Harper College

Institutional Climate
Qualitative Findings Report

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Introduction

Colleges and universities across the country strive to increase success rates for their students and eliminate institutional inequities between student groups. To that end, William Rainey Harper College has committed to eliminating racial and socioeconomic completion gaps by 2025 through the *Illinois Equity in Attainment (ILEA) initiative*. Over the past several years, Harper College has made significant steps toward reaching this goal by continually assessing and reviewing various areas related to institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), resulting in several reports and task forces designed to drive change. In 2018, the Latinx Task Force provided 17 recommendations to improve campus culture and enrollment for Latinx students and employees. In 2019, Harper College launched *The Basic Needs Project* to investigate how to improve basic needs support for students, and the college completed a cultural values assessment, which provided critical data on the campus culture. In 2020, consultants assessed the past five years of the former Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and provided recommendations for expanding equity to better support students moving forward. Harper College also formed the Social Justice Studies Task Force in the summer of 2020. Adding to these valuable insights, Harper College sought a qualitative climate study designed to center the voices of current students of color and better understand their experiences at the institution.

In August 2022, Harper College's Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Dr. Tamara Johnson; Director of Outcomes Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness, Deann Surdo; and English as a Second Language and Linguistics Professor Dr. Alina Pajtek partnered with NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) to conduct a qualitative study. NORC researchers conducted eight virtual focus groups with 47 total participants in November 2022. The results of this qualitative research will provide critical insights into the experiences of students of color at the institution. While the report does include students' perspectives about campus-specific recommendations for improvements to the campus climate, NORC does not offer additional interpretation or specific recommendations related to any of these findings. We hope your institution will continue collaborating with students and the broader Harper College community in translating these descriptive findings into campus discussions and action. Additionally, the study may be used in coordination with existing DEI-related information to continue informing existing and new efforts toward Harper College's goal of eliminating racial and socioeconomic completion gaps.

Methodology

At NORC, there is a long-standing tradition of commitment to scientific rigor and transparency with our clients about our methods and the results we achieve. NORC abides by the American Association for Public Opinion Research's (AAPOR's) Transparency Initiative to help ensure consistent access to methods and background information related to our research. NORC is proud to be a charter member of AAPOR's Transparency Initiative to promote methodological disclosure through a proactive, educational approach. This methodology section meets and exceeds the high reporting standards set by AAPOR.

NORC is committed to executing culturally responsive campus climate reviews, which involves centering the experiences and perspectives that are too often marginalized in educational contexts. The NORC team operationalized cultural responsiveness in each phase of this project, as outlined below. This approach included developing and refining the focus group protocol in collaboration with stakeholders at Harper College, who illuminated key areas to examine. NORC's data collection approach included focus group moderators who shared students' racial and ethnic backgrounds to build rapport and encourage students to share openly about their experiences as students of color at the institution. NORC's analytical approach reflected the perspectives of our culturally diverse research team and incorporated theoretical perspectives (described below) that are particularly relevant to both students of color and their postsecondary educational contexts. Finally, NORC collaborated with focus group student participants to allow them to review and provide feedback on the findings included in this report before sharing them with anyone at the institution.

This methodology section details all data collection and analytic procedures executed by NORC.

Student Focus Groups

After securing approval from NORC's Institutional Review Board to conduct a qualitative study, Harper College elected to collect focus group data about how students of color at the institution perceive various dimensions of the climate, including their academic experiences, sense of belonging, involvement, and other factors in students' ecosystems that contribute toward and hinder their success.

Focus Group Sample. NORC used homogenous purposive sampling, an approach that is used to intentionally select participants based on a shared characteristic, to select a sample of students who identified as students of color at the institution. NORC conducted eight virtual focus groups with 47 participants. Five focus groups included students who all shared the same racial/ethnic background (i.e., one group of Black students, two groups of Latinx students, two groups of Asian students). Three focus groups also included students of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. To protect the identities of the student participants, no demographic or other identifying information is shared in this report.

Focus Group Protocol. NORC developed the student focus group protocol (see Appendix C) in collaboration with Harper College. NORC clarified with Harper College stakeholders the purpose of the focus groups, which included the various dimensions of the institutional climate on which to focus the protocol. Additionally, the NORC research team placed Harper College's insights in conversation with theoretical perspectives (i.e., critical race theory, validation theory, and sense of belonging) related to the particular types of experiences the college most wanted to understand. NORC finalized the protocol after two rounds of review and feedback by Harper College.

The protocol consists of introductory framing (i.e., purpose of the focus group, logistical considerations, verbal consent process, and expectation setting) and 11 questions for participant discussion about: 1) students' academic experiences, 2) students' experiences outside of classes, 3) various aspects of the institutional climate (e.g., sense of belonging, involvement, and experiences as students of color), and 4) various personal and institutional factors that relate to students' experiences. Probes related to the questions elicited more nuanced information.

Focus Group Procedures. Harper College designed the recruitment messaging (see Appendix A), which was used to email prospective participants and coordinate participant registration. NORC offered a $25 gift card to either Starbucks or Speedway to incentivize students to participate. Once participants were identified, Harper College sent the confirmation emails to the students along with the Zoom link to join their virtual focus group. The email also included an informed consent form (see Appendix B) to review in advance of participating.

Two NORC researchers co-moderated each of the focus groups; one researcher facilitated the group discussion while the second researcher handled all audio-recording and notetaking. The moderator responsible for facilitating the group discussion shared the students' racial and ethnic backgrounds, and the second moderator identified as a person of color. NORC used this approach to build rapport and encourage students to share openly about their experiences as a student of color at the institution. The focus groups each lasted 90 minutes and were conducted virtually on November 2 and November 3, 2022. Each participant verbally consented to participation and to audio-recording at the outset, and each focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Focus Group Data Analyses. Using the transcribed focus group data, NORC used MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software to employ content analysis to identify, categorize, and compare themes within and across the eight focus groups. To do this, NORC used both the focus group protocol and the three theoretical perspectives described below (i.e., critical race theory, validation theory, and sense of belonging) to provide initial structure for developing a code frame to identify concepts (or codes) within the data.

We used critical race theory (CRT) to deductively code students' perceptions of their experiences as students of color at the institution (Ladson-Billings, 2021). First, the centrality of race and racism in the experiences of students of color as well as the ingrained nature of racism in educational contexts are key tenets of applying CRT to postsecondary education (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Second, many critical race theorists also explain that amidst the primacy of race and racism in organizing students' experiences, their other intersecting identities (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, ability status) and systems of oppression compound inequities across different contexts (Gillborn, 2015). These perspectives were central to understanding the experiences of this sample of students.

We used validation theory (Rendón, 1994) to deductively code students' perceptions related to their academic experiences and factors that contributed to their success at Harper College. This theoretical perspective explains that the process of validation—by institutional agents, including faculty—provides learning contexts where students feel seen, capable of learning and succeeding, and like they matter. This theory underscores that academic (i.e., taking action to help students trust their ability to learn and be a student) and interpersonal (i.e., taking action to help students adjust to college personally and socially) validation are critical in retaining and developing those whose college-related experiences are often invalidated, including students who are the first in their families to attend college and those who have been otherwise historically excluded from postsecondary education. This can be seen in the "Primary Contributors to Students' Success" and the "Sense of Belonging" sections, where students explain how faculty and advisors have supported students individually.

Finally, we used the concept of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) to deductively code students' perceptions related to their connection to faculty, staff, and peers (i.e., the types of

individuals who contribute to this), sense of support, and feeling valued at the institution. We also used this theoretical perspective to understand the impacts students perceived when they did and did not experience a sense of belonging at the institution.

As additional concepts emerged, these were added to the code frame. This code frame allowed NORC to carefully define, illustrate (i.e., with direct quotes and/or specific examples), and precisely tally the various codes in the data. Analyzing these detailed codes enabled NORC to identify key themes and compare these themes within and across the focus groups. After focus group data analyses concluded, NORC employed member checking with the focus group participants, a verification process that invited the students who participated in each focus group to review the preliminary focus group findings for accuracy before sharing with their institution. This practice helped to validate and enhance the credibility of the focus group findings we share below.

Major Findings

We organize the findings to align with the focus of this qualitative study, which was to center and understand the experiences of students of color at Harper College. To do this, we begin by describing students' perceptions of their experiences as students of color at the institution. We then describe students' perceptions about various factors that both contribute to and act as barriers toward their success at Harper College. From there, we include findings related to students' sense of belonging at the institution, their academic experiences, intercultural programming experiences, and the reasons why these students have stayed at Harper College. There are six major subsections within the Major Findings:

1. **Experiences as Students of Color at Harper College**
2. **Primary Contributors to Students' Success**
3. **Barriers to Students' Success**
4. **Sense of Belonging**
5. **Perceptions of Students' Academic Climates**
6. **Intercultural Programming**

Several students offered suggestions for Harper College, and those are **highlighted in blue** throughout this section. We conclude the report with a summary of the key takeaways and recommendations.

Experiences as Students of Color at Harper College

At each focus group, we asked students whether they had experienced any challenges specifically as students of color. Several key themes related to the students' experiences and perceptions were identified across the groups.

Combatting Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes. Five students across three of the focus groups discussed their experience combatting stereotypes related to their race or ethnicity. For example, one student shared that faculty often assume that they are in the nursing program when they say that they are "pre-med" rather than in the pharmacy program. In response to this participant, another member of the focus group shared that many people do not recognize their implicit racial biases resulting from how they were taught when they were young. Another student shared they felt their professor initially did not like them because of their young age,

gender, and because they were a student of color. Two other students explained they feel pressured to be "good at math and science" and understand technology due to their race.

Additionally, eight students shared they often feel like outsiders on Harper College's campus because many spaces are predominantly White. Four students specifically said they have not experienced any discrimination or racism on the Harper College campus; however, they often find themselves being the only student of color in a class. They describe the experience as "a sense of alienation or loneliness" and find themselves negotiating stereotype threat, requiring them to "prove to everyone else that you're smart enough or good enough to be in that classroom with them." Other students describe feeling hesitant to join in conversation with other students because they may not have the same cultural or language background.

Navigating the Campus as English Language Learners. Three Asian students discussed the challenges of being an English language learner at Harper College. Two students shared they do not join in conversations with other students because they feel like they cannot articulate themselves or express themselves the way they want to. One of the two students shared that while they do not feel that they have been discriminated against, they still feel "different" from others on campus because English is not their first language, and they are from a different country. The second student explained that "navigating through the whole system" of Harper College, even with help from an advisor, is challenging. Meanwhile, another participant in the group expressed having difficulties with their advisor due to the language barrier. They explained that they could not communicate "what I want to do in Harper College," and they can't get "good information" because of this. **The student suggested Harper College employ advisors who speak students' first languages, when possible.**

Navigating Cultural Differences. Students across the focus groups named other challenges that they felt impacted students of color specifically. Five Asian students expressed difficulties navigating cultural differences on campus. One student described a time when they and another White student got the same two questions wrong on an exam, and both chose the same wrong answers. However, the White student talked to their professor, discussed the question, and was able to get the points back on the exam. These points were not given back to the whole class though, and the participant felt that this was a disadvantage to students of Asian background who "don't really talk back to authority figures." The second student in the focus group agreed that when some students get a question wrong, they begin to "question the grading" and may confront the professor about it, but this is different for Asian students. Additionally, one student shared that they experienced "educational differences between my home country and the U.S.," explaining that they did not take several classes in high school that those in the U.S. have taken, so "it's very challenging for me to catch up with the others." Another student shared they once had to miss class for a religious trip, and while their professor was very understanding, the student assumes that this could be a problem for other students of color who participate in religious activities.

Two Latinx students explained that being a first-generation college student can also generate unique challenges for students. One student shared that they assumed any science class would "count" toward a biology degree, and they only realized their mistake after taking three classes that they did not need. The students also shared they did not recognize the benefit of "spacing out" the difficult science, math, and chemistry classes across multiple semesters, and this resulted in them having stressful semesters unnecessarily. Another student shared that "I'm seeing a lot of Hispanic/Latinx families where not many of us go to college, and not many of our

parents understand what that means or know the struggles of studying and how to overcome those challenges." **Students wished their parents received resources specifically designed to educate those with first-generation students.**

Primary Contributors to Students' Success

We asked students in the focus groups about the factors that contributed to their success at Harper College. We first asked students more broadly about these factors; next, we asked them specifically whether faculty or staff reach out to them with encouragement or if they have received any special services to assist with applying for financial aid or scholarships. Students across the focus groups reported that the three major contributors to their success at Harper College are: 1) the financial support they receive, 2) their advisors, and 3) their professors.

Sufficient Financial Support. Eleven students across the focus groups named financial support as a primary contributor to their success at Harper College. Additionally, 10 students shared that after questioning their decision to leave Harper College, they decided to stay because it remains the best financial decision, and it allows them to obtain an associate's degree debt-free, live at home while attending school, and save money. Seven participants explained that the process for applying for scholarships is very straightforward on the school's website, and there are a variety of scholarships available to students. In particular, students shared it was easy for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students and international students to identify which scholarships they qualified for. One student said that Harper College does a great job of explaining the process of applying for federal financial aid and sending out relevant information. Two other students said that the financial assistance they received related to the COVID-19 pandemic was very useful. For example, these students mentioned the COVID Relief Fund, other related funds, and the lowering of prices for students for some of Harper College's specialty programs. Another participant said the campus jobs at Harper College greatly benefited international students, who may not qualify for other types of financial assistance.

Understanding Advisors. Fourteen students across the focus groups shared that their advisors contributed significantly to their success at Harper College. One student shared that when they had trouble getting a professor to respond to their questions over email, they started to fall behind in class. However, their advisor went "out of her way" to check in with them, so they felt like they could "open up to her and let her know [their] situation." Because of this interaction, the advisor was able to help the student transfer to a new class. Another student similarly expressed surprise when an advisor "took [their] side" and helped them to register for a new class when they had problems with a professor. Other students described their advisors as a "valuable resource" who they could go to when they needed help registering for classes, accessing tutoring sessions, or applying for scholarships, among other needs.

In addition to their advisors, students also specifically mentioned Monica R. Shirley, the Coordinator for Student Diversity Initiatives at Harper College, and explained that she assisted students in finding financial support and encouraged them to attend intercultural programs. Additionally, one student explained that she "welcomed everyone" and helped students to find community on campus.

Helpful Professors. Twelve students across the focus groups shared that their professors contributed significantly to their success at Harper College. Three students shared that connecting with their professors helped them to learn more about the resources available to

them around campus, such as financial aid to cover technology fees in class. Two students shared that they felt like they could "open up" to their current and past professors; one of these students shared that their professors were extremely understanding as they experienced mental health issues. Four students described times when their professors would stay after class or offer additional office hours for students who needed help, and they offered additional encouragement when needed. One student shared that their professor helped them to improve their speaking skills by pairing them with a "speaking partner" in class, which they appreciated.
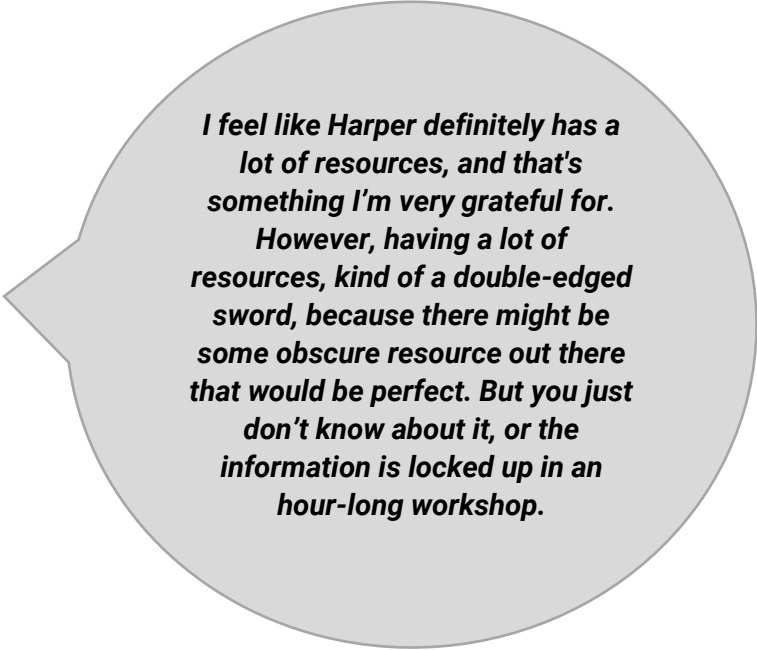
Barriers to Students' Success

In the focus groups, we also asked students about factors that served as barriers to their success at Harper College. Students' most cited experiences with barriers related to locating resources online or in person, scholarships, academics, and transportation.

Difficulty Finding Resources. Three students expressed that they had difficulty finding the resources they needed at Harper College.

Similarly, one student described the Harper College website as "overwhelming" when searching for resources, and another student shared that it takes a long time to find what you need. Additionally, one student shared that there is a way for students to make a reservation to meet with someone at the financial aid office, but they described it as "complete chaos because there's a lot of people there" trying to get the answers they need. This student described their experience making a reservation as follows:

I feel like Harper definitely has a lot of resources, and that's something I'm very grateful for. However, having a lot of resources, kind of a double-edged sword, because there might be some obscure resource out there that would be perfect. But you just don't know about it, or the information is locked up in an hour-long workshop.

> *By the time I was able to be there in person, even the person at the desk couldn't help me while I was physically standing there. And when they gave me options or choices, I had to go to different buildings, to talk to different people, to get clarity about what the person from one stop was telling me. Go to the business office and see if they can help me, and then go to another office to see if they can help me, and then try and go back my way to my advisor and see if my advisor can make sense of what the situation was.*

Scholarship-related Barriers. While financial support was among the top contributors to students' success at Harper College, students also mentioned that aspects of seeking this type of support reflected barriers. Across the focus groups, students expressed that they needed additional help from Harper College when applying for scholarships. Two students shared that while Harper College sends email announcements about different financial aid opportunities,

they would like for the financial aid office to be "more reachable" and provide a checklist for students. For example, one student shared, "That way, you'll not only be able to know how to do it but also be sure on whether or not you've completed it."

Another student shared that you must be proactive in order to access Harper College's scholarship-related resources on campus, "You have to ask many people what kind of resources they have and what kind of help they offer." Two other students also felt that they could have received more support from Harper College. One of these students shared they were told by a staff member to apply for all the scholarships on the Harper College website, and this was the extent of the help they received. The other student shared that when they toured Harper College initially, they believed that there were ample scholarship opportunities for students; however, they now feel like these scholarships are not easily accessible to students due to the complexity of the Harper College website. **Students in the focus groups suggested that Harper College create a physical and/or virtual space where students can easily find the resources they need on a variety of topics.** Students shared that this would be especially helpful when trying to access Harper College's existing resources for scholarship opportunities and financial assistance.

Other students shared that they would like to see more scholarship opportunities in general. One student shared that since they do not qualify for federal financial aid programs and were unable to find other scholarship opportunities, they had to "go virtual because I had to get another job to make ends meet." Other students shared that they would like to see more opportunities for merit-based scholarships or scholarships for students outside the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

Barriers Related to Students' Academic Classes. Eleven students across the focus groups highlighted barriers related to their academic classes. One student had difficulties finding accurate class descriptions online. Six students had difficulty registering for classes, and they specifically mentioned the classes filling up quickly. Students shared that there are not enough classes for the students, and this specifically affects new students who are trying to register for classes.

Additionally, one student shared that they chose to attend Harper College because they experience severe anxiety in school settings and could take classes virtually from their home. However, this student and two others explained that not all professors are understanding about continuing virtual classes. In addition to challenges with virtual learning contexts, one student cited a lack of available academic help beyond the writing program. The most frequently cited reason to leave Harper College is that the classes are too difficult—especially when balancing a job and family responsibilities. Four students shared that they considered leaving the institution after they started to struggle in their classes, and one participant shared that the experience caused them to question whether they belong there.

Transportation Barriers. Five students across the focus groups shared that they had difficulty getting to class and campus events because they did not have a car. Two students suggested **adding additional bus routes for students; another student suggested adding additional bike lanes. Students also shared that while the Lyft program at Harper College is helpful, students need more than eight rides per month because "that's not really feasible if you need a ride every single day."**

Sense of Belonging

Students in the focus groups were asked to describe specific types of groups, individuals, and other institutional aspects that have contributed to a sense of belonging at Harper College. We describe below findings related to the specific types of individuals and contexts at the institution that students described.

Individuals Who Contribute to Students' Sense of Belonging. Across the focus groups, 14 students shared that student-led organizations and student clubs were the primary source of their sense of belonging on campus. The following clubs were named specifically: Latinos Unidos, Black Student Union (BSU), International Students Club, Chemistry Club, and Business and Entrepreneurship Club. Participants also mentioned the students at the Academic Support Center in this discussion. One student described the impact of the student groups on campus. Like intercultural programming, students view these organizations and groups as a way to build community and network with other students and professors. In fact, two students drew a direct comparison between the experience of attending intercultural events with their experience attending student groups. Six other students also shared that seeing classmates in person created a sense of belonging on campus.

Relatedly, four other students identified other campus programming as contributing to their sense of belonging. Two students shared that campus events such as the movie nights, pumpkin carving, and dances also promote socialization and "build a sense of community." Another student shared that joining extracurricular activities helped them to feel a part of the community.

> *I think I would agree with everyone about what an impact student groups make and having those leaders putting on these different groups like the first participant said. The advisor for Latinos [Unidos], and you know she's very supporting, very welcoming, and having that support system, that means you have someone to look for in case you ever need anything; it means you have that guide, and you have someone that understands your needs, too. But also, I feel like I understand the set of students who just come to classes and then leave immediately after, because in their head they're just going to get a degree. They're not there to interact. I feel like that stigma at community colleges is still very much relevant, where, like there isn't much of a "college life" and that there isn't much to do, when there are so many different opportunities available for students and those student groups are there for them.*

Virtual Environment Negatively Influencing Students' Sense of Belonging. Three students identified virtual classes as the most significant contributor to them not feeling a sense of belonging at the institution, which was the most cited reason across the focus groups. One participant shared that it is difficult to form a connection with classmates and professors when they feel "restricted by a camera." Relatedly, another student shared that they typically feel a sense of belonging from their professors who are very "friendly" and "inclusive," along with their classmates; however, this has been difficult because the student is taking all online classes. Still, another student agreed that student-led clubs and organizations generate a sense of

belonging on campus but that it feels difficult to "adjust back after the pandemic," and there's "little support in trying to help students as we adjust."

Perception That Some Harper College Students Are Not Interested in a Sense of Belonging. Two students shared that they have found it difficult to connect with other students on campus, who are seemingly not interested in building community. One student explained that since Harper College is a "commuter school," it's difficult to connect with others outside of class. Another student shared that it's difficult to invest in the community at Harper College because many students are only on campus for two years, and it feels "very temporary." Two other students shared that students at Harper College typically spend time with their high school friends and are not interested in building community on campus.

Perceptions of Students' Academic Climates

Students in the focus groups were asked about several aspects related to their academic experiences at the institution, including any culturally inclusive teaching they have observed, the contributions of faculty of color, their experiences with predominantly White faculty members, and the use of technology in teaching and learning contexts. We present the major themes related to these areas below.

Culturally Inclusive Teaching on Campus. Across all focus groups, students continually demonstrated ways that their professors adopted culturally inclusive teaching methods into their classes. Nineteen students could describe specific instances when professors incorporated culturally inclusive materials, primarily in their English, Sociology, and Speech classes. Seven students shared instances when their professors incorporated social issues into their classes, including discussions on race and racism, the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, the role of police officers, and research about homelessness. Fourteen students shared that they had professors who taught their courses in culturally sensitive ways, and seven students expressed that these teaching practices caused them to feel comfortable, supported, understood, heard, and cared about.

Four students expressed that they did not experience culturally inclusive teaching in certain STEM classes, but they also felt that culturally inclusive materials or discussions were "not relevant," or they believed that "there's no real way to incorporate different assignments that have to do with culture" in these spaces.

Areas for Improvement in Culturally Inclusive Teaching. While the students agreed that culturally diverse materials and teaching practices were included in many of their classes, 12 students identified areas for improvement in culturally inclusive teaching at Harper College. First, students identified times when professors taught culturally diverse materials in inappropriate ways. For example, one student described an instance in their intercultural communications class

> ***When you do experience microaggressions, it's hard to know who to turn to, because everyone around you is White.***

when the White professor questioned their Japanese identity, causing them to not feel "Japanese enough." The student explained," [The] professor went on to quiz me on the material

in the class that wasn't accurate." Another student shared that a professor created an assignment where students would write an encyclopedia for the different human races, and the students had to answer "What are the pros and cons of being seen as a Black woman? What are the pros and cons of being Hispanic?" This student felt that the assignment was inappropriate. Three other students went on to describe professors who "did a good job representing a bunch of different cultures throughout [the class]. We did different sections with different cultures." However, one student explained that they sometimes viewed their professors' instruction as "kind of outdated, and honestly, it was kind of like the teacher was trying to initiate his own beliefs in the class." The student further explained that "sometimes I didn't really agree with everything he said, and it just made me feel sometimes uncomfortable to come to class and listen to stuff that I don't personally believe in." Relatedly, another student shared, "The [class instruction] feels as though we are looking at a species," and "it feels like a zoo." **Students at Harper College recommend that White professors receive additional resources and instruction on *how* to implement culturally diverse materials in a culturally sensitive way.**

Students also shared that their professors often taught culturally diverse materials incorrectly. Two students described classes where they felt like the culturally diverse authors and historical figures were misrepresented and unfairly criticized. One of these students shared that they eventually dropped a class focused on LGBTQ filmmakers because "all the assignments were about critiquing the filmmakers, and it seems to put the filmmakers in a negative light." The student wished that the class had been more balanced with discussions around the various challenges that LGBTQ filmmakers faced at the time. Another student shared that while they had excellent English professors who successfully incorporated culturally inclusive materials in class, they described their class on world religions in the following way:

> *[The class is] very much from a Western perspective. So instead of ... [looking] at the primary text, we're going to instead read analyses by Western scholars, which I think is quite limiting because we're not getting to look at actual primary texts and the perspectives from the people that are part of that religion.*

Relatedly, three other students felt that their history textbooks were "not factual" and that their professors' instruction was "out of date, out of line, and invalid." Two students also shared that they wished the professors would allow students of color to challenge the prescribed curriculum and discuss different perspectives in class, and two other students shared that professors could do a better job of making sure that the materials being taught reflect the diverse students in the class.

Contributions of Harper College's Faculty of Color. Fourteen students across the focus groups shared that they felt more comfortable with faculty who identified as persons of color. Three students shared that having a professor who "looks like me" made it "easier to connect with them" because they "understand the struggles and kind of relate to what you're going through at the moment." One student shared that all their White professors had been nice and helpful; however, they recalled having a Black professor who was "much more open" and "non-judgmental." This

> *... I felt like I could try harder, and I feel better about doing my work, because I knew, even if you know something wasn't right or like clearly it wasn't my best piece of work, that I wouldn't necessarily be judged—that I'd be helped.*

professor also "reaches out" to students to say, "I'm proud of you in this," even if they only taught students in a virtual setting. When asked if having this professor made a difference in terms of their learning, the student replied, "Absolutely, because I felt like I could try harder, and I feel better about doing my work, because I knew, even if something wasn't right or like clearly it wasn't my best piece of work, that I wouldn't necessarily be judged—that I'd be helped."

Another student recalled a Black professor who made the class feel comfortable and "always made it clear that if we had children or siblings, we could bring them in." One student shared that Harper College does not provide enough resources for students with children, and this message resonated with the class. This student went on to explain that this experience impacted their learning because "it makes you more comfortable. If I ever need anything, there won't be any problem reaching out." Another student recalled that they have only had one professor who was a person of color but that has been the only professor who they have seen "interact with students and personally go to them individually during class to see if they were ever stuck on any problems." This experience was especially meaningful to this student, who shared, "It gave me a little bit of a confidence boost to know that it's okay to reach out to those professors for help." Three other students said they appreciated it when professors of color taught classes where their insights would be especially relevant, such as African American Studies or Spanish, and two other students shared that having a professor of color made them feel safer, even if the professor had a different background than the students.

Impacts of Predominantly White Faculty. Overall, Harper College students have had mixed experiences with their White faculty. Fifteen of the students across the focus groups shared that they have never experienced any form of discrimination from their White faculty, and 11 students shared that they have had overall positive or neutral experiences. However, four students shared that White faculty were difficult to connect with, and two students have felt discriminated against by White faculty in the past. One student described a time when they were ignored by their professor as they were publicly representing a student affinity group with which they were involved, and another student felt they were treated differently in the nursing program because of their background. Additionally, one student shared that when leading discussions about race in class, White professors "do not really know how to react" if a student says something racist or something that "is a microaggression to another student," and this becomes "difficult for me and a lot of students of color."

Uses of Technology at Harper College. Eleven students shared they had positive experiences using technology while enrolled at Harper College. In particular, students felt the technology loans to students and the phone applications by Harper College and Blackboard were helpful. Students liked getting notifications about their assignments, signing up for classes, and looking up the location of certain buildings on their phones. However, five students expressed frustration about the mixed modes of technology among Harper College faculty. For example, some professors use WebEx and others use Zoom, and none of the professors of focus group participants use and organize assignments on Blackboard in the same way. Three students also shared that learning how to use Blackboard is "just part of a game" when adapting to college life, and it can be a barrier for many students. **Students across the focus groups suggested that Harper College standardize the way professors use technology and create specific resources about technology that can be used across different classes.**

Intercultural Programming

Participation in Intercultural Programming. Eighteen students across the focus groups shared they participated in at least one intercultural program or event. From those who attended, 11 students described the importance of these events as they help students to make friends, learn more about campus resources, and build community.

The most frequently cited reasons why students were unable to attend these programs were: 1) they were unaware of the event, or 2) they had a scheduling conflict. Nine students explained that they would have liked to attend the events if they had known about them, and nine students shared that scheduling conflicts kept them from attending. Six of those students said that they were in class during the events. Students suggest that Harper College poll students to identify times when intercultural programming would work best for the students' schedules.

Conclusion

Racial and socioeconomic completion gaps are a major concern for colleges and universities across the country, and Harper College is committed to eliminating this institutional inequity on its campus. Harper College has already taken significant steps toward reaching this goal (the Basic Needs Project, the Latinx Task Force, and the Social Justice Studies Task Force). In an effort to continue to improve upon these efforts and others, this qualitative research centers the voices of current students of color so that administrators can better understand their experiences at Harper College. Findings from this study reveal that the three major contributors to students' success are: 1) the financial support they receive, 2) their advisors, and 3) their professors or other campus leaders. Additionally, barriers related to locating resources online or in person, scholarships, academic support, and transportation were the most cited aspects of students' experiences. Through this study, students shared several recommendations for Harper College:

1. Employ advisors who speak the students' first languages, when possible.
2. Provide parents with resources specifically designed to educate those with first-generation students.
3. Make the financial aid office more reachable, and provide a checklist to students about the requirements often needed for financial aid or scholarship applications.
4. Create a physical and/or virtual space where students can easily find the financial resources they need on a variety of topics.
5. Consider transportation improvements, such as additional bus routes, additional bike lanes, and increased Lyft benefits.
6. Require faculty to receive training and provide resources and instruction on *how* to implement culturally diverse materials in a culturally sensitive way.
7. Standardize the way professors use technology and create specific resources about technology that can be used across classes.

In coordination with Harper College's existing DEI initiatives, this study may be used to inform existing and new efforts toward eliminating racial and socioeconomic completion gaps.

Appendix A: Student Recruitment Materials

Subject Title: We invite you to share your Harper experience!

Dear Student,

The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion would like to hear more about your experiences as a student at Harper College! We are working with an external partner, NORC at the University of Chicago, who will conduct 1.5-hour focus groups. Our hope is to learn what has positively contributed to your experience at Harper and ways we can improve our student programs, resources and services.

If you attend a focus group, following the session, you will receive a $25 gift card for Starbucks or Speedway (gas) in appreciation for your time and participation. Please note that you are not required or expected to participate in a focus group session, but we hope you decide to join us either in-person or virtually. Also, these focus groups are by invitation only, so please do not forward this email to others.

Limited spots are available for each focus group. If you are interested in participating, please complete the following form: [insert formstack link] and you will receive a consent form and additional information in the coming weeks.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kindly,

Dr. Alina C. Pajtek (she/her/hers)

Professor of ESL & Linguistics

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Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Title of Project: Harper College Campus Climate Initiative

1. **Why are you doing this Study?** NORC at the University of Chicago is conducting student focus groups at Harper College to understand student perceptions of the campus climate. In particular, we want to understand students' sense of welcome and inclusion, their perceptions of cross-cultural attitudes and interactions, and any suggestions for campus action with a specific focus on the inclusion of minority students.

2. **Who is funding this Study?** Harper College is sponsoring the study. They have contracted with NORC at the University of Chicago to administer the focus groups and collect and analyze the data.

3. **What would I be asked to do if I am in this study?** You will be asked to participate in a 90-minute focus group with 4-8 other students in a conversation about various aspects of Harper College's campus climate. If you agree to participate in this focus group, you will be asked to respond to a series of questions as well as respond to others' answers. You will be encouraged to respond openly and honestly to the questions asked of you.

4. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no known risks involved in participating in this focus group, although discussions about academic and social aspects of campus, interactions with others, and other perceptions of different aspects of your campus may be sensitive for some individuals. Additionally, while we ask that all attendees keep confidential what they hear from others, there is a chance that someone may accidentally attribute comments to a participant outside of the focus group.

5. **Benefits:** We hope this research will benefit your institution. Benefits may include informing any efforts related to ensuring a positive campus climate and fostering a deeper understanding within Harper College about students' experiences and perspectives.

6. **How long will it take for me to participate in this study?** It will take about 90 minutes to participate in the focus group.

7. **Confidentiality:** Although we ask everyone in the group to respect everyone's privacy and confidentiality, and not to identify anyone in the group or repeat what is said during the group discussion, please remember that other participants in the group may accidentally disclose what was said.

NORC researchers will take precautions to maintain the confidentiality of what is shared. The NORC Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may also review records related to this research study. We will audio and video record all focus groups and transcribe the focus group conversation to ensure accuracy in reporting. Only the NORC researchers will have access to these audio, video, and transcription files, which will be stored on password-protected computers.

Given the virtual nature of these focus groups, participants may not opt out of being audio recorded, but they may opt out of video recording (by leaving their camera off). Participants are free to stop participating at any time without penalty. Even after the focus groups conclude, participants may indicate to the NORC researchers that they do not wish their contributions to be included in the findings; we will honor a participant's request that the researchers exclude their data from any analyses.

We will not use any student names in the information shared in any reported findings. We will compile a report that includes major themes and share it (by email) with all student participants prior to finalizing and sharing the report with Harper College.

8. **Right to ask questions:** Please contact us at harpercollegefocusgroups@norc.org with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the NORC IRB Manager by toll-free phone number at (866) 309-0542.

9. **Payment for participation:** Harper College will provide all participants who complete the focus group with a $25 gift card to your choice of Starbucks or Speedway (gas), which will be sent upon completion of the focus group. Students must complete the focus group to be eligible for the gift card, though they may choose to exclude their data from analyses.

10. **Voluntary participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

Additional details:

- You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.
- Your participation in the focus group implies that you have read the information in this form and consent to take part in this research study. We will also ask for (and audio record) verbal confirmation of all participants' consent to participate in the focus group before beginning.
- Please keep this form for your records or future reference.

Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol

Student Focus Group Protocol

Experiences Inside the Classroom

1. In what ways have your classes been taught so that they include culturally diverse perspectives, content, ideas, and authors?
   - In what ways does this impact your experience as a student?

2. The majority of faculty here at Harper College are White; how if at all, has that impacted your experience at Harper?
   - Have you had an opportunity to have classes with professors of color or professors that reflect your own racial identities?

3. In what ways can Harper use technology to enhance your student experience (for example, the Harper app, smoother enrollment processes, access to resources and campus services)?

Experiences Outside the Classroom

4. The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and The Office of Student Engagement at Harper College have established programs for students, such as: Hullabaloo, Fall Fest, and the Cultural Center Kick-Off. Are you aware of these programs?
   - Have any of you participated in any of these programs or others offered by these offices?
     - o For what reasons have you/have you not participated in these types of programs (for example, timing, virtual vs. In-person programs, etc.)?
       - To what extent have these programs been helpful or not helpful for you?
       - In what ways?

Climate

5. Have you found a sense of belonging/sense of community at Harper?
   - IF YES: What _individuals_ at Harper have contributed to you feeling a sense of belonging/community here?
   - IF YES: What _other aspects_ at Harper have contributed to you feeling a sense of belonging/community here?
   - IF NO: What _individuals_ at Harper have contributed to you not feeling a sense of belonging/community here?
   - IF NO: What _other aspects_ at Harper have contributed to you not feeling a sense of belonging/community here?

6. Have you experienced any challenges specifically as a student of color?
   - What are some of the challenges you've experienced?
   - Have you talked to any Harper faculty or staff about these challenges, and if so, did you feel heard?
   - If you have not experienced any challenges specifically as a student of color, are there any challenges you've experienced more generally that you'd like to share?

7. Can you describe any factors that contribute to your success here?
   - In what ways, if at all, do Harper faculty or staff reach out to you to offer assistance or encouragement?
   - What could Harper College do differently to show they are invested in your success?
   - Has Harper College offered any services that make the process of applying for financial aid or other scholarships smooth for you?

8. Was there a point during your time at Harper that you questioned your decision to stay?
   - If yes, what were your concerns?
   - If yes, what led to your decision to continue at Harper?

9. Can you describe any factors at Harper College that feel like barriers to you?
   - Any difficulty enrolling for classes?
   - Any difficulty applying for financial aid or scholarships?
   - Are any of these barriers specific to students of color?

Personal Barriers

10. Many students experience difficult personal circumstances such as [health issues, financial problems, childcare challenges, transportation issues, and family tragedy]. Have you encountered any of these types of personal circumstances since beginning your studies at Harper College that have affected your experience as a student?
    - Were there resources, faculty, or staff at Harper that you found particularly useful while navigating these personal circumstances?
      - o   If not, what did you need that was not provided by Harper?

11. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience as a Harper College student that you think would be important for the institution to know?

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