

# **Navigating Higher Education in Milwaukee: Black and Brown Student Perspectives**

## **Grant Report**

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### **Context, Significance, and Project**

Milwaukee is one of the most segregated metropolises and one of the worst for Black Americans. Segregation and inequity have deep historical roots and are structurally embedded in the housing, economies, policing, and education. These dynamics pervade Black and Brown everyday lives, development, and outcomes. One specific domain in which they are affected is educational achievement. Black and Brown students in Wisconsin have less access to higher education and lower graduation rates, while many institutions are plagued by issues of hostile or problematic campus climates.

These discrepancies are neither new nor hidden under the surface. Many local organizations and programs work to support young people from underserved groups in getting to and succeeding through college. Individual institutions of higher education also boast a growing number of initiatives and centers to support these young people in transitioning to and graduating from college.

While there are some connections across campuses, support for Black and Brown students tends to be focused solely within an institution or on general challenges with higher education (e.g., access, financial obstacles, social capital). What is overlooked is how historical and current dynamics shape these institutions and experiences of them.

Furthermore, Black and Brown students are not centered in conversations or programming about challenges, resiliencies, and trajectories as they navigate higher education in Milwaukee. Their voices and perspectives, however, are critical for developing more effective programming.

For the Advancing Social Equity (ASE) research grant, we sought to highlight Black and Brown voices through focus groups within and across three Milwaukee institutions of higher education: Marquette (MU), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), and Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC). We trained students from each institution in research methodologies, and these trained students co-facilitated focus groups first within each institution and then with students across institutions. We were interested in understanding underrepresented students' barriers to success they have encountered in their respective institutions, as well as experiences of Milwaukee and its role in their lives on campus.

In total, four student researchers were trained and nine conversations were held with 33 participants overall during the months of April and May 2021. These conversations lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, and the analyses lasted through the summer, with input from the trained student researchers, graduate research assistants, and faculty on the project.

## **Findings**

### *Marquette*

At Marquette, a clear theme across focus groups was a general feeling that Black and Brown students often felt uncomfortable on campus. This discomfort was tied to racial/ethnic experiences and climate, which fed into these students' expressed struggles to feel like they belonged or feelings that they were imposters on campus. Some of these participants talked about feeling like they were either boxed into a category as to their identity (i.e., they were expected to be and act a certain way) or had to represent their identity group in a way that was tiring and alienating for them.

In terms of peers, participants described feeling like they often had to educate or respond to other students who came from sheltered or homogenous backgrounds and carried with them explicit or implicit racial attitudes. At an institutional level, students expressed an overwhelming sense of frustration and fatigue surrounding the topic of race and the ways that Marquette has addressed racial bias and racially motivated incidents.

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5. MATC feeling of representing Milwaukee, but this fact is not recognized or celebrated

**Takeaways/Suggestions:**

Two concrete implications for institutions of higher education in Milwaukee emerge out of