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## Enhancing Emotional Safety in a Graduate School Setting

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### ABSTRACT

In the United States, racial disparities in education can be seen in rates of graduation from high school through doctoral programs, with People of Color reporting rates that are significantly lower than their White peers. Academic success has been significantly predicted in prior research by the support of teaching staff. Our Safety in the Classroom (SITC) program was developed to close the support gap for several different often-marginalized groups within graduate school classes in psychology at a university in southern California. Students within racial, religious, and sexual orientation minority groups reported greater perceptions of prejudice when compared to their White peers. These results were achieved without undermining the students' belief in their own ability to negotiate over or confront problems in the classroom. Expanded use and evaluation of the SITC program could contribute to the growing literature on academic success and achievement among minority group members, which provides one possible tool for helping to close the support gap.

### Keywords

Graduate psychology safety, Microaggression, Classroom

### INTRODUCTION

Although Critical Race Theory has become a political flash point (Ladson-Billings, 2021), the overarching idea that race, racism, and power of predominantly White institutions shape African American students' abilities to pursue graduate level education is widely accepted in academia (Allen et al., 2018; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). People of color continue to encounter systemic barriers that limit their access to and success in higher education. Anti-affirmative action legal challenges, state referendums, and societal constructs such as attitudes and perceptions toward minority cultures are seen by many to perpetuate limits on access to graduate education (Allen et al., 2018; Posselt et al., 2012). Legislation such as California's Proposition 209 and Michigan's Proposal 2 forbade race-conscious admission policies in universities, while judicial decisions such as *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, *Hopwood v. The University of Texas Law School*, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, and *Grutter v. Bollinger* set complicated limits for universities in other states regarding the use of race as an admission factor.

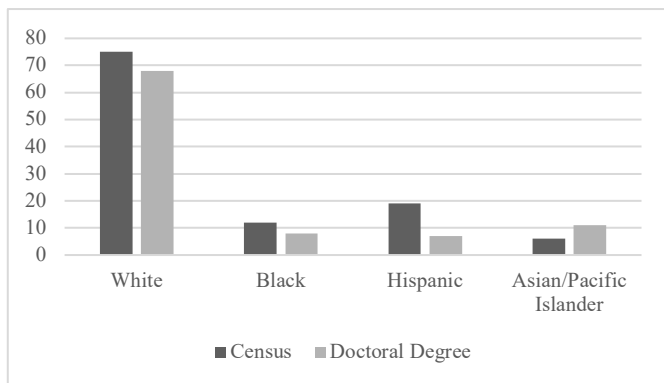
To better understand this issue, it is helpful to consider how minority students are being left behind in terms of graduation rates. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (de Brey et al., 2019), in comparison to their White peers, people of color were at a substantially higher risk of not receiving their high school diplomas. State graduation rates for Black students ranged from 66% (Wyoming) to 88%

(Alabama), with a national rate of 81.1%. High school graduation rates for White students ranged from 81% (Arizona) to 94% (Wisconsin), with an overall rate of 90.2%. Six-year college graduation rates were 64% for White students and 40% for Black students.

There are signs of some limited positive change. Over the course of a decade (2005-2015), the relative percentage of all master's degrees earned by Black and Hispanic students increased by 3%, while the relative rate of master's degrees earned by White students over this period decreased by 8% (McFarland et al., 2017). During the same period, doctoral degrees that Black and Hispanic students earned increased by 2% while the percentage earned by White students decreased by 7% (McFarland et al.). Although the disparity has decreased, a significant gap remains in advanced degree completion rates for doctoral students (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Percentage Distribution of Doctoral Degrees by Race*



*Note.* Frequency data of doctoral degrees and racial data within the census data of United States citizens. U.S. Census Bureau (2019). Quick Facts: Race and Hispanic Origin. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/dashboard/US/PST045219>.

Compared to their white peers, college students of color face additional challenges. For example, students of color reported more negative race-related experiences and issues regarding a sense of belongingness (Clark et al., 2012; Williams, 2000; Williams, 2002), an experience echoed by other (sexual, religious) marginalized groups. In a study exploring sexual minority students' overall perceptions of campus climate, sexual minority students were more likely to perceive the campus climate as "chilly," were less likely to feel comfortable with the classroom climate, and were more likely to consider leaving the institution (Rankin et al., 2010). Research has also found sexual minority students to be more likely to perceive the campus climate as poorer due to unfair treatment by heterosexual students and faculty (Tetreault et al., 2013; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Sexual minority students reported more harassment on campus than did their heterosexual peers, with some students reporting experiences of clear statements of hostility and prejudice towards sexual minorities (Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Religion-based discrimination is less

frequently studied, but it is notable that the large probability-based panel recruited by Gallup in 2019 found that 17.6% of Jewish students and 30.7% of Muslim students (as compared to 6.5% of Christian students) reported having an experience of "being treated unfairly because of your religion" (Scheitle et al., 2020).

Students of color also consistently reported experiences in academic settings of harassment (Rankin & Reason, 2005), discrimination (Stevens et al., 2018), and racial microaggressions (Clark et al., 2012; Mills, 2020). Students of color exposed to more negative race-related experiences were less likely to perceive a sense of social support in the academic environment (Clark et al., 2012; Williams, 2002). Black students were four times more likely to report a negative race-related experience than were their peers from other ethnic backgrounds (Stevens et al., 2018), and they endorsed fewer positive perceptions of the academic and social environment (Williams, 2002). Black students also reported more administrative concerns, such as registration and funding issues (Williams, 2000). Some results again were promising, such as equal ratings across racial groups for support by faculty advisors. Still, differences remained for the students' ratings of the social and academic environment in which they functioned daily. In a recent publication, Woods et al. (2021) analyzed the graduate students' concerns as "racial battle fatigue," noting that Black students experienced these stressors more often in the classroom than in direct advisee or supervisee roles. This is one of the only publications on the topic, and it is limited in generalizability due to nonrandom snowball sampling.

Differences in the experience of social environments by marginalized and nonmarginalized groups are not without cost. Research has highlighted a significant and positive correlation between the experience of microaggressions and traumatic stress, with the accumulation of microaggressions (or covert discrimination) being equal to or even more distressing than overt discrimination (Nadal et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2018). Students of color further indicate that these experiences of microaggressions are associated with poorer overall mental health, including increased anxiety, suicidal ideation, depression, and binge drinking (Blume et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2019; O'Keefe et al., 2015; Torres-Harding et al., 2020). Additionally, ongoing negative race-related experiences or microaggressions can increase posttraumatic stress disorder symptomology, as individuals may become more hypervigilant or engage in avoidance behaviors in an attempt to reduce the occurrence of these negative experiences (Williams et al., 2018). In surveys of undergraduate and doctoral programs, students of color reported that these negative experiences in academic environments led to decreased academic performance (Stevens et al., 2018; Williams, 2000). Such experiences thus present institutional challenges for the retention and recruitment of students of color.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE SAFETY IN THE CLASSROOM PROGRAM

It is widely believed that felt support from a mentor can predict academic success (D'Amico & Fruiht, 2020; Carpenter et al., 2015; DeCastro et al., 2013). D'Amico and Fruiht (2020) showed that on-campus support, particularly from instructors, significantly predicted academic outcomes and perceived ability to succeed in college. The researchers also found indications of a "support gap," in which students from underrepresented ethnic minorities were more likely to report a lack of support from educators on campus. Such reports may stem from an actual lack of support or from perceptions of lack of support generated by a history of exposure to systematic racism (Kennedy et al., 2007). If we assume that professors typically do value productive learning experiences for their students, it is useful to consider ways in which changes in the learning environment might alter the power dynamics between mentor and mentee, or teacher and student.

The Safety in the Classroom (SITC) program was created to reduce the power differential between students and educators within the graduate school setting. This program was first developed through an alliance between the campus (student-run) Association of Black Psychologists and the Trauma Research Institute, receiving support from the university's leadership. In the initial brainstorming sessions, students of color reported that they were often averse to reporting concerns that they felt might alter the dynamic between students and instructors. For example, an instructor may have used language that the student found offensive, or perhaps the student felt pressured to conform to particular views expressed in the classroom. The comments were not complaints about the general tenor of the institution. Students frequently note the presence of microaggressions in otherwise healthy institutions committed to inclusion and diversity (Harwood et al., 2015); however, they are often uncomfortable sharing their concerns directly with an instructor, even if they feel that the instructor's motives are benign. In addition, due to the process by which course evaluations are conducted in most institutions, faculty do not receive feedback about the students' perceptions until after the term is over.

Given these considerations, the extant system is largely the worst of both worlds. Faculty do not receive critiques until it is too late to change the course, and these critiques may be confusing or even uninterpretable without access to their authors. Further, feedback provided at the end of the term might not be seen as personally useful for the student evaluator; therefore, motivation may shift from a desire to offer a useful critique to the wish to anonymously punish the authority figure who made a careless remark. One of the authors (CD), as head of a faculty evaluation and promotion committee for many years, has often sat with instructors as they tried to take in confusing, anonymous student statements that they had been somehow offensive, unclear, or unsupportive in their classrooms. Other authors have been student leaders or leaders

of the minority coalitions within the school (JA, RJ, and TG) who have listened to their colleagues express their distress about an upsetting faculty comment that was never disclosed to or discussed with the offending instructor.

Students in the present system thus may be left feeling unmotivated to provide helpful feedback, and faculty cannot receive information in time to make necessary changes. Additionally, students may get no practice providing constructive feedback, as the risk of being identified may be too high. The SITC program was developed to remedy these issues by (a) allowing faculty to receive feedback in a more useful, understandable, and time-relevant manner and (b) establishing a reasonable balance between encouraging student responsibility and protecting student vulnerabilities.

## SITC PROGRAM OUTLINE

The central feature of the SITC program was the designation of a student liaison within each course who was responsible for facilitating communication between students and the instructor for that particular course. A registrar or program assistant randomly chose these liaisons from each class. Prospective liaisons could refuse the role, in which case another student would be selected. Once selected, the name of the student was provided to the professor. Twice per semester, the liaisons were tasked with emailing their classmates to solicit feedback on how the students perceived the class and the instructor. Feedback was freeform and could be structural (e.g., "I didn't understand the grading process for the last paper") or procedural (e.g., "The teacher's discussion of topic x made me uncomfortable for reason y"). Students could choose to provide feedback to the liaison or directly to the instructor. Liaisons were tasked with confidentially reporting to the instructor any substantive issues and/or issues reported by multiple students. This simple process provided students the option of a middle path between silence and direct interaction with the instructor. Further, the liaisons could provide the feedback from a neutral stance, if they chose, simply reporting the concern of another student. To collect feedback on how students perceived the program, students were asked to fill out a brief evaluation of their experience at the end of the semester.

## INITIAL RESISTANCE TO THE SITC PROGRAM

Although there was strong support for the program from several internal diversity-centered or trauma-centered groups, there were also sources of resistance to the project. Some of the objections were said to be in service of protecting minority groups, although they were voiced only by individuals outside those groups. Generally, the argument was that, despite the university's diverse community, students who raised classroom concerns could potentially be identified by the study's research staff (and, thus, confidentiality could not be guaranteed). To meet this criticism, the collected demographics were changed to allow individuals to identify only if they were or were not Caucasian or were or were not a member of a

minority religious/sexual community. This procedure permitted fuller de-identification of the data.

A concern voiced by several faculty in two initial faculty forums was that the information gathered by the liaisons would be available to the SITC project's faculty supervisor; this instructor (CD) was also a member of the faculty evaluation panel of the school. Thus, some faculty members were apprehensive that data from the project potentially could be used in assessing faculty performance. To allay this concern, instructions for the liaison were modified so that the SITC supervisor was copied only if the liaison felt that the concern was grave and/or that the initial meeting between the liaison and instructor had been unsuccessful. For instance, accusations of harassment or grade tampering were elevated by the liaisons and directly managed by the SITC supervisor, who referred them to the correct university procedures.

Two additional linked concerns stemmed from a general resistance to the concept of "safe space." Several instructors cited recent research outlining the perceived negative effects of creating processes or places that produce "safety" for people of color (e.g., Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018), arguing that the role of the university is to give free expression to all voices, regardless of social acceptability. These faculty argued that the program's existence infantilized students by suggesting that they were too fragile to face the faculty themselves, noting that microaggressions, if any, were not or should not typically be harmful or distressing.

A set of more specific objections arose from "trigger warning" research, i.e., studies of the effect of warning students of potentially upsetting class content. Some faculty argued that trigger warning research has shown that few students experience the distress undergirding the supposed need for such warnings (Boysen et al., 2018). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that such statements increase students' beliefs in the need for trigger warnings (Boysen et al., 2018, 2019). Similarly, some faculty were concerned that the SITC program might foster a belief that communication with instructors had to go through the liaisons, thus undermining existing communication. In response to these concerns, a question was added to the end-of-term evaluation to assess whether students would feel comfortable in the future discussing an instructor's perceived insensitive remark directly with that instructor, testing the critics' prediction that the liaison group (compared to the control) would be less likely to agree.

In 2018, the program was tested in 24 classrooms. Eight of the 24 courses were taught by faculty of color, which is in keeping with University norms. The authors hypothesized that the liaison group would report greater comfort in the classroom than the control group. The hypothesis of concerned faculty that the program would undermine future willingness to speak directly to faculty was also tested. Effect sizes were expected to be larger among under-represented racial minorities. Data were collected regarding gender and marginalized sexual minorities; however, *n*'s were not expected to be large enough for subgroup

analyses. Given the cohort respect for the program's leaders, representatives of the Student Division of the Association of Black Psychologists, a high cooperation rate was expected for the survey. Original procedures called for three reminders over a two week period or until 55% or more of the students had responded. This would yield a minimum sample size of 76, equivalent to a power of .8 with a moderate eta square equal to .10.

## METHODS

The present study aimed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from graduate students on the prevalence of microaggressions and the effectiveness of the SITC program. Quantitative data concerned the prevalence of microaggressions in the classroom and perception as to comfort in discussing controversial viewpoints in the classroom, and qualitative data concerned suggestions regarding improving the effectiveness of the program. The study was judged to be in the exempt category for IRB purposes, given that it was an evaluation of a standard educational process in place for all students with protections against any adverse outcome on any student's ability to learn.

## PARTICIPANTS

Twenty-four classes were randomly chosen from more than 200 available in the Spring 2018 semester. Ten courses were foundational psychology courses (e.g., Research Methods, Developmental, History and Systems, Social Psychology), eight courses were clinical electives (e.g., Group or Child Psychotherapy, Introduction to Psychotherapy), and six courses were multicultural or trauma electives (e.g., Multicultural Psychology, Trauma and Diversity). One faculty member randomized into the program was excluded, as the instructor was one of two who strongly objected to the SITC program (which was not then an official part of the curriculum procedures). The classes were randomly assigned to a liaison group and a comparison group without a liaison. The types of classes randomly chosen are representative of the courses taken by our students, with the exception of oversampling of the multicultural and trauma courses. The choice of courses was left to chance, but the oversampling of courses that might be seen as "triggering" was thought to be a strength of the sampling method. The current scientific literature does not support concerns that students should be protected from upsetting material covered in our trauma and multicultural courses in the form of discussions of, for instance, the long term effects of slavery and antisemitism (see the recent series of experiments and meta-analysis by Sanson et al., 2019). However, such courses certainly would provide a greater number of opportunities for discussion of controversial topics.

One hundred thirty-eight students (all enrolled students in any of the 24 classes) were asked to assess the program as part of a schoolwide evaluation, yielding a response rate of 67% ( $n = 93$ ), significantly above Wu et al.'s (2022) report of average response rates in unfunded studies (43%;  $\chi^2 = 16.93$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

Data were therefore collected from a total of 93 graduate students attending doctoral programs at the university (43 PhD and 49 PsyD students and one student who failed to state program). Of the respondents, 31 students had no liaison classes, 32 had one such class, 19 had two classes and 12 had three classes. Chi square tests revealed that students from liaison and non-liaison groups were equally likely to respond to the survey.

## PROCEDURE

At the beginning of the semester, one student in each class was randomly selected as the liaison for the class. The student was sent an email describing liaison duties (see supplemental materials for sample emails). The student was free to decline, in which case another student was randomly chosen. The stated objective of the liaison was to provide a buffer between the instructor and class to facilitate the discussion and amelioration of student concerns.

At weeks three and nine, the liaisons were asked to email students within their classes. (An example of this email is provided at Open Science Foundation's website, <https://osf.io/s5g4w>.) Students in the classes were not required to respond to the email. The liaison was asked to make a brief report to the class instructor at weeks four and 10, either by email or in person, detailing any concerns that students identified. The liaison was asked to report widespread concerns (e.g., "many students are confused about the paper requirements") and to represent students who believed minority positions were being misrepresented or obscured or that discriminatory behavior was taking place. The liaison did not need to defend the positions put forth by other students; the task of the liaison was to make the instructor aware so that the instructor could change behavior or provide students additional context. Complaints that alleged hate speech, exploitation of students, or other serious behaviors were to be escalated by the liaison to the Program Director. The liaison process was designed as a method to facilitate communication between students and instructors, with the understanding that both groups had benign motives and wished classes to function well. Templates for the letters explaining duties to the liaison and sample letters that may be used for liaisons to solicit student input are available at <https://osf.io/s5g4w>.

## EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

At the end of the term, students were asked questions in the following areas: the perceived frequency of offensive statements from program faculty in varying areas (disparaging comments about race, religion, and/or sexual orientation, rated as absent, heard once or twice, or heard more often in their graduate school careers); feedback on how the program functioned practically (receipt of emails, contact with liaison, whether the issue was resolved, rated yes/no); and self-report of overall satisfaction with the program, comfort at the institution, and comfort with future discussions with university professors (all rated on 5 point scales). Offensive statements were defined

subjectively, taking the following form: "During your time at the University, have you ever heard your professor say something in your opinion that would be offensive to members of ethnic/racial minorities?" Students also were asked to self-identify as members of religious minorities (defined as members of marginalized religious groups), sexual minorities (defined as those other than cisgender heterosexuals), or racial minorities (defined as students of color). The language ("minorities") and definitions (e.g., "marginalized or cisgender") were developed by the identified groups both as members of the research team and in small group forums of 8 to 12 minority group members in conjunction with the student committee of the Association of Black Psychologists. A free response evaluation of the program also was solicited from those students in the liaison courses; students in other courses were provided a description of the program and also gave their recommendations as to its implementation. Although faculty were assured that their survey responses were confidential, an option of placing anonymous feedback in the program director's mailbox was provided for those who were less trusting in this assurance (in order to encourage critical comments from faculty, if any).

## RESULTS

### SAMPLE

The participants included 19 (20.4%) men and 74 (79.6%) women. Thirty-five students (37.6%) were in their first year of graduate school in clinical psychology PsyD or PhD programs, 27 (29%) were in their second year, and 31 (33.3%) were in their third year or higher. (Most coursework at this institution is completed in the first three years.) In the institution's diverse student body, 35.8% ( $n = 34$ ) identified as a student of color, 8.4% ( $n = 8$ ) as a religious minority, and 10.5% ( $n = 10$ ) as a sexual minority. Forty-seven students (50.5% of the sample) identified as White heterosexuals who were religiously unaffiliated or members of a Christian faith (defined as a majority). Majority members, students of color, and sexual minorities were equally likely to be in a class with or without a liaison. In contrast, the small number of religious minorities were more likely to be in a liaison class (Chi square = 4.38,  $p < .05$ ). Religious and sexual minority status were not used as separate predictors, given low sample sizes for these groups, but comparisons between students of color and White groups were conducted.

### PREVALENCE OF CONCERNING STATEMENTS

Despite the strong focus on diversity and inclusion in the institution, a majority of students (50.5%;  $n = 47$ ) reported at least one instance in which they had heard a comment that they felt might be offensive to members of a racial, religious, or sexual minority. Specific results are given in Table 1. The greatest number of statements perceived as offensive referred to racial minorities (45.6%,  $n = 42$ , heard such a statement), with lower prevalence rates for statements regarding religious

or sexual minorities (25.8% and 38.6%,  $n$ 's = 24 and 35, respectively).

**Table 1**

*Number of Students Reporting Problematic Comments, Crossed with Gender and Racial Status*

Remark content	Gender		Chi <sup>2</sup>	SOC	Racial Status	
	Male	Female			Caucasian	Chi <sup>2</sup>
Religion	9 (47.4%)	44 (59.5%)	.34	21 (61.8%)	32 (54.2%)	.48
Sexuality	5 (26.3%)	19 (25.7%)	.96	9 (26.5%)	15 (25.4%)	.01
Race	2 (10.5%)	33 (44.6%)	7.48**	13 (38.2%)	22 (37.3%)	.01
Any remark	7 (36.8%)	35 (47.3%)	.67	19 (55.9%)	23 (29.0%)	2.48
Frequent remarks	1 (5.3%)	20 (27.0%)	4.10*	10 (29.4%)	11 (18.6%)	1.43

Note. SOC = students of color. \*\*  $p < .01$ . Frequent remarks = more than once or twice.

Report of having heard at least one statement correlated with the length of time in the program ( $r = .34, p < .01$ ). Therefore, time in the program was controlled in subsequent analyses. Approximately one fifth of the sample (22.6%;  $n = 21$ ) reported hearing problematic statements more than once or twice. Using a stepwise logistic regression, gender and student of color status (controlling for time in program) predicted whether a student belonged to this more sensitive subsample, with more problematic statements reported by students of color and by women (Chi Square = 10.59, Nagelkerke R Square = .16,  $p = .02$ ). Splitting by gender, potentially offensive statements of any type were noted by 47.4% of males ( $n = 9$ ) and 59.5% of females ( $n = 44$ ). Racially insensitive statements were reported by 54.5% ( $n = 18$ ) of students of color and 39% ( $n = 23$ ) of White students. Female students were also significantly more likely to report statements thought to be problematic regarding sexual minorities ( $\chi^2 = 7.48, p = .01$ ).

### EFFECTS OF THE LIAISON PROCESS

Of the 62 students in the liaison classes, two students provided feedback that they were unaware of the program and had not participated. Of the 60 remaining students, 16 (27%) stated that they used the program at least once to pass on a comment to the instructor. In 11 of the 16 situations (68.75%), students reported that the liaison resolved the situation to their satisfaction. When asked about their comfort with the support of the university for their achievement (and controlling for years in the program), students in the liaison group gave a higher rating ( $M = 4.25, SD = 0.82$ ) than did those in non-liaison groups ( $M = 3.81, SD = 1.30; F[1, 88] = 3.98, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$ ). Although the  $n$  was smaller, rendering the effect marginal ( $F[1, 30] = 3.18, p = .08$ ), the effect size for the students of color group alone was twice as large ( $\eta^2 = .096$ ). Of note, none of the 19 students of color in the liaison program gave one of the two lowest ratings (indicating lack of comfort with the overall

support by the University), while 5 of the 14 students of color in the no liaison group gave such ratings ( $\chi^2 = 7.62, p < .01$ ). The sexual and religious minority groups were too small to be separately analyzed.

Contrary to critics' fears, the program did not undermine the students' belief that they could approach an instructor independently if a problematic situation arose. In fact, 43.3% of students in the liaison program ( $n = 26$ ) and 34.5% ( $n = 11$ ) in the non-liaison group stated that if they heard a questionable or offensive remark in the future from an instructor (in a class without a liaison), they would attempt to discuss it directly. Again, the effect was larger for the minority students. Here, 57.9% ( $n = 11$ ) of the students of color in the liaison group stated that they would approach an instructor in the future, compared to only 28.6% ( $n = 4$ ) of the students of color in the non-liaison group. These effects are not only nonsignificant but are in the opposite direction of the critics' hypotheses. Overall, 66% of the total student sample stated that they would prefer to speak to a liaison about a sensitive matter if one were available to facilitate discussion with the instructor.

### QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Most students (85%) reported support for the program. When specifically asked if the program was infantilizing, only one of the 93 students agreed. Twenty-six students overall made optional positive comments in the free response, while thirteen made negative or neutral comments. Themes within positive statements and all negative comments are provided in Table 2. Themes were consensually developed by three raters and independently coded into categories (with a .92 generalized kappa) by three additional raters. Negative comments tended to suggest changes in the structure of the process or question whether the liaison had sufficient



power. Only one student participant was overtly hostile to the program itself. The most common positive comments were praise of the program as a stepping stone to professionalism and praise for the institution itself in turning words (mission statements, diversity value statements) into action. As noted by some of the project’s promoters among the students, the latter comments echo the recent commitment of the American Psychological Association, which, in addition to publishing an apology for past racist actions (APA, 2021), has promised self-examination and action.

Faculty comments were solicited by email with the additional option of anonymous feedback by a note in the project director’s mailbox. Nine faculty responded positively, with one faculty noting that although he or she had been initially negative, the program’s success had elicited a change in attitude through the process.

**Table 2**

*Themes of Positive and Negative Student Comments about the SITC Program*

	Positive comments
General praise	10
Acknowledgment of personal help	2
Urging administration to implement soon or praise for turning words into action	9
Acknowledgement of aid with power differential	5
	Negative comments
No need	3
Student concern not resolved	2
Concern about confidentiality	3
Concern about inappropriate complaints	2
General administrative concerns	1
Infantilizing of students	1
Perceived overconcern with minority and gender issues by administration	1

*Note.* Comments may include more than one theme.

## DISCUSSION

In recent years, there has been much debate—but relatively few studies—about efforts to promote emotional safety in the classroom. The bulk of the literature on the topic questions the idea that such efforts are helpful, with arguments along the lines of “if students succeeded in creating bubbles of intellectual safety in college, they would set themselves up for even greater anxiety and conflict after graduation, when they will certainly encounter many more people with more extreme views” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 9). Critics of safe spaces warn that avoidance of reminders maintains rather than ameliorates symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., McNally, 2016). Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) introduce Taleb’s (2012) concept of *anti-fragility* in this context, arguing

that “muscles, bones, and children” are anti-fragile, meaning that “they require stressors and challenges in order to learn to adapt and grow” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 23).

While recognizing that it is certainly possible to overdo provisions designed to provide greater safety, there are positive aspects to a safe space process. Those who favor such processes emphasize the wish to “scaffold and support” (Harless, 2018) students rather than protect them from challenging information. To use Lukianoff and Haidt’s muscle analogy, the use of weights does build muscle by stressing the system, but it is still widely regarded as useful to begin a weight-lifting regimen with a spotter, a gradual plan to increase weights over time, and effective coaching. Several of the students in the initial program evaluation mentioned that they were not yet professionals but professionals-in-training, and they appreciated the guidance and support in learning a method for discussing inappropriate behavior in a process with built-in buffers.

The use of a purposive sampling method with support of the University in evaluating this program allowed collection of data with increased ecological validity and somewhat larger samples than prior studies of graduate psychology students (Koch et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). The inclusion of multiple minority group members on our development and recruitment team also likely contributed to our high response rate within both minority and majority students. To our knowledge, this is also the first experimental study of an intervention aimed at increasing the classroom comfort of diverse graduate students. This program also comes at a critical time for discussing American approaches to discrimination and stereotyping. Several federal and state statutes have forbidden or restricted training that puts forth evidence for systemic racism, considering the argument that Whites benefit from racism against Blacks, for instance, to be a divisive and anti-American idea. Graduate schools are now even more central in providing a space to discuss racism and sexism, along with their causes and consequences.

## PRIMARY FINDINGS

The most important finding of the study was that the liaison procedure *did* increase comfort and willingness to engage for the students who went through the experience. Students, and in particular minority students, were more likely to state that they would now be more comfortable participating in a discussion with an instructor who initially appeared to have been making a racist, homophobic, or otherwise unacceptable statement. It is important to note that 68.75% of these incidents were resolved completely through the liaison process, suggesting that some portion of them were indeed minor (or even misunderstandings). Yet these incidents did appear to be microaggressions to the students, at least initially. The evidence here supports the conclusion that students were using the SITC program to enhance the likelihood of resolution, not to avoid disagreement entirely.

Although overall numbers of perceived offensive statements were low—arguing against an oversensitivity in our sample—

women reported higher rates of perceived problem statements. Similarly, in a study exploring negative race-related experiences of graduate students, Clarke et al. (2012) reported overall low levels of microaggressions. Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) cite instances in which legitimate disagreements could occur over whether a statement should be deemed problematic in an academic setting. This may indeed be true for a subgroup of our microaggression examples. Other inappropriate remarks, however, were likely not noticed by our male (and particularly our White male) students, perhaps because they were less attuned to the issues of race or orientation, having fewer experiences of demeaning references to their identities. This is in keeping with the large body of data showing lower recognition of racism and sexism by White males compared to other groups (Kirkman et al., 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2022). Arguably, the remaining levels of disagreement on the prevalence of concerning statements demonstrate the need for instructors to increase their awareness of their role in perpetrating microaggressions, as well as the provision of skills training for them to learn to facilitate useful discussion in classroom settings (Wong & Jones, 2018).

The qualitative findings reinforce the findings of survey studies on the experiences of students of color within graduate schools. Evans et al. (2017) were struck by the “substantial proportion” of their 21 graduate students of color who provided “consistent reports of lip service to diversity [and] surface level discourse” (p. 27). The participants in this study frequently echoed the same values in praising the university for “turning words into action,” that is, thinking deeply about the structural changes that might shore up the leaky pipeline of Black and Hispanic achievement. Further, the SITC was designed with the recognition that confrontation of traumagenic authority—the harassing supervisor, the demeaning advisor, the misguided instructor—is a skill set that is not automatically available to most individuals (see the seminal work of Darley and Latané, 1968). Most individuals who did use the liaison system had a successful experience of making a positive difference through intervention, an experience that may serve them well professionally.

In general, the student liaison program appeared to provide a valuable mechanism that allowed faculty to receive feedback from students regarding the classroom climate. In a setting where minority students may feel isolated from their peers or uncomfortable directly addressing racial negativity or heterosexual bias in a classroom, the student liaison program potentially increases student autonomy in addressing discomfort issues while advising faculty of problems in the classroom as they occur.

## LIMITATIONS

To protect confidentiality, students were not asked specifics about their racial identity, sexual identity, or religious subgroup. Some limitations did exist in our ability to create ideal conditions of confidentiality for students within the classroom, however, given the relatively small size of graduate

classrooms. When providing feedback within a small community, there is a potential risk that the individual providing feedback may be identifiable based on the nature of their reported concerns. For example, a sole African American student in a class of ten students might be assumed responsible for reporting the occurrence of a microaggression toward a person of color. As a result, future research utilizing this protocol within larger and more diverse classrooms might be important. Furthermore, the study findings were generated from a total of 93 PhD and PsyD students from a single university. It could be argued that the generalizability of our findings may be limited, given the less traditional and more diverse nature of Southern California. That said, it should be noted that the diversity of this particular graduate school goes beyond race, religion, and orientation; most students entering the school at any given year are not Southern California natives. Further, the support for the program by students of color was clear, both in the statistical analyses and through their later development of presentations to faculty to encourage acceptance of the procedure as a permanent part of the university processes.

While the SITC study collected data on the frequency of disparaging comments, data were not collected on the negative effect these comments may have had on students. Again, this limitation was a result of efforts to preserve anonymity. The few comments that reached more official channels (perhaps because the student repeated the comment in the final course evaluation) varied in the degree of offense reported. These comments included a reference to an adjunct instructor who publicly informed a gay student that she was going to hell, a faculty member who devoted one week of the semester to the writings of female psychologists (implying, in the students’ opinion, the rarity of high-quality female writing), and a faculty member who made assumptions about the political affiliation of a student based on race. Future research could include information about the intensity of emotions experienced by students after problematic comments in the classroom. Within graduate programs in psychology, where students work more closely with peers and faculty than may be true for undergraduate programs, it would be important to explore how these comments impact student likelihood of achieving graduation, publication, and other measures of success.

The SITC program examined the occurrence of racially, sexually, and religiously disparaging comments by instructors within courses at a university campus in California. The study did not include an analysis of comments regarding other underrepresented subgroups (e.g., those with visual or hearing impairments) to which students may have been exposed. To continue to promote inclusivity among all students, it is important to broaden the focus of our efforts.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings in this pilot project broadly highlight that graduate students from racial, religious, and sexual minority backgrounds reported increased perceptions of prejudice in classroom settings when compared to their White heterosexual

peers. However, through structural interventions using the SITC program, students were empowered to negotiate and address issues that arose in the classroom. The results demonstrate that, through the program's implementation, underrepresented students could experience enhanced comfort in the classroom. Such programs may decrease the institutional support gap, potentially affecting attrition and other measures of graduate success. Replications of the study might also be expanded to include more in-depth analysis of the collegiate and graduate experiences of sexual and religious minorities, as well as the experience of disabled students (whom we did not query in this investigation). The definition of religious minorities also could be expanded to include the growing conservative Christian community, who often vary in their beliefs about racial and sexual discrimination (Brown, 2009; Yancey & Kim, 2008) and may find themselves confronting attitudes among their college classmates or professors that they find offensive (Hyer & Hyer, 2008). Further, analysis of methods of resolving differences in perspectives on the role of race, religion, and gender in the presentation of academic material is increasingly important in an age of divisive rhetoric and expanding reach of hate groups through digital networks (Dunbar, 2022). The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in these analysis will aid researchers in integrating the voices and thoughts of others in our increasingly global community.

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