

**Abstract**

International students who are racially Black contend with racism in US society and in their US colleges and universities. This article highlights how Black international students navigate the intersection of their race and nativity in US higher education. It offers considerations as well as demands for US higher education institutions to demonstrate that Black international students' lives matter.

## Black International Student Lives Matter

**Chrystal A. George Mwangi**

*Wherever the Negro goes, he remains a Negro.—Frantz Fanon (1952)*

**A**s US higher education institutions (HEIs) grapple with systemic racism on their campuses, it is important to remember that anti-Black racism is an international student issue. Black international students, who predominantly come from sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, represent 4 to 5 percent of all international students in the United States. Although this percentage is small, Black international students can comprise significant proportions of HEIs' Black student population, particularly at selective institutions and within graduate programs. Yet, it is common for international students who are racially Black to first experience confusion and uncertainty regarding the systemic racism present within US higher education. US racial realities can be distinctly different from socialization and salience of race and Blackness in many of their majority Black home countries. When Black international students come to the United States, the differences they perceive are often in relation to their foreign status/nationality rather than the racial positioning US society imposes. This does not mean that Black international students are not negatively impacted by racism. Their Black lives matter.

### Learning (Anti-)Blackness and Racist Nativism in the US Context

The initial disconnection that Black international students experience regarding race in the United States and the ways in which they cope with racism can manifest themselves through attempts to distance themselves from these issues or to ignore them. Yet, the institutionalized nature of racism and anti-Blackness within the United States, and its embedding in higher education, create racial encounters and discrimination on campus that often force students to consider their own racial status and identity in the US context. Over time, Black international students state experiencing more discrimination than their white international peers, including social isolation and exclusion from group work, being called racial slurs, racial microaggressions, and other harassment from faculty, staff, students, and local residents of their college towns. In a recent survey conducted by World Education Services, one-quarter of Sub-Saharan African international students cited discrimination as one of their top three most significant challenges in their educational experience—a higher proportion than all other international student populations.

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Black international students' experiences with racism and anti-Blackness is further intersected by a US sociopolitical climate steeped in xenophobia, antiglobalist rhetoric, and nationalism. For example, many Black international students come from countries that President Trump allegedly identified as “sh\*\*t-hole countries.” There has also been an increase in hate speech, a push for nativism, and anti-immigrant sentiment on US campuses. How white American faculty and peers perceive Black international students' accents, languages, and cultural differences can lead to negative stereotypes. This is exacerbated by US society's stereotypical portrayal of Africa as a region of poverty and instability, or of people from the Caribbean as pot smoking partiers, all reinforcing how Black international students are perceived in racist-nativist ways.

### Navigating Racial Injustice

Racist-nativist experiences negatively impact Black international students' well-being and college success in many ways, including increased homesickness, reduced academic achievement, weakened self-esteem, greater stress, academic withdrawal, self-isolation, and social withdrawal. Being temporary visa holders in a volatile US sociopolitical environment also makes them vulnerable to retaliation for naming the racist nativism that they experience. Further, because student services related to race are often focused on domestic students and siloed away from international student services, Black international students are left without the direct advocacy and resources needed to serve their multiple marginalized identities.

Black international students may feel uncertain about their role in fighting racial injustice, given that their heritage did not stem from historical racial marginalization in the United States, even as they are impacted by the ramifications of that history. Yet, many Black international students are also committing to antiracist work and the fight against anti-Blackness across the Diaspora by mobilizing through community activism, cultural organizations, and protests around the United States.

### What Can US Higher Education Institutions Do?

Over the past decade, sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean have consistently increased their numbers of outgoing students to US HEIs, and the United States has remained a top choice for many African students, particularly from Nigeria and South Africa. However, given the current climate, the United States may no longer remain Black international students' top destination. While US HEIs have pursued international student enrollment for financial reasons, the structural underrepresentation of Black international students makes it more difficult for them to find their place within a group community or mobilize for greater support and advocacy. US HEIs will need to be intentional in recruiting Black international students and increasing their numerical representation. Yet, the recruitment of Black international students should be done alongside improved recruitment for Black Americans, not as a proxy for Black American student representation.

It is also critical that Black international students and their experiences be acknowledged and prioritized, for example, by collecting institutional data that can be disaggregated by race and nativity, so that Black international students are made visible to their institutions. This may require HEIs to collect demographic student data beyond what is

needed for federal or state reporting (for example, by asking both for the race and nativity status of students, rather than classifying international students solely by foreign status/nationality—or recognizing that Black international students are less likely to claim a Black race on surveys when the option is Black/African American, because Black international students are not American). Data that can be disaggregated would allow institutions to track the needs and progress of Black international students. Doing so would provide the nuanced information needed to develop or reinforce resources that address the intersection of these students' race and nativity. For example, Offices that serve international students should be prepared to communicate with students about racist-nativism and collaborate with offices such as counseling services, multicultural affairs, and academic affairs in order to serve these students. This would move institutions away from merely recruiting international students, toward a retention-based model.

Yet, US HEIs must go beyond providing Black international students strategies and community to cope with racist-nativist experiences. Improved campus racial and global climate should be integrated into universities' internationalization and diversity strategies to ensure that Black international and other racially minoritized students have equitable opportunities for sustained success. Accessible and safe bias-reporting procedures can also be created, so that Black international students have formal structures to ensure that their racist-nativist experiences are addressed. HEI leaders must recognize that racism is not a simple, singular construct, but exists at the intersection of racism and nativism for these students. Thus, when developing antiracism training and programming for faculty, staff, and students, it is important to target and integrate racist-nativism and anti-Black racism. If US HEIs believe that Black international student lives matter, they must work to dismantle the campus structures that marginalize, oppress, and isolate these students. ▲

*Chrystal A. George Mwangi is  
associate professor of higher  
education, University of  
Massachusetts Amherst, US.  
E-mail: [chrystal@umass.edu](mailto:chrystal@umass.edu).*