



RESEARCH REPORT

Understanding Racial and Ethnic Differences in the College Experience

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Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
Executive Summary	v
Understanding the College Experience	1
Data	2
Descriptive Findings	4
Regression Analysis	15
Conclusion	17
Appendix. Additional Figures	19
Notes	29
References	30
About the Authors	31
Statement of Independence	32

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Executive Summary

College students' experiences vary significantly by race and ethnicity. Often, institutions prioritize structuring their undergraduate experience to cater to white students' needs and desires, such as by hiring predominantly white instructors, and creating classroom learning environments that privilege white students. This means students of color frequently experience the same institution differently from their white peers. Though scholars researching students' college experiences and outcomes frequently measure college quality by more easily defined data—such as graduation rates and students' earnings after college—more research is needed that explicitly examines the racial and ethnic variation in students' college satisfaction.

This report explores student-reported satisfaction from a nationally representative sample with a focus on variation across racial and ethnic groups, with most of our analyses centered on the four largest racial and ethnic groups (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and white people). We match data from the Strada-Gallup Education Survey to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and minority-serving institution data from the US Department of Education, enabling us to link institutional characteristics, demographics, and graduation rates. And using these data, we created an index of satisfaction and use regression analysis to understand how different aspects of a student's background or college characteristics correlate with this index.

We find that Asian respondents rate their education experiences the highest, although satisfaction decreases when adding controls, including level of education. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander and white respondents show similar trends, though less dramatically. Conversely, for Black and Hispanic respondents, perceived educational quality tends to go up as more controls are added. Additionally, students who attended historically Black colleges and universities and tribal colleges report valuing their educations more highly than students who attended other types of institutions, but not students who attended Hispanic-serving institutions.

Although the data show a general decrease in students' ratings of the quality of their education, ratings have been on the rise for those who attended college within the most recent decade. Acknowledging that students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds can experience the same institution in vastly different ways, we find that Black and Hispanic students appear to be more satisfied with their college experiences when we take individual and college characteristics into consideration.

Our findings reinforce the need to deepen our exploration of college “success” measures beyond the average student. Though significant work is still needed before these measures of students'

experiences can be integrated into larger policy measures of college quality, by examining racial and ethnic differences, we can demonstrate strong variation in the ways institutional characteristics and students' experiences relate to their perceptions of college quality.

Understanding the College Experience

College students' experiences vary significantly by race and ethnicity. Institutions are not equally committed to constructing collegiate environments that benefit all students (e.g., Hurtado et al. [1998]). Often, institutions prioritize structuring their undergraduate experience to cater to white students' needs and desires, such as by hiring predominantly white instructors (e.g., White-Lewis [2020]) and creating classroom learning environments that privilege white students (e.g., Suárez-Orozco et al. [2015]). This means students of color frequently experience the same institution differently from their white peers.

Scholars researching students' college experiences and outcomes frequently measure college quality by more easily defined measures, such as graduation rates and students' earnings after college. These experiences are important and a priority for policymakers when considering how to measure whether specific colleges are worth the significant investment federal, state, and local governments pour into higher education. But labor market experiences are not the sole focus of American colleges and universities. More subjective information, such as students' reported satisfaction, could be a useful complement to explorations of labor market outcomes. Several scholars have found that students' college satisfaction predicts their likelihood of persisting and graduating (e.g., Bowman and Culver [2018]; Pascarella and Terenzini [2005]). But similar to other measures of college quality, more research is needed that explicitly examines the racial and ethnic variation in students' college satisfaction. Explicitly exploring this variation would be especially useful when thinking about the quality of institutions, such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), that aim to serve certain students of color. Research has shown that students attending these types of institutions may feel more satisfied with their education (e.g., Chen, Ingram, and Davis [2014]).

Current policy discussions about higher education rarely incorporate systematic consideration of students' satisfaction with their higher education experience. When these considerations do happen, they rarely consider the variation in different experiences afforded to students because of their race or ethnicity. We explore student-reported satisfaction from a nationally representative sample with a focus on variation across racial and ethnic groups. Because of the evidence showing a link between college satisfaction and such outcomes as persistence and graduation, we examine these data to find evidence on the promise and potential limitations of attempting to incorporate students' satisfaction as a measure of college quality on a national scale.

Data

The main data source for this research is the Strada-Gallup Education Survey, a telephone survey conducted from June 2016 through April 2019. The data are a random sample, and weights are provided to create a nationally representative sample. Respondents are asked about their current situations and educational experiences, including objective aspects (e.g., the institutions they attended, their field of study, and their current income) and subjective aspects (e.g., whether they would recommend their educational path to others like them or whether their education was worth the cost). These questions are answered on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

The sample includes 341,735 respondents (table 1) over four years (table 2) covering more than five decades of educational experiences (table 3) since the late 1960s and many levels of education, from those with graduate degrees to noncompleters (table 4). Most of our analyses in the body of the report focus on the four largest racial and ethnic groups (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and white people). Appendix figures show data for American Indian and Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, people of two or more races, and people of other races or ethnicities.

TABLE 1
Survey Respondent Distribution, by Race or Ethnicity

	Number	Share of respondents
American Indian or Alaska Native	4,234	1%
Asian	8,385	2%
Black	30,413	9%
Hispanic	40,155	12%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1,393	0%
Other race or ethnicity	19,829	6%
Two or more races	10,620	3%
White	226,706	66%
Total	341,735	100%

Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Notes: Respondents could indicate multiple races or ethnicities. Here, anyone indicating a Hispanic ethnicity is coded as Hispanic, while anyone selecting two or more races aside from Hispanic is coded as two or more races. “Other race or ethnicity” includes respondents who did not indicate any race or ethnicity.

TABLE 2

Survey Respondents, by Year

	Number	Share of respondents
2016	60,382	18%
2017	123,188	36%
2018	125,046	37%
2019	33,119	10%
Total	341,735	100%

Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

TABLE 3

Survey Respondents, by Decade of Attendance

	Number	Share of respondents
1970s or earlier	49,527	14%
1980s	78,543	23%
1990s	63,790	19%
2000s	63,734	19%
2010s or later	86,141	25%
Total	341,735	100%

Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

TABLE 4

Education Levels Represented in the Strada Data

	Number	Share of respondents
Completed grades 1–11 or received no schooling (less than a high school diploma)	19,285	6%
Completed grade 12 with a diploma or GED certificate (high school graduate)	69,093	20%
Completed a technical, trade, vocational, or business school or program after high school	13,622	4%
Completed some college (at a college, university, or community college) but received no degree	59,281	17%
Received a two-year associate's degree from a college, university, or community college	36,153	11%
Received a four-year bachelor's degree from a college or university (e.g., BS, BA, or AB)	82,600	24%
Completed some postgraduate or professional schooling after graduating from college but received no postgraduate degree	4,721	1%
Received a postgraduate or professional degree (e.g., MA, MS, PhD, MD, JD)	56,980	17%
Total	341,735	100%

Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Note: Figures for less than a high school diploma and high school graduate are included here for completeness but are not included in the analyses of college satisfaction that follow.

Because these data identify the institution(s) attended, we can match these data to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS, accessed via Urban's Education Data Portal) and minority-serving institution (MSI) data from the US Department of Education (to identify institutions

receiving federal funding under Titles III and V of the Higher Education Act). Using IPEDS data, we can link institutional characteristics (e.g., level and control; table 5), demographics, and graduation rates; the MSI data provide information on institutions classified as serving particular racial or ethnic groups (table 6). Because IPEDS begins later than some of our respondents graduated, we backfill missing data using the earliest IPEDS data available. But the bulk of respondents graduated during periods of ample IPEDS coverage.

TABLE 5
Survey Respondents, by Institutional Sector

	Number	Share of respondents
Two-year or less		
Public	40,908	21%
Private nonprofit	866	0%
Private for-profit	2,930	2%
Four-year or more		
Public	93,933	49%
Private nonprofit	46,749	24%
Private for-profit	5,785	3%
Total	191,171	100%

Sources: Strada-Gallup Education Survey and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

Note: Level is determined by Carnegie Classification.

TABLE 6
Survey Respondents Attending Minority-Serving Institutions

	Number
Historically Black college or university	3,083
Predominantly Black institution	2,671
Hispanic-serving institution	29,468
Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution	17,126
Tribal college	106
Native American-serving nontribal institution	822

Sources: Strada-Gallup Education Survey, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, and the US Department of Education.

Note: Some institutions may fall into multiple categories.

Descriptive Findings

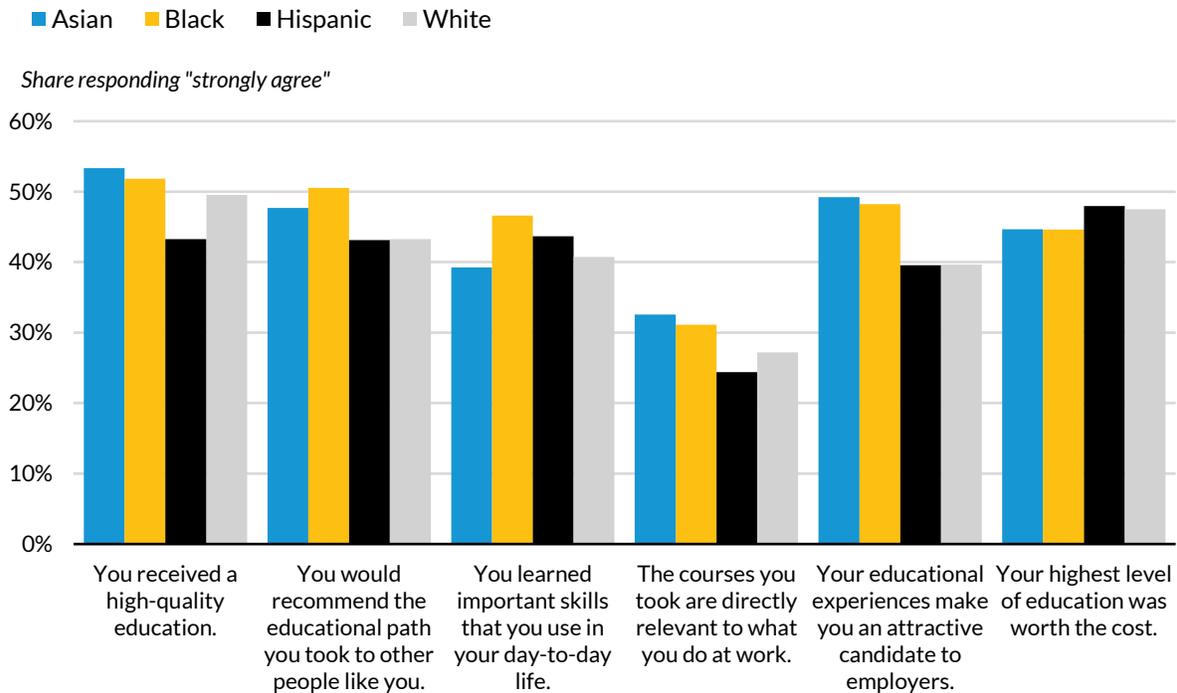
In our analyses, we focus on the following six areas, all of which are measured on a five-point scale:

- You received a high-quality education while obtaining your highest level of education.
- You would recommend the educational path you took to other people like you.

- You learned important skills during your highest level of education that you use in your day-to-day life.
- The courses you took during your highest level of education are directly relevant to what you do at work.
- Your educational experiences make you an attractive candidate to potential employers.
- Your highest level of education was worth the cost.

Respondents tend to rate their educational experiences highly on average, with most responding “agree” or “strongly agree” to most of these questions (figure 1; see appendix figure A.1 for a corresponding chart with smaller racial and ethnic groups). Because of this, our analyses typically show the share responding “strongly agree.” Under this approach, Asian and Black respondents tend to have high ratings along most dimensions, except when indicating whether their education was worth the cost. The lower ratings for Black students are consistent with greater student loan burdens among Black students (Houle and Addo 2019; Miller 2019; Scott-Clayton 2018). Even if these students perceived their educational quality to be similar to their peers’ experiences, large cumulative student debt loads and difficulty navigating a byzantine repayment system could make these students less likely to report that their education was worth the cost.

FIGURE 1
Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity
All levels of postsecondary education

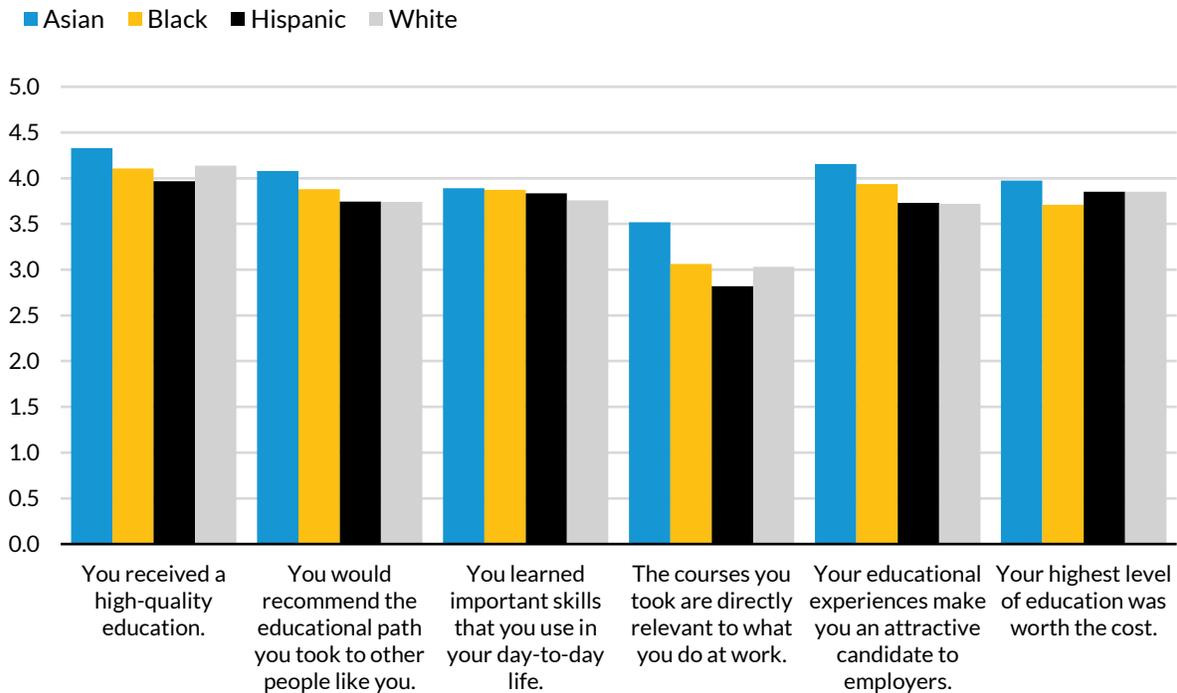


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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Rather than reporting the share responding “strongly agree,” another approach is to average the numerical values of the responses, with “strongly agree” treated as 5 and “strongly disagree” treated as 1. Although this approach has drawbacks, it allows for more flexibility, and we use it in later analyses. In general, both approaches reveal similar patterns: Asian and Black respondents continue to have high ratings for most questions, though some of the differences are flattened. Notably, Asian students now have a higher reported satisfaction with the cost of college, suggesting that more Asian students responded that they agree with this statement than Black students did. We encourage future researchers to explore these subtleties.

FIGURE 2
Average Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity
All levels of postsecondary education

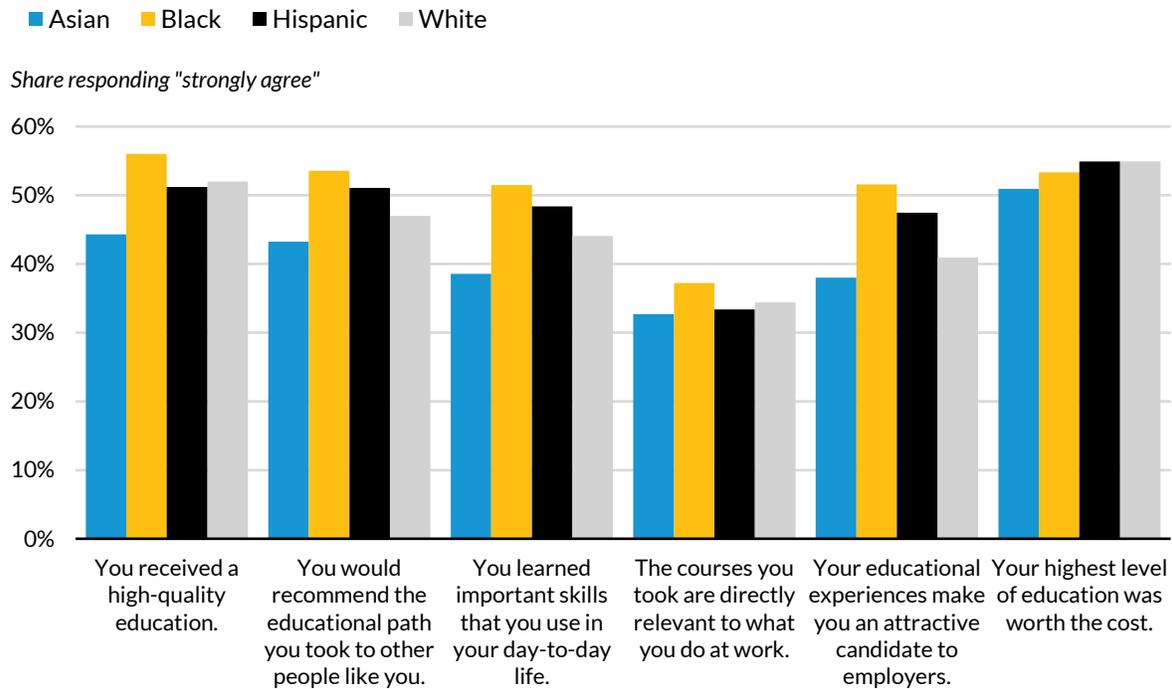


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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Figures 1 and 2 ignore important nuances that we will try to dissect in ensuing analyses. For example, educational level matters. When we consider, for example, those who hold associate’s degrees as their highest degree (figure 3), we see that Asian respondents no longer value their educations more than other races or ethnicities, and Black respondents have higher valuations across the board—with the exception, again, of whether their education was worth the cost. Similar patterns hold for other levels of education (appendix figures A.1–A.10). This pattern occurs because perceived educational quality tends to increase with level of education, and Asian respondents tend to have the highest levels of education. We also see that completers value their educations more than noncompleters, even at the same types of institutions.

FIGURE 3
Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity
Associate's degree holders



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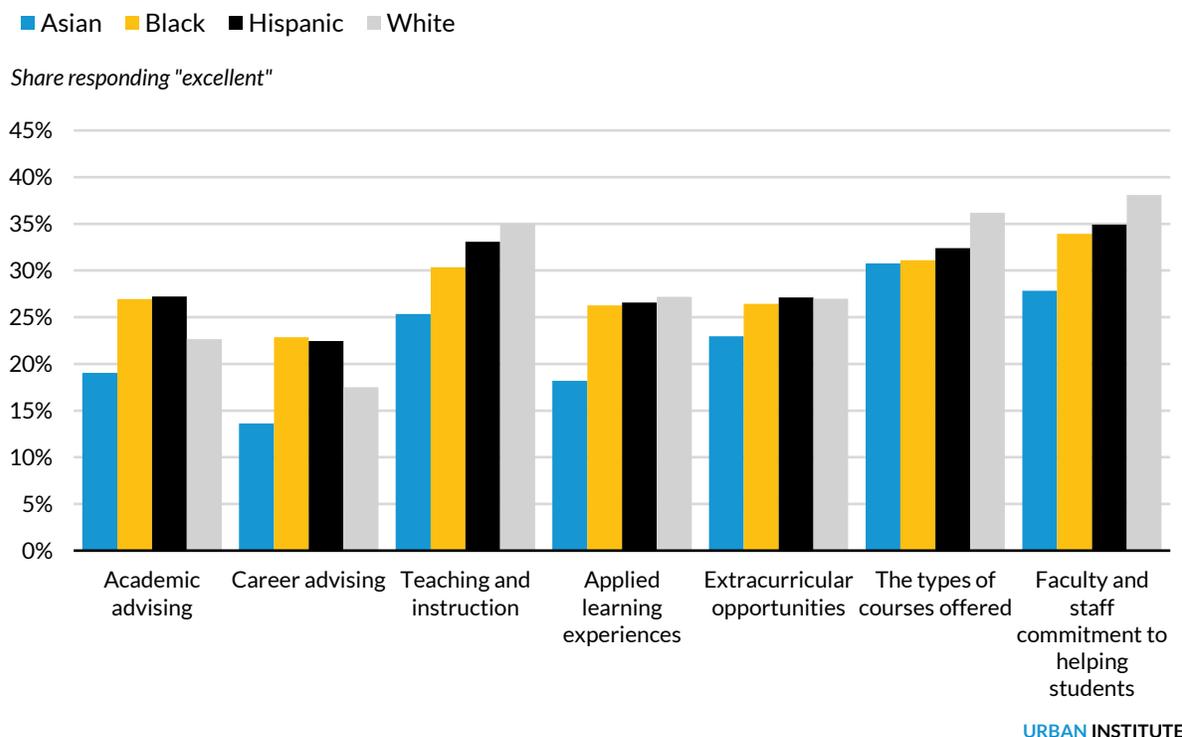
Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

A subset of respondents (approximately 48,000 in the 2018 and 2019 waves) are asked more specific questions about the quality of various specific on-campus experiences:

- academic advising
- career advising
- teaching and instruction
- applied learning experiences
- extracurricular opportunities
- the types of courses offered
- faculty and staff commitment to helping students

These are rated on a four-point scale (excellent, good, fair, poor). Unlike the more general questions addressed in the previous figures, figure 4 instead tends to show high ratings from white respondents and lower ratings from Asian respondents, although there is more heterogeneity.

FIGURE 4
Ratings of Perceived Quality of On-Campus Offerings, by Race or Ethnicity
All levels of postsecondary education



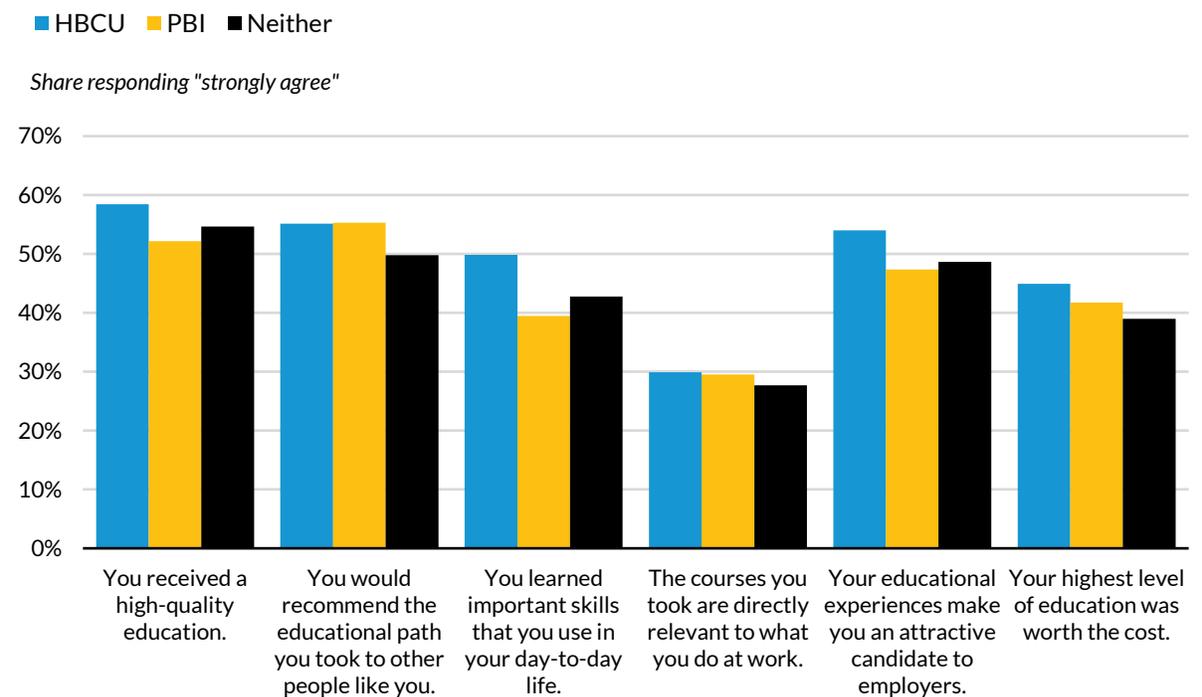
Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Which College Characteristics Matter, and to Whom?

Aside from the level of education they offer, colleges vary tremendously in size, mission, outcomes, demographics, and other characteristics. How much does this matter? Research has shown, for example, that HBCUs provide additional support and learning opportunities for their students, especially their Black students (e.g., Kim and Conrad [2006]). HBCUs are defined by when they were founded (before 1964) and their mission (to help uplift the Black community). The mission component of HBCUs should not be taken lightly. Scholars have shown that simply enrolling a larger number of students of color does not guarantee that an institution is focused on supporting those students (e.g., Garcia, Núñez, and Sansone [2019]). To explore how mission might play a role in students' assessments

of college quality, we examine the main experience measures for Black students who attended an HBCU and those who attended a predominantly Black institution (PBI).¹ PBIs are institutions where Black students compose at least 40 percent of the undergraduate student body (in addition to some other eligibility requirements). This comparison allows us to see whether institutions with a mission focused on Black students have the same reported quality as institutions that simply enroll more Black students (figure 5). We find that generally students who attended HBCUs report higher agreement with most of the experience measures. This is particularly true when looking at whether students' educational experiences make them attractive candidates to employers and whether they learned important skills that they use in their day-to-day lives.

FIGURE 5
Ratings of College Satisfaction, by School Type
Four-year college attendees



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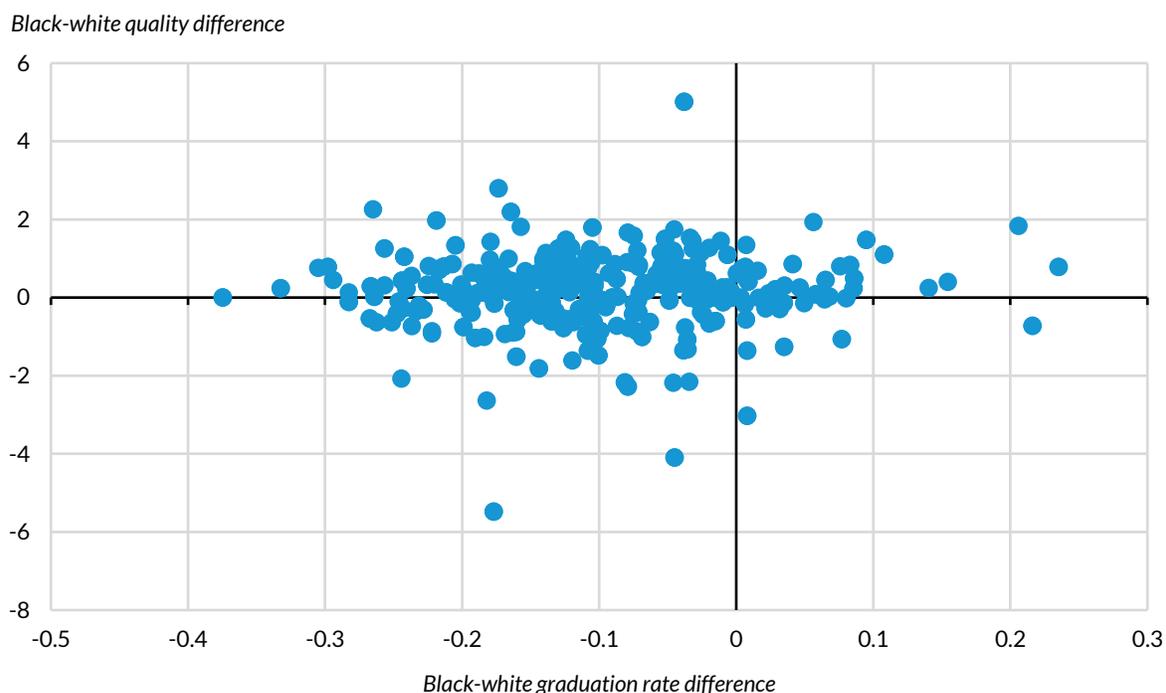
Sources: Strada-Gallup Education Survey, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, and the US Department of Education.

Note: HBCU = historically Black college or university; PBI = predominantly Black institution.

We might also be interested in how students of different backgrounds experience the same college. To analyze this, we use a principal component analysis to create a single index ("quality") that captures the six measures of subjective college experience used above.² We then compare the measure for

different groups of students at each college (e.g., Black students compared with white students). At some colleges, white students rate their experience more positively than Black students, whereas at others, the reverse is true. But it is difficult to ascertain whether colleges at the extremes of the distribution are systematically different; we encourage future researchers to do a deeper dive into these institutions. For example, we could not find strong relationships between gaps in these subjective measures and gaps in certain objective measures, such as graduation rates (figure 6) or income. We did find some correlation (0.19) between gaps in subjective experience and gaps in racial or ethnic enrollment shares (figure 7).

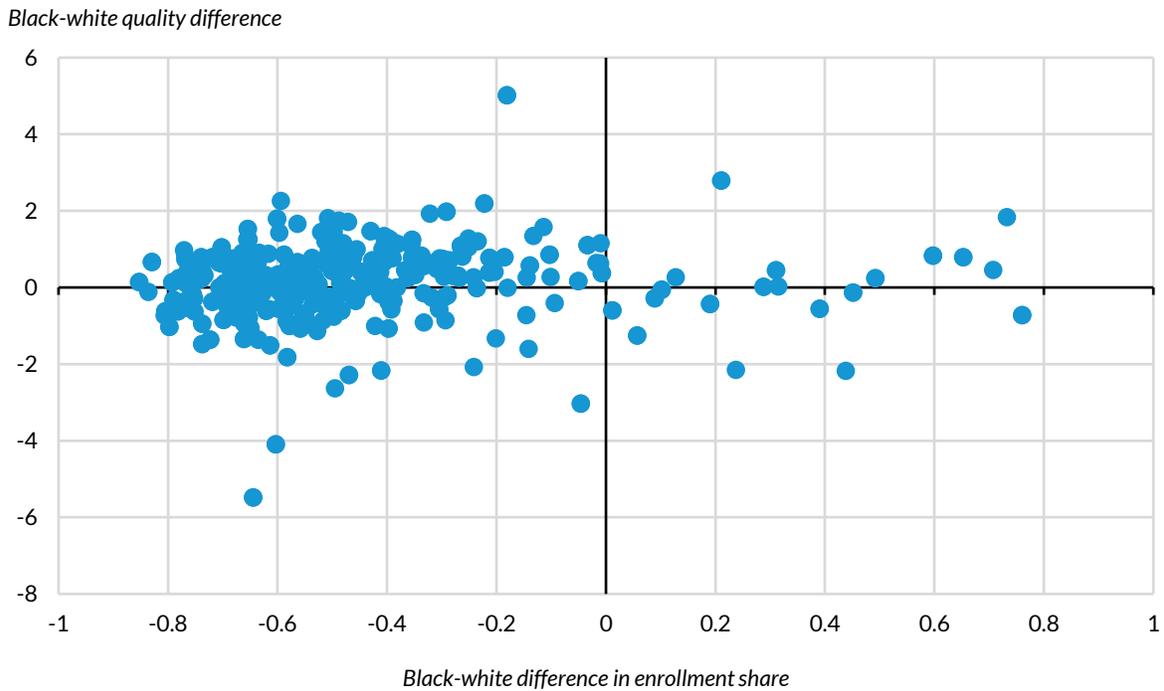
FIGURE 6
Relationship between Quality Gaps and Graduation Rate Gaps
Black and white four-year college attendees



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Sources: Strada-Gallup Education Survey and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

FIGURE 7
Relationship between Quality Gaps and Enrollment Shares
Black and white four-year college attendees



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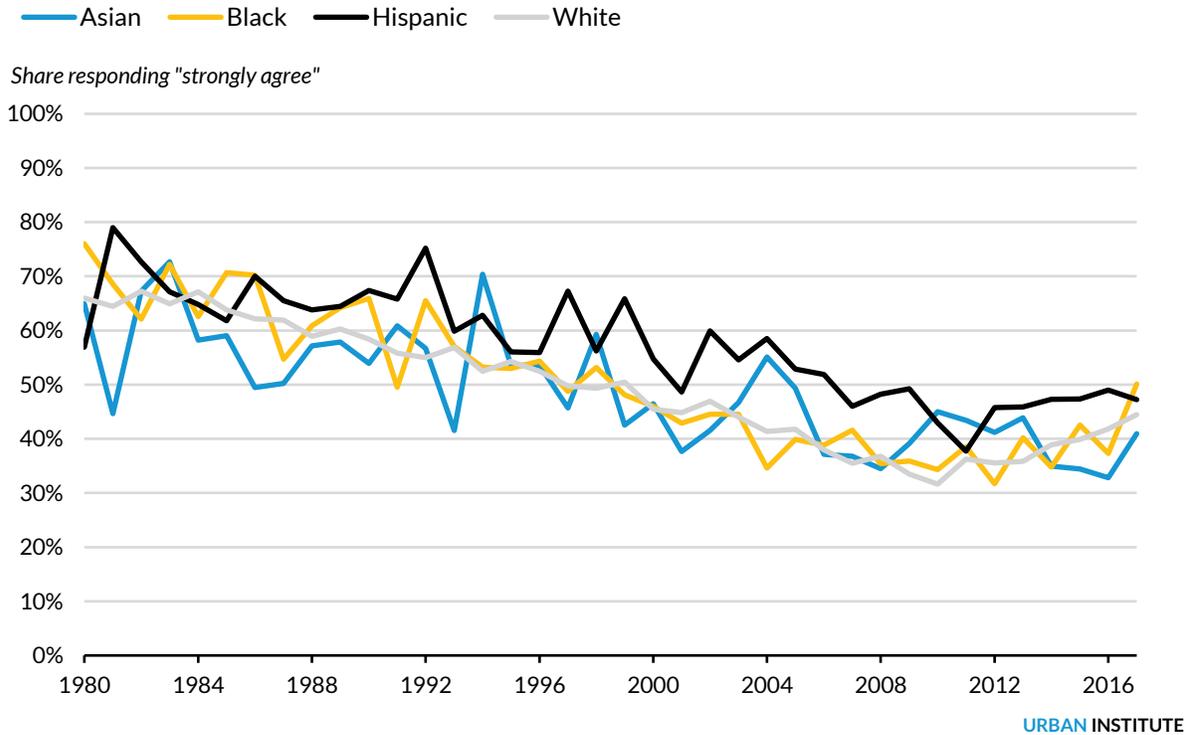
Sources: Strada-Gallup Education Survey and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

How Has Perceived Quality Changed over Time?

The Strada survey allows comparisons of cohorts who graduated at very different times, with the oldest respondents having attended college in the late 1960s. Measures of perceived quality all trend downward until roughly 2010 and then begin a slight uptick. This is most stark when respondents are asked to report whether their education was worth the cost (figure 8) and is consistent with increased debt burdens over this time. But the uptick since 2010 is surprising. One potential story is that the nadir coincides roughly with the worst of the Great Recession; perhaps as the economy was improving, so were students' views of their educations. One complication in interpreting these trends is that people were all surveyed between 2016 and 2019, so it is impossible to disentangle the effect of the period during which they graduated from the time since graduation.

Other questions show generally similar trends, though less pronounced (figure 9). We plot trends for those whose highest degree was a bachelor's degree, but we see similar patterns for other levels for education.

FIGURE 8
Average Perceptions That Education Was Worth the Cost among Those Whose Highest Degree Is a Bachelor's Degree, by Race or Ethnicity

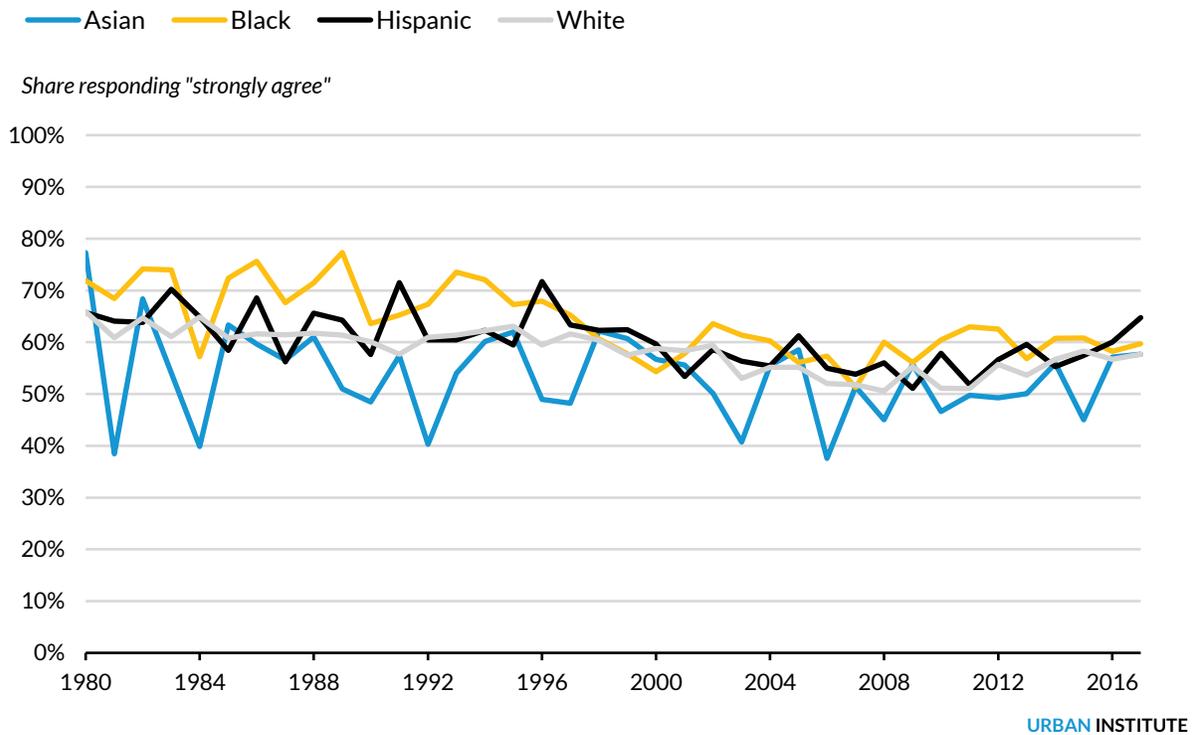


Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Note: The x-axis represents the student-reported graduation year.

FIGURE 9

Average Perceptions of Overall Quality among Those Whose Highest Degree Is a Bachelor's Degree, by Race or Ethnicity



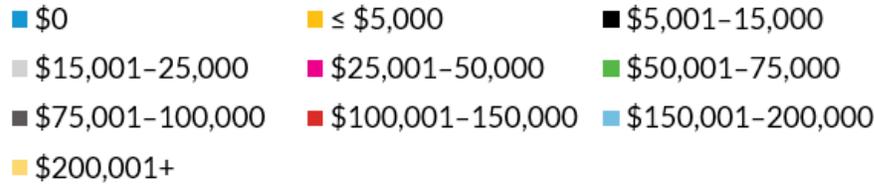
Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Note: The x-axis represents the student-reported graduation year.

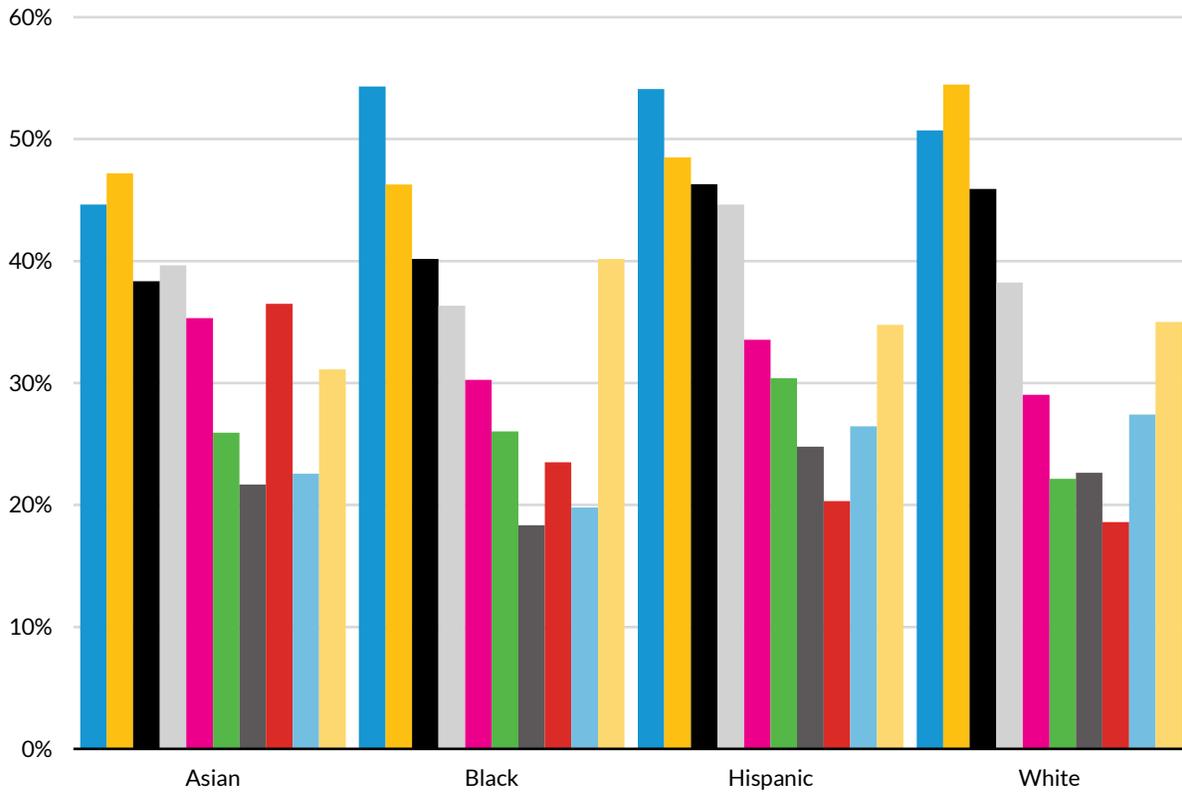
One of the largest changes over the past decades is the increased amount of borrowing. How does the amount borrowed relate to a respondent's assessment of whether their education was worth the cost? Surprisingly, the relationship appears to be U-shaped (figure 10). Across all races and ethnicities, the more a person borrows, the lower the perceived quality—up to a point. For very high amounts borrowed, the relationship switches and perceived quality goes up again. Interestingly, Asian and white respondents were more likely to report that their educations were worth the cost when they borrowed small amounts (less than \$5,000) than when they did not borrow at all. We encourage future researchers to explore the relationship between perceived value, debt, tuition, and college characteristics.

FIGURE 10

Average Perceptions of Education Being Worth the Cost among Those Who Attended a Four-Year College, by Amount Borrowed



Share responding "strongly agree"



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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Note: Students with graduate degrees are excluded.

Regression Analysis

In the above sections, we saw how differences across races and ethnicities in perceptions of educational quality differ by such factors as the type of institution, the year attended, and the amount borrowed.

Many other factors matter as well, such as field of study, gender, the college's demographic makeup, parental education, and grades received while in college.

We used principal component analysis to create an index of satisfaction. We then use regression analysis to understand how different aspects of a student's background or college characteristics correlate with this index. We add controls iteratively, beginning with no controls at all, restricting our sample to respondents with data for all controls.³ In the first model, we add the highest level of education (e.g., associate's degree or bachelor's degree). Next, we add characteristics of the student (year attended, gender, parental education, and amount borrowed). Then, we add basic college characteristics (institutional control, flags for each type of minority-serving institution, demographic composition, and graduation rate). Next, we add in-college choices or outcomes (field of study and grades). In the final specification we add institution-specific fixed effects. In figure 11, we show the coefficient associated with each racial or ethnic group as subsequent controls are added. These coefficients can be interpreted as the average perceived college quality for each racial or ethnic group (relative respondents of races or ethnicities are not included here, including those who did not indicate a race or ethnicity).

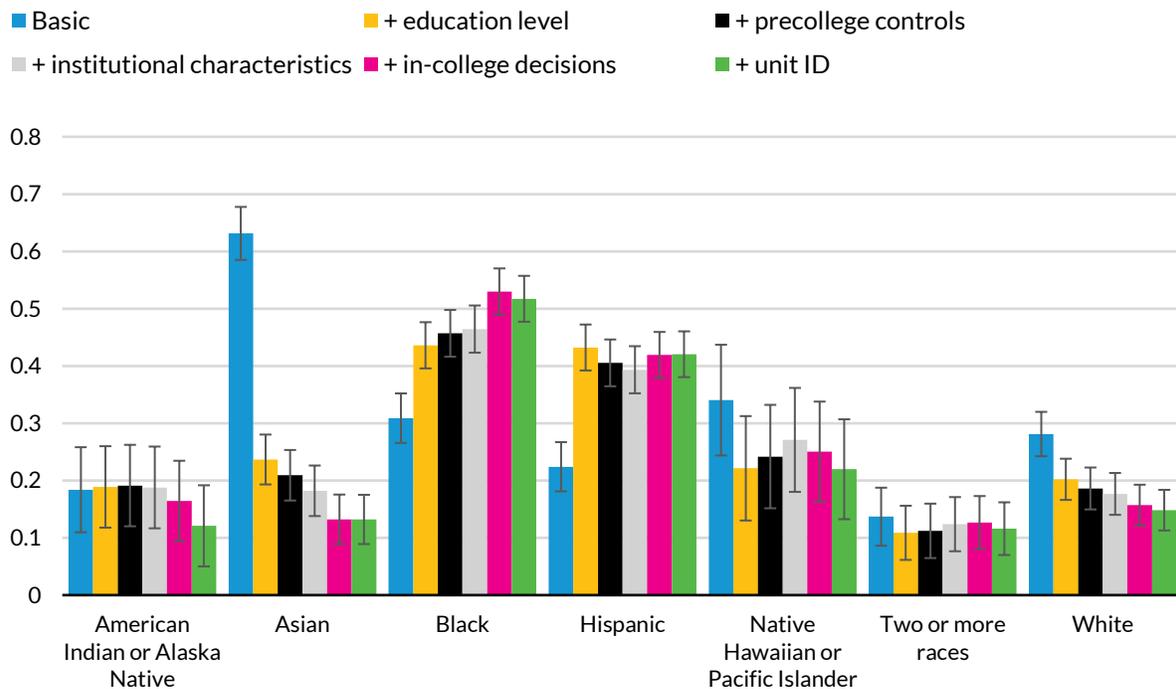
Consistent with figure 1, figure 11 shows that, without controls, Asian respondents rate their education experiences the highest. But this is eroded immediately when level of education is included as a control and continues to erode as further controls are added. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander and white respondents show similar trends, though less dramatically. Conversely, for Black and Hispanic respondents, perceived educational quality tends to go up as more controls are added.

Our analyses also show that women tend to report valuing their educations more than men and that those with higher levels of student debt report valuing it less, consistent with figure 10. Participants who attended private nonprofit institutions reported valuing their college experience more highly than those at public institutions, on average, while those who attended private for-profit institutions reported significantly less value for their experiences. We find that students who receive higher grades report valuing their experiences more highly, as do students who attend colleges with higher completion rates. Students who attended HBCUs and tribal colleges value their educations highly, but not students who attended Hispanic-serving institutions. Those whose mothers received less than a high school diploma report valuing their educations more.

The large changes when we add education level reflect the reality that people's average levels of education differ across racial and ethnic groups and that those with higher levels of education tend to report higher satisfaction. But large differences remain even after including controls for the college

attended, indicating this is not merely about segregation across colleges. Rather, students attending the same college are experiencing their educations in vastly different ways. An important next step is studying the colleges that are making their campuses equitable environments and identifying and disseminating their best practices.

FIGURE 11
Differences in Aggregate Satisfaction Measures, Adjusted for Covariates
All students



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Sources: Strada-Gallup Education Survey, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, and the US Department of Education.

Note: The y-axis depicts the estimated coefficient for each racial or ethnic group.

Conclusion

Although we find there has been a general decrease in students' ratings of the quality of their education, ratings have been on the rise for those who attended college within the most recent decade.

Acknowledging that students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds can experience the same institution in vastly different ways, we find that Black and Hispanic students appear to be more satisfied with their college experiences when we take individual and college characteristics into consideration.

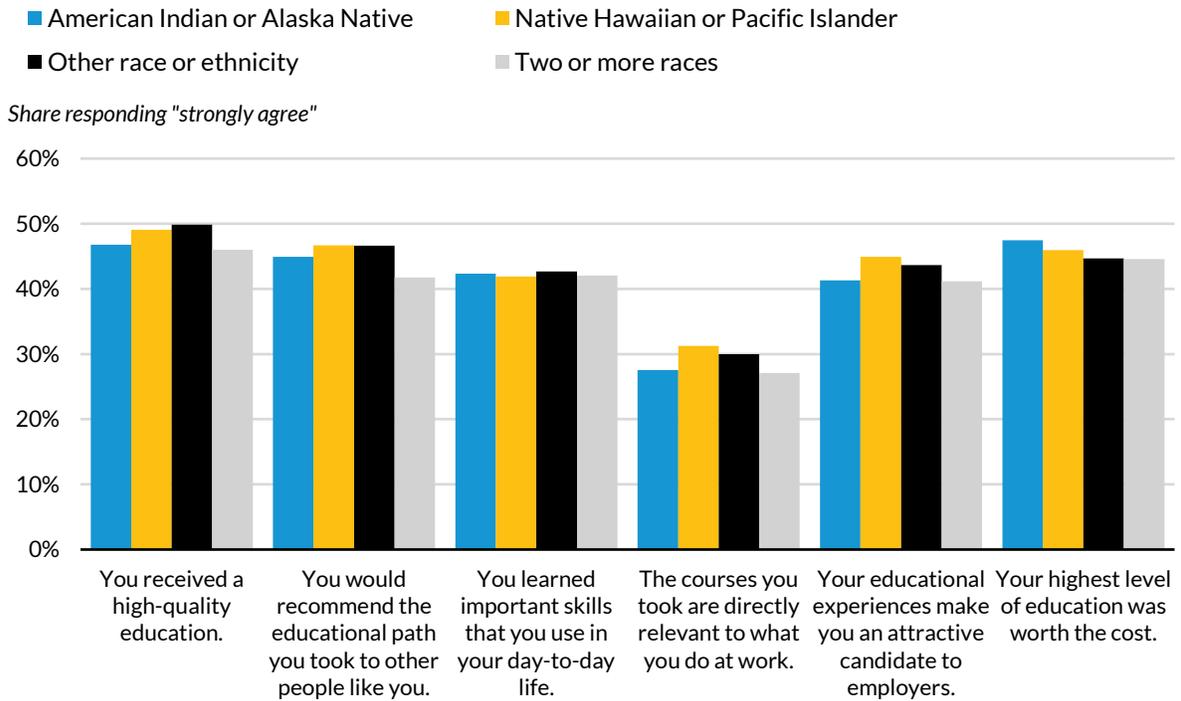
Our findings reinforce the need to deepen our exploration of college “success” measures beyond the average student. By examining racial and ethnic differences, we can demonstrate strong variation in the ways institutional characteristics and students’ experiences relate to their perceptions of college quality. Significant work is still needed, though, before these measures of students’ experiences can be integrated into larger policy measures of college quality.

Appendix. Additional Figures

FIGURE A.1

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

All students



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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

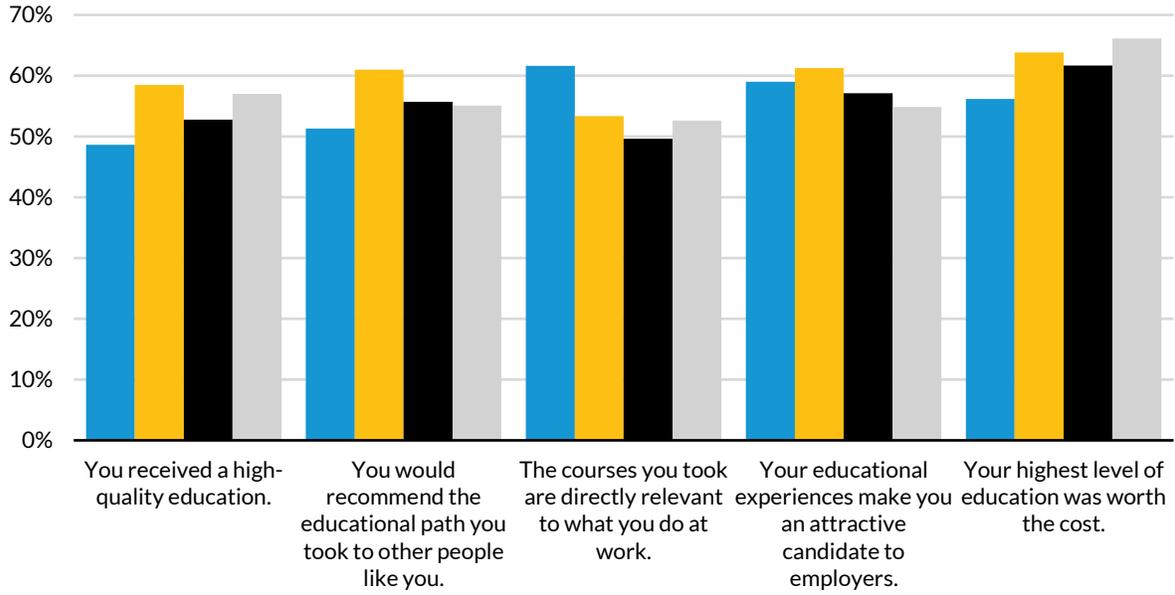
FIGURE A.2

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those who attended a technical college

■ Asian ■ Black ■ Hispanic ■ White

Share responding "strongly agree"



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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

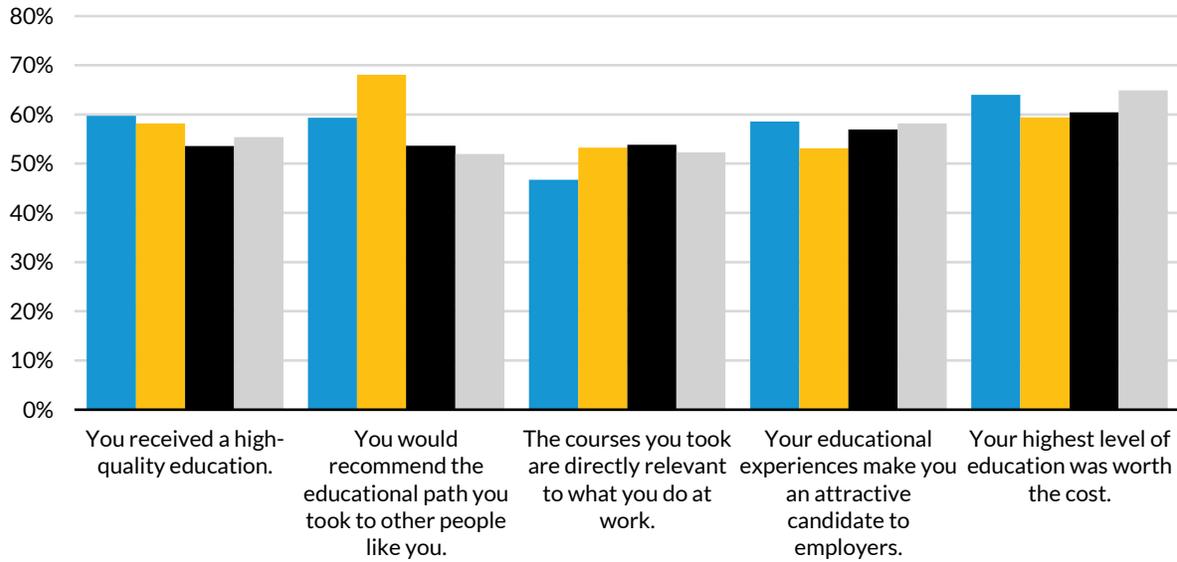
FIGURE A.3

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those who attended a technical college

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other race or ethnicity
- Two or more races

Share responding "strongly agree"



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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

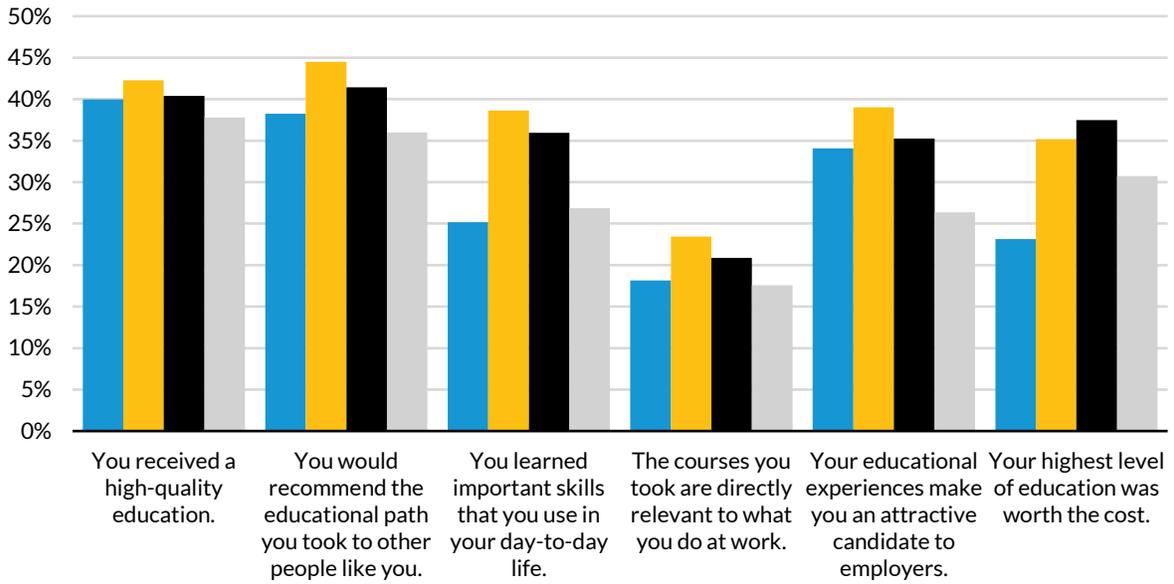
FIGURE A.4

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those with some college

■ Asian ■ Black ■ Hispanic ■ White

Share responding "strongly agree"



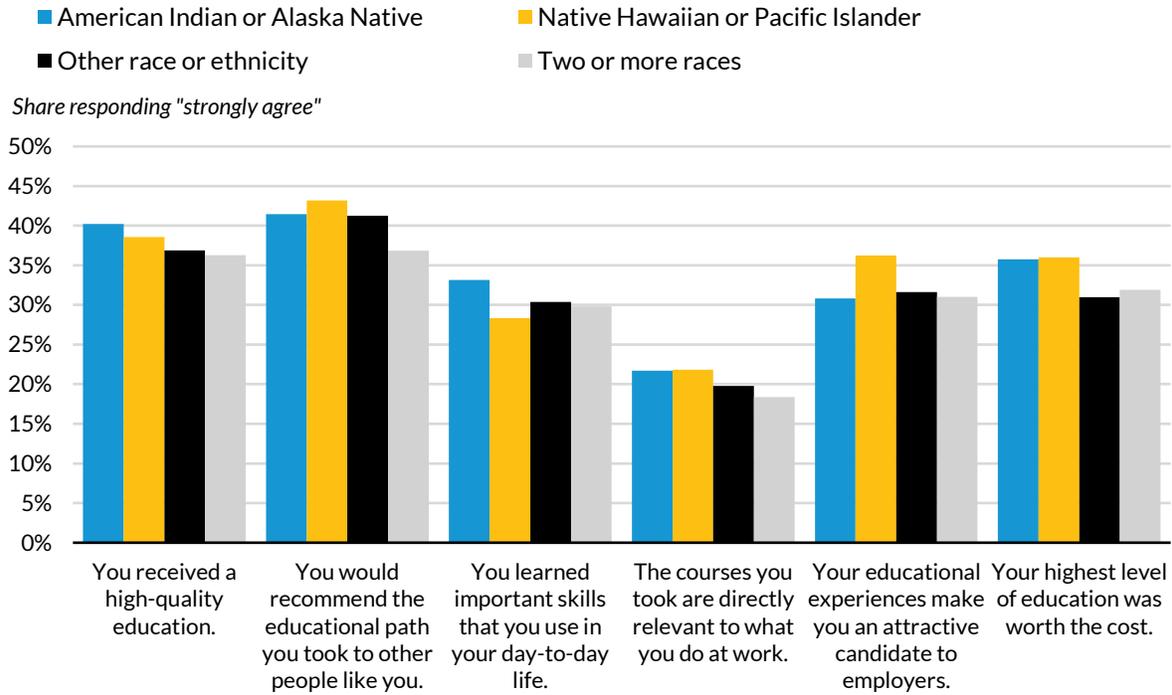
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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

FIGURE A.5

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those with some college



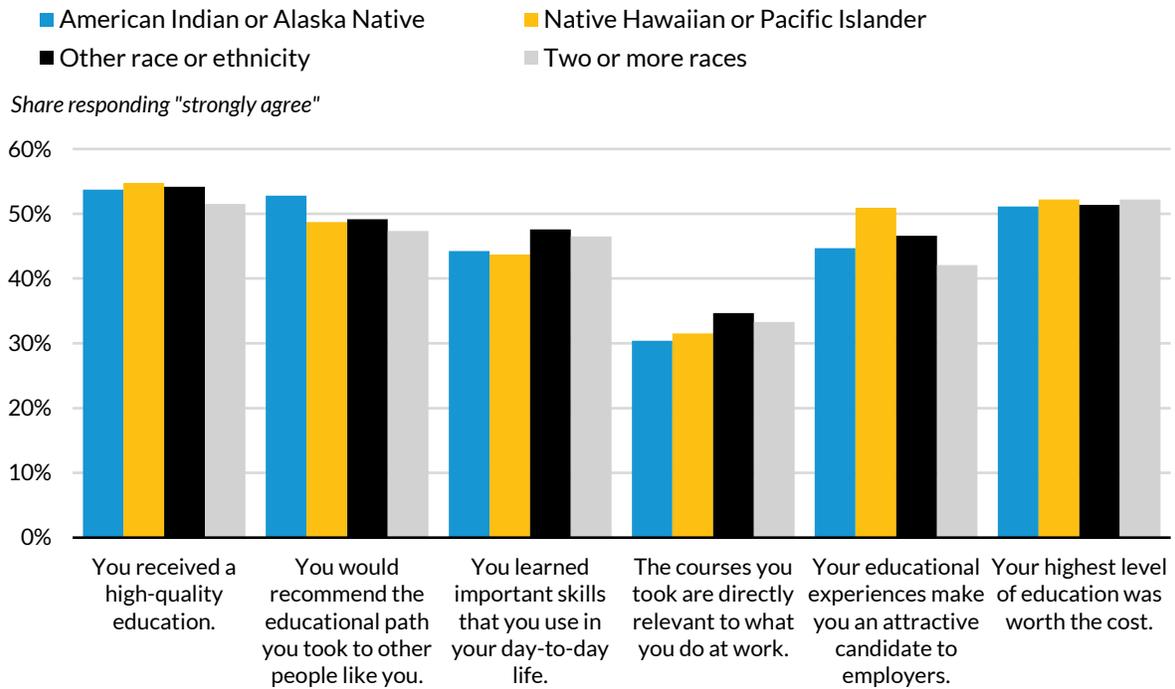
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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

FIGURE A.6

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those with an associate's degree



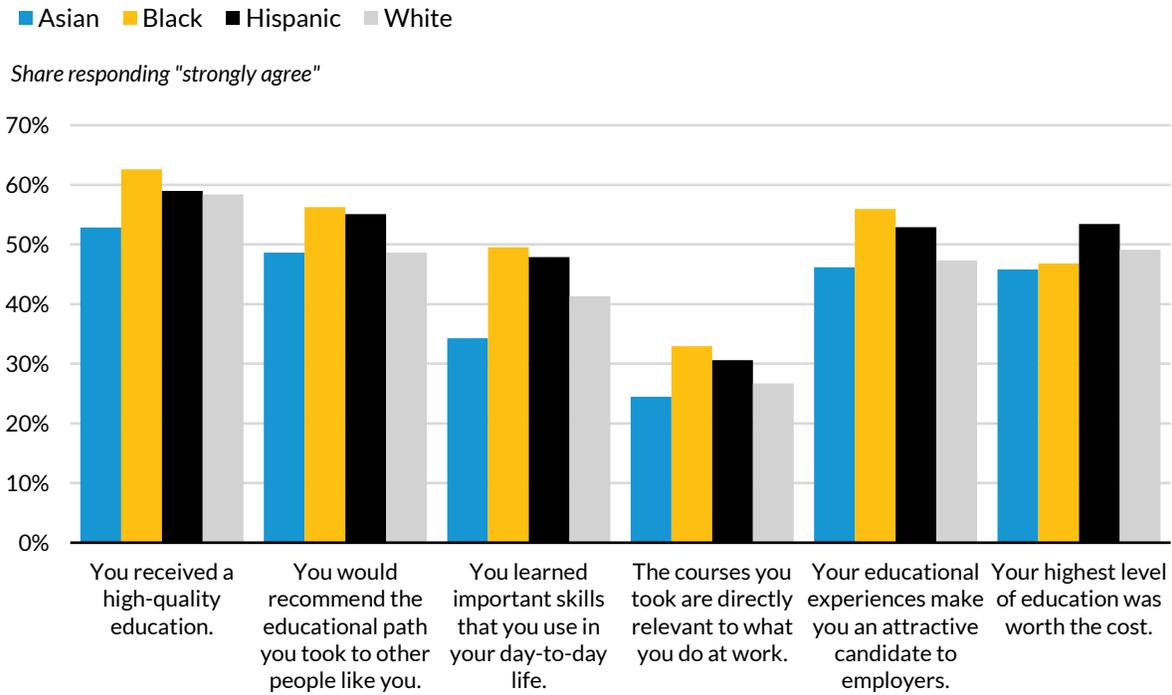
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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

FIGURE A.7

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those with a bachelor's degree



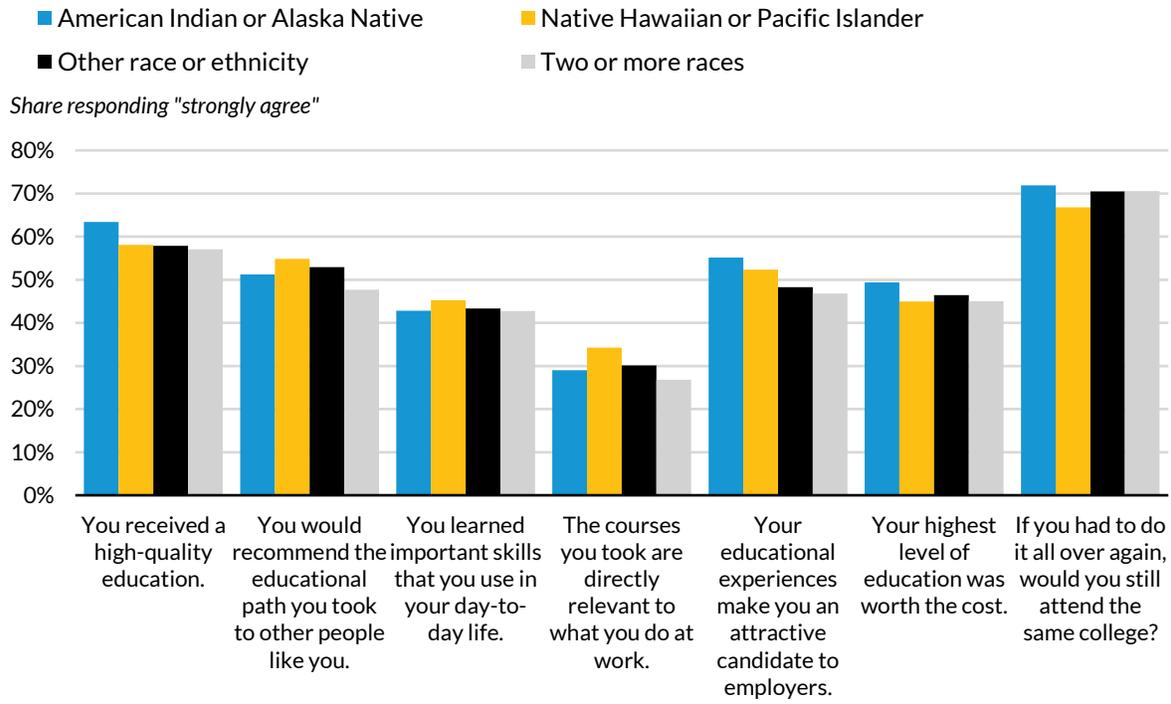
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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

FIGURE A.8

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those with a bachelor's degree



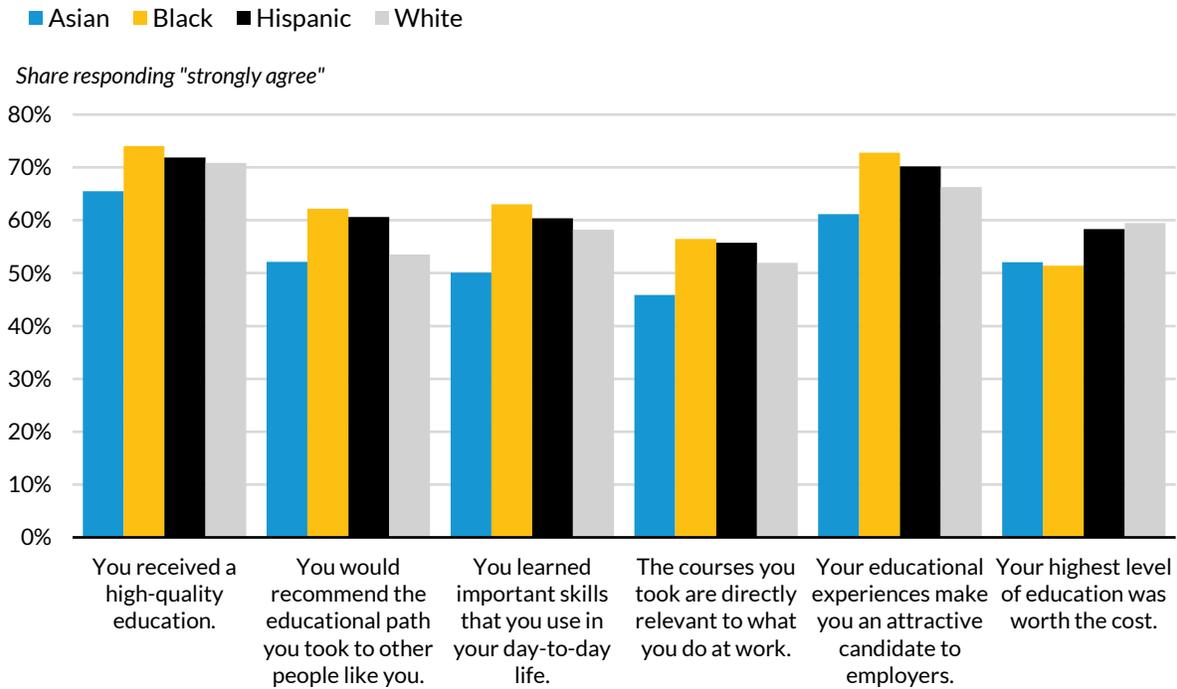
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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

FIGURE A.9

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those with a graduate degree



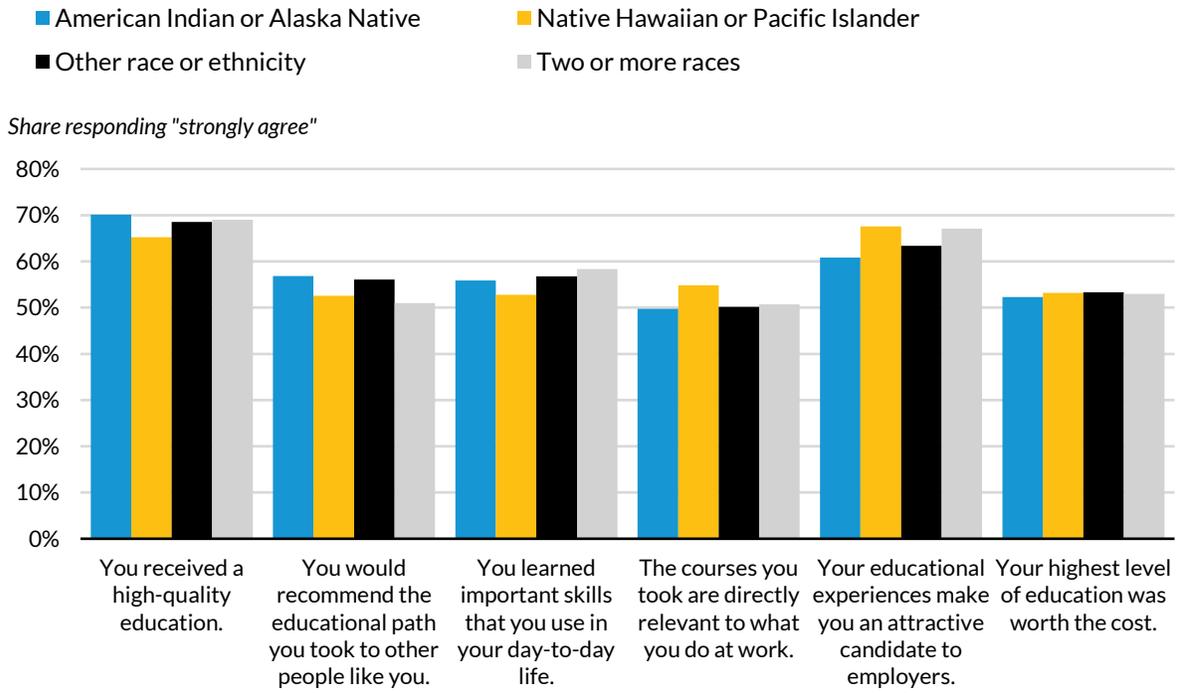
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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

FIGURE A.10

Ratings of College Satisfaction, by Race or Ethnicity

Among those with a graduate degree



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Source: Strada-Gallup Education Survey.

Notes

- ¹ We focus on mission-driven MSIs because of research suggesting a material difference between their campus climates and the average enrollment-driven MSI. The primary mission-driven MSIs are HBCUs and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs). Because of the small sample size for TCUs in the data, we focus solely on HBCUs in this report.
- ² The “index” captures the first component and the only component with an eigenvalue greater than 1.
- ³ In some cases, we create an additional category for “question not asked,” such as for amount borrowed, to maintain sufficient sample sizes.

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