

When college diversity delivers benefits

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The benefits of race-conscious college admissions are only fully realized under certain conditions, concludes new University of Maryland-led research. To stimulate meaningful cross-racial engagement, incoming freshman classes should reflect both racial and socio-economic diversity, the researchers report.

The peer-reviewed study appears in the June 2013 issue of the *"American Educational Research Journal."* The researchers say their study is the first to test empirically how socio-economic diversity affects racial interaction in colleges.

"Social class and race not only affect who goes to college, but what actually happens to students once they begin the journey of learning together," says lead author Julie J. Park, an assistant professor of education at the University of Maryland (UMD). "Socio-economic diversity matters, not only because we need to broaden access to universities, but because it better equips these institutions to support racial diversity. A broader mix of students helps encourage more fluid interactions."

Park's team analyzed [questionnaires](#) filled out by more than 15,000 students at 102 U.S. colleges and universities on their campus interactions in and out of the classroom, including contacts with students from different races and social-economic backgrounds. Students reported as freshman and then again four years later as seniors.

The researchers found that students who reported higher levels of

interaction with those from different socio-economic backgrounds also had significantly higher levels of contacts with other races, and an overall higher level of mixing with students from diverse backgrounds.

These findings "indicate that both socioeconomic and racial diversity are essential to promoting a positive campus racial climate," the researchers write. "Racial and socioeconomic diversity, while interrelated, are not interchangeable."

Park explains that white students from lower class backgrounds tend to have more experiences with people from different backgrounds due to the racial composition of American high schools.

"For one thing, sharing similar socio-economic backgrounds provides a way for students of different races to find common ground," Park adds. "Socio-economic diversity in combination with [racial diversity](#) creates a safer, more level playing field where people can meet and learn from each other."

The study's findings have practical implications for [college admissions](#) policies.

"In order to better support both racial and socioeconomic diversity, selective and highly selective colleges need to increase efforts and dedicate additional resources toward recruiting, admitting, and supporting greater numbers of academically talented low-income students of all races and ethnicities," the authors write.

More information: aer.sagepub.com/content/50/3/466.abstract

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