



**Final Student Report**  
**Of**  
**The Campus Climate**  
**Focus Group Research Project**  
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## **Introduction to the Study**

The Campus Climate Focus Group Research Project was initiated at the request of the Campus Climate Committee (CCC), a Presidential advisory group composed of faculty, students, administrators, and staff. This study examines campus climate at SJSU based on data collected from thirteen focus groups composed of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. The initial impetus for this study came from findings of the 2006 Campus Climate Survey conducted by the CCC. As is common practice in social science research, this research project was designed as a “follow-up” study to offer a deeper understanding of the survey results (Morgan 1996). The primary goal of this research project was to explore experiences of campus climate through the lens of race, gender, sexuality and rank. Data collection began February, 2009 and ended November, 2009. The thirteen groups included in this study were: African American, Asian American, International, Latino, LGBT, and White students, and African American, Asian American, Latino, LGBT, and women faculty and staff, lecturers, and MPPs.

### **Introduction to Focus Group Methodology**

Focus group methodology is, “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (Morgan, 1996:130). Focus groups are generally small (6-10 people) and are convened for a one-time discussion of a specific topic (Reinharz 1992). The logic of focus group methodology resides somewhere in between inductive and deductive approaches. The groups are typically convened around a specific topic and are guided by an interview schedule, however, the research questions can also be treated as merely “probes” and the discussions allowed to range freely.

The advantage of focus groups (as compared with individual interviews) is that they can create a deeper exploration of complex topics as they allow participants to ask questions of and explain themselves to one another. Carey and Smith (1994) have termed this

phenomenon “the group effect.” The emphasis on interaction between participants allows for the opportunity for contradictory ideas to be expressed, and “the information that is produced is more likely to be framed by the categories and understandings of the interviewees rather than those of the interviewer” (Montell, 1999:49). The analysis produced from these data, therefore, is “grounded” in the social world of study participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The challenge of using focus groups for data collection also centers on the “group effect” phenomenon. Because group composition plays a large role in framing the dialogue that occurs, the manner in which a group is recruited becomes an essential part of the study design. Focus groups composed of otherwise unrelated participants can yield a qualitatively different data set, compared to focus groups recruited from existing and/or established groups. In the latter case, the ongoing social relationships of participants may drastically shape the kind of conversation that evolves in the focus group session. Understanding the social context of the focus group itself becomes a key element in subsequent data analysis (Hollander 2004).<sup>2</sup>

## **Study Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

The data collection phase of the project was scheduled to occur during the spring 2009 semester. Ten groups were initially identified for inclusion in the project: African American, Latino, Asian American, LGBT and women faculty and staff, and African American, Latino, Asian American, International, and LGBT students<sup>3</sup>. As the analysis proceeded, lecturers and administrators were added to the list in order to collect data relevant to issues of rank. At some

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<sup>2</sup> I am greatly indebted to Dr. Marcos Pizarro for his insights into the effect of social context on data collection.

<sup>3</sup> Though faculty, staff and students with disabilities were clearly identified in the CCC survey data as warranting further study, at the initiation of this study another team of SJSU researchers were conducting focus groups with this population. People with disabilities were not, therefore, specifically targeted as one of our focus groups.

point in the process it became evident that the initial formulations of this project fell prey to the “invisibilities of whiteness,” in that this group was not initially considered for inclusion in the racial focus of the study (McIntosh, 2009).<sup>4</sup> At the point of realization, the principal researcher added a session with White students to the study.

We used a variety of techniques to recruit participants for these focus group sessions. We advertised through the use of flyers posted throughout campus, we made direct appeals to students in upper and lower division General Education classes, and we made use of campus email lists targeting specific groups of faculty, staff, and students. The composition of the subsequent focus groups reflected the varied recruitment process. Three of the thirteen focus groups were composed of participants from existing campus groups, the remaining ten were composed of participants with infrequent, very little, or no prior contact. No compensation was offered to any participants beyond pizza and drinks provided by the Office of the President. As each session commenced, participants were advised of their rights as research subjects, each signed consent forms, and each agreed to keep confidential the statements made by others in the session. Each session was digitally recorded.

Five different researchers acted as primary facilitators for the focus group sessions. In several sessions we had additional facilitator/observers present who took observational notes. Whenever possible we tried to “match” the relevant “characteristics” of focus group facilitators with participants (Queer to queer, white to white, women to women, etc.). Focus groups sessions lasted from 1 to 1.5 hours. Facilitators were given interview schedules with questions designed to focus the group discussions around specific phenomenon (see Attachment A for sample

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<sup>4</sup> As of Fall 2010 White students represent 27% of our student population, the second largest racial group of students on campus. For a breakdown of SJSU student enrollment by gender and ethnicity see, <http://www.oir.sjsu.edu>.

interview schedules). Facilitators were instructed to minimize their participation in each session, allowing participants to have “free ranging” conversations in response to each probe.

Recordings were sent to an off-campus transcriber.

### **Analysis of data**

To ensure accuracy of the data, all transcripts were reviewed (and re-transcribed when necessary) by the principal researcher. For purposes of this report each focus group was analyzed separately using the following analytic techniques. Written transcripts were initially hand-coded, then coded into NVivo 9 software for qualitative analysis. These data were then analyzed using a combination of principals drawn from Becker’s (1970) discussion of “quasi-statistics,” Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) formulation of “grounded theory,” and Katz’s description of “analytic inductive” methods. Analytic coding occurred in two stages: initial coding and focused coding. Using the NVivo 9 software, data from each transcript was initially coded into “free coding” categories. Each “free coding” category was then analyzed, compared with other free codes, and eventually moved into more abstract coding categories (“tree codes”). As initial codes shifted into more abstract codes, the analysis moved into more focused coding.

Theoretical memos were formulated from the categories created through focused coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Each memo was compared with one another, building the understanding of these data, the resulting findings were then compared and contrasted with existing theory. The end results of this analytic process are the reports contained herein.

### **Ethical Concerns: Confidentiality**

To ensure confidentiality of participants in this study, all references to specific departments, divisions, or people have been removed from qualitative examples given in this report. No persons (or committees) have had access to the original transcripts other than the principal investigator and those that assisted with initial data collection.

### **Scope of this Study: Contextualizing the Findings**

The findings from this study are constrained by the confidentiality offered participants. We asked people to give detailed examples of their daily experiences on this campus relative to their membership in particular race, gender, sexuality, and rank-based identity groups. We also assured them that in the reporting of our findings we would disguise their responses in such a way that they and their department or division on campus would not be identifiable. At the same time, San José State University is a very large campus and the various departments and divisions can really be likened to micro-climes. The politics of race, gender, rank, and sexuality vary depending on the local context of these micro-climes. Local context varies by demographics (what people are present), by power structures, by available resources, by disciplinary context (e.g. male-dominated verses female-dominated disciplines), and by environmental factors. While information at this local level might be compelling, given the confidentiality extended to participants, these analyses will not extend to this level of analysis.

In other words, this is not an “investigation” of racism, heterosexism, sexism, and power relations at SJSU. This study is not about finding those spaces on campus where these isms reside; indeed (as will be seen) they are everywhere. Instead, the objective here is to convey a

deeper sense of how these phenomena manifest on a daily basis, such that current members of the campus community will be able to recognize and confront campus climate issues in situ.

**A Note of Thanks & Acknowledgement:**

While I accept full responsibility for the analysis contained in this report, I certainly could not have completed it without support and assistance from a number of sources. First, I would like to thank Wiggys Sivertsen, the Campus Climate Committee, and the President's Office for initiating and supporting this research project. Dr. Rona Halualani and the Campus Climate Committee were instrumental in the initial design phase of this research project. Thank you also to Chris Cox, Rona Halualani, Minna Holopainen, and Sunny Malatesta for their assistance with data collection. Finally, I am greatly indebted to Chris Cox, Julie Dixon, Dr. Amy Leisenring, Dr. Carlos Garcia, Dr. Angela Krum, Dr Marcos Pizarro, and Dr. Ruth Wilson for their comments on specific reports contained herein.

In the end, this study would not have been possible without the willingness of the administrators, faculty, staff, and students who participated in these focus group sessions. As a community we owe them our gratitude for sharing their stories.

## **Findings from Student Focus Groups**

Black/ African American

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender

International/ Immigrant

Latino/a

Vietnamese

White

*“As soon as you start bringing up race people don’t want to talk about it. Everyone’s overly concerned about being p.c., let’s not say anything wrong to offend anyone, but really, it’s like, well maybe we need to start offending some people so we can work through these – these issues that we’re having, cause they’re not going away, they’re getting swept underneath the rug, basically”* (African American SJSU student).

### **Findings from the Black Student Focus Group**

The Black student focus group was composed of undergraduate students ranging in age from 18 to 26. They were from a variety of majors and included both straight and gay students. While we did not collect data on the social class position of the students we studied, there is much evidence to support the notion that the experiences of race and racism are mitigated by one’s social class location (Southworth and Mickelson 2007, Lareau 2002). In the discussion that follows, the racialized experiences of the students we studied are constrained by their social class locations.<sup>5</sup> Analysis of the findings from this focus group session yielded three main themes shaping the campus climate experience of these African-American<sup>6</sup> students: 1) negotiating negative stereotypes, 2) being Black on campus, and 3) building relationships in diverse communities.

#### **Negotiating Negative Stereotypes**

The negative stereotypes about Black people figured prominently in these student’s assessments of their racialized experiences on campus. In their daily interactions with professors, coaches, staff, and other students, these African American students negotiated their

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Ruth Wilson for her insights on the ways in which social class location contextualizes the experiences of African American college students.

<sup>6</sup> The racial categories these students used to identify themselves included: Black, African American, and Mixed Race (half Black), thus this analysis follows the practice of the students in using both Black and African American.

racial identities in a continued conversation with stereotypes about Black temperament, intelligence, academic proclivities, and “ghetto” origins. These negative stereotypes manifested in three primary ways, 1) in the expectations held by others, 2) in the expectations of the Black students themselves, 3) and in the self expressions of these students as deliberate attempts to defy negative stereotypes.

The Black students in our study were all acutely aware of the negative stereotypes about Black people and perceived these stereotypes as shaping others’ expectations of them. For example, in his role as a tutor for other students one African American man stated:

*“But what I have noticed is that sometimes when I’m the only African American male [tutor] working in there. Sometimes when – when they pair me up with certain people to read, like, say, look over a paper, or do something, I see some people kind of question like, will he be able to really help me or looking for someone else to help them with their paper before they get paired up with me. It doesn’t offend me, because I’m also aware, I’m aware of the stereotypes of African American’s intelligence...”*

In a similar vein another student related a story about her boyfriend’s experience in a major that has few African American students:<sup>7</sup>

*“So, a lot of the professors will be like, are you sure you’re in the right class, kind of thing, and he tells me this almost daily. Like, are you – like, when school started, like, are you sure you’re in the right class, or be like, [John]<sup>8</sup>, can you answer that question, or can you do this, can you do that kind of thing. So, it was like, trying to see if he’s actually*

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<sup>7</sup> For a breakdown of Undergraduate Degrees Granted by Discipline Division and Ethnic Group, Systemwide, 2009-10 see [http://www.calstate.edu/as/stat\\_reports/2009-2010/deg14.htm](http://www.calstate.edu/as/stat_reports/2009-2010/deg14.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of study participants.

*able to keep up with the material. So, it's like a constant kind of pick on kind of thing, to see if he's even where he's supposed to be."*

As in the first example, here the student's intellectual abilities are called into question "almost daily" by a seemingly innocuous question, "are you sure you are in the right class?" In this example the racism is "subtle" in that it is hidden behind a presumption of helpfulness (Quillian 2008, Saufley, Cowan and Blake 1983). While it is common practice at the beginning of each semester for professors to announce the name of the course they are teaching to make sure students are in the right class, it is not typical to poll individual students about their presence in any particular course. It is the perception of these Black students that they are seen through a racialized and racist cultural lens that, at any moment, might cause them to be, "... *looked at as, we came from the hood or something.*"

Though the Black students described these stereotyped expectations as being placed on them by others, they also talked about moments where they perceived other Black students embracing stereotypes. One of the women students, for example, talked about her experiences when she first arrived on campus:

*"When I first came here, I went to [a] predominantly white high school. And the African Americans that did go to my high school, they were very – I felt that they overly tried to fit certain stereotypes, maybe to get along or to prove quote, unquote, their blackness. And like, I never really wanted to do that. So, and then when I came here, I wasn't – I didn't – so I kind of disassociated myself with them, so to say, except for a few African Americans that I thought that I guess, didn't try to over-portray stereotypes."*

Here the student articulates her awareness of negative African American stereotypes and deliberately “*disassociated*” with those people she saw embodying them. In this case, however, the student does not indicate that she believes the stereotypes actually say something essential about the students that embody them. Instead she offers an alternative explanation that the students who “try to fit” stereotypes are really just trying to, “*prove quote, unquote, their blackness.*” This ambivalence about racial stereotypes is also evident in the following statement by a student athlete:

*“I think a lot of African Americans also feel like most of us in the room, that it’s like they don’t want to just surround ourselves with like, African Americans all the time. I think like, especially I think with our culture, a lot of African Americans are trying to spread out to understand different cultures, because they’re trying to become better people and the stereotype is typical, meaning for African Americans like, not successful. And so, I think they try to surround their selves with more successful cultures to get to where they want to be in life.”*

In this case, the line between stereotype and reality is not clear. On the one hand, the student argues that African Americans are, “*trying to spread out to understand different cultures,*” a laudable practice in a racially diverse society. But on the other, he posits that not surrounding one’s self with other Black people is about, “*surround[ing] their selves with more successful cultures.*” This statement, in turn, can be read as an indictment of Black culture as not successful, or as an acknowledgement of the historical, social, and economic oppression faced by African American people. In either case, the stereotypes of Black people figure prominently in the ways others see these students and in the ways they see one another (Saufley, Cowan and Blake 1983).

These students also actively resisted these negative racial stereotypes by deliberately defying them in their presentations of self (Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 1959). An example of this is found in the rest of the response by the student (above) working as a tutor:

*“I’m aware of the stereotypes of African Americans intelligence, but when I sit down with them, I’m trying to I guess, prove them wrong, so that maybe the next time, when they interact with someone else, that that’s not the first thing they’re thinking.”*

In this example and elsewhere the students articulated a responsibility for representing all African Americans by actively working to deconstruct stereotypes. Another example is found in the comments of one of the student athletes:

*“Black people are trying to make a change in the world, like, we’re trying to come out and be equal to either the whites or Asians, and stuff like that, so in that sense, it’s good to represent. I feel the need to represent my culture in and out of the classroom. I feel the need to represent because we’re always looked down upon. And people are always stereotyping us, and looking down on us for whatever reason. So, to go out of that element and be different, it makes you feel good inside, and to have your friends also – the people you surround yourself with are also that way, you know, it’s kind of – makes you feel like there is going to be a change one day.”*

“So to go out of that element,” to defy stereotypes imposed upon Black people, inspires these students to, “*feel like there is going to be a change one day.*” Which implies that the “*change*” is not here yet, and that the campus climate for these Black students is one that is rife with racial stereotypes.

## Campus Racial Climate: Being Black at SJSU

Since 2000, enrollment of African American students at SJSU has remained consistently low, between three and four percent of the total student enrollment – with a high of 4.86% in 2007 and a low of 3.67 in 2003.<sup>9</sup> What these figures can mean is that Black students frequently find themselves in classes with mostly non-Black students. The dynamic that emerges from the racial composition in these class sessions is one that Black students find troubling at best, racist at worst. In each of the stories that emerged around this topic, it was the behavior of the professors that students singled out as most problematic. Sometimes these behaviors involved just a “look,” “...in classrooms like, if the teacher’s talking about an African American situation, they kind of – when they’re discussing it, they kind of look at you.” But more often, the African American students in our study were actually called upon to “represent their race.” Such was the case with one of the student athletes:

*“There’s been several instances in my classes where the professor would, give an example of something that’s kind of like, stereotypically Black and they would call like, “Oh, [student’s name], do you?,” like, am I the only Black person? But I don’t speak for everybody, so yeah, I’ve had that type of example, where I guess I’ve been looked upon for answers for our culture.”*

And with a recent transfer student:

*“Yeah, I’ve experienced in the classroom as well, teachers kind of turning to you for answers. And it’s like, you got all these other kids, and they wouldn’t know the answer to – you don’t have to come to me.”*

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<sup>9</sup> For a complete analysis of enrollment trends by ethnicity see statistics by the SJSU Office of Institutional Research <http://www.oir.sjsu.edu/cognos8/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi>

The frustration that these students experienced, and the extent to which this behavior calls into question the credibility of faculty members, is summed up in the following comments by one of the women students:

*“Like, I have no problem answering questions that are related to the curriculum. But when it comes to me being a voice for the whole African American community, that’s when it’s like, ‘Are you serious, like, can you be the voice for your whole entire,’ – it just gets really frustrating to me.”*

Here the incredulity expressed by the student, “*Are you serious?*” underscores a breach in normative constructions of professors as educated (read: unbiased) people. But here and elsewhere in these data the Black students perceive at least some of the faculty to be racist. Such was the case in the following example.

*“The [name of discipline] teachers, especially the older ones, and, I mean white ones, are known to be racist toward minority students that are in their classes. And I didn’t really believe that it was true. And so, a few weeks ago, I was in – I don’t really know if this is why it happened, but I’m just guessing – I was in lecture. And it’s a pretty big lecture. And I had a question, I raised my hand, and my hand was clearly up, the only hand clearly up for a good five minutes, cause I was kind of being stubborn, like you see my hand, you’re gonna call on me kind of thing. And I would not get called on. But then somebody else raised their hand up a different, like a white person, and they got called on, like, instantly. And so, I was very upset about that.”*

In this case, the student is resistant to the narrative that some older white teachers are racist towards minority students (*And I didn’t really believe that it was true.*). With this narrative in mind, however, she has an experience of not being called on in class when another white student

is called on, and the experience gets framed as racist. While it is impossible to know for certain what transpired here (and that is not the goal in qualitative research), what is clear is that in the course of getting educated these Black students constantly negotiate racialized and racist constructions of their everyday interactions.

For the Black students in our study the campus climate at SJSU is one that contains racist constructions of Africa American students. The racial stories these students articulated about San José State University included generalized references to racial animosity targeting them. As above, reflected in the statement, “*the white [teachers]*” are “*known to be racist towards minority students,*” the stories conveyed a sense that this animosity is coming at them from above, and that the end result might be about pushing them out of the university. For example, in reference to the recent budget situation at SJSU, one of the students commented; “*The system is trying to weed out a lot of I guess, minorities or people that they would suspect wouldn’t do as well in the – in the university system.*” Then, in the Black student discussion of the “*people that they (the university) suspect wouldn’t do as well,*” the students see themselves as *those people*. As one of the men commented: “*I was talking with an advisor in [department], and he mentioned something about certain faculty expecting black students to fail.*”

The racialized climate surrounding these students contributes to their sense of injustice at the ways they are treated by professors, coaches, and others in positions of authority at the university. In one example, a student athlete described the differential treatment that the Black players of one sport received in comparison with the white players of another.

*“It was the way he [staff] looked upon us [Black players] and it was like – like, we were literally sitting right next to the same [white players] who dress like this and everything else, but it was kind of like – they told a couple of my teammates, “Oh, you pull your*

*pants up, you do this, do that.” But the [white players] were doing the same thing. You know what I’m saying, so it’s like, is it because we’re Black? He was looking down at us, and it was like, “Oh, take off your hats,” and all this kind of stuff, but the same [white] player had a hat on as well, so that’s when I kind of took it as a more of like, a racial type situation. Cause like, it was the same thing from both sides, but one’s white and one’s black.”*

Parallel to Morris’s findings that educators differentially discipline students in dress and manners depending on their racial locations, this student perceived the differential treatment she was subjected to as, “*a racial type situation*,” (Morris 2005). Even further, seemingly minor “corrections,” like the one described here can have major repercussions when employed as part of a larger “disciplinary regime.” As Morris concludes about the differential treatment of the students of color in his study of high school students:

Rather than create opportunities for advancement, the emphasis on regulating students into embodying dominant modes of dress and comportment only seems to bolster perceptions of poor and minority youth as flawed in some way. Schools employing disciplinary regimes steeped in race, class, and gender assumptions (however well intentioned) risk pushing many students away and, ironically, reproducing the very inequalities they are attempting to change (Morris, 2005:45-46).

Here, and elsewhere in these data, the students see their racial location as a guiding factor in the way they are treated at the university. The treatment they receive, in turn, shapes the ways they choose to conduct their own relationships on campus.

## **Building Relationships in a Diverse Community**

The Black students in our study perceived the SJSU campus as a racially and sexually diverse space. In the context of this diversity the students talked a lot about the relationships they have formed with others on the campus. Specifically, they talked about their relationships with other Black students, about the value they placed on cross-racial interactions, and, finally, they discussed how critical their relationships with Black faculty are to their ability to both survive and flourish at this university.

### Relationships with other Black students

Given the racism they experience, it is not surprising that some of these students find solace and comfort in their relationships with other Black students. While each statement affirming their relationships with other African American students also included reference to relationships with “other” groups, for many of these students their “*closest*” relationships and “*best*” friends were African American. As one woman commented, “*I interact with a lot of different types of people, but my closest friends are still African American.*” By way of explanation for their choices in relationships the students talked about the “*comfort zone*” that is experienced with people that you perceive will “*understand you.*” These students applied this same explanation to other racial groups they observed hanging out together on campus:

*“When I see other races in their little cliques – me personally, I just look at it like, okay, they’re hanging with their friends, just as I would be hanging with my friends as well. I don’t see it as, oh, they got their little clique, they’re all Filipinos, that’s their little clique. I just look at it like, okay, you have that. They’re entering their comfort zone. After they just left, you know, socializing with a whole bunch of other races, now they’re gonna turn to their comfort zone.”*

The strategy of periodically gaining strength and support from in-group interactions has been articulated by many anti-racist activists and scholars (Aptheker 1989, hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism* 1981, A. Hurtado 1996). That these students find sustenance from their relations with other African American students can be likened to the “inspiration” Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith attribute to their experience in a “Black context” (Smith and Smith 1983). As one senior articulated:

*“I think a lot of African American students interact with a lot of African American students on campus, cause you’re trying to help each other succeed.”*

Relationships between African American students were also characterized as problematic for some Black students – particularly those that identify as mixed-race and those that identify as gay. Mixed-race students articulated a kind of “no-win” situation regarding their acceptance by and approval from either “side” of their racial heritage. For example, a self-described “Mexican and Black” mixed-race student described her relationships with other Black students as “different” because of: “... *me being lighter skin – brown, I guess you could say. It’s kind of like beneath the surface a little bit separated by our differences. I don’t know, sometimes I feel that I even like, get the cold shoulder from – amongst like, my Black friends, sometimes. But when I’m with another group, I’m you know, too Black I guess.*” In this case the student describes a “separation” from both Black students and (presumably) non-Black students. In the former instance she attributes the differences she feels to her “light skin,” in the latter to being “too Black” a reference to phenotype or culture. An even more compelling example of the dilemmas faced by mixed-race students was given by a student recounting the experiences of a friend of mixed ancestry planning a speech during Legacy week:

*“One of my friends had to do a speech during the legacy week, and it was like when – she’s mixed between African American and white. So, when a majority African Americans came to watch the speech, she was kind of like, “Okay, should I not say this, should I not say that, cause they might look at me different cause I’m half white?” And then, also when – but also when the – like the white people came and watched her speech, she was like, “Okay, I’m not going to support too much on the black side, cause I don’t know how the white people are gonna feel.”*”

In this case the student’s uncertainty in how to proceed intellectually reflects the historical divide between Black and white. Suspended between two racial communities she fears rejection from both. Students who self identify as African American and gay also experience fear of rejection, and actual rejection, from members of the Black community.

Several of the African American students in our study described incidents of “harassment” and “verbal abuse” being directed at Black gay students by other members of the Black community. While some characterized these experiences as arising from the religiosity of the African American community, others attribute the homophobia they observe as grounded in constructions of Black masculinity. Regardless of how they theorize the origin of the behaviors, the end result is that students experiencing homophobia feel marginalized and rejected by their own community. This was true for black gay men on campus, as the following comment by a gay student indicates:

*“I have personally seen like, other men be really angered towards somebody just walking past them that’s not straight, that is black and is a male. It’s like, dude you better get away from me. Don’t come over here with that like, get away from me – you know, we don’t roll like that. But it’s like, you know what I’m saying, people [gay men] just like,*

*they're not trying to – it's not like they're trying to sexual harass you, like, "Oh, I'm trying to turn you out," like that, they just – they're just there to chill. Like, they're not no walking disease. But I think that's how a lot of heterosexual African Americans around campus look at homosexual men."*

This level of animosity was also experienced by Black lesbians whose gender expressions are more "masculine." Such was the case of a student athlete:

*"As far as heterosexual males and homosexual females of the masculine type, I think they also will verbally, sexually – what is the word? Verbally harass a homosexual female of the masculine type. I had a girlfriend on campus, and while we're walking around holding hands, like we don't care, or whatever, and like, a dude, one of these guys, like, I've seen him on campus a lot. I always see him on campus, and he's always like, "Man, get your hand off her. I'll take your girl," blah, blah, blah. Just talking all this other kind of nonsense. And it's like, I'm not invading your space, so don't invade mine. You know what I'm saying, so I think like, I don't know like, I know a lot of feminine homosexual females, and they don't really get the same harassment, cause I think guys just look at them like, okay you like girls, but you could like me too. You know what I'm saying? I think they just look at it like that, that they're bisexual and they're going through a phase or something."*

In this instance the student is harassed for transgressing both norms of sexuality and gender expression. Much has been written about the intersection of oppressions such that sexism, homophobia, and racism all work together to uphold existing power arrangements (Collins 2004, Perry 2001). In her article, "Prisons for Our Bodies, Closets for Our Minds: Racism, Heterosexism and Black Sexuality," Patricia Hill Collins (2009) writes about the

connection between racism and heterosexism and how both oppressions shape the experiences of all of us:

In the United States, the assumption that racism and heterosexism constitute two separate systems of oppression masks how each relies upon the other for meaning. Because neither system of oppression makes sense without the other, racism and heterosexism might be better viewed as sharing one history with similar yet disparate effects on all Americans differentiated by race, gender, sexuality, and class and nationality (P. Hill Collins 2009).

The African American students in our study perceive this separation to characterize the Black “community” at SJSU, *“We had an event – homosexuality in the black community– and there was almost no black people there, and it was about our community.”* These students also articulated an analysis that unveiled the “mask” Hill Collins describes above. As a senior commented: *“And I think being black adds a lot more of the discrimination to it, because we’re already discriminated against, and so when you see another Black – well, when men see another Black man, it’s like they get angrier.”* Similarly, a Black lesbian pointed out:

*“I know a lot of like, homosexual white people, and it’s like they don’t even get it nearly as bad. I think it’s because we’re already discriminated on. Going back to the [white women athletes], it’s okay for them to walk around with their girlfriend. Or like Asians, I see a lot of Asians walking around with their girlfriends. And it’s like, they’re just normal people walking by. But don’t let me come walking through a crowd of Black men. It’s like all hell breaks loose.”*

In both cases, the students suspect that the discrimination experienced by Black gay men and lesbians on campus is compounded by the racism experienced by the Black community. Similar

to the dilemmas faced by persons of mixed ancestry, gay and lesbian people of color also experience the sense of being in the middle of the predominantly white queer community and whatever community of color they belong too. When being queer is constructed as a white cultural phenomenon, then queer people of color find themselves being constructed as “traitors to their race” (Hill-Collins 1993; Ratti 1993, Trujillo 1991).

### Cross-Racial Relationships

Most of the African American students in our study characterized their interactions on campus as “*pretty diverse.*” Some of the students came from “multicultural” high schools and continued those patterns of interaction at SJSU:

*“I didn’t come from a place that was all black or all white. It was more so diverse and intercultural. So, when I came here, I kept that going, cause I’m not used to just being with one race or one type of people.”*

While often reserving their closest associations for other Black students, the students in our study understood the importance and value of cross-racial interactions. This pragmatic approach to relationships was exemplified by the comments of one of the senior women:

*“In the business realm, you can’t just be used to talking to black people, cause you might talk to them a different way. You have to socialize yourself with different types of people that you’re gonna actually encounter in your work field. If you socialize yourself with a certain realm of people, you might not be as successful when it comes to your career and not ever being socialized with white people or Asian people, if you’re just used to that one race.”*

For a lot of these students, their most successful cross-racial relationships were those facilitated by institutional programs connected with Student Life, housing, sports, etc.. In

reference to their past participation in a multicultural retreat for example, one of the students stated, *“when everybody reaches a certain point, or you know, that level of being comfortable with everyone and being able to understand, , it’s really a big eye opener.”* Similarly, a student athlete explained, *“I’ve hung out with pretty much every culture that’s around campus, because of my [sports] team.”*

For others, as in the case of Black gay students, they sometimes find more acceptance outside the Black community. As one of the lesbian students commented:

*“I think a lot of the African American females don’t really want to socialize with me cause it’s like, ‘if one of these boys see me, they might think that I’m gay too.’ You know what I’m saying, like that? But I can hang out with a bunch of like, white girls, and they’re just like cool with me, you know what I’m saying, they’re just like, “Oh, whatever, hey you’re cool,” like, cause I do hang out with a bunch of white girls. And it’s like they’re cool, but I can’t get that same result from an African American female, around campus, at least.”*

In this case, the Black lesbian student understands that straight Black women fear their sexuality being tainted by association with an openly gay woman. In her analysis the *“white girls”* are *“just like cool with me.”* Indeed, the privileges of whiteness (McIntosh, White Privilege Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack 2009), extended to these *“white girls”* might mitigate any additional stigma they experience from association with an openly gay Black woman. And finally, while understanding the benefits of diverse interactions, these students are also aware of the possible pitfalls of too much cross-racial interaction, particularly with white people.

*“For other people who do venture out, I mean, for African Americans I’ve seen who have predominantly white friends – like, a black guy who you mainly see predominantly with white people or a different race, I think he’s looked at like, oh, he’s – he’s not – or he’s whitewashed, first thing that comes to mind. Or he’s – he’s like, not with us, or something like that.”*

The relationships that these Black students form with other students on campus are complex. Relationships within the Black community and without contain elements of support, suspicion, comfort, and stigma. However, the one area the students in our study characterized as unambiguously supportive was in their relationships with Black Faculty.

#### Relationships with African American Faculty

The Black students in our focus group assumed African American faculty to be their allies. While several talked about their relationships with Black faculty as being *“the closest,”* and referred to the fact that, *“the professors that have really helped me are all African American,”* the most compelling finding was that these students assume Black faculty to have a special stake in helping them. Just like the students themselves feel a responsibility to *“uplift the race,”* so too do they assume faculty operate under a similar assumption. As one of the students said, *“the Black teachers, if they see Black students, they’re gonna try to help them succeed, cause there’s not enough of us succeeding.”*

From the student’s perspective these faculty often go out of their way to help Black students negotiate the challenges of SJSU’s bureaucracy. *“Black teachers want to see more African American students be successful, so they’re going to take that extra step to help them.”* Here again the attribution of help is not personal to any particular student, it is instead framed as part

of a larger goal of Black teachers (and, as one student allowed, “*perhaps other teachers too*”), to ensure African American students graduate from college.

For this reason then it is understandable why these students urge the university to hire more Black teachers. Based on self-reflection, they have come to understand the importance of having someone who looks like them in front of the classroom.

*“I think maybe – maybe hire more African American faculty. If you have people who look like you and who are role models, that influences you already. So, if you have more people that look like you in this position, that’s kind of already like a self-motivator. And that happens unconsciously. They [other Black students] may not be conscious of – ‘by having African American professor, this is boosting my academic performance’.*”

## **Findings from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Student Focus Group**

The LGBT student focus group was a multiracial group composed of undergraduates from a variety of majors. The designation of “lesbian, gay, or bisexual” refers to one’s sexual identity, “transgender” refers to one’s gender identity. Transgender people can be heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The placement of these four identities together is political and based, in part, on the shared experience of gender oppression. The students were from all class levels, including transfer students. For some, this was their first semester at SJSU, while for others it was their last. To contextualize the findings from this group it is important to note that the focus group took place during the spring 2009 semester. The previous fall semester was the opening semester for the SJSU LGBT Resource Center. Before the fall of 2008 there were no campus organizations devoted to LGBT issues except for one student led club.

When asked about their experiences as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, four central themes emerged concerning campus climate: 1) initial heterosexist experiences on campus, 2) encounters with homophobia, 3) “coming out” dilemmas on campus, 4) and encounters with transphobia.

### **Initial Heterosexist Experiences on Campus**

Heterosexism is “a system of power and ideology that assumes that heterosexuality is the norm. Heterosexism culturally favors heterosexuals while denigrating and stigmatizing non-heterosexual people (p. 555)” (Ferber, Holcomb and Wentling 2009). Because heterosexism is so deeply entrenched in the structure of all dominant social institutions, it is virtually invisible to those whom it benefits. Because most gay and lesbian people are also socialized in heterosexist social institutions, even they don’t often recognize the systemic nature of this form of discrimination. Gay and lesbian youth, in particular, often lack a critical and structural

perspective that might enable them to see their individual struggles as social issues. As a result, gay and lesbian youth internalize the marginalization they experience and are, for example, two times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual contemporaries (Russell and Joyner 2001).

Relevant to our study is the idea that heterosexism manifests in what *is not* present, rather than what is present. Theorists argue that social involvement and connection are critical steps toward developing a positive identity and pride as an LGBT person (Biechke, Eberz and Wilson 2000, McCarn and Fassinger 1996). For the GLBT students in our focus group, “social involvement and connection” seemed to be a “missing piece” felt most keenly when they first arrived on campus. Many of these students arrived at the university prior to the opening of the LGBT center, and their first impressions of SJSU left them feeling marginalized and unwelcome. As one transman commented, his initial experiences as a transfer student at SJSU fell short of even his high school experiences:

*“I think in general it didn't feel necessarily welcoming to anybody in the community and I didn't really feel like there was a community. Like no one to connect with. Any other campus I've been on, like even in high school or other junior colleges, there was an identifiable community. Here it just felt really abandoned.”*

The idea that SJSU lacks an LGBT community presence was echoed by others who grew increasingly frustrated as they, “*didn't even know where to start looking.*” Campus web searches prior to the AY 0910 yielded no hits other than the student led club QTIP (Queers Thoughtfully Interrupting Prejudice). As a newly arrived lesbian student commented, “*I was brand new here this semester and I heard people talk about stuff that was happening. And I knew it was*

*happening, and still couldn't find the information about it on the school website. And so it was just like, that's so bad, to not be able to find any resources."*

Initial encounters with University services did nothing to alleviate the sense of isolation experienced by these students. As a gay student noted, "...when I went to the orientation, nobody mentioned anything about LGBT resources." What they did encounter at orientation was perceived of as an overwhelming amount of information. As one gay student recalled, "... the [LGBT] resources have not been set up in a way that I think incoming students could easily find them. When I arrived, they gave me just a deluge of "Welcome to SJSU orientation," we're going to pound your head with all the information, and there's no way to reference it after the fact."<sup>10</sup>

Early encounters with campus housing also left students with negative impressions of the university. The following recollection by a gay Latino student exemplifies the perception LGBT students have of 'the people in charge.'

*"But my probably most unwelcoming experience was in the freshman dorm housing, there is very little sensitivity put in by the housing services to really make sure that you're comfortable with who your roommates are, in my opinion. And to make sure that lifestyles are met. And this goes beyond the LGBT experience, I believe. I had roommates that were literally racist and used the N-word as well as the F-word (fag) and it was just a very difficult experience."*

This student, in his third year on campus when he made this comment, actually expressed an overwhelmingly positive view of SJSU during the rest of the focus group session. As a

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<sup>10</sup> Note: Some of the orientation issues raised by these students have been addressed. Counseling Services first brought an LGBT event to "Fall Welcome Days" in August, 2008. In September 2008, the university hired the first director of the new LGBT Resource Center. The LGBT Resource Center and the Peers in Pride Mentor group (also started by Counseling Services) started hosting a break-out group at Orientation (for LGBT students) in 2009. Before 2008, there was no programming targeted at incoming LGBT students.

student campus leader, who started his own queer student group – he is the exception. For other Latino students – both gay and straight – with 6-year graduation rates of 30.8% <sup>11</sup> - such initial encounters might signal the end of their academic careers.

Even instances where the university is trying to be more inclusive are sometimes read by students as being out of touch with their reality. At one point during the focus group session, the students had the following exchange: *Gay student: “Actually, when you fill out the housing application and there is one line and it literally says, ‘Do you have any homosexuality issues?’ [LAUGHTER] That is the exact phrasing. ‘Do you have any homosexuality issues?’ And I was in counseling at the time, and I asked my friend who knew I was gay, And I was like, ‘Do I say that I have any homosexuality issues?’ And she was like, ‘What does that even mean?’ What do you write?”*

*Lesbian student: “Really? It says that?”*

*Gay student: “Yeah, that was in there. It was like, ‘Do you have any homosexuality issues?’ I’m like, ‘No, but I am one.’ [LAUGHTER]”*

*Lesbian student: “I am one, but I’m cool with it. [LAUGHTER]”*

In this case, the question “Do you have any homosexuality issues?” implies that being queer is something you have or don’t have, or are able to put on or take off. Being queer to those that are, is an identity not “an issue.” In other words, one does not have gayness, one is just gay. So, at the level of structure it seems as though there is still much work to be done to counter the deeply entrenched heterosexist assumptions that characterize business as usual at this public university. Though the opening of the LGBT Resource Center is certainly a move in the right direction, it is clearly only a beginning, not an end to the work that remains.

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<sup>11</sup> For statistics on graduation rates by race see <http://www.oir.sjsu.edu/cognos8/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi>

## Encounters with Homophobia

Homophobia, “describes the fear, hatred, or disapproval of, and discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (p. 556)” (Ferber, Holcomb and Wentling 2009). Findings from the focus group data suggest that both homophobia and transphobia are present on campus. The GLBT students in the focus group shared an overall sense that there are a lot of folks on campus that continue to harbor homophobic ideas. Indicators of this came indirectly from “*writing on the bathroom walls (God hates Fags)*,” from conversations overheard in the hallways, “...*from people who think that we're all going to hell,*” and from snickers and comments unaddressed in classrooms.

Several focus group participants described moments within their classes where legitimate references to gay or lesbian people were met with laughter, or where statements denigrating gays and lesbians were made by other students without sanction. In cases where the professor did step in and say something, the GLBT students felt like *they* had to initiate it.

*“In one of my [major] classes we watched a movie and my professor brought up that they engaged in a lot of homosexual activity. And so then these guys in the back row who were talking about how great that movie was, how they loved that movie, they were like, ‘Oh, that movie’s gay. I hate that movie now.’ And she [the professor] was like, ‘Come on guys,’ and she tried to get them to settle down. But then I emailed her specifically about it. I said, ‘That wasn’t a big deal, but it can create hostility, especially in that class.’ So, she went a step further and talked to them personally and they were kind of upset about it and complained about it in class.”*

Even more troubling were those cases where the GLB students felt like *they were the problem* and not the homophobic comments. In other words, the students felt like their presence

as gay people necessitated that their professor say something in response to homophobic comments and the professors resented them for it. The following exchange exemplifies these situations: *Gay student: "So, did the professor step in and address the giggling and the laughing?" Lesbian student: "Not really. She just kind of pushed through it. For me, I thought it was more troubling for her to have to deal with me. It got on my nerves."* Here the student's perception is that her presence as a lesbian is more problematic for the professor than having other students in the class snicker at gay references. And, while we cannot know what actually occurred in this case (nor is that our goal), what is important is the idea that our queer students perceive their identities as queer people to sometimes work against them in the classroom. They cannot assume, the same way that their heterosexual classmates can, that the fact of their queerness will be automatically defended.

Within a heterogendered social order all things heterosexual are normative and thus proceed relatively unnoticed. The presence of GLBT people breaches normative expectations and thus "invites" comment, sanction, or the necessity to be more inclusive. Even commonplace references to one's family can be read as "in your face" gay propaganda. As in the comments by the following queer student:

*"But every professor I've ever had has been like, 'Oh, well, my wife and I, blah blah blah.' And it's so acceptable for you to just give that as a general fact of your life and it's not considered to be disclosing anything inappropriate or intimate when a heterosexual professor mentions their partner. But if a queer professor were to mention that, or you we're to mention in class, "My girlfriend and I, blah blah blah," then that becomes this big deal where people talk about it. They would talk about the professor and that they're queer. And it becomes this thing where it's like you're disclosing something that other*

*people are like, 'Well, I don't need to know about it. That's not my business. You can do what you want behind the door, but you shouldn't tell me about it.' But straight people are allowed to offhand mention their significant others all the time. It's just a part of life and it's really not equal."*

Not feeling safe enough to “*offhand mention [your] significant other,*” is part of the unequal and daily reality faced by GLBT people on campus and elsewhere. Perhaps the most telling indicator of the experiences of the GLBT students at SJSU is found in their discussions about “coming out.”

### **Coming Out on Campus**

“Coming out” is a euphemism within the gay community for being open about one’s identity as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person. A 14-campus survey conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force indicated that over one third of LGBT college students concealed their identity within the previous year to “avoid intimidation,” avoided disclosure to faculty due to potential negative consequences, and experienced harassment based on their sexual orientation (Rankin 2003). Similar to Rankin’s (2003) findings, fear seemed to be the underlying thread running through the discussions of “coming out” by our GLBT students. In line with the findings from the 14-campus survey, our students also talked about their fears in reference to how their professors might respond to the information that they were GLB or T. Students talked about fear of negative judgments and the consequences that might result. As one lesbian student commented about why she was not out, “*I guess it's that fear of being judged by somebody else. Especially by a professor. That's your grade. You don't want that.*” Her comment was then quickly followed by a gay male student, who replied,

*“Especially if you're here on scholarship and you need to keep your insurance and all that. If a professor said, ‘Well, I don't agree with your decision, or I don't agree with your expression, I'm gonna fail you,’ of course you would have some sort of recourse. But who knows – it's a case of he said she said. You don't know that you have the backup from the school. You don't know if you have protection from the school. We don't know if that professor is tenured and you can't touch them. You don't know anything about what goes on outside of that classroom. So, disclosing is almost not an option.”*

Not knowing that they have “*the backup from the school*” goes back to the heterosexism that characterizes the larger institutional context of SJSU. If the overwhelming message is one that assumes heterosexuality rather than assuming diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions from SJSU students, then students really can't discern who their allies might be. As one student articulated, “*simply not being discriminatory is not enough to make a student feel safe.*” In cases where the students did disclose their sexual or gender identities to professors it was always *after* the professor had made some explicit reference to their being an ally. As one lesbian student put it so succinctly, “[in] *order to make you feel open, a professor would have to actually go out and talk about LGBT issues and talk about race or ethnicity or ability issues, in order to make you feel like that's something you could even expose.*” And, as is the case for LGBT faculty and staff, some departments and offices on campus are perceived of as safer than others.

So while some of the queer students on campus remain closeted, as was the case with the lesbian student who said “*I don't have any experiences with disclosing to any teachers. I haven't. I guess I don't feel comfortable.*” For others it depends upon the class, department, or office they are dealing with. As the following gay student explained:

*“For me, most of my professors in the [undisclosed] department are LGBT identified or are allies. And they are really open and I feel they value my diversity, and the fact that I’ve been open with respect to being a gay man with my fellow students. And I can offer that and share that. That’s part of the experience. And in other classes like GE classes when you do that you have people look at you kind of funny.”*

Throughout the session the students made it clear that “coming out” and “being out” were very contingent on receiving positive messages about queer lives from people in charge.

Whether it was seeing a “safe space sign on the door,” or being assigned “lots of literature by gay people,” or having professors who “lecture about gay issues,” the students need some pro-queer sign before most will feel safe enough to be out on campus.

The benefits of “being out” have been well documented in the social science literature. As Krumm (2008) found in a previous study of LGBT students at SJSU:

Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual students who were more ‘out’ to their parents, siblings, new acquaintances, work peers, and members of religious community experienced less overall difficulties related to their sexual orientation identity. A greater degree of outness was also related to a greater sense of ingroup identification (i.e., shared experiences with other LGBT persons) ( $r = .37, p < .01$ ), greater involvement in political organizations ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ), and older age ( $r = .32, p < .05$ ) (Krumm 2008).

The issues related to “being out” are exacerbated for our transgender students, as indeed, transphobia is still widely regarded as acceptable behavior in the dominant culture. While there are several identifiably safe and accepting departments on campus for gay and lesbian students, there are few spaces where trans students feel openly welcomed. As a gay man commented,

*“...relating that [being out and gay] to a trans experience, I couldn't imagine it. It never feels like that is addressed in any of my classes. Like, no one ever says ‘it is okay to be trans’ or ‘if you're a trans student that’s another perspective that you can bring up, too.’ I wouldn't feel comfortable being a trans student at this university, as much as I would as a gay man or a Greek student at all.”*

## **Transphobia on Campus**

Transphobia is the “the fear, hatred, or disapproval of, and discrimination against, any person who transgresses the culturally prescribed gender categories, such as roles, expressions, or behaviors (p. 557)” (Ferber, Holcomb and Wentling 2009). Though transpeople have long played important roles in our history and in the histories of many other cultures (Stryker 2008), it has only been within the last 10 to 15 years that they have received any wider public acknowledgement. And while there are numerous books, articles, and news stories detailing the lives of trans people (Boenke 2003, Green 2004, Krieger 2011), and several popular films<sup>12</sup> depicting their struggles, the general public still remains woefully ignorant about the daily reality of being transgender in America. Such ignorance is also characteristic of many members of our SJSU learning community.

For the trans students in our focus group, life at San José State means being in the position of constantly educating others. For many transgender youth, the years they spend in college become their transitioning years. While many may have known for a long time that they were transgender, gender variant, or in some way genderqueer, the college years finally give them the opportunity to live their lives more authentically. Thus it is these years where they may start to undergo some of the physical, emotional, cultural, and presentational changes necessary

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<sup>12</sup> c.f. The Brandon Teena Story 1998, Boys Don’t Cry 1999, Transamerica 2005

to live their lives they way they want. In every campus encounter discussed and described by the trans students in our study, it was they – rather than a campus official -- that had to take the lead in anything related to their transness. The following incident, described by a trans student looking into possible hormone therapy, exemplifies such encounters:

*“And I didn't know where to go. Like, I was really new to this process. I didn't know what was going on. So, I went to go talk to [SJSU staff] and I mentioned it to her and she kind of freaked out on me a little bit. Like, she was like, “What? You wanna be what? I don't know what that is.” And just kind of stumbled over her words and looked at me kind of awkwardly. And I was like, “Great, thanks for making me feel good.” She was like, “Why don't you just go talk to these people,” and she pointed to a flier for the Billie DeFrank Center.”<sup>13</sup>*

Though this student was clearly asking for some very specialized information, it was not the lack of information they received that was so troubling. Here the student's reaction is really in response to the “awkward,” “stumbling” and “freaked out” reply of the staff person to his inquiry about hormones. This “awkwardness” was described again and again by trans students, even in response to the simple disclosure that they were transgender. As this trans student put so clearly, “[b]ut I think overall, I mean I get the impression a lot that nobody knows what to do with me once I disclose that. And they don't know how to react and they don't know what to say.”

The issue here is whether or not SJSU administrators, faculty and staff *should* know what to say and *should* know how to react. These trans students seem to have a realistic and relatively “modest” set of expectations for campus officials. As with the other queer students, they won't

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<sup>13</sup> The Billie DeFrank Center is an off campus GLBT resource center.

come out<sup>14</sup> unless they get some clear indication that the person they are facing is an ally. And when they do come out – especially to professors – their requests usually center on name and pronoun changes.<sup>15</sup> But even these modest requests are left unfulfilled. As was the case with this transman:

*“I’ve had a number of experiences with my professors where I’ve told them that I am trans and transitioning, and having them acknowledge that. And, in acknowledging it, they still call me by female pronouns. And I thought that was a little sketchy. Because if I told you and you tell me, ‘Oh, that’s great, I totally understanding,’ and ‘good on you **girl**,’ you’re clearly not getting it.”*

The willingness of these students to participate in this focus group session was predicated on the assumption that - having heard their stories – the campus community would finally “*get it.*” It would seem that the next steps are clearly up to us.

*After finishing the preliminary draft my analysis on LGBT students I send a copy to Dr. Angela Krumm for editing and review. Dr. Krumm completed her own research on our LGBT students (Krumm 2008), and has been working continuously and closely with this population. In her comments on the preliminary report, Dr. Krumm indicated that there have been a number of significant changes on campus since these data were collected (spring 2009) and felt some follow-up information was warranted. This is her response:*

#### **A Response from Angela J Krumm, PhD, Counselor Faculty, Training Coordinator**

In 2011, LGBT students at San José State University continue to experience forms of discrimination and marginalization, however, several notable changes have made the campus a

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<sup>14</sup> The obvious exception to this is the small, but dedicated, group of trans students who routinely sit on GLBT panels in classrooms all over campus.

<sup>15</sup> Starting fall 2011 a new form is available for students who opt to use their preferred name over their legal or primary name: Notification of the Use of Preferred Name (for classroom use only). Emailed instructions from the Registrar’s Office (Aug. 26 2011) states that a student can, “complete and submit this form to the Counseling Services Dept. Counseling Services will be responsible for communicating with the instructors of record about students who are taking this option.” The form can be found: <http://www.sjsu.edu/registrar/forms/>

more welcoming and affirming place. The first welcome event for new LGBTQQI students occurred in August of 2008. In September of 2008, the LGBT Resource Center was established with the hiring of Assistant Director, Bonnie Sugiyama. By fall of 2009, the Peers in Pride mentoring program, a collaboration between the LGBT Resource Center and Counseling Services, was launched to provide LGBTQQI-identified peer mentors to incoming students. The LGBT Resource Center has supported the only previous LGBTQQI student group ("QTIP"), encouraged the development of numerous culture-specific student groups (e.g., Queer and Asian, Urban Pride, El País), developed a student group focused on gender-identity and transgender identities (i.e., "Transtalk"), created an active virtual presence on Facebook, maintained weekly social events, provided a speaker's bureau to educate the campus, hosted numerous informational events (e.g., Transgender Awareness week), and supported a weekly discussion/support group (hosted by Counseling Services). Although these initiatives (and others too numerous to mention) have significantly changed the experience of LGBTQQI students at SJSU, there is more work to be done. The campus community needs significantly more work to decrease heterosexism and cisgender privilege and create an affirming living and learning environment for our students.

### **Findings from the International Student Focus Group**

The international student focus group was comprised of both undergraduate and graduate students from various countries. They ranged in age from 18 to 30. The concerns expressed by this group encompassed three main topics, 1) the SJSU bureaucracy: completing the paperwork, 2) campus connections: feeling valued and finding community, and 3) racial mapping in the classroom.

The analysis of the first two themes is drawn exclusively from the international student focus group data collected spring 2009. Analysis of the third theme, Racial Mapping, also references data collected from a previous research project by the principal investigator (Baba and Murray 2005)<sup>16</sup>. I have drawn on this supplemental data – including additional focus groups and depth interviews with students from African, Asia, Mexico, and Latin America – because it adds depth and context to the issues of racial mapping raised (but not fully explicated) in the 2009 focus group session.

#### **The SJSU Bureaucracy: Completing the Paperwork**

While anyone dealing with the California State University system must contend with bureaucratic red tape, for the international students in our study “completing the paperwork” arose as the single-most problematic aspect of their SJSU educational experience. Though much of what follows is not solely the purview of international students, the bureaucracy they encounter is exacerbated by their international status. To attend SJSU, international students must sustain interaction with various agencies of the federal government *in addition to the CSU*.

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<sup>16</sup> The previous study, centered on international and immigrant students at SJSU, included four focus group sessions and 11 depth interviews. The study included students from the following eighteen countries: Brazil, Cameroon, China, Congo, East Africa, El Salvador, England, Ethiopia, France, Iran, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Vietnam.

Admission to the United States on an F1 student visa necessitates a trip to the U.S. Consulate in their home country, interaction with U.S. Customs upon entry to the U.S., and a continuous relationship with the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Information (USICE). These interactions, moreover, must be coordinated between the various agencies (and San José State) with papers, signatures, and stamps being circulated in a particular order.

Negotiation with U.S. governmental agencies arises *after* they have successfully applied and been accepted for admission to SJSU. Admission to the California State University system is also an involved process for these students. According to the university website,<sup>17</sup> international students wanting to apply to the CSU must:

“... contact the CSU campus which they wish to attend for application procedures. Usually, these procedures include submitting [an electronic international student application form](#), a \$55 application processing fee, proof of financial support, proof of English proficiency (TOEFL), official transcripts, and diplomas/certificates sent directly from institutions the student attended to the CSU campus in sealed envelopes (accompanied by exact literal English translations), and possibly additional application forms for the department to which the student is applying, letters of recommendation, portfolios, auditions, and other tests (e.g., GMAT, GRE, MAT, etc.). Graduate applicants should check with their graduate departments on each CSU campus for additional requirements.”

In addition to completing the above requirements and successfully negotiating all the interactions therein, international students also pay up to \$24,000 a year for tuition (including room and board). These conditions set the context for interpreting the findings from this focus group. When asked about their “experiences on campus as international students,” much of ensuing discussion centered on three main issues, 1) getting their I-20s in a timely fashion, 2) getting their credits transferred successfully, and 3) being given the “run around.”

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<sup>17</sup> From: <http://www.csumentor.edu/faq/international.asp>

The I-20 is the certificate of eligibility issued to prospective students that enables them to apply for an F1 student visa. After an international student successfully applies to SJSU and is accepted to the university, the university inputs the student's information into the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS ).<sup>18</sup> The university then prints a SEVIS-based I-20 form and sends it to the student, who in turn uses this form to apply for an F1 visa. The international students in our study talked about two main problems with the I-20 process. First, several of them expressed concern about the time lag between their acceptance to SJSU and their receipt of the I-20 form. For example, as one male student explained:

*“I think the time that SJSU takes to contact people and then send their I 20s to them [is problematic], because it takes a lot of time, and then you kind of start getting worried, you know, cause you have to apply for your visa, and it’s a big hassle again, I mean – but here, you don’t really realize how much of a hassle it is with all the paperwork that you have to do and stuff like that, you know? And there is a kind of a big rush to get it all done actually. And you have to really pick things up and run, because – like, in my case, I have not taken a student loan, so, for me I had a lot of paperwork to do to prove that you don’t need one. And that takes a long time. And for that, I need to be sure that I’m getting my I-20. And then you know, the process takes at least seven to eight days to take all the papers and get them together, and you know? So, that was a – I remember the date that I got my email from San José State, saying that I got an admission at around – not around but on the first of October, and my I 20 – I got my I 20 like, on – I don’t know the first of December, or something. So, that was like two months. And I was waiting and waiting and waiting, and I had other universities, so – you know, but I still said, okay, I*

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<sup>18</sup> SEVIS is a government web-based system that enables schools and the USCIS and the USICE to monitor a student's visa status throughout their stay in the U.S.

*want to go to San José State, but they wouldn't send their I 20. I kept calling admissions. And admissions, when you call them, there's no response. You're talking to a wall on the other side of the phone"*

For other students the problem was waiting for an I-20 that never arrived and then having to get the university to send another copy. In one instance a student had her sister (on a business trip in the United States) fly from Florida to San José to pick up a copy of the I-20 in person after several attempts to get it by mail.

*"The only issues that I have were with admission office overall because I would get an email saying that I was accepted at San José State. I had my undergrad here. So basically, and they say that they already issued me a I-20, but I never got it. So, I was in Malaysia waiting, because I need to apply for my visa. And then, 'okay, we're gonna send it a second time.' Send I-20. And I never got it. And eventually my sister, she was in Florida, she kind of fly over here, and she got the I-20 sheet with her, getting the I-20 from that. And she sent that to me by express mail. It's all because – they say they sent it like, three or maybe four times, but I never get it. So, I was kind of late in applying for the visa, and I was kind of frustrated too, like, how come I never got it? You told me I was already accepted. For some reason, I don't know, it got lost in between or something. Or someone maybe never even sent it out. Who knows? It was a bad experience."*

"Who knows?" Indeed, in both these situations it is impossible to know what really happened or who is responsible. In recounting these stories and the ones that follow it is not about blaming any one department or staff member or even the student, the importance of these stories is that they construct the campus climate that surrounds our international students. The students are describing the campus that they experience as SJSU international students.

The second main “paperwork” issues for these students was getting their credits transferred successfully so that they were able to register for the right courses. Failure to register for the right classes can mean spending an extra semester or more as an SJSU student. Again, this is a problem for all transfer students as it is not uncommon for it to take a semester or two for previous college course work to show up in their student records. In the case of international students – paying a higher tuition – an extra semester can mean paying an additional \$12,000.

As one student described:

*“At San José State before coming, they told me that this many units would transfer. So, I thought, I was – but then they never gave me a detailed list of what courses would transfer. So, it’s – it was very hard for me to register for classes, really hard. So, I had to randomly like, register for classes myself. And then after coming here, I was informed that the international evaluator said this many credits would transfer, but then I come to know that that’s not it. You need to go to the specific department, fill out forms, and – you know, that’s – there’s no guarantee that the subjects will get transferred. That’s a little annoying and disappointing. You really think that this specific course will transfer, but then when you come meet your – what is it? Evaluator in that specific department, they would be like, you know, we don’t know the answer. So, you end up doing – you’re being a junior and you end up taking your freshman class again. That’s something you never want to do.”*

Part of the problem is the time it takes to update a transfer student’s record so that it reflects the actual courses transferred to the university. What is also at play here is that decisions about “transferable” courses are made both in Admissions and in specific department (and they don’t always concur). Add to this confusion all the players involved in student advising and it is

easy to understand the sense these students have about being given the “run around.” According to another woman student:

*“Another one more thing is, after coming to San José State I was in touch with international evaluator about my credit transfer and things like that. So, after coming here, it was very hard for me to get in touch with her, because she’s busy, I can get appointment to see her, but I ended up meeting the GE advisor – the GE advisor. But then she wasn’t even able to help me, because my courses were not in the system. So, basically, she had no clue what courses I had done... And then I went to my undergrad, my department undergrad coordinator, he told me that this particular course was equal to this particular math course. But then, I went to the evaluation in my department, then I couldn’t meet 50 percent mark. Now I’m doing – I took special permission from the course coordinator, I’m doing as a co-requisite.”*

While this student is not directly complaining about having to see so many people to figure out which math course to take, other students were quite explicit in their sense of being passed off from one person or department to another. As one man commented, *“...in general, I mean, like, for the simple Plan of Study thing you have to really run around, I mean, to get it signed, and signed twice, or thrice – you really, I mean, I – I’m still running around.”* And a newly arrived student chimed in, *“...I have no idea how it works here on campus. I thought that people always sent me to different people.”* Though there was some dissention among the focus group students as one exchange student stated, *“I think they take care of exchange students and try to help them. There’s always somebody you can contact whenever,”* still another replied:

*“I disagree. Even though I’m an exchange student, I have some problem with transferring credits and it wasn’t me that did the mistake, and in the end, I was on my own and had to*

*figure out how to solve it on my own. And they sent me from place to place, and I even went to the [major] department and to the head, and it was – I felt quite alone on that. It was quite stressful, because I spent a couple days here, and you're on your own, and it wasn't even your mistake that you're trying to find out – how it works, and how to fix it.”*

Paperwork, delays in transference of credits, and getting the bureaucratic run around are certainly issues that most people on campus can relate to (albeit from different perspectives).

What is unique to our international students is that they must negotiate these challenges in a new country, often speaking a new language, governed by a new set of normative assumptions.

### **Campus Connections: Feeling Valued and Finding Community**

Much of the discussion of the relationships international students have with their professors and other students on campus was prefaced with enumerations of the numbers of international students present in any given situation. Generally speaking, the international students in our study felt more valued by their professors in majors/classrooms where there were not a lot of other international students present. At the same time, students in classes without a lot of international students felt themselves to be isolated and separate from “American” students. International students characterized their closest associations as taking place in contexts where international students were in the majority.

As above, many of the international students had difficulties with credit transfer resulting in late registration in classes. Often this meant they had to meet directly with professors to request admission into classes. It was at this juncture that many of these students felt “valued” for their international status. As an international student from Germany explained:

*“Well maybe, my professor accepted me to add his class, because it was an [name of discipline] class, and he said he'd be happy to have a non-American student in the class*

*to have a different perspective. So, that was really nice, because otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to take this class because it was already full..."*

True to the professors' initial acceptance of this international student, her experience in class affirmed her sense of being valued as an international student:

*"And he (her professor) always asked me, "What do you think about it? What is your perspective?" To have a kind of contrast to what the Americans think. But it's about American culture, so it makes – it makes sense to have somebody with a different perspective in that class. And in general, I think the professors try to include international students by asking, "So, what do you think? How is it in Germany?" That's what they always ask. And they – I think they really try to include the fact that you're from a different country."*

Not only do the students feel valued for their perspective on a particular topic, they also understand their value in helping other international students. As one masters student from India commented:

*"At the time that I applied (to her Masters' program) ..., I was the only international student in my program. And so I was given a lot of attention in terms of my ideas, and my values and the things that I learned back in my undergrad in India. And it really helped me a lot, I felt a lot of support... Over the years that I've been here, I've seen more international students come and get into the program, and more Indians coming into the program as well. And it's nice when the professor says, 'you know so-and-so started off being very alone, why don't talk to her about her classes she's taken.' And it feels good because they're being supportive. And, just the advice of, the rapport with your professors, it all comes down to... I have had a fantastic experience at San José State."*

The sense of being valued by professors seems to depend on the number of students present and the number of other international students present. Those students in large classes dominated by international and/or immigrant students did not express this same sense of feeling valued.

*“I think in the [major] department, no one really cares where you’re from. You’re just one of many and like, but in the [major] department, on the other hand it’s different. Like, they really care about and they try to help you a lot. I really think it depends on the program...”*

Another student, from India, also commented on their experience in this same department:

*“I think in the [major] program, also, there are a lot of international students, so it’s not that special about them. Every once in a while, some professors will ask, you know, if they think that, oh, it’s relevant, they will ask, ‘how do you think it works you know, in India, or whatever’. But it generally happens in graduate level classes, not undergrad, I don’t think, or very huge classes.”*

The international students’ interactions with other students seems to be governed both by their international status and by racial and ethnic context. These students reported spending more time with other international students than with “American” students, and in those cases where there were lots of other students from their home country concentrated in the same major, they report spending more time within their own racial/ethnic group. Such is the explanation given by a graduate student from India:

*“I think yeah, on campus, I mean, you don’t really have a lot of opportunities to interact with other people, because I don’t know, you really wouldn’t – there are just so many*

*Indians that you that you just end up interacting with them. You just interact with them only. Especially, I don't know, this is like, for [major]. Maybe other fields where you do have students in your class, like – you don't have in a class of 60, 58 Indians.”*

It's not that these students don't interact cross-racially because they do and many discussed the fact of having friends from “*all over the world.*” In fact, the students in our focus group that lived in housing designed for international students reported many “diverse” interactions with other international students. The following example from a woman student from India was typical of the statements made by these students:

*“Being undergrad in [academic] program, I think I - you don't have that many Indians in the classes. I mean, like, not a – other people that take the class. I mean it's the same here in [international student housing]. So, I think I spend a lot of time with other students from different countries. It's good, you know, and you get to share your experiences with others. So, I think I spend a lot of time with other people. And my study group is not at all Indian.”*

For these international students, like so many of the other student groups we studied, their interactions with non-international students are limited.

*“In class, I talk to some of the other students, but actually not that much. It's become commuter campus, and they just come for class and go back after class, and they work and so on. Even for a presentation, it sometimes happens that they say, ‘Okay, we're supposed to do it as a group, but everybody does it at home, and we'll just present together somehow.’ It's really hard sometimes to really talk to them... In my English classes, there are not really many international students. They're mostly Americans and just – we talk about an assignment or something you know, ‘so are you done already, or*

*what did you do?’ But that’s mostly it. I don’t really – I don’t know why there’s not interaction with the American students. I hang out with the international students.”*

While this student attributed her lack of interaction with American students to their commuter status, other international students characterized *themselves* as commuters with their commuter status impinging on their interactions with other students.

*“I would take my classes, I would go home, I would work, and I would just stay on campus mostly for the class. So, I didn’t get to. And then undergrad classes, you don’t even see the same faces in your classes, cause every class, you have a different set of people. It’s not even the same faces that you know – oh, we have three classes together, and so you know – so, it was just hard for me the first couple of years to, you know, trying to see where I fit, and who I – I mean, I used to talk to a lot of people because we had a lot of group work, but then again it’s just – you know, you’re working as a team, but you really don’t feel like that – you can’t be best buddies or best friends. And that’s what you need, I think, in the first couple of years.”*

In both cases, regardless of the explanation, the students are expressing the same issue: they don’t feel connected to other students. Classroom interactions are transitory. Transnational interactions are problematic. And, in the end it is more comfortable to spend time with people you perceive having more in common with.

## **Racial Mapping in the Classroom<sup>19</sup>**

Within the institution of education, the classroom is the primary public stage upon which university life is enacted. It is a stage in that both students and professors take up institutionally scripted roles as they interact within the classroom context (Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 1959). The classroom is imbued with normative expectations about acts and actions that may take place there, and it is filled symbolic objects that connote power relations. The classroom is also filled with individuals possessing human agency, thus the potential to subvert scripts, violate norms, and resist power relations is always present in this space. Scholars have assessed the classroom for its limitations – its ability to reproduce existing racial hierarchies (Bourdieu 1977, Bowles 1976, Macleod 1987) – and its potential to liberate (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* 1994). As an interactional space where student identities are negotiated, we found both processes at work. For the international and immigrant students in our study, the classroom was referenced as a primary site where they felt racialized, othered, and set apart, *and* as a (liberating) space where they occasionally had self-defining experiences.

Much of the racial mapping that occurs within the classroom is a “team” effort (Goffman 1959:77). For many international and immigrant students the “team performance” that they feared the most – the one perceived as resulting in a demarcation between themselves and “Americans” -- was initiated by someone speaking with an accent. In these cases, though the

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<sup>19</sup> The analysis in this section is drawn primarily (though not exclusively) from data collected in a previous research project I conducted with Dr. Yoko Baba (Baba and Murray 2005). Though this previous study included both immigrant and international students, many of the “immigrant” students that we interviewed started as international students just as many of the international students in the 2009 focus group had plans to continue living in the U.S.. So while someone who defines their stay in the U.S as permanent (immigrant) might have a different perspective from someone who sees their stay as temporary (international), this distinction is perhaps not as salient to a discussion of classroom interactions.

students characterized their English speaking skills as problematic, it is instead the social/interactional responses to “speaking with an accent” that generate or initiate their feelings of not belonging – their sense of otherness. Such is the case in the following example from of a student from Africa:

*“I just feel like I don’t belong [in my classes]. I have trouble with my accent. I fear everybody will look at me. In most classes I’m the only African. I just feel I don’t have anything in common with them. That is just the way I feel. The students are nice to me, but I still feel I don’t belong.”* [African focus group – Dec 2000]

In this case, the student attributes her sense that she does not belong to her “trouble” with her accent. The “trouble” she anticipates is found in the social response that she expects, “*everybody will look at me.*” The significance of her observation that “*In most classes I’m the only African.*” is neutralized by her subsequent insistence that her feelings of not belonging in her classes are her own responsibility. This pattern of students’ locating responsibility for their sense of difference in themselves (and not in the social responses surrounding them) occurred repeatedly in both data sets. The typical response to these interactional situations was for students to avoid the possibility of being sanctioned (*everybody will look at me*) by minimizing their participation in class. This same fear and response is present in the comments by this student from China:

Interviewer: *What about in class? Do you ever talk in class?*

Student: *In class, I don’t talk that much.*

Interviewer: *Why not?*

Student: *Uh, afraid of what other people are going to think. My answer. Things like that. So, I don’t say a lot of stuff.*

Interviewer: *Are you afraid you might get it wrong?*

Student: *Yeah, and they all turn their heads at me* [Interview, Feb. 2002].

Here the fear of social response (*afraid of what other people are going to think*) manifesting as the possibility of a group-level gesture, “*and they all turn their heads at me*” justifies this student’s choices about class participation (*In class, I don’t talk that much.*) While it is within the boundaries of normative behavior to look at a speaker when they are speaking, in the classroom context students do not typically look at other students when speaking. In the classroom the students look at the professor. Though individual students may occasionally turn their head to look at student speakers, the concerted all group head-swivel is usually reserved for the so-called unexpected, untoward, or “deviant” response. In an interactional context where native English speakers are the norm, the “accented response” falls into this category.

As an African student described:

*“Like when I’m in a class and I have a question, I don’t like to ask because if I ask then when they (other students) hear the accent everybody [respondent turns upper-half of his body in an exaggerated manner] looks at you. Nobody wants to look at you like that, but they just hear you and wonder what kind of accent or what kind of person is talking. Such a small thing, but you have to accept it...”* [African focus group – Dec. 2000].

Being “looked at” is one of those informal, often unintentional, visible, behavioral reminders that the “*kind of person*” you are, or the “*accent*” you possess is unexpected and/or not normative. The consequences of being “looked at” are often described by students as “feeling like you don’t belong,” or more generally, “feeling uncomfortable.” As a Latin American student commented:

*“You know, when someone’s looking at you that way, you’re like, “you know, why are they looking at me that way?” So you’re not comfortable”* [Interview, April 2002].

The “group head swivel,” initiated by the “accented” response, was the most often cited team performance that international and immigrant students were subject to by other students. The significance of this performance and its potential impact on student identities deserves further consideration. It is in these (fleeting) interactional moments that meanings about race, ethnicity, and nationality are continually reconstructed. Though often viewed as “normal,” “natural” or “acceptable” responses<sup>20</sup> – even to the international and immigrant students themselves – the “normative” social world being upheld is one that positions non-native people as the “unexpected” participants. What makes these subtly racist responses even more problematic is that they originated from *both* students and professors.

Subtle racism perpetrated by professors came in the form of racially marking students in response to both student “accents” and the way they looked. While the act of “marking” someone by race is not always seen as racism (though the fact that people of color are verbally “marked” by race does reflect a racial hierarchy in which the unmarked case is whiteness), what is important for this analysis is that international and immigrant students *perceive* the act of racially marking a student in the classroom as problematic – as setting them apart. That this marking is carried out by the professor – the social actor with the most power in the situation – exacerbates the potential impact on international and immigrant student identities. As in the situation described below:

*“There’s this Japanese lady in our class that doesn’t speak English very well. And at one point she (the professor) referred to her (the student) as ‘the Japanese girl’, just like in front of the whole class. And I was surprised, being a sociology major, I was just*

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<sup>20</sup> In this instance and in my use of the concept of “subtle racism” that follows I have transposed Benokraitis’ conceptualization of “subtle sexism” (N. Benokraitis 1997).

*“whoa.” You know I can’t believe she said that...*” [International student focus group – May 2000].

In this case, “not speaking English well” is offered as the impetus for the racial marking. Not speaking English well, in other words, creates a classroom situation where it becomes possible to be publicly marked by race (e.g. *“in front of the whole class.”*). In other instances students recalled being singled out by professors because of their phenotype. In the quote above the Brazilian student went on to say,

*“You know, I can't believe she [professor] said that, and once she was talking about Mexicans, and I guess she just saw the color of my skin, and she turned around, and said "Aren't you...?," and she just caught herself and just turned back. She didn't even finish it”* [International student focus group – May 2000].

And while this student was clear that she was being marked by race (*I guess she just saw the color of my skin*), other students were more reticent in their analysis of such situations. A far more typical response to the topic of “difficult or challenging classroom situations,”<sup>21</sup> was as follows.

*“I think for me, most of the teachers that I've had, they haven't really had a problem like understanding me or...but I think that one thing, sometimes they see us...we're not...the color of our skin and my hair, sometimes. Like my freshman year they would kind of see you in a different way. I don't know if it's just me or what was it...”*[Latin American student focus group , 2000].

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<sup>21</sup> In the 2000, 2002, and 2009 focus groups and depth interviews we followed an interview schedule that consisted of very general questions. While we were definitely interested in racism within the classroom, we avoided asking directly about racism. Typically we would ask students about “any challenging or problematic situations they had faced in the classroom,” if the students did not bring up this topic on their own.

Here the student hedges his interpretation of being seen “*in a different way.*” Though he includes “*the color of our skin and my hair*” – both phenotypical markers – as part of being seen “*in a different way,*” in the end he puts it back on himself “*I don’t know if it’s just me.*” This pattern of dismissing subtle racism by locating responsibility for socially constructed meanings within their own identities was typical of students. Many followed up descriptions of being “othered” by students and professors by blaming themselves for being “too sensitive.” Though none of the students in our study labeled what was happening to them as “racism” (perhaps because such subtle racism is internalized as “normal,” “natural,” and “acceptable” (Benokraitis, 1997:11)), much of what they describe resonates as “...social practices which (explicitly or implicitly) attribute merits or allocate values to members of racially categorized groups solely because of their ‘race’” p. 145 (Omi and Winant 1987).

In both focus group and depth interview data, there were many examples of classroom interactions where the racism and racial marking was not so subtle. Such was the case in the following incident described by a student from Mexico:

*“In my first semester here at school I took a [language] class. I go in there and I sit in the class and there were just Asian students and a couple of whites too. And the professor walks in there and you know, like I walk in there with my backpack and sit down and everybody turns around and looks at me, you know, like “who is this guy and what is he doing here?” And I was just sitting there and then you know, you can just feel the attention from everybody like what is he doing here? And I was just there. And then the professor you know, walks in and takes off his jacket and looks around, “All right, this is [Language] 25A or whatever. “Is everybody in the right class?” I knew he was saying this because of me. “Is everybody in the right class?” “Yeah.” “This is*

[Language] 25A.” *And then he walks around asking, “You’re in the right class, yeah?” And then he looks at me and says, “This is a [Language] class. This is a [Language] course.” I’m like, “Yeah, I know.” “Have you ever taken [Language] before?” “Yeah, a couple of years” “You have?” “Yeah.” “Oh.” Then he turns around, you know, and then I don’t know...I mean, after awhile yeah, I guess they got used to it and just, you just don’t see many Hispanic or you know, being involved in the [Language] course or anything” [Latin American student focus group, 2000].*

In this case, taking a [specific] language class, was not one of the social practices allocated to members of the racial category “Mexican” by the students in this class or the particular professor. Instead, it seems as though the professor’s initial interpretation of this student’s presence was that the student made a mistake and was in the wrong place. This student, in other words, violated the racial maps held by the professor. Though we did not collect data on professor’s perceptions of racial mapping in the classroom, for the students in our study these maps were very evident; especially during exams. As one African student commented in a focus group session:

*“I’m sure they [professors] do know [that students are racially divided in the classroom]. I guess you see that they realize the divisions when it’s time to take the tests, you know, because they, because they make sure that we’re [African students] between every couple of them [Vietnamese students], you know. They separate us pretty well. Some of them that are concerned about cheating” [African focus group, 2000].*

Similarly, a Vietnamese student described the following situation:

*“Of course the instructors they don’t say directly to you or show directly they discriminate and stuff. But, like one of the instructors they catch a Vietnamese student cheating, and since that day on, every time we took the test, that [subject] class took the test the teacher separate the Vietnamese students. They didn’t let the students sit close together. It was true that some of the Vietnamese students were cheating and stuff, but don’t assume all of the Vietnamese students do so. I know that some of the students they copy one student and they assume all the other students do so” [Interview – Feb. 2002].*

In each of these cases the students are describing the social worlds they encounter in the classroom. For both the African student and the Vietnamese student the classroom is perceived of as a racially divided space. Professors are perceived of as sanctioning these racial divisions, unless the class is taking a test. In both instances the students observed the professors separating the students for the test and interpreted the separation as being based on national origin. Though we cannot know for certain the intentions of either professor, for the students in our study the classroom is clearly an interactional context where racialization and “othering” takes place. Here Hewitt’s (1997) discussion of “situated and biographical selves” helps to illuminate the impact these “situations” may have on the identities of the international and immigrant students we studied (p. 88-90). According to Hewitt,

“People bring selves to social situations. That is, they enter situations not as empty containers into which others will place whatever goals or motives they wish us to have, but as active creatures ready to pursue goals of our own as well as to take on those of the situation... The reality of the person is thus both individual and social, and it is anchored in the numerous situations of everyday life and created anew in each situation as well as

in biographies people construct for themselves or have constructed for them by others” (Hewitt 1997).

Thus international and immigrant students bring “biographical” selves – “memories of the past, other roles that have been made, special successes and failures”(Hewitt, 1997:88) – into the classroom, and these selves may be transformed in and through the interactions taking place there. Empirical indicators of these transformations may be found in the way in which students respond to instances of subtle and blatant racism. As the data indicates, some students made conscious decisions to ignore, or overlook these interactional assaults; to minimize the impact on their biographical selves. For others, however, these classroom situations shaped and transformed their identities. This is especially evident with those students who consciously silence themselves – refusing to ask questions or participate in classroom discussions. Though ignoring, denying, or simply not seeing racism for international and immigrant students of color may be interpreted as retreat, for some students it is held up as a strategy of resistance. As an African student commented, “*I just focus on getting my degree, I just try to keep that goal in mind and let go of the rest.*” Ignoring interactional cues marking them as “outsiders” enables these students to defy the limits imposed upon them by the racial hierarchies they encounter as they move through the various contexts of this institution.

*“Sometimes we don’t feel welcomed in our own land.”* (Latino SJSU Student)

### **Findings from the Latino Student Focus Group**

The Latino student focus group was composed of both undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of majors. The students ranged in age from 18 to 26. Included in this group were several AB 540 students.<sup>22</sup> Several important themes related to the campus climate experienced by Latino students emerged from analysis of these data: 1) reclaiming community, reclaiming history, 2) being Latino in the classroom, 3) recruitment, retention, and graduation.

#### **Reclaiming Community, Reclaiming History**

The statement above, by a Latino graduate student, exemplifies the paradox experienced by the Latino students in our study. Throughout the focus group session these students articulated a vision for SJSU embedded in a rich historical analysis of the Chicano power movement of the 1960s. Even further, their analysis included an understanding of the history of California such that they were able to lay claim to this campus as their *“own land.”* This historical sense of entitlement, however, was accompanied by a more immediate sense of disenfranchisement, a sense of not *“feel[ing] welcomed in our own land.”*

The students expressed their sense of disenfranchisement as, *“being ignored,” “needing more recognition,”* experiencing the campus as *“uninviting,”* and, as above, not *“feeling wanted.”* Underlying their articulation of this sense of not belonging was an understanding of the consequences of this experience. As expressed by one of the transfer students, *“if you don’t feel*

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<sup>22</sup> Assembly Bill 540, effective January 2002, created a nonresident tuition exemption for undocumented students who meet certain additional criteria. The students attending university as a result of this law are sometimes referred to as “AB 540 students.” For specific information on the legislation and the eligibility requirements see <http://www.sjsu.edu/registrar/services/students/ab540.html> .

wanted in a place, you start losing-- your focus.” Or simply put by a Latina graduate student, “if you feel like you’re welcome, you’re going to stay. If you don’t feel like you’re welcome you’re-- you’ll go to some other school.”

The sense of disappointment characterizing the responses of these students can be tied to the expectations that many of them had before coming to SJSU. The following comment by a recently arrived student captures this sense of loss:

*“Although I-- I just came-- I’m new to campus. I started school this spring. And besides-- besides choosing to come here because of the department, because of my major-- one of the factors that-- that pulled me in was-- was the community. Yeah, there’s a large Latino community in San José. And-- and that was inviting to me. I was like-- that was actually, like, a major factor for-- for coming here. And then I come to campus and that idea doesn’t really-- doesn’t really exist. The numbers -- the population numbers that surround the campus don’t match-- the Latino population -- on campus.”*

The longed for “idea” that these Latino students feel does not currently exist on campus is an idea of community. It is a call for *La Raza*<sup>23</sup> to be recognized and acknowledged for their rich historical and cultural contributions to California and to San José State University. In place of this welcome, the students experience a response that ranges from “silence” to outright racism. As one Latino student commented:

*“On our campus there’s a lot of tension. But I think it’s a lot of, like, passive tension that-- that students hold on campus. Because-- there’s so much silence. You walk through and it’s silent and you don’t want to break the silence.”*

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<sup>23</sup> “The people.”

And another explained:

*“We definitely need more appreciation and recognition of our presence here at San José State University. I feel like they-- the people are ignoring us. On a personal level, I walk around as a Chicano, as Raza, and I don't feel welcome here. I feel like, just, people look at us or look at me and stereotype us right away, whether he's a student or not or stereotypical gangster or drug dealer or something. And it's time for us not to be ignored and to start getting appreciated and recognized. Make it mandatory for the administration to appreciate our culture or our different cultures. And that, yeah, we're the majority right here. And we're gonna keep on migrating. Our people have always migrated. And we're gonna keep on migrating. And-- they just need to recognize our-- our space, our historical space in San José and California, in general. That we are here and they need to recognize our culture, make it mandatory for people to have sympathy or-- and an appreciation for us being here. And we're gonna keep on being here. I just think that they just keep on ignoring us or they're afraid of us.”*

Here again the contradiction between entitlement and disenfranchisement plays out in this student's daily life on campus. *“I walk around as a Chicano, as Raza,”* and, *“I don't feel welcome here.”* Clearly he understands the historical contributions Chicanos have made to California and, more specifically, to San José and just as clearly he wonders at the lack of recognition of these contributions. Instead of being likened to Ernesto Galarza<sup>24</sup> he see himself and other Chicanos stereotyped as *“gangsters,”* and *“drug dealers,”* and as people that others fear. Similarly, the Latina students also see themselves as subject to a gendered version of this

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<sup>24</sup> Ernesto Galarza (1905–1984) was a Mexican-American labor activist, professor, writer and key political figure in California history.

violent stereotype. An interaction between one of our graduating seniors and an SJSU alumni exemplifies this experience of being stereotyped:

*“I’ve had a person in [my department] who is a State graduate say-- and I know it was a joking matter, but I mean, still, you-- you don’t say it no matter who it is, he was like, ‘Mexicans go to college? What? You guys actually like to go to school?’ And I’m like, ‘Yes. Yes we do,’ like, don’t even go there. You know? Like he doesn’t under-- he doesn’t know me. He doesn’t know ever-- anybody’s experience. So how can he just judge? You know? I mean I-- I come from east LA. That doesn’t mean I was ever a Chola or, you know, I ever did any-- you know--anything wrong, right? I don’t have any tattoos. You know? I don’t have ten kids. You know? So it’s like who is he to judge? Who is anybody to judge who you are, you know, by-- by your presence, by your last name, by your language or whatever. You know?”*

Here, the racist “joke” is received as anything but a joke. The quip, ‘*Mexicans go to college?*’ is seen as one more layer of judgment placed unfairly on these students. Regardless of the intention of the speaker, this “joke” about race does not create connection or camaraderie, instead it invokes additional racist stereotypes, “*That doesn’t mean I was ever a Chola...I don’t have tattoos... I don’t have ten kids.*” In other words, this interaction and others like it, contribute to the larger sense of disenfranchisement experienced by the Latino students in our study and elsewhere (Hurtado and Carter 1997).

### **Being Latino in the Classroom**

The sense of separation and isolation expressed by these students was most apparent in their discussions about their classes. The classroom, for these Latino and Latina students was described as a place filled with racialized “*tension.*” In response, many of these students

characterized themselves as “*holding back*,” “*not speaking*,” and “*never expressing myself completely*.” In their perceptions, the consequences of not participating (which they seemed well aware of), were outweighed by the possible downside of, “*saying the wrong thing*.”

*“I know I shouldn’t hold back what I have to say, but I-- I never express myself completely. I don’t want to get on, especially, the teacher’s bad side ‘cause they give me grades.”*

Here the student knows he, “*shouldn’t hold back*,” but fears repercussion if he does so. Similarly one of the graduate students said, “*I guess it’s (his own silence) a hindrance. Like I-- I’m hindering myself, my-- intellectual development.*” While these students understand the intellectual costs for not speaking, they also understand the possible price of visibility. Such was the case for one of the graduate students:

*“I’ve had some encounters in the masters program here and-- where a non-colored lady, she-- felt my presence was a risk to her classroom.... [In a classroom discussion] I made a comment, ‘Well, I’ve seen teachers make a mockery of their students just for the sake of it.’ Ooh. She-- she had-- she took it personally. Like, ‘I’ve never done that,’ or ‘I’d never.’ Since then it went downhill. Eventually, she’s like, ‘You know what, you shouldn’t be on my roster.’”*

In this student’s perception, his participation in a discussion was “*taken personally*” by his professor and that led to his expulsion from class. As he was relating this story in the context of the focus group session, another student characterized his encounter as, “*a slap in the face*.” “*A slap*,” delivered by, and seemingly expected from a non-Latino professor.

It is clear from these data that Latino and Latina students have low expectations for their relationships with faculty who are not Latino. Throughout the focus group session these students

told stories about faculty who, “*even though they say come to office hours, they don’t mean it,*” or faculty who could, “*care less about students,*” or “*think their students don’t have feelings.*” This was especially true for those students in majors where Latinos and Latinas are underrepresented.<sup>25</sup>

*“I feel totally outnumbered, like where-- where are they? You know? That’s definitely a problem. That’s definitely an issue. Like, who am I gonna identify with in class? In my courses, what is somebody that is not of my race-- gonna explain to me through a film or, you know, through some media project that-- you know, I can’t relate to them if they’re speaking about Star Wars. Well, what does that have to do with my culture? You know? What does-- I don’t know. I just-- there’s definitely a lack of connection between us and, maybe-- courses, instructors, people in our classes.”*

The perceived “*lack of connection*” experienced by these students permeates all aspects of their education. This is not to say that these students did not have a solution to the problems they face in the classroom and on campus in general. The students had both a structural analysis of the problems of disenfranchisement, and a well-articulated plan for recruitment, retention, and increased graduation of underrepresented students. They also had an immediate solution to their problems with professors: hire more Latina/o faculty. As one Latina commented:

*“If there were more Latino-- professors around, that-- that could share some of our stories-- it would invite us to-- to participate more in classrooms.”*

Similarly, a transfer student suggested:

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<sup>25</sup> For a breakdown of Undergraduate Degrees Granted by Discipline Division and Ethnic Group, Systemwide, 2009-10 see [http://www.calstate.edu/as/stat\\_reports/2009-2010/deg14.htm](http://www.calstate.edu/as/stat_reports/2009-2010/deg14.htm)

*“I think we need more instructors. I think we’re definitely missing a lot of instructors, especially in different departments. I mean I look up to the-- the professors in the MAS<sup>26</sup> department because they’re, like, the only ones I can turn to, you know? People in my department are Caucasian and I can’t really relate to a lot of-- you know, what they’re trying to tell me, I guess. But I mean there’s definitely a lack of professors.”*

During the fall 2010 semester, Latina/o students composed 21% (6,013) of the total student population, while Latina/o professors (of all ranks) composed only 6% (101) of faculty.<sup>27</sup> In this case then, both their observations of what are missing, “*a lot of instructors*,” and their analysis of what it might mean for their educational experiences is corroborated in the academic literature (Cole 2007, Anaya and Cole 2001, Lundberg and Schreiner 2004, Monzo and Rueda 2001).

In their study of Latino teachers and paraeducators of elementary students, Monzo and Rueda (2001) found for example,

Among almost all paraeducators, *confianza* (mutual trust and a sense of comfort in sharing information with someone), was discussed as an important factor that enabled students to ask for assistance in academic tasks, share concerns that may affect their learning, and feel more comfortable within school contexts. They believed establishing *confianza* was fostered by their shared language and culture and by getting to know students and interacting with them informally (p. 443).

As above, the “*lack of connection*” experienced by the Latina/o students in our study to non Latina/o faculty might well be expressed as a lack of “*confianza*.” These students believe,

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<sup>26</sup> Mexican American Studies.

<sup>27</sup> For complete statistics on student and faculty composition by race see <http://www.oir.sjsu.edu/>

and the academic literature concurs that a “shared language and culture” between teachers and their students can foster mutual trust leading to more successful academic outcomes (Monzo and Rueda 2001).<sup>28</sup> Faculty/student ratios related to racial and ethnic representation is a structural issue with interactional outcomes. Structural issues require structural solutions. In their discussion of campus climate, the Latino/a students in our study referenced a number of institutional level issues they felt impeded the academic success of Latino students. Underlying this discussion was a deep concern with recruitment, retention, and graduation of Latino/as and other underrepresented students.

### **Recruitment, Retention and Graduation**

What is perhaps most striking about these data is the extent to which the Latina/o students in our study constructed a “group level” analysis of campus climate. While these students did speak about their own personal experiences (as above), much of their discussion was framed as idiosyncratic of larger, more wide-reaching problems. Recruitment and/or lack of support for recruitment of Latina/o students was a recurrent theme for these students.

*“If I were going to pinpoint one issue, I would say recruitment. If you get a group together, they-- they will flourish and they will develop what they need. If we can get more Latino students in our school, we will start doing your job for us. [LAUGHTER] We just need more of our population here to-- to start creating an EOP group, to-- to start-- like ourselves, we-- we could tutor ourselves. We could organize our own workshops. We just need the numbers. We need enough participants.”*

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<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that non-Latino/a professors cannot successfully teach and mentor Latino/a students, they can and they do. However, the research does indicate that cross-racial relationships might be better served through shared culture and language. In the case of non-Latino/a professors this could necessitate further educational training.

There are two key components to what this student is articulating. On the one hand, here and elsewhere in these data the students call for additional university level support for recruitment of underrepresented students. For example, one of the graduate students, who also completed her undergraduate degree at SJSU, commented on the downsizing of the university's EOP program:<sup>29</sup>

*"I remember when Walquist library was still here. EOP had an entire floor and it was just this huge program with-- you know, from director down to tutors, mentors. And-- they would give us programs every-- every week we would have workshops on-- like leadership, note taking skills, time management skills. And it's now down to-- I guess it's-- well they just got a director, from what I hear. And I think there's two other people that are working for EOP. Some of us don't even know where EOP is located anymore. So that's-- it-- you know, it's-- if it wasn't for EOP, some of us wouldn't be here, you know, Latinos. So I think it's-- it's-- EOP's integral to the university as far as recruiting, you know, out of the Chicano community. So I think that should be brought-- brought back. You know, it was a model program. So it'd be nice to see it like that again."*

Here, as above, the student puts the onus of responsibility for recruitment on the university and suggests that more university support should go to programs like EOP. In addition to the perception that the university is responsible for recruitment, however, is the understanding that these Latino/a students *also* feel responsible for recruitment. This is most evident in their commitment to and advocacy for Raza Day. Raza Day is an annual student-led event designed to encourage Latino/a high school students to attend college. The event involves

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<sup>29</sup> From: [http://www.sjsu.edu/eop/about\\_us/](http://www.sjsu.edu/eop/about_us/) "The Educational Opportunity Program is designed to improve access and retention of historically low-income and educationally disadvantaged students. EOP students have the potential and demonstrated motivation to perform satisfactorily at a CSU, but they have not been able to realize their fullest potential because of their economic or educational background."

campus tours, workshops, and performances celebrating traditional Chicano culture. This event is organized and financially supported primarily by the student organization MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán). The students in the focus group were clear in their commitment to Raza Day and to mentoring youth. What they felt was lacking was university support for their efforts. For example, they lamented the fact that they had to pay rent to the university for the rooms they were using to recruit students to the university.

Latino student: *“And Raza Day, like we just had Raza Day and paid who knows how much money to rent out halls on campus to recruit students that would later on, like, hopefully attend this college. I don’t know, it doesn’t-- why should we have to pay for that?”*

Latino student: *“We’re doing the university’s job, you know?”*

Latina student: *“Yeah, it does not make sense.”*

Latino student: *“And we still gotta pay for it.”*

It seems as though these students operate on two parallel tracks. They feel responsible to hold the university to its commitment to the serve the Latino community, and they feel their own responsibilities to the larger Latino/Chicano community. These concerns arose even more acutely in reference to issues surrounding retention of Latino/a students. The depth of these concerns are exemplified in the following statement by an undergraduate student:

*“I’m really glad we have these grad students here. You’re talking about retention-- the-- totally key, right? I think we really need to focus on retention. And we need a lot of other attention also. Just getting by, getting through college, didn’t get you guys into grad school. I think we need the president to understand that people from under resourced communities, they have, man, just a whole long list of obstacles to overcome just to-- first*

*of all, just to get to college. And then not having someone, not having any examples of, like, an older sibling maybe, of going to college, being the first to go to college. Not having parents that know the system or know of-- well, how to apply or even just how to, like, promote student skills. Money is huge. Money-- a lot of us-- a lot of us work and that takes time away from-- from the intellectual development. Getting by, isn't intellectual development. We might graduate but will we be able to compete later on when we-- when we're looking for jobs, or is that gonna be the next obstacle we're then stuck at, you know, not being able to get the job that we studied for."*

These students are not interested in simply “*getting accepted*” to college, or “*getting by*” in their classes, or even “*being able to graduate.*” They want to excel. They want to be prepared enough to compete successfully for the job opportunities their university education opens up for them. They are willing to make the effort to accomplish their goals, and they have a well-articulated plan for how the university can support them in their endeavors. Their plan - articulated throughout the entire focus group session – encompassed both practical and political concerns.

On the practical side, student concerns centered on tuition increases, the lack of a 24 hour study space, lack of office space to support student organizations, limited access to resources during summer, and the problems endemic to negotiating the SJSU bureaucracy. On the political side, the students were committed to highlighting the historical legacy of La Raza, and focusing the spotlight on persistent racial inequalities. For some, these inequalities manifest through the educational system. Several students, for example, talked about the Writing Standards Test (WST), the challenge it poses for non-native speakers, and the “lack” of preparation students receive from the institution in order to pass it.

*“I was in mind with improvement in the WST testing, the language department as well. Being a Mexican American, a Chicano-- my experience with the English department has been—‘okay, show ‘em the basic necessities to get them by and get them out.’ Fine. We get out, we can’t write. We can read, we can’t write properly, you know? And then if you look at the WST questions they are ‘support your thesis...’, we’re doing it as we were taught. And then, well, why didn’t we pass?”*

For others, the politics of inequality reside in both the university and the government. For example, many of the students were deeply concerned with the plight of the AB 540 students. As one of the graduate students stated:

*“I am what they call an AB 540 student. We are undocumented students, who because we completed certain requirements, are allowed to continue onto higher education. And of course we are not allowed to receive financial aid or any other kind of help. We started a student support group because we didn’t have any support from the administration. I understand because, you know, state funds are not there for this type of activity. Okay, so one of our issues is collecting support because the problem is not so much admission, but actually graduating, retention and graduation. Yes, we can be-- admitted, but it’s not promised we’ll be able to have our degree. And an even harder issues is that we are aware that we will not be able to use our degree to practice what we study because of our situation, which is out of the hands of the state and the administration. But with that in mind, I would like to say that there is something that the administration could do, create a way to help fund specific students or books or legal assistance for these students.”*

Another student echoed these sentiments in her suggestion we (the campus community), “...*build a support system for the undocumented student community,*” and that the university president take a stand on The Dream Act:<sup>30</sup>

*“We have been working-- as a group to try and get the [former] San José State University President to write a letter of support-- some sort of press release -- to the newspaper endorsing his support for The Dream Act, like all the other campuses have done. And it's-- it's imperative that we do that because San José State is located in one of the most diverse areas in California.”*

The Dream Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors), reintroduced into Congress in 2009, is one of the most significant and potentially life changing pieces of legislation affecting our undocumented students. And while most of the Latina/o students on campus are not undocumented, they still see the plight of undocumented students as part of their fight for social justice.

For the Latina/o students at SJSU, campus life offers a conundrum of possibilities: social justice, Chicano power, disenfranchisement, community, education, and, for some, a degree. The campus climate they perceive surrounding them is both hostile and is home. They recognize the potential power “the university” has to change their lives and the lives of others like them, and they are willing to take action to ensure this happens. In the end though, the confianza they experience here, is the confianza they create among themselves. As one of the Latinas commented, “*Our biggest support comes from one another,*” to which another student replied, “*It's like a sigh of relief when we see each other.*”

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<sup>30</sup> For a more extensive analysis of The Dream Act see <http://www.immigrationforum.org/policy/legislation/the-dream-act-in-the-111th-congress> . For an in depth analysis of the experiences of undocumented students see the link on this page to: Gonzales, Robert G. (2009) “Young Lives on Hold: The College Dreams of Undocumented Students,” College Advisory Board.

### **Findings from the Vietnamese Student Focus Group**

The Vietnamese student focus group was composed of both undergraduate and graduate students ranging in age from 18 to 30. This group included recent immigrants, 1.5 generation students, and U.S. born students. Of all the student focus groups, this one had the greatest number of participants and was of the shortest duration (less than one hour). However, while this group discussion did not go into as much depth as some of the other student groups, these students were quite definitive in their identification of campus climate issues. Analysis of these data revealed three main areas of concern for Vietnamese students, 1) Vietnamese representation and campus diversity, 2) language and writing issues, and 3) making connections and building community.

#### **Vietnamese Representation and Campus Diversity**

The city of San José has the largest population of Vietnamese people of any city in the United States.<sup>31</sup> According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Vietnamese people make up 10% of San José's total population.<sup>32</sup> Of the 31,280 students enrolled in San José State University during the fall 2009 semester, 32% were Asian American<sup>33</sup>, and of those, 12 % were Vietnamese. For many of the Vietnamese students in our study, the presence of so many Vietnamese people at SJSU and in the surrounding community provides them with a sense of belonging. According to one student:

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<sup>31</sup> See [http://www.sanjoseca.gov/planning/Census/briefs/race\\_ethnicity.asp](http://www.sanjoseca.gov/planning/Census/briefs/race_ethnicity.asp)

<sup>32</sup> According to the 2010 U.S. Census data, as of Jan 1, 2011, San Jose City had a total population of 958,789 people. Of those people 31.7% were Asian, including 10.6% (100,486) Vietnamese.

<sup>33</sup> The SJSU category for "Asian" includes: Asian Indian, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Guamanian, Hawaiian, Japanese, Korean, Loatian, other Asian, other Pacific Islander, other Southeast Asian, Samoan, Thai, and Vietnamese.

*“Well, I’m from the Central Valley, and there’s not much Vietnamese people there, so that’s how I grew up, and that’s how it’s been. So, going here is kind of like, whoa. There’s so much Vietnamese people around. You know, it’s like really different. Like, you get out here and you get a class with more than just one person with the same last name as me. And now I have like, basically like, families or something in my classes. So, like, ahhhhh. I fit right into the crowd.”*

This sense of belonging extends beyond the Vietnamese community (both on and off campus) to the larger “diverse” campus community. For many students, SJSU is not only their first encounter with so many people from their own racial/ethnic group, but also represents their entry into a more multi-racial community. Even transfer students arriving from local community colleges experience SJSU as a more diverse community than they are use to. As one junior stated:

*“I transferred from Mission College in 2007. And when I came here, I realized the San José State environment is really diversity. You have a lot of like, races, white, African, Spanish, you know – and then I don’t see any like, discrimination toward the minority like, Asian or something. So, it’s a really good environment for us to study, cause I have a lot of white friends, and African, and they’re very cool with that.”*

These two phenomena, the presence of a strong Vietnamese community and an emphasis on diversity, create a kind of paradox for these students. The celebration of diversity at San José State – exemplified by icons like the Smith/Carlos statues and the Cesar Chavez arch – teach these students the value of diversity, and also sensitizes them to what is missing from this celebration. Such was the case for the following graduate student who praises the university for

honoring Black History Month, but questions why there cannot be a “*week or two for the Vietnamese people.*”

*“Recently,<sup>34</sup> California passed the resolution for Black April Memorial Week from April 23<sup>rd</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup> honoring the Vietnamese, and people who died in the war. So, if campus can do like a Black History Month, I appreciate that on campus we can have a week or two for the Vietnamese people or the Vietnamese students too – because that’s part of history, why we’re here, why we come here.”*

These sentiments were echoed in other, more direct statements. Like the one given by a graduating senior, “*Yes, all the campus should learn about us too, like we learn about the Mexicans, and we learn about the Blacks.*” For other Vietnamese students, the lack of a university focus on the Vietnamese culture justifies their own lack of participation in campus events. As one Vietnamese woman stated:

*“Maybe – I don’t feel like our important holidays are being acknowledged as much here, compared to other holidays. Like, our New Year, or our Autumn Festival,<sup>35</sup> I don’t think much people seem to care. So, I think that’s why our attitude is like, we’re like – yeah, whatever too, about other cultures, or not willing to go out there and learn about other involvement. Like, when – during our Autumn Festival, you know, no one really talks about it. The school doesn’t really bring it up. But on certain other holidays, like I notice like, you know, the front page of the school newspaper – I think a lot of those little things makes us – maybe makes some of us feel that you know, ‘why be so involved?’”*

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<sup>34</sup> March 25 2009

<sup>35</sup> The “Mid-Autumn Festival” or Tet Trung Thu is “held on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar” (Do 1999:100). See [The Vietnamese Americans](#) for a description of this holiday **Invalid source specified.**

In addition to the 9,459 Asian students enrolled during the fall 2009, the campus enrollment figures also included 29% white, 17% Hispanic, 8% Foreign National, and 4% African American.<sup>36</sup> The Mission Statement for the university lists six main goals for both undergraduate and graduate students.<sup>37</sup> Two of the six speak directly to the issue of diversity and intercultural interaction:

*“For both undergraduate and graduate students, the university emphasizes the following goals:*

- *Multi-cultural and global perspectives gained through intellectual and social exchange with people of diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds.*
- *Active participation in professional, artistic, and ethnic communities.”*

From the standpoint of the Vietnamese students we interviewed, it appears that these two mission goals need additional attention. SJSU clearly has the diversity numbers (at least when it come to students), but seems to be lacking in *“social exchange,”* and *“active participation.”* Similar, in some ways, to findings from the white student group, the Vietnamese students recognize the value of *“diversity”* but fail to see Vietnamese people and culture adequately represented by the university. *“I don’t feel like our important holidays are being acknowledged as much here, compared to other holidays.”* One response to this perceived lack of representation, as exemplified in the comments by the Vietnamese woman above, can be a resistance to *“intellectual and social exchange with people of diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds.”*

## **Language and Writing Issues**

Many of the students in the focus group identified as ESL students. Of these students, some U.S. born and some foreign-born, many experience challenges in writing in English.

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<sup>36</sup> See <http://www.oir.sjsu.edu/Students/QuickFacts/20104QuickFacts.cfm>.

<sup>37</sup> For a complete version of this mission statement see [http://www.sjsu.edu/about\\_sjsu/mission/](http://www.sjsu.edu/about_sjsu/mission/)

Though many were educated in U.S. schools, their primary language – and the one spoken at home – is Vietnamese. For this reason, the university writing and learning centers figured prominently in their assessment of campus climate at SJSU.

As is the case with most campus services, the students reported mixed experiences in their attempts to get help from these resources. Some students had very positive experiences:

*“So, yeah, and we receive help from the academic tutor. I think they have like, Vietnamese tutor to help you and stuff if your English is not good enough. That’s what I think about San José State.”*

While others described encounters that left them feeling unwelcomed:

*“I experience problems in my writing. And several times I went to the writing center, and even the Learning Center and it sound to me like I’m not welcome, because English is our second language. And the person just keep asking the same question. I said, ‘If I knew the answer, I would not come there.’ And they keep asking me, I said, ‘Excuse me, you look at me like I’m a dumb student.’ They just keep looking at me like that. And I said, ‘I don’t – I don’t feel like they’re welcoming or helping.’”*

Underlying all their comments, however, was an understanding about how critical these language services are to ESL students, and how much graduation depends on access to adequate services. All of the students agreed that more tutors were needed and that the Vietnamese students could best be served by tutors who were themselves proficient in Vietnamese. There is a plethora of academic research ( (Fillmore 1991, Harklau 1994, Olsen 1997, Rumbaut 1990) supporting each of these observations, 1) that access to ESL services is critical, and 2) that “literacy in one’s home language is the best basis for literacy in a second language,” (Olsen, 1997:91), hence the need for Vietnamese proficient tutors.

## **Making Connections and Building Community**

As educators attempt to create optimal school environments for increasingly diverse populations, we need to know how students negotiate boundaries successfully, or, alternatively, how they are impeded by barriers that prevent their connection not only with institutional contexts, but also with peers who are different from themselves (Phelan, Davidson and Cao 1991, 226).

The Vietnamese students in our study seemed to develop their primary campus relationships through their participation in an identity-based student organization. Other means of connection seemed to pose a challenge for this group of students. Several of the foreign-born students talked about how difficult it was for them to “acculturate” to U.S values and how language barriers exacerbated their transition. As one student explained:

*“Let me first say, it’s pretty difficult, you know, because I have to take the LLD class and try to, you know try just to acculturate. But I didn’t know anybody, so I really didn’t have any friends and stuff like that, so, for me, you know, English is my second language. I think it’s pretty hard.”*

Interactions within the classroom did not seem to facilitate sustained cross-racial interaction as these were characterized as “short-lived” and confined to the necessities of the group project. As one female student commented, *“I think really, like the class, as far as interacting with people, making friends – usually you just go to class and the only time you actually talk to people is for a group project, but you only do it for that project, and afterward – I think rarely contact each other anymore.”*

One explanation for this seeming lack of connection to the wider campus community was

the fact that so many Vietnamese students live at home<sup>38</sup>. Several of the students talked about living at home, coming to campus for classes and to study, and then going back home. Between studying, family obligations, and work, these students claimed they had little time for additional campus involvement.

*“I think it’s hard, because most Vietnamese students here, we don’t live on campus. And it goes with, you know, I think our culture, like, you know, our parents prefer for us to live at home. So, we don’t have as much involvement with school. And [student organization] is another way to, I guess, be involved but not too much commitment where it’s affecting our work and our grades at the same time. So, it would be nice for us to be involved more. It’s kind of difficult at the same time.”*

The sentiments expressed by this student exemplified the experiences of many of the students in our focus group. The students talked about coming to campus and not knowing anyone. They discussed the limitations built into living at home and commuting to campus for classes. They were clear that going to class, studying, and performing academically formed their core commitment to college life. And, similar to the experiences of the student above, the identity-based student club was the perfect vehicle for any additional campus/community interactions they required. As one sophomore explained:

*“I think it’s pretty cool, cause – I mean, [student organization], we’re just a bunch of Vietnamese students, we just want to get together and make friends and hang out and it feels like – I think it’s important people just go to school and go home. But when we have an organization like this, we can just meet up and you know, bond, talk about school, hang out. So, just sit here like, when I first got here, I don’t know anybody. I have*

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<sup>38</sup> For example, of the 1306 Vietnamese students enrolled during the Fall 2009 semester, only 3 lived in campus housing (Office of Institutional Research).

*like two or three friends. But now, I feel like, you know, I make so many friends. I learn a lot from each individual. So, I mean, it's good to have something like this."*

Much has been written in the academic literature about the adaptation experiences of immigrant youth as they move through the educational system (Stritkus and Nguyen 2007, Zhou and Bankston III 1994, Phelan, Davidson and Cao 1991). For second generation immigrants in particular, educational success becomes more challenging the further along they are in the system (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Transition to college can bring unique challenges to immigrant students as the social world of home and family become increasingly disparate. According to Tseng (2004)

College can be a time of increased conflict between youth's family and academic demands. Youth from immigrant families likely transition into adulthood with an enduring emphasis on family interdependence, but dominant U.S. ideologies stress physical and emotional independence from parents during this period (Lapsey, Rice and Shadid 1989, Quitana and Kerr 1993). Children of immigrants negotiate these cultural expectations regarding inter- dependence and independence at the same time they face more challenging academic demands (Tseng 2004).

Understanding some of the unique challenges faced by SJSU's immigrant students in general, and Vietnamese students in particular, can contribute to their academic success – if the challenges are addressed by the university.

### **Findings from the White Student Focus Group**

The white student focus group was composed of undergraduate students from a variety of majors. The students ranged in age from 18 to 24, and composed all class levels, including transfer students. This focus group session was the first time any of these students were asked to articulate their experiences as white people. Indeed, one of the “privileges” of being white is that white people are not held accountable for their membership in whiteness. White people are rarely asked to speak for all the people of their racial group – as the group is seen as far too complex to be represented by any one person (McIntosh, *White Privilege Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* 2009). Moreover, other than within the context of academe, there is no culturally recognizable space for white people to talk about being white without being constructed as racist.

Within the context of this focus group discussion several contradictory constructions of whiteness emerged. Tasked with the responsibility of talking about their experiences *as white students at SJSU*, five main themes emerged from their conversation; 1) race means nothing, but diversity is everything, 2) “diversity” does not mean white, 3) the stigma of whiteness, 4) “reverse” racism, and 5) the segregation of campus life.

#### **Contradictions of Whiteness: Race Means Nothing, Racial Diversity is Everything**

Consistent with findings from scholars on whiteness (Omi and Winant 1986, Wellman 1993, Lewis 2004), these students articulated a “color blindness” intent upon downplaying the importance of racial meanings (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick 2004). At the same time, these white students described an awareness of campus racial diversity that put race at center of their experiences at SJSU. Nowhere was this more evident than in the opening statement made by one of the white men in this focus group:

*“I don’t think race plays a big part in my own daily life at San José State. Like I don’t even consider it. I think-- maybe that’s cause-- I don’t know. It’s really diverse here. So you can walk around and you’re used to it, -- you can’t go really anywhere else and not see, you know, people-- you know, just white people in one group. I don’t think race plays an issue in my interactions with other people on this campus. If-- if anything, this is probably the best campus I’ve been too or school situation where race definitely doesn’t come into play or even in my mind.”*

Here the student both “fails to see” (Dalton 2002) the impact of racial meanings on his SJSU experience, *“I don’t think race plays a big part in my own daily life at San José State ,”* and at the same time, positions racial “diversity” as contributing to this being *“the best campus.”* This seemingly contradictory view of race and racial meaning is typical of white people who adhere to the idea that to be white is to be “raceless” (McIntosh, White Privilege Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack 2009). Much has been written about the “invisibility” of whiteness and the extent to which this enables white people to talk about racial meaning without implicating themselves as beneficiaries of racial hierarchies (Wellman 1993). The invisibility of whiteness was apparent throughout the focus group session – like most white people, these students lacked the critical tools to be able to see their position within the racial hierarchy at SJSU and in the wider U.S. culture. What is compelling about these data, and about the focus group methodology, is that tasked with the need to talk about their racial experiences, and lacking the critical language to do so, the students constructed consistently opposing racial meanings.

As the focus group discussion began and the students were formulating their initial responses to the inquiry, “tell us about your experiences as white students at SJSU,” their responses were seemingly positive:

*“Well, my experience [as a white person] has been very easy. I never had any problems. I never faced any other issues as far as racial. I always get treated very kindly wherever I go whether it is financial aid or the registrars, even in my classrooms, like, all my professors treat me very nicely and kindly. So I find my experience to be quite nice at this school. I’ve never had, like, any incidents of discrimination. I’ve never even had a hard time. They don’t even make me wait for anything. It’s been a good experience so far.”*

Here the student characterizes their experiences being white as “easy,” and “nice,” and as not involving “any incidents of discrimination.” Similarly a student athlete followed this up with his own experience;

*“I’m with her. I came from a place that was not diverse at all [meaning all white]. So, you know, being white you are kind of the minority at San José. You still get-- I mean it’s not like you get treated any differently. So its been easy going here and stuff, and everyone’s pretty respectful, I mean, for the most part. So it’s pretty easy.”*

In this case, while being white is again constructed as “easy,” there is an undercurrent indicating, that perhaps, is not always the case. Here the student alludes to the other end of the “easy” continuum in his comment that, “being white you are kind of the minority.” At this point in the conversation the ‘easy’ part of being white was quickly complicated by the reality that many white folks confront when they arrive at SJSU; that this is a racially diverse environment

and that whites only compose 27% of the student body.<sup>39</sup> For many of these students, the fact of their whiteness against the backdrop of racial diversity was shocking to them. As this woman student explained:

*“At my high school we had two students that were black and the rest were white. It was very-- very white. And coming here it was a big culture<sup>40</sup> shock. And-- it was very different. And it took me a while to get used to ‘cause I lived in the dorms and my roommate was from El Salvador, so we kind of had a thing there. But school-wise, it was pretty good. It’s like normal.”*

Here again the student adheres to both realities. On the one hand, being white is “*pretty good. It’s like normal.*” And on the other, coming to SJSU was “*a big culture shock.*” And the shock and “*differentness*” arose in her transition from a primarily all white environment – where her whiteness made her like everyone else – to a racially diverse environment – where her whiteness made her different. This is the complication facing these white students. They have learned racial tolerance which, for many, is expressed as not seeing race or not “buying” racial stereotypes. As a student athlete commented about one of his teammates: “*...there’s this other guy on the team and you look at him, you’d think he’s, like, full black, like looks the part, but he’s a great guy and he likes hanging out with me and stuff.*” At the same time racial tolerance also means that one values diversity and therefore diverse experiences. When the need to value

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<sup>39</sup> According to the SJSU Office of Institutional Research the racial composition the student body for Fall 2010 was: African American 4%, Asian 30%, Hispanic 21%, white 27%, foreign national 8%, other 10%. <http://www.oir.sjsu.edu/Students/QuickFacts/20104QuickFacts.cfm>

<sup>40</sup> For white people, “culture” is often used as a code word for “race.” While talking about “race” is often off limits to white people, talking about “culture” and “diversity” is acceptable, desirable, and signifies liberalism. Throughout these data the white students repeatedly used the word “culture” or “cultural difference” when referring to race and racial differences.

diversity is coupled with the invisibility of whiteness there appears to be no place for these students in this great multicultural experience.

### **“Diversity” Does Not Mean White**

The white students in our study clearly did not see themselves as having a valued place in the celebration of diversity at SJSU. While they believe in and value diversity, they also experience themselves as excluded from the “inclusiveness” of diversity. The disconnect they feel is exemplified in the following statement by a woman student:

*“I think it [the diversity message] bonds all these other diverse groups together. But I think it might create a little separation between white people and then, like, the rest of everyone else. Because it feels like everyone else is very, like, you know, like Asians and Filipinos and everything are very-- they’re all bonded together because they are a minority and they’re what the school is all about, it’s diversity and things like that.”*

According to this white student, SJSU is all about students of color because they represent diversity. Diversity, in turn, though a valued commodity is also the phenomenon that separates and excludes whites from everybody else. These students, like most white people (Wellman 1993), were unwavering in their commitment to diversity and in their adherence to racial justice. What they lack is a comprehensive<sup>41</sup> understanding and awareness of the position of white people in the racial hierarchy. What they lack is an analysis that includes the possibility of white people engaging in anti-racist work *as white people*. What they have instead is this no-win scenario where they must espouse a philosophy of racial justice, diversity and

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<sup>41</sup> “Comprehensive” meaning an understanding of white people that acknowledges their unearned racial privilege, their historical and contemporary culpability in perpetuating racism and racial discrimination, and also their continued history of engaging in antiracist work.

equality, but do so at the cost of their own sense of belonging. Such was the case with the following student activist who has spent much of her time at SJSU involved in social justice work.

*“It’s hard to participate when they emphasize it [diversity] so much. Like it is highly emphasized and I think that’s really incredible that the university can do that for people. But then it does make it hard to participate in those kinds of groups. Even though they say of course anyone can go. But if you’re gonna show up, some people are always like, “Wait you’re in the African-American club? Like what?” You know? Like you just-- you already have that kind of, like-- like suspicion almost, I guess. But sometimes it makes it harder to participate in a lot of activities when they are, like, they have a label based on race instead of just, not culture, that’s not the right word, but identity.”*

Whiteness, in this case, is associated with, “...*that kind of, like – suspicion almost.*” This response and this characterization of whiteness as a stigmatized identity were consistently articulated throughout the focus group session.

### **The Stigma of Whiteness**

*“There is really nothing good to say about being white.”* This statement, by one of our student athletes, captures perfectly the underlying sentiments of all the white students who participated in our study. It parallels, moreover, findings from scholars on whiteness who assert that in the post-civil rights era, whiteness is always constructed and essentialized as problematic (Eichstedt 2001). Variations on the theme -- statements like, “...*you can’t say “I’m proud to be white.”*”—were made in reference to interactions within classrooms, and in the wider campus community. As one young woman commented:

*“...in lectures there’s just not celebration of our culture. And it’s almost like you’d be scolded if you were like, “Oh, white power.” Like that’d be so bad. You know? Like that’d be all wrong. You know? I don’t know-- like, I would never even want to celebrate that.”*

Similarly, in a discussion of student-based organizations one of white men noted:

*“...before this [focus group session] I’ve never seen anything at San José State that said, like, you know, like a white community type thing. Where there is an Asian community club or something like that. You can’t have, like, a white club or something like that, it’s called, like, KKK.”* Talking about whiteness, celebrating whiteness, or taking pride in one’s racial history is clearly off limits for white people. The students know this and they understand the consequences for this type of behavior. As one of the student athletes articulated:

*“Yeah, like they’re saying there’s no—There’s all kinds of clubs for different cultures and stuff, but there’s nothing-- it would be considered racist if there was a-- some kind of club just for white people. It’s just the same thing, like with our country we have, like-- like Hispanic pride or black history month, black pride. And if we had a white pride month it would be considered racist.”*

So, avoidance of all things white seems to be a strategy employed by some of these students to steer clear of the stigmatization associated with claims to whiteness. There were, however, a number of situations that these white students described where the stigmatizing

effects of their “white status” could not be avoided.<sup>42</sup> This was most acutely felt by students in classroom situations where racial oppression was the focus of lecture or class discussion.

*“But, sometimes, like, in lectures and in certain-- discussions in class, I feel like-- I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s almost like-- there’s kind of a stigma to being white sometimes when you are discussing, you know, what it used to be like in the past and histories of other cultures. And sometimes you feel like-- sometimes-- yeah, that-- when people say, “All the white people do this” or “They used to do this.” Then it feels like, Oh, I just kind of, like, sink down in my chair if I’m sitting next to someone of the other culture that we’re talking about that’s being oppressed. I guess that’s how that would only play in my experience.”*

Here and elsewhere, the white students take on the burden of the history of white racism. And, though they clearly don’t see themselves as personally implicated in race oppression (nor are they seeing or acknowledging their white privilege), they do experience guilt by association. An additional example of this is found in the statement made by a recent transfer student:

*“...in a class discussion and, you know, you’re bringing up topics, especially, like, history classes or, you know, things that play on slavery and white oppression, like, you know, white people being the oppressive ones. And then you kind of feel, like, guilty, even though your family probably had nothing to do with that.”*

Here the student feels guilty and remains doubtful about whether the guilt is deserved or not, “*though your family **probably** had nothing to do with that.*” What ultimately seems to

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<sup>42</sup> In reality, of course, one’s status as a white person can never be simply avoided or abandoned. Whether one acknowledges it or not, whiteness brings with it a set of “unearned privileges.” These privileges are likened by McIntosh (2009) to an “invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.” P. 78.

happen in these moments of white guilt and white stigmatization is they quickly get transformed into white victimization. With no way to racially redeem themselves, these white students resort to a well worn pathway to white redemption: “reverse racism.”

### **“Reverse” Racism**

Like the “stories and testimonies” of the students in Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, & Embrick’s (2004) study of colorblind racism, the student in our study also resorted to, “the dominant racial stories of the post-civil rights era,” (P. 556) to make sense of their racial experiences. The racial “storyline” that propels white folks into the victimization role is the one that casts them as “minorities.” As above, for many white people, San José State is the most racially diverse environment they have ever experienced. The “culture shock” they describe in reference to their arrival here arises out of their migration from “all white” environments to SJSU.

*“I almost feel like there’s not that much-- like almost like white people are almost even the minority. Like I’ll sit in my classroom and I’ll look around and-- yeah, it’s like the white people are the minority in there. So we’re very diverse. It’s almost-- I think it’s almost, like, close to even-- between all kinds of different races.”*

As articulate by this transfer student, many of the white students in our study experience themselves as a minority, because for the first time in their lives they are in the numerical minority (compared to students of color as a group). However, with the assumption of “minority” status they also take on the sense of injustice that has historically been the purview of people of color. In response to a question about what SJSU can do to improve the campus climate for white people, this first year student responded:

*“I don’t know. It-- it’s hard to say, like, “Oh we need more,” you know, “activities and clubs for white people.” ‘Cause then like they said before, that-- that’s called the KKK and, like, that’s what everyone says. So it’s-- it’s hard to almost say anything. It’s almost like the concept of reverse racism. Like I don’t know if I’m using it in the right context, but if you try, like, you know, really hard to give all the other minorities and other ethnic groups, like-- activism for their cultures, then it’s like if we ever did say anything, it’s like “Oh, you’re racist.” And I don’t know.”*

Here the student references all the help that’s been given *“the other minorities,”* and then positions white people as unable to advocate for themselves without being charged with racism. This story line is similar to that found by Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, & Embrick’s (2004) which they refer to as “the past is the past:”

The core of this story line is the idea that we must put our racist past behind us and that affirmative action programs do exactly the opposite by keeping the racial flame alive. Moreover, as the story line goes, these policies are particularly problematic because they attempt to address a past harm done against minorities by harming whites today”(p. 563).

Though the student quoted above does not specifically mention affirmative action programs, she does allude to the *“really hard”* work that has gone into helping minorities with *“their activism.”* A more explicit reference to the ‘harm’ that whites are subject to can be found in the following statement by a student athlete:

*“With a lot of jobs you feel like they have to hire a certain amount of, ethnic-- or like other people. My brother-in-law has been trying to get a job as a firefighter. And so he’s a little more qualified than a guy who’s, like, say Asian or something. They’re gonna*

*give it to the Asian guy 'cause they have to have, you know, a certain amount. So that's the only thing I'd say. Checking the white box, kind of does give you a disadvantage in jobs and stuff."*

This perception, that "checking the white box" structurally disadvantages white students was also discussed in reference to grants, scholarships, awards, and membership in certain clubs and fraternities.

*"You're almost excluded from getting an award if you do list yourself as, you know, Caucasian, is usually the check box that you would check. And if you do that, sometimes it, like, hurts your chances of winning that award or scholarship whatever it is."*

It is clear from these data that the white students in our study were bereft of any kind of positive construction of whiteness.<sup>43</sup> Though their initial descriptions of their experiences as white students included words like "nice" and "normal," further inquiries quickly unveiled the "not so nice" experiences of whiteness lurking below the surface. In reality these students experience their racial location as isolating, stigmatizing, and ultimately penalizing. The "cost" for these racial constructions seems to arise most dramatically in their perceptions of campus life. For these white students, SJSU is primarily experienced as a segregated campus.

### **Campus Life: We Have *Not* Overcome**

A walk across campus during the noon hour quickly reveals a racially divided landscape of student groups. Each table lining the walkway in front of the student union is surrounded by students looking remarkably similar in countenance, dress, and phenotype. While this seeming separation can be breeched through purposeful interaction, not all members of the campus

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<sup>43</sup> See Eichsted, (2001) for a more in depth analysis of the challenge of managing white identities.

community feel themselves to be capable of such interaction. For the white students in our study, the SJSU campus is often experienced as segregated, with this segregation positioning them as outsiders. An example of this interpretation is found in the following exchange:

*Woman Student 1: “Yeah, like if you walk down the student union area where all the Asian and the Hispanic sororities and fraternities are, they don’t even look at you—“*

*Woman Student 2: “They won’t.”*

*Woman Student 1: “-- if you’re white.”*

Similar references to the divisions between racial ethnic groups on campus were made in reference to “cliques” in the quad, in the dorms, in the classrooms, and most especially during Rush week.

*“But I feel like during Rush week, you’re approached by people who want people like you to be in their club based on what you look like. Cause they-- you can see them, like, picking and choosing just from the looks. Like if the person looks-- especially the-- the culture-based sororities and fraternities. They approach you-- you know, like she said, like you can walk by the Filipino club, and so many times I do every day, and they won’t-- they won’t even glance at me. And if there’s a kid right next to me, and they will reach over me [to hand them a flyer] to him, and I’m like ‘Oh.’ Then they are like ‘no it is just for him.’”*

Here the student articulates a campus climate that equates desirability to what one looks like, “they pick and choose just from the looks... and they won’t even glance at me.” The only interactions with students of color that these students described in ways that could be interpreted

as “positive,” were those interactions that were “*forced*” upon them through sport affiliations or dorm life. Several of the student athletes talked about how playing together and rooming together with “*all different kinds of cultures*” made them, “*get to be friends with all those guys real fast.*” Similarly another student related a story of racial reconciliation about two women in her dorm - one Black and one white. In this story, the white girl (a self-proclaimed redneck), found herself assigned a Black roommate, and “*...she told her mom, ‘I want to leave right now. I don’t want to stay here anymore.’ And her mom was like, ‘Why?’ And she pointed to the pictures and saw that her roommate was Black.*” But in the end the girls, forced to remain roommates, “*became best friends.*” And the moral of the story – as articulated by the teller – went like this:

*“And I thought that was like, kind of a-- advantage of the dorms here on campus, they actually started—they broke the-- I don’t know the word, that negativity between her idea of people who are Black, and of course the girl who was Black, it broke her idea of people who were white and seemed more to be on the redneck side. And I thought that was just kind of really a cool thing to hear when we all talked about it later, she was like, ‘Yeah, I’m not gonna lie. I used to be really racist.’ But because they were roommates, it stopped that thinking.”*

Overwhelmingly, the white students in our study expressed an appreciation (“*was just kind of really a cool thing to hear*”), for those moments when the structural arrangements facilitated cross-racial interactions. The only other place white students talked about being involuntarily compelled to interact with students of color, was in the classroom when required to do group work. And while they did describe a few of these interactions as successful cross-racial connections, the nature of the classroom rendered these both short-lived and transitory. An example of the “success” of this type of interaction was given by one of the women students;

*“Well, in groups well, towards the end you end up working really well together with all the different diversities.” With this statement then followed by the qualifier: “But I’ve noticed, like, after that class is over or that session of the class is over, you know you don’t really talk to them anymore. And they act all kind of, like, separate.”*

Far more prevalent were characterization of cross-racial classroom interactions as “awkward,” “difficult,” and fraught with the possibility of “offending” a person of color. In analyzing the classroom scenarios described by these students two underlying assumptions seemed to be shaping the definitions given to these situations. The first assumption these white students carry into these interactions is an overwhelming fear that they will offend the students of color by inadvertently saying the wrong thing. For example:

*“When I had to [do group work with] someone in class, it was awkward. I felt kind of weird because I knew that their culture was very different from mine. ... It’s just like-- when there is that difference diversity it is kind of hard to communicate. You know? And you kind of do have that fear, like, be careful what you say. You don’t want to hurt their feelings. At the same time, trying to do your work. It gets kind of difficult.”*

White students saw cross-racial interactions as “difficult” because of the “carefulness” needed to avoid “offending” which in turn can precipitate accusations of racism. Interaction within ones racial group was viewed as much less problematic, “...when you get paired with white people, I mean, just saying, you kind of just start joking around with them and stuff. But when you get with a person on another ethnicity, you kind of want to feel how they are and kind of see what’s up.” In addition to this fear of offending that seemed to underlie cross-racial

communications, these white students also evidenced a belief that the students of color were purposefully avoiding them.

This second assumption -- that students of color were actively avoiding interactions with white students – seemed to coalesce around stories about Black students. In reference to the experience of group work, one of the white women students observed,

*“Usually when we have to group up for something-- I see the clustering and I --. There are people you know, I think like more African-American, Mexicans, whatever, they’ll kind of, like, get into their group or people who they have something in common with or another class with and they will quickly run to them.”*

In this case the student identifies two racial groups – African Americans and Mexicans – as more likely to “cluster” and “run to” people they “have something in common with.” It is the behavior of these students of color that is posited as initiating the separation between racial groups. Other students were more explicit in blaming Black people for the racial divide between Blacks and whites. As the following transfer student made clear;

*“I don’t feel they even want to hang out with white people. Like I tried-- there was a girl in another class of mine, and she’s African-American. And she was having problems with the classes and stuff, and I tried to reach out to her and help her with the class. And I tried to talk to her. And I tried like, two or three times, because I find it interesting, you know I like their people very much. But they’re so, I feel like a few are you know.... They don’t feel really friendly or that they can connect with me or-- you know, give me that communication back. So I’ve never been able to, like, make a friend or keep them that are African-American”*

This student saw herself as both initiating and trying several times to connect with a Black student and then placed blame for the failed interaction on Black people, “*They don’t feel really friendly or that they can connect with me.*” Similar claims about African-Americans as a group were made in discussions by student athletes in reference to team interactions:

*“It’s also about how you were brought up and stuff cause like playing [college sport] and stuff you see a bunch of different types of African American people. Some of my best friends on the team are Black guys, but then some guys were brought up with almost a grudge against white people. Like it was us who did all that... but I wasn’t there. That wasn’t me.”*

While this student acknowledges that there are, “... *a bunch of different types of African American people,*” he makes a parallel claim to the culpability of Black folks for the race relations between Black and white, “*some guys were brought up with almost a grudge against white people.*” A word count of the white student focus group transcript reveals that 71% of all references to students of color were made about Black or African American students (compared to references to Asians 13%, Hispanics 12%, Filipinos 4%). This overwhelming focus on Black/white interactions is especially problematic given that Black students only make up 4% of the student body at SJSU.

The contradictory nature of the white identities constructed by these students reflects the paradox of white privilege and the invisibility of whiteness. The campus climate constructed by the students in our study runs parallel to racial climate experienced and constructed by white people in the wider community (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, & Embrick, 2004; Lewis, 2004).

**Appendix A**  
**Sample Interview Schedules**

## African American/Black Student Focus Group Questions

### Introductory comments:

*Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group on your experiences as African American/Black students on this campus. I want to assure you that your discussion today is confidential. None of you will be identifiable - nor will this group be named – in any future write up of our research.*

**Hand out Consent forms.** *I will be recording the session to assure that I get the most accurate representation of your thoughts.*

*I have some general questions to prompt the discussion today, but I really want you to think of this experience as a conversation between all of you. We are interested on getting a wide range of thoughts on these issues. Please feel free to talk to one another, ask each other questions, and even disagree with one another.*

- What have your experiences been like as a \_\_\_\_\_ at SJSU? Describe this for us.
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was valued/appreciated by SJSU
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was NOT valued/appreciated by SJSU (or here at SJSU). (
- How would you describe your interactions on campus? In class? W/staff? Other students? Professors?
- In the original survey, 50% of African American students indicated they were uncomfortable discussing racially sensitive issues on campus. Has this been your experience? If not how might you explain it? If yes, can you describe a particular example that might explain it?
- In the original survey, 71% of African American students indicated that they are expected to represent their race or ethnicity group in discussion in class,

Has this been your experience? If not how might you explain it? If yes, can you describe a particular instance of it occurring to you or someone else?

- Thirty-three percent of women and twenty-four percent of men reported that they “feared for their physical safety on campus” – how would you explain that statistic? Do you feel safe on campus?
- Have you ever experienced sexual harassment on campus?
- What would you like to see SJSU do to improve the experiences of all \_\_\_\_\_? (request for their ideas of responsive action; using identity as expertise)
- Can you think of anything else that we have not covered that you would like to comment on?

Thank everyone for participating: **Hand out demographic questionnaires.**

## White/European American Student Focus Group Questions

### Introductory comments:

*Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group on your experiences as White/European American students on this campus. We want to assure you that your discussion today is confidential. None of you will be identifiable - nor will this group be named – in any future write up of our research.*

**Hand out Consent forms.** *We will be recording the session and my assistant will be taking notes to assure that we get the most accurate representation of your thoughts.*

*I have some general questions to prompt the discussion today, but I really want you to think of this experience as a conversation between all of you. We are interested on getting a wide range of thoughts on these issues. Please feel free to talk to one another, ask each other questions, and even disagree with one another.*

- What have your experiences been like as a \_\_\_\_\_ at SJSU? Describe this for us.
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was valued/appreciated by SJSU
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was NOT valued/appreciated by SJSU (or here at SJSU). (
- How would you describe your interactions on campus? In class? W/staff? Other students? Professors?
- Thirty-three percent of women and twenty-four percent of men reported that they “feared for their physical safety on campus” – how would you explain that statistic?/do you feel safe on campus?
- In the original survey, 16% student respondents, all White/European Americans, critiqued the campus for its predominant focus on minority student issues, at the expense of neglected White students. They felt that their voice as White students were not being heard or “allowed a space” as with minority students. Has this been your experience? If not how might you explain it?
- In the original survey, 5% (5) of student respondents commented that SJSU spends too much time highlighting diversity which they felt was “divisive” and created “separation among groups.” Has this been your experience? If not how might you explain it?
- Have you ever experienced sexual harassment on campus?
- What would you like to see SJSU do to improve the experiences of all \_\_\_\_\_? (request for their ideas of responsive action; using identity as expertise)
- Can you think of anything else that we have not covered that you would like to comment on?

Thank everyone for participating: **Hand out demographic questionnaires.**

## International Student Focus Group Questions

**Bring: Consent forms, demographic questionnaires, pizza, voice recorders, lap top for notes.**

### Introductory comments:

*Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group on your experiences as International students on this campus. We want to assure you that your discussion today is confidential. None of you will be identifiable - nor will this group be named – in any future write up of our research. **Hand out Consent forms.** We will be recording the session and my assistant will be taking notes to assure that we get the most accurate representation of your thoughts.*

*I have some general questions to prompt the discussion today, but I really want you to think of this experience as a conversation between all of you. We are interested on getting a wide range of thoughts on these issues. Please feel free to talk to one another, ask each other questions, and even disagree with one another.*

- What have your experiences been like as a \_\_\_\_\_ at SJSU? Describe this for us. (grand tour question; description of experiences, details, context, the “how”)
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was valued/appreciated by SJSU (or here at SJSU – is it the institutional treatment we are looking at; or the social relations/treatment that are part of the institution but also involve other factors?) (their interpretation of the “positive aspects”; how they deem “positive treatment” of their identity)
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was NOT valued/appreciated by SJSU (or here at SJSU). (their interpretation of the “negative aspects”; how they deem “negative treatment” of their identity)
- How would you describe your interactions on campus? In class? W/staff? Other students? Professors?
- In the Classroom: Overall 35.4% of students reported that they are “expected to represent their race or ethnicity in class discussions.” Has this been your experience. [48.5% of the students for whom English is not their primary language also expressed this – could use this instead – depending]
- Thirty-three percent of women and twenty-four percent of men reported that they “feared for their physical safety on campus” – how would you explain that statistic?/do you feel safe on campus?
- 6% of the students whose first language is not English report being discriminated against “frequently,” or “occasionally” on campus– how would you explain that statistic? Have you experienced or observed situations that might support this statistics?
- Have you ever experienced sexual harassment on campus?
- What would you like to see SJSU do to improve the experiences of all \_\_\_\_\_? (request for their ideas of responsive action; using identity as expertise)
- Can you think of anything else that we have not covered that you would like to comment on?

Thank everyone for participating: **Hand out demographic questionnaires.**

## LGBT Student Focus Group Questions

### Introductory comments:

*Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group on your experiences as LGBT students on this campus. We want to assure you that your discussion today is confidential. None of you will be identifiable - nor will this group be named – in any future write up of our research. **Hand out Consent forms.** We will be recording the session and my assistant will be taking notes to assure that we get the most accurate representation of your thoughts.*

*I have some general questions to prompt the discussion today, but I really want you to think of this experience as a conversation between all of you. We are interested on getting a wide range of thoughts on these issues. Please feel free to talk to one another, ask each other questions, and even disagree with one another.*

- What have your experiences been like as a \_\_\_\_\_ at SJSU? Describe this for us. (grand tour question; description of experiences, details, context, the “how”)
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was valued/appreciated by SJSU (or here at SJSU – is it the institutional treatment we are looking at; or the social relations/treatment that are part of the institution but also involve other factors?) (their interpretation of the “positive aspects”; how they deem “positive treatment” of their identity)
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was NOT valued/appreciated by SJSU (or here at SJSU). (their interpretation of the “negative aspects”; how they deem “negative treatment” of their identity)
- How would you describe your interactions on campus? In class? W/staff? Other students? Professors?
- Thirty-three percent of women and twenty-four percent of men reported that they “feared for their physical safety on campus” – how would you explain that statistic?/do you feel safe on campus?
- 56.5% of gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual students reported feeling uncomfortable disclosing their sexual orientation on campus – how would you explain that statistic? Are you “out” (on campus, with other students, with professors, at home)? If not, why not?
- Have you ever experienced sexual harassment on campus?
- What would you like to see SJSU do to improve the experiences of all \_\_\_\_\_? (request for their ideas of responsive action; using identity as expertise)
- Can you think of anything else that we have not covered that you would like to comment on?

Thank everyone for participating: **Hand out demographic questionnaires.**

## Vietnamese Student Focus Group

### Introductory comments:

*Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group on your experiences as Vietnamese students on this campus. We want to assure you that your discussion today is confidential. None of you will be identifiable - nor will this group be named – in any future write up of our research. **Hand out Consent forms.** We will be recording the session and my assistant will be taking notes to assure that we get the most accurate representation of your thoughts.*

*I have some general questions to prompt the discussion today, but I really want you to think of this experience as a conversation between all of you. We are interested on getting a wide range of thoughts on these issues. Please feel free to talk to one another, ask each other questions, and even disagree with one another.*

- What have your experiences been like as a \_\_\_\_\_ at SJSU?
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was valued/appreciated by SJSU
- Tell us about a time when you felt your identity as a \_\_\_\_\_ was NOT valued/appreciated by SJSU (or here at SJSU).
- How would you describe your interactions on campus? In class? W/staff? Other students? Professors?
- 
- Thirty-three percent of women and twenty-four percent of men reported that they “feared for their physical safety on campus” – how would you explain that statistic?/do you feel safe on campus?
- Have you ever experienced sexual harassment on campus?
- What would you like to see SJSU do to improve the experiences of all \_\_\_\_\_? (request for their ideas of responsive action; using identity as expertise)

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