

Critical Race Theory within Graduate Education: Connecting Theory with Practice

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Graduate enrollment patterns of students of color suggest that a gap in graduate enrollment persists between Black and Latinx students and White students despite an overall increase in enrollment. Graduate enrollment depends, in part, on student aspirations for graduate study, which is influenced by undergraduate student success and sense of belonging. Using a lens of Critical Race Theory, this paper seeks to explore the nature of undergraduate student experience and how it impacts aspiration to graduate study. It also provides a framework to facilitate equity-minded academic advising, providing a positive space for students of color to explore graduate aspirations.

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Despite the increase in students of color participating in graduate programs, access to graduate education remains disproportionate between White students and students of color, specifically, Black and Latinx students (Okahana et al., 2020). Sixty-four percent of enrolled graduate students in 2016 were White, 14% were Black, and 10% were Latinx (Okahana et al., 2020). This paper seeks to examine how undergraduate advising can influence graduate study participation by students of color through equitable access to academic support resources that influence academic success and graduate aspiration. An equity-minded advising framework is then proposed to facilitate undergraduate advising of students of color to improve graduate aspiration.

Research suggests that academic advisors are central to undergraduate student success and subsequent graduate degree aspiration (Drake, 2013; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of academic advisors in facilitating

such success. Academic advisors identify patterns affecting the student experience because of their frequent interactions with students, and they provide administrators insight into the collective student experience (Aljets, 2018). Academic advising often integrates aspects of career advising, contributing to graduate degree aspirations (Lynch & Lungrin, 2018). More importantly, frequent advising interactions with students can provide Black and Latinx students with a safe space where they can access resources that help them be successful in the graduate admissions process (Yeung, 2020).

While there have been attempts to construct models to provide a framework for graduate school aspiration (English & Umbach, 2016), such models do not account for structural elements of racism and racial microaggression that significantly impact the realities of undergraduate education for Black and Latinx students. Racialized experiences influence graduate school aspiration, application, and enrollment of students of color in various ways. Race plays an important role in establishing involvement, sense of belonging, and academic excellence with undergraduate students of color (Case, 2013). Undergraduate Black and Latinx students are more likely to experience racism and racial microaggression from academic advisors, faculty members, and peers (Strayhorn, 2013). As a result, Black and Latinx students who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) are less likely to utilize academic resources because of a culture of exclusion created by racism and racial microaggression (Booker, 2016; Nadal et al., 2014; Weir, 2017; Yeung, 2020). Access to resources is defined by positive relationships with academic advisors for undergraduate academic success and guidance on the graduate admissions process (DeLaRosby, 2017; Museus, 2021; Yeung, 2020).

This paper will discuss how the principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be used to examine the experiences of students of color as

they navigate undergraduate academic advising as a means to the graduate admissions process. An equity-based academic advising framework should be considered to better serve undergraduates of color as they consider graduate study.

Critical Race Theory

Originating from the legal system, CRT was created by legal scholars who were dissatisfied with how classic tenets of general legal theories did not address social forces on legal change (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Specifically, civil rights policies in the 1970s served the political interests of elite liberals rather than communities of color (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT suggested that the existing system legitimizes structural discrimination (Bell, 1989; Freeman, 1978). Because racism advances the interests of those who are White, there is little incentive and social pressure to eradicate it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additionally, achieving racial equity requires an expansion of litigation outside of civil rights, and “meaningful equity” (Green, 1995, pp. 300) may not be achieved otherwise. Race is a social construct created by dominant groups of society to establish dominance. Race is embedded in social relations and structures, many of which are naturalized by the knowledge-making disciplines we inherited and reproduce, including higher education structures (Crenshaw, 2011). CRT aims to eliminate racism as a larger goal of eliminating all forms of racial subordination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Matsuda, 1991).

It is important to acknowledge various branches of CRT such as LatCrit, AsianCrit, and DesiCrit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These branches offer a more nuanced discussion specific to their respective racial and ethnic groups, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Within higher education, CRT suggests that the education experiences of students of color are impacted by structural racism (Ladson-Billings, 2017). The policies, curriculum, and climate of higher education institutions reflect the complex relationships between race, property, and expression (Patton, 2016).

Despite existing research describing racism experienced by students of color on college campuses (Booker, 2016; Harwood et al., 2018; Nadal et al., 2014; Yosso et al., 2009), higher education researchers are generally unwilling to

view higher education research through a CRT lens (Harper, 2012; Patton et al., 2007). When race is discussed in higher education research, this is often explained away or unacknowledged (Harper, 2012). Using CRT in higher education provides a framework to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of higher education that maintain dominant racial positions within colleges and universities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT may be used to understand how subconscious biases, rooted in the race-blind policies that influence academic advising, help create an environment that excludes undergraduate students of color (Museus, 2021; Museus & Ravello, 2021). There are multiple tenets to CRT that help academic advisors explain and understand racial biases within their practice, but the tenets most applicable to this discussion are color blindness and the Myth of Meritocracy, racial realism, intersectionality, and counter-narrative.

Color Blindness and the Myth of Meritocracy

Color blindness emerged as a response to political conservatives’ opposition to the policies influenced by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Within higher education, this was initially aimed at affirmative action policies that admitted Black students into colleges and universities historically inaccessible because of segregation and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Color blindness later permeated all aspects of higher education, including academic advising. It led to the adoption of meritocracy as a means of evaluating success and suggested that educational inequality is the result of education choices rather than racism, discrimination, and color-blind policies. On its face, meritocracy is perceived to be the fairest way to provide educational opportunities because it assumes a level playing field. However, this hurts students of color because it ignores the influence of structural discrimination (Crenshaw, 2019; Lipsitz, 2019; Zamudio et al., 2010). Society fails to realize that inequitable access to opportunities exists for people of color because of discriminatory policies and history (Lipsitz, 2019). Within academic advising, meritocracy disadvantages students of color. Academic advisors who adopt a policy of color blindness assume that any deficit within the student’s academic performance is a result of their academic abilities rather than an influence of institutional and

structural factors (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Pendakur, 2020).

Academic advisors, who utilize research to establish best practices in advising, may not be aware of the influence of racism if this is not held accountable in existing literature (Harper, 2012). Research in higher education has not given colleges and universities support to consider race and racism in their policies. In an analysis of research in higher education, Harper (2012) found that while much has been written about racial gaps in access, achievement, and attainment in higher education, most research fails to mention racism as a factor. Color blindness becomes problematic in higher education as it silences the racialized experiences of students of color (Vue et al., 2017).

The failure to recognize racism in higher education is compounded by the fact that graduate admissions policies rely heavily on color blindness and merit. Admissions to graduate programs are defined through merit-based processes that place students of color at a significant disadvantage compared to their White peers (Harper et al., 2016). Studies that examine admissions policies of graduate programs (Andrews et al., 2006; Bersola et al., 2014; Posselt, 2014; Potvin et al., 2017; Scherr et al., 2017; Utzman et al., 2007) prioritize grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores of applicants when making admissions decisions. Such practices are problematic for two reasons. First, racism and microaggression tend to result in students of color having lower GPAs and standardized test scores (Ladson-Billings, 2017; Zamudio et al., 2010), partly because of a lack of equitable access to academic advising (Booker, 2016; Davis et al., 2004). Second, GPA and standardized test scores are considered objective measures of academic merit, potential, and talent but are in fact measures of wealth and privilege enjoyed by most White applicants (Garces, 2020). For many, testing costs and access to resources prevent students of color from applying to graduate programs (Hadinger, 2017; Ramirez, 2011, 2013).

While academic advisors have little control over graduate program admissions processes, it is necessary to consider how the structural influence of color blindness establishes an exclusionary culture for Black and Latinx applicants. In practice, when academic advisors believe they are color blind when working with students, they fail to recognize the systemic nature of racism

that influences their students' experiences (Lee, 2018).

Racial Realism

Color blindness and the assumption of merit-based processes ignore the existence of racism within higher education. CRT's tenet of racial realism suggests that race and racism control all aspects of American society (Bell, 1980, 1992; Freeman, 1978), permeating our social, economic, and political structures (Bell, 1980, 1992; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Race and racism are therefore central to the subordination and the establishment of racial dominance (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This means that higher education institutions are established as sites of power, where oppression of students of color is reflected through policies and actions of faculty and staff members (Pusser, 2004).

Students of color encounter racism and racial microaggression in their interactions with peers, advisors, and faculty members (Eimers, 2001; Harwood et al., 2012, 2018; Hurtado et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2014; Sax et al., 2018; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano et al., 2005; Yosso et al., 2009). Academic advisors have perpetuated racism and racial microaggression by discouraging students of color from applying to graduate programs as undergraduates, suggesting that those programs are too competitive for the student (Ramirez, 2011, 2013). This oftentimes discourages participants from approaching them for further help (Ramirez, 2011, 2013). Academic advisors, who perpetuate racism and racial microaggression, contribute to a hostile campus environment that prevents students of color from engaging with and accessing beneficial campus resources (Kanter et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2013, 2016; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Nadal et al., 2014; Warner, 2019; Yosso et al., 2009).

Intersectionality

In addition to considering how racial identity of undergraduates and racism influences academic success and graduate aspirations of students of color, it is imperative to mention that the combination of various identities of the individual influences their experiences and interactions with power in society. Intersectionality focuses on the need to acknowledge differences between groups (Crenshaw, 1991). More recently, intersectionality expanded to include the intersections of race, gender identity, sexual identity, and immigration

status (Harris & Patton, 2019). Intersectionality is most applicable when considering how different identities of individuals intersect in a way that such experiences cannot be subsumed under traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). The significance of intersectionality is not just that multiple identities have an impact on how individuals experience racism, but that it examines multiple inequalities (Collins, 2015) within the contexts of power and oppression.

Within higher education, intersectionality can be applied to how students of color navigate their undergraduate, graduate admission, and graduate school experiences. Black women, Latinx women, and undocumented Latinx immigrants experience racism in unique ways (Awad et al., 2015; Domingue, 2015; Enriquez et al., 2019; Walley-Jean, 2009). Intersectionality allows us to consider how intersecting systems of power—race and gender or race and immigration status—are interrelated and oppress individuals differently. Examples include discrimination on physical appearances (Lewis et al., 2013; Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020) for Black women and in accessing financial aid and limited geographical mobility (Abrego, 2006; Diaz-Strong et al., 2011; Enriquez et al., 2019) for undocumented students. Such microaggressions have also been experienced by Black and Latinx students in their interaction with academic advisors (Johnson et al., 2019).

Counter-narrative

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) described counter-narrative as a means to tell the stories and share experiences of those who are often overlooked in history or in policy. Counter-narrative is based on the belief that racism is reinforced through a *master narrative* (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). White privilege and supremacy are reflected through stories told by the majority, reflecting assumptions and stereotypes of the oppressed class. Additionally, the master narrative seeks to reinforce subjugation of minority race groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling allows people of color to share marginalized experiences and challenge the dominant discourse on race (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Within academic advising, the use of a master narrative is reflected in the racism and racial-microaggression encountered by students of color, where assumptions and stereotypes of them

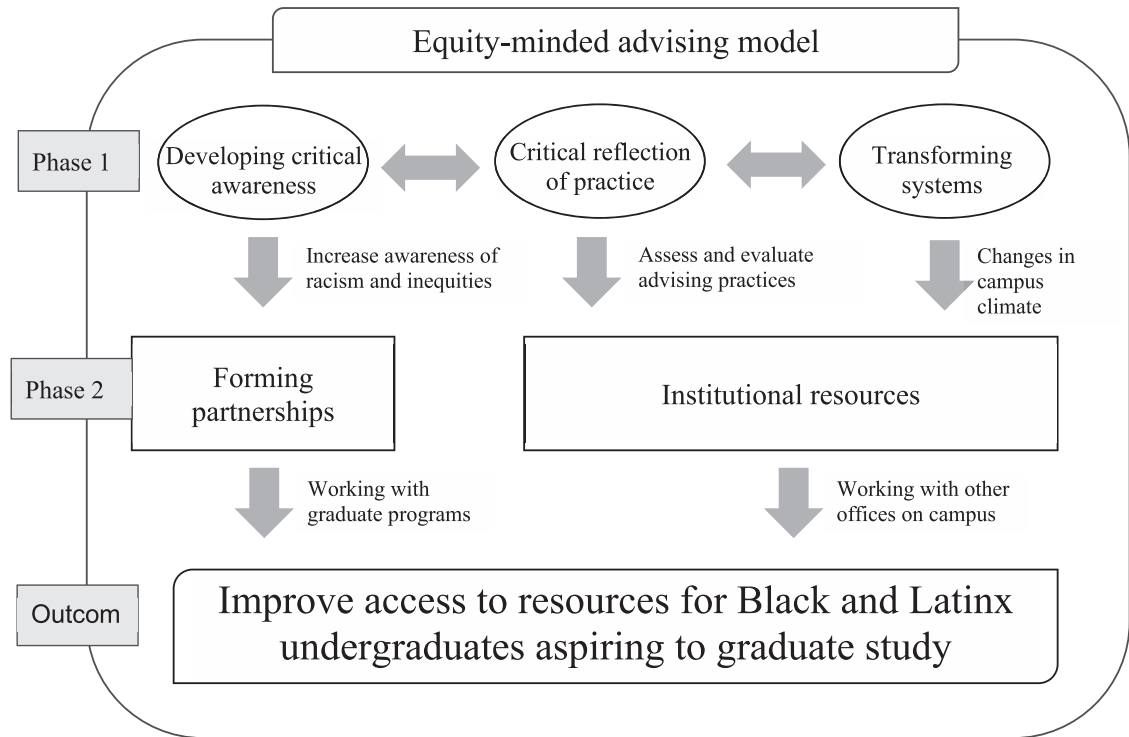
are reinforced (Booker, 2016; Davis et al., 2004; Hurtado et al., 2011). The use of counter-narrative has allowed Black and Latinx students to share their marginalized experiences (Hadinger, 2017; Ramirez, 2011). Within academic advising, counter-stories serve four functions: they build community among students of color and with the advisor providing the space to do so; they challenge the majoritarian narrative about race and academic success; they provide new insights into the reality of undergraduates of color; and they teach advisors that rich stories, narratives, and experiences can be constructed by juxtaposing individual experiences and reality.

CRT allows academic advisors to develop an understanding of how structural and individual racism can heavily influence the undergraduate student experience and academic success. The tenets of CRT presented create an academic environment that places deliberate barriers for Black and Latinx undergraduates. Color blindness and the Myth of Meritocracy provide an understanding of how race-neutral policies and processes do not consider challenges that Black and Latinx students must overcome to be academically successful. Individual racism and racial microaggression influence student relationships with their advisors and their willingness to use beneficial campus resources. Intersectionality allows researchers to consider how the different identities of a student can create disproportionate challenges for groups of students.

Equity-minded Advising for Student Success

The challenges faced by undergraduates of color when navigating the graduate admissions process is a result of structural racism within higher education. Higher education institutions position success as a student's responsibility (Pendakur, 2020). Institutions assume that it is the student's responsibility to navigate institutional resources, but access is limited because of racism and racial microaggression from faculty and staff members. While graduate programs are responsible for increasing enrollment of students of color, the academic advisor can facilitate student success and aspirations to graduate study by providing resources that lead to undergraduate academic success.

Equity-mindedness centers the responsibility of education on the institution and forces institutions to address how they create equitable opportunities for students (Pendakur, 2020).

Figure 1. Equity-minded Advising Model for Academic Advisors

Considering racial equity in the engagement and recruitment of students of color addresses the lack of access to academic resources and humanizes their racialized undergraduate experiences (McNair et al., 2020a).

Figure 1 shows the equity-minded recruitment model to advise undergraduates aspiring to graduate study. The model proposed here is an adaptation of both McNair et al.'s (2020b) and Toretzky et al.'s (2018) models. McNair et al.'s (2020b) model of a Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) framework requires institutions to participate in a process of truth-telling of racial injustice, racial healing, and transformation. Toretzky et al.'s (2018) framework for recruitment, retention, and academic success in the health professions provides specific student and faculty member recruitment and provision of academic resources to increase the recruitment and retention of students of color.

The role of the academic advisor as the main resource for students becomes important within this framework. As discussed, students who experience microaggression or stereotype threat from advisors find themselves hesitant to access

institutional resources. Academic advisors, who can employ an equity-minded framework, create a welcoming environment for students of color seeking academic success.

It must be noted, however, that some of these practices may be intuitive for academic advisors, and that advising offices may have already incorporated these elements into their practice. Indeed, existing research suggests that advising offices and academic advisors incorporate practices that contribute to the success of racialized minority students (Museus, 2021; Museus & Ravello, 2021). The aim of this framework is to allow advising offices and faculty advisors to consider their practices within the larger contexts of the university community, to consider how those practices impact aspiration to graduate study, and to reflect upon how they can invest in the improvement of their work by being more intentional about their practices.

Phase 1

Phase 1 requires advisors to develop critical awareness, reflect critically on practice, and seek to transform their systems and processes. These

aspects interact to create a racially equitable advising framework culminating in an environment that allows students of color to readily access advising resources and contributes to success in the graduate admissions process.

Within this phase, advisors adopt practices that evaluate and transform existing practices and address access to academic resources and structural discrimination. They must develop an awareness of their own assumptions and role in perpetuating inequities and assess and evaluate their own advising practices to create a transformation of existing processes and systems.

Developing Critical Awareness. Equity-minded advisors are willing to assess their own racialized assumptions, address their lack of knowledge in the history of race and racism, and engage in learning about the history of oppression and racial inequities (Bensimon et al., 2016; McNair et al., 2020b). They are willing to take responsibility for contributing to the oppression of historically underserved student groups (Bensimon, 2016; McNair et al., 2020a) and are committed to being responsive to the systemic nature of inequities (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Advisors committed to helping students of color navigate the graduate admissions process should consider how existing inequities within the education system—beginning in high school, if not earlier—contribute to a lack of opportunities to succeed academically. Academic advisors should consider

- the harm institutions may have done through existing policies that contribute to marginalization and oppression of communities of color;
- the advising office's contribution to marginalization and oppression of communities of color surrounding the college community.

Critical Reflection of Practice. Equity-minded advisors can critically assess racialization in their own practices (Beers, 2020). Critically reflective advisors rely on data to guide their understanding of education inequities, and they examine their practices to determine how they contribute to such inequities (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Academic advisors and advising offices should:

- Consider how knowledge of undergraduate education, resources, policies, and processes are created and the perspectives from which they are created.

- Critically evaluate how academic advising policies are created and applied to students.
- Critically evaluate if academic advising policies are created to consider race and racism experienced by students of color.
- Address Black, Latinx, and other students of color by their racial or ethnic identity rather than use generic terms such as non-White or underrepresented students.
- Be prepared to discuss race in a clear and direct manner.
- Know and understand the student and their background, including how their racial identity may have influenced their experiences, perceptions, and interactions with the advisor and the university.
- Review and assess policies for language that can disadvantage racially minoritized students and perpetuate historical educational inequities.

Transforming Systems. Academic advisors and advising offices who embrace equity-mindedness seek transformation of their systems (Bensimon et al., 2016; McNair et al., 2020a). Advisors reflect on their own advising practices, adopt antiracist policies and language, and are empowered to adapt and revise advising practice toward equity-mindedness (Bensimon et al., 2016). Advising is decolonized by creating spaces for diverse ways of participation and engagement (Parson & Weise, 2020) and treating student experiences and backgrounds as unique (Bensimon et al., 2016). Advisors should avoid making assumptions about student engagement (Parson & Weise, 2020) and consider student sociocultural identities and how educational inequities may have impacted their academic success.

Such transformation leads to a change in culture and attitudes toward diversity and inclusion, creating a safer and more inclusive environment for students of color (Quaye et al., 2014). Students realize that the advising office and academic advisors take responsibility (Malcom-Piqueux, 2017) in the continuous assessment of their own practices and can transform them using equity-mindedness as a guide (Bensimon, 2016).

Phase 2

After initial assessment and transformation of their individual advising practice in Phase 1, academic advisors can proceed to Phase 2, which allows academic advisors and advising offices to

enact the outcomes of their activities in the first phase. Advising offices and academic advisors adopt specific strategies to improve advising outcomes for students interested in graduate study. This includes the ability to point students toward resources for graduate study, institutional resources, and faculty and staff members who can improve the collective student experience.

Developing Critical Awareness: Forming Partnerships. Forming partnerships aligns with developing critical awareness from Phase 1. Partnerships with graduate programs reflect an awareness of systemic inequities (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017) and an acceptance of institutional responsibilities in perpetuating these inequities. This phase allows undergraduate advisors to create more effective partnerships with graduate programs to address access to resources for students of color aspiring to graduate study.

Studies show that not all advisors have access to information that can provide meaningful help to students considering graduate school (Ramirez, 2013; Yeung, 2020). Admissions requirements, the graduate study process, and career options vary. Advising offices and advisors should engage graduate programs in recruitment activities to share information with undergraduate students. Having access to such information, particularly from graduate programs, provides early exposure to graduate study options for Black and Latinx undergraduates.

Critical Reflection and Transforming Systems: Institutional Resources. Institutional resources—engagement with campus resources that contribute to student sense of belonging and student success—align with critical awareness and critical reflection. Academic advisors are in the best position to engage campus resources because of their frequent interactions with students and because of their understanding of university policies and resources (Aljets, 2018). This understanding addresses existing challenges of access to resources described by Black and Latinx students in the graduate admissions process.

First, academic advisors should work with offices of diversity and inclusion to revise and improve policies and processes for undergraduate students. Advisors should take the lead in these discussions early because of their impact on student success and graduate study aspiration (Hart-Baldrige, 2020). Working with offices of diversity and inclusion allows changes in campus climate that address racial neutrality, misunderstanding how enrollment and academic achieve-

ment is rooted within structural discrimination, rejecting stereotypes, and avoiding addressing race in a clear and direct manner (McNair et al., 2020). Faculty and staff members, who consider themselves race-neutral, show a lack of awareness regarding institutional racism's impact on the student's academic success (Lee, 2018), and they perpetuate color-blind practices that place Black and Latinx students at a disadvantage.

Second, academic advisors should directly engage with other campus resources that impact student success and sense of belonging—offices that provide academic tutoring or serve specific populations, university writing centers, and libraries. Direct engagement includes the use of constant, direct communication to ensure that information about the availability of resources is provided to students and to provide a specific point of contact for them. This engagement humanizes the student experience, creating a more welcoming atmosphere where students feel safe accessing other institutional resources.

Improved Access to Resources

The steps taken by academic advisors in Phases 1 and 2 culminate in improved access to resources for undergraduates of color. Academic advisors, who can take responsibility for their roles in perpetuating inequities and racialized advising practices, create a culture that respects student differences and is cognizant of existing power structures that have oppressed students of color thereby creating a more inclusive environment for students of color (Quaye et al., 2014). Academic advisors who utilize a culturally conscious model create more positive advising experiences for racially minoritized students (Museus & Ravello, 2021).

An equity-minded framework addresses issues highlighted in existing research on undergraduate student experiences that influence their aspiration to graduate study. Academic advisors who address racialization in their practices are more cognizant of their biases toward students. This awareness reduces racism and racial microaggression experienced by undergraduates of color. The advising office's ability to work with institutional resources to create dialogues on equity-mindedness also improves overall campus climates that may have been hostile to undergraduates of color because of racial microaggression and university policies that inadvertently reinforce oppression.

Limitations

While the equity-minded advising framework seeks to improve access to resources for graduate study for students of color, limitations exist. The role of the academic advisor is to assist students in completion of their undergraduate study. Providing access to resources for graduate study remains secondary. However, students who work closely with their academic advisors and experience academic success may go on to consider graduate study because of positive experiences with their academic advisors.

Also, this framework considers the experiences of students enrolled in PWIs. Existing research suggests that students of color who attend PWIs are more likely to experience racism and racial microaggression (Strayhorn, 2013). This framework does not consider the experiences of students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Minority Serving Institutions.

Finally, this framework assumes an advising model where academic advising is the primary responsibility of academic advisors. While it does not consider advising models where academic advising is a secondary responsibility of faculty and staff members, the recommendations provided can be applied to these models.

Conclusion

Despite the pervasiveness of research on the experiences of undergraduates of color in higher education, research has often stopped short of attributing racism and discrimination to the experiences of students (Harper, 2012). Without the recognition that race and racism are central to the undergraduate experience, undergraduate academic advising will continue to use race-blind policies and practices that invalidate the experiences of students of color. These policies and practices perpetuate a hostile and exclusionary campus climate for Black and Latinx undergraduates and influence academic success and graduate aspirations.

CRT underscores the importance of having racially conscious policies and processes. It establishes a foundational understanding of how academic advising is blind to the impact of structural and individual racism and how it can influence student experiences, academic success, and aspiration to graduate study. The gap in Black and Latinx participation in graduate education is most often attributed to a lack of access to campus resources that help those students be

academically successful and aspire to graduate education. The lack of access is defined by individual and structural racism that exists within the processes, policies, and practices of colleges and universities and academic advising. Equity-minded advising practice creates an opportunity for academic advisors to assess and improve their own practices and institutions. This provides a framework to establish an intentional, racially conscious advising practice for the benefit of all students.

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