



# Digest of Recent Research

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Edited by **Matthew J. Mayhew**

with assistance from **Eric McChesney**

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The **Council of Independent Colleges (CIC)** is an association of more than 760 nonprofit independent colleges and universities, state-based councils of independent colleges, and other higher education affiliates, that works to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of independent higher education's contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on services to leaders of independent colleges and universities and state-based councils. CIC offers conferences, seminars, publications, and other programs and services that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, student outcomes, and institutional visibility. It conducts the largest annual conferences of college and university presidents and of chief academic officers in the United States. Founded in 1956, CIC is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit [www.cic.edu](http://www.cic.edu).

## About the Digest

CIC's *Digest of Recent Research* is a compendium of summaries of research that independent college and university presidents are likely to find helpful. The *Digest* highlights timely research from scholarly journals and other publications with a focus on findings useful to presidents and to other leaders of independent colleges and universities. Edited by Matthew J. Mayhew, William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration at Ohio State University, each *Digest* offers a brief summary of selected articles that includes a discussion of the findings and implications for action by the leadership of independent colleges and universities.

Article reviews in the *Digest of Recent Research* can be downloaded as a single document (PDF). For questions or comments about the *Digest*, please contact Jason Rivera, CIC director of strategic research, at [jrivera@cic.edu](mailto:jrivera@cic.edu).

## About the Editor

Matthew J. Mayhew is William Ray and Marie Adamson Flesher Professor of Educational Administration with a focus on higher education and student affairs at Ohio State University (OSU). Before coming to OSU, he served as an associate professor at New York University and an administrator at Fisher College and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Mayhew's research examines college and its effects on students. To support this line of inquiry, he has been awarded over \$17 million in funding from sources including the U.S. Department of Education, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Fetzer Institute, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Merrifield Family Foundation. He is lead author of *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence That Higher Education Works* and has published over 70 peer-reviewed articles in top-tier journals in the field. Mayhew has served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, and the *Journal of College Student Development*. He earned his BA from Wheaton College (IL); his MA from Brandeis University; and his PhD from the University of Michigan.

Assisting with this issue is Eric McChesney, a PhD candidate in higher education and student affairs at Ohio State University and a research associate with the College Impact Laboratory. His research interests include the cultivation of interdisciplinary skillsets, STEM graduate training, and innovation.

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# Frozen and Failing: Administrative (Non)Response to DEI Incidents

Garces, L., B. Johnson, E. Ambriz, and D. Bradley. 2021. "Repressive Legalism: How Postsecondary Administrators' Responses to On-campus Hate Speech Undermine a Focus on Inclusion." *American Education Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211027586>.

## SUMMARY

How do university administrators think about and conceptually frame their institutions' responses to hate speech on campus? How do they negotiate the tensions between legally protected free speech and their imperative to protect students from harmful speech? This embedded single-case study examines the responses of 16 administrators at the University of Texas at Austin in the context of the post-2016 election hate speech environment and several free speech lawsuits faced by the university. Leveraging a conceptual framework that spans organizational theory, cultural analysis, and several forms of legal theory, the scholars forward the argument that a form of "repressive legalism" overdetermined the university's responses to controversial speech and resulted in preventing it from pursuing inclusive practices.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Public universities, like UT Austin, must maintain a balance between the protection of freedom of expression and the promotion of inclusive policy. This balance has become more difficult to maintain as access to information has become instantaneous and self-curated, hate speech has become more widespread, and racial and political polarization has increased. A careful examination of how these administrators framed hate speech-related incidents illuminates the powerful influence of external threats from the prevailing legal context that largely determined the suite of responses available to the institution and unnecessarily prevented it from pursuing its inclusive mission. The findings provide guidance for leaders of CIC colleges and universities.

The researchers observed that their participants tended to acknowledge the harms that stem from hate speech, but legitimized its many instances as legally protected under the First Amendment and outside the scope of institutional prevention. Administrators framed their responses to these incidents in light of the external pressures and fears of legal action from advocacy groups and a conservative state legislature. This coerced institutional leaders into adopting policies that appeared neutral regarding the content of hate speech and prompted them to ignore the patterns of historical exclusion and power imbalances between those who frequently produce and those who frequently receive hate speech on campus. Thus, a culture of repressive legalism, the authors argued, served to hinder the achievement of equity in the face of incidents of hate speech.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

Formulating effective institutional responses to hate speech remains a challenging process that is dependent in part on the legal, policy, and political environment surrounding the institution. However, instituting content-neutral speech policies need not prevent administrators from acknowledging the specific harm hate speech causes, nor does it demand ignoring the context in which this harm occurs. As a state institution, UT Austin needs to understand its constituencies and frame issues of equity accordingly. The manner in which a message is crafted requires a balance of acknowledgement of hurt and a reduction of risk to the institution at large from internal and external sources. Although independent institutions have more latitude in the types of policies they can enact, they are just as likely to

face a complex environment of stakeholders and consequences depending on how the policies and actions are perceived.

Effective, and fully legal, responses might include finding ways to empower the voices of the harmed and marginalized on campus, instituting campus-wide training regarding the effects of

hate speech, and creating intergroup dialogue programs to help prevent hate speech from being voiced in the first place.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Liliana Garces is an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Texas at Austin.

Brianna Davis Johnson is a program manager in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at the Ohio State University.

Evelyn Ambriz is a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin.

Dwuana Bradley is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Southern California.

## **LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT**

Ben-Porath, S. R. 2017. *Free Speech on Campus*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hutchens, N. H., and F. Fernandez. 2018. "Searching for Balance with Student Free Speech: Campus Speech Zones, Institutional Authority, and Legislative Prerogatives." *Belmont Law Review* 5 (5): 103–127.

Waldron, J. 2012. *The Harm in Hate Speech*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

# It's Not Just Exposure: Adjusting Institutional Engagement and Behavior to Improve Transfer Student Enrollment and Success

Wang, X., S. Y. Lee, B. R. Nachman, and X. Zhu. 2021. "It Matters Long Before: How Early Exposure to Faculty and Advisors at Baccalaureate Institutions Relates to Upward Transfer." *Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20956659>.

## SUMMARY

Although many community college students desire to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a baccalaureate degree, less than one in five fulfill this aspiration—prompting questions regarding how receiving institutions can mobilize their resources to support transfer student retention. This longitudinal study was conducted at three Midwestern community colleges and focused on 860 transfer students who had received STEM training. The scholars reported that community college students who had early exposure to faculty members and/or advisors from a baccalaureate institution were almost twice as likely to transfer successfully over the next three years, even when accounting for other methods of interacting with baccalaureate institutions and personnel.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

While much research has examined the role of community colleges in preparing students for successful transfer experiences, less energy has been dedicated to the crossover space of transfer itself. The findings presented in this study indicate the continuing importance of interaction with faculty members and advisors in generating aspirational momentum among students and providing them with the various forms of capital needed to actualize these aspirations. The study also clarifies several concrete actions baccalaureate institutions can

take to effectively strengthen their partnerships with community colleges beyond the usual development of articulation agreements and provision of campus visits.

By broadening the “web of transfer support” (p. 111) institutions may be able to contribute to the efficacy of these partnerships and better support the readiness and sense of belonging experienced by transfer students who are disproportionately drawn from historically marginalized communities.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

The importance of creating genuine connections between institutions is critical for success with transfer populations. While colleges and universities may enter into agreements to ensure curricular integrity for students, these institutions should also ensure that transfer students are supported by faculty and staff at their incoming institution.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Xueli Wang is a professor of educational leadership at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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Xiwei Zhu is a doctoral student in educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

## LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT

Fink, J., and D. Jenkins. 2017. “Takes Two to Tango: Essential Practices of Highly Effective Transfer Partnerships.” *Community College Review* 45 (4): 294–310.

Hatch, D. K., and C. E. Garcia. 2017. “Academic Advising and the Persistence Intentions of Community College Students in Their First Weeks in College.” *Review of Higher Education* 40 (3): 353–390.

Wang, X. 2020. *On My Own: The Challenges and Promise of Building Equitable STEM Transfer Pathways*. Harvard Education Press.

# You Belong with Me: Helping First-Gen Students Find Their Place at Your Institution

Museus, S. D., and T. Chang. 2021. "The Impact of Campus Environments on Sense of Belonging for First Generation College Students." *Journal of College Student Development* 62 (3): 367–372.

## SUMMARY

How do educators create belonging on campuses for first-generation students? Defined as "those reporting that no parent attended college" (p. 368), first-generation college students (FGS) have been identified as an important social identity group for consideration, with a number of empirical efforts documenting their distinctive experiences before and during college. In addition, sense of belonging has been routinely identified as critical for retaining students from minoritized identities (see Strayhorn, 2018).

Controlling for a host of theoretically justified covariates (race, age, living situation, and employment status), the authors found that the more campuses were able to validate these students regarding their backgrounds and identities, the more likely the students were to feel that they belonged on campus.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Several factors were identified as important for consideration, including first-year students' perceptions of and experiences with educational environments that provided: a) greater access to people with whom they share common backgrounds and experiences, b) community-relevant learning opportunities, c) service projects that allowed them to give back to their respective communities, d) clear messaging about campus values that were grounded in what the authors called "collectivist orientations" (p. 367), and e) experiences that validated their backgrounds and identities. Although all these factors were important for understanding sense of belonging among first-year students, the experiences that validated their backgrounds and identities were most important. These experiences were related

directly to sense of belonging and indirectly due to its relationship between with the other factors listed above. It is also worth noting that participation in service projects that allowed first-generation students to give back to their respective communities was related directly to sense of belonging.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

The study provides a number of implications for campus leaders. In the authors' words, "With regard to practice, campus leaders that seek to improve sense of belonging among FGS should provide structures, spaces, programs, and events designed for these students to connect with other people who are also the first in their families to attend college. For example, orientations could be designed to connect first-generation students with peers, faculty members,

and staff who have themselves been first-generation students. Educators should also ensure that FGS have the opportunity to acquire and exchange knowledge relevant to their backgrounds and identities, such as at conferences and social events. Educators can also construct relevant service projects that give FGS the opportunity to give back to their pre-college neighborhoods and high schools, as well as to support other FGS on their campus (for example, through peer mentoring and tutoring programs for FGS)" (p. 372).

The authors also underscored the importance of adopting an equity-minded framework for creating educational solution sets that help first-year students. Rather than blame FGS for their lack of sense of belonging, educators should see themselves as change agents charged with helping these students succeed.

Also, educators who design service opportunities should take an equity-minded approach to the problems underserved populations face—and provide opportunities to learn about how

systems marginalize underserved populations, instead of focusing on why these populations don't just help themselves.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Samuel Museum is professor of education studies and director of the National Institute for Transformation and Equity at the University of California, San Diego.

Ting-Han Chang is a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at Indiana University-Bloomington.

## LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT

Strayhorn, T. L. 2018. *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students, Second Edition*. New York: Routledge.

Rendon, L. 1992. "From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American 'Scholarship Girl'." In *First Generation Students: Confronting the Cultural Issues*, edited by L. Zwerling and H. London, 55–64. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Toutkoushian, R., R. Stollberg, and K. Slaton. 2018. "Talking 'bout My Generation: Defining 'First Generation College Students' in Higher Education Research." *Teachers College Record* 120 (4): 1–38.

# Why Mental Health Matters: Factors Impacting Retention across the Student Lifecycle

Thomas, N., P. Barr, D. Hottell, A. Adkins, and D. Dick. 2021. “Longitudinal Influence of Behavioral Health, Emotional Health, and Student Involvement on Student Retention.” *Journal of College Student Development* 62 (1): 2–18.

## SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to examine the attrition of over 10,000 students who participated in a longitudinal study from 2011 to 2014 at a large urban institution. Cohorts of students were followed to determine the social, behavioral, and interpersonal factors related to retention over time. Findings suggested that attrition was related to behavioral health factors, including “increased depressive symptoms, antisocial behaviors, exposure to stressful events, and substance use” (p. 2). The authors also explored a variety of protective factors related to student involvement and concluded that their occurrence during the students’ early years was critical for deterring drop-out during college.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Through a series of rigorous statistical models, the authors were able to substantiate a noncausal relationship between behavioral health and student attrition. The authors worked with survey data, registry data provided by the institution’s Division of Student Affairs, and institutional researchers to curate a data set robust enough to capture behavioral health information and important student demographic and trafficking information. The variables collected in this data set—including gender, race, parental education, age, cohort, and SAT scores—were used as controls in the models. The authors then performed a variety of inferential tests to determine how this information was related to students’ attrition at five time points: Dropping out after the first semester,

second or third semester, fourth or fifth semester, sixth or seventh semester, and eighth semester.

Attrition across all semesters was related to greater occurrences of depressive systems, antisocial behaviors, and stressful events. Illicit-substance use was also related to an increased likelihood of attrition across time, but to a lesser extent than the behavioral health variables. In addition, this research empirically established the relationship between student involvement and attrition. The sooner a student becomes involved with a campus organization, the greater the likelihood the student will persist in future years. This effect is especially pronounced in earlier terms.

Importantly, some of the effects noted above were fully or partially mediated by

grade point average. This suggests that increases or decreases in grade point average might explain or partially explain drop-out patterns at certain times during the college years; this is not at all surprising given the strongly established and documented relationship between academic performance and student persistence.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

By developing a community of data curators and interested parties the authors were able to utilize a dataset that was rich in quality and content, and which then permitted complex understandings of the data, leading to improved potential interventions. Other institutions, with sufficient leadership directive and collective will, could also conduct these

types of community data-gathering practices. In the context of persistence, this team approach is the most direct route toward helping institutions make data-informed decisions regarding retention rates.

This research empirically supported the importance of getting students involved in campus organizations early on, and of keeping them involved through the first semester of their junior year. Getting students engaged in campus organiza-

tions anchors them in formal social experiences with their peers; both peers and friends are documented for their positive effects on student persistence (see Mayhew et al., 2016).

Campus leaders are encouraged to prioritize student behavioral health. Students come to college stressed, stay in college stressed, and probably leave college stressed, a situation which has only been worsened by the pandemic. What can educators do to minimize the impact of stress in college? Initiatives such as

well-being programs can certainly help, especially in the first year. In addition to this support, perhaps educators might adopt a case management approach to each student, where supports are mapped onto any given student's specific needs. The more overlapped support networks can be, with free-flowing information between parties, the more likely a student's needs can be met to ensure successful student outcomes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nathaniel Thomas is a graduate student in the psychology department at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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## LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT

Mayhew, M., A. Rockenbach, N. Bowman, T. Seifert, G. Wolniak, E. Pascarella, and P. Terenzini. 2016. *How College Affects Students Volume 3: 21st Century Evidence That Higher Education Works*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuh G., J. Kinzie, J. Schuh, and E. Whitt. 2005. *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

# The Duopoly of Diversity Data: Using Nuanced Data to Understand Diversity

Winkler, C. E., M. Mayhew, and A. Rockenbach. 2021. "Beyond the Binary: Sophisticating Diversity Climate Considerations and Assessments." *Research in Higher Education* 62: 556–568.

## SUMMARY

This article explores the intricacies of studying diversity climates at institutions and extends conversations of diversity climate beyond simple dichotomies of good or bad, positive or negative, productive or unproductive. The authors argue that diversity climate information is highly complex, pushing scholars and leaders beyond the comforts of arbitrary—however, efficient—labeling practices that may do more harm than good. In the context of this study of religious, spiritual, and secular diversity, the authors suggest that some climates may inspire the type of diversity experiences that optimize student learning.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Building on the strong work of Hurtado et al. (2008) and Harper and Hurtado (2007), the study empirically demonstrates what these scholars and others have suggested for a long time—that diversity climates are complicated to understand and even more difficult to assess. If not evaluated well, these factors can lead decision makers to faulty conclusions about how to advance justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus.

Using a higher-order factor model, the authors derived three ways of thinking about campus climate. The first, the productive climate, includes policies and practices that support students in wrestling with the discomfort often engendered by interactions with people across religious, spiritual, and secular difference. The second is the unproductive climate where students are unsupported and left struggling with dissonance on their own: Due to this lack of support,

students often experience psychological retreat and increasingly employ stereotypes. The third involves a provocative climate where students are in spaces that are neither productive or unproductive, but rather where they “are in the process of rethinking [their] assumptions about their own and other’s worldviews as a result of challenging discussions, disagreements, and even criticism.”

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BY CAMPUS LEADERS

Campus leaders are encouraged to assess their climates for diversity. This may involve a hybrid approach that both outsources evaluation to research shops equipped for benchmarking information in ways that make sense for the institution while also charging internal committees with the task of collecting their own data that speak specifically to the institution’s practice.

Although information efficiencies often become more accessible through the use

of bifurcated frameworks (for instance, good vs. bad, this vs. that), this oversimplification may lead to lost information or even misinformation that might undermine the assessment effort. The importance of disaggregating the data is key to understanding and utilizing results from climate surveys. This can present a unique concern for smaller institutions as the size of certain groups of students, faculty, or staff can become very small, very quickly; efforts should then be focused on protecting identities as much as possible but also understanding the nuances found on campus. Given the complexity of ideas involved with improving diversity practice, administrators and educators should pause and think outside of the box regarding diversity data gathering and analysis. Doing so may just inspire the kind of changes students need to feel supported as they struggle with encountering difference and their own lived experience, often for the first time in their lives.

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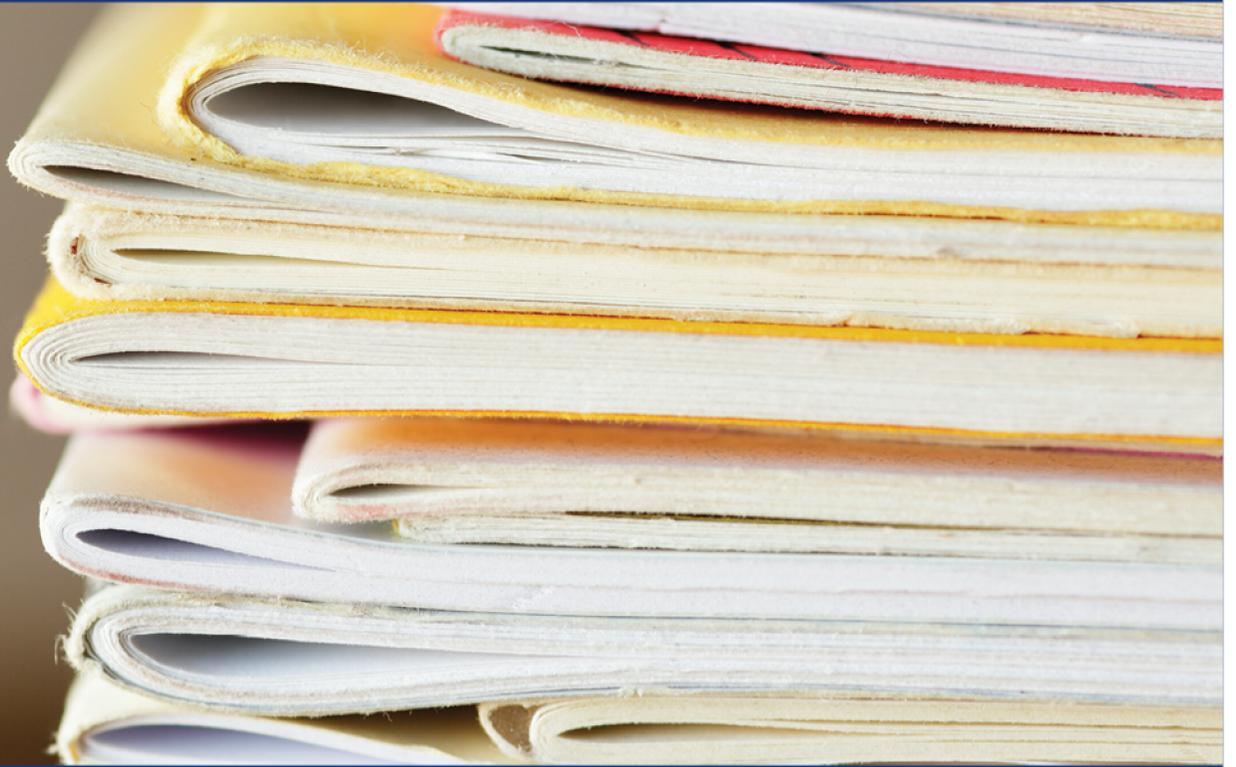
Alyssa Rockenbach is a professor of higher education in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development at North Carolina State University.

## **LITERATURE READERS MAY WISH TO CONSULT**

Hurtado, S., K. A. Griffin, L. Arellano, and M. Cuellar. 2008. "Assessing the Value of Climate Assessments: Progress and Future Directions." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 1 (4): 204–221.

Harper, S. R., and S. Hurtado. 2007. "Nine Themes in Campus Racial Climates and Implications for Institutional Transformation." In *Responding to Realities of Race on Campus: New Directions for Student Services* 120: 7–24, edited by S. R. Harper and L. D. Patton. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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