

Black student activists face penalty in college admissions

5 September 2018, by Ted Thornhill



Black students who express an interest in racial justice are less likely to get a response from predominantly white, private liberal arts colleges, new research shows. Credit: [AshTproductions/www.shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/AshTproductions)

Back when I taught at a predominantly white, selective liberal arts college, I came across a book called "[Acting White? Rethinking Race in 'Post-Racial' America.](#)"

In the book, legal scholars Devon Carbado and Mitu Gulati argue that in the "post-racial" era, white-controlled organizations prefer to hire "'good blacks' who will think of themselves as people first and black people second."

"They will neither 'play the race card' nor generate racial antagonism or tensions in the workplace," the book contends. "They will not let white people feel guilty about being white; and they will work hard to assimilate themselves into the firm's culture."

This lets an employer realize the benefits of diversity without having to deal with issues of race, Carbado and Gulati argue.

Their critique made me wonder: Do America's colleges and universities act the same way toward [black students](#) in the admissions process?

Based on a recent [nationwide study](#) that I conducted, the answer is: yes.

What I found is that historically and predominantly white institutions are more likely to embrace black students who don't profess interest in racial justice.

Preferences at play

In other words, similar to how the authors of "[Acting White](#)" argue that white employers like black employees who see themselves as people first, and black people second, my study found that white colleges like black students who see themselves as students first, and black students maybe second or third or fourth, if at all.

Why does this matter?

It matters because this is a time when issues of race and racism on campus – and [student-led efforts to fight racism](#) – continue to command considerable attention. Black students are demanding that white colleges [hire more faculty of color](#), remove racist iconography, such as [Confederate soldier statues](#) and [rename buildings that pay homage to slave owners](#).

My research suggests that black students who state that they plan to fight for these kinds of things might never get the chance to set foot on campus of the college of their choice.

Racial hostility on campus

It also matters because this is a time when black students are facing hostile environments on campus. At Yale, for instance, earlier this year a white [student](#) called police on a black student who was [napping in a common area](#). I would argue this

is a time when America's college campuses need more students eager to fight racism, not just acquiesce.

It's not that white colleges don't want black students – many do. A 2014 [report](#) showed that nearly all enrollment leaders at hundreds of public and private historically and predominantly white institutions indicated a goal to enroll "diverse students." Research shows this often means [black students](#).

However, what my study shows is that these institutions are more likely to screen out black students who vocalize opposition to racism.

I refer to this expectation of a public, post-racial posture and politics as [the color-blind imperative](#). Deviating from it can result in [negative consequences](#), especially for blacks, as such individuals are often seen among many whites as divisive, racial rabble-rousers, [as I myself have been](#).

A closer look

To investigate whether white admissions counselors were screening black high school students who don't adhere to the color-blind imperative, I conducted [a nationwide audit study](#). I began by generating and testing a list of distinctly black names, such as Lakisha Lewis and Keshawn Grant, that would signal to white admissions counselors that the students who were emailing them were black. I then created an email account for each name.

Next, I created four email templates that represented black students interested in 1) math and English, 2) environmental sustainability, 3) African-American history and culture, and 4) [anti-racism](#). In each one the fictitious student asked if he or she would be a good "fit" for the school based on their interests and activities.

I sent a random sample of 500-plus white admissions counselors at the same number of private, historically and predominantly white colleges across the United States, two of the four emails from two fictitious black high school students

approximately one month apart. I selected small or medium-sized colleges and universities from U.S. News & World Report's 2013 list of best colleges.

To identify white admissions counselors, a research assistant and I used profile pictures from college websites or websites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Only those counselors who both of us independently agreed appeared white were classified as white.

My findings revealed that white admissions counselors were, on average, 26 percent less likely to respond to the emails of black students whose interests and involvements focused on anti-racism and racial justice. The gender of the counselor and the student also mattered. White male counselors were 37 percent less likely to respond to anti-racist black students. And when black women students committed to anti-racism were emailing white male counselors, they were 50 percent less likely to receive a response.

The most extreme finding was the difference in the response rate for white male counselors responding to black women. Black women interested in environmental sustainability got a response rate of 74 percent, while those who presented the anti-racist narrative got a response rate of 37 percent. Stated differently, white male admissions counselors were twice as likely to respond to black women if they were committed to fighting environmental degradation instead of white racism. This indicates that it was not activism that depressed the response rate of anti-racist black students, but rather the focus of their activism.

Degrees of race consciousness

Noteworthy, too, is the finding that white admissions counselors were just as responsive to moderately race conscious black students who participated in culturally resonant activities, such as a jazz band and gospel choir and who mentioned the phrase "cross-cultural understanding," as they were to black students who revealed no interest in racialized involvements. This suggests, in other words, that it was not simply race consciousness, but a [critical race consciousness](#) – one that unequivocally challenges the validity of color-blind

ideology – that seemed to be unappealing to some white admissions counselors.

Importantly, the screening pattern I uncovered doesn't necessarily show that admissions counselors are purposefully discriminating against anti-racist black students, but it doesn't preclude it, either. Whatever the case may be, there are clear, concrete and immediate steps that administrators can take to curtail this racially discriminatory practice.

Policy solutions

Some may think the solution is for black students who actively fight racism to masquerade as something that they are not. One problem with that approach is it's difficult, if not impossible, to be vocal against racism and not leave evidence of one's anti-racist activism in their digital footprint. For that reason, I focus my solutions on what institutions can do, not how black students should comport themselves to fit into a white environment.

First, chief admissions administrators should familiarize themselves and their staff with the [research](#) on [intra-racial discrimination](#).

Second, schools should institute policies requiring admissions counselors to respond to all inquiry emails. Currently, the [National Association for College Admission Counseling](#) doesn't have any best practices for email or inquiry response, according to an association official I spoke with for this article.

Third, the chief admissions administrator should develop a system whereby all admissions staff emails are randomly audited for responsiveness, content and tone.

Fourth, and most importantly, as with [employment discrimination](#), there must be appropriate sanctions and consistent enforcement to maximize compliance. Such a system would incentivize admissions counselors to act in a non-discriminatory manner toward not only black students but all students committed to fighting against white racism and white supremacy.

Might this intervention come at a financial cost to colleges and universities? Perhaps. But it should not be a prohibitive one. Either way it is necessary. If some white admissions counselors don't even respond to an inquiry email due to a black student's commitment to racial justice, how can they be trusted to treat these students fairly at the application stage?

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

APA citation: Black student activists face penalty in college admissions (2018, September 5) retrieved 20 May 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-09-black-student-activists-penalty-college.html>

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