Understanding Students’ Precollege Experiences With Racial Diversity: The High School as Microsystem

Julie J. Park, Stephanie H. Chang

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Few qualitative studies consider how high school experiences affect readiness for diversity engagement in college. Using data from an ethnographic case study, three central trends (student experiences within homogeneous high schools, racial divisions within diverse high schools, and students who attended diverse high schools but had little engagement with that diversity) illustrate how students can enter college without meaningful engagement around diversity, even when they attend racially diverse high schools. Findings underscore the essentialness of critically engaging students around issues of race and diversity during the college years, given the general lack of meaningful engagement prior to college.

In multiple Supreme Court cases, universities have argued for the ability to consider race as one of multiple relevant factors in determining college admissions. Since Grutter v. Bollinger and Gratz v. Bollinger, defenses of affirmative action in higher education have been largely based on the idea that engagement with racial diversity during college is paramount to vital learning and civic outcomes. As Michigan argued, part of why diversity engagement during college is critical is because the majority of students come from racially homogeneous high schools and residential communities, meaning that most students have little meaningful engagement with diversity prior to college (Gurin, Dey, Gurin, & Hurtado, 2004). Thus, engagement with racial diversity via college can spur active learning, challenging students to understand complex issues from a variety of viewpoints.

Numerous quantitative studies and demographic portraits of America confirm that US K–12 educational and residential communities are highly divided by race (see for example, Orfield, 2009; Sáenz, 2010). Studies also have shown how attending racially homogeneous high schools is linked with lower levels of engagement with diversity during college, particularly for White students (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Sáenz, 2010). However, there is little qualitative insight into how high school environments shape precollege experiences with diversity. This study aims to fill that gap by exhibiting and analyzing students’ descriptions of diversity, or lack thereof, in their high schools. Such information provides additional depth and understanding into how students come to college prepared or in some cases less prepared to engage with diversity. Student affairs educators often talk about “meeting students where they are” when engaging them in conversations about complex topics. This study aimed to assist educators by providing a fuller understanding of where students “are” in their engagement with and perspectives on diversity when they come to college.

Julie J. Park is Assistant Professor of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education at the University of Maryland, College Park. Stephanie H. Chang is a doctoral candidate of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education at the University of Maryland, College Park.
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

We begin this review of the literature by reviewing previous quantitative studies that documented the extent of racial segregation in US high schools and how it adversely affects students’ readiness to engage with diversity in college. We then review qualitative studies on how various types of high school environments, both diverse and homogeneous, affect high school students’ engagement with diversity prior to college. As we will show, although numerous studies have provided rich depictions of student life in high school, few studies have made linkages between the high school years and the transition to college as related to student experiences with diversity.

Exposure to Racial Diversity Prior to College

High schools in the United States are divided both along racial and socioeconomic lines. The average high school with 0–10% of students living in poverty is made up of 82% White students, whereas the average high school with 50–100% of its students in poverty is only 33% White (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Resegregation for low-income Black and Latino/a students has occurred, and these students are much more likely to attend racially homogeneous schools with high concentrations of students living in poverty (Orfield, 2009). In 2006–2007, only 14% of White students, 25% of Black students, 28% of Latino/a students, and 21% of American Indian students attended high schools classified as multiracial, and 36% of White students attended a high school that was 90–100% White in 2006–2007 (Orfield, 2009). Overall, only a fraction of students in the United States attend high schools classified as multiracial, meaning that college students enter college with minimal exposure to racial diversity. This trend has significant ramifications for how students actually engage with diversity during their college years (Park, Denson, & Bowman, 2013).

As part of the research examining the benefits of racial diversity in higher education, scholars are increasingly interested in how students’ precollege experiences with diversity, or lack thereof, shape their actual engagement with diversity in college. In most cases, precollege experiences with diversity have been represented by the racial composition of a students’ high school, although some studies have accounted for students’ precollege experiences with cross-racial interaction. Milem, Umbach, and Liang (2004) conducted one of the first studies that examined the role of precollege environments on college student engagement with diversity. They found that, for White students, coming from more homogeneous precollege environments (i.e., a composite of neighborhood, school, and peer group composition) was indirectly and negatively linked with cross-racial interaction during college.

Subsequent studies found similar results. Hall, Cabrera, and Milem (2011) discovered that attending a racially diverse high school was directly and positively related to students’ precollege interaction with diverse peers, which in turn was both directly and indirectly linked to higher levels of cross-racial interaction. Locks et al. (2008) found that, for White students, having a higher percentage of White students in their precollege environment was negatively related to positive experiences with cross-racial interaction. In the same study, attending a high school with a greater proportion of Whites was also negatively related to predisposition for engagement in diversity activities for both White students and students of color. Sáenz (2010) compared predictors of cross-racial interaction for White and students of color who attended predominantly White and predominantly minority high schools. He found that attending a university with a
higher percentage of non-White students was associated with higher levels of positive cross-racial interaction for White students from both types of high schools, whereas there was no effect for students of color. Also, White students who attended predominantly White high schools and who were involved in Greek life during college were significantly less likely to experience positive cross-racial interaction during college, suggesting that being immersed in the predominantly White environment of Greek life was especially detrimental to engaging with diversity for White students from mostly White high schools. Precollege exposure to diversity may also affect the relationship that exists between cross-racial interaction and various college outcomes. An analysis conducted by Bowman and Denson (2012) found that “relationships between college interracial interactions and college satisfaction are strongest among students who have had greater precollege exposure to difference and heterogeneity” (p. 419).

**Qualitative Studies of Precollege Engagement with Diversity**

Although quantitative studies have documented the role that high school environments play in shaping students’ actual engagement with diversity during college, qualitative research has seldom considered this aspect of the precollege environment. Albeit, there are comparatively fewer qualitative studies that focus on the benefits of diversity more generally, although numerous qualitative studies have explored other aspects of the campus racial climate and the experiences of students of color. Some studies on college students have included retrospective reflections on high school experiences. In studying men’s friendship groups, Antonio (2004) documented several instances of precollege experiences influencing men’s perspectives on the diversity of their friendship groups. Several students noted that their friendship groups were diverse in high school, which “led them to expect racial diversity in their [college] friendships” (Antonio, 2004, p. 562). Another student noted how his understanding of diversity grew during college, despite having a diverse friendship group at an international high school. He noted that in high school, he recognized that students from different nationalities were simply different. However, in college he came to recognize how diversity can exist within a particular ethnic group due to the variation in individuals’ experiences and perspectives.

Studying Korean American college students, Park (2012) found that some students reported feeling bewildered at how to approach diversity in college due to the contrast between their high school environment and the racial composition of their institution. In a phenomenological study of three college students’ journeys of becoming more open to social identity-based difference, Bergerson and Huftalin (2011) noted that none of the participants attended a high school where they were challenged to think about such differences; participants’ high schools were described as “limited” and “sheltered” in terms of engagement around diversity. The lack of meaningful engagement with difference underscored the salience of college as a time to reflect on their own identities as well as the diverse experiences of their peers.

Given this dynamic, university educators frequently challenge college students to consider how their racial or ethnic identity influences their sense of self, others, and the greater society, and they often seek to foster college student awareness of social identities; diversity; and systemic issues of racism, class, sexism, and heterosexism (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). However, this same type of engagement is far less common in high schools, as demonstrated in
multiple studies focusing on the high school environment. In her qualitative study of youth of color and their experiences with race and racism in middle and high school, Carter (2005) deconstructed how race, ethnicity, class, and family background influenced high school experiences. She noted that public high school curriculum increasingly focuses on graduating youth through standardized test and curriculum, with minimal attention to youth’s social and cultural experiences in and out of the high school setting (Carter, 2005; Phelan, Cao Yu, & Locke Davidson, 1994). Carter noted: “Schools are not just places where learning comprises how to read, compute, analyze, and synthesize information; they are also key sites of socialization and cultural reproduction” (p. 9). However, in the case of the students she studied, Carter found that, instead of helping students identify meaning or connections between their education and personal experiences, schools were “blind to their social, cultural, and material realities” (p. 163). By not incorporating Black and Latino students’ experiences in the everyday classroom experience, the socialization of students perpetuated notions of “Whiteness” (Carter, 2005, p. 162).

Numerous studies have illustrated the need for high school teachers to take a more intentional effort to connect learning with youths’ experiences, including aspects of their own racial/ethnic identity (Carter, 2005; Garner, Bootcheck, Lorr, & Rauch 2006; Pollack, 2004). Faircloth (2009) posited that giving students opportunities to engage and write about the various facets of their identities would facilitate a greater sense of belonging in school as well as a greater sense of self. After engaging 80 students in such writing exercises, Faircloth cited one student who wrote, “My favorite assignments are where I can talk about myself because no one really knows me for what I really am and usually people don’t understand what I have to go through in everyday life” (p. 338). Similar efforts could be instrumental in developing students’ self-concept and self-esteem during high school; however, few high schools make such intentional efforts (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Garner et al., 2006; Lee, 2006; Lew, 2004). Part of this general omission may be because high school educators often struggle to dialogue freely about race, even in diverse high schools where students are highly cognizant of racial dynamics (Pollack, 2004). Race may often be talked around or alluded to, but broader policy discussions are generally “colormute” (Pollack, 2004).

The transition to college from high school is “an exceedingly complex phenomenon” (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 61). Given that most high schools provide students with little engagement around issues of race, college is oftentimes the first time that students have to engage with such issues (Gurin et al., 2004). Furthermore, given the continued racial segregation of K–12 education, for many students, college could be literally their first time in a racially diverse environment (if their institution is racially diverse). Although one can make logical assumptions from the K–12 literature about students’ experiences, or lack thereof, of dealing with race prior to college, there is little research in the higher education or K–12 research base that actually has showcased students’ impressions of how their high school prepared them, or did not prepare them, to engage with diversity during college. Thus, our study addressed a critical gap in the literature by providing qualitative insight into how different high school contexts shape students’ precollege experiences with diversity.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study drew upon Bronfenbrenner’s person–process–context–time (PPCT) model
of ecological development, which has been advanced by Renn (Renn, 2003; Renn & Arnold, 2003) in the student development literature. Bronfenbrenner’s model focuses on how an individual (person) is shaped by experiences and interactions within an environment (process), immediate settings (context), and shifting sociocultural dynamics (time). In this study, we used Bronfenbrenner’s model to situate a student’s precollege experience within a broader ecology of social forces that shaped his or her development. More specifically, we were most interested in a student’s precollege engagement with diversity and race within the high school environment.

Bronfenbrenner proposed that there are four layers of context that shape an individual’s environment: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem is the closest and most immediate layer of influence, whereas the macrosystem is the most distal. The microsystem consists of the “face-to-face settings containing the individual” (Renn, 2003, p. 388). We proposed that, in a student’s precollege life, high school is one microsystem within a student’s environment, and students carry the high school microsystem into college as one of multiple microsystems that influence their learning and development related to diversity. Although there are subsettings or contexts within the high school experience that may be pertinent to consider, such as a student’s classroom experiences or involvement in student organizations, in this study, we focused on the general role of high school, its demography, and the experiences recounted by students.

The mesosystem consists of two or more microsystems that interact with one another, and Renn (2003) suggested that development may be spurred or impeded depending how a student handles the interaction between the two or more microsystems within the mesosystem. For instance, in a mesosystem, two microsystems may provide differing perspectives on an issue, and a student has to choose how to address the conflict. Although our study focused less on the role of the mesosystem, two microsystems that may interact or come into conflict with one another during a student’s college transition are how he or she negotiates points of difference between the high school environment and the college environment. Some quotations from participants in this study highlight this transition, as students described the contrast between high school and collegiate microsystems and how they made sense of the transition between environments. This study’s findings will help educators better understand how high school experiences related to diversity are one microsystem that exists in a student’s broader ecological environment that will in turn interact with other microsystems and layers of context in a student’s college experience.

The second two layers of context that shape an individual’s environment, the exosystem and macrosystem, are more distal from the student. The exosystem and macrosystem are relevant to understanding why students have varying precollege exposure to diversity, although we did not focus heavily on them in the study. Exosystems consist of the settings that influence student development, but the student is not directly involved in them. In the case of precollege exposure to and engagement with diversity, relevant exosystems could include policies shaping the high school curriculum and a school’s demographic makeup. The macrosystem is the broadest and most distal layer of influence; there are multiple broader social and historical forces that indirectly influence the type of high school a student attends and his or her ensuing experience. Such forces may include Supreme Court decisions mandating desegregation, state and federal education policies, and housing markets.
that influence where families can afford to live, among numerous factors. Although the exosystem and macrosystem are important to the complete PPCT model, this study concentrated on the ways different high school contexts shape students’ precollege experiences with diversity and the high school’s role as a microsystem. Still, we encourage readers to remember the numerous layers of context that surround an individual student and the high school they attend.

METHODS

The findings were part of a broader ethnographic case study of a multiracial campus religious organization, the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF), at “California University” (“CU”). As stated on the national organization’s website

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA* is an evangelical campus mission serving more than 35,000 students and faculty on more than 560 college and university campuses nationwide. Incorporated in 1941, InterVarsity has a rich tradition of campus witness, thoughtful discipleship, and a concern for world missions. (quoted in Park, 2013, p. 9)

Although it was not the central focus of the study, some of the participants noted how their involvement in IVCF, a multiracial organization, helped them process and understand issues of race and diversity during college. For more information on IVCF at CU and its approach to addressing issues of race, see Park (2013). Also, the majority of students attended church prior to college and, given that the vast majority of US churches (over 90%) are classified as racially homogeneous (Emerson & Chai Kim, 2003), precollege engagement in church is an additional site of socialization regarding race. However, in this study we focused more on the specific site of the high school in students’ precollege engagement with issues of race and diversity.

CU is a large and selective public institution. At the time of the data collection in 2007–2008, CU undergraduate enrollment was 3.3% Black, 0.4% Native American or Alaska Native, 38.6% Asian American or Pacific Islander, 14.7% Latino/a, 34.4% White, 3.6% international, and 5.1% unknown or other. In studying IVCF, we were interested in hearing students talk about their engagement with diversity prior to college. However, students were not specifically asked about the racial composition of their high school; thus, findings are based on responses from students who initiated discussion of their high school in describing their experiences with diversity prior to college.

Participants were recruited through a variety of means: an e-mail sent to the IVCF listserv, snowball sampling, and requests to students who were met through field work. Thirty-four undergraduate students active in IVCF were interviewed for the overall study, and the quotations displayed here come from the 10 participants (nine current undergraduates and one recent graduate) who mentioned their high schools during their interviews: Three of the participants were White, one was Latino, and six were Asian American; five were female and five were male. The sample included one sophomore, four juniors, four seniors, and one recent graduate. All participants attended high school in California, and all were assigned pseudonyms. Interviews took place during the 2007–2008 academic year.

Through an open-coding, qualitative data interpretation strategy, the lead author assigned codes to recurring themes, meaning that she first went through the interview transcripts identifying themes and patterns without a predetermined set of codes. Once high school racial composition was identified as a recurring
theme, she went back and recoded previous transcripts to check for the appearance of the theme. Drawing upon a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), codes within the theme were identified and compared with one another until several distinct categories emerged. There were three main categories or clusters of the vignettes that were coded as “high school”: (a) student experiences within homogeneous high schools, (b) racial divisions within diverse high schools, and (c) students who attended diverse high schools but had little engagement with diversity.

In terms of the authors’ identities, both are Asian American females. The lead author conducted the fieldwork, interviews, coding, and analysis, and the second author assisted with the literature review, theoretical framework, and discussion. As the one who conducted the fieldwork and analysis, the lead author’s positionality was most relevant. An Asian American from the Midwest who grew up in predominantly White schools, the lead author was fascinated with the students’ narratives on their high schools, most of which were far different from her own. The lead author’s status as an outsider to the West Coast made her curious to delve deeper into students’ experiences and to identify both the patterns that cut across students as well as the variation in their experiences.

As with any study, there were several limitations. By the time the analysis and write-up were completed, we no longer had updated contact information for participants, who had all graduated from CU; thus, we were unable to conduct member checking. As a measure of trustworthiness, a peer debriefer with no direct connection to the project was used at various points of the analysis to help assess the lead author’s positionality as well as to help test preliminary interpretations of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, readers should be reminded that the study captured only a facet of high schools in the United States and was not intended to be generalizable to all college students. Finally, although Black students were part of the broader ethnographic sample, due to the way the subsample was gathered (only students who mentioned their high school), there were no Black students among the 10 participants. Future studies can compensate for these deficiencies by recruiting a broader sample of students.

**FINDINGS**

We first display quotations from students who attended more homogeneous high schools and how that shaped their understanding, or lack thereof, of diversity and race. We then exhibit remarks from students who attended more racially diverse high schools. As we will demonstrate, even though several students attended more diverse high schools, they still entered college without meaningful engagement with racial diversity.

**Student Experiences With Homogeneity: “My High School Was Pretty White”**

Although students were not asked directly to comment on it, numerous students brought up the racial/ethnic composition of their high school. Most of the students who commented came from more homogeneous high schools, as was the case with Mary, a White senior. She commented:

I came from a pretty suburban area. My high school was pretty White; I guess I didn’t really think about ethnic diversity just because I wasn’t aware of it. I went back and looked in my high school year book, and I was looking at people’s last names, I was like, “I had no idea. I didn’t even think about . . . like this person was Latino. I didn’t even.” . . . I know it sounds so bad, but I had no idea. And so I think [IVCF] opened my eyes up a lot to
how different people experience the world and how different people experience. . . . I've been blessed by it, honestly.

Mary expressed how the racial homogeneity of her high school made her somewhat oblivious to issues of race. She later realized that she was unaware that some students of color actually were among her classmates. In contrast, participating in a multicultural campus fellowship, a microsystem from her time in college, made her more attuned to issues of diversity and difference.

Whereas Mary's experience took place in a suburban, predominantly White high school, Martin, a recent alumnus of the group, also had little contact with people of other races growing up in the inner city. He noted:

I'm a Latino from the urban city, the inner city. You know, Latinos maybe from the suburbs, they're probably a little bit more used to other races integration, but I was used to nothing but other Latinos and Blacks, so when I got here, you know, White people and Asians, it was just all completely new to me.

More specifically, due to high school and residential segregation, he had little contact with Whites and Asian Americans. He explained how that dynamic affected him once he started attending CU, a predominantly White and Asian American university:

When I first got here, it was like a culture shock. Nothing but a sea of blue eyes and blond hair, and so it was hard for me to actually go out and talk to people that weren't Latino. I felt more uncomfortable and it took me some time to kind of let go of that, but I was always a lot more . . . even the way I would talk to other Latinos on campus or Black people on campus was very different from the way I'd talk to a like a White person. . . . So it was very different and it took a lot of getting used to. I didn't have anything against anybody else, it's just that whole not knowing people, not knowing or having been immersed with other races just kind of made it feel uncomfortable, you know, so it took me awhile until I started actually.

The startling contrast between Martin's high school and college environment affected him in several ways. First, he experienced some initial culture shock. Second, he felt uncomfortable talking to Whites and found it easier to relate to other Latinos as well as Black students on campus. It took some time for him to feel more comfortable interacting with other races. In another part of his interview, he noted that becoming involved with IVCF, which had a strong Asian American presence, helped him make the transition. Like Mary, IVCF was a microsystem that helped buffer his transition to college as he made sense of the abrupt contrast between his high school and collegiate environments.

Two students shared experiences of coming from high schools with high concentrations of Asian Americans. Perry, a Chinese American junior, recalled:

In my high school it was just Asian domination or Asian invasion, whatever you want to call it. There were a lot of Asians and most of my students . . . and if you were a very high caliber student, always taking the honors classes, AP classes, most of your classmates tended to be towards Asian. Very few, if any, other ethnic groups. . . . There was barely any African Americans in our school, so I wasn't as sensitive to it I guess because everyone's Asian, so when you crack a joke like that everyone's going to laugh and no one's going to really be sensitive, but coming to CU, it has opened my eyes to the diversity.

He explained how in a high school with few Black students, there was little understanding of the harmfulness of racially charged jokes (presumably those targeted toward Blacks).
The lack of racial diversity in his high school made it difficult for students to be sensitive toward the feelings of other groups because there was no critical mass of other racial/ethnic populations. Mina, a Chinese American sophomore, who also attended a mostly Asian American high school, further commented on how she had little understanding of what it could be like to be in the minority prior to college. Mina was asked, “Did you really even think about things related to race before you came to college?” She responded:

Not really, no, because [my high school]’s pretty much all Asian and [my hometown] is pretty Asian, so it’s not something that really comes up because it’s not like . . . for me, I was in the majority, so it wasn’t really an issue. I don’t know, I had friends who were White or who were Black, and it was just normal. It was never something that to me was really a big issue, and so I came to college and they were throwing all these things at us and I was like, “Oh,” and I got to know another person, he’s Black, and just hearing his stories of the racism he’s felt and heard and I was like, “I don’t know if I could be react as well as you did in that situation.”

Being numerically well represented, Asian Americans experienced the comfort of being in the majority at Mina’s high school. However, in college, she benefited from hearing the perspectives and experiences of a Black classmate. Although Mina mentioned that she had friends who were of different races during high school, it appears that there was nothing there that pushed her to have conversations about issues such as race or diversity. In contrast, in college “they were throwing all these things at us,” suggesting that, in the collegiate environment, students were able to have more challenging conversations about race and racism.

Overall the quotations from students who attended more homogeneous high schools attest to the need for colleges to engage students around issues of race and diversity, given that students appear to have little exposure in high school. This finding is somewhat unsurprising, but what about students who attended racially and ethnically diverse schools? The next sections provide insight into these students’ experiences.

Diverse High Schools, Little Engagement: “That Was Just the Way It Was”

Some students commented on how distinct racial boundaries existed within their schools precluded meaningful student engagement across race. Warren, a White senior, recalled a memory from earlier years:

My elementary school was I believe 70 to 80% Latino. I was one of the . . . not few . . . I don’t want to say few children, but we were definitely the minority, and so every day we would have a time in our class where we would . . . the Spanish-speaking students would go and learn English as a second language and English-speaking students would go and learn Spanish as a second language. There were definite cliques based on race out on the playground, and so I was aware that I was White at a very young age. I wanted to play basketball with some of the Mexican students, but they had their own court, and if I wanted to go play with them, they wouldn’t let me play, but a Mexican could play, and then the White students had their own court.

Within the school, academic divisions divided students along ethnic lines. The playground dynamics reinforced these boundaries. Despite certain beliefs that children are color blind and do not become aware of racial/ethnic distinctions until later years (Lewis, 2001), Warren’s quote shows how such patterns can
start early in the schooling process.

Sarah, a Korean American senior, recalled the divisions at her high school:

Well, in high school, there was definitely segregation on my campus. You can look on our campus and you can see the White people in this area and the Asian people in this area and the Latinos and the African American students in this area, and for me, I grew up thinking that was just the way it was, that's just very normal and there's nothing wrong with that.

There was nothing at Sarah's high school that challenged the status quo of racial divisions that she took for granted as "normal."

Student Experiences in Diverse High Schools: “I Didn’t Think Much of It”

Some CU students actually did attend diverse high schools, but noted that they had little reason or opportunity to think deliberately about the diversity that surrounded them. Thomas, a Pakistani American senior, recounted attending a diverse high school in northern California:

I was definitely exposed to [diversity] because my high school I would say was pretty . . . had a pretty diverse community. There was a lot of Samoans, Tongans, Asians, so it was pretty diverse . . . but nothing that I really took time to explore/think about. I was pretty focused in high school.

His experience with diversity in high school was more one of exposure rather than engagement. Within the microsystem of high school, there was little that pushed him to thinkmeaningfully about the diversity that surrounded him. Nathan, a Chinese American junior, also shared that he had thought little about the diversity in his high school, despite being surrounded by it. After asking him if he had thought about issues related to race and diversity prior to college, he answered:

Not a whole lot. I went to a high school that was half White and half other . . . non-White, and so it was pretty ethnically diverse. It was kind of cool that way, I came from an elementary school that was Chinese and Hispanic dominated, so I’ve always grown up kind of around pretty diverse circumstances, but . . . I don’t know. What was your question?

Interviewer: Did you think about those types of issues?

Thomas: Not a whole . . . yeah, not a whole lot, but I think I’ve always been pretty surrounded by different ethnicities.

Once again the pattern was an appreciation for being surrounded by other ethnicities but less actual experience with thinking about and discussing difference.

Whitney, a White junior, attended a high school where she was a minority as a White student:

OK, my group of friends, my high school, it was very diverse. My classes were very diverse. I was used to being kind of the only White person in the room or one of two or three kind of in the classroom, so when I first came to CU, I remember being at orientation and like, “There’s so many White people here,” it kind of freaked me out. But I think as far as kind of discussing it, it was never really something that was discussed back home with my friends or things like that, other than joking around, so I think I have learned a lot even through the Race Matters discussions and things like that.

In Whitney’s case, she was conscious during high school of being in the minority, but the conversations actually addressing issues of race during this time were more superficial (i.e., jokes). Even with this experience of growing up in a diverse high school, she gained a lot from engaging in more meaningful dialogues about race through IVCF’s Race Matters program, a quarterly discussion on issues of
race and difference.

Like Whitney, some students were conscious of differences within their diverse high school environments but had no impetus to think deeply about the issues until college. Grace, a Korean American junior, grew up as one of few Asian Americans in an area that was predominantly White and Latino:

> My closest friend was Latino. I never really thought of it. . . . AP classes, at my high school, [were] all Asian and Jewish people, and so I was like, “Oh, this is interesting. I never noticed that until now. . . . Even though my parents raised me Korean, I don’t know much about my culture that much, but also being around White and Latino friends before . . . it’s not that I know about their culture that much, either, so I feel like I’m like this big blob of things, just gathering information. So coming here, I never really thought of it all that much. I noticed things, but I didn’t think much of it.

During high school, Grace observed various dynamics related to race at her high school, such as advanced placement courses being made up of mostly Asian Americans and Jewish students, despite the fact that Latinos made up a sizeable portion of the school. However, she did not reflect on the significance of the pattern until college, nor was she conscious of her own ethnic identity or those of her friends of different races. She described herself as a “big blob of things, just gathering information,” always noticing and observing but without meaningful processing about the issues.

**DISCUSSION**

This study explored how students’ high schools shape their precollege engagement with racial diversity. It provides a qualitative perspective on the racial composition of students’ precollege environments and how these environments often do not provide students with meaningful engagement around issues of race and diversity, even when students attend more diverse high schools. The findings shed insight into why critical engagement with racial diversity during college is essential given the general racial homogeneity of many precollege environments and the lack of meaningful engagement with diversity even in more heterogeneous high schools for many students. According to Braddock (1980), segregation in one area of life (i.e., residential or educational) basically begets further segregation, underscoring the need for racially diverse institutions to disrupt the cycle of segregation that pervades American life (Sáenz, 2010). This study reflected Braddock’s (1980) proposition by showing how racial segregation in various spheres of American life (i.e., educational) has real ramifications for how students are primed and prepared to deal with diversity in college. This is an important consideration for university educators as they challenge students to reflect on their social identities and engage with diversity as part of their development as conscious and engaged citizens (Zúñiga et al., 2007).

Given the limitations of the sample (10 students), the study did not showcase the voices of students who have grappled with race in a more meaningful fashion prior to college. Our intent was not to communicate that students never discuss race in a meaningful fashion prior to college, but that it is possible and even arguably commonplace for students to progress to college without having these conversations, even in more diverse high schools. Thus, several key patterns are apparent from these findings: (a) Many students do not have such meaningful engagement, although they may acknowledge and think about diversity in some fashion prior to college; (b) many high schools do little, if anything, to address these issues in a systematic fashion; and (c) racial diversity in high school does not
guarantee that students will have meaningful precollege engagement with diversity and race.

There are numerous possible reasons why students come to college with much to learn about issues of race and diversity. As was the case for some students in the study, both White and students of color, it may be a literal lack of exposure prior to college due to the racial homogeneity of their high school environments. As noted and consistent with participants’ experiences, high school educators may do little to encourage education around issues of race and diversity, even in more diverse settings (Carter, 2005). Another issue may be that students are less developmentally equipped to handle the complexity behind issues of race and diversity in high school than they are during the college years, underscoring the importance of the college years as a pivotal time for students to begin to understand, assess, and articulate multiple points of view (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). They may have some capacity to recognize, appreciate, and respect diversity, but the college years are especially ripe for students to develop a more nuanced, deeper, and complex understanding of diversity, race, and difference. The potential limitations of high school students’ developmental capacity to understand and grapple with these issues is not a reason for high schools to avoid engaging students around them; it simply means that there is ample work to be done during the college years in terms of deepening students’ understanding of the country’s diverse democracy and their role as citizens in it.

Notably, some students commented on the role of IVCF, the multiracial campus fellowship in which they were involved, in their college experience and transition as they began to process diversity issues and find a home at CU. Student subcultures like IVCF can serve as an intermediary microsystem that buffers the transition from high school to college. For example, Mary and Martin came from very different high school environments: a suburban predominantly White high school and an inner-city high school that was mostly Latino/a in composition. As they both entered college, the multiracial composition of IVCF and the opportunities it provided to discuss race helped the students bridge their high school and collegiate microsystems. For more information on how IVCF helped students process issues such as ethnic identity and working out race-related conflict, see Park (2013). The same phenomenon was true for Whitney, who had grown up around diversity but rarely discussed it prior to college—and IVCF’s Race Matters dialogues spurred her out-of-the-classroom learning. These experiences are obviously not limited to IVCF; for other students, different student organizations or peer groups may interact with the microsystem of their high school experiences to shape how they make meaning of the collegiate environment.

Although precollege exposure to racial diversity in high schools appears to positively affect student engagement around diversity in college (Locks et al., 2008; Milem et al., 2004), there is still room for growth in how students engage with diversity and race in college as well. As Renn (2003) indicated, using Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model, the microsystem or context of contact that students make across different racial identities and diversity matters. Our qualitative findings give voice to students on where they were at the starting point of this journey: the microsystem they inhabit prior to college and the one that they bring with them as they transition into a new environment. This provides educators with greater understanding of the microsystem that shapes students’ experiences prior to college. Students do not come to college as blank slates; they come with years of
prior socialization in various environments. Understanding students’ past experiences, or lack thereof, with diversity equips educators to better understand the multidimensionality of students’ experiences.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings underscore the importance for institutions of higher education to break the cycle of segregation, given that most students come to college with little engagement with diversity (Sáenz, 2010). Educators need to pay attention to the multiple facets of the campus racial climate in fostering an environment that is conducive to positive cross-racial interactions, interracial friendships, and meaningful conversations around race. A key element of a healthy campus racial climate is the racial diversity of the student body. Although it alone cannot ensure a healthy campus racial climate, cultivating racial diversity in higher education is an essential foundation that sets the stage for students to be able to learn from each other’s differences and life experiences (Gurin et al., 2004). However, educators and policymakers should consider that, not only do the majority of US college students come to college with little meaningful exposure to racial diversity, but even those attending racially diverse high schools may not be receiving adequate preparation for citizenship in a diverse democracy.

This study’s findings further underscore the need for student affairs educators to foster environments for students to grapple with difference during college, moving from coexistence to engagement. Student affairs educators are at the forefront of this task as they facilitate student learning both inside and outside of the classroom. Thus, it is critical to understand that students do not enter the college environment as blank slates—that precollege experiences matter in how students shape their understanding of self and others during the college years. College students face increasingly complex challenges that spur deeper and more complex ways of meaning making; they need both challenge and support as they come to understand issues of race and diversity. There is a unique opportunity here for student affairs educators to facilitate the integration of students’ precollege experiences into students’ existing curricular and cocurricular experiences.

Student affairs educators can support students as they make sense of their transition to college, including the shift from the high school to college environment, and stitch together the multiple microsystems that influence their evolving perspectives and worldviews on diversity. Our study provides some examples of possible scenarios that students might encounter, such as a student who goes from being part of the majority in his community to a minority on campus or a student who grew up in a diverse environment but has little critical awareness of race. Students may also need support to help them analyze phenomena such as so-called “self-segregation” and moving from a simplistic “why can’t just everyone get along like they did in my high school” response to a more complex understanding of why some students may benefit from time spent with those of the same race. Educators can reassess existing programs, such as intergroup dialogues, leadership retreats, living-learning initiatives, and other programs that may promote cross-racial interaction, to include activities and questions that directly relate to students’ precollege experiences with race and ethnicity. This would create and foster an opportunity for students to consider the influence of their past microsystem(s) or most recent “face-to-face settings containing the individual” (Renn, 2003, p. 388) on how they
understand and see race, diversity, and culture in the collegiate environment. Our findings speak loudly to the need for educators to take the initiative in offering students’ a broader array of perspectives and experiences related to race and diversity during the college years.

In addition, our findings suggest a need for future research on racial diversity in college to address students’ precollege experiences. Future research on students’ precollege experiences can explore the depth and breadth of high school experiences with diversity and their relationship to how students engage with diversity at the collegiate level. Using the themes of this study, scholars can further investigate how homogenous and heterogeneous high school environments influence how students make meaning of cross-racial interaction. They can also look beyond their school environment to consider how other precollege microsystems, such as neighborhoods and religious communities, contribute to students’ college experiences (Park, 2012). Another option is to measure or assess what it means for students to be developmentally equipped for cross-racial interaction or how developmental capacities are influenced by the structural components of an institution (e.g., demography, structural inequality).

Overall, our study reminds student affairs educators that, in order to meet students where they are, some understanding about where they are from—the prior worlds that they have inhabited and how they may be interacting with their present way of making sense of the world—is necessary. It may be troubling that most students lack meaningful and critical engagement with diversity prior to college, but it also underscores the essential role that student affairs educators have to play in facilitating student learning in this area.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Julie J. Park, Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education, 3214 Benjamin Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742–1315: parkjj@umd.edu
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