

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

## **Grant Report**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Findings

### Marquette

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

In terms of peers, participants described feeling like they often had to educate or respond to other students who came from sheltered or homogenous backgrounds and carried with them explicit or implicit racial attitudes. At an institutional level, students expressed an overwhelming sense of frustration and fatigue surrounding the topic of race and the ways that Marquette has addressed racial bias and racially motivated incidents. There was also frustration about the lack of including student voice or change in response to asking for student voices.

Importantly, these Marquette students listed several positive sources of supports that they felt were critical to underrepresented students. These include programs like RISE, groups like the Black Student Union, physical spaces on campus like the Title IX office, and those individuals who actively tried to be advocates and allies (including faculty, staff, and those in residence life who show genuine care and engagement).

Focus Group	Area: Student Success and Racial/Ethnic Climate	Area: Experience of Milwaukee
Marquette Students	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenges to Belonging</li> <li>Experiences with other students, professors, and staff</li> <li>Institutional Action/Inaction</li> <li>Varied sources of support</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students stick to the "Marquette bubble"</li> <li>Lack of familiarity</li> <li>Discourses about city play into problematic racial/ethnic climate on campus</li> </ol>
UWM Students	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive spaces of welcoming</li> <li>Lack of feeling of diversity on campus</li> <li>Different feelings when in spaces with those with similar backgrounds</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Segregated and divided city</li> <li>Students stick to East Side</li> <li>Lack of feeling like UWM engages with the city</li> </ol>
Marquette, UWM, and MATC Students	N/A	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diverse, but segregated</li> <li>Family members and friends often think of the city as unsafe</li> <li>Transportation is a barrier to engaging with the city</li> <li>Marquette and UWM campuses as insulated bubbles</li> </ol>

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

The UWM participants touched on similar topics in discussing challenges to student success concerning racial/ethnic campus climates. These students specifically spoke to the power of feeling represented in spaces and relationships. For example, no student had been assigned an academic advisor who identified as a person of color or first-generation, leading multiple students to look for an equipped advisor that looked like them to help support them. Additionally, the participants noted feeling a lack of representation on campus. They pointed out that even though UWM sells being the most diverse campus in WI, students do not see or feel that diversity around campus.

Like their Marquette peers, UWM students also noted welcoming and comfortable spaces on campus. These participants mentioned the Roberto Hernandez Center and programming like MKE Scholars and Lead the Change as ways they were able to find supportive communities embedded within the institution.

*Across Institutions*

In the conversations across campuses, students from UWM and Marquette seemed to agree on their peers having similar perceptions and experiences of Milwaukee. In general, they expressed feeling that students at their institutions did not know Milwaukee very well and tended to stay close to campus in a “bubble.” They said that preconceptions about Milwaukee created barriers with the surrounding community, stoking fear and discouraging students from venturing out.

More broadly, students across institutions described the city as "segregated" and "divided" despite its diversity. This perspective was not only about the city’s general reputation or their sense but drawn as well on their lived experience. They noted feeling everyone sticks to their "assigned area" in the city, that traveling outside of these spaces makes people feel out of place, and that there seems to be tension when someone steps into a different ethnic community

Students at both institutions also described institutional actions that alienated them from being true community members, though their reasons differed. At Marquette, this tension focused on the ways that students were told to be careful about areas surrounding campus. At UWM, participants noted the specific issue of food deserts in the area around the campus, noting that UWM had done nothing to address this community problem.

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“...When you look at the people that populate these areas, they look like me, right?...they look like other black and brown people walking around campus. So, when [Marquette is] saying these neighborhoods are dangerous, they're also saying these people are dangerous.”

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### **Takeaways/Suggestions:**

Two concrete implications for institutions of higher education in Milwaukee emerge out of these students' perspectives. First, participants' experiences speak to the need for first-year or orientation programming that effectively addresses questions of race/ethnicity and the urban context of Milwaukee. Students arrive on these campuses with preconceptions, prejudices, and frameworks for thinking about these dynamics that should be carefully deconstructed to address their impacts on racial/ethnic climates on campus. Furthermore, the way the institution approaches these topics at orientation and across the first year sends powerful messages to students about who belongs on campus, how the institution will respond to racialized incidents, and what is valued about Milwaukee. A second implication builds on this focus on the integration onto campus: it is critical for institutions to be reflective about whether discourses, statements, and messaging are reflected in concrete actions. Participants particularly noted feeling there was a disconnection between what the institution professes and actions or inaction it takes in reference to the surrounding community and student concerns.

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“It's been happening and occurring since my freshman year—racial incidents. And it's crazy that it's still happening. It seems like every single time it's the same. It's a cycle, it's okay, let's host a town hall meeting. Let's talk about it. And then pretty much there's no follow up.”

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### **Dissemination**

We have begun to share these findings across campuses, as well as in broader settings. This work has been part of presentations to administrators and staff at Marquette and MATC working on student success. Additionally, the research has informed the work of the Black and Latino/a Ecosystem and Support Transition (BLEST) Hub as we map the network of organizations and challenges facing these students in the Milwaukee area. It has been included as well in the yearly *State of the Ecosystem Report* published in August, which has been shared broadly and can be found on the [BLEST Hub website](#). Lastly, our team has submitted a research report on these findings to one academic journal focused on higher education and is in the process of developing a manuscript to submit to another.