

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

The Critical Role of Faculty as Buffering the Impact of Discrimination on College Student Aspirations

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Title: The Critical Role of Faculty as Buffering the Impact of Discrimination on College Student Aspirations

Post-secondary students who belong to non-dominant groups experience discrimination that includes both subtle microaggressions and overt acts of bigotry and prejudice. There is growing evidence of the cumulative effects of perceived racial discrimination and stereotyping on the daily functioning, mental health, and academic outcomes of racial minority students (Musues, Lambe & Ryan, 2015; Wei, Heppner, Ku & Liao, 2010; Schmader, Major & Gramzow, 2001). During the transition to college, such experiences can lead these students to feel a global lack of belonging, which tends to undermine academic success (Yeager et al., 2016). Moreover, while in college, racial minority students continue to encounter discrimination in both academic and social spaces (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). Women who choose to pursue degrees in disciplines where they are historically underrepresented and where their abilities are stereotyped face similar challenges (Hill, Corbett, & St. Rose, 2010; Carlone & Johnson, 2007). Taken together, there is ample research to suggest that college students who face discrimination are significantly negatively impacted by such experiences.

Despite a rich and growing body of research supporting the negative impact of discrimination on college students, there is less research examining the specific role of faculty and particularly, the potential for faculty to mitigate the negative experience students may experience as a result of discrimination from their peers. In the present study, we examined the role of college faculty in mediating the relationship between discrimination and student aspirations (please see Figure 1). We hypothesized that when students trust that their faculty treat them fairly and can be relied upon to prioritize their needs, even when they experience discrimination, they report less stress and greater belonging at the University. This in turn has a positive impact on their future aspirations.

Survey data were collected from a diverse group of 327 undergraduate and graduate students at a Midwestern urban university with a student body of nearly 47,000. To measure discrimination, students were asked to assess the frequency in which they had experienced fifteen discriminatory behaviors. Specifically, they were asked the following: "Please indicate how often (on average) you have experienced the following situations while on campus, taking a course, or at a University event." The scale ranged from 5= Daily or Weekly, 4 = Monthly, 3 = annually, 2 = rarely, to 1 = never. A sample item was as follows: "I have had the feeling that someone was afraid of me because of my race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or another social group I identify with." Previously validated scales were used to measure stress, perceived belonging, trust in faculty and future aspirations related to education, leadership, and general achievement.

Preliminary structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses support the model presented in figure 1. More frequent discrimination was associated with greater levels of stress and lower perceptions of belonging. Higher levels of stress and lower levels of belonging were negatively

related to future aspirations in education, leadership and achievement. However, trust in faculty served as a mediator in this relationship. Additionally, responses to open-ended survey items indicate that college students often expect faculty to serve as role models for others to create a more inclusive campus climate.

Although our research team is just beginning the process of drafting a complete write-up of our findings, we anticipate that this research will help illuminate the critical role faculty play in student experiences with discrimination on college campuses. For example, faculty may contribute to the negative impact discrimination has on students by engaging in or supporting discriminatory behavior. They may also contribute negatively by passively condoning such behavior by not serving as an ally or holding others accountable for poor behavior. Yet there is another role that faculty may play, which is to prioritize students and seek to advocate for their needs. When this happens, students likely experience faculty as organizational representatives of the University who may help mitigate the negative impact discrimination can have on students and their relationship with the university as well as their future professional and personal aspirations.

The results of this study informed the development of a diversity and inclusion training toolkit with the goal of training faculty to be more aware of the important role they play in fostering an inclusive campus climate. The training is currently being piloted at this University. We anticipate being able to share evaluation data and participant reactions to the training as well as the results of this study in presenting our work at the upcoming conference in March 2022.

