

Young, gifted, and diverse: Camille Z. Charles on Black identity

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Camille Z. Charles, the Walter H. and Leonore C. Annenberg Professor in the Social Sciences, a professor of sociology, Africana studies, and education, and the director of the Center for Africana Studies. Credit: University of Pennsylvania

In the fall of 1999, Camille Z. Charles and colleagues began collecting

data from 3,924 students at 28 elite colleges and universities in what became known as the [National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen \(NLSF\)](#). Through a combination of surveys and interviews, the group checked in at regular intervals to assess students' academic, mental, and social well-being.

In a new book, Charles and her co-authors mine the NLSF to explore responses from more than 1,000 Black students, a rising generation of the professional class. "[Young, Gifted, and Diverse: Origins of the New Black Elite](#)" complicates assumptions about both a monolithic Black experience and the future of Black political solidarity.

Charles sat down with Penn Today to discuss the increasing diversity of Black college students and why it's important to stop stereotyping and start recognizing that diverse groups have diverse needs.

Charles is the Walter H. and Leonore C. Annenberg Professor in the Social Sciences, professor of sociology, Africana studies and education in the School of Arts & Sciences; faculty co-director of Penn First Plus; and director of the Center for Africana Studies Summer Institute for Pre-Freshmen. Two of her co-authors, Kimberly Torres and Rory Kramer, are Penn alumni and Charles' former Ph.D. students.

Who are the Black elite and what can be said about this group?

This new Black elite is not representative of the Black population as a whole. It is disproportionately female. It's disproportionately immigrant. It's disproportionately mixed race. And it is socioeconomically quite diverse, but it's also higher income, on average, than the U.S. Black population as a whole. The Black students who attend these more selective colleges and universities skew more in those directions than the general Black population, and we felt that was important to document.

The diversity of the Black student population at elite colleges and universities emerged in the analysis in our first book, but we weren't really able to dig into that diversity. So, you know, it was like, 'Hey, look at this.' Coming to this bigger project, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, I had always wanted to write this book. Some of that was born out of my own Black experience not being the stereotypical one.

After I came to Penn, noticing the increasing diversity among Penn students (Penn is one of the 28 schools in the project), it just became increasingly important to me. On the back end, it has implications for when this population of students goes out into the world as adults. In terms of thinking about how to support students color on these campuses, I think it's important to document and reinforce the idea that there isn't a one-size-fits-all way to do that.

In your years of teaching this material, what do students respond to? What interests and resonates with them?

They really respond to an effort to see that diversity, to challenging the stereotype that all Black students are [low-income](#) from inner cities and acknowledging that there is a diversity of background and experience.

I think that they also respond to an effort to understand why some of the intergroup differences exist around Black identity. There is some tension between immigrant Blacks and multigenerational, native Blacks, with the former tending to define themselves in terms of their national origins, and American Blacks often assuming that this is a conscious effort to distance themselves, rather than it just being the reality of their experience being raised by [immigrant parents](#) from countries where everybody's Black and where national origins are often more important.

That doesn't mean that there isn't some prejudice against American-born

Blacks, because there is. The other piece we demonstrate is that among the immigrant Blacks in our study, those negative perceptions diminish over time. The two groups come to have more in common by the end of college, despite their diverse origins. That piece definitely resonates.

Too often, social science research projects will focus on a particular subset of the Black population. And so, I think that my students really respond to just being seen and being able to find themselves in that has been important for the students.

As a Black professor teaching Black college students, how does your lived experience inform the research?

I'm a scholar of racial inequality, and my goal is to think about that with as much multidimensionality as possible. These broad categories that we use have always flattened groups and people because there is diversity among whites, there is diversity among Blacks, Latinos, Asians, whatever. Using these broad categories is convenient analytically, but a lot gets missed. When you're talking about institutions like education, that flattening has important implications. What happens is that we end up doing things to try and support this stereotypic idea of what a group needs. And in doing that, we can overlook the needs that other students have.

If we tend to fixate on an image of Black students as overwhelmingly low income, for example, we think that literally throwing money at it is the way to support the students. But in fact, not all Black students are low income, just as not all low-income students are Black. Right? And so not only are we ignoring non-Black low-income students; we're ignoring the reality that middle- and high-income Black and brown students still struggle. Their struggles just aren't financial. What do we need to do institutionally to address that?

That relates to my personal history. While I certainly am phenotypically identifiable as Black, I also learned pretty quickly that I had class advantages, that I had skin-tone advantages. It meant that my educational experience differed in some very meaningful ways from other Black (and brown) kids who attended my predominantly white schools. I recognized those differences, but I, too, struggled with teachers and other students. Sometimes my struggles were the same as those of my peers, but in some other important ways it was different.

There are different ways to both be Black and to experience one's Blackness, and they are all meaningful.

How do you hope that your work will influence the field or make a practical difference?

To the extent possible, I think we need to acknowledge and address complexity. These identities intersect, and they all matter in terms of social mobility, right? Gender matters, race matters, social class matters. We know that where you start is influential for where you end up, and we know that these things intersect and compound on one another. We know that society tends to pit immigrant Blacks against American-born Blacks and to say, 'If they just worked as hard as immigrant Blacks do,' they would be better off.

But the truth is that Black immigrants tend to come from families with more resources—higher incomes, better educated parents, and more ambition, on average—than both U.S. Blacks and the peers they've left behind in their home countries. It's selection bias that explains any differences in outcomes, not a lack of motivation or aspiration.

As a practical matter, I would like institutions of higher education to understand that we cannot treat Black students as a monolith and expect to support them effectively. Yes, a substantial portion of Black students

is economically disadvantaged and in need of significant financial support. But both monoracial and mixed-race Black students also disproportionately experience mental health challenges across social class statuses, across gender, and across immigrant statuses.

If we're only thinking about Blacks as this kind of student, we're only going to do things to support that kind of Black student. Institutions of higher learning remain generally inhospitable environments for many Black students. But, here too, not all Black students. Some don't struggle much at all—or maybe their struggles aren't primarily racial—and we need to recognize that as well.

So, some Black students will need a lot of support, some of them won't need much, and probably most are somewhere in between. Some will need financial support, others socioemotional support, and still others academic support. Some will need various combinations of these. Our institutions will serve all of our [students](#) better by really embracing and addressing the diversity within.

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