



RACIAL DYNAMICS *on* CAMPUS

What Student Organizations Can Tell Us

By Mitchell J. Chang

As our campuses become more diverse, the racial dynamics become more complex. How are these dynamics affecting students?

THE SUSTAINED DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT toward greater racial diversity, particularly over the last decade, has changed not only the composition of the student body but also the racial dynamics on campus. If recent census projections are on target, the trend toward increased student body diversity will generally persist, except perhaps in the few highly selective institutions and the state flagship ones that may eliminate traditional affirmative action taken to enroll underrepresented students. For those campuses that will likely experience increased diversity in their student body, how might this shift affect campus racial dynamics?

One way of gaining some insight into this question is to examine the social opportunities and types of campus organizations available to students. The evolution and particularly the structure of student organizations have been both remarkably sensitive to enrollment shifts and instrumental in shaping campus racial dynamics. The focus of these organizations, how they define their interests, and how students align themselves are essentially an expression of a campus's racial dynamics. By looking closely at these organizations, we can begin not only to gain a clearer picture of the racial dynamics on our campuses but also to better understand how

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increased diversity may affect them. I would like to start by setting forth some models of how student organizations can be structured in response to the racial makeup of a campus.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS ON PREDOMINANTLY WHITE CAMPUSES

LET'S FIRST CONSIDER what student organizations might look like on a hypothetical campus with a predominantly white student population. It is also a campus whose prevailing norms, values, and practices cater mostly to white students even though the total enrollment may have a small percentage of students of color as well as foreign students. And on this campus is a collection of student groups, clubs, and organizations. These groups are particularly important because research consistently shows that there is a great deal of educational potential within them.

What might the student organizations look like at this hypothetical campus? For one, clubs organized around the interests of students of color would not exist. There might, however, be a Latin American Club, for example, and the interest of such a club would likely target the study or appreciation of foreign South American societies and cultures, as opposed to one that targets the interests of Chicanos and Latinos in the United States. Student organizations can be platforms for advancing the interests of groups that continue to be targets of racism;

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the lack of such organizations on campus makes it more difficult for students to challenge discrimination and incidents on campus that they view as racially offensive. Without these organizations, students have more difficulty mobilizing a collective and sustained challenge of, for example, pregame rituals in which students dress up in Native American costumes and dance around a raging bonfire to promote so-called school spirit, or fraternity-sponsored parties that have themes like “Viva Zapata,” “Turning Japanese,” or “Who rides the bus” (in which partygoers dress up like “minorities” who are more likely to use public transit). More importantly, Robert Rhoades has documented in *Freedom's Web* how campus groups that are organized around students' racial backgrounds have been instrumental for pressing institutions to make even more substantive changes, such as increasing the representation of faculty of color and strengthening ethnic studies programs.

Without those organizations, the few students of color enrolled on this hypothetical campus have two options for participation in student organizations. Option A: they could try to adopt and assimilate the norms of those who operate most successfully within the mainstream, with hopes of eventually integrating into those groups. A student can do this by, for example, joining a traditional fraternity, sorority, dining club, honor society, athletic team, student government, or some other long-standing university service group. Such students might also regularly participate in pep rallies and attend sporting events, which might enable them to develop a stronger sense of affiliation with their campus.

Perhaps the biggest drawback of option A is that when students blindly pursue it, they often find that it compromises their cultural heritage or sensibilities. After all, those who have traditionally occupied that space have typically viewed the cultural practices and norms of many students from historically excluded groups as deviant or inferior.

Students who either failed in their pursuit of option A or were not prepared to deny or abandon an important aspect of themselves have another option: avoiding assimilation (option B). There are many reasons

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why a student of color would either resist or simply fail to become involved with a student organization. Sylvia Hurtado and her associates, in *Enacting Diverse Learning Environments*, highlighted two widely documented reasons, apart from financial considerations: (1) for some students of color, engagement is too personally taxing, and (2) they may not feel comfortable but rather alienated on campus. Both reasons can arise in part from the disconnection between those students' heritage or background and the existing options for student involvement.

By not engaging in organized activities, these option B students end up spending their out-of-class time while on campus in what may be described as the margins of the mainstream. They attend to their course work, and those who eventually complete their degrees move on without having made even a minor impact on the racial dynamics of campus life. Similar to option A, this option also does not disrupt prevailing arrangements, and it subsequently surrenders the power for dictating cocurricular life to those who have traditionally occupied this area. Moreover, those who end up on the margins do not reap the benefits of valuable campus resources that their student fees help to support. Lastly, Alexander Astin consistently found in his research that failing to become more involved on campus has negative effects both on students' ability to persist in college and on their level of college satisfaction, among other outcomes.

Campuses have historically held those newly entering groups of students responsible for adjusting to the majority culture rather than making broader changes to the campus environment to better serve all students. Although this may have worked with a fair degree of success for campuses in the past, students from groups that had not entered higher education in significant numbers had much more distance to travel before they became more closely aligned with campus norms, values, and practices. Some also had more academic distance to travel as a result of unequal academic preparation. Not surprisingly, this arrangement created

a set of circumstances whereby those students from groups who had a longer history of enrolling in higher education continued to function much more adeptly within traditional student organizations, even as the composition of the student body changed around them.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS ON RACIALLY DIVERSE CAMPUSES

THE OPTIONS FOR PARTICIPATION in student organizations, however, tend to look different for students of color when the enrollment is racially diverse. Consider another hypothetical campus, which, unlike the previous one, has a more diverse student body and a longer history of educating such a population. One thing that stands out on this campus is the additional cocurricular option available to students of color (option C). This option, inspired by student movements in the 1960s, occurs when students not only resist the other two options but also demand resources to establish additional organizations that revolve around cultural and political interests that are more closely aligned with those communities with which they most identify.

Historically, achieving substantive resources to establish new organizations did not come easily, and those initial demands required active persuasion, if not protest. Such student activism has been widely chronicled in student newspapers, and some cases even received national attention. If students are persuasive enough and receive adequate resources to establish separate organizations, they provide for themselves and other students an alternative option for academic, social, cultural, and political integration and expression on campus. This option empowers those marginalized students by enabling them to play a more significant role in campus life. In short, it gives them greater control over their own educational experiences and status on campus, and it provides a space to also engage in shaping institutional norms and practices.

Not surprisingly, as the proportional enrollment of students of color increases, so do the number of organi-

zations devoted to their interests. What is interesting is that on more racially diverse campuses, student clubs and organizations tend to be organized by both race (for example, an organization for Asian students) and ethnicity (organizations for students who may be Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese, or Indonesian). As the number of student organizations increases, they are further differentiated by political, religious, career, and other interests (organizations for Korean Christians, Asian feminists, Thai entrepreneurs, and so on).

For example, Loyola Marymount University (LMU), where I once worked, has organizations such as the Black Student Union and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) that are more racially defined, as well as organizations such as the Vietnamese Student Association, Isang Bansa (to promote Pilipino and Pilipino American student interests), and Na Kolea Hawaiian Club, which are more ethnically defined. Additionally, LMU has organizations that are further differentiated by other interests: the Black Student Business Association, preparing African American students for the business world; Chicanos for Creative Medicine, supporting Chicano and Latino students pursuing science careers; and Asian American and Pacific Islander Sisterhood, providing a platform for voicing feminist concerns. On my current campus, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), which is slightly more diverse and enrolls more students than LMU, the permutations of such student organizations capture even more groups and interests.

BALKANIZATION?

SOME OBSERVERS have expressed serious concerns about the strain and tension related to the proliferation of student organizations that are differentiated along racial and ethnic lines. The fear is that as the student body becomes more racially diverse, the campus necessarily becomes more racially divided or balkanized. Many charge that student clubs, as well as curriculum, organized around racial or ethnic groupings foster students' tendency to segregate themselves. Recent research by Anthony Antonio, however, does not seem to support this charge, particularly the extent to

which this occurs. Moreover, Daryl Smith and her colleagues reported in their review of the literature that organizing student groups and curricula with attention to race and ethnicity can have educational benefits. For example, student organizations that are specifically designed to support students of color appear to contribute to those students' retention, adjustment, and attachment to their institution.

Another related concern is that some white students have charged that they do not have clubs available to them to allow for the celebration or expression of their cultural heritage, and thus, their options are now much more constrained. Shrinking resources, a reality of higher education, will no doubt exacerbate the underlying tensions driving this charge, which are due in large part to political, cultural, and ideological differences. Regardless of whether or not such charges are accurate, educators must take them seriously because they can negatively affect campus racial dynamics. The mere perception that one group of students may be losing out on resources to another group can intensify negative feelings, which at worst can lead to destructive actions expressed through hate speech, property damage, or physical harm. The ramifications of such actions, even when perpetrated by only one student, can set back some of the gains made in improving race relations.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

ALTHOUGH the degree of racial tension and balkanization is often overstated and their source can be attributed to a small percentage of students, campuses for the most part have not done all that they can to maximize student opportunities for positive cross-racial interaction and enduring friendships. Many campuses have certainly taken those concerns quite seriously and have considered, if not actually implemented, a wide range of strategies. In thinking about ways to improve racial dynamics on campus through structuring student organizations, it may be helpful to examine two strategies that reside at polar opposites of a continuum.

One is to merge all organizations back into the mainstream (strategy A) and reduce any duplication

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created by racial or ethnic differentiation. The reasoning behind this strategy is that merging all the spin-off organizations would not only better use resources but also soften tension attributed to racial balkanization. To use as an example those organizations that are exclusionary by nature, one outcome of strategy A might be to merge those social Greek organizations that target African American, Asian American, or Latino students with mainstream organizations. When fully merged, these organizations would ideally operate as one united system rather than as separate unaffiliated systems that rarely communicate with each other. A similar merging has been achieved on most campuses for traditionally Jewish fraternities and sororities, which at one time operated as a separate system and did not typically affiliate with their mainstream counterparts.

Strategy A, however, poses some serious problems for those students whose organizations do not reside inside the mainstream. For them, this strategy looks like a retreat to the way things were before they had alternatives to choose from. In their minds, unless there have been substantive changes in the norms, values, and practices that once prevailed, this proposal would only serve to limit more than to expand their options. Although most students who are members of organizations that target the interests of certain racial or ethnic groups also wish to ease racial tension and promote understanding, they often have different ideas about how best to achieve those goals.

An alternative to strategy A that seems more appealing for students of color is to effectively dismantle the mainstream by eliminating the organizations within it that duplicate those outside it (strategy B). One extreme example would be to eliminate all those mainstream Greek organizations, while retaining their counterparts that mainly serve students of color. In all likelihood, however, the desired outcome—namely, to expand the horizons of those who engage solely inside the mainstream culture by participating in other organizations—can be achieved without eliminating it. Some desirable outcomes of strategy B might be, for example, increases in the participation rate of white students in the Black Student Union, MEChA, or fraternities

or sororities that are not part of the mainstream system. As an addendum to this strategy, it would also make sense for students in those racially or ethnically differentiated organizations to also engage in other ones outside of the mainstream groups (strategy C). Here, a desirable outcome might be achieved when a student involved with MEChA also becomes an active member of Alpha Phi Alpha, a traditionally black fraternity.

As it stands, the chances of uniting all the organizations by breaking down racial distinctions are highly remote. One major hurdle with any unification strategy is deciding who will take the first step. A fundamental difference between strategies A and B is that the former calls for students of color to bear the major responsibility for reducing racial tension or balkanization, whereas the latter calls for white students to do it. Regardless of who takes the first steps, change will require students to venture out of their comfort zones and take certain immeasurable risks by becoming outsiders. Until more students are willing to do this, my guess is that students will generally remain firmly grounded in their comfort zones and vigorously defend their own separate organizations, as new organizations that are racially and ethnically distinct continue to multiply on campus.

If students do not have opportunities for positive cross-racial interaction and become too comfortable operating apart from each other, leaving their comfort zones will become increasingly harder for them. When this occurs, students may miss out on some valuable educational opportunities. In my own research, I have found that the opportunity for a student to socialize with a student of a different race is educationally compelling. Developing cross-racial friendships has added benefits to students' learning by enhancing their intellectual and social self-concepts, ability to graduate, and satisfaction with college.

NEW POSSIBILITIES

THE CAMPUSES where I have worked, which enroll some of the most racially diverse student bodies, show signs that options for participation in student organizations and the dynamics of race have

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become much more complex, making room for new possibilities. Interestingly, as student groups that are differentiated by race or ethnicity multiply in a way that becomes more narrowly tailored around political or ideological positions, cultural or religious heritage, academic or career interests, the centrality of race diminishes considerably. Members of an Asian Pacific American student organization that traces its roots to civil rights-related interests and activism, for example, might well discover that they have more in common with members of other Chicano and Latino or African American organizations with similar civil rights-related interests than they have with those in other Asian Pacific American groups that focus almost exclusively on career development or cultural celebration. When students recognize this, it presents interesting possibilities for new student organizations.

Indeed, students at both LMU and UCLA have formed multiracial groups that have been organized around key issues that concern a wider range of communities. One example is Student Advocates for Bilingual Education, which students at LMU formed to advocate the reinstatement of bilingual education in California. Another example is the Affirmative Action Coalition at UCLA, which unites fifteen student organizations that seek to reinstate affirmative action in the University of California system. These examples suggest that race and ethnic ties still matter for students enrolled in racially diverse campuses, but those ties are not nearly as central as they once were to structuring student organizations in ways that are still relevant to their respective communities.

On highly diverse campuses, racial and ethnic ties also appear to be less central to dictating cocurricular options for individual students of color. Those students enrolled at UCLA and LMU, for example, can choose from seemingly innumerable ways to participate in student organizations. On those campuses, students of color are not limited to only three options in and around the mainstream but can choose from a range of permutations of those options. For instance, some students are associated with multiple organizations and move fluidly from one to another and at times might even straddle several of them. One of my former students, for exam-

ple, is the philanthropy chair of her sorority, the executive director of programming for the Student Welfare Commission, and an active member of the Chinese Student Association. Generally, the range of options for students who attend more racially diverse campuses is quite fascinating, and circumstances on those campuses better allow for all students to find suitable ways to be engaged. The wider range of options for student involvement on more diverse campuses present new possibilities not only for participation in student organizations but also for racial dynamics on campus.

Even with some thoughtful and substantive intervention on the part of institutions, campus racial dynamics seem to be evolving toward their own inescapable conclusion. The circumstances described here seem to suggest that racial and ethnic identification will continue to matter as the undergraduate enrollment becomes increasingly more diverse, but the centrality of race for structuring student organizations will slowly but surely weaken as student groups differentiated by race and ethnicity continue to multiply. This weakening may be accelerated when an institution confronts a crisis, whether fiscal, political, or social. To protect their interests and further their goals, student groups may find themselves building new coalitions to combine human and other resources. As we have already observed on some of the nation's most racially diverse campuses, these coalitions will most likely be multiracial. It is unclear, however, whether these fragile cross-racial coalitions will last. What is clearer is that these student-initiated coalitions emerge from a context where students can freely choose from and form a wide range of organizations.

Although broadly illustrating different examples of campus racial dynamics can provide some sense of what may occur when enrollment shifts, it does not provide easily applicable solutions. This limitation is largely due to the fact that no single campus model can be applied universally to effectively nurture both unity and difference. Thus, each campus can essentially chart its own unique course, and depending on how serious each one is about maximizing the educational benefits associated with increased racial diversity, the future may either be quite promising or daunting. What generally seems to work, however, are those campus strategies that can

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accommodate critical enrollment shifts in thoughtful ways that allow students to choose freely from and to form responsibly a wide range of student organizations. In such a setting, students have a much better chance of recognizing for themselves the differences that really matter as well as the interests that they have in common.

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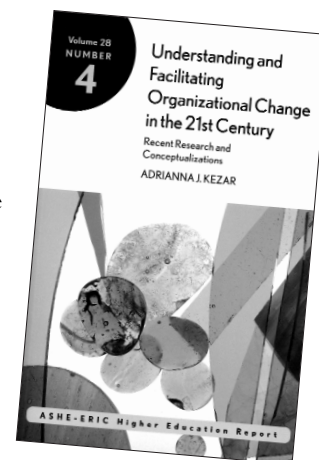
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