



Wounded Healers:

The Pandemic, Racial Battle Fatigue,
and Higher Education in California

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The quadruple pandemic (a four-part interconnection of health crises, financial calamity, climate change, and racial violence) of 2020 brought the equity gaps afflicting our communities, corporations, classrooms, and college campuses to the global stage. The pandemic widened disparities, causing our most marginalized populations to experience significant stressors, trauma, and barriers to wellness. The effects of 2020's pandemic and racial reckoning were catalysts in bringing the racialized experiences of Black students and professionals within systems of higher education into more visibility.

The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, along with the subsequent protests, led to an extremely and overtly tense racial climate. Responding directly to the urgency of 2020, many school and college campuses, corporate offices, and community organizations articulated their commitment to supporting racial Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEI or DEIB). In the face of pledges for racial solidarity, Black Americans, including Black students, staff, and faculty in higher education, grappled with the mental, emotional, and physical trauma that stemmed from the violence of 2020's racial reckoning.

Emerging from 2020's pandemic, this report voices the racialized experiences of fifty Black students, staff, and faculty in California higher education. This qualitative research study was conducted over the course of the 2021-22 academic year. The study centers on how the racialized experiences of 2020 exacerbated already existing equity, inclusion, and belonging gaps in higher education. The study is a part of a larger book and film project that provides voices for the social-emotional, academic, and interpersonal impacts of 2020 on Black Californians in higher education.

Fifteen years as an African American Studies professor combined with a lifetime as an African American man have taught me that race and racism can be employed to categorize, separate, and treat groups of people differently. As a social construct, race is powerful enough to divide a country that pledges to be indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. It is this differential treatment and the differences in experiences related to race that eventually wear on a group's mental, emotional, and physical selves. Differential treatment based on race has existed for centuries in the United States. It is not a new phenomenon.

During the shelter-in-place mandates of 2020's pandemic, those differential, negative racial experiences that Black Americans have long suffered culminated in some very high-profile murders. And those murders were captured and circulated virally for the world to witness. Consequently, 2020 bore a Racial Reckoning.

With that racial trauma present, combined with 2020's physical health risks, I witnessed how the global health pandemic took a toll on me and others. I witnessed how students were affected. I felt how families were struck. I experienced how entire communities became unhinged. Classes abruptly transitioned to an online format. Masks became mandatory. Stores closed. Jobs were lost. Hospitals filled up. And life turned upside down. The tumultuous events of 2020's pandemic reverberated into the 2021-2022 academic year and beyond.

With 2020's racialized murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery still fresh, I yearned to gain a deeper understanding of how the intersections and experiences of anti-Black racism, wellness, and the feelings of inclusion and belonging on campus shaped my Black students and my Black colleagues. I conducted a qualitative research study to gain their perspectives and to improve my understanding. Fifty anonymous, online survey respondents shared emotion-laden details with me, creating the qualitative data for the study. The respondents represented a combination of California community college students and higher education professionals at both two- and four-year institutions in California. The 50 respondents provided first-hand insight into their racialized experiences due to 2020's racial violence. They also suggested practical means for campuses to advance their support and increase equity, inclusion, and belonging in ways that mattered to them as Black people. These suggestions are detailed in the section, Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research.

The Pandemic, College Student Wellness, and Higher Education in California

Race, class, and gender notwithstanding, California's college students felt the weight of 2020's pandemic. Some of the typically expected social, emotional, and mental wellness challenges that students face on college campuses, such as performance anxiety or feelings of imposter syndrome, became a full-blown crisis during the pandemic. These health and wellness crises have implications yet to be fully determined. But there is research to draw from to better understand what students experienced during the pandemic.

The 2021 California Student Aid Commission's report, for instance, helped provide a window into the student experience during 2020's global health pandemic. One student in the report voiced: "I have been exposed to Covid and [it] led me to worry for my own health. I then found out I had no health insurance and was staying in my car because I have family with underlying medical conditions. Then my mental health was declining rapidly. The last thing on my mind was school. Covid has increased my anxiety levels and made it really difficult to learn and stay focused in class"(California Student Aid Commission, 2021, p. 6).

Further illuminating student health and wellness concerns, the Kresge Foundation/Steve Fund's recent mental health landscape brief articulated, "depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation are prevalent among college students generally" and have been exacerbated by the pandemic, extended isolation, and racial tensions (Tseng et al., 2016, p. 1201). The landscape brief further notes that: "Many college students experienced the compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the country's racial reckoning in addition to the ongoing stresses experienced, such as academic pressures, financial concerns, balancing the demands of school with employment and family obligations, and the day-to-day stressors of life" (Kresge Foundation and The Steve Fund, 2023, p. 4).

It is important to note that these problems were particularly acute for community college students, of whom research shows that, comparatively, community college students experience larger gaps in accessing health and wellness support than their four-year college counterparts. These gaps often make the community college student population's wellness more at-risk. According to Katz and Davison's study, *Community college student mental health: A comparative analysis*, "Compared to students at four-year institutions, students in community colleges face additional challenges, have fewer campus mental health resources, and report more severe psychological issues and less frequent use of mental health resources" (2014, p. 307-326).

Demographically Devalued: 2020's Black Student Experiences in Higher Education in California

Campuses in California's Community College (CCCs) system, California State Universities (CSUs), and the University of California (UCs) system of public higher education all experience gaps in racial equity, inclusion, belonging, wellness, and student success.

According to California Community College administrator Eric Handy, author of *The Impact of a Safe Space for African American Males in Community College* (2023), perhaps the gaps existing within higher education systems can be traced back to their respective creation, design, and inception. The 1960's California Master Plan for Higher Education split public higher education in California into a three-tiered hierarchy. At the top are California's elite level, four-year institutions, the University of California (UCs) system. The California State University (CSUs) system anchors the next tier. The final tier is represented by the California Community College (CCCs) system. The CCC system would offer the broadest access and lower division instruction to students who were not eligible to enter the CSU and UC systems directly. Handy offers that, "The California Community Colleges (CCC) system, like all of America's systems of schooling, were birthed from a fundamental landscape of systemic racial oppression... intended to disadvantage students of color in terms of access and equity" (Handy, 2023, p.12).

The CCC system has blossomed into 116 campuses throughout the state. Today's CCC system boasts a student enrollment of nearly 2 million students. Seventy percent of the students enrolled in the CCC system identify as students of color. The CCC system also enrolls the largest number of Black students in the nation. However, the California Campaign for College Opportunity posits that the "growing racial equity gaps obstruct the promise of educational opportunity for Black students and diminish the economic potential of our state. California is losing talented Black students because of bad policies, practices, and a lack of courage and political will to tackle this challenge" (Ed.gov, 2019, p. 4).

Furthermore, where institutional investment, financial, and other support resources are concerned, each of California's systems of public higher education has devalued their Black student populations. "When you follow the money, Black students are systematically underinvested in by the state when it comes to higher education funding, perpetuating economic inequity for Black Californians and the maintenance of a permanent underclass. Systematic underinvestment in Black degree attainment did not happen by accident" (Collegecampaign.org, 2021, p.2). The allocation of resources, especially financial resources with the increasing costs of college, indicates how much students and programs that support their inclusion, belonging, and success matter to a college system. So systemic financial underinvestments in California's Black college students point to their systemic devaluation.

2020's highly publicized, racially motivated murders of Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd sent shockwaves around the globe. The murders may have easily compounded any already present feelings of systemic devaluation for California's Black students in college. Experiencing those violent deaths, even on screen, was traumatic. Vicarious trauma can occur when you are exposed to traumatic experiences or stories of someone with whom you share a closeness or identification. The vicarious trauma of witnessing the end of another Black person's life undoubtedly exacerbated any pre-existing mental health and wellness issues among Black students attending Historically White Institutions (HWIs) in California. Moreover, those institutions were unable to tend to the specific needs of their Black students due to long standing devaluation.

According to research, "Historically White institutions (HWIs)—are places where, through hard work, they (students of color) can achieve the so-called American dream. However, for far too many Black men (and women), HWIs represent racial climates that are replete with gendered racism, blocked opportunities, and mundane, extreme, environmental stress (MEES)" (Smith, Hung, Franklin, 2011, p. 63). The stress of encountering and enduring a hostile campus climate, replete with discrimination and racial prejudice, takes a toll on Black students' mental and emotional health, affecting their academic success. Students expressed that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning facing communities in the wake of George Floyd's murder had profound effects on their mental health. For students of color at HWIs, their "perceptions of campus climate can affect their psychological health" (Kresge Foundation and The Steve Fund, 2023, p.5).



Wounded Healers: 2020's Black Employee Experiences in Higher Education in California

With regard to student success in higher education, student-facing campus staff and faculty (i.e., counselors, financial aid staff, professors, student life personnel, etc.) play pivotal supporting roles. Student-facing employees usually are the ones to encourage, uplift, mediate, serve as role models, and educate students. They provide critically important development for students' interpersonal growth and self-actualization. Unfortunately, "despite the fact that faculty are so crucial to students' academic lives, they are often underutilized and are grappling with faculty burnout, dissatisfaction, and resignations at growing rates" (*Diverse Education*, 2023, p.1).

The subsequent impact of the 2020 pandemic and the racial violence therein did not just have an impact on students on HWI campuses. The employees of those campuses were directly impacted. The vicarious trauma that students felt and reported also extended to the staff, faculty, and campus personnel who were responsible for educating them. According to Riba & Milani (2022): "Recent data suggest that the mental health of faculty and staff has also been impacted by the pandemic, with more than 50% of faculty respondents reporting a significant increase in emotional drain and work-related stress. So, in addition to supporting students, what can be done to better support faculty and staff?" (p. 1).

Riba and Milani further underscore that: "The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated many mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress, isolation, bereavement, substance use, suicidal thoughts, sleep difficulties, and economic challenges. Faculty and staff deal with these issues on multiple fronts: supporting students, supporting one another, and supporting their employers" (2022, p.1). Staff and faculty are tasked with maintaining multiple fronts. In essence, the student-facing campus employees, especially Black staff, faculty, and administrators, ended up as wounded healers in 2020.

So, what can be done better to support the student-facing faculty and staff in higher education? Research suggests that campus professionals need intentional support to maintain themselves and their sanity, within their on-campus positions. This support is especially imperative at HWI campuses. Black faculty and staff must be supported in equity, inclusion, and belonging, to facilitate student success. "At a time when faculty were teaching remotely and isolated from colleagues, they needed the same community and support that they were trying to provide for their students. We learned how critical it is to attend to faculty experiences of belonging, which empowered faculty and supported their ability to foster the same sense of belonging among their students" (*Diverse Education*, 2023, p.3).

In the case of California’s systems of public higher education, experiences of anti-Black racism are systemic and longstanding. Historically White campuses can often feel like Anti-Black environments teeming with racist sentiment, policy, and practice that affects our work. 2020’s racial violence impacted Black faculty and staff tremendously. The killings infringed on their collective sense of safety. The murders impacted mental health and wellness. Those high-profile deaths impacted relationships, lines of communication, and the ability to carry out job duties.

There is a descriptor for the racialized pain that the Black students, staff, and faculty experienced during 2020 and spoke candidly about: Racial Battle Fatigue. Coined by William Smith in 2003, the term Racial Battle Fatigue refers to the “psychophysiological symptoms—from high blood pressure to anxiety, frustration, shock, anger, and depression—people of color may experience living in and navigating historically white spaces” like college campuses (Smith cited in Adams, 2020, p. 2).



My Positionality

Since August 2008, I have had the privilege of teaching African American Studies and Ethnic Studies in the CCC system. In my field of study, we learn about race, culture, and ethnicity. Thus, racial histories and racial experiences become central to teaching and learning in my courses. My field of study, coupled with the social and political contexts of 2020, led me to conduct research on the racial experiences of Black students, staff, and faculty during the pandemic. The methodology for collecting this study's qualitative data involved canvassing Black, higher education organizations (i.e. Pipelines 2 Possibilities, the Umoja Community, Black Student Success Week, and A2Mend) and professional listservs (i.e. Umoja Program Coordinators, African American Studies) in California, for professional participants. I reached out to colleagues by phone and email who work with students to get connected with Black student participants.

After sending out three separate emails for participation, 15 Black, CCC students responded to my anonymous online survey questions. The remaining 35 I surveyed were Black professionals (staff, faculty, administrators), representing 2-year and 4-year colleges in California. In total, I anonymously surveyed and received data from 50 online participants during the 2021-22 academic year. Given the fact that higher education has been a historically racialized space, I wanted to provide an anonymous, safe, online opportunity for Black students, staff, and faculty to share and express their experiences, feelings, and hopes for equity, inclusion, belonging, and social justice in the wake of surviving 2020.

This qualitative research study gleaned perspectives from 15 Black students in the CCCs. Nine of the student participants self-identified as men and six self-identified as women. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 56 years old. Each student responded independently to an online survey of 19 questions about their campus and community experiences related to 2020's racial reckoning. Each student participant had the opportunity to provide additional written details and descriptions related to some of the survey questions.

Additionally, the research study surveyed 35 Black professionals across all tiers of California higher education. Sixteen of the thirty-five professionals surveyed self-identified as men, 18 self-identified as women, and 1 self-identified as other. The professionals answered 24 online survey questions independently. The professionals surveyed represented institutions within the CCC system, the UC system, the CSU system, as well as private universities in California. Their years of professional employment within California's multi-tiered systems of higher education ranged from four to over thirty years. Each professional had the opportunity to provide additional written details and descriptions related to their campus and community experiences stemming from the 2020's Racial Reckoning.

Between the students surveyed and the professionals surveyed, the 50 respondents provided reflections and feelings that mirrored each other. Collectively, and affectionately referred to by me as “The Black Voices,” they shed light on the experiences in the social and cultural margins of higher education. Their voices provide perspectives found at the intersection of race, age, higher education, and institutional/ structural racism. The Black Voices also gave perspective on where institutions can make changes towards equity, belonging, and inclusion and ways that campuses can consciously move away from the Anti-Black racism entrenched within the structures, policies, and practices of higher education.

Sample Research Questions

A sample of the twenty-three survey questions for the professionals included the following:

- Did experiencing these incidents affect or impact your ability to carry out your job duties as assigned? Please explain.
- Did experiencing these incidents affect your mental, emotional or physical health? Please explain.
- Did experiencing these incidents affect other areas of your life (home life, relationships, identity)? Please elaborate.
- Is your institution currently doing anything to support Black students and/or Black faculty/staff in dealing with anti-Black violence in the community? Please elaborate.

Similarly, the students surveyed as a part of the research study responded to a series of nineteen questions including:

- Did experiencing these incidents affect your academic progress? How?
- Did experiencing these incidents affect your mental or emotional health? How?
- Would you have wanted your professors or counselors to address the incidents? How?
- What would you have liked your college to do to support members of the Black community on campus when the incidents occurred? Please elaborate.

Survey Findings: Racial Battle Fatigue

“I had a hard time with the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. My school did very little to acknowledge the trauma that Black students, faculty, and staff experienced during that difficult time. I was expected to carry on like business as usual.”

The qualitative survey data received included personal feelings and an outpouring that was poignant, painful, and disheartening. Simultaneously, the survey responses were also real, heartfelt, and very forthcoming. As a Black practitioner, teaching African American Studies, the 50 survey respondents shared feelings and experiences that were very familiar to my own. Given the nature and history of the intersections of race and higher education, what was expressed was agonizing yet, unfortunately, unsurprising.

In the study of psychology, attributional ambiguity is a theory that plagues members of a stigmatized group who aren't able to effectively express what they are going through or name what they are feeling and experiencing. Individually and collectively, these 50 survey respondents were able to more effectively express what they were going through and how they were feeling. Whether or not they used the descriptor Racial Battle Fatigue by name, every Black student and Black professional interviewed expressed their experiences with what's now understood as Racial Battle Fatigue.

As Black people operate within society, race and ethnicity continue to shape social-emotional and interpersonal experiences. Whether on our campuses, in our cars, or in our communities, racism, racial stereotypes, racial microaggressions, racial equity gaps, and Racial Battle Fatigue are a part of the Black social experience. Racialized experiences occur in various facets of life. The racism experienced in higher education, however, becomes more evident by the following expressions from some of the student respondents surveyed. They illustrated their experiences during 2020's Racial Reckoning.

Referring to cumulative effects of racial hostilities experienced in predominantly white, higher education settings, Racial Battle Fatigue is detrimental to the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of Black people. For example, a 39-year-old student-parent at San Jose City College suggested that the Racial Battle Fatigue felt left them in a state of mental turmoil and worry. The student was unable to compartmentalize the aftermath of the racial violence. They stated, "I have a child and I'm worried about his future. I don't want him to end up being one of these victims. So, it keeps my brain in constant turmoil worrying about his future. I try not to let the negativity and reality set in to where I cannot complete my daily tasks. Although, I'm still thinking about it in the back of my head." Similarly, reflecting on the violence of 2020's Racial Reckoning, a 19-year-old Evergreen Valley College student said, "It (the racial violence) made me see the world and state of the country in a colder perspective than before, to the point where I'm disgusted with America."

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The Black professionals who were surveyed offered many of the same sentiments as the Black students surveyed. For example, an English professor at Riverside City College, expressed, “My concentration, emotional well-being and stress level were all affected by the murders. Unfortunately, my college didn’t show much concern for my health and well-being. They only desired work as usual.” A Contra Costa College history professor went on to say “The emotional fatigue and the weight on my spirit led to me falling into depression. That depression created sadness and then anger.” A history professor in Santa Clara offered that “My daughter watched on TV news the killing of George Floyd and developed anxiety from seeing that. She now believes that I’m going to be killed by the cops. I had to seek a child psychologist for help.” Additionally, a composition professor at the College of Alameda shared that “It stressed me out. I’m an avid runner. I adjusted one of the courses that I run after hearing of and seeing the video of Ahmaud Arbery’s murder while jogging.”

Mentally anguished. Emotionally triggered. Not feeling valued. Ignored and unheard. Physical exhaustion. Mental replays. Hypervigilance. Disgust. Vicarious trauma. Replacing the murder victims with self or loved ones. The voices of Black students, staff, and faculty revealed the hardships endured and overcome during the extreme racial violence experienced in 2020.



Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators are faced with instances of racial experiences frequently, often in the form of racial microaggressions. Plus, the psychosocial toll of Racial Battle Fatigue is genuine. Continued Anti-Black violence, Racial Battle Fatigue, and racial equity gaps make navigating the terrain of California's higher education systems tumultuous.

How will we see our campuses step up to support and uplift their Black faculty, staff, administrators, and Black students? When will we see colleges address the experiences of Anti-Black racism on campus? And when will we see our campuses step up to support and uplift their Black faculty, staff, administrators, and Black students? Simply hiring Black staff or admitting Black students is not enough. What is your institution doing to invest in their success once they arrive on your campus?

Based on the recent nature of this publication, coupled with the responses from the survey participants, it remains evident that the historically established patterns, policies, and practices of Anti-Black racism in higher education still impact the contemporary experiences of Black students, staff, and faculty today. What is clear is that systemic changes are required to understand, honor, and value the myriad contributions that Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators make toward their respective college campuses.



Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research

The 50 Black Voices surveyed offered meaningful recommendations, including ways that campuses, and individuals working on campuses, can show up in solidarity and worthwhile support of their Black faculty, staff, administrators, and Black students. In addition to recommendations that were made by students and professionals in this study, the following recommendations are drawn from my own experiences and research in higher education. The list is not exhaustive, however. Nevertheless, it represents actionable steps toward creating an Anti-racist campus where equity, inclusion, and belonging can thrive. Remember, campus environments where staff and faculty feel valued, heard, and respected for their contributions all lead to the success of students and a successful college. Several of the action steps listed below will improve the on-campus experience for people of *any* and *all* races and ethnicities.

- ✓ Acknowledge and address the incidents of racial discrimination, mental, and social-emotional harm that Black people report on your campus.
- ✓ Fund a campus-wide subscription to mental health and wellness apps such as Liberate Meditation, for example, that addresses the harms of racial stress.
- ✓ Fund on-campus spaces, staffed by Black professionals, to foster community-building.
- ✓ Develop and put into practice an Anti-Racism strategic plan specific to your campus. Be sure the plan contains a list of vetted allies and partners from the local community, including Black vendors, before it is implemented into campus operations.
- ✓ Update the language, visuals, marketing materials, and hiring practices that your campus uses when outreaching to potential Black applicants.
- ✓ Include routine implicit bias, unconscious bias, and Anti-racism training as a mandatory component of your campus's professional development and professional growth requirements, as well as for "on-boarding" all new employees and for all campus police employees.
- ✓ Create a food pantry, a clothing closet, and emergency grants for Black students faced with food, clothing, and financial insecurities.
- ✓ Conduct exit interviews where Black employees and/or students who leave your campus can openly and honestly share the reasons that led to their decision to leave.

Due to the inescapably unfortunate, traumatic, and devastating experiences that many students and higher education professionals had during 2020, the global pandemic, and its subsequent racial reckoning, we are reminded that the need for racial equity, inclusion, belonging, accessibility throughout California's systems of public higher education is ever-present. Black students, staff, and faculty have articulated loud and clear how systemically undervalued they are and feel across these three systems. No longer can ignorance or not knowing be utilized as an excuse for continuing disinvestment in their futures. For equity-focused campus leaders, the time is now to put meaningful practices, procedures, and policies into place that will support the Black students, staff, and faculty and add to the diversified beauty of the nation's higher education tapestry.

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