

The Perception of Progress: Conceptualizing Institutional Response to Student Protests and Activism

By Katherine S. Cho

On November 9, 2015, the University of Missouri's president and chancellor announced their resignations in the midst of growing media coverage of student activism calling attention to issues of campus racism and diversity.¹ While UM's student protests gained national headlines, student resistance across the nation has surged since 2014, as students protest, demonstrate, and sit-in and die-in against racism on their campuses, and around the broader and parallel issues of students feeling unacknowledged, silenced, and oppressed by their colleges and universities. These protests are not merely symbolic demonstrations of collective unhappiness, but are larger critiques about national issues, such as racism, by students demanding institutional action and accountability.

Student and university clashes are not new. In the 1960s, American college students held acts of resistance as part of the Civil Rights Movement; in the 1980s to call on universities to divest from corporations

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supporting apartheid; and in the 2010s in solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement.² The most recent wave around campus racism has led some institutions to release statements, or hire chief diversity officers, while others remain ambivalent to student concerns. Yet, the similarity of student demands from decade to decade suggests something is not working. For example, the University of Missouri's student protesters, known as Concerned Student 1950, have pointed to unmet issues

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from a set of 1969 student demands.³ The continued iteration of student demands and cyclical concerns demonstrates the need to not only reconsider how we frame the issue, but how we *conceptualize* it. Instead of examining the impact of student resistance and activism on institutional accountability, what of the reverse direction—how institutional responses and (lack of) accountability sustain the very campus racial climates that concern

and suffocate students. This change in perspective leads to the conceptualization of what I call the *Institutional Response Framework* as a way to analyze the relationship between higher education institutions and the student activists who push for institutional improvement with regard to campus racial climate.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL ROOTS

The current realities for Students of Color include discrimination, bias, and silencing that, together with various sociohistorical structures, interpersonal dynamics, political contexts, and institutional history, comprise campus racial climate.⁴ Poor campus racial climate encapsulates overt, covert, and colorblind racism that marginalize Students of Color.⁵ These displays of racism are not merely limited to the actions of campus members, but also include symbols of slavery and colonialism including campus statues and buildings' namesakes.

The majority of research on student protests focuses on students: their context for change, their actions/strategies taken, and the immediate consequences.⁶ While these studies provide a foundational context regarding student resistance, this student-centered approach places the onus of positive change on students, and the implications of such research focus (only) on what students have, could, and should do to hold institutions accountable.

Outside this scope, some studies consider faculty and staff motivations and/or their roles to support students,⁷ and others suggest how institutions could support student resistance through the practice of *partnership*.⁸ But many institutional responses do not provide partnership to students. Indeed, the continued presence of student protests suggests that their responses do not mitigate, alleviate, or improve campus racial climate.

Moreover, studies that incorporate organizational theory to examine institutional change tend to lean on theories of neo-institutionalism, which focus more on external factors than the localized power dynamics between individual groups of actors.⁹ As such, campus decisions are tied to what the field is doing at large and *not* on the on-the-ground dynamics—specifically, the localized racism and tensions that drive the initial acts of resistance. In response, this paper is part of the next generation of scholarship needed to merge student resistance, institutional accountability, and organizational theory in ways that honor the realities, tensions, and struggles of students.

The Institutional Response Framework is rooted in several key theories. While institutional theory helps explain the decision-making of colleges and universities, the dynamics within campus racial climate protests necessitates Critical Race Theory. Moreover, racial formation theories also help inform how colleges and universities address their racialized histories and current contexts.

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POWER AND DECISION-MAKING

Within institutional theory, the concepts of dominant coalitions and resource dependence theory examine the localized power dynamics and external forces that impact institutional responses to students. University action depends on dominant coalitions, or the groups of stakeholders who vie to make decisions such as administrators, faculty, governing boards, alumni, and to some extent, students.¹⁰ Decision-making also depends on

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revenue streams—for example, monies from federal and state governments, foundations, campus athletics, alumni, and students and parents.¹¹ However, because colleges and universities confer their degrees, students cannot simply withhold their tuition to force institutional change; students are both actors and recipients within higher education. To circumvent this power imbalance, student activists seize upon an alternative

revenue stream: an institution's reputation.

Universities, and other organizations, need positive reputations and approval by their audience to survive, because reputation relates to other revenues, such as donor and alumni gifts.¹² By harnessing social media and tying local campus incidences with movements like #BlackLivesMatter, students magnify the reputational threat to institutions.¹³ As such, universities opt for changes, not because of campus climate concerns, but as a defense against negative attention resulting from student resistance.

RACE AT THE CENTER

The centrality of race and racism seems obvious within the context of campus *racial* protests, yet this centrality ties to a deeper indictment of how traditional research ignores or “explains away” racism through power dynamics and organizational theory. Originally housed within Critical Race Legal Studies, Critical Race Theory poses the following five tenets:

1. the centrality of race and racism, and their intersection with other forms of subordination;
2. the challenging of dominant ideologies supported by traditional research and assumptions of objectivity;
3. the legitimization of experiential knowledge by marginalized communities;
4. the transformative relationship linking theory with social justice action; and
5. the interdisciplinary nature that challenges ahistoricism and acontextualism.¹⁴

This fifth tenet, in other words, necessitates examining the historical, political, socioeconomical, and contextual surroundings.

Higher education cannot be separated from its history: the slaves who built campuses, the indigenous people murdered for campus land, and the veterans of color who were tracked into vocational programs and/or less selective colleges through discriminatory policies like the federal G.I. Bill.¹⁵ To decontextualize and ahistoricize this background only adds to the unmet needs and struggles of Students of Color. Even further, interest-convergence theory, rooted in Critical Race Theory, explains how dominant institutions adopt racially just policies when it benefits their agenda.¹⁶ For example, the University of Missouri acted on racial climate concerns *after* athletes on the revenue-generating football team decided, in solidarity with Concerned Student 1950, to boycott future games.¹⁷

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Racial formation is the sociohistorical process by which groups are *othered* and subsequently excluded, exploited, and even exterminated due to their race.¹⁸ Similarly, higher education institutions alienate student protesters and activists by minimizing their concerns, which insinuates a deeper level of colorblind racism. Colorblindness, as the aversion, rejection, and invalidation of racism, avoids racialized terminology with an (intentional) ignorance of examining the mechanisms and systems that produce racial inequality. The lack of explicitly, or even minimally, addressing racism and white supremacy embedded within colleges and universities suggests colorblindness on an institutional level.

CONCEPTUALIZING INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

The Institutional Response Framework theorizes different ways colleges and universities respond to student demands, based on several dimensions. The first dimension is the extent to which colleges and universities meet the demands of students, ranging between buffering and bridging. Institutions *buffer* or mitigate external forces from interrupting

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their internal machinations to preserve the status quo. Contrastingly, institutions *bridge* to external demands by adopting, incorporating, and transforming their internal workings.²⁰ The second dimension is the extent to which higher education institutions share power with students, manifesting metaphorically into both having a seat at the table *and* being able to make decisions. These two dimensions create a two-by-two matrix for four types

of responses: (1) schisming, (2) appeasement, (3) co-option, and (4) partnership.

Schisming—When faced with student demands/concerns, institutions can schism, separate, and disengage from the conversation through apathy, minimization, or criminalization. Through apathy, institutions neither formally acknowledge student concerns nor invest any financial or personnel resources to address them. In this manner, institutions buffer student concerns while retaining control of the conversation. Similarly, institutions minimize issues of campus racism to be *singular* incidents or *out of the ordinary* and evade their culpability in creating poor campus racial climates. More recently, higher education institutions, like the University of Wisconsin System, have sought to silence students by criminalizing student activism, and making it possible to expel students who protest and “disrupt” campus activities.²¹ With these measures, institutions not only remove themselves from current student resistance, but stifle future speech as well.

Appeasement—Institutions can *appear* to provide control to students but ultimately buffer against their demands. For example, the adoption of *non-performative* diversity language provides institutions with the appearance of effort, yet does not reflect the diversity-related practices needed to improve the lives of Students of Color.²² Similarly, institutions suggest students are part of the university conversation by inviting them to committee meetings or task forces, even as they rely on bureaucratic red tape to delay action or create strategic (symbolic) plans without effects. For example, a typical tactic to appease student demands for more faculty of color is to make those hires in non-tenure track positions that do not sustainably address student concerns.²³

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Co-option—Co-option is the intentional merger or erasure of a subordinate group within the dominant group to preserve the existing organizational structure and power.²⁴ In a campus setting, co-option often looks like the convenient rebranding of institutional decisions that minimize underlying racial issues. For instance, within prison divestment protests, students have centered systemic racism as a pivotal issue, and yet resolutions like Columbia University's ASCRI [Advisory Committee on Socially Responsible Investing] statement have omitted mention of student groups or concerns.²⁵ Instead, they rationalize prisons as bad economic investments because of community sentiments and financial concerns.²⁶ At face value, these decisions continue to decenter racism and co-opt the narrative of decision-making, even as they bridge to student demands. Co-option is skewed collaboration. Even as colleges and universities use students' knowledge and action, they refuse to allow students to have power, a seat at the table, or authorship come time for implementation and recognition.

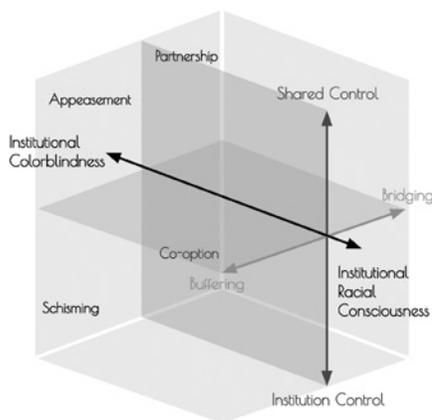
Partnership—Partnership presents a key difference from co-option. In partnership, students have sovereignty and control to address their concerns and/or proposed demands. As students have more organizational power as decision-makers, and as they enter into shared leadership with

administrators, their relationship with the institution becomes more equitable. The idea of shared leadership includes not co-opting progress already made, building trust, and acknowledging past efforts.²⁷ However, partnership may remain idealistic due to the embedded power imbalance between institutions and students. Moreover, partnership must account for the transient nature of students. To that degree, even the consideration of students as an *external force* to the university requires a transformation in how higher education institutions perceive students.

THE DIMENSIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Institutional responses are dynamic in nature and may range across the four quadrants, even at the same institution, depending on evolutions in administration, budgetary concerns, as well as student resistance. However, these four quadrants—schisming, appeasement, co-option, and partnership—can never be decontextualized outside of racism. As colleges and universities continue to marginalize Students of Color, the degree to which institutions reify institutional racism transforms this 2D model into 3D. This third dimension ranges between *institutional colorblindness* and *institutional racial consciousness* as seen in Figure 1:

FIGURE 1: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE FRAMEWORK



When colleges and universities affirm themselves as incapable of maintaining racism, they are engaging in institutional colorblindness, which consequently invalidates the racialized experiences of students. Manifestations include the language of meritocracy, for example, how “certain” students’ test scores are “not rigorous enough,” and thereby decontextualizing merit from the racialized sociohistorical contexts that have privileged white students for generations; in doing so, colleges and universities seek to affirm that they are *objective* and *neutral*.²⁸ This colorblind attitude not only (white)washes higher education’s ugly history of excluding communities of color, but also reinforces the fallacy that institutions cannot be racist or promote racist climates. Moments of campus racism are painted as just that—*moments*, rather than revealed to be part of a larger narrative around unhealthy campus racial climates.

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Conversely, institutional race consciousness explicitly recognizes racial differences and inequalities.²⁹ On campuses, this looks like not only the recognition of racialized experiences of student protesters, but also the critical examination and implementation of responses that address poor racial climate. While racial realism (i.e., the permanence of racism) suggests white supremacy will linger on our campuses, institutional racial consciousness serve as a necessary and reflexive guide for colleges and universities to fight against racism and other oppressive systems.³⁰

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

The construction of Ethnic Studies departments on college campuses exemplifies various components of the Institutional Response Framework. Specifically, how institutions responded to the Black Studies movement in the 1960s demonstrates a change from still typical institutional responses of *schisming*.³¹ At that time, anti-racism activism, including hunger strikes, from the Soul Brothers Association, led by Bobby Seale

and Huey Newton, established the African American Studies department at San Francisco State College, the first ever.³² And yet, more than 50 years later, the threat of co-option and divestment remains for many ethnic-specific departments and centers today.

Similarly, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) moved from an institutional reponse of disengagement via the formalization of its Chicana/o Studies department in 1993. However, the program has

struggled with poor funding and a lack of full-time faculty and faculty lines dedicated to its growth, which reveal an institutional strategy of appeasement. In pursuing appeasement, institutions first set up groups to fail and then either justify a disengaged response, such as the 1990s recommendation to suspend the Chicana/o Studies major at UCLA, or set the stage for co-option through retrenchment.³³

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Both the 1968 creation of the first African American Studies department, at San Francisco State College, and the 1993 establishment of the Chicana/o department at UCLA were results of student resistance that forced institutional movement across the framework's quadrants.³⁴ Eventually both institutions hired tenure-lined faculty for the respective departments, demonstrating financial commitment and a sense of permanent investment, which axially moves towards institutional bridging. But ongoing issues of divestment, struggles for control, and even the historical erasure of student contribution threaten this progress.

RECONCEPTUALIZING INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The central thesis behind campus racial protests for many students, particularly Students of Color, comes from their critique of current campus racial climates and their threatened sense of belonging, which ultimately impacts retention, graduation rates, and quality of diverse learning environments.³⁵ These concerns are especially critical given the changing

demographics of college students and, specifically, the growing number of students from nonwhite racial/ethnic backgrounds.³⁶

The Institutional Response Framework aims to challenge the discourse around institutional accountability and student resistance. The conceptualization of how colleges and universities respond to student protests shifts the onus and focus *away* from students and *onto* institutions and their (in)actions. Moreover, the Institutional Response Framework provides language and *power* for student activists to understand and contest the institutional responses with which they may not agree, and for institutional agents to be reflexive in the ways they (do not) assist and support students. Further, the Institutional Response Framework serves as a conceptual critique for colleges and universities so that institutional responses can no longer be single, siloed

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reactions. Instead, these responses are part of an ongoing narrative of how institutions continue to threaten the livelihood of Students of Color. The conceptualization from the Institutional Response Framework pushes and expands on organizational theory and higher education research to name race and racism explicitly, and to do it in ways that honor the localized concerns of our marginalized young people. Organizational theory *requires* a racialized lens. As a field informing a significant body of research aiming to explain the tensions at and across colleges and universities, higher education organizational theory cannot disregard the socio-historical context and continued permeation of racism. To do otherwise is a disservice to students, higher education progress, and the field at large.

Ultimately, the most significant implication of this framework is the changing of campus racial climates. Students change institutions through their resistance and activism. They mobilize, strategize, build networks, create demands, and continue these actions while still being students with classes, assignments, and more. But students are only part of the equation.

Institutions, as the other half, must answer their concerns and the limited scholarship about institutions confounds their culpability and responsibility. The Institutional Response Framework complicates the questions around accountability and its relationship with student action, protests, and activism regarding campus racial climate. College campuses now, more than ever, are the current battleground for racism and race-based ideas, including the overt presence of white supremacy.³⁷ And without a change, without a different interrogation on institutions and the responses they take, all we can expect, five, ten, twenty years from now, is what we have already seen. **nea**

ENDNOTES

1. Hoffman and Mitchell, "Making Diversity," p. 277.
2. Rhoads, "Student Activism."
3. Concerned Student 1950 was named for the year that the first Black students were admitted to the university.
4. Hurtado, et al., "Enhancing Campus Climates for Racial/Ethnic Diversity: Educational Policy and Practice," p. 282; Museus, et al., "Racism and Racial Equity," pp. 60-71.
5. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, p. 26. I capitalize Students of Color in recognition of the unique, collective entity of minoritized students.
6. Rhoads, "Student Activism"; Rojas, "Social Movement Tactics."
7. Chen and Rhoads, "Undocumented Student Allies"; Kezar, "Shared Leadership"; Rojas, "Social Movement Tactics."
8. Kezar, "Faculty and Staff Partnering," p. 475.
9. Rojas, "Social Movement Tactics"; Schneiberg and Lounsbury, "Social Movements"; Stulberg and Chen, "Race-conscious Affirmative Action"; Scott and Davis, *Organizations and Organizing*.
10. Scott and Davis, *op cit.*, see chapter 8.
11. Pfeffer and Salancik, *External Control of Organizations*, see chapter 10. Johnstone, "Financing American Higher Education," pp. 321-22.
12. McDonnell and King, "Keeping up Appearances," p. 12.8.
13. Garza, "#BlackLivesMatter Movement."
14. Solorzano and Delgado Bernal, "Transformational Resistance," pp. 312-15.
15. Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*, p. 134; Museus, et al., *op cit.*, pp. 42, 51.
16. Bell, "Interest Convergence Dilemma," p. 518.
17. Jaschik, "What the Protests Mean."
18. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, p. 105.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 132.
20. Honig and Hatch, "Crafting Coherence," p. 25.
21. Davis, "A Dangerous Precedent."
22. Ahmed, *On Being Included*, p. 117; Hoffman and Mitchell, "Making Diversity," p. 280.

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23. Nagel, "Pitfalls of Diversity Management," p. 62.
24. Manning, *Organizational Theory in Higher Education*.
25. Wong and Green, "Campus Politics."
26. At most, the statement includes a section called "Additional Views of Some Committee Members" with one mention of, "racial disparities" as a consequence of prisons; "ACSRI Resolution," p. 2.
27. Kezar, "Shared Leadership," see chapter 8.
28. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, p. 7.
29. Haney Lopez, *White by Law*, p. 14.
30. For issues like gender equity, the third dimension of institutional racism would be *intersectional*, not *replaced* by feminist theory and the like. The erasure of race, even within social movements demonstrates how "justice" can still marginalize communities of color; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," p. 1244.
31. Rojas, "Social Movement Tactics," p. 2151.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Aguilar-Hernández, "¡Sí Se Pudo!," p. 122. Retrenchment policies, used by institutions, target "failing" departments to downsize, create structural changes, or surrender their control—all under the possible threat of departmental closure; Gates, "Isomorphism," p. 271.
34. Aguilar-Hernández, *op cit.*
35. Hurtado, et al., *op cit.*
36. For the next generation of potential college-going students (ages 5 to 17), between 2000 to 2016, Latinx students have increased 16 to 25 percents, Asians from three to five percent, and Multi-racial students, from two to four percent. Musu-Gillette et al., "Status and Trends," p. iii.
37. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Ten Days After: Harrassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election," pp. 4-13.

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