

# The Effects of Colorism on Belongingness in College Students

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the belongingness rates of black students and white students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). We hypothesized that both lighter and darker skinned black students will report low levels of belongingness at a PWI, compared to black students at an HBCU, black students at a PWI would have less belongingness compared to white students, black students from The Neighborhood Academy (TNA) would experience higher levels of belongingness compared to black students from other schools when at a PWI, and there would be a difference in belongingness in skin tones for students at any school. We used an existing belongingness survey from a previous study, and asked students from TNA, who then used word of mouth to spread the survey around to college students they knew. These questions were given to college students who were able to define how much they felt like they belonged on their campus. We found that, surprisingly, black students felt like they belong more at a PWI compared to white students. There were many factors that may have given us the opposite of what we expected. Our data suggest that COVID has impacted the way that black students feel about college, and belongingness.

## **Introduction**

This study will be discussing the effect on skin tone and race on feelings of belongingness in college. In 2010, the four year graduation rate for black men was 21% and 45% for white men. The 6 year college graduation rate was 40% for black men and 64% for white men (1). This shows the difference in success at college between not only racial groups, but black students as a whole, including both light and dark skinned students. Colorism, or bias against darker skin, would suggest that the rate for darker black students could turn out to be worse. This topic is very important to study because it gives an understanding how skin tone and race affect how well one might fit in at college, and how well it gives students an idea of how their experience might be at any specific university.

Colorism is defined as a discrimination against individuals with a darker skin tone, and a preference for lighter skin. Colorism originated in the United States when preference was given to lighter colored slaves because of their white ancestors (2). Colorism is not only seen in education, but it exists in households, workplaces and even marriage. Research suggests those who identify as light skinned earn \$5,000 more per year than those who identify as dark skinned (2). Light skinned women are also seen as more friendly and attractive and dark skinned women are not. Colorism is a common bias that sadly affects the success for many students in general, in particular in this case, at a university.

### *Colorism at PWIs (Predominantly White Institutions)*

Colorism is seen with both dark and light skinned students at PWIs, but the effect of colorism is different for both groups. Harris studied the effect of being biracial or light skinned at a PWI (3). These students felt that society viewed them in certain ways. Some were seen as black, others white, and it did not always match how they saw themselves. As a result, they questioned their identity and had lower self-esteem. Colorism did not always benefit the light-skinned person, they as well were called racist terms by both black and whites, felt pressure to change their looks (straight hair) to be seen as “more professional” and felt pressure to change how they talked to fit in with black or white peers. Their skin tone affected how they felt at a PWI. Colorism predicts that lighter skin tones should be more accepted and they should feel more belongingness, but in reality, these women did not.

Like light-skinned students, darker skin toned students also experience discrimination at PWIs, but it is different because of colorism (4). Lee studied the experiences of dark-skinned students who attended a PWI. Dark skin students reported feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility at the same time. Students felt ignored in spaces of education, yet also reported being fetisized and stared out due to how they stood out. As a result, they felt like they could not be their authentic-self and instead had to self-suppress their identities. Because of these feelings of not being good enough, they basically oppressed themselves. These students therefore lacked belongingness at their colleges. Another way they coped with these racial issues involved drinking. Studies showed that black women who faced belongingness problems at a PWI are more likely to drink than those who do not (5). This comes to show that racial issues and lack of belongingness lead to negative coping methods.

Next, we discussed the ideas of black students and how they feel when it comes to racial regard (6). One author studied black students within a PWI making a meaning of their racial regard. He found that successful student leaders make it because they have high private regard for their racial identity, and have the self-esteem to represent what it means to be black. He also found many black people leave PWIs because they cannot maintain the positive private regard to themselves, and makes them want to give up. This shows that private regard played a large role on students at an PWI.

### *HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities)*

Even with Black students facing many issues involving belongingness at PWI's, going to an HBCU gave them the tools they needed for belongingness and success. Researchers have studied how African American males, especially those failing behind, have an opportunity to discover the strategies and tools needed to succeed (7). This study found that family and friend (mentor, teacher) support played a large impact.. These men needed these tools in order to feel like they belong and "survive" their college experiences.

HBCUs facilitated noncognitive skills for black men, according to research (E). they came to the conclusion that students need a lot of self comfort, a large amount of support to prevent them from procrastinating and not working to their best ability, and help understand simply how to be black and deal with the issues of racism. Overall, this helps the students feel as if they belong and have the right mindset to make it through their university. With these tools

provided, these black men have more of a sense of belonging knowing they have they have the resources needed to help them.

### *Study Hypotheses*

Overall, the research says that black students at PWIs have difficulty feeling a sense of belonging, and colorism plays a role in disadvantaging both lighter and darker students. However, research at HBCU's suggests they provide support to help black students feel like they belong, but there is little research on colorism and skin tone at HBCUs. In our study, we will survey recent high school graduates from TNA and other schools about their sense of belongingness and information about their race and skin tone.

We hypothesize:

1. Both lighter and darker skinned black students will report low levels of belongingness at a PWI, compared to black students at an HBCU
2. Black students at a PWI will have less belongingness compared to white students.
3. Black TNA students will experience higher levels of belongingness than black students from other schools when at a PWI
4. There will be a difference in belongingness in skin tones for students at any school.

### **Methods Section**

The participants in this study included a group of high school graduates from high schools around the US. A total of 81 participants, 83% female and 17% male, participated and answered all of the questions that related to a sense of belongingness within themselves in their university. A total of 7 people were eliminated due to them graduating outside of the four year range and 3 were eliminated due to race, in other words they were not classified as black or white. We have 55% of the participants being white and the other 42% of them being black. And when it comes to black students their colors can be broken down to 18% light skinned, 16% of them were brown skinned, and 9% of them were dark skinned.

The survey was based off of an existing belongingness survey (9). The name of that survey was SCI: Sense of Community Index. We didn't use the survey as it was, but instead added things like race, age, skin tone, and university. Using family and friends as resources,

participants were able to spread the survey around and get more of their peers to take it. Due to school COVID rules, we had to do the survey via the internet only.

## Results

Going back to the idea of belongingness, we studied the idea of belonging and colorism among university students. Students from a variety of colleges responded to a premade belongingness survey; I was able to send my survey out to college students all around the country. We expected that black students would belong more at a HBCU vs white students, that students from TNA would adapt better to HBCUs vs other students, and that Black students would feel less of a sense of belongingness at a PWI.

The first hypothesis was that black students, regardless of skin tone, would feel less belongingness at a PWI vs. an HBCU. In our sample, we only had four students at an HBCU. An independent t-test found no difference in the groups ( $t(28)=0.3$ ,  $p=0.38$ ). Students at a PWI ( $M=29.9$ ) had essentially the same belongingness as those at an HBCU ( $M=28.8$ ). Because of the low amount of students attending a HBCU, we decided to split the schools up into 2 different groups. The first group was for schools that had a percentage of black students that was 13.4% or higher, and the second group was lower than 13.4%. The 13.4% represents how many people identify as black/African American in the US, so we decided that any school with that percentage or higher should be qualified as a school with a higher than typical number of black students. An independent t-test found no difference in the groups ( $t(28)=0.3$ ,  $p=0.43$ ). Black students at schools with larger than typical percentages of black students ( $M=29.5$ ) had essentially the same belongingness as those at schools with smaller percentages ( $M=30.0$ ).

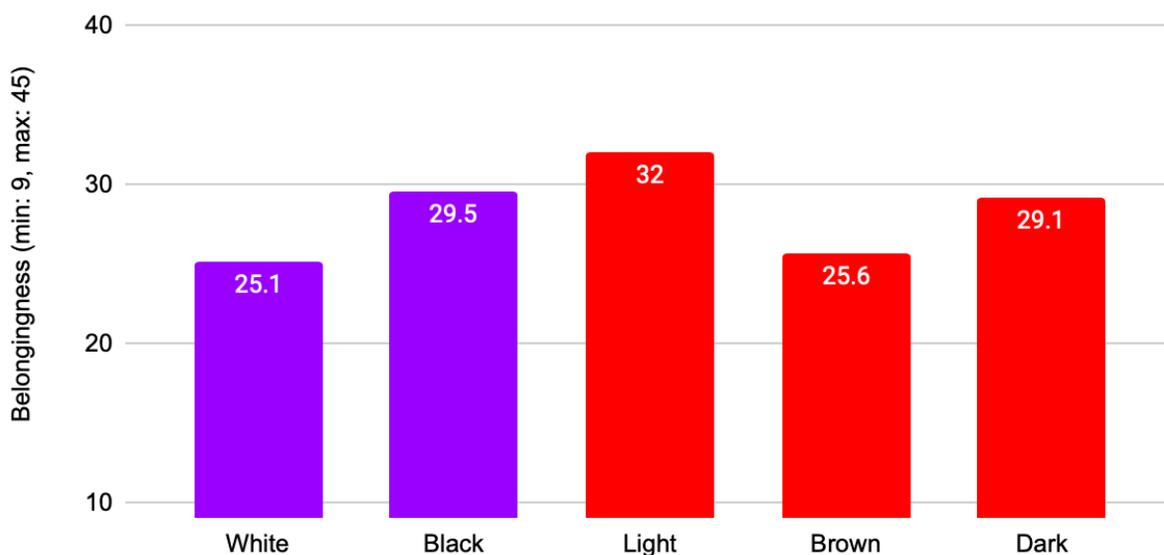
Next, we hypothesized that black students would feel like they wouldn't belong at a PWI compared to white students. We looked at the 61 students who attend a PWI, 29 were black and 32 were white. An independent t-test found a significant difference in belongingness by race ( $t(59)=1.99$ ,  $p=0.02$ ). Black students ( $M=29.0$ ) felt more belongingness at their PWI compared to white students ( $M=25.1$ ). This finding is in the opposite direction in which we hypothesized.

The third hypothesis was that TNA students would feel like they belong more to a PWI than black students who attended other high schools. As a high school, TNA focuses on the idea of black excellence which is why it might have behaved like an HBCU to help students overcome their challenges. We compared 10 TNA students in our sample to the 20 students who

didn't go to TNA nor an HBCU and an independent t-test found no difference in belongingness ( $t(28) = -1.01, p = 0.16$ ). TNA students ( $M = 27, SD = 6$ ) were more like one another compared to the other black students ( $M = 29.8, SD = 7.5$ ) due to the lower standard deviation, but TNA did not seem to produce any real positive effect on future belongingness.

Our last hypothesis is that there are different amounts of belongingness among skintones. We compared the belongingness score between the light, brown, and dark skin respondents. A one way ANOVA for independent samples did not find a significant difference through belongingness ( $F(2, 30) = 2.53, p = 0.10$ ). Light skin toned people ( $M = 32.0, SD = 6.6$ ) had the highest rate of belongingness, compared to dark skin people ( $M = 29.1, SD = 9.0$ ) and lastly followed by brown skin people ( $25.6, SD = 6.2$ ).

### Belongingness by Race and Skin Tone



**Figure 1. College Belongingness by Race and Skin Tone.** *This graph shows the belongingness rates for different groups. In purple are the scores for white and black participants and in red are the three different self-reported skin tones of the black participants. Black respondents had higher scores than white ( $p < 0.05$ ), and among skin tones, light toned people reported the highest, but the difference was not significant.*

## Discussion

For the first hypothesis, we stated that both light and dark skin students would report a low level of belongingness at a PWI, versus students at an HBCU. This hypothesis was unsupported and there was no difference spotted. My second hypothesis was that white participants will feel like they belong more at a PWI compared to black participants. This hypothesis was unsupported and black people in fact felt like they belonged more (Figure 1). My third hypothesis was that TNA students would be more prepared at a PWI, because TNA is like an HBCU. My hypothesis was unsupported and no difference was spotted between TNA students who went to a PWI vs. HBCU. The last hypothesis was that different skin toned participants would have different rates of belongingness. My hypothesis was partially supported, light skinned people had the highest rate of belongingness among black participants (Figure 1), but the difference was not significant..

Our results for the first hypothesis and the third hypothesis are inconsistent with previous research on HBCUs. HBCUs have been found to provide tools needed to help black students, specifically men, to succeed (7). Our results were different and we saw there was no clear difference between a PWI and HBCU in terms of belongingness. Also TNA students did not have an extra edge for belonging in a PWI. This lack of difference might be because we only had a small number (4 out of 65) of students from an HBCU, and only 10 students from TNA. If we had more data, it may have been different.

The survey was taken by TNA students, or people they knew. Many students who graduate from TNA attend PWIs mostly because they provide more funding, causing them to want to go. If HBCUs gave out more funding, maybe a larger amount of students would have attended, which would have given us more data. The lack of differences we found should not change the way HBCUs are viewed by black high school students, as most research says they do provide tools and schools needed to help black students succeed.

Our results for the second hypothesis are also inconsistent with other research on PWIs. Many black students struggle at PWIs, because they have a low private regard of their racial identity, and often do not stay at the university because of a lack of belongingness (8). Many dark skin students have also experienced a type of discrimination called hypervisibility. This is where they feel very visible, but yet still invisible or overlooked (4). Our results showed the complete opposite. We found that black students felt they belonged more (29.5 vs. 25.1, Figure

1) and surprisingly, we found that darkskin students had higher belongingness than white college students (29.1 vs. 25.1, Figure 1). The reasoning for the difference in studies may be because of COVID. A lot of students have not been on campus, and in virtual classrooms and the effect of that is that they feel less hypervisible, making them feel like they belong more. We still do not know for sure because we didn't ask students if they were on campus or not, making a conclusion hard. Family, friends and mentors are a “key to success” for black students (7) so being virtual may mean students have these things accessible to them at home and they feel more prepared.

Our results for the fourth hypothesis were inconsistent when it came to light skinned and biracial students. Other research found that light skin toned students often felt stuck between white and black groups, and they felt pressure to look or act a certain way to match an identity (3). Our results were the opposite of that; light students had the highest belongingness about anyone, black, brown, dark or white. This does not conclude that my data is completely incorrect but there was a reason why it might be different. According to previous research, light students felt colorism with friends and social places (3), but with COVID restrictions, this is less, so they might avoid the need to navigate their identity and instead get the benefits of lighter skin, such as the ability to switch identities as they want. Another reason why it could be different is because light students might feel as if they belong more, they could be not as “hypervisible” as dark students in class.

Many factors have impacted our research, and gave different results from studies in the past. First, COVID came very unexpectedly and the effect of this was that students were not able to be on campus, so belongingness may not really be playing as large a role as it should. Next, we used students from TNA and those students used word of mouth to spread the word as well. This means that the sample was not random, which largely impacted the results making them less generalizable. Many students and alumni chose PWIs because they are known for giving more money. It was harder to get results from students from an HBCU because tuition is larger and they are less likely to give black students a scholarship because they are already so diverse. This impacted our ability to recruit HBCU participants for the first hypothesis the most.

In the future, this study should be repeated with 100% on campus students. Maybe even researchers could go to colleges and to the participants in person. Another thing that would be interesting would be to expand and look into specific racial encounters and look at different contexts like classroom or social experiences to see how belongingness might change.

In conclusion, we recommend that black students research their school carefully. They should look deeper into the idea of going to a PWI, or even an HBCU because belongingness is important and they shouldn't spend money and stay on the campus of a place where they don't feel like they belong. I also think that teachers and counselors should be open to pushing back on student college choices, they should force students to know the importance of belongingness and race at the university they might attend.

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