

**Diversity, Equity, and Illusion: The Influence of Exposure to Institutional DEI
Communications on Perceptions of Racial Progress at Davidson College**

Josh Matushak, Maggie Tillquist, Nhi Tran, Jordan Whitehouse, and Christina Wray

Department of Psychology, Davidson College

PSY 316: Industrial Organizational Psychology Research Methods

Dr. Linnea Ng

May 12, 2025

Abstract

Previous research consistently demonstrates that Americans, especially White individuals, frequently overestimate racial progress in the United States. Small higher education institutions like Davidson College employ diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI) communications, including website-based DEI statements and resources, to support students and promote inclusive campus climates. However, the effectiveness of these institutional communications in shaping perceptions of racial progress remains unclear. This study examined whether direct exposure to Davidson College's website-based DEI communications influenced undergraduate students' perceptions of racial progress in student demographics at the institution. We hypothesized that (1) students exposed to DEI communications would overestimate racial progress, (2) students not exposed would also overestimate racial progress, and (3) students exposed to DEI communications would estimate greater racial progress than those not exposed. Participants viewed either general institutional statements or these statements accompanied by an explicit DEI statement and DEI resources. Results revealed that all students, irrespective of their exposure to DEI communications, significantly overestimated racial progress. However, exposure to DEI communications did not further exaggerate students' perceptions compared to those without such exposure. These findings indicate a widespread misconception of racial progress among students, suggesting that institutions like Davidson College should critically assess the cause behind faulty perceptions.

Keywords: racial progress, DEI, racial narratives, equal representation, racial equity

**Diversity, Equity, and Illusion: The Influence of Exposure to Institutional DEI on
Perceptions of Student Racial Progress at Davidson College**

As a nation built on racial inequality, the United States often embraces narratives that prioritize comfort over confronting uncomfortable truths, hindering genuine racial progress (Torrez et al., 2024). Narratives about racial progress typically suggest that racial equality is steadily and inevitably increasing, irrespective of significant efforts toward achieving equitable representation (Kraus et al., 2022). However, existing literature consistently demonstrates that racial progress in the United States is frequently overestimated (Torrez et al., 2024). Moreover, perceptions of racial progress vary notably based on racial identity; individuals who experience fewer direct impacts of racial inequality tend to perceive greater progress compared to those who regularly encounter its negative effects (Brodish et al., 2008; Kraus et al., 2019).

Racial progress refers to the advancement toward greater racial equality and justice, typically assessed through measures such as disparities in wealth, leadership roles, and employment opportunities. Within this context, organizations often use diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI) communications, institutional messages conveying commitment to diversity, equity, & inclusion, to publicly demonstrate their efforts toward fostering an inclusive environment. Although organizational racial representation is crucial for creating feelings of belonging among racially minoritized groups, particularly Black Americans (Duran et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2025), visible diversity alone can lead to misleading perceptions that systemic inequality is being effectively addressed. Relatedly, organizational diversity structures, including DEI statements and resources, can inadvertently create illusions of procedural fairness that do not reflect actual conditions (Kaiser et al., 2012). Individuals from higher-status or majority

groups are especially susceptible to perceiving these diversity frameworks as evidence of genuine progress, further contributing to inaccurate perceptions.

When institutions genuinely commit to advancing racial equity, they create climates that promote respect, engagement, and collective potential (Rice et al., 2025). Conversely, ineffective DEI strategies risk exacerbating alienation, suppressing marginalized voices, and hindering institutional growth. Understanding the extent to which individuals overestimate racial progress, and the role institutional DEI communications play in shaping these perceptions, is crucial for reducing complacency and promoting evidence-based actions that lead to authentic and sustainable racial equality (Torrez et al., 2024).

National Illusions of Racial Progress

Torrez et al. (2024), in Study 1 of a larger investigation, demonstrated that when people were asked to quantify racial representation with ratio-style questions anchored to a White reference group, they systematically overestimated racial progress. Participants estimated, for example, how many Black chief executive officers existed “for every 100 White CEOs” in 2004, 2018, and 2025.” Across all leadership domains, the pattern was consistent. Participants believed that present-day Black representation was significantly higher than federal data indicated and projected a smooth, linear rise to near parity within a decade. By collecting the same ratio estimates for three time points, such as past, present, and future, the authors revealed two distinct biases: inflated memories of historical progress and optimistic forecasts that did not align with demographic realities. These findings suggest that individuals do not only misjudge a single time point, they also perceive an entire trajectory of racial advancement inaccurately.

Racism Reminders and Selective Revisions of History

Relatedly, Onyeador et al. (2020) examined whether explicitly telling White Americans that racism continues to shape Black people's economic opportunities would change their beliefs about racial progress. After reading a brief article about continuing discrimination, participants changed their overall sense of progress downwards, but they did this by saying that the 1960s were more equal than they thought before the article, while leaving their overestimates of current Black-White income and wealth gaps unchanged. This pattern suggests that reminders of racism lacking concrete contemporary statistics can reshape narratives about the past more readily than they sharpen understanding of present-day inequalities, allowing optimistic misperceptions to persist.

Diversity Within Higher Education and Illusions of Fairness

Organizational diversity frameworks including statements, offices, and more may create an “illusion of equality” that disguises existing inequities. Kaiser et al. (2012) found that merely announcing such structures may lead observers to assume that decision-making is unbiased, regardless of proof of true fairness. White men, in particular, tended to rate procedures as more equitable than those from minoritized groups. Just as White Americans overestimate national racial progress (Brodish et al., 2008), they also can overestimate organizational equity when diversity structures are highly visible, these disparities in perception can compound larger gaps in how inclusive an organization actually is. By contrast, Black Americans measure progress against the still-unmet standard of full equality, producing more accurate estimates of advancement.

Misjudging an organization’s overall fairness distorts how employees rate the very policies meant to improve it. In Study 2 of Torrez et al. (2024), U.S. workers reviewed several diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI) options and judged quick, low-effort steps, like a one-off bias

workshop or a public diversity statement, as just as effective as more substantial measures such as targeted recruiting or tracking promotions of under-represented groups. Because their sense of racial progress did not depend on meaningful action, participants assumed any DEI strategy would deliver equity, deeming easy gestures “good enough” and easing pressure to pursue the harder changes that actually move the numbers. Recognizing this bias is crucial, because when simple fixes seem sufficient, organizations and universities are unlikely to undertake the deeper structural reforms needed for real racial progress.

Diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI) initiatives are now embedded in contemporary higher education plans; DEI functions as a filter for institutional recruitment targets, curriculum reviews, and student-support programs (Ficht & Levashina, 2023). Textual analyses of university statements reveal a similar issue: 79 percent of documents employ aspirational language such as “inclusive excellence,” while fewer than 15 percent include detailed benchmarks or timelines, prioritizing declarations of progress over direct engagement with inequity (Wallace et al., 2024). However, framing racial progress as a linear journey driven solely by time can obscure where measurable change is, or is not, occurring. Kraus et al. (2022) show that many stakeholders view time, rather than policy, as the vehicle for racial progress, a mindset that can diminish the sense of urgency for meaningful reform and even foster complacency.

Sense of Belonging on Campus

Data from multi-institution studies coincidentally indicate significant gaps in black students’ sense of belonging on campus. Specifically, Duran et al. (2020) conducted a critical quantitative analysis across various institutions with varying levels of racial representation, revealing that Black students experienced substantially lower levels of belonging compared to White students overall, with intersectional considerations such as generation status further

influencing these disparities. Similarly, Fong et al. (2025) analyzed sense of belonging at U.S. community colleges, which revealed significant variations among racial and gender groups. Notably, Black men reported the lowest belonging compared to other demographic groups. Together, these studies show that numerical diversity alone does not guarantee inclusive climates. Institutions must implement targeted and culturally sensitive strategies that enhance racially minoritized students' sense of belonging and inclusion on campus.

Gaps in the Literature

Even with the increase in campus-diversity research, most work remains descriptive, documenting rhetoric or symbols rather than experimentally testing whether exposure to DEI communications alters perceptions of racial progress. Causal studies focus on employees rating national organizations, leaving undergraduates, whose daily sense of belonging is central, largely unexamined. Few investigations anchor perceptions to archival records, so it is unclear whether overestimation persists at small liberal-arts colleges. Finally, the behavioral consequences of misperceptions, whether they breed complacency or weaken support for reform, are virtually unexplored. Our randomized exposure design therefore offers the first empirical test of the DEI-illusion hypothesis in a small-college context, linking students' estimates to their own institution's demographic realities.

Present Study

The current study employs a similar method as Torrez et al. (2024) through the use of ratio-style questions and time point inquiries, adapting the ratio-estimation paradigm to university enrollment data. Existing evidence that the narrative of racial progress inflates perceptions of equity comes almost entirely from organizational settings and adult worker samples (Torrez et al., 2024), yet parallel biases have also been documented in national surveys

that treat time itself as the driver of racial improvement (Kraus et al., 2022). Relatedly, experiments where reminders of racism alter memories of the past but leave current gaps untouched (Onyeador et al., 2020), and in studies showing that highly visible diversity structures lead observers to overrate procedural fairness (Kaiser et al., 2012). Whether the same bias operates among undergraduates who routinely encounter their institution's DEI communications remains untested. The present study investigates if students at a higher-education institution replicate the findings of existing literature. Moreover, prior work has documented correlations between misperceptions of racial progress and exposure to symbolic rhetoric but has rarely tested whether direct exposure to institutional communications actively shapes these perceptions. More specifically, in the present study, DEI communications refers to website-based DEI statements and resources available to students. The present study addresses this gap by experimentally varying students' exposure to Davidson College's own DEI web pages and resources before they provide estimates of racial progress. In doing so, this study experimentally tests whether direct exposure to institutional DEI communications influences students' perceptions of racial progress, linking institutional messaging to measurable distortions in students' understanding of campus racial demographics.

Primary Hypotheses

Based on the current literature, we formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Students who are exposed to DEI communications will overestimate racial progress in student demographics.

Hypothesis 2: Students who are not exposed to DEI communications will also overestimate racial progress in student demographics.

Hypothesis 3: Students who are exposed to DEI communications will overestimate racial progress in Davidson College student demographics than students who are not exposed to DEI communications.

For clarity, Hypotheses 1 and 2 reflect the expectation that students, regardless of whether they view DEI communications, will overestimate racial progress in student demographics.

Method

Design

We conducted a 2-cell (DEI communications vs. control) between-subjects experimental study in which participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. We then assessed participants' estimations of racial progress between 2000 and 2024 at Davidson College. These estimations were then compared to actual data retrieved from Davidson College Factfiles.

Participants

This study included 45 undergraduate students from Davidson College. All participants were recruited through the Davidson College Psychology Participant Pool and received one course credit for their participation. After signing participants were randomly assigned to the DEI communications group ($n = 25$) or the control group ($n = 20$). Participants varied in class year (30% First-year, 24% Sophomore, 24% Junior, 22% Senior), gender (51% women, 44% men, and 5% nonbinary), and race (73% White, 5% Black/African-American, 13% Asian, 7% Hispanic or Latino, and 2% Middle Eastern).

Materials

Stimuli

Both control and experimental conditions took place online through the Qualtrics survey platform. First, participants viewed screenshotted segments of the Davidson College website. The control group was shown the Davidson College mission & values statement and the Davidson College statement of purpose. The experimental group was shown the same two statements, as well as the diversity, equity, & inclusion statement and available student DEI resources. Please refer to Appendix A for the full materials.

Measures

Campus Life Perception. Participants were asked to provide a short answer to describe campus climate and culture: “In 3-4 sentences, how would you describe the overall atmosphere and traditions that define student life at Davidson College?” By asking them to first reflect on their general perception of campus culture, this question aimed to prevent participants from guessing the primary study goals.

Racial Progress. This measure was adapted from Torrez et al. (2024) and asked participants to estimate the number of Black students for every 100 White students at Davidson College during the years 2000, 2024, and 2048. Total racial progress scores ($M = 11.46$, $SD = 6.96$) were then calculated by subtracting the number of estimated Black students in 2000 from the number of estimated Black students in 2024 (e.g., “For every 100 White students at Davidson College, how many were Black in the year 2000?”). The same questions that were asked to collect estimations of racial demographic change were also asked in the context of gender demographics and international student demographics. However, the estimations for the year 2048, as well as the gender and international student demographic questions merely served as distractors. Please refer to Appendix B for the full measure.

Racial Progress Satisfaction. This measure was adapted from Onyeador et al. (2020) and asked participants to rate their satisfaction with the progress made toward student gender equality, student racial equality (for Black students), and student LGBTQ+ equality (e.g., “I am satisfied with the progress made towards student racial equality (for Black students) at Davidson College”). The measure had 3 questions and used a 7-point Likert scale (1-*Strongly Disagree* to 7-*Strongly Agree*). These questions served as distractors. See Appendix B for the full measure.

Prior Knowledge. Participants were asked to report prior knowledge in two domains. Participants were asked to rate their familiarity with (1) DEI initiatives and (2) students’ racial demographics at Davidson College prior to this study (e.g., “Before this study, I was familiar with DEI initiatives at Davidson College”). This measure aimed to control for participants’ prior knowledge as a confound for the Racial Progress measure. The measure had 2 questions on a 5-point Likert scale (1-*Strongly Disagree* to 5-*Strongly Agree*) (Question 1: $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.14$, Question 2: $M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.22$). Please refer to Appendix B for the full measure.

Manipulation Check. Participants were asked to describe the contents of the initial stimuli presented to them: “In 2-3 sentences, please describe the content that you viewed from the Davidson website at the start of this study.” This measure ensured that participants paid attention to the presented materials. No participants failed the manipulation check or were excluded from the study.

Procedure

Participants completed the study online through the Qualtrics survey platform to ensure consistency in data collection. Upon accessing the survey link, participants first reviewed an informed consent form that outlined the study’s purpose, procedure, potential risks, and voluntary participation rights. Participants provided explicit digital consent before proceeding.

After providing consent, they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions via Qualtrics' randomization function. Participants in the control condition viewed screenshots of the Davidson College website, specifically of Davidson College's mission & values statement, along with the Davidson College statement of purpose. Participants in the experimental (DEI communications) condition viewed Davidson College's DEI statement and DEI-related student resources in addition to the same materials as the control group. To ensure adequate exposure, participants were required to view all assigned materials for at least 2 minutes before proceeding.

Following the exposure to materials, participants answered a structured survey. To minimize hypothesis guessing, participants first answered the Campus Life Perception measure. They then completed the primary Racial Progress measure. Throughout this section, participants also answered distraction questions regarding gender and international representation progress at Davidson College. Next, participants answered the Racial Progress Satisfaction, Prior Knowledge, and Manipulation Check measures. After completing the survey, participants answered demographic questions including class year, gender, and racial identity. The final page of the survey contained a debriefing form explaining the study's objectives and hypotheses. The study was estimated to take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Results

To measure estimations of racial progress, we compared participants' estimated change in the number of Black students that exist per 100 White students on Davidson's campus between the years 2000 and 2024. A one-sample *t*-test was conducted between the group exposed to DEI communications to the actual amount of growth in the amount of Black students per 100 White students ($M = 5.03$). The results of the test indicated statistical significance, $t(24) = 5.07$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.01$. Overall, participants exposed to DEI communications overestimated the

growth in number of Black students per 100 White students between 2000 and 2024 ($M = 11.90$, $SD = 6.78$).

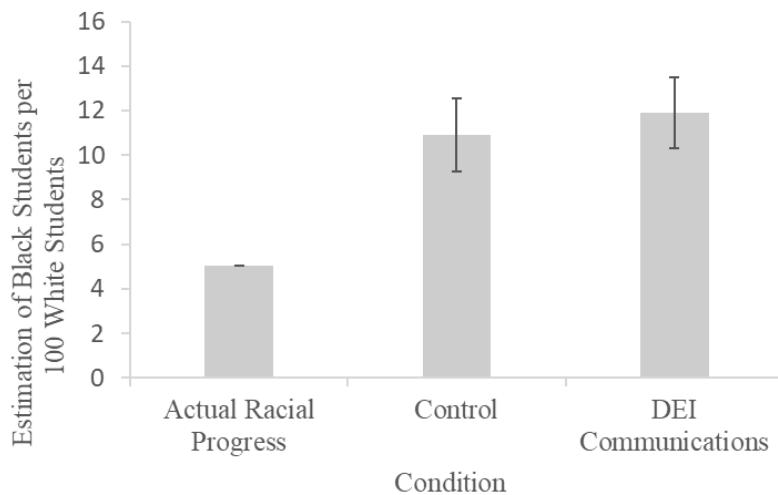
Subsequently, to measure estimations of racial progress, we compared participants' estimated change in the number of Black students that exist per 100 White students on Davidson's campus, between the years 2000 and 2024. A one-sample *t*-test was conducted between the control group and the actual amount of change seen at Davidson of Black students per 100 White students ($M = 5.03$). The results of the test indicated statistical significance, $t(19) = 3.59$, $p = .002$, Cohen's $d = 0.80$. Overall, participants who were in the control group also overestimated the growth in number of Black students per 100 White students between 2000 and 2024 ($M = 10.90$, $SD = 7.31$).

To measure for differences in estimations in racial progress between groups, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare estimated change between 2000 and 2024 in Black students per 100 White students between the group exposed to DEI communications and the control group. The results of the test did not indicate statistical significance $t(39.38) = -0.47$, $p = .64$, Cohen's $d = 0.14$. Thus, there was no significant difference in estimations of racial progress of Black students per 100 White students between the DEI communications group ($M = 11.90$, $SD = 6.78$) and the control group ($M = 10.90$, $SD = 7.31$). Please refer to Figure 1 for results based on DEI communications exposure.

Figure 1

Perceptions of Racial Progress from 2000 to 2024 Depending on Exposure to DEI

Communications



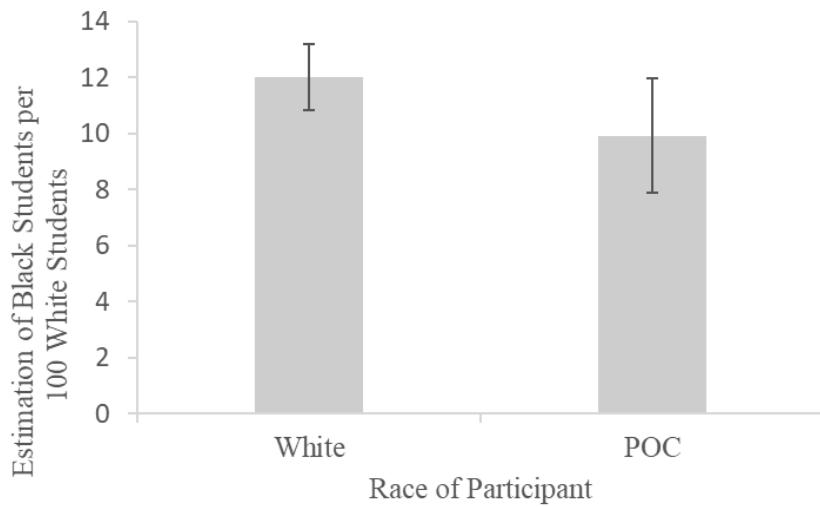
Note. Both error bars represent the Standard Error of the Mean. No error bars are present for “Actual Racial Progress” because the bar represents true demographic change. While no significance was found between the “Control” and the “DEI Communications” groups, both groups differed significantly from the actual racial progress that occurred.

As discussed in previous literature, participant race is relevant for estimations of racial progress such that White individuals have exaggerated estimations in comparison to Black individuals (Brodish et al., 2008). We conducted an exploratory analysis examining the effect of participant race on estimated change in the number of Black students per 100 White students between 2000 and 2024. An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare 33 participants who were White ($M = 12.02$, $SD = 7.06$) and 12 participants of color ($M = 9.92$, $SD = 6.71$) regardless of exposure to DEI communications or not (see Figure 2). The results of the test demonstrated no significant difference in scores, $t(20.51) = -0.92$, $p = .37$, Cohen’s $d = 0.31$. Further analysis was conducted to understand the impact of prior knowledge of student demographics and whether it

would lead to differential estimations of racial progress. A correlation calculated between racial progress estimations and previous exposure to student demographic information at Davidson indicated no significant difference ($t(43) = -0.88, p = 0.39, r = -0.13$).

Figure 2

Perceptions of Racial Progress from 2000 to 2024 Depending on Participant Race



Note. Both error bars represent the Standard Error of the Mean. Furthermore, the two participant groups did not significantly differ from each other.

Discussion

The results of our study reveal that both participants exposed to DEI communications and those not exposed significantly overestimated the change in number of Black students per 100 White students between 2000 and 2024 compared to Davidson's actual change in student demographics. These findings support Hypotheses 1 and 2, indicating that, regardless of exposure to DEI communications, participants perceived racial progress to be higher than it truly is. This finding also aligns with existing literature, which shows that adults in the U.S generally overestimate racial progress in the past and present (Kraus et al., 2019; Onyeandor et al., 2021;

Torrez et al., 2024). However, these recent studies asked participants to reflect on racial progress in a larger, more broad context of all U.S workers, which is a population they might not have direct and frequent exposure to. Our study builds on that work by demonstrating that such misperceptions also occur on a smaller scale where individuals are a part of a more close-knit environment that interact daily. Furthermore, our results indicate that Hypothesis 3 was not supported, as there was no significant difference in estimates of racial progress between participants who were exposed to DEI communications and those who were not. This suggests that brief exposure to DEI communications may not have meaningfully altered participants' perceptions of racial progress.

In our exploratory analysis, we examined the effect of participant race on estimations of racial progress, in changes of Black students per 100 White students between 2000 and 2024. The results of this analysis were not significant. Consistent with Torrez et al. (2024), our findings suggest that both DEI-exposed and non-exposed participants hold overly optimistic views of racial representation, reflecting the deeply ingrained narrative of steady progress through time (Kraus et al., 2022). This study only considered demographic change in the context of Black individuals as existing literature has largely focused on examining differences between Black and White individuals, especially in conversations surrounding racial progress, eschewing other racial groups in their analyses.

Implications

Contrary to our prediction, there was not an effect of exposure to DEI communications on participants' racial progress estimations in our study. As previously noted, Kraus et al. (2022) described the potential for misconceptions about institutional racial progress to come from narratives of institutional DEI. There are two clear ways in which we might be able to explain

why the present study's results do not align with this previous literature. One explanation is that prior to the study, students may have been exposed to institutional DEI communications.

Therefore, both groups were not as impacted by our manipulation. Another possible explanation is that institutional DEI communications at Davidson College may simply not impact perceptions of racial progress, suggesting that there are other factors contributing to these overestimations.

Overall, these findings leave ambiguous the role of institutional DEI communications in shaping estimations of racial progress, particularly within a small college setting.

Nonetheless, our findings show that students significantly overestimate institutional racial progress. Widespread inflated perceptions of racial progress suggest that existing issues surrounding student racial representation are not perceived to the degree in which they exist. This gap between reality and belief may reduce inclinations to address ongoing systemic barriers impacting students of color. As a result, meaningful efforts to foster inclusion, promote racial equity, and support underrepresented students on college campuses may become less supported and prioritized (Kraus et al., 2022). Overall, racial progress overestimation suggests a campus climate that reinforces the marginalization of Black students and undermines the urgency for correcting perceptions of racial progress and institutional support.

Relatedly, existing literature finds that Black students report significantly lower sense of belonging and that students who perceive their campus environment as socially and academically supportive tend to experience a stronger sense of belonging overall (Duran et al., 2020; Fong et al., 2025). Thus, the implications of overestimating racial progress can extend to minority groups' sense of belonging. As previously discussed, when majority group students assume that racial equity has been achieved, they may be less likely to recognize ongoing challenges faced by students of color. This can contribute to dismissive attitudes and inaction toward past and

existing discrimination, exclusion and inequality, thus further impeding students of color's inclusion and sense of belonging. As a result, this disconnect can strain relationships, as students of color may feel unsupported by their peers, which can hinder the social and academic support necessary to foster belonging. Overall, institutions need to acknowledge and rectify the effect of racial progress misconceptions on students' lives. This would create an inclusive, supportive environment for all students without dismissing existing racial disparities and enforcing misconceptions on racial progress.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study is the participant pool, which included a relatively small sample size that had limited participant racial diversity. Current literature on the topic of racial progress boasts much higher sample sizes (e.g., Torrez et al., 2024; Brodish et al., 2008), which allows for more power and generalizability. Additionally, the students in this study were mostly recruited from the Davidson College Psychology Participant Pool, representing a convenience sample. Replicating the current study with a larger and more racially diverse student sample would shed light on whether racial identity systematically influences perceptions of institutional racial progress. Although race was not a factor initially hypothesized or explicitly tested in our study design, prior research suggests that White individuals may hold higher overestimations of institutional racial progress compared to students of color (Brodish et al., 2008; Kraus et al., 2019; Torrez et al., 2024). Future studies should empirically test this possibility using a more extensive demographic sample that includes a broader and more inclusive representation of racial and ethnic identities. Additionally, investigating other campus populations, such as faculty, administrative staff, first-generation college students, and individuals from diverse

socioeconomic backgrounds, could further enrich our understanding of perceptions regarding racial progress.

Moreover, the finding that there was no significant difference between the control and manipulation groups could suggest that the DEI communications used in this study did not meaningfully influence participants' estimations of racial progress. One possible explanation relates to aspects of the experimental design itself. Although baseline familiarity with DEI topics was measured, this familiarity may have reduced participants' sensitivity to the experimental manipulation, particularly if most participants already had moderate-to-high prior exposure to DEI communications. Additionally, the DEI communications used in this study may not have been sufficiently impactful, perhaps due to content, framing, or brevity, to prompt meaningful changes in perceptions among participants already familiar with these themes. In particular, the manipulation simply highlighted resources for DEI at Davidson College and did not necessarily represent the full commitment and overall institutional DEI efforts. Future studies could vary message content or intensity, specifically targeting individuals with different levels of baseline familiarity, to better understand the conditions under which DEI communications shift perceptions of racial progress.

Specifically, future research should assess additional methods of college communication beyond static web postings. For instance, institutional messaging can be communicated via social media posts (e.g., Instagram and Twitter), campus-wide memos, official emails, promotional videos, recruitment brochures, and visually engaging posters around campus. By systematically varying the communication medium (e.g., social media stories versus formal emails from administrators) or the presentation format (e.g., posters featuring images of diverse racial groups versus posters presenting detailed demographic statistics), future research can identify the

communication methods most significantly influencing students' perceptions of racial progress. Investigating different communication stimuli is valuable because varying formats could uniquely impact how clearly students interpret the institution's racial demographics and the perceived level of institutional progress. For example, visuals of actual diverse groups could focus more on personal experiences while statistical formats might focus more directly on demographic information. Understanding these varied responses could provide insights into how different message strategies impact students' perceptions of racial progress.

Subsequently, it is important to consider the downstream effects of widespread overestimations of racial progress. Future studies should investigate how perceptions of racial progress relate to students' sense of belonging within their institution, trust in institutional leadership, and willingness to engage in DEI or racial diversity initiatives. Prior research demonstrates the impact of racial disparities in reducing Black students' sense of belonging on campuses, indicating that perceptions of institutional commitment to racial diversity and representation may critically influence students' belonging and campus experiences (Duran et al., 2020). Overestimations of racial progress might lead students to perceive additional DEI efforts as unnecessary, potentially resulting in decreased belongingness and lower engagement with initiatives aimed at addressing racial disparities (Kraus et al., 2019). Additionally, examining how these perceptions impact students across different educational contexts, such as larger public universities, smaller community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and majority White liberal arts campuses, would provide valuable insights into the significance of racial progress perceptions for student experiences in diverse settings. Parallel studies with faculty and staff could examine how perceptions of racial progress influence

critical institutional decisions such as faculty recruitment, staff promotions, professional development opportunities, and resource distribution.

Finally, incorporating qualitative methods, such as focus groups, interviews, and discourse analyses, into future studies could clarify the cognitive processes that students use when they interpret institutional messaging about racial progress. Qualitative inquiries could explore the specific messaging that students recall, and the method through which messaging shapes their estimates of racial demographics and how these interpretations influence their personal feelings and daily experiences on campus. Asking participants to explain their reasoning, describe emotional reactions, and reflect on how institutional messaging shapes their overall campus experience could reveal more detail related to how perceptions of racial progress are formed. This qualitative approach may reveal nuanced understandings and interpretations that quantitative methods might overlook. The current study revealed a discrepancy in actual versus estimated racial progress in a college setting, aligning with existing literature on national estimations of racial progress. This highlights a need for actionable insights on communicating effectively about racial progress to ensure campus perceptions are aligned with demographic realities.

References

- Brodish, A. B., Brazy, P. C., & Devine, P. G. (2008). More eyes on the prize: Variability in white americans' perceptions of progress toward racial equality. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*(4), 513–527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167207311337>
- Duran, A., Dahl, L. S., Stipeck, C., & Mayhew, M. J. (2020). A critical quantitative analysis of students' sense of belonging: Perspectives on race, generation status, and collegiate environments. *Journal of College Student Development, 61*(2), 133–153. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0014>
- Ficht, L. S., & Levashina, J. (2023). Should DEI statements be included in faculty selection? Exploring legal, diversity, and validity issues. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 31*(2), 212–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12421>
- Fong, C. J., Mahdavivand Fard, S., Dezhkameh, A., Littlefield, T. D., & Rozek, C. S. (2025). Exploring disparities and antecedents to students' belonging at U.S. community colleges: An analysis by gender and racial/ethnic groups. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2025.2471276>
- Kaiser, C. R., Major, B., Jurcevic, I., Dover, T. L., Brady, L. M., & Shapiro, J. R. (2013). Presumed fair: Ironic effects of organizational diversity structures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 104*(3), 504. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030838>
- Kraus, M. W., Onyeador, I. N., Daumeyer, N. M., Rucker, J. M., & Richeson, J. A. (2019). The misperception of racial economic inequality. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 14*(6), 899-921. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619863049>
- Kraus, M. W., Torrez, B., & Hollie, L. (2022). How narratives of racial progress create barriers to

- diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43, 108–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.06.022>
- Onyeador, I. N., Daumeyer, N. M., Rucker, J. M., Duker, A., Kraus, M. W., & Richeson, J. A. (2020). Disrupting beliefs in racial progress: Reminders of persistent racism alter perceptions of past, but not current, racial economic equality. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 47(5), 753–765. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220942625>
- Rice, D. B., Maxie, J., Massey, M., Edevbie, N., & Day, S. (2025). The impact of ethical leadership on black employees' workplace experiences: Echoes from black culture and history. *Journal of Business Ethics*. Advance online publication.
- <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-024-05916-4>
- Torrez, B., Hollie, L., Richeson, J. A., & Kraus, M. W. (2024). The misperception of organizational racial progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. *American Psychologist*, 79(4), 581–592. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001309>
- Wallace, L. E., Reeves, S. L., & Spencer, S. J. (2024). Celebrating organizational history triggers social identity threat among black americans. *PNAS Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 121(16).
- <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2313878121>

Appendix A

Davidson College Mission & Values Statement

The screenshot shows the Davidson College website's navigation bar at the top, featuring links for REQUEST INFO, VISIT, APPLY, GIVE, NEWS & EVENTS, and RESOURCES FOR. Below the navigation is a dark horizontal bar with links for Academics, Admission & Aid, Campus Life, About, and Athletics. On the left, there is a sidebar under the 'About' heading with links for Fast Facts, Mission and Values (which is currently selected), Statement of Purpose, Honor Code, and Commitment to Freedom of Expression. The main content area contains a large paragraph describing the college's mission and values.

About

- Fast Facts
- Mission and Values**
- Statement of Purpose
- Honor Code
- Commitment to Freedom of Expression

A Davidson education fosters humane instincts and disciplined and creative minds. Students flourish in our distinctively supportive community, where peers and mentors act with integrity and embrace academic rigor. We strive to create an environment where students are anchored by relationships and experiences—connections that cultivate curiosity, empathy and intellectual bravery.

Davidson College Statement of Purpose

The screenshot shows the Davidson College website's navigation bar at the top, featuring links for REQUEST INFO, VISIT, APPLY, GIVE, NEWS & EVENTS, and RESOURCES FOR. Below the navigation is a dark horizontal bar with links for Academics, Admission & Aid, Campus Life, About, and Athletics. The main content area contains two large paragraphs describing the college's statement of purpose and its liberal arts mission.

Davidson seeks students of good character and high academic ability, irrespective of economic circumstances, who share its values and show promise for usefulness to society. In the selection of faculty, the college seeks men and women who respect the purpose of the college, who are outstanding intellectually, who have the best training available in their fields of study, and whose interest in students and teaching is unfeigned and profound. The Trustees commit to being faithful stewards of the traditions of the college. They are charged with governing under the Constitution and By-laws and with providing the financial resources necessary for adequate student aid and appropriate facilities and programs, including furnishing the faculty with the time and opportunity for creative scholarship fundamental to the best teaching.

As a liberal arts college, Davidson emphasizes those studies, disciplines, and activities that are mentally, spiritually, and physically liberating. Thus, the college concentrates upon the study of history, literature and languages, philosophy and religion, music, drama and the visual arts, the natural and social sciences, and mathematics. The college encourages student engagement with other cultures through domestic and international studies. The college also requires physical education, provides for competitive athletics, and encourages a variety of social, cultural, and service activities. While Davidson prepares many of its students for graduate and professional study, it intends to teach all students to think clearly, to make relevant and valid judgments, to discriminate among values, and to communicate freely with others in the realm of ideas.

Davidson holds a priceless heritage bequeathed by those who have dedicated their lives and their possessions for its welfare. To it much has been entrusted, and of it much is required.

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Statement

REQUEST INFO VISIT APPLY  GIVE NEWS & EVENTS RESOURCES FOR  

Academics Admission & Aid Campus Life About Athletics

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

- [Employee Diversity & Inclusion](#)
- [Teaching, Research and Scholarship](#)
- [Gender Identity Resources](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Staff](#)

Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion

Davidson College understands that cultivating a broadly diverse community is crucial to our educational mission and to our foundational commitment to leadership and service.

We strive to sustain a culture of belonging for staff, faculty, and students from diverse cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities, ages, national origins, socio-economic backgrounds, and abilities. [Our policies](#) do not discriminate, our student Code of Responsibility centers valuing individual differences and condemns discrimination, and our employee benefits plans reflect our commitment to all staff, including our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) staff. We believe that these policies are crucial to the realization of our aspirations and that they enable us to recruit, develop, and retain the highest caliber colleagues and students.

Davidson encourages students to acknowledge and discuss the faith traditions and spiritual practices of its diverse student body. The college, through student interest groups and Davidson-sponsored programmatic efforts, supports students of all [faith and religious traditions](#) and those without specific traditions.

[Student Diversity & Inclusion](#)

[Employee Diversity & Inclusion](#)

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Student Resources

REQUEST INFO VISIT APPLY  GIVE NEWS & EVENTS RESOURCES FOR  

Academics Admission & Aid Campus Life About Athletics

Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion

Home // Offices and Services // Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion

Offices and Services

- [Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [Community Spaces](#)
- [First-Generation Student Support](#)
- [LGBTQIA+ Student Support](#)
- [Peer Support](#)
- [Undocumented & DACA Student Resources](#)
- [Staff](#)

CENTER FOR STUDENT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION
704-894-3103

MAILING/SHIPPING ADDRESS
Davidson College - Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion
209 Ridge Rd
Box 5000
Davidson, NC 28035

The Center for Student Diversity & Inclusion fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment on campus.

The Center for Student Diversity & Inclusion pursues this goal by providing direct support services, educational programming and community building opportunities within and across social groups.


A Student-Centric Approach
The CSDI seeks to engage all students in diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. The Center helps achieve this by partnering with the offices of academic access and disability resources, international student programs, and religious and spiritual life to support student organizations that closely align with respective office missions and programming initiatives to uplift the intersections of culture and identity.

The Center also offers specific programming and support to the following student populations*:

<p>Students of Color → Students from ethnic and racial backgrounds that have been historically and systematically underrepresented and underserved.</p>	<p>LGBTQIA+ Students → Students who may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, queer, asexual, intersex, etc.</p>
<p>First-Generation Students → Students who are the first to attend a higher education institution and neither of their parents graduated from a four-year college or university with a bachelor's degree or equivalent.</p>	<p>Undocumented Students → Students attending college within the United States who hold an nonimmigrant or undocumented status.</p>

Appendix B

Racial Progress (Adapted from Torrez et al., 2024):

Gender Representation Perception:

For every 100 male students at Davidson College, how many are female in 2000?

For every 100 male students at Davidson College, how many are female in 2024?

For every 100 male students at Davidson College, how many are female in 2048

Primary Questions (Perceptions of Racial Progress):

For every 100 White students at Davidson College, how many are Black in 2000?

For every 100 White students at Davidson College, how many are Black in 2024?

For every 100 White students at Davidson College, how many are Black in 2048?

International Student Representation Perception:

For every 100 domestic students at Davidson College, how many identify as international in 2000?

For every 100 domestic students at Davidson College, how many identify as international in 2024?

For every 100 domestic students at Davidson College, how many identify as international in 2048?

Racial Progress Satisfaction (Participants will rate each statement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)) (Adapted from Onyeador, 2020):

I am satisfied with the progress made towards student gender equality at Davidson College.

I am satisfied with the progress made towards student racial equality (for Black students) at Davidson College.

I am satisfied with the progress made towards international student equality at Davidson College.

Prior Knowledge (Participants will rate each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree))

Before this study, I was familiar with DEI initiatives at Davidson College.

Before this study, I knew statistics about student demographics at Davidson College in the past and present.