

# Biracial Identity Development at Historically White and Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Sociology of Education  
2020, Vol. 93(3) 238–255  
© American Sociological Association 2020  
DOI: 10.1177/0038040720926163  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/soe](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/soe)



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## Abstract

This study explores the relationship between biracial identity development and college context. I draw on interviews with 49 black-white biracial first- and second-year students attending historically black colleges/universities (HBCUs) or historically white colleges/universities (HWCUs) and follow-up interviews with the same students at the end of college to explore how and why their racial identities changed over time. Most participants experienced racial identity change over the course of the study, and this change was most often in the direction of a strengthened black identity for both HBCU and HWCU students. An increasing understanding of racism led students at both institutional types to develop stronger black identities. The processes that led to this heightened awareness of racism, however, differed across institutions. Reflected appraisals (HBCU students' impression that their peers included and accepted them as black and HWCU students' impression that their white peers excluded and labeled them as nonwhite) also played a role in students' strengthening black identities, as did increased contact with black peers (especially for HBCU students). This article describes the implications of biracial identity development for biracial students' psychosocial well-being, campus social adjustment, and college persistence.

## Keywords

mixed-race, biracial, HBCU, HWCU, PWI, identity development, college students

College is an important time for identity development. Many college students are between ages 18 and 25 (National Center for Education Statistics 2016); this is a period of emerging adulthood, when individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood and explore possible selves (Torres, Jones, and Renn 2009). For students of color, racial identity development is a critical part of psychosocial development and is associated with social adjustment (Hatter and Ottens 1998), mental health (Williams and Williams-Morris 2000), and academic performance (Miller-Cotto and Byrnes 2016).

College may have a particularly large effect on the racial identities of mixed-race students due to the often fluid and contextual nature of their racial identities. For multiracial students, college may

strengthen or disrupt existing identities, with implications for students' academic and social well-being (Renn and Shang 2008). There is thus a need for research exploring colleges' effect on biracial students' identities; the findings would advance understanding of how elements of institutional cultures (e.g., academic curricula, student organizations) shape racial identity and would provide higher education professionals with the

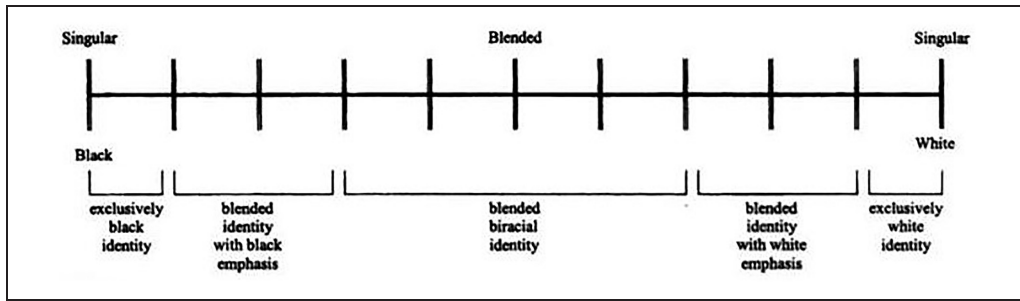
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**Figure 1.** Continuum of Biracial Identity model.  
Source: Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005).

knowledge to better anticipate and respond to the needs of multiracial students, a growing demographic on college campuses (National Center for Education Statistics 2015).

Knowledge of the relationship between college and biracial identity is limited, however, due to an overreliance on cross-sectional designs. Although cross-sectional designs are useful for exploring identity at particular moments, longitudinal designs are better able to capture change over time, making them essential for understanding processes of biracial identity development during college.

Moreover, previous studies on the relationship between college and biracial identity focus almost exclusively on historically white colleges/universities (HWCUs). The lack of studies exploring biracial identity within historically black colleges/universities (HBCUs) reflects the general marginalization of minority-serving institutions within discourse surrounding higher education and prevents a full understanding of how institutions of higher education, as racialized organizations, shape students' identities. HWCUs and HBCUs have different racial structures or "set[s] of social relations and practices based on racial distinctions" (Bonilla-Silva 1997:474). They also have different approaches to addressing race through the curriculum (Bennett and Xie 2003). Thus, comparing biracial HBCU and HWCU students' identities will contribute to a more complete understanding of the interaction between racial identity and the racialized nature of different educational contexts.

To advance understanding of this topic, I draw on interviews with 49 black-white biracial underclassmen attending HBCUs or HWCUs and follow-up interviews with participants at the end of college.

Before discussing methods and findings, I contextualize the study by reviewing existing literature on (1) biracial identity development and (2) college's effect on racial identity.

## BIRACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

This study fits within the ecological approach to biracial identity, which emphasizes the role of social factors in determining racial identity (Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado 2009). This approach posits that racial identity can change throughout an individual's life; it contrasts with previous approaches that characterize identity development as a process ending during late adolescence (Erikson 1968).

Consistent with this approach, Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005) developed the Continuum of Biracial Identity (COBI) model. According to this model, biracial individuals may identify anywhere along a continuum on which each pole represents singular identification with blackness or whiteness and the midpoint represents equal identification with both (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005). Figure 1 displays the COBI model.

Some individuals identify singularly with whiteness or blackness, but most fall somewhere in the middle, "understanding themselves as biracial, but leaning more in one direction versus the other" (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005:8). The extent to which individuals identify with blackness and whiteness is influenced by social factors, including region, neighborhood, gender, socioeconomic status, family socialization, experiences with racism, and reflected appraisals (Buggs 2017; Davenport 2016; Lee and Bean 2007;

Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). Studies of biracial identity are more often cross-sectional than longitudinal, but the latter support the ecological approach by demonstrating identity fluidity over time (Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2006; Terry and Winston 2010). These studies show that biracial individuals' racial identity can change between adolescence and early adulthood, a time when many people are in college (Doyle and Kao 2007). In the following sections, I describe how college may affect individuals' racial identities as they transition from adolescence to adulthood.

## HOW HWCUS SHAPE RACIAL IDENTITY

Most U.S. college students attend HWCUs, "whose histories, traditions, symbols, stories, icons, curriculum, and processes were all designed by whites, for whites ... at the exclusion of others who, since the 1950s and 1960s, have been allowed in such spaces" (Brunsma, Brown, and Placier 2013:719). Symbolically, the whiteness of HWCUs is reflected in traditions created before integration, reflecting the tastes of white people, and in pictures and statues on campus, many of which depict white men with racist backgrounds (Bonilla-Silva 2012). The student body at most HWCUs remains predominantly white, despite attempts at integration (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder 2008, 2011). Brunsma and colleagues (2013) describe a "mismatch" within many HWCUs: They espouse a belief in diversity but remain structurally white institutions.

Multiple studies explore how HWCUs affect monoracial students' racial identities. Research on white HWCU students suggests that race is generally not a salient component of their identities (Jones and McEwen 2000) and that they may exit college without critically reflecting on race (Brunsma et al. 2013). Such students often avoid classes about race; if required to take these courses, they may be unreceptive to messages that threaten their identities (Brunsma et al. 2013). Similarly, these students may resist elements of diversity programming that conflict with their endorsement of color-blindness (Cook and McCoy 2017). In addition, racial segregation within HWCU social scenes prevents many white students from having meaningful contact with students of color that could cause them to reflect on race (Brunsma et al. 2013). Thus, many white

students view themselves as "normal," unracialized individuals and fail to recognize the continuing significance of race and racism (Brunsma et al. 2013). Some white students (particularly those who are motivated to explore race and whose colleges emphasize multiculturalism) may experience racial identity changes, but most do not.

Compared to white students, black HWCU students experience increased difficulty transitioning to college and achieving social integration (Wilkins 2012). Racialized exclusion and microaggressions on campus may make race a more salient component of their identities than it was before college (Brunsma et al. 2013; Wilkins 2012). Academic discussions of race may help black students navigate hostile environments while aiding in positive racial identity development; for instance, students who take black studies classes often develop stronger black identities and more racial pride (Marie 2016). In addition, participation in black student organizations provides students space to express and further develop their racial identities (Harper and Quayle 2007).

Many biracial students likely experience HWCU environments differently than their monoracial peers do. Regardless of how biracial students identify, they are often labeled "nonwhite," resulting in marginalization (Jones 2015). Thus, biracial students' identity development is unlikely to closely resemble that of their white peers. Biracial students' experiences also may differ from those of monoracial-black students. Studies show that biracial-black students are more likely than monoracial-black students to experience social distance from black peers and alienation from the black campus community (Smith and Moore 2000) and that they are more reluctant to join black student organizations (Jones 2015; Ozaki and Johnston 2008). Because biracial students' social experiences often differ from those of monoracial-black students, their racial identity development likely also will differ.

A growing body of research explores multiracial HWCU students' identities (e.g., Jones 2015; Renn 2004; Renn and Shang 2008; Twine 1996). Some studies suggest HWCUs lead biracial students to develop stronger black identities through racial studies courses, awareness of segregation and marginalization on campus, and black peers' encouragement to participate in black student organizations (Jones 2015; Twine 1996). Other studies suggest that encountering multiracially identified peers and being exposed to mixed-race

student groups may strengthen students' *multiracial* identities (Talbot 2008).

Overall, the literature suggests college can affect racial identity in multiple ways. Classes about race can prompt students to reflect on their identities and develop more critical racial worldviews; however, students may avoid these classes or resist messages that are inconsistent with their ideologies. Even in the absence of academic discussion of race, black and biracial students may develop more salient black identities as a result of marginalization and discrimination. Participation in race-based clubs also may affect students' identities; for multiracial students, this may strengthen black *or* multiracial identity.

Existing scholarship provides insight into how college shapes racial identity, but less work explores multiracial (compared to monoracial) identity. In addition, the above-referenced studies on multiracial identity are cross-sectional. The present study contributes to the literature by using a longitudinal design, which enables a more nuanced understanding of how biracial students' identities change throughout college. In addition, this study makes an important contribution by comparing HWCU and HBCU students' identity development.

## HOW HBCUS SHAPE RACIAL IDENTITY

The term "HBCU" refers to schools created in the 1960s or prior to educate black students in a segregated society that largely prevented black students from attending white universities. HBCUs' missions often focus on maintaining black historical and cultural traditions and producing graduates who can address race relations and work for the betterment of black communities (Brown and Davis 2001). Their curricula highlight black history and culture (Bennett and Xie 2003), reflecting HBCUs' historic function as "repositories of Diaspora history and the history of social hostility" (Brown and Davis 2001:44).

Most research on racial identity within HBCUs focuses on monoracial students. Several studies exploring black students' identities found no significant differences between HBCU and HWCU students' racial awareness: Race was an important part of most black students' self-concepts, regardless of institution (Cokley 1999). Other research found that many black students selected HBCUs because of the racial focus or to develop their racial identities

(Van Camp et al. 2009). These students often participated in organizations with a racial focus and took courses about race, providing them with opportunities to further explore their racial identities (Van Camp et al. 2009). This suggests HBCU students may be particularly likely to experience racial identity changes because many perceive college as an opportunity for racial self-exploration.

A growing body of research explores the experiences of white, Latinx, and Asian HBCU students. These students may develop a heightened sense of racial otherness (Peterson and Hamrick 2009), increased appreciation for diversity, increased understanding of racism, and diminishing racial prejudice (Arroyo, Palmer, and Maramba 2016).

Little research, however, explores mixed-race HBCU students' identities. I am aware of only a few studies examining biracial HBCU students' experiences, and none primarily focus on how HBCUs shape students' identification with blackness and whiteness. Studies have explored biracial students' evaluations of blackness (Clayton 2019b), racial identity work (Clayton 2019a), and engagement on campus (Harris and BrckaLorenz 2017). Some broad studies on multiracial identity include respondents who attended HBCUs, although the relationship between college and identity is not the focus (e.g., Khanna 2011).

Existing research provides some insight into how HBCUs may shape biracial identity. Like the black respondents in Van Camp and colleagues' (2009) study, some biracial students may attend HBCUs to explore their racial identity. As a result of this intentional quest for racial identity development (Van Camp et al. 2009), or the institutional emphasis on black history (Bennett and Xie 2003), these students may develop stronger black identities. Alternatively, like white students (Peterson and Hamrick 2009) and some respondents in Khanna's (2011) study, biracial students may feel a heightened sense of racial otherness, leading them to develop stronger biracial (or white) identities. The current literature largely ignores biracial HBCU students' experiences, so more research is necessary to determine how HBCUs influence biracial identity.

## METHODS

I conducted a qualitative, longitudinal study to better understand how black-white biracial students'

racial identities change throughout college and how these changes are related to institutional context.

### *Sample and Site*

I focus on black-white biracial individuals because this is one of the largest and fastest-growing biracial groups (Jones and Bullock 2012). Moreover, this group is interestingly situated in relation to the institutions I compare: HBCUs, where black students are the majority and white students the minority, and HWCUs, where white students are the majority and black students are a minority group.

I recruited from one HWCU, a public Southeastern research university enrolling more than 26,000 undergraduates. The HWCU is a residential campus; 37 percent of undergraduates (including all first-years) live on campus. The university has a history of racial exclusion; it was founded in the 1780s but did not admit black students until the 1960s.

Consistent with Brunnsma and colleagues' (2013) description of HWCUs, this university has a "mismatch" between institutional endorsements of diversity and the whiteness of the institution. The university's mission stresses the importance of respect for diverse cultures, and all undergraduates must take one course on African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, or Native American cultures. Despite these endorsements of diversity, the representation of black students and professors remains well below the state's black population. When the study began, 73.0 percent of students were white, 7.5 percent were black, and 3.0 percent were multiracial. Among full-time instructional faculty, 78 percent were white, and only 6 percent were black. During the study, the school was in the news multiple times for racist incidents within the university or the college town.

I also recruited from three HBCUs; all are private Southeastern institutions enrolling between 2,000 and 4,000 students. Two are liberal arts colleges serving undergraduates. The third is a research institution serving undergraduate and graduate students. The HBCUs describe themselves as residential colleges; between 28 and 68 percent of students live on campus. Consistent with Brown and Davis's (2001) description of HBCUs' objectives, all three schools express a commitment to teaching students about black

culture and history and producing students dedicated to opposing racial injustice; such commitment is expressed through mission/purpose statements or the curriculum. One HBCU requires all students to take two courses on African/African American experiences. The others offer numerous courses related to black experiences. The HBCUs are similar to each other, and distinct from the HWCU, in that they encourage sustained study of black experiences. When the study began, between 84 and 94 percent of students were black, 0.0 to 0.1 percent were white, and 0.2 to 13.7 percent were multiracial.<sup>1</sup> More than 60 percent of full-time instructional faculty were black.

I recruited from three HBCUs (to enroll enough participants), but the schools are in the same state, and students reported socializing within each other's campuses. Although the HBCUs differ on some measures, students' experiences and identity development were similar; thus, throughout this article I do not differentiate between HBCUs.

I recruited most of the sample (85.7 percent,  $n = 42$ ) through ads posted on campuses and emailed to student mailing lists. Six students (12.2 percent of respondents) were referred by others. During recruitment, I avoided the word "biracial," instead indicating that I was seeking students with one black and one white biological parent.

Recruitment resulted in an initial sample of 55 respondents. Six students were lost to attrition (3 attended an HWCU, and 3 attended an HBCU). This article focuses on the 49 students who completed the study; 30 students (7 men and 23 women) were recruited from the HWCU, and 19 students (6 men and 13 women) from the HBCUs. See Table 1 for demographic information.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Students participated in two interviews. Initial interviews occurred between 2013 and 2014, when all participants were in one of their first two years of college (29 first-years and 20 sophomores). Follow-up interviews occurred between 2016 and 2018; 40 respondents were in their final year of college, five had recently graduated, and four had left college prior to graduating. There was an average of 33 months between interviews.

Initial interviews were conducted face to face and ranged from 49 to 130 min (mean: 83 min). Most follow-up interviews (85.7 percent,  $n = 42$ )

**Table 1.** Profile of Research Sample.

	Historically White College/University	Historically Black College/University	Total
<b>Biological parents' race</b>			
White mother/black father			
%	80.0	73.7	77.6
n	24	14	38
White father/black mother			
%	16.7	21.1	18.4
n	5	4	9
Other <sup>a</sup>			
%	3.3	5.3	3.2
n	1	1	2
<b>Family structure</b>			
Parents married/cohabiting			
%	20.0	15.8	18.4
n	6	3	9
Parents divorced/separated; more contact with mom			
%	46.7	42.1	44.9
n	14	8	22
Parents divorced/separated; more contact with dad			
%	0.0	10.5	4.1
n	0	2	2
Parents divorced/separated; equal contact			
%	26.7	21.1	24.5
n	8	4	12
Adoptive white family			
%	6.7	5.3	6.1
n	2	1	3
Adoptive black family			
%	0.0	5.3	2.0
n	0	1	1
<b>Socioeconomic status<sup>b</sup></b>			
Poor			
%	0.0	5.3	2.0
n	0	1	1
Working class			
%	23.3	26.3	24.5
n	7	5	12
Middle class			
%	73.3	63.2	69.4
n	22	12	34
Upper class			
%	3.3	5.3	4.1
n	1	1	2
<b>High school composition<sup>c</sup></b>			
Predominantly white (four years)			
%	30.0	57.9	40.8
n	9	11	20
Predominantly black (four years)			
%	2.7	5.3	4.1
n	1	1	2

(continued)



Table 1. (continued)

	Historically White College/University	Historically Black College/University	Total
Diverse (four years)			
%	60.0	21.1	44.9
n	18	4	22
Multiple schools/different racial compositions			
%	6.7	15.8	10.2
n	2	3	5

<sup>a</sup>One student had a multiracial (white/black/Native American) mother and black father. Another had a biracial (black/Asian) mother and white father. Both selected into the study. I included them because they perceived their parents as belonging to different racial groups and had ties to blackness and whiteness.

<sup>b</sup>To determine socioeconomic status (SES), I considered parents' occupations (following Lareau's [2011] SES operationalization) and students' descriptions of cultural capital and financial (in)stability.

<sup>c</sup>Reflects students' perceptions of school racial composition.

were conducted face to face; 14.3 percent (n = 7) were conducted over the phone. Follow-up interviews ranged from 30 to 122 min (mean: 77 min).

Interviews were conducted as part of a larger study of biracial students' identities and relationships. Questions about racial identity included the following: (1) How strongly do you identify with being black compared to how strongly you identify with being white? (2) What do you write on forms that ask about your race? (3) Does how you identify racially depend on context? and (4) Imagine you are at a multicultural retreat where you are asked to split into groups with people of your same race; what would you do? The open-ended, semi-structured nature of the interview meant participants also spoke about racial identity in response to questions that were not explicitly on this topic.

Initial and follow-up interviews were based on a similar guide, including many identical questions. Asking the same questions at two times allowed me to assess changes in students' identities. In addition, at time 2, I asked, "Thinking about how you identified racially on your first day of college and thinking about how you identify now, would you say there's been any change?" This allowed me to assess participants' awareness of identity change.

I began the analysis by comparing individual data across time. I closely read and coded each participant's interview at time 1 and compared it to the interview at time 2, allowing me to assess whether/how each participant's identity changed. Next, I analyzed trends within and across

institutions. I utilized a constant comparative method, identifying similarities and differences across individuals and categories (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Comparing interviews from participants within and across institutions allowed me to build an argument about the relationship between institutional context and racial identity development.

FINDINGS

Respondents' descriptions of their identities were consistent with the COBI model (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005), indicating that biracial identity can be thought of as a continuum: Individuals may identify singularly with whiteness or blackness, identify equally with both, or fall anywhere in between. I examine the percentage of respondents at each institutional type who identified more strongly with blackness, more strongly with whiteness, or equally with both. I consider any movement along the continuum to be identity change.

In the following sections I describe students' identities at time 1 and time 2. I then highlight the mechanisms that help explain why students at both institutional types often developed stronger black identities during college.

HBCU Biracial Student Identities

At time 1, 57.9 percent of HBCU respondents (n = 11) identified more strongly with blackness, 36.8

percent ( $n = 7$ ) identified equally with blackness and whiteness, and 5.3 percent ( $n = 1$ ) identified more strongly with whiteness. Of the 11 respondents who identified more strongly with blackness, 3 said this was a recent change. During her first semester, Leah said, "I don't think I really would've called myself a black woman before I came here. I would've just been like, I'm just me. But after I came here I think I would now consider myself a black woman" (T1).<sup>2</sup> Leah's comment shows how even one semester at an HBCU strengthened some students' identification with blackness.

This trend of strengthening black identity is more pronounced when looking at the longitudinal data. During the study, 73.7 percent of respondents ( $n = 14$ ) experienced racial identity change, and 85.7 percent of these students (12 out of 14 participants) developed stronger black identities. At time 2, 73.7 percent of respondents ( $n = 14$ ) identified more strongly with blackness, 26.3 percent ( $n = 5$ ) identified equally with blackness and whiteness, and 0.0 percent identified more strongly with whiteness.

For some students, identity change was gradual and moderate. For instance, at time 1, Cody identified slightly more with blackness (60/40, black/white), but at time 2, he said, "On a scale of 100 percent, I would say 70/30—70 being black, 30 being white." Over time, Cody exhibited a gradual strengthening of his black identity. Other students experienced a greater identity change. Sophomore year, Isaac said, "I see myself as 50/50" (T1), but by senior year, he said, "I identify as black" (T2). Isaac experienced a change from a biracial to an (almost) exclusively black identity. HBCUs did not have identical effects on every participant, but the general trend shows HBCU students developing stronger black identities.

### *HWCU Biracial Student Identities*

At time 1, 30 percent of HWCU respondents ( $n = 9$ ) identified more strongly with whiteness, 30 percent ( $n = 9$ ) identified more strongly with blackness, and 40 percent ( $n = 12$ ) identified equally with both. I found cross-institutional differences in students' identities at time 1: Compared to HBCU students, more HWCU students "leaned" toward whiteness, and fewer "leaned" toward blackness. This likely reflects selection effects: Students who lean toward blackness are more

likely than those who lean toward whiteness to choose an HBCU. It also may reflect early influences of HBCUs on identity, as several students said their HBCU strengthened their black identity, even though they had only attended for a short time.

Cross-institutional differences in racial identity were less pronounced at time 2. Like their HBCU counterparts, many HWCU respondents (76.7 percent;  $n = 23$ ) experienced racial identity change, and most of these students (73.9 percent; 17 out of 23 students) developed stronger black identities. By time 2, the percentage of HWCU respondents identifying more strongly with blackness increased from 30 percent ( $n = 9$ ) to 50 percent ( $n = 15$ ), and the percentage identifying more strongly with whiteness decreased from 30 percent ( $n = 9$ ) to 10 percent ( $n = 3$ ). Table 2 shows trends in identity by institutional type and over time. In the remaining sections I highlight the mechanisms explaining students' development of stronger black identities, noting how these mechanisms differ across institutions.

### *Increasing Awareness of Racism*

Respondents often followed a similar trajectory of identity development whereby an increasing understanding of racism led to stronger black identities. The processes that increased awareness of racism, however, differed across institutions. HBCU students most often situated their awareness of racism in relation to coursework. HWCU students more often mentioned national conversations around racism and personal experiences of discrimination. For both groups, increased awareness of racism often contrasted with color-blind messages they heard from family.

*HBCU biracial students: Increasing awareness of racism through the curriculum.* All HBCU respondents reported learning about black history in class. Quinton said, "Every class is a black history class in some aspect, even psychology and history, or whatever" (T2). These classes often highlighted the history (and continuance) of racism:

In every class, it could be African American Studies, or it could be calculus ... the professor will go off on a black empowerment episode ... talking about how we're being



**Table 2.** Racial Identity by Institution and Time.

	Time 1	Time 2
<b>Historically black college/university participants</b>		
Stronger identification with white		
%	5.3	0.0
n	1	0
Even identification		
%	36.8	26.3
n	7	5
Stronger identification with black		
%	57.9	73.7
n	11	14
<b>Historically white college/university participants</b>		
Stronger identification with white		
%	30.0	10.0
n	9	3
Even identification		
%	40.0	40.0
n	12	12
Stronger identification with black		
%	30.0	50.0
n	9	15

oppressed and how as African Americans it's our job to fight the stigmas that we face. (Isaac, T2)

Students said their classes helped them understand the implications of one's racial background for their placement in a U.S. racial structure that privileges whiteness. Heightened understanding of (and identification with) challenges facing African Americans strengthened their black identities. Cody's interview (T2) highlights this process:

All of my classes ... I feel like are geared behind adapting yourself as an African American in the workplace. ... I've realized that I more just identify with being black. ... When you're hearing about on campus, hearing all these bad things happening to black people, how much harder it is to get work in the workplace, it just sets in that I have to embrace that, and being half white is not going to help me.

Cody's courses taught him about challenges black people face in the workplace, challenges he believes he will face despite having a white parent. In this way, his increasing knowledge of racism

caused him to "more just identify with being black."

Similarly, Leah's (T2) strengthened black identity resulted partly from her increasing understanding of racism:

[First year], I would just have been like, "I'm biracial," ... whereas now of course me saying I identify as a black woman. I think that just came more so from gaining an understanding of the black experience. ... Growing up, my parents didn't force me to—I wasn't white, I wasn't black, I was just Leah. I think I missed a huge part of understanding what it meant to be African American. ... It was just something I didn't realize growing up that I gained at [this HBCU]. ... I didn't truly understand the plight of African American communities and the different ways we have been oppressed throughout history.

Leah's comments highlight the relationship between family and racial identity, showing how biracial individuals' families may encourage color-blind perspectives and deemphasize the relevance of racism. During college, these familial

messages are replaced with messages from the HBCU academic culture, highlighting the importance of recognizing race and opposing racism.

Respondents' awareness of racism also influenced their career trajectories, increasing their desire to work toward racial justice. This is consistent with HBCUs' goals to produce graduates who address race relations and work for the betterment of black communities (Brown and Davis 2001). Leah (T2) said,

I can get on a whole spiel about the social institutions I feel like have disadvantaged people of color. ... I definitely didn't have knowledge about that before [college]. Being able to gain that knowledge and understand the world in a different perception made me realize, "Wow! I really care about these things, and I'm really dedicated to changing them."

Some respondents began situating their racial identities in relation to their occupational identities, perceiving a link between their racial identity and their desire to oppose systemic racism. Camryn (T2) said,

I feel like I'm black now because of the things I want to do in my future. The whole reason I wanted to be an economist is to do race relations and feminist research to try to help the black community. ... You can't try to help a group if you don't identify as that group really in my opinion.

Overall, respondents' comments suggest HBCUs disrupt students' color-blind worldview by exposing them to academic perspectives about race. Academic attention to racism disrupted students' notion that race does not matter, leaving them with a more racialized worldview. This strengthened their black identities by (1) increasing their awareness that they will likely be treated as black and encounter racism or (2) increasing their desire to identify as black to more successfully work within black communities in pursuit of racial justice.

***HWCU biracial students: Increasing awareness of racism through experiences of discrimination and the national discourse on racism.*** Increasing understanding of racism also led some HWCU respondents

toward stronger black identities; however, in contrast to HBCU students, most HWCU respondents did not learn about racism primarily through the curriculum. Instead, they highlighted how discrimination on campus or national discourse about race made them think about racism.

One third of HWCU respondents ( $n = 10$ ) said race was a notable theme in their studies, but most ( $n = 20$ ) said it was not. Unlike HBCU students, who were exposed to academic content about race regardless of major, HWCU respondents' comments suggest only certain majors (e.g., sociology majors) encountered sustained academic discussion of race.

When discussing how their classes made them think about race, several respondents mentioned experiences of tokenization, stereotyping, or discrimination from classmates or professors. Skylar's interviews highlight this trend. At time 1, Skylar said, "I identify with my white half more than the black half," whereas at time 2, she identified as "probably more black than white":

I've become more woke ... to learn about maybe different things that affected the black community that then you can identify with. ... Being disadvantaged already when it comes to relationships with your professors, because they might not be like you ... I have a bunch of white Southern conservative professors, men. And having to do twice as good to be considered on the same level of your peers that are more along those same lines that they are.

Skylar described how her strengthened black identity is related to a process of "becoming woke," that is, understanding how racism influences black people's lives and how it similarly influences her experiences. For instance, she began identifying with challenges facing black people, such as double standards for evaluating white and black individuals' work (Foschi 2000). Her classes were influencing her racial identity, but it was because of her perception of racism in the classroom, not the content of the classes.

In addition to experiences of racism in the classroom, students' identities were affected by increasing attention to racism on the national level. During the study, police violence against black people became increasingly visible, the Black Lives Matter movement grew, and

a tumultuous and racially charged presidential election occurred. These events increased the salience of racism in national discourse and strengthened participants' black identities. Sophia's (T2) comments highlight this theme:

I've recently been trying to identify more with my black side. ... I think race has become a much bigger issue in the country. So it's kinda made me think more about who I am. ... It's been a lot of hearing the issues of the Black Lives Matter, that whole movement ... that kind of opened my eyes to like, Hey, I'm a part of that, too. ... I need to care a lot about this because that's half of who I am.

Believing that race had "become a much bigger issue" in the country and learning about racism increased Sophia's concern for problems facing black people and her desire to identify with blackness.

National conversations surrounding race and racism (e.g., in the news, social media) appeared more central in shaping HWCU students' (compared to HBCU students') worldviews because these conversations sometimes constituted students' only exposure to counterhegemonic ideas about race and racism. In the absence of academic coursework explaining racism and the importance of working against it, many HWCU students found these broader national conversations particularly influential.

The sociopolitical climate also affected students' identities through (negatively) affecting institutional climate. Brooke (T2) described the pervasive racism on campus and how it was amplified in light of the 2016 presidential election:

People were Yik Yaking [writing on an anonymous campus social media site] that there are monkeys downstairs; they need to go back to Africa. ... A swastika was written in shit on one of the bathroom walls. ... Especially in light of the election and everything, and I know I keep bringing it up, but it's exemplary of what the issue is here, is that you have all of these students that on Yik Yak or in the bathrooms, or in the election, will all of the sudden be saying these things, but won't tell you. They won't

say it in public ... but they'll go out to the polls and they'll vote for Donald Trump, or they'll go in the bathrooms and they'll write it in poop on the wall.

Respondents also described how national discourse surrounding police brutality influenced campus interactions. Kia (T2) said, "I've heard stories about frat parties. ... The guys ... would yell, 'The cops are coming!' to get all the black people at their parties worried or to leave or something, 'cause of police brutality, and they thought it was funny." Experiences of discrimination on campus and awareness of widespread, systemic racism led several students to develop more race-conscious worldviews and stronger black identities.

Like the HBCU students' process, increased awareness of racism disrupted the color-blind messages HWCU students often received from family. For example, at time 1, Monique said, "I just don't see myself as black or white. ... Color really doesn't matter in our family. ... My mom doesn't care about race. ... I feel like racism couldn't reach me." At time 2, however, she said,

The person next to me could have been Trayvon Martin. ... It hits home when you have friends and you're talking about it and you just realize ... how it would affect you if you lost anyone in the room. ... It helped me a lot to grow and understand the intensity of what was happening around us. ... I think white people don't see that. ... Even talking to my mom. ... Like when Trump won, and she just didn't understand the magnitude of what that meant to me as a black individual. This man who is obviously racist is now the leader of the free country. And she was like, "I mean, who cares?"

Living at home with her white mother, Monique was socialized to believe race was insignificant and that racism could not affect her. At college, her mother's color-blind messages were replaced by racialized messages. She witnessed racism on campus and in the broader sociopolitical context (e.g., racist rhetoric surrounding the election) and was able to reflect on these events with black peers. This changed her worldview and increased her identification with blackness.

## Reflected Appraisals

Consistent with previous studies (Khanna 2011; Lee and Bean 2007), students' comments highlight the importance of reflected appraisals of identity; however, the way respondents discussed reflected appraisals differed across institutions. At both institutional types, students' strengthening black identities resulted partly from the perception that others in a racist society viewed them as black. HBCU students, however, also highlighted how being *included* as black on campus strengthened their black identity. HWCU respondents more often spoke about how being viewed as non-white and *excluded* led to stronger black identities. Respondents' comments highlight the connection between racial identity (one's self-understanding) and racial identification ("how others understand and categorize an individual") (Rockquemore et al. 2009:27).

**HBCU biracial students: Inclusion as black.** HBCU respondents' perceptions that black faculty and students viewed them as black and *included* them strengthened their black identities. Tory (T2) described how professors addressed the student body as black: "The professors will say like 'us' and like 'we' or like ... 'you as black women.'" Such comments told respondents they were perceived as black and as belonging. Quinton (T2) highlighted how being *accepted as black* within black spaces influenced his identity:

You walk into a classroom, and everyone's black. I imagine that's pretty striking to anyone who's not in that environment themselves. ... And the one thing that would be at the end of each realization, or each time I noticed it, would be like, well, I'm in here too, and no one said anything, so obviously I belong here.

Similarly, Grace (T2) described how being viewed as black strengthened her black identity:

In high school ... I was always seen as the white girl versus in college, now I'm just seen as another black girl. ... Because I'm at an HBCU, and now essentially, I feel like I'm a part of the group. ... I don't know if I mentioned being the white girl

from the hood ... but that was something that was very relevant in my life, just because my friends always saw my [white] mom. ... People knew that I was half white versus now people look to me as like, oh she's just a light-skinned black girl.

Respondents' perception that their peers saw them as black and included them as "part of the group" aided in their development of stronger black identities. Grace's comments highlight the relationship between family and reflected appraisals: When living at home, biracial individuals may believe others see their interracial family and thus recognize them as biracial. When living alone at an HBCU, biracial students may believe others perceive them as black.

**HWCU biracial students: Exclusion from whiteness.** Compared to their HBCU counterparts, HWCU respondents more often discussed exclusion. The sense that they were viewed as nonwhite and prevented from fully participating in campus life weakened their white identities and strengthened their identification with blackness. Brooke's (T2) comments illustrate how reflected appraisals led biracial students to develop stronger black identities, as they realized white students and faculty often perceived them as black:

Freshman year I was very much like, "I'm a biracial woman. This is me. This is how I identify." Then in the context of being in college and being in a predominantly white institution, you realize that the majority and the people that I think that are in a position of power, they don't necessarily view you as being biracial. They just see you as a person of color. They see you as a minority. In that context, in the context of the majority, I identify as a black woman more now.

Respondents also realized that white peers' perceptions of them as racially other often led to exclusion. At time 1, Kia highlighted this relationship between reflected appraisals and racial identity in the context of exclusion:

I probably identify with the white side. ... I've kinda noticed that usually black girls are less accepting than white girls of me.

... In ... [high school] white people would accept me. ... I was the one that was just half and they considered me white.

By time 2, Kia's reflected appraisals changed:

I wouldn't completely identify with that [whiteness], because I'm not enjoying the privileges enough. ... [White people are] not going to identify me as one of them either, and that's part of identity. ... I think the black people are willing to accept me, especially at this point.

Comparing Kia's comments shows how her perception of who accepted her shifted and how her racial identity shifted along with it. At time 1, she thought white peers considered her white and accepted her whereas black peers rejected her; however, by time 2 she believed white peers did not view her as "one of them" and that black peers were more likely to accept her. Her interviews suggest this change resulted partly from marginalization on campus.

Other respondents similarly entered college expecting to be included as (honorary) white students, like they were in high school, and rejected by black students, only to discover that black students included them more than white students did. For instance, Brooke and Monique initially planned to join a predominantly white sorority. They believed they would be accepted by white sororities but their phenotype would prevent them from being recruited by a black sorority:

The thing with the black sororities is that they have to choose you, and unfortunately me and Brooke don't look black. ... So I feel like that would be really hard for them to choose us to be in their sorority. And then on the other hand the sororities on the white side ... me and Brooke feel like they would choose us. (Monique, T1)

At time 2, however, Brooke and Monique were involved with black Greek organizations and believed black students accepted them as black, whereas white students excluded them. Monique said, "They [predominantly white sororities] are not accepting of black people. ... They are stereotypical just like the bars downtown."

Monique (like others) entered college expecting to be included by white students, but she

realized the white campus community (especially white Greek organizations and the college town bar scene) was hostile toward black and biracial-black individuals. This is consistent with research highlighting how biracial students often experience marginalization on HWCU campuses (Jones 2015) and how middle-class black students who were included in white high school social networks often experience unexpected exclusion from white college networks (Wilkins 2012). In the present study, exclusion by white students reminded biracial students of their blackness.

### *Increased Contact with Black Peers*

Increased exposure to black peers also increased some students' identification with blackness. At HBCUs, contact with black peers was constant. HWCU students, in contrast, could graduate without having substantial contact with black students; however, respondents who participated in black or multicultural organizations often experienced strengthened black identities as a result.

***HBCUs: Necessary contact with black peers.*** College was the first time many HBCU respondents were fully immersed in a black environment. This led to increased familiarity and comfort with black people, which then led to a stronger black identity. This is consistent with previous research showing that biracial individuals may identify with the racial group they are most familiar with (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). This effect on students' identities is seen in Cody's statement that his strengthened black identity is "a response, I guess, from being around black people" (T1) and in Leah's comment that her strengthened black identity is "just about the people I surround myself with" (T1).

Similarly, Omar said increasing familiarity with black culture strengthened his black identity. Although he entered college identifying more strongly with whiteness than blackness, at time 1 he said his college experience "is changing that and it's helping me to find that balance": "It allows me to really see ... what African Americans are like. We get depictions on TV or reality shows or writings. ... But until you've really lived and experienced the culture and its subcultures, you don't really know." Omar's statements capture the importance of familiarity with a racial group for identification with that group. Attending

an HBCU allowed him to “see what African Americans are like.” This increasing familiarity with black people and culture strengthened his black identity.

**HWCUs: Optional engagement with black peers.** Increased familiarity with black peers also helps explain some HWCU students’ strengthened black identities. Compared to HBCU respondents, however, HWCU students less often said college led to increased contact with black peers. Due to underrepresentation of black students on campus, HWCU respondents did not have much contact with black peers unless they intentionally sought it out.

The Office of Multicultural Services listed six institutionally recognized black student organizations and eight black Greek organizations. At time 1, only 7 percent of HWCU respondents ( $n = 2$ ) belonged to a black student organization; by time 2 this increased to 33.3 percent ( $n = 10$ ). Most respondents were not involved in the black campus community, but those who were often said it strengthened their black identity.

Monique, who was involved with the black student union and black Greek organizations, said at time 2, “I definitely feel like my views have changed; again with [Black University] I feel like I became closer to my culture and my blackness.” “Black University” is the unofficial name black students gave the black campus community. Monique’s experiences are consistent with prior literature showing that participating in black student groups can give students an opportunity to comfortably express their blackness and further develop their black identity (Harper and Quayle 2007).

The Office of Multicultural Services also sponsored two organizations that were broadly for students of color and not limited to one specific racial/ethnic group, and they held workshops and retreats for students of color. Among respondents, 13 percent ( $n = 4$ ) were involved in these organizations. Respondents who participated in these organizations had increased contact with black peers, which affected their identities:

Before the retreat, I identified as mixed race. ... Then the retreat made me want to identify more as a black female. ... The environment of the retreat made me realize that I have a lot of things in common with black people who are just strictly African

American. I wanted to be sympathetic to the issues that we face ... the issue of hair, of colorism ... housing discrimination, job discrimination. (Shayla, T2)

Shayla’s increased contact with black peers at the retreat led to an increasing identification with blackness. Discussions and reflection at the retreat made her realize she had much in common with black students, especially with regard to their position within a racialized social system that privileges whiteness.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the literature on biracial student development by including biracial HBCU students, an understudied segment of the mixed-race student population, and utilizing a qualitative, longitudinal design. The longitudinal design captures identity changes that would go unnoticed if I solely relied on retrospective accounts of identity change. The qualitative design captures not just changes in students’ racial labels but changes in the *meanings* they attach to their race; this is important because individuals’ identities (or self-understandings) are not always consistent with their racial categorization (e.g., the labels they choose on forms) (Rockquemore et al. 2009). The qualitative, longitudinal design also allows for a nuanced understanding of students’ *processes* of racial identity development within different institutions.

Overall, the study shows how schools influence students’ racial identities. The findings highlight the power of academic spaces to shape students’ racial worldviews and identities. As Brown and Davis (2001:44) note, HBCUs serve as “repositories of Diaspora history and the history of social hostility” and are dedicated to producing graduates who can analyze race relations and work for racial justice. The HBCUs I studied were largely successful in these goals. Frequent study of race and racism increased biracial students’ identification with blackness and their desire to engage in antiracist work. By contrast, the HWCU placed less emphasis on studying race; two thirds of HWCU respondents said race was not a salient theme in their studies.

Regardless of whether they studied race, many respondents developed stronger black identities.



Students who take courses about race, however, may experience more positive racial identity development, accompanied by a greater sense of racial pride (Clayton 2019b; Marie 2016) and an improved ability to navigate racism (Marie 2016). The present findings suggest HBCU students are more likely than HWCU students to study race; thus, biracial HBCU students may graduate with more pride in their blackness and a better ability to navigate racially hostile environments.

Relatedly, schools' academic cultures have implications for student retention. Compared to white students, black and biracial students are less likely to graduate from college (de Brey et al. 2019). And compared to HBCUs, HWCUs have a particularly difficult time retaining black-identified students (Bennett and Xie 2003; Hardy, Kaganda, and Aruguete 2019). Research suggests black student attrition is often related to racial identity and social adjustment challenges on campus (Harper and Quaye 2007). As discussed previously, racial studies classes can help black students feel more proud of their heritage and more successfully navigate racially insensitive campus environments; it follows that such courses could help reduce attrition by reducing social adjustment challenges.

Many biracial HWCU students in this study experienced racial hostility and exclusion on campus; however, many also entered college with color-blind ideologies, making them unprepared for these experiences. Moreover, most did not take classes about race that might have increased their ability to navigate racism. Notably, two of the three HWCU respondents who dropped out of college cited negative campus race relations as a contributing factor in their withdrawal. Altering HWCU academic cultures to more thoroughly address race, racism, and social justice may help students process their experiences with discrimination, adjust to campus life, and reduce attrition.

In the absence of academic study of race, black student organizations may give biracial HWCU students a space to develop and positively express black identities (Harper and Quaye 2007). In the present study, students who participated in such organizations often reported strengthened black identities and positive social experiences. It is important to note, however, that only one third of HWCU respondents ( $n = 10$ ) reported involvement in black organizations. This is consistent with previous research showing that multiracial-

black students often avoid race-based organizations (Jones 2015; Ozaki and Johnston 2008) and are more likely than monoracial-black students to be alienated from the black campus community (Smith and Moore 2000). Thus, some biracial HWCU students are developing understandings of themselves as black largely due to racism and without positive campus spaces where they can process their experiences with the support of other students of color. In such situations, students may experience negative psychosocial development, adjustment issues, or attrition. Overall, the findings suggest that although biracial HBCU and HWCU students may similarly develop black identities during college, the process by which this black identity is achieved may be more positive for HBCU students (e.g., related to *inclusion* and a growing sense of black pride) and more challenging for HWCU students (e.g., related to racial *exclusion*).

The findings also highlight the relationship between family and college in influencing biracial students' identities. Respondents' white and biracial identities were often rooted in familial relationships. Living with white family may lead to white or "mixed" identities by (1) influencing reflected appraisals (e.g., Grace's belief that others viewed her as white because they knew her white mom), (2) increasing biracial youth's desire to racially identify in ways that reflect familial bonds, and (3) encouraging color-blind perspectives. This is consistent with research showing that white parents often utilize color-blind socialization strategies (Johnston-Guerrero and Pecero 2016) and encourage children to identify as biracial instead of black (Buggs 2017).

Respondents' white identities stemmed largely from family, and their black identities grew as they moved away from home. Peers in their college networks did not necessarily know their families and thus often considered them black (as opposed to biracial), influencing biracial students to begin to see themselves this way. Familial messages emphasizing color-blindness were replaced with racialized messages. And many respondents realized that although they share bonds with white family, they experience the world differently. Thus, college pulls biracial students toward a black identity partly because the pull of their families is weaker at this time, as they transition out of adolescence and toward greater independence.

This study contributes to understanding biracial students' identity development and aspects

of educational contexts (e.g., academic spaces, student organizations) that affect identity, but it is not without limitations. One limitation is the small number of men in the study, which makes discussing gender differences in identity development difficult. Future studies could compare the identity development of biracial men and women during college. Future studies also could compare the identities of biracial students attending schools in different U.S. regions. Region may be particularly important for biracial HWCUs students' experiences; students at Southern HWCUs may have more limited racial identity options, resulting in a greater likelihood of developing black identities (Jones 2015; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). Finally, future research could further explore the relationship between biracial identity, academic study of race, participation in race-based student groups, and attrition; such research is particularly necessary considering the challenges to positive racial identity development and campus social adjustment identified in the present study.

## RESEARCH ETHICS

This project received institutional review board approval. All participants gave their informed consent prior to participating in the research. To protect participants' confidentiality, names of institutions have been omitted, and the names of participants have been changed.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the generous funding and support I received from the University of Georgia Graduate School, the Southern Regional Education Board, and the Center for Research and Engagement in Diversity Seed Grant Program (funded by UGA President's Venture Fund, the American Psychological Association, and the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences).

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## NOTES

1. Caution should be used when interpreting institutionally reported racial demographics. Despite having parents from different racial categories, students may identify with one race on college applications.

2. "T1" indicates the quote is from a student's initial interview; "T2" indicates it is from the follow-up interview.

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