Members of groups with different backgrounds must have mechanisms in place that allow them to engage in intergroup interactions.

This brings us to the third method of defining diversity, and the one that we focus on in this article: *curricular or classroom diversity*. Curricular diversity is the result of formal attempts by colleges and universities to help students engage in or learn about diverse experiences. Most research on this kind of diversity has focused on the impact of racial/cultural awareness workshops and courses explicitly designed to address issues related to racial diversity in society (Astin 1993; Springer et al. 1996; Chang 2002). These initiatives are intended to expose students to diversity and encourage them to engage in intergroup interaction with diverse peers. Proponents hope to see the kinds of democracy outcomes discussed above. Of course, some of these positive outcomes are shaped

by the self-selectivity of students who opt into these courses. In fact, some critics argue—admittedly, with only anecdotal evidence—that *requiring* students to take part in these formal interactions, which often emphasize group differences and past abuses, may lead to racial division and conflict (D'Souza 1991; Wood 2003).

ACTIVATING DIVERSITY THROUGH CLASSROOM INTERACTION

The findings of Antonio et al. (2004) and others suggest that the mere inclusion of different perspectives, and especially divergent ones, in *any* course or discussion leads to the kind of learning outcomes (e.g., critical thinking, perspective-taking) that educators, regardless of field, are interested in. Drawing on minority influence theory, their experiments showed that when a planted "novel" (not merely oppositional) perspective was introduced into discussions, other students thought about the issues in more complex ways.

In one of the few studies to address these formal interactions, Nagda et al. (2004) found that "encounter-based learning," where students from different backgrounds engage course material together in dialogue, is of utmost importance for maximizing the potential of a diverse student base. Utilizing a pretest/posttest self-assessment measure, they concluded that while curricular content was important, it was peer–group interaction that "had wider influence" in the classroom (Nagda et al. 2004:209).

In her report about the positive effects of diversity in the classroom, Marin (2000) examined classroom dynamics through qualitative data, including focus groups, interviews, and observation. She discovered that teachers were limited in their ability to model, through lectures, all of the divergent approaches one might use to analyze course content. She reports that "faculty and student participants agreed that faculty members have biases as well as limited knowledge and therefore are considered only one of many classroom participants—and not even the central one" (Marin 2000:63). Similarly, critical pedagogue Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) warns that even those classrooms where teachers hope to empower students to engage the material at a higher level, particularly around questions of race and diversity, can easily become just another location where racial diversity exists, but the benefits of that diversity cannot be activated.

Both Marin and Ellsworth argue that, in addition to a structurally diverse classroom, interaction between racially different students is necessary for enhanced learning outcomes; discussion is critical. But even in research that addresses classroom dynamics directly, there is still very little empirical examination of exactly what takes place in cross-racial interactions. For example, Marin (2000) concludes her analysis by offering a theoretical model listing cross-racial interactions as fundamental to maximizing diversity's effects. However, even this model posits the interactions as a "black box." She recognizes that interaction within a diverse student body is necessary, but she does not offer any insight into what differences students might actually bring to those interactions. Her respondents claim that "in general, [structurally diverse] classrooms expand on course content by engendering more perspectives, more complicated discussion, and more sophisticated analysis" (Marin 2000:69). These reflections do not point to actual

examples of different perspectives raised within these discussions. In the absence of actual data showing what occurred in these courses, we are left with useful—but still only anecdotal—evidence that students from different races, when present and given the opportunity to contribute to course discussion, might contribute fundamentally different perspectives or pieces of knowledge.

This article extends current knowledge about the impact of diversity on campus by demonstrating how student engagement with course material in the context of class discussion varies by race. Our work is motivated by a desire to better understand how diverse populations shape course conversations and, ultimately, course content. In the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* decision, Justice Lewis Powell, quoting Justice William Brennan (*Keyeshian v. Board of Regents* 1967), argued that "the Nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth 'out of a multitude of tongues.' " Powell used Brennan's remarks to demonstrate his strong belief that a diverse student body, particularly a racially diverse one, broadens the range of experiences and viewpoints that can be brought to bear in educating college students. Eighteen years later, the Fifth District Court of Appeals ruled in *Hopwood v. University of Texas* that using race as a factor in admissions only results in a "student body that looks different," and that assuming students represent group rather than individual differences "may promote improper racial stereotypes." They went on to say that "such a criterion is no more rational on its own terms than would be choices based upon the physical size or blood types of applicants" (*Hopwood v. University of Texas* 1996).

Clearly, some would have us believe that having black students (or, for that matter, white students) in classes only yields visible differences. We argue that these students—both black and white—actually bring different dynamics to class discussions. While it is true that one cannot assume that any individual student will differ from her peers in the background she brings to campus interactions, research suggests that in the aggregate, she and other students who share her race will tend to be different from peers who do not (Omi and Winant 1994; Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Desmond and Emirbayer 2010). In fact, research has shown that blacks and whites differ, by race, on any number of experiences, values, and viewpoints (Hunt and Hunt 2001; Eitle and Turner 2003; Bruce and Thornton 2004; Small 2007; Buchanan and Selmon 2008; Leicht 2008; Thomas, Herring, and Horton 2010; Williams and Sternthal 2010). These differences extend beyond experiences with inequality to other important social dynamics like volunteering (Musick, Wilson, and Bynum 2000), attitudes toward gender roles (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004), the formation of political ideologies (McDermott 1994), and even responses to homophobia (Pitt 2010). Not only are their actual experiences different, but their perceptions of those experiences differ as well (Fraser and Kick 2000; Orfield and Lee 2005; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Wells et al. 2009; Taylor and Mateyka 2011).

The literature postulates that these differences are important because their presence on a college campus leads to a more diverse collection of thoughts, ideas, and opinions in the classroom (Sleeter and Grant 1994; Chang et al. 2006). This article tests that

proposition by investigating the impact of a racially mixed student population on issues raised in a course discussion. Where previous studies have largely examined learning outcomes, we focus here on uncovering the often assumed, but unexamined, learning experiences that result from a diverse student body.

We know that black students, particularly those at predominantly white institutions, participate in course discussions less frequently than their white counterparts (Saufley, Cowan, and Blake 1983; Howard, Zoeller, and Pratt 2006). This dynamic changes when the discussion switches to race (McKinney 2005). In this case, white students often go silent in these kinds of interactions, "fearing they will say something ignorant or offensive and hear it from their peers" (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009:314), while black students talk more, often feeling a responsibility to "be the spokesperson for the race" (Feagin et al. 1996:91). But what happens when we hold the number of contributions constant and focus, instead, on the content of those contributions?

THE CURRENT STUDY

We find compelling reason in the existing literature to focus our inquiry here on the racialized content of student course contributions. One of the few studies to explicitly take account of race in assessing classroom interactions is Elizabeth Aries's (2008) *Race and Class Matters at an Elite College*. She points out that long after a class has finished, students recall different aspects of the same course. White students tended to hold on to the firsthand accounts of life as a minority offered by their black peers. Aries describes each recollection as a moment where white students gained a new outlook on the issues of race because they encountered experiences different than their own. Black students, on the other hand, focused on the more abstract principles their white counterparts brought to course discussions. They spoke of different "perspectives" (e.g., if racism still exists) shared by white students rather than describing any actual lived experience with race or racism recounted by their white peers. This was reminiscent of their descriptions of experiences with white professors who would raise an issue and then "argue both sides" (Aries 2008:94), presumably without taking a personal stance or reflecting on the impact of the issue on his own values and beliefs.

We expect to see this same dynamic at work in our findings: Black students will be more likely to speak of their lived experience—particularly in discussions of race—while their white peers will tend to engage these issues from a distance, rendering less self-reflexive "perspectives" on the topics. In order to explore this issue, we offer a set of research questions that build explicitly off of that expectation. In particular, we focus on peer-to-peer discussions, examining the different kinds of resources (e.g., personal experiences, academic exposure) that might be brought to bear in discussions about course content in an elective course on race. In order to test if these trends are exclusive to discussions of race, we also examine student contributions to an elective course on religion. We follow a rationale laid out by Hartmann et al. (2011) in selecting this particular combination of courses. They determined that these two social phenomena can be considered "mirror images of social organization and differentiation" (p. 336). We

believe it will be useful to see if the trends observed in the race course are reflected in the religion course as well.

First, we ask if black students are more likely than their white peers to bring up different issues or topics in these classes. Specifically, are there significant race differences in the degree to which students reference different sociological institutions (e.g., education), cultural symbols (e.g., ethnic foods), and demographic categories (e.g., white ethnics)? Second, we ask if students with different race backgrounds utilize different strategies or resources in these course discussions. For example, does race play a role in determining whether a student is more likely to draw on personal biography, other people's experiences, or news and popular media? It may be reasonable to assume that students bring different life experiences with them into the classroom, but we do not yet know if and how these experiences translate into points of inquiry. This research will help uncover those answers. To both cases, we hypothesize that differences will exist.

DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Much of the literature in this area relies on self-report data that pose a particular set of problems that have been well documented (Pascarella 2001; Gonyea 2005). In order to directly "observe" whether diversity is operating in these classrooms, we employed an interpretive content analysis of Web blog postings as our principle research method.

We use blog postings as a proxy for discussion for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that, even when "class participation" is required, very few students actually contribute to in-class conversations. While the benefits of class discussion are high, the actual opportunities for students to participate are fairly low. Most students report that they rarely actively participate in college classes, and only a few students are responsible for most class participation (Nunn 1996; Crombie et al. 2003). Actual in-class discussion is, of course, hampered by larger nonseminar classes, which these were. Most of the important interactions that students might have in classrooms, interactions that might "activate diversity," occur in smaller classes (Neer and Kircher 1989; Fassinger 1995). As these classes were 35–40 student lecture sections, a course blog was deemed the most effective way to ensure that each student contributed something to the overall content of the course.

Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) reviewed the literature analyzing online course materials, and concluded that online discussions can produce similar learning effects as in-classroom, face-to-face discussions. In general, the literature treats these electronic communications in much the same way as face-to-face discussions, while recognizing some potential benefits, such as less disruption and interruption, more students having an opportunity to participate, and more time for reflection for students who are reluctant to speak up in face-to-face interactions (Althaus 1997). We recognize, however, that the static nature of Web blogs does not allow for an analysis of in-the-moment discourse; they are not an absolute approximation of what might happen in face-to-face interactions. That said, we believe that what we discover here certainly lays the groundwork for further study of more dynamic in-class exchanges.

We generated our sample of blog postings from course assignments in the authors' sociology of race and sociology of religion courses. These courses are taught at a large private university located in the southeastern United States. About 8 percent of the 7,000 undergraduate students at the university self-identify as black U.S. citizens. The race courses were both nearly 50 percent black, and the religion course was 28 percent black.

Each student was required to initiate a minimum of 10 threads on each course's Web blog; neither threads nor responses were anonymous. It was important, both pedagogically and empirically, for students to know who they were hearing from (and talking to) in the blog discussion. In a way, this lack of anonymity also served as a prophylactic against the kinds of problems the use of electronic communications sometimes produces. Some people might be concerned that online communications have the potential to incite more inflammatory and personalized comments than face-to-face interactions. However, while it is true that online social aggression is a potential problem, particularly in informal blogs and discussion forums, much of the research examining this dynamic suggests that the culprit is anonymity rather than the medium itself (Willard 2007; Hoff and Mitchell 2009).

Threads could, and did, take many forms, from comments on the in-class discussion or lecture to links to an interesting and relevant web page. Students were not required to contribute a post on each class session. Students were free to choose when they contributed to the blog "discussion" and, as such, could contribute a blog post immediately after the in-class lecture or days afterward. This freedom allowed the blog discussion to be driven as much by students' interests in any subject as by any particular issues raised in a particular day's lecture. We randomly selected 18 black and 18 white contributors across two race courses, aiming for a little more than 50 percent of the courses' population. As the religion course was mostly (72 percent) white, we used all 10 of the black contributors and a random sample of 10 white contributors from that course. Only initial blog entries or postings were analyzed in order to avoid the inevitable conflation of the initial contributor's priorities with those of the responding contributors.[1] In all, 360 race blog postings and 200 religion blog postings were used for this analysis.

We constructed two coding schemes in order to address our research questions. As blog postings themselves were easily attributed to the contributor, we coded each posting as either white or black based on the race of the contributor. Each contributor's race was determined by answers to an introductory survey that each student took. We excluded biracial students and students who were unsure of their race category in the United States (for example, Lebanese Americans). Our second coding scheme was concerned with the subject matter and content of each posted message. Each blog posting was treated as an individual data point and assigned an identification code. That identification code was later used to connect the respondent (and therefore his or her white or black status) to each posting for the final analysis; the coding itself was race blind. The postings were then shuffled, printed out, and coded separately.

The variables that we coded were determined by the instructional priorities of the lead author, and included a number of instructional components valued and recommended by leaders and master teachers in sociology (for example, Goldsmid and Wilson

1980; McKinney et al. 2004; Persell, Pfeiffer, and Syed 2008). These concepts, experiences, or supplementary materials are deemed critical for students to fully engage the course material in sociology courses. Ultimately, their presence in the sociological classroom facilitates the learning of the material; they are less an end than a means to that end. For the analysis of the race course blog, the variables covered four major areas: mapped intersections of race with other key sociological categories or institutions; direct mentions of particular racial institutions, groups, or individuals; the invocation of supplementary materials (e.g., news stories, course readings) related to the topic of race; and personal/secondhand experiences with race. For the religion course, we used similar broad categories, substituting religion for race where appropriate. While each blog posting could contain multiple examples of each variable, we only counted the first example in our frequency count. For example, if they included two links to external news stories in the same blog posting, we only coded that posting as "1" on "Links to News-Story or Blogs."

Intercoder reliability was an important consideration in our analysis. In spite of the degree of subjective judgment required to determine whether each blog posting met the coding conditions, the initial degree of agreement between coders was 83 percent. Once any major differences between the coders had been discussed, that number rose to an average level of 96 percent agreement across all of the variables, with more (but only slight) variance in the coding of the "personal experiences with race/religion" variables.

Our primary analysis is a quantitative description of the differing degrees to which white and black students contribute various concepts, experiences, or supplementary materials in the course "discussions" about race and religion. Chi-square tests of significance are used to reveal these quantitative differences. In order to further demonstrate these differences, we will incorporate some qualitative analysis in those circumstances where the frequency of contributions is similar, but the tone of those contributions differs by white/black status.

As with any research, there are some limitations to this study that should be noted. The limitations are all structural in nature and regard the breadth rather than the depth of the data collected. First, and most important, are some issues with the sample. This research only accounts for differences between black and white students. While the different experiences of black and white students are among the most clearly seen in the literature, there certainly is value in collecting data about the impact of interactions with students of other races. Along these same lines, intragroup differences are obscured in our analysis as we focus on between-group differences. Second, we only use data from sociology courses. Our research supports the idea that sociology discussions activate the diversity that may exist in structurally diverse courses, but we cannot directly address courses where discussion is less frequently used as a pedagogical tool or where discussion takes a different form. For example, while personal experiences are an obvious source of information when developing a sociological perspective, these might be considered less useful in an introductory biology course, and thus the impact of racial diversity may be decreased. However, this is an empirical question, and there is enough evidence from our research and the research reviewed to suggest that we should not assume that racial

diversity cannot be activated in these courses. Imagine, if you will, the possible impact of having a black group member in an epidemiology course study group or a Native American lab partner in an environmental management course. If there are opportunities for interactions—via group work or laboratory work, for example—student differences can enter into both informal and formal conversations. Future studies would do well to include more discrete racial categories across a broader range of courses in order to further explore the extent to which diverse classroom interactions impact learning outcomes.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

As we show below, there are some differences between black and white students' contributions to course discussions. On more than half of the twelve variables we measured, the contributions of black and white students were significantly different. Of course, the converse of that statement is that white students are just as likely to bring up some issues (e.g., historically black colleges) as black students are. For clarity, we first describe the analysis of race course discussion; those findings are shown in Table 1. We then turn to our findings in the religion course analysis, represented in Table 2.

Intersections with Key Sociological Categories

We sought to determine the degree to which students, by race, brought up other important sociological categories in the context of these race-focused discussions. As was the case with most blog posts, the topics students chose to discuss were rarely simply a continuation of that day's lecture or in-class discussion. Each post is time and date stamped, so we could determine that students rarely contributed to the blog immediately after class. We argue that this lag between class and blog post enables student contributions to be based more on issues salient to the student rather than just being an artifact of those issues discussed in the professor's lectures or the in-class discussion.

Students, regardless of race, were significantly more likely to deal with intersections between race and social institutions ($\overline{X} = 2.5$) than they were to bring up intersections with class, gender or sexual orientation ($\overline{X} = 0.8$), or intersections with primary relationships like marriages ($\overline{X} = 1.3$). Most postings about family or dating focused on interracial relationships. This was a fairly common issue; 13 percent of the postings focused on this topic.

A quarter of the 360 race blog postings mentioned some intersection between race and an important sociological institution. While the most common institution mentioned was education, students also wrote about health, criminal justice, the economy, religion, and politics. The institutional issue raised most often in the 90 blogs mentioning race and institutional intersections was affirmative action. These blog posts, like this example written by a white student, might look like this: "It seems to me that there is a completely different atmosphere a teen can experience by either going to a predominantly white or black high school. I really don't know for sure because I did not go to either type. My high school was extremely diverse, so my experience was very different."

TABLE 1. Table Representing Mentions of Topics in Sociology of Race Course Blog, Organized by Race, Average Frequency by Each Respondent, and Number of Blog Postings

	Whites		Blacks		Total sample	
	RespAvg[a]	BlogCnt[b]	RespAvg[a]	BlogCnt[b]	RespAvg[a]	BlogCnt[b]
Intersections with key sociological categories						
Intersections with class, gender, or sexual orientation	0.9	16	0.8	14	0.8	14
Intersections with primary social relationships (e.g., family)	1.2	22	1.3	23	1.3	45
Intersections with a secondary institution (e.g., schools)	3.1**	56**	1.9	34	2.5	90
Mentions of racial cultural institutions or racial/ethnic groups						
An ethnic holiday, organization, or institution	0.9	17	0.7	12	0.8	29
Races other than black or white	3.0***	54***	1.3	23	2.2	77
White ethnics (e.g., Italians)	1.2**	21**	0.2	4	0.6	25
Invocation of supplementary materials						
Links to news story or blogs	1.7†	31†	0.9	17	1.3	48
Media depiction of race or racism	1.3	23	2.2*	40*	1.8	63
Discussions in other courses	0.3	6	0.4	7	0.4	13
Experiences with race/racism						
Secondhand experiences with race or racism	1.0*	18*	0.3	6	0.7	24
Personal experience with race or racism	0.2	4	0.9**	17**	0.6	21
Anger or other emotion about race	0.2	4	1.3**	23**	0.8	27

[a]RespAvg (Respondent Average) represents average number of mentions of the topic in each respondent's set of 10 postings.
[b]BlogCnt (Blog Count) represents the number of blogs (N = 360) that mention the topic.
Note: Significant group differences using two-tailed tests are indicated by the following: $^{†}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

TABLE 2. Table Representing Mentions of Topics in Sociology of Religion Course Blog, Organized by Race, Average Frequency by Each Respondent, and Number of Blog Postings

	Whites		Blacks		Total sample	
	RespAvg[a]	BlogCnt[b]	RespAvg[a]	BlogCnt[b]	RespAvg[a]	BlogCnt[b]
Intersections with key sociological categories						
Intersections with race, gender, or sexual orientation	2.6**	39**	1.5	23	2.1	62
Intersections with primary social relationships (e.g., family)	0.4	6	1.2	18	0.8	24
Intersections with a secondary institution (e.g., schools)	1.0	15	1.2	18	1.1	33
Mentions of religious institutions or religious groups						
A religious holiday or organization	0.5	7	0.9	13	0.7	20
Religious traditions other than Protestantism	2.9	43	3.3	49	3.1	92
Invocation of supplementary materials						
Links to news story or blogs	3.4*	51*	2.2	33	2.8	84
Media depiction of religion	0.9	13	2.3*	35*	1.6	48
Discussions in other courses	0.1	2	0.4	6	0.3	8
Experiences with religion						
Personal experience with religion	1.1	17	2.2**	33**	1.7	50
Anger or other emotion about religion	0.1	2	0.7*	10*	0.4	12

[a]RespAvg (Respondent Average) represents average number of mentions of the topic in each respondent's set of 10 postings.
[b]BlogCnt (Blog Count) represents the number of blogs (N = 200) that mention the topic.
Note: Significant group differences using two-tailed tests are indicated by the following: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

Further analysis reveals few racial differences in students' broad contributions to this content area. There were no significant differences between the number of blogs written by blacks and whites referencing class, gender, sexual orientation, or family. The difference arises in the final category: intersections between race and social institutions. About 31 percent of the white students' blog postings referenced these intersections; only 19 percent of the black students' postings did.

There was not just a difference in frequency. There was also a difference in the issues raised by the two groups. When black students dealt with institutional intersections, their blog posts were limited to three areas: politics (voting patterns), education (segregation on campus), and the criminal justice system (drug sentences, urban surveillance). White students engaged a host of issues ranging from cultural pluralism in interracial churches to racism in Greek-letter organizations. They brought up all of the issues that black students raise, and also initiated discussions about racism in college sports, patriotism in minority communities, white versus black "jock culture" in high schools, and the likelihood of serial killers to be white men.

Mentions of Racial/Cultural Institutions or Racial/Ethnic Groups

Our second set of analyses focused on student mentions of ethnic celebrations, minority organizations or schools, and particular race groups. Of the three variables we focused on, ethnic cultural institutions was least likely to be mentioned. Fewer than 10 percent of the blogs mentioned these traditions. Students rarely (less than 2 percent of the blog posts) wrote about ethnic holidays or other traditions (e.g., food). They were more likely to mention minority institutions, usually referring to historically black colleges or Greek-letter organizations. There were no significant differences between black and white students in the frequency at which they mentioned these institutions.

We did observe differences in student mentions of particular ethnic and racial groups. As our sample only included black and white students, we were especially interested in which group was most likely to bring the experiences of either nonblacks or nonwhites into the course discussion. The following blog post, written by a white student, gives an example of what a nonblack-and-white post might look like: "I was thinking about why we celebrate Thanksgiving the other day, and I'm not sure what to think. The first Thanksgiving was harmonious with local Native Americans, but in later Thanksgivings, settlers probably gave thanks for victories over those Native Americans. They helped them survive that first one. WTF?"

We also wanted to know which of the two groups would be more likely to make explicit references to white-immigrant ethnicities (e.g., Italian, Jewish). We expected more white students than black students to introduce these differences into the course discussion via the blog. The following blog post is an example of how white ethnicity might be introduced: "I am a Jewish female who grew up in a Jewish family, belonged to a synagogue and had many Jewish friends. However, it wasn't until I came to [this school] that I really felt as though I was in touch with my Jewish heritage."

Postings by both black and white authors were more likely to mention nonblacks and nonwhites than they were to mention specific white ethnics. But in both cases, white

students were significantly more likely to mention these racial and ethnic groups than their black peers. White students averaged three posts that mentioned some group other than whites or blacks; they averaged 1.2 posts mentioning white ethnics. Other than mentions of intersections between race and secondary institutions, this was the variable seen most often in the postings and, specifically, in postings written by white students. Seventy-seven blog postings mentioned races other than black or white, and 70 percent of those postings were authored by white students.

Often, nonblacks or nonwhites were included in posts that mention blacks or whites. This took two forms. The less common version was a discussion about an issue in which other groups were merely listed alongside blacks or whites. For example, in a post written by a white woman, she discussed stereotypes her friends held when considering dating men. More commonly, when students mentioned other races alongside blacks or whites, their discussions targeted issues faced by people in those groups. Whether discussing similarities between the plight of urban blacks and rural Native Americans, or similarities between whites and Asians in affirmative action policies, white students' references to other races often brought their experiences into the discussion in ways their absence in the class might otherwise disallow. That is not to say that only white students are necessary in a class. As we will show, nonwhite students' presence in classes may bring something no secondhand mentions can offer.

There were differences in the ways white and black students introduced different racial or ethnic groups into the course discussion. Not only do black students mention other races less often in their blogs, but their mentions are much more likely to take the first form. They mention these groups alongside blacks or whites, but the inclusion of the groups is not central to the point they are trying to make. For example, one black student's discussion of Tiger Woods mentioned his attempts to "prove his Asian side," but the focus of the posting was on the different demands blacks and whites placed on his decision to self-identify as one race or another. Ultimately this, like many of the posts written by black students, was essentially about the black–white divide. Conversely, white students were twice as likely to either focus their attentions on a comparison between the experiences of blacks and another nonwhite racial group, or on some issue faced exclusively by one of those racial groups. An example of the latter was a blog post about the ways "Indian art was described as crafts, rather than 'high art' " in an art history course.

Invocation of Supplementary Materials

If there is one thing that sociology instructors agree on, it is the value of incorporating supplementary materials (e.g., newspaper articles, film and television clips, music) into class lectures and discussions (Prendergast 1986; Misra 2000; Albers and Bach 2003). In our third analysis of the race blogs, we wanted to determine what, if any, differences existed in the types of supplementary materials black and white students might bring to bear in their discussions about race. We measured these contributions in three ways: offering links to news stories or other Web blogs, invoking media depictions of race or racism, and referring to discussions about race that may have occurred in other courses.

Nearly a third of the blogs invoked some supplementary material, with media depictions of a racial issue (occasionally accompanied by a video) representing more than half of these. Both black and white students contributed all three kinds of materials, with no significant differences between black and white student mentions of discussions occurring in other courses or in the average number of blog posts that included a link to a news story.

There were racial differences in the number of posts that mentioned or pointed to film, music, or television. Black students contributed nearly two thirds of these, with the average number for each black student being about two. The remaining posts were written by white students who averaged about one post that referred to the media. These posts often mentioned black celebrities (e.g., Chris Rock) or cartoons (e.g., the Boondocks), using them as both discussion starters and as examples of ways black comedians and artists are taking control of media depictions of the black community. Other posts, like this one, pointed to examples of white racist behaviors on television or in movies: "Highlights for the next episode of Real World shows one of the white roommates on the phone saying that he wants to leave the house 'because some nigger wants to kill me.' I was wondering if this is what white people really want to say when they get mad at a black person."

Experiences with Race or Racism

While the first three analyses focused on students' decisions to bring either broad sociological institutions, broad racial/ethnic categories, or supplementary materials to bear in the course discussion, this fourth analysis focuses on what is generally assumed to be the most valuable aspect of diversity in the classroom: student (and teacher) depictions of their own diverse experiences (Poll 1995; Kubal et al. 2003). In a 2008 article by Caroline Persell and her colleagues, their analysis listed "learning about the centrality of equality" as one of the nine major goals that leaders in sociology have for sociological training. In order to teach this information, these leaders used class discussion and cross-cultural exposure as their primary pedagogical tools. Just as students' encounters with experiences different from their own in residential halls are expected to lead to opportunities for cross-racial learning, Persell and others argue that these opportunities are critical in classroom settings as well. We, therefore, wanted to determine if—when given the opportunity to—students introduce different lived experiences with race or racism into the course material.

It was somewhat uncommon for students to talk about their own experiences with race or racism in the blogs. We measured this in three ways: how often students mentioned directly experiencing race-based behavior targeted at someone important to them, how often they mentioned directly experiencing race-based behavior targeted at themselves, and how often they mentioned having some emotional response (e.g., anger, frustration) about race or racial issues. The first two categories were not mutually exclusive from the third. Students may have described either a personal or secondhand experience with racism, and also expressed some emotional response to that experience. Of the 360 race blog postings, about 7 percent dealt with students' lived experience with

race or racism; that is less than one blog post for the average student. Nevertheless, for all three items related to experiences with race/racism, black and white student contributions to the discussion differed significantly.

As one might expect, white students were more likely than black ones to introduce their secondhand experiences with race or racism into the course discussion. Three quarters of blog postings about secondhand racism were written by white authors, and the average white student wrote one blog post about it. Occasionally, these were descriptions of what Frankenberg (1993) refers to as "rebound racist" experiences, experiences where white partners in interracial relationships described being treated poorly in public situations. They framed the experience as a racist rejection of their nonwhite partner, but ultimately they were affected by the poor treatment (e.g., being skipped over when seats were available at a restaurant). Usually, their descriptions of secondhand experience were more basic experiences with friends or roommates. For example, one white student wrote, "I have noticed that an alarming number of times when friends from home learn that my roommate is black, they always ask 'Does he play sports?' I don't even know how to react to this because it seems so backwards and racist. Why is there such a stereotype that if my roommate is black he must be an athlete?" White students occasionally spoke of their own personal experiences with race (e.g., being looked at strangely for knowing the words to a rap song) and also expressed some emotion about race (e.g., anger over people's assumptions that her dark features and last name marked her as Hispanic when she was, in fact, "100% Italian"). These kinds of contributions to the discussion were rare. Similarly, black students rarely spoke of secondhand experiences with race, in spite of the possibility that they could have also spoken about the experiences of Hispanic or Asian friends or partners.

Black students were much more likely to describe their own experiences with race and to express some emotion about it than their white peers. Eighty-one percent of the posts describing a personal experience with race were written by black authors. While the majority of these descriptions told of explicit experiences with racism (e.g., being followed around a store), some described seemingly more benign, but just as informative, encounters with the impact of race in their lives: "When people who haven't met me see my name on a piece of paper they often assume I am White. Jessica[2] does not seem too ethnic of a name and you see the surprise in people's faces when they finally meet me and see that I am a Black girl. There are countless times in which peers have said 'You're Black? I thought you were White all this time.' " Jessica's introduction of this experience as a blog post extends the conversation about race beyond the usual textbook examples of discrimination and inequality.

Along the same lines, when some black students described emotional responses to the way race functions, these descriptions were not always tied to an incident in which they were discriminated *against*. In fact, sometimes they described instances of positive stereotyping, where the intent of others' raced behaviors may be positive, but are experienced negatively by the student. For example, Christine—a black woman—wrote of her anger at the privilege she is perceived to receive because of her fair skin: "This whole complexion thing has infuriated me pretty much since I could understand that it

exists. First of all, I have my own psychological issues about being light that I need solved apparently. For example, when I look at my skin as compared to a beautiful dark-skinned black person, all I see is a representation of years of rape and suffering during slavery. Result? My in between color." In most cases, the emotions that black students expressed about race and racism was anger tied to a description of a discriminatory event in their or, occasionally, someone else's life. Having Christine's contribution to the class discussion is as valuable as having an Asian student's angry reflections on being treated as a model minority (see Cheryan and Bodenhausen 2000 for more on this). Her contribution brings a unique perspective to an issue that (1) may not be raised in a less diverse classroom, and (2) if raised, may tend to be viewed through a limited and one-dimensional "scholarly" lens.

Extending the Race Findings to Religion Discussions

While black and white students contribute differently to course discussions, it may be the case that these contributions are limited only to courses that focus on race as a topic. In order to examine the possibility that racial diversity's impact on the classroom extends beyond race-based discussions, we completed an analysis of a course blog for a sociology of religion course. The results of this analysis, shown in Table 2, support the findings from the first analysis. There are strikingly similar differences between black and white student contributions to the course discussion in this class.

In the analysis for the race course, we discovered that white students were more likely than blacks to write about intersections between social institutions (e.g., religion) and the key demographic category—and subject of that course—race and ethnicity. Here we find that this trend continues when the subject of the course is a social institution instead. White students were significantly more likely than black students to discuss intersections between demographic categories like race or gender and religion as a social institution. Two thirds of the blogs mentioning race, gender, or sexual orientation were written by white students, and each white student wrote an average of 2.6 blogs doing this. There were no significant differences between black and white students on the number of blog posts referring to religious holidays (e.g., Easter) or institutions (e.g., religious colleges).

We expected to see similar results in the "mention of religious groups" category as we did in the "mention of racial groups" section of the race course analysis. In a recent report for the Social Science Research Council, Smilde and May (2010) determined that more than half of the sociology of religion articles written between 2003 and 2007 focused on Christianity. Just as the field focuses on both the U.S. and Christian religious phenomena, course discussions naturally focused on these areas. It was, therefore, important to determine if whites were as likely to bring up non-Christians as they were to bring up nonblacks, nonwhites, and white ethnics in the race class. While white students were just as likely to write about other religions (2.9 postings) as they were to write about other races (3.0 postings), they were not significantly more likely to do so than their black peers. In fact, black students averaged 3.3 blog posts referring to

non-Christians. While this is not significantly different from whites, it is significantly different from the number of posts ($\overline{X} = 1.3$) black students wrote about other races in the race course.

We also see differences in the degree to which black and white students invoke supplementary materials in their contributions to the course discussion. While white students are more likely than blacks to offer links to news stories about religion, black students are more likely to refer to media depictions of religion. White students were slightly more likely than blacks to offer links to news stories and blogs about race, but the difference was not statistically significant. These contributions to the religious discussion are significantly ($p < 0.030$) higher than the contributions of their black peers; white students also contributed more links to news stories in the religion blog than in the race one. Black students were more likely to discuss the media and its handling of religion than were white students. Two thirds of the posts that invoked media depictions of religion were written by black students. Just as black students in the race class averaged about two blog posts (of 10) that spoke of the media and race, black students in the religion course averaged about two blog posts that focused on the media and religion; whites averaged 0.9 and 1.3 posts, respectively.

Where the religion course analysis most supports the findings from the race course is in the fourth analytical frame: experiences with religion. Just as they were more likely to discuss personal experiences with race and express an emotional response to race issues, black students were significantly more likely than white ones to do the same with religion. Two thirds of the blogs discussing a personal experience with religion were written by black students; each student averaged 2.2 blog posts that were personal in nature. These posts usually described either experiences with their religious community or stories about religious (and nonreligious) upbringing in their families. For example, Jonathan, a black student, described early interactions with his mother in which he questioned the restrictions on women in his Catholic church in Brooklyn: "In my church, the women do just about everything except bless the wafers and wine. I could tell that my mother seemed very disappointed by this, but yet she would take us all the time." White students averaged 1.1 blog posts in which they detailed a personal experience with religion, and it was rare for those posts to have an emotional component to them. Black students, on the other hand, were more likely than whites to indicate some emotional response—sometimes anger—about religion or religious people. For example, Charlene wrote, "I admire Jehovah's Witness [sic] for the strong persistence to convince others that their way is the right way and Muslims for their dedication to their religious rituals." As often as they wrote about anger (usually about church responses to slavery or Jim Crow laws), black students also expressed admiration or some other positive emotional response.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to the statement made in the *Hopwood* ruling, we offer evidence that increasing diversity means more than simply achieving a multihued student body. We show that students actually make different contributions to class discussions, and these contribu-

tions are significantly correlated with student race. As with any study of racial differences, we did not expect to find that whites and blacks always differed. There was some overlap: some white students contributed things that black students did and vice versa. Nevertheless, we believe that our examination uncovers ways that whites and blacks differ in the *degree* to which each group adds fundamentally different kinds of knowledge to the course discussion.

These findings complicate the usual arguments about diversity. Of the seven or eight kinds of contributions with significant racial differences, black students can be counted on to contribute in (only) two major ways: invoking media depictions of race/religion and describing personal experiences with (and emotional responses to) these social phenomena. The value of this particular set of contributions, particularly the second of these, should not be taken for granted or devalued. Students, regardless of their racial background, can be counted on to bring a wide collection of thoughts and opinions to any classroom conversation. The assumption we make when measuring diversity's value in racial terms is that it is a different *experience* that informs the different *thoughts and opinions* nonwhite students bring to these interactions. The desire for racially diverse campuses is not simply a desire to add more opinions to student interactions. The true intent is to add sets of experiences not likely shared by other students. It is at that intersection of Student A's lived experience and Student B's lived experience that the educational impact of a racially diverse undergraduate population can be seen. This article demonstrates the ways in which diversity is activated in order to leverage the differences in life experiences that we expect black students to bring to a diverse academic community.

Whether in race discussions or religion discussions, we find black students doing what Kubal and his colleagues call "bringing lived experience into the classroom" (Kubal et al. 2003:441). This finding is important in two ways. First, we see that black students expose their white peers to real-life examples of experiences they may not share, experiences that may diverge from their own backgrounds. But, maybe more importantly, we have also shown that these students do not contribute to these conversations in one-dimensional ways. They do not always discuss inequality or discrimination, and their emotional take on race or religion is not always displayed as anger and frustration. It is this expression of diversity *within* their own group that enables them to educate their white peers and their black ones alike. They also help their classmates move toward meeting an important goal of liberal arts training: knowing "how to appropriately generalize *or resist generalizations* across groups" (McKinney et al. 2004).

While it is likely the case that all students benefit from diversity, there is an implicit expectation that the primary beneficiaries of a diverse campus—in terms of learning outcomes—are its white students. The most obvious evidence of that expectation is the fact that there is virtually no research arguing that, historically, black colleges or universities would benefit from an influx of "diversifying" white students. This expectation is sometimes not so implicit. In the introduction to the American Association of University Professors' report, *Does Diversity Make a Difference*, the authors explicitly state that "perhaps the most striking and telling survey finding is that faculty members

strongly believe that racially and ethnically diverse classrooms enrich the educational experience of *white students*" (Alger et al. 2000:4, emphasis ours). Most of the focus on diversity assumes that the main contributions to the diverse learning environment are made by nonwhite students whose presence, in a predominantly white space, brings diversity.

But what about the "unique" contributions to class discussions, particularly those about race, that white students bring? In our preface to this study, we argued that white students would "tend to engage these issues from a distance, rendering less self-reflexive 'perspectives' on the topics." We found this to be true. Even though they offered different thoughts and opinions about race and religion, white students rarely spoke about their own experiences with either of these phenomena. Yet, there are ways that white students in classes with only black and white students bring the experience of other racial and ethnic groups into the classroom. They do this in a couple of ways.

Our sample presented two possible pedagogical problems. The first is a function of the actual demographics of these classes. The experiences of Asian, Native American, and Latino students were absent from course discussions because students embodying those experiences were absent from the courses. The second pedagogical problem is a function of ethnic invisibility for white students. Just as there is ethnic diversity in the black, Asian, Native American, and Latino racial groups, there is ethnic diversity among whites. Those ethnic differences are as critical to students' ability to define, give examples of, and demonstrate the relevance of differentiations by race/ethnicity (McKinney et al. 2004) as the ethnic differences between Cubans and Puerto Ricans. In discussions of race, whiteness becomes stripped of ethnicity; those experiences become essentialized as the white-American experience. If issues related to racial diversity are critical for both learning in general and learning about race/ethnicity specifically, it makes sense that issues related to ethnic diversity—in this case, white ethnic diversity—are critical as well. Therefore, determining if students made visible the experiences of white ethnics (e.g., Jews, Italians) was important in this analysis.

As we discovered, compared with black students, whites were twice as likely to cite the experiences of Asian, Native Americans, and Latinos, and five times as likely to introduce their peers to the experiences of white ethnic groups. Their low number of posts about personal experiences with race suggests that whites' discussions of white ethnic groups were not simply incidents where they mentioned their own ethnicity; they were, yet again, talking about other people's experiences. In addition, most of the blog posts recounting white students' secondhand experiences with race or racism—another contribution they were significantly more likely to make—were about friends or acquaintances who are black.

While we might assume that these secondhand accounts of other people's lived experiences would not have the same effect on learning outcomes as the kind of first-hand accounts actual Asian, Jewish, or Hispanic students would contribute, even that remains an empirical question. This is another place where the literature is woefully silent, mainly because (until now) scholars had not considered that a racial/ethnic group's physical absence in a discussion does not always mean their voice is not heard.

Certainly, these groups would be "present" in course lectures or readings. These findings suggest that their experiences may be amplified and brought to life through the recollections of other (white) students in course discussions.[3]

The impact of this research has potential ramifications both inside and outside the walls of the university. Chang et al. (2006:432) utilize findings from student surveys at the beginning and end of the college experience to suggest that racial and ethnic diversity is an "educational tool" that can be effectively utilized in the right circumstances to maximize student's educational outcomes. Gurin et al. (2002) support this assertion. This research suggests the beginning of what such a "template" might look like and where we can expect to find student contributions.

Additionally, understanding how diversity works in the classroom is crucial because, as Appel et al. (1996) points out and we discuss above, diversity must be actively attended to or managed in order for the benefits to be reaped. Unlike informal interactions that might take place in other places on campus, the formal interactions that take place in a course discussion offer the most potential for educators to extract the benefits of structural diversity on college campuses. Our findings show that black and white students engage course material in different ways, providing us with a means to begin understanding what is taking place in the "black box" of student course interactions. The findings suggest that people concerned with maximizing the benefits of a diverse classroom would do well to make space for and highlight the different kinds of course contributions made by students of different races. A next step in this research might be to better understand why the life experiences of black and white students produce these different contributions. That is an important question worthy of further study but beyond the scope of this particular article which focuses on proving what those differences might be.

The importance of this research extends beyond the academy, however. Perhaps most notably, these data offer support for advocates in the ongoing policy discussions regarding affirmative action. In her research report summarizing the extant research on the educational benefits of diversity, Shaw (2005) argued that "researching the educational benefits of diversity is necessary in order to offer evidence to judges, attorneys, and policymakers to uphold and support the consideration of race in college admissions" (p. 1). These findings go further than most in helping to fill in the gaps in our understanding of what the consideration of race might actually yield in any college classroom.

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NOTES

[1]Test cases on a small subset of our larger sample revealed that this concern was a reasonable one. We found that because students were responding to issues raised by the first discussant, the

coding of the content of each response was often shaded by the initial post. For example, when a white student spoke about Latinos in an initial post, each of the five responses—three black, two white—naturally spoke to that issue. As the initial-post analysis will show, white students are significantly more likely than black ones to *introduce* other races into the discussion. Coding all five of the responses as instances where the respondent's race shaped their contribution to the discussion struck us as an inaccurate representation of the phenomena we were trying to uncover with this analysis. This was particularly problematic when responses were analyzed separately rather than as part of a single thread. In the end, we decided to restrict our analysis to initial posts.
[2]Students' names have been changed to maintain their anonymity.
[3]Inasmuch as our research focuses on diversity at predominantly white institutions (PWI), we can only speculate on what might be missing in conversations about race on predominately or historically black college or university campuses (HBCU). If black students on PWI campuses are very unlikely to bring up the experiences of both nonblacks and ethnic whites, even in second-hand accounts (e.g., someone assuming a Hispanic friend did not speak English fluently), to what degree are those experiences being raised in discussions on HBCU campuses? Does it fall on the teacher to make these experiences "present" in the classroom? Does the lack of racial diversity—both physical and via surrogates—on these campuses stifle the kind of benefits we expect to see on racially diverse PWIs?

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