

Departments

VIEWS

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Thriving and Flourishing While Black and a Student: What can PWIs do?



As colleges and universities nationwide welcome a new cohort of students, the beginning of a new academic year generates a sense of anticipation. However, it is necessary to recognize the fight against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and affirmative action, which continues to dominate and has taken center stage on the educational landscape. As part of the ongoing battle, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott signed a new law shutting diversity offices at Texas' public universities. Similarly, the higher education reforms signed into law by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis have imposed significant limitations on spending funds for diversity, equity, and

inclusion programs at colleges and universities in his state. This new legislation presents a formidable barrier that hampers the ability of Black people (students, faculty, and staff) to flourish and thrive in their academic pursuits.

Several faculty members in Florida have expressed their concerns that these new higher education reforms may hinder the recruitment of faculty members and enrollment of students in state colleges or universities. For Black people to flourish and thrive, they need an environment that supports their holistic growth.

As a Black student studying on a white campus, I (Agyemang) have witnessed the challenges Black students face that hinder their ability to thrive and flourish. Black students are often the targets of microaggressions and discrimination, and they may feel like they don't belong. This can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. These laws, approved by governors and lawmakers in states like Texas and Florida, undermine creating an inclusive campus climate and perpetuate systemic barriers that impede Black students' academic and personal growth. And targeting of faculty by groups such as Idaho Freedom Foundations does not provide a campus environment where Black people feel safe. It is essential to recognize the critical role that diversity, equity, and inclusion play in creating a robust, equitable educational environment. It is crucial to critically assess the potential impact on Black students' ability to flourish and thrive in higher education institutions.

Black Flourishing and Thriving

Black thriving and flourishing in higher education refers to the holistic and comprehensive development of Black students and employees within academic institutions. It involves creating an

environment that fosters academic, personal, and professional growth while addressing historical and systemic barriers Black individuals face in education. While these terms are often used synonymously, they have slightly different meanings.

Thriving is often related to the success generated by one's effort. Flourishing is most often associated with creating and facilitating the environment for a person to be successful. So, we have learned that for Black people to thrive and flourish, it is not just about effort, as one can thrive in one aspect of life because of great effort but flounder in other areas because of inadequate conditions. However, to be holistically successful by flourishing, a person needs the right environment (i.e., people, resources, time, space, support, etc.).

What does it mean for Black students to thrive and flourish in higher education? We believe it means that they can:

- **Feel safe and supported on campus.** This means students can be themselves without fear of discrimination or harassment. It also means having access to resources and support services that can help them succeed. There will also be the need for Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) to intentionally cultivate and build multiple communities of support for Black students. In many departments, it is uncommon to find more than one or two Black faculty or staff member.
- **Combat negative stereotypes.** Black students and employees are often labeled negatively at PWIs. There has been a longstanding false perception that Blacks in general are resistant to pursuing higher education. Therefore, their path to success is hindered by incidents of racism and marginalization, which negatively affect their ability to thrive and achieve their educational goals. Institutional leaders should actively highlight the academic contributions of African Americans on their campuses to combat these ideas.
- **See themselves reflected in the curriculum and in the faculty.** This means seeing Black history and culture represented in the courses they take and the professors who teach them. It also means having Black role models who can show them what is possible.
- **Have access to mentors and role models who can help them succeed.** This means having people who can provide guidance and support as Black students navigate the challenges of higher education. It also means having people who can help them connect with opportunities and resources and developing mentoring relationships with other Black faculty, inside or outside their field of study.
- **Feel like they belong and that they have a voice.** This means feeling like Black students are part of the campus community and that their voices are valued. It means feeling like they can make a difference in the world. Black thriving is both a mindset and a continuous action to progress our community through various approaches, and a feeling of belonging and voice is being one of them. As strategies are employed and implemented, it is crucial to recognize the significance of understanding the psychology of belonging and how it impacts the self-esteem, self-worth, self-identity, and motivation of Black students to actively participate and learn. This understanding becomes imperative in fostering an inclusive and supportive environment that promotes their academic success and overall well-being.

• **Be able to achieve their academic goals.** This means having the support Black students need to succeed in their coursework and to pursue their dreams after graduation. A typical example is the institution of scholarships and funds that target Black students. For example, the Promoting Black Flourishing Fund provides one-time funding 1.) to support initiatives by Black members of the University of Manitoba (UM) Community and Black UM-affiliated groups and organizations and 2.) to advance anti-racism at UM.

In conclusion, Black thriving and flourishing is not just about individual success. It is also about creating a more just and equitable society. When Black students thrive and flourish, it sends a message to the world that Black lives matter and that Black people have the potential to achieve great things. Recent legislative actions in Texas and Florida challenge Black students' ability to flourish and thrive by limiting diversity and inclusion programs which remains crucial for growth of Black students. A higher education system that celebrates Black experiences and fosters equity can be created by challenging limitations and promoting inclusive policies. This collective effort will enable Black students to thrive academically and in all aspects of their lives to the benefit of their communities and society.

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