



African American Student Experiences at CU Boulder Focus Groups Executive Summary

In fall 2015, Division of Student Affairs staff members facilitated three focus groups of African American (AA) undergraduate students. Twenty students in total participated. The purpose of the focus groups was to delve more deeply into findings of the 2014 Campus Climate Survey, which asked students to reflect on their campus experience both in and out of the classroom. This executive summary highlights the most prevalent themes, sub-themes, and examples. It also includes campus-level recommendations intended to improve the climate and a list of relevant action steps already underway.

Theme 1: Transition to College

- Exploring values, beliefs, identity, and sense of self can be more challenging at predominantly white institutions
- Experience of sadness and lack of belonging during their first year on campus
- Difficulty navigating unknown cultural expectations and unwritten rules—feelings of alienation and need to filter oneself to avoid being perceived as threatening
- Students are asked to speak to the experiences of an entire population; worry they will confirm negative stereotypes about their social group (phenomenon known as “stereotype threat”)

Theme 2: Challenges within the Academic Environment

- Few opportunities for students to work with faculty who have similar life experiences and/or cultural backgrounds
 - Cultural differences that students experience in the classroom can contribute to feelings of exclusion
 - Academic content and opportunities are not sufficiently diverse and relevant to AA students’ cultural experiences
 - Instructors and peers put AA students in role of being “ambassador” for their race
- Students feel they are criticized for expressing their opinion during classroom discussions and devalued or excluded from group work
 - *“An instructor [is] meant to really nourish the voice that I had, he instead decided to cut me down.”*
- Students feel white peers are given leniency from instructors when they make inappropriate or offensive comments, while AA students must be cautious or silent so they are not perceived as “angry;” feel silenced if/when they do speak out

Theme 3: Authenticity and Conformity

- AA students feel they are not able to reveal their authentic selves. Feel like being a “character” instead of a whole person
 - *“They’re really not listening to you. They’re listening to the idea of you.”*
- Students feel forced to assimilate and conform to perceptions of peers—not able to reconcile who they really are with others’ expectations of them based on their race
 - *“I feel like I have to live in a box all the time...not truly who I want to be.”*
- Multiple layers of “blackness”—there is not only one “black community” on campus as is the perception
- Assumptions that AA students must be at CU Boulder for athletics

Theme 4: Isolation/ Only-ness

- Students experience race as the defining difference among students, which contributes to feelings of isolation and only-ness
 - Students may experience both physical and psychological isolation: heightened awareness of their race, having to expend more mental and emotional energy than white peers, being physically avoided by peers
- Feelings of isolation lead some students to rethink their decision to attend the University, or may prevent students from participating in the fullness of their college experience
- Students desire physical and community spaces in which they feel comfortable and a sense of belonging

Theme 5: Illusion of Inclusion

- Efforts to be more inclusive are offered sparingly and are not part of the ongoing systemic structure of the institution (“buzzwords” rather than meaningful change)
 - One day, one event, one-month celebrations of the culture can feel inauthentic
- AA students are sought out to be brochures, flyers and publications
 - “*You feel like a prop on the CU landscape instead of a student at this university*”
- Peer interactions: white students express discomfort with discussing racism, which limits dialogue and learning; AA students feel like they represent the shame that other people feel around racism and stereotypes

Recommendations & Action Items

- **Provide culturally relevant engagement opportunities for students of color**, beginning during their first year at CU Boulder, to connect with supportive communities and explore their identity and values.
 - Action 1: Establish a Chancellor’s advisory council for student climate related to the black/AA student experience. Council members, who will be black student leaders representing a variety of student organizations and backgrounds, will assist the Chancellor and Dean of Students by: gathering information about campus climate, sharing student perspectives, and providing valued feedback to campus leadership. *In planning stages.*
 - Action 2: Create residential learning community focused on social justice education. *In planning stages.*
- **Enhance the intercultural competence skills of faculty and staff:** create academic and co-curricular environments in which students of color feel valued, supported, and encouraged to use their cultural experiences and backgrounds to inform their learning.
 - Action 1: Campus-wide support for faculty, staff, and administrative leadership participation in the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) and associated skill-development opportunities. *Currently being implemented.*
 - Action 2: “Critical Conversations” trainings across campuses, facilitated by Human Resources. *Currently being implemented.*
 - Action 3: “Inclusive Excellence” initiative spearheaded by Office of Diversity, Equity, & Community Engagement (ODECE). *Currently moving from planning stages to actions.*
- **Establish opportunities for all students to participate in dialogue discussions** that promote intergroup understanding, and can lead to more authentic campus interactions. Additional programming opportunities might include developing an allies program and a Students of Color Leadership Institute.
 - Action 1: Engage student leaders and student organization members in intercultural competency trainings such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Student skill development and implementation of new skills contributes to campus climate change via peer leadership and role modeling. *In planning stages within Division of Student Affairs.*

- Action 2: Cultural Unity & Engagement Center partnered with Residence Life to offer the Ignite Conference, a social justice and dialogue-focused retreat available at no cost to students. *Completed 2016 retreat and planning for 2017 retreat.*
- **Inventory current facilities for multicultural student groups and resources;** expand available spaces with guidance from appropriate campus units (ODECE, Cultural Unity & Engagement Center, Center for Student Involvement, etc.).
 - Action 1: Offer dedicated organization space for multicultural student groups to facilitate engagement, community-building, and leadership development (“Student Engagement and Collaboration Area” in UMC). *Space renovation and opening complete as of 2016.*