# Black Student Wellness Assessment

## Summary & Recommendations

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## INTRODUCTION

Institutional wellness is a core element of student wellness. Even before the double pandemics of COVID-19 and current national civil unrest, Black communities have contended with institutional stressors such as racism, mistrust, opportunity gaps, and underrepresentation. Consequently, the data concerning the well-being of Black communities is also strikingly clear-- unhealthy school and work environments wreak havoc on Black mental health and can derail even the most promising career trajectories, making institutional wellness a social justice issue. And while the overarching goal is to eliminate anti-Black policies, practices, and culture that maintain these disparities, we must also acknowledge that this work is long-term and that the change process is incremental. **Thus, the focus of this current assessment is to gain insight into the ways in which the well-being of Black students at Cal Poly Pomona can be cared for in the midst of overwhelming trauma and distress as your institution strives toward that incremental change.**

## METHOD

To provide targeted recommendations and interventions, we invited students at Cal Poly Pomona who identify as being of African descent to a 90-minute community forum, held on May 10, 2022. Thirty students were present, with a majority gathered at a physical location on campus to participate, while others, including the facilitators, joined and contributed virtually. There were two psychologist facilitators who both identify as African American, and a third psychologist consultant who identifies as Mexican American, and whose primary role was oversight of the polling software as well as assistance with note taking. Upon providing a brief introduction, the third psychologist muted both video and audio for the remainder of the assessment.

Our goal was to build rapport and establish trust with the community while gleaning insights into their personal and academic well-being. The session began on time and there were no technical issues. We are confident that a healthy rapport was established with the students which increases our confidence in our findings. Below you will find a summary of our conclusions which includes both quantitative and qualitative insights that informed our recommendations which are noted at the end of the report. Limitations of the assessment are also discussed.

## OVERVIEW & COMMUNITY WELLNESS RATING

We began the community forum by providing education on how each of us can think about our own sense of well-being. We explained that resilience is our ability to withstand, endure, persevere through, and recover from difficult situations. In psychology, we call this *psychological fortitude* (or PF for short).  People of African descent in the US need a particularly high level of PF in this era of discrimination, invisibility, psychological warfare, and violence against Black bodies.

We asked participants to think about their overall well-being as a Black person in terms of a PF level on a scale from 1 to 10 (how protected do they feel at this moment from stressors). A rating of **10** means they feel phenomenal and that their wellbeing is not a hindrance to their pursuit of their personal or academic goals. A rating of 10 would indicate that a person has all the energy, motivation, drive, and wherewithal needed to accomplish their goals in school and life. A rating of **1** would be the lowest possible level of PF. It would indicate the students' circumstances are bleak and that they have little will to live. A person with a rating of 1 is likely completely incapable of academic rigor or carrying out necessary daily tasks. Ratings at 6 or below are considered significant and indicate intervention is necessary. A student with a rating of 6 or below, over an extended period of time, is most likely not performing optimally and is at high risk of suffering negative health outcomes as well as having their academic career impacted negatively.

**Sixty-six percent (66%) of your students rated their PF at a 6 or below when asked to self-assess their wellbeing in the current moment.** Additionally, when asked to rate their average PF since the start of the year, students indicated similar levels with 53% rating it at a 6 or below. Notably, 29% of your students rated their PF since the start of the year as a 4 or below.

### Where would you rate your PF today?
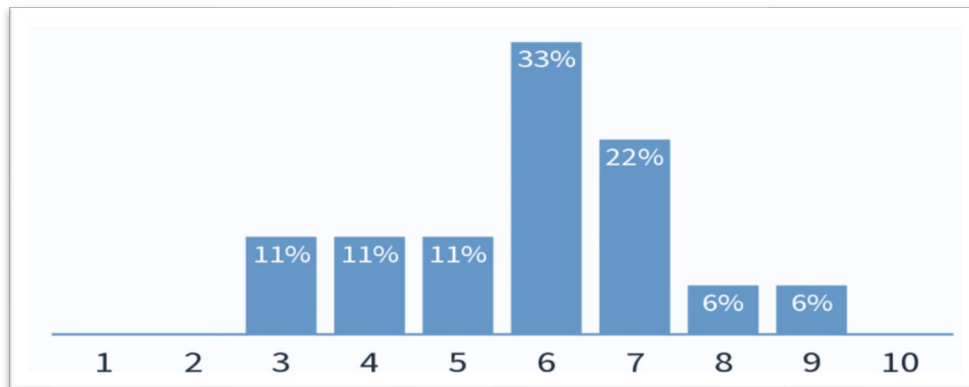


### Where would you rate your PF on average since the start of the year?
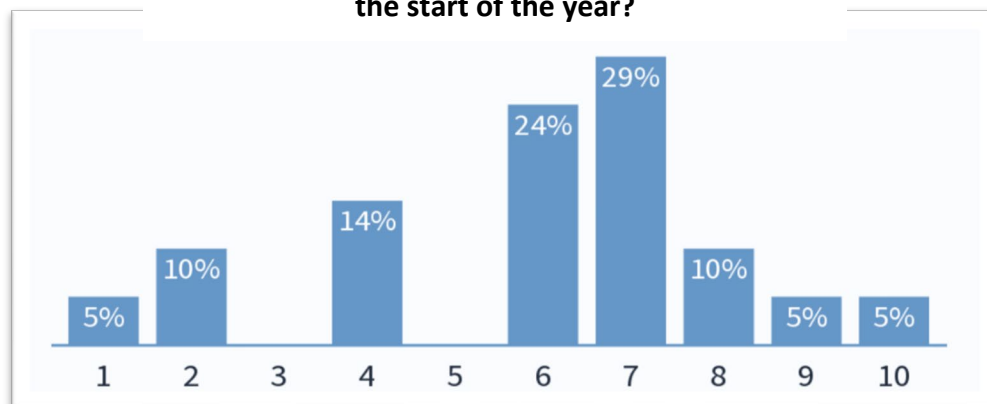
To help us better understand these ratings, we assessed 11 domains which have been identified in academic literature as factors that contribute to the overall wellbeing and career satisfaction of Black/African American people. **Out of the 11 domains, 8 areas emerged as areas in need of intervention for the Black student community at Cal Poly Pomona.**

| Wellbeing Domains | Intervention |
|---|---|
| 1. Critical Consciousness | X |
| 2. Radical Hope | X |
| 3. Strength and Resistance | X |
| 4. Microaggressions | X |
| 5. Cultural Representation | X |
| 6. Career Advancement and Upward Mobility | X |
| 7. Authenticity | X |
| 8. Community & Collective Care | X |
| 9. Cultural Authenticity and Self Knowledge | |
| 10. Visibility | |
| 11. Physical wellness | |

In the sections below you will find a definition for each of these domains as well an analysis of how this applied to your students. At the end of the report, we have provided a list of interventions that can aid in improving upon each area, which will ultimately improve wellbeing among your entire student community.

## AREAS OF STRENGTH

While the purpose of this assessment was to identify areas in need of intervention, we would be remiss not to also share strengths we identified in the process. We'd like to highlight 3 areas:

- **Student engagement**. While not an official domain we assessed in this report, the level of active engagement from the student body emerged as a noticeable strength. Undergraduate and graduate students, representing many campus organizations and departments, participated in this assessment with what seemed like minimal probing. Worth emphasizing are the graduating students that lent their voice knowing they likely wouldn't benefit from the outcome of this assessment. This demonstrates a high level of connection to the institution and a vested interest in the progress they believe is possible.

- **Cultural Authenticity and Self Knowledge.** Cultural Authenticity and Self Knowledge is a measure of each person's ability to draw upon ancestral practices to navigate the pain associated with racial trauma. We assessed for general knowledge of such practices and level of engagement with these practices during hard times. Higher levels of awareness and usage is predictive of greater resilience.

  *Assessment: The majority of participants indicated that they connected to Black ancestral practices throughout the pandemic. Students reported engaging in activities such as decolonizing spiritual practices, reading The 1619 Project, learning about family lineage, and joining niche organizations in the community. These initiatives, taken on by students during the pandemic, are a great testament to their high level self-awareness and desire to find and create ways to deepen and nourish their identity. Some expressed the power of belonging to Black-centered social organizations and book clubs as a way to facilitate connection. There was mild interest in learning more about cultural history and specific cultural practices.*
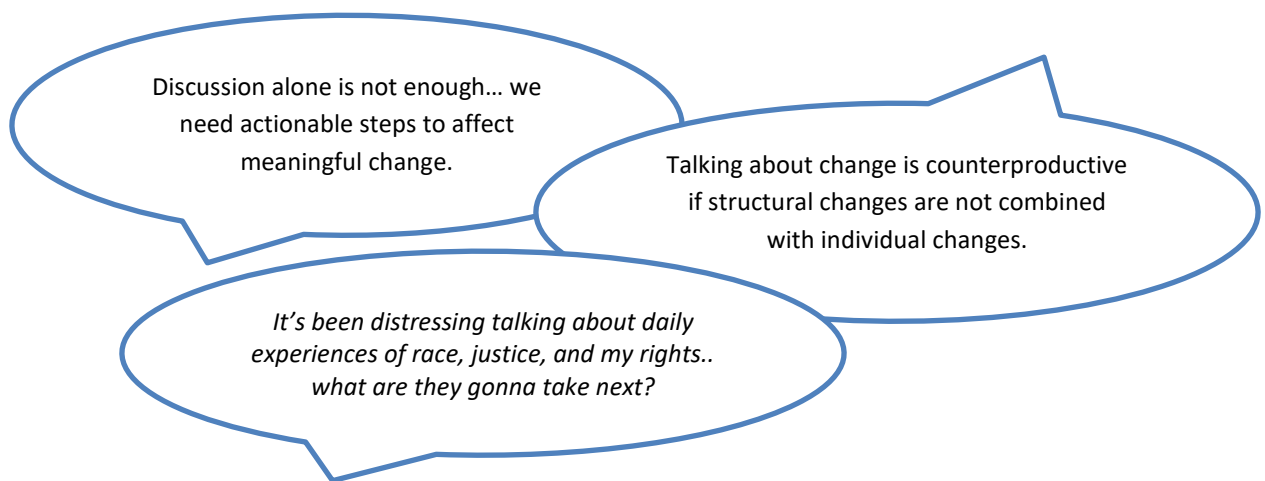
- **Physical Wellness.** Physical Wellness is a measure of each person's interest in interventions that address physical health, which has been found to improve overall performance and productivity. We assessed for interest in culturally centered forms of wellness, including healthy cooking, mindfulness and meditation practices, exercise, and spirituality practices.

  *Assessment: There was general interest in interventions that addressed physical health, with a particular focus on healthy cooking utilizing culturally relevant foods and recipes, and cultivating mindfulness and meditation practices. Though students expressed interest in gaining additional skills, many appeared to be well-resourced and had access to information to build upon their current wellness practices.*

<u>AREAS IN NEED OF INTERVENTION</u>

1. **Critical consciousness.** Critical consciousness is a person's capacity to critically reflect, deeply question, discern, and act upon their socio-political environment. It is the process of discovering how and why power dynamics are structured and maintained. It has been noted in the literature as a prerequisite to healing from racial trauma. It is imperative to healing that Black people have safe spaces to process and have these conversations.
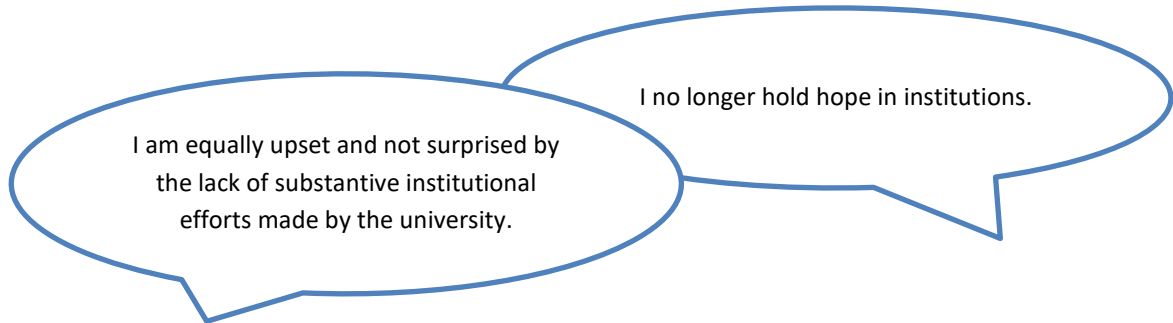
   *Assessment: Student participants expressed ambivalent feelings around the usefulness of critical dialogue. While at least one student noted finding value in being a part of a book club to facilitate conversation regarding issues facing the Black community, the majority of the student sentiment highlighted reservations around the helpfulness of such discussions. They noted that past conversations often heightened feelings of distress and overwhelm, which, coupled with doubt about whether actual change would occur, contributed to a sense of hopelessness or resignation that emerged. It became evident that past attempts by the university to assess student concerns have not led to the intended outcome. The major points of contention were the lack of safe and responsive spaces to have honest dialogue about their frustrations, coupled with insufficient follow-up. Students are feeling the effects of systemic injustices but appear to lack structured and guided spaces to safely discuss and process resultant emotions.*

   Discussion alone is not enough... we need actionable steps to affect meaningful change.

   Talking about change is counterproductive if structural changes are not combined with individual changes.

   *It's been distressing talking about daily experiences of race, justice, and my rights.. what are they gonna take next?*

2. **Radical Hope.** Radical hope is defined as a person's belief that desperate conditions can change for the good even when there is little evidence. It is a belief that one can fight for justice and that the fight will not be futile. For Black Americans, this type of hope is directly tied to motivation and achievement.

   *Assessment: During a discussion about the conflict between fearing disappointment and holding on to hope for systemic change, **students consistently reported that their ability to remain hopeful is constantly challenged by their experiences with the***

*administration.* *Students indicated frustration with the lack of consistency and follow-through of institutional efforts and noted that they have had to learn to temper their expectations to combat disappointment and hopelessness. The students lamented that it has been difficult to hold onto hope as they have not seen substantive change within the campus culture and indicated that though there is understanding that change can be a slow process, they have yet to experience any meaningful action that prioritizes their wellbeing and concerns. A bright note was that some participants expressed hope in Black leaders and organizations specifically, even with skepticism and cynicism for the larger institution.*

> I no longer hold hope in institutions.

> I am equally upset and not surprised by the lack of substantive institutional efforts made by the university.

3. **Strength and Resistance.** Strength and Resistance refers to a person's commitment to living a joy-filled life in community with others despite a critical awareness of racial trauma and oppression. This is a measure of how able people are to intentionally pursue moments of joy in their lives regardless of circumstance. An inability to do this can be a risk factor for depression and lead to a decline in mental health.

*Assessment: Many participants discussed that they find joy, connection, and community through outlets such as social media, family relationships, friendships, pursuing creative endeavors and reconnecting with themselves. Students excitedly reflected on the fact that a positive of the pandemic has been an ability to explore and connect to more niche activities and special interests that created opportunities for joy, even in the midst of continued oppression. Interestingly, it was evident that students have predominantly pursued moments for joy outside of the university setting, which may reflect the reality that such opportunities do not readily exist within the campus community.*

> I have increased in my creative endeavors, such as sewing and art... and connecting more with myself.

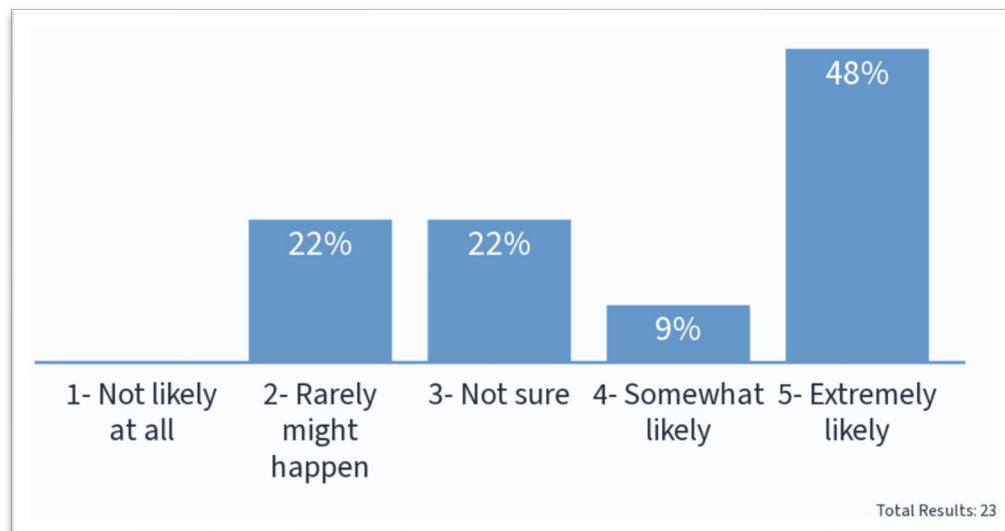> We have community, but not community within the Cal Poly environment.

4. **Microaggressions.** The term microaggression describes seemingly small gestures, comments, or actions that negatively targets a marginalized group of people. They can be intentional or unintentional but, in all forms, are considered discrimination. Widely supported by the literature, the psychological impact from these experiences is believed to compound over time and cause undue distress that is particularly harmful in the academic setting. People who experience more racial microaggressions report higher levels of depression, trauma, and overall life dissatisfaction. While we did not inform participants what we were assessing, we read a series of scenarios that portrayed different types of incidents that would be considered microaggressions and asked them to rate either how likely these were to happen at Cal Poly Pomona or whether something similar had happened to them at the university already. The following themes emerged as concerning:

   a. **Microassaults.** Microassaults are a specific type of microaggression (the most overt type) that reflect conscious attitudes of the perpetrator where biased feelings, beliefs or behaviors are knowingly communicated through external cues, comments, or behaviors. An example in the academic setting would be someone using a derogatory term when referencing the death of George Floyd while commenting they just don't understand what all the fuss and protests are about.

   *Assessment: **57% of students reported microassaults were somewhat or extremely likely to occur on the campus.*** *Of note, 44% of participants reported being unsure if microassaults would occur on campus or believed they would rarely occur. No students (0%) endorsed a belief that these types of incidents were not likely at all to occur.*

**How likely is this to happen at Cal Poly Pomona?**



| | 1- Not likely at all | 2- Rarely might happen | 3- Not sure | 4- Somewhat likely | 5- Extremely likely |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 22% | 22% | 9% | 48% |

Total Results: 23

b.  **Microinvalidations.** Microinvalidations are a type of microaggression that seeks to exclude or invalidate a person's thoughts, feelings, or existence. An example of a microinvalidation would be dismissing a Black peer as less intelligent or not qualified for their role.

*Assessment:* ***Of significant note, an astounding 95% of students reported these experiences are either somewhat or extremely likely to occur on campus.***

**How likely are you to experience this at Cal Poly Pomona?**
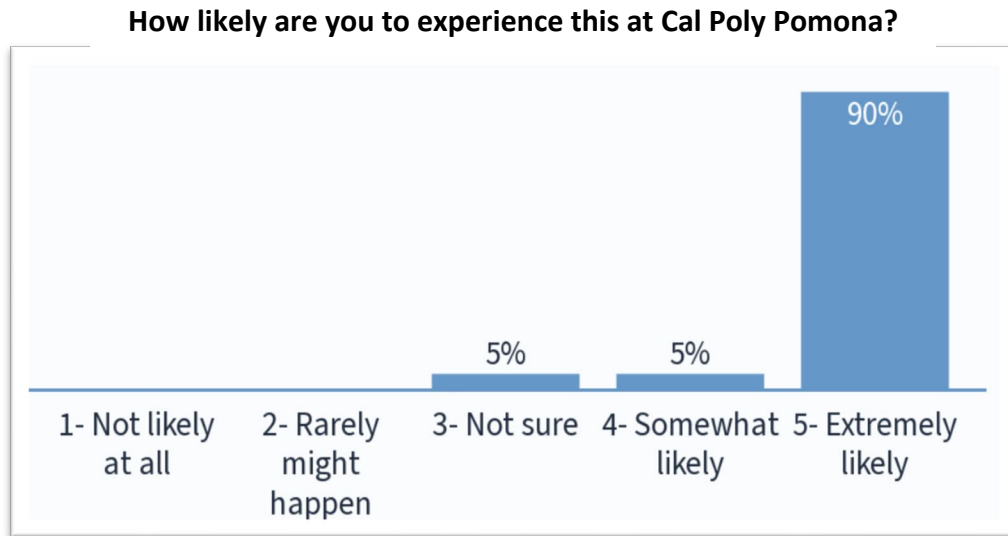


c.  **Microinsults.** Microinsults are more subtle, but nevertheless have harmful effects especially when compounded over time. An example in the academic setting would be someone  publicly commenting that a Black student should be grateful for being a diversity admit and then laughing as if the comment were a joke.

*Assessment:*  ***52% of the students indicated that such an occurrence would be either somewhat or extremely likely to occur.*** *This means that over half of your students are frequently contending with microinsults meant to undermine their place and/or sense of belonging within the campus community. These are necessary components of psychological safety and subsequent retention. The remaining majority (43%) of students indicated that they were unsure if such behavior would happen on campus. It is possible that the likelihood of a student experiencing this type of microaggression is dependent upon other variables such as their major or where they live. In other words, there may be "safer" spaces on campus wherein students are shielded from experiencing such insults.*

**How likely are you to experience this at Cal Poly Pomona?**
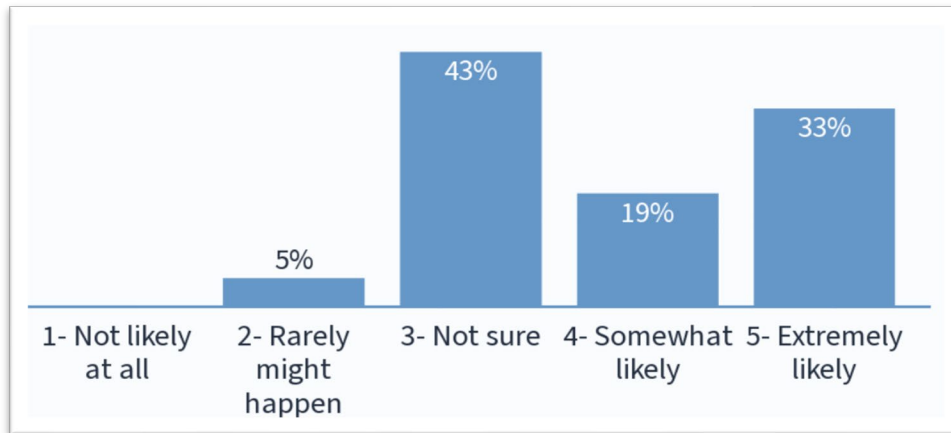


5. **Cultural Representation.** The Cultural Representation domain is a measure of perception of the actual numbers of Black employees and students within the university across all levels, and the perceived genuineness of the university's commitment to expanding that representation. The stronger a student relates to the scenario presented in this section, the more likely they are to feel alone or tokenized within the institution.

*Assessment:* ***87% of students endorsed a perceived lack of representation and feelings of tokenization****. While this domain captures perceptions and not statistical data, it is important to note that perception is what actually drives behavior. A perceived lack of a critical mass of Black people creates a psychological burden by othering students and employees. Students shared concerns about Black issues being minimized and subsumed under the more general label of "POC" or "diversity" issues.*

**How likely is this to happen at Cal Poly Pomona?**
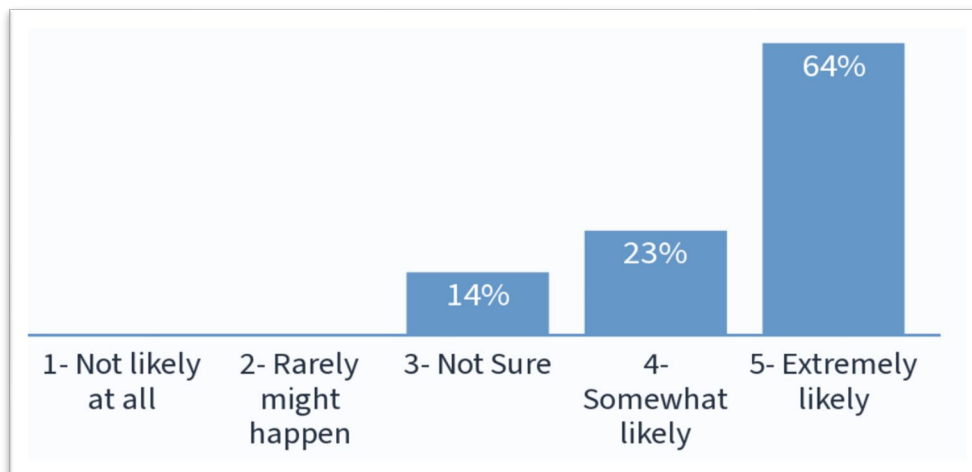
6. **Career Advancement and Upward Mobility.** This domain measures student perception of the university's desire, ability, and willingness to provide opportunities to enhance their skills, provide meaningful leadership opportunities, valuable career guidance, and offer viable pathways toward post-graduate career and/or educational advancement. Students who strongly relate to the scenarios in this section likely do not believe that obtaining the necessary mentoring and guidance needed to assist in advancing in their chosen field of study is generally feasible for them at Cal Poly Pomona.

   *Assessment:* ***50% of students somewhat or strongly related to scenarios of being overlooked or ignored when it comes to securing the necessary support and connections to gain access and advance toward attaining academic and career goals.*** *It is important to note that these beliefs held true even when considering their chances if they were top performers at the university. The remaining 50% of students were either unsure or could not relate to the scenario. Those who indicated uncertainty may reflect the experiences of freshman, who have yet to seek such engagement or support, or those who have done so minimally with ambiguous results. Students who indicated that they could not relate at all to the scenario may highlight positive experiences with receiving faculty support.*

**How strongly do you relate to this scenario and identify with this situation?**
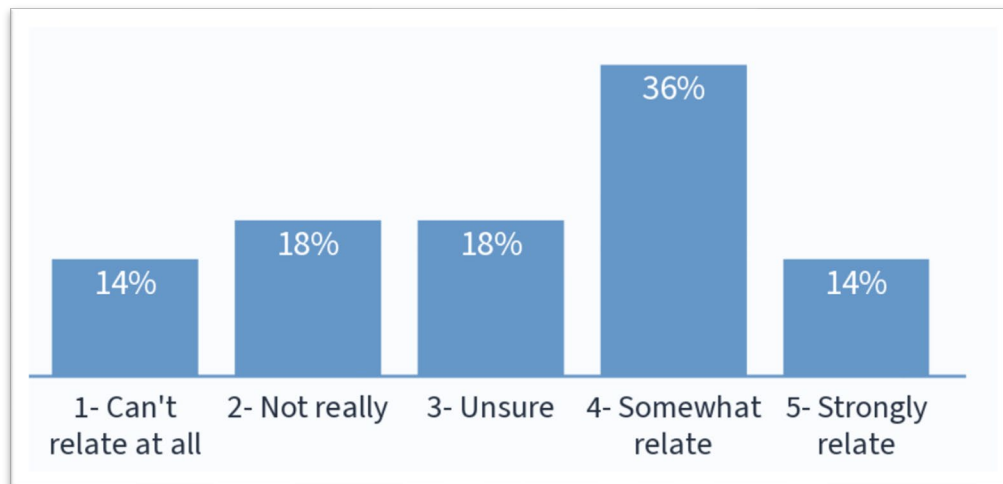


7. **Authenticity.** Authenticity refers to the ways in which students believe they have the freedom to confidently show up visually as themselves as well as the freedom to express their beliefs and racial/ethnic pride. Through a series of mock scenarios, we assessed the degree to which participants felt they can show up as their authentic selves on campus as a member of the Cal Poly Pomona community.
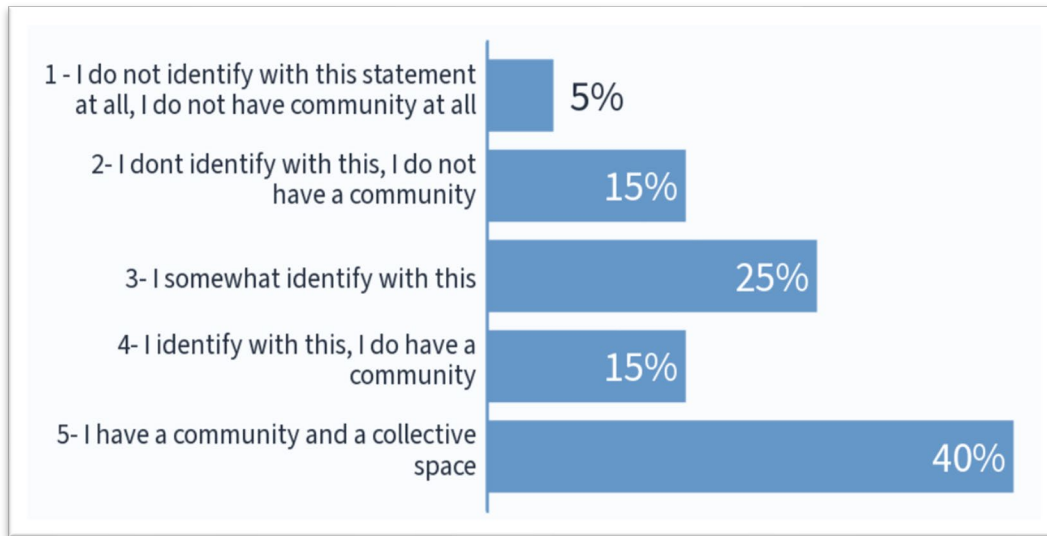
*Assessment:* ***87% of students indicated they do not feel Cal Poly Pomona is a safe space to show up as their authentic selves, without fears of repercussion.*** *The participants expressed that they are constantly mindful of the ways in which they present and interact with non-Black peers as well as with the faculty and staff. They fear being judged and/or labeled as angry. We witnessed a lack of freedom for Black students to express their full range of humanity and emotion, which is linked in the literature to increased psychological burden and stifled academic performance.*

**How strongly do you relate to this scenario?**
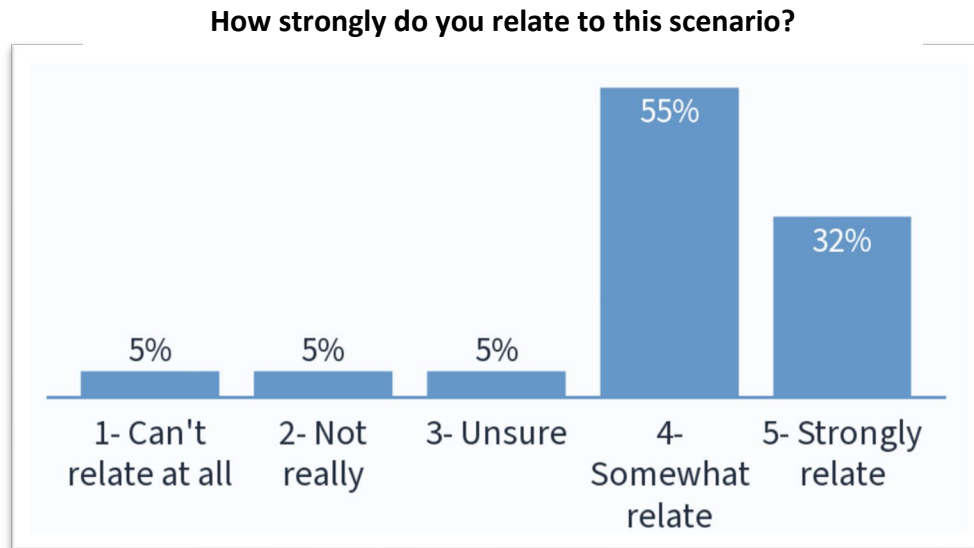


8. **Community & Collective Care.** This domain refers to the process of healing through the power of connection and belonging to one's ethnic group. Here, we assessed the degree to which individuals have a space and community on campus where they feel part of a collective and supported by a community that affirms and uplifts them.

*Assessment:* ***45% of students endorsed a weak or completely non-existent sense of community in general.*** *Further, while the other 55% indicated they do have such a community, sentiments were mixed regarding the extent to which that community existed at Cal Poly Pomona. Some students expressed a sense of connection and belonging fostered within clubs and organizations, but it appeared that the majority of students experience community within their personal, off-campus lives. What's more, multiple participants expressed a need and support for safe spaces to discuss and process emotional fatigue, stress, and grief due to ongoing racial trauma specific to the Black student experience.*

**How much do you relate to this statement?**



| | |
|---|---|
| 1 - I do not identify with this statement at all, I do not have community at all | 5% |
| 2 - I dont identify with this, I do not have a community | 15% |
| 3 - I somewhat identify with this | 25% |
| 4 - I identify with this, I do have a community | 15% |
| 5 - I have a community and a collective space | 40% |

## AREAS IN NEED OF ONGOING ASSESSMENT

There was one area where we felt we did not have enough data to make formal recommendations. For the domain listed below, we believe ongoing assessment is needed:

● **Visibility.** Visibility refers to a person's perception of their significance within the institution. Often Black students find themselves feeling either completely invisible because of their race or hyper visible because of their race. The former leads to beliefs that they will be overlooked for opportunities, and the latter leads to beliefs that they will be constantly called upon to serve as cultural ambassadors for the institution (often without compensation). We read a series of scenarios that would capture perceptions of visibility on campus and asked students to rate how strongly they identified with the experience of the characters.

*Assessment: Results here were mixed. Just over half of the students (53%) endorsed being unsure or not likely to identify with these scenarios. The other half of students (47%) endorsed relating or strongly relating to feelings of both invisibility and hyper-visibility. While some students shared stories about the demands often put on Black students to be the cultural ambassadors for new Black students, we believe the impact of the pandemic and distance learning on this phenomenon may have impacted results in this domain. With the transition to a virtual learning environment, it may be that Black students, especially in cohorts who have not spent much time in-person and on campus, have not had such experiences. Their focus may have been on individual survival and the need for them to be cultural ambassadors therefore was significantly reduced. We recommend continuing to monitor this area and remaining mindful of these pressures as new interventions are deployed.*

## RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS

| Areas of Concern: | Interventions: |
|---|---|
| Critical Consciousness<br>Radical Hope<br>Strength & Resistance<br>Community & Collective Care | ☐ Healing Circles<br>☐ Wellness Workshops<br>☐ Individual Wellness Coaching<br>☐ Strengthen Black Student Organizations |
| Microaggressions<br>Authenticity | ☐ Allyship Training |
| Cultural Representation<br>Career Advancement & Upward Mobility | ☐ DEI Leadership Coaching + HR Training |

☐ **Healing Circles.** Our healing circles are meant to increase *Critical Consciousness, Radical Hope, Strength & Resistance,* and *Community and Collective Care.* Given these are foundational in healing from racial trauma, we recommend starting here by offering at least one healing circle per month until you begin to see an increase in self-report ratings in these areas. Our post healing circle evaluation process offers insights and documents change over time. Implementing consistent healing touch points for your students will foster community, build trust, and alleviate the anxiety that arises when students are unsure when their next opportunity for support will come.

☐ **Wellness Workshops.** To further address *Community and Collective Care,* we are recommending you intervene to address the heightened sense of race-related distress by equipping students with language and psychoeducation so they are better equipped to navigate their environment. During the assessment it became clear that a significant proportion of students were experiencing a sense of emotional and mental drain due to the unrelenting threat and battle of racism and were at a loss as to how to care for themselves. Our workshop series offers students concrete ways to cope and regulate their functioning. These sessions are taught by professionals with expertise in supporting the mental health and wellness of Black students and can be combined with your existing student programming. We recommend integrating at least one workshop per quarter into your existing programming to facilitate maximum engagement and provide the requisite educational and tools needed.

☐ **Individual Wellness Coaching.** While our workshop series and Healing Circles provide group-based interventions, it also recommended that your efforts include culturally responsive support at the individual level. We are aware of the

challenges that Black students have encountered with the university counseling center and with the barriers to recruiting and retaining Black mental health providers. We offer a wellness coaching model meant to supplement your CAPS services. As a partner, we can offer your students 30-minute solution-focused coaching sessions throughout the year that offer familial style connection with Black doctors. We focus on wellness goals and can facilitate warm handoffs to your clinical staff for those who need a higher level of care.

☐ **Strengthen Black Student Organizations.** There was representation from multiple black student clubs and organizations present during the assessment, but it appeared they had little direct connection to the campus administration. It was unclear which factors contributed to this dynamic but we recognize this as a foundational concern. We recommend organizing key student leaders and faculty/administrative stakeholders to further assess the disconnect and to collaborate on pathways towards strengthening the leadership and impact of these organizations.

One option would be to host an invite only event for students who serve in leadership roles across Black student organizations and clubs to meet with select faculty/staff/admin who identify as allies to these organizations. The purpose of these meetings will be to facilitate *Community and Collective Care*. In the context of campus life, the intention is to increase the degree to which individuals have a space and community on campus where they feel part of a collective and supported by the leadership that affirms, uplifts, and makes financial investments in them. The agenda for each meeting should be set collaboratively and aim to identify areas of common interest and promote optimal wellbeing for Black student leaders. We recommend quarterly meetings with a *Sunday Dinner* theme.

☐ **Allyship Training.** Low ratings in the areas of *Microaggressions* and *Authenticity* are a reflection of the university culture. The results from our assessment suggest that the environment at Cal Poly Pomona is such that both more subtle and overt forms of microaggressive behavior are sustained and upheld by the current culture. Disrupting this climate requires interventions beyond your Black students. In support of your full community, we propose engaging those who identify as allies in the student body in consistent trainings that offer education on the individual and societal impact of anti-Black racism and that empowers them to take personal accountability and action towards a socially just world. Our team can be available to help you assess the effectiveness of existing programs or to help you identify vendors to partner with in delivering this programming. A few trusted providers are noted below and we'd be happy to make an introduction:
  - [Deeper than Color](#)
  - [Brave Trainings](#)

☐ **DEI Leadership Coaching + HR Training.** Low ratings in the areas of *Cultural Representation* and *Career Advancement and Upward Mobility* are reflections of your faculty, staff, leadership, policies and procedures. Addressing these issues is challenging work, and we strongly recommend hiring a DEI consultant to coach your staff and leadership. We partner with [Dorianne St. Fleur Consulting](#) to support institutions who want to deploy a DEI lens to their work. This organization is a research backed, data driven, action-based consultancy at the forefront of helping institutions move beyond the status quo of check-the-box diversity & inclusion activities, and into a new frontier of building anti-racist workplaces. Leveraging 15+ years working in Operations, HR and D&I for top companies across tech, financial services, and higher education, their team uses its professional and academic backgrounds to help organizations address the common - easy to miss - problems sabotaging their diversity efforts. They have a team of training facilitators with subject matter expertise in Human Resources, Diversity & Inclusion, and virtual and in person training facilitation. Alternatively, your lead consultant is available for consultation to support your evaluation efforts in other programs you are considering or already using.

## LIMITATIONS

One limitation in this assessment was the sample size of the graduate student population. Less than 25% of the sample size consisted of graduate students. It is unknown how representative their experiences are, and to what extent our recommendations are inclusive of their needs. Also, due to the mixed virtual /in-person setup there were some barriers to stimulating dialogue and engagement at various points in the assessment.

## CLOSING COMMENTS

It is with gratitude that this report is submitted. You have an amazing Black student community at Cal Poly Pomona, who are excited by the possibility of their experiences being more fully integrated into the fabric of the university culture. We applaud your efforts to date, and we would love to support you in moving forward. It is our hope that our collective efforts on this wellness assessment will provide you with a clearer understanding of challenges your Black students face, as well as several promising and evidence-based ideas for intervention.

While taking action may vary in its complexity, practicality, and feasibility, we suggest starting small with the healing circles. These initiatives can be rolled out over time, and we will be here to support your efforts. Our recommendation is for you to strive toward incremental change consistently. 10% shifts will compound over time, positively shifting the health and wellness of

the university as a whole, which is intimately connected to the strength, health, and well-being of the Black community.

## RESOURCES

We have provided a selection of recommended readings and topics for internal discussions:
- [Toward a Psychological Framework of Radical Healing in Communities of Color](#)
- [Dynamic list of resources](#) (articles, books, movies, podcasts) to educate yourselves on anti-racism work
- [Academic 4 Black Lives](#) (education and resources for faculty & staff)
- Cal Poly Pomona [Enrollment data](#)

Trending articles and reports:
- [Black Students Experiencing Racism on Campus Lack Mental Health Support](#)
- [Preparing and Supporting African American College Students](#)
- [Being a Black Ph.D. Student Following George Floyd's Murder](#)
- [Adapting and Innovating to Promote Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being of Young People of Color: COVID-19 and Beyond](#) (a report by The Steve Fund)
- [How Organizations are Failing Black Workers- And How to Better - Harvard Business Review](#)