

## Chapter 5

# Cultural Barometer: What's the Mood?

### ABSTRACT

*Every campus has its own rhythm that underscores the mood of the overall college experience. Cultural interactions can heighten the cadence and may result in racial tension and unrest. Whether local (e.g., racially charged incidents in classrooms) or global, such as the 2016 presidential election, these events can shift the pulse and alter narratives within the university setting. The term “cultural barometer” is often used to describe the mood, and in this chapter, the five interviewees plus additional voices provide personal perspectives on campus temperature in terms of race, sexual identity, disability, student involvement, international students’ experiences, and positive steps taken to address these phenomena during their time at the university.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Once I got to college, I continued to experience certain macro- and microaggressions, and so in order for me to really illustrate the pain that I was experiencing, I used my words, I used my voice, I used my writing. I went to poetry club and throughout college, I used poetry to explain my experiences to students. I also joined and led a group called Make It Happen! and one of the activities we did was to write microaggressions on the sidewalk on campus. And I remember I wrote n\*\*\*\* on the sidewalk in front of one of the student buildings. I wrote it because I was being called that on campus, there were other Black students who were being called that on campus and we were uncomfortable every day. And so I didn't care that I made people uncomfortable for two weeks or however long that it lasted on the sidewalk before someone washed it away because I wanted people to know how it felt to be a Black student on campus, and I wanted them to know the pain that we experienced. ~Regina*

Over many years, every university generates overarching themes or metanarratives that serve as a blueprint for its institutional identity. They include chronicles of student successes and failures, academic exploits, and athletic achievements to name a few. Diversity stories do not always fit comfortably within these metanarratives as newer generations, opinions, and events challenge established cultural norms. As a case in point, the college where the interviewees were enrolled experienced a broad array of twists and turns during the students' four-year stay. The presidential election of 2016, for example, brought a sense of unrest as undergraduates argued from the political left and right about immigration and its impact on the university's large Latinx population. Internal events also confronted the status quo, as when Regina, whose video narrative opens this chapter, formed with others a group called *Make it Happen!* to advocate for a stronger on-campus voice for non-White students. She organized protests and eventually met with university officials to discuss ideas for promoting racial parity. The following year, incidents occurred on campus in which the *n*-word was prominently displayed, resulting in confusion and even intervention by the local police. These events were a wake-up call to the university and prompted discussions in classes, social arenas, faculty meetings, and other gatherings. Over time, progress came on some fronts while resistance remained on others; yet existing

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