Racial Microaggressions and the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign:
Preliminary Analysis of Focus Groups with Students of Color Living in University Housing

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II. INTRODUCTION

The University of Illinois is committed to excellence in research, teaching, and public engagement. The university’s mission is to transform lives and to serve society by educating, creating knowledge, and putting knowledge to work within a framework of excellence. The University of Illinois serves the state, the nation, and the global market through innovation in research; prepares students to live in a global society; and uses the transfer and application of knowledge to meet societal needs.

This campus has been and is committed to undergraduate and graduate education. Over 30,000 undergraduate students are enrolled in nine (9) divisions that cumulatively offer over 4,000 courses in over 150 fields of study. The university has an enrollment of over 11,000 graduate students from around the world and ranks among the top five (5) universities in the nation in doctoral degrees awarded. In its 2008 rankings, U.S. News & World Report’s America’s Best Colleges rated Illinois as the number 8 public university and the number 38 national university.

However, although the institution is one of the most prestigious in the nation, not everything is so glamorous. Joy A. Williamson (2003) in Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois 1965–75 describes the institutional hostility and apathy toward individuals of color, particularly Blacks. She describes the social support mechanisms that lead to student activism and student and group solidarity and advancement. This work documents the trials and tribulations of being a student of color at Illinois during a rigid time of racial change.

At the dawn of the 21st century, higher education was faced with taking a stance on issues of multiculturalism and diversity. The affirmative action cases of Gratz v. Bollinger and Grutter v. Bollinger placed the University of Michigan at the forefront of implementing policies to diversity college campuses. Even though the decision limited the formularized use of race in college admission decisions, the University of Michigan’s core argument—which allowed for colleges and universities to implement affirmative action policies in which race could be used as a factor in admissions decisions—prevailed. This allowed for the creation of a diverse environment that leads to positive educational outcomes. Illinois, like other institutions of higher education, was affected by this decision and was tasked with documenting the positive educational outcomes diversity provides.

In response to this charge, the University of Illinois, through the Center for Democracy in a Multiracial Society (CDMS), sponsored a conference in 2006 titled “Documenting the Differences Racial and Ethnic Diversity Makes.” The major objectives of this conference included determining and understanding how racial and ethnic diversity differs depending on the institutional context; discussing how to foster an environment where colleagues can address racial and ethnic diversity issues; initiating a dialogue around issues of racial and ethnic diversity on the Urbana–Champaign campus; providing an interactive atmosphere whereby participants are able to recognize and respect the pluralistic nature of race and ethnicity; and providing a context in which participants are able to discuss student life, curriculum, teaching, and research, and to brainstorm on how to create a campus climate that promotes inclusion and social justice. In his closing remarks at the conference, Chancellor Richard Herman stated:
Research presented at today’s conference adds to the growing body of evidence that confirms what many of us have always known to be true: Diversity inside and outside of the classroom enhances the campus learning environment. . . Diversity matters in the development of faculty members’ pedagogical approaches, and styles. Diversity matters because it shapes how we interact with one another, informs the research that we do, and permeates the traditions, policies, and practices we uphold. Finally, diversity matters because it helps to cultivate a welcoming campus climate and culture for all segments of our community.

The benefits of diversity were clear to the chancellor. As a result, he announced that the Documenting the Differences Diversity Makes conference would become a biannual event for the Illinois campus community and would serve as a vehicle for sharing the campus’ progress with the campus (because Illinois is decentralized) and local communities, state, and national scholars. The campus remained charged with discussions surrounding race and the role it plays on campus. In the spring of 2008, the Illinois community participated in another conference focusing on “Race, Diversity, and Campus Climate.” After many interdisciplinary sessions and discussions, the conclusion at the end of the conference was that there is yet more work to be done.

CDMS is a unique interdisciplinary research and service institute organized around a commitment to the practice of democracy, equality, and social justice within the changing multiracial society of the United States. It includes a network of UIUC–affiliated scholars with an expertise in and sensitivity to the persistent and significant role of race in many aspects of life in the United States. It is important to explore the experiences of students of color in order to work to eliminate the negative academic outcomes and health effects of subtle and contemporary forms of racism on college campuses. One of the implications of this research project is to promote and foster an inclusive campus community that respects differences and offers all members an equal opportunity to engage in a diverse democracy. During the 2007–2008 academic year, the Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society (CDMS) initiated the foundation of the Racial Microaggressions Working Group. The following academic year in 2008–2009, CDMS supported the research to explore the experiences of students of color to work to eliminate the negative academic outcomes and health effects of subtle and contemporary forms of racism on college campuses.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

As the Racial Microaggressions Working Group explore and write about the experiences of students of color, the foundational basis of the study can be found in critical race theory (CRT). West (1995, xi) states that CRT “compels us to confront critically the most explosive issue in American civilization: the historical centrality and complicity of law upholding White supremacy (and concomitant hierarchies of gender, class, and sexual orientation).” Critical theorists explore legal thought from the perspective of the law’s role in constructing and maintaining social domination and subordination. Similarly, laws within the university context are both spoken and unspoken policies and procedures that greatly affect campus climate. Under the auspices of CRT, the principle of racial equality and interest convergence manifests in
examining the issues. Bell (1980) asserts that “the interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of Whites.” While the focus in Bell’s (1980) work is Blacks, the same statement can be made for other minority or subordinate groups.

Over the past few decades, college campuses have become increasingly diverse, both racially and ethnically. As a result, colleges and universities have initiated policies to increase racial representation on campuses. More recently, higher education administrators have attempted to promote multicultural awareness and sensitivity in an effort to create an inclusive and diverse democracy on college campuses. Over the last twenty years, researchers and educators have conducted research that has concluded that a variety of benefits to diversity in higher education exist, including critical thinking, intellectual engagement, cultural awareness, democratic sensibilities, perspective taking, and increased community and civic engagement (Chang, 2002; Engberg & Mayhew, 2007; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, 2005; Lopez, 2004).

Despite increases in numerical diversity and research highlighting the benefits of diversity, members of historically underrepresented groups tend to perceive the general campus climate differently than their majority group peers. In general, racial minority students perceive the campus climate as unwelcoming and unsupportive, which has been associated with adverse outcomes, including poor academic performance, greater levels of stress, and poor mental health outcomes (Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008). In addition, research indicates that racial minority students may perceive greater racial tension on campus, particularly in residence halls, which decreases academic persistence and may lead to decreases in racial minority retention rates.

There has been an increased attention to subtle and contemporary forms of racism in the social science literature. According to Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, and Esquilin (2007), “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). These racial microaggressions are often perpetuated by individuals who are unaware that they communicate in this way when interacting with racial and ethnic minorities. Given the increase in diversity on college campuses and the negative perceptions of campus climate among students of color, racial microaggressions may be one area of research that can help explain these phenomena.

This research project is collecting empirical data to describe the experiences of students of color at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (Illinois). We explore the various forms of racial microaggressions, their impact on recipients, and the ways in which students cope with these experiences. The objects include the following:

1. Uncover the extent to which racial microaggressions affect the lives of students of color on the University of Illinois campus.
2. Educate the campus community about the negative impact of racial microaggressions in fostering an inclusive Illinois community.
3. Provide the administration with recommendations to improve the campus climate for all community members.
The investigation consists of three phases of data collection. Phases I and II gather rich descriptions of racial microaggressions through small, intensive focus groups with students of color. The qualitative data provide the best way to gather information about the lived experiences of students of color on campus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mishler, 1986). Phase III builds upon what is discovered in the focus group and quantifies the types and extent of racial microaggressions through a campus-wide survey of students of color.

Phase I occurred during the Spring Semester of 2008. The research team contacted and obtained a list (name, e-mail, and assigned code number) of all racial/ethnic minority students living in university housing. Researchers selected a random sub-sample of students from this list and sent an e-mail requesting their participation in one of two (2) focus groups (Appendix A). Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that there was no penalty if they chose not to participate. Students who agreed to participate were given an informed consent form (Appendix B). For Phase I, a total of ten (10) undergraduate students participated, both male and female, representing Latino/a, Black, and Native American students on campus. Phase I was funded by the CDMS.

Focus group participants received a light lunch and a chance to participate in a drawing worth $300.00. Focus group sessions were approximately 60 to 120 minutes and were conducted in English. The sessions began with questions on educational backgrounds and then inquired about the students’ experiences on campus in various settings (Appendix C). The focus groups provided narratives that illuminate students’ ‘lived experiences” (Creswell, 1994, p. 12).

We recently finished Phase II of the process. Between the summer of 2008 and spring 2009, the research team worked closely with the Asian American House, La Casa, and Black House to recruit students for Phase II. Nine (9) additional focus groups were completed during Phase II. Each focus group targeted specific subpopulations of students of color, including McNair students, Black male students, Black female undergraduates, Black female graduates, Asian undergraduates, Latinas, and Latino students. A total of 72 undergraduate and graduate students participated in these focus. The transcripts of these focus groups are close to completion and analysis will begin in Fall 2009. Phase II was funded by Campus Research Board and CDMS.

Phase III of data collection, which has not been conducted, will include a Web-based survey. Specifically, the research team will send a personalized e-mail to all racial/ethnic minority students and invite them to participate in the Web-based survey. We plan to obtain a list of all racial/ethnic minority students who currently attend the university from the Division of Management Information (DMI) and solicit participation for our study by sending a personalized e-mail, flyers, word-of-mouth, and other forms of advertisement. We are currently looking for funding to complete Phase III.
IV. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

a. Racial Microaggressions on/off Campus

The focus groups revealed that racial microaggressions occur in university housing, as well as in many different spatial contexts across campus and throughout the greater Champaign–Urbana community. While the purpose of this report is to highlight issues related to university housing, we feel these broader themes help us frame the specific housing related observations. There are several sections to this summary that share findings from the students residing in the residence halls. The emerging themes that are briefly discussed include the following: (1) racism in the classroom; (2) racial stereotypes and campus life; (3) segregated spaces; (4) racism in the workplace; (5) racial profiling in the Champaign–Urbana (CU) community; as well as unexpected findings.

Racism in the Classroom—The learning environment at the UIUC is one in which students of color feel that classmates, teaching assistants, and instructors displayed racist behaviors and attitudes. Racial microaggressions in the classroom stem from assumptions that students of color do not speak intelligently, do not have anything to contribute, are dangerous, or made it to the university because of affirmative action. For example, one focus group participant stated, “I feel like in the classroom . . . it’s the biggest place where racism does occur.”

Well I was in my speech comm class and we were in the class talking about TV shows and how Blacks are usually represented as criminals and reality… they’re actually more of the people who get attacked… the teacher asked the question, so why do you think we don’t see crime in Sex and the City, but we see it in CSI, and then some kid yelled out, because there’s no Black people up there…. everybody started laughing, but me and this other girl and we were just like umm, so are you trying to say that because Black people aren’t in the show that’s why there’s no crime, that’s basically what they were trying to say, and that was kind of like dismissed. The teacher said it was racist but he was laughing too, you can tell he didn’t think it was a big deal.

Additionally, students in the focus group expressed that their academic counselors and tutors assume they cannot handle challenging courses and, as a result, steer them toward easier courses.

Students of color are often the last ones picked to participate in group projects. Some students of color try to work with other students of color to avoid this problem; others “step up” and “be a leader” to prove to White students they can hold their own in groups with White students. Additionally, students of color find that class discussions often reinforce negative racial stereotypes, including jokes about rappers, assumptions that all Latinos are the same, and beliefs that people of color live in the inner city and are poor. Instructors who do not pay enough attention to classroom dynamics further silence students of color. When students of color speak out to correct such comments, they do not feel supported because “instructors do not listen” and some have even laughed. Finally, the focus group participants discussed how they perceive that
some instructors grade them down because of their racial background. Students ask for assignments to be re-graded but cannot prove the grading is racially motivated. Together these factors create an unwelcoming classroom environment.

Racial Stereotypes and Campus Life—As has been well expressed by the students of color and a variety of student organizations on the university campus, racial stereotypes exist throughout the campus community. Focus group participants discussed the racial-themed parties are one example of racial stereotyping at the University of Illinois. For example, White students have painted their faces black to attend “ghetto themed” parties or White students have dressed up as pregnant Latina women for a “Tacos and Tequila” party. This environment creates an unsafe space for students of color, who feel offended and disrespected by theme parties that mock and disrespect other cultures and races. Students of color work to “beat the stereotypes” by doing well in class and getting involved in efforts to change the campus climate. Campus life is negatively affected by such events that demean and degrade.

Segregated Spaces—Focus group participants view the university campus as a segregated space.

Well, I remember freshman year we...the first couple of days, we’re trying to explore campus and stuff and it was at night. I had a couple of friends and they wanted to go to a party and we were walking towards, I guess, frat park or something and we’re walking towards one of the houses, and some dude’s like, they said “Why are you walking this way? We don’t want Mexicans”, and I was like whoa... we weren’t welcomed here. And so I think that really hit home. But for me, it was more like you’re ignorant, I’m not gonna listen to you...

Students of color reported that the most segregated spaces include university housing, campus libraries, the Quad/Union area, and the cultural houses. Student of color view the quad and union as White spaces, with an exception to the front of the union, which serves as an important space to voice alternative views. According to our participants, Granger Library is where the Asian and White students study, because few students of color, with the exception of Asian students, are in engineering and related majors. Many students of color study at the undergraduate library (sometimes called “Club UGL”). UGL is a social space for some and often not the best place to get a lot of work accomplished. The cultural houses provide important spaces for networking and support but at the same time are viewed as an add-on to the campus and not physically integrated or important to the overarching university experience of most students. Segregation and housing is discussed in the next section.

Racism in the Workplace—Students of color work both on and off campus. Many of the racial microaggressions experienced in the classroom and housing occur in the workplace. Students feel they are treated differently because they are viewed as “non-White.” A supervisor asked, “Do you want me to whip you like a slave?” when a student showed up late for work. Another student noted that she was “fired from [her] job for wearing earrings.” While this is difficult to conceive, this was the actual reason stated for her termination. To date, she wonders what the actual reason was and why no one came to her defense, considering her evaluations stated that she was doing a good job. Racial tensions between staff members are not addressed; students of
color want to discuss workplace conflicts, yet employers deal with culturally inappropriate comments by not responding.

*Racial Profiling in the CU Community*—When students of color leave the campus, they are often harassed and mistreated by local police. Police frequently follow and pull them over. One student explained: students of color are penalized even if they follow the rules. The police often state the driver fits the description of someone they are looking for or that the car’s taillight is out.

…the noticed a police car that was following us for about three, four blocks. We had our seat belts on and we were not speeding there was no reason for them to pull us over but they pulled us over in Walgreens and it wasn’t just one squad care it was two. So not only did they pull us over but now we’re scared because we don’t know what we did wrong…they came to the car, “put your hands on the wheel…license and insurance.” …at the end they said “oh we pulled you over because…your backlight is out.” But the next day we looked at it and it was not out.

In addition, students of color feel unwelcome in local stores, bars, and even on the bus. Employees and customers stare at students of color in a way that makes students want to leave. Local real estate agents also steer students away from certain neighborhoods.

**b. Student Experiences of and Perceptions about University Housing**

The students of color who participated in the focus groups were frank in discussing their experiences. They provided many details about issues they and their colleagues face daily in university residence halls. The issues were categorized into themes.

*Communities of Influence*—The thought of attending a college or university is a major life decision for many students. From applying to the university, accepting the offer, to picking a housing arrangement and selecting courses, students gather and interpret information from various people, including those external to the University of Illinois (friends and family, as well as high school peers, teachers, and counselors) and those internal to the university (UIUC students, staff, and faculty). This experience is heightened if the individual is the first in his/her family to achieve this goal. In the high school setting, students and their families look toward the high school guidance counselors and other “trained” individuals to assist with navigating this road. At the college and university level, various members of residence life and student affairs staff are seen as guides as well.

During this research process, students noted that they received information from relatives and friends who attended or were attending the university, in addition to high school guidance counselors. Counselors and those familiar with the university assisted with shaping students’ expectations of what life at the university could be like. When choosing a place to reside for incoming freshmen, the opinions and advice of family members, friends, and school counselors shape student choices. For example, Florida Avenue Residence Hall (FAR) was referred to as the “projects, minority central, the beehive, Cabrini Green.”
I’ve heard minority central, beehive… I’ve heard beehive cause like, this is gonna sound really bad but, um black and yellow… Yeah, so I’ve heard minority central, beehive, the projects, Cabrini Green…

Many of the focus group participants learned about the image of this hall before they arrived on campus. This is further perpetuated once an individual arrives into the space.

Additionally, residence life staff engaged in general conversation with students and their family that suggested places of preference for an individual based on race and socioeconomic status. For example, when attempting to make a decision between residing in FAR and ISR (Illinois Street Residence Hall), the student commented that the staff member “came up with excuses” as to why ISR would be better than FAR, such as inoperable amenities.

They terrified me…when I was moving they said…they tried to talk me into going to ISR. “You know that’s the project, right?” My parents was kind of disappointed, okay cause the projects is the projects. So when we came out, we said this is not as bad as they made it sound.

The staff. They show you ISR. They don’t show you FAR. …I knew that I was coming to FAR before I came to my orientation. So I want to see what my campus is gonna look like and they’re coming up with excuses why they don’t want to take me to FAR... And they like, “are you sure?” They said “the air conditioners don’t work.” They made it sound like some crack head is gonna sit in the hallway somewhere and roaches are gonna crawl up in the room…”

Upon arriving to campus, the student thought, “FAR was better [than ISR] when I saw it—FAR was better.” From this experience, the student in the focus group suggests that students of color cannot rely on others to make decisions for them. Individuals need to research and concretely find out for themselves what the options are. Taking the direct advice of a staff member did not yield positive results for this student.

*Racialization of Housing*—Individuals respond differently to the same type of stimulus. The recognition and interpretation of the stimulus can be either positive or negative. Students within residence life have strong perceptions about how residence hall rooms are assigned. Based on their lens of knowledge and experience, their views of the assignments are socioeconomically based and highly racialized. Although these issues may not be factors in the process, students view this is such.

It was a White person who said the reason why Black people stay in FAR and PAR is because this is the last resort and they said that… Black people are the ones to finish their housing last so they’re stuck with these two buildings…these are the last dorms and if you’re gonna live anywhere they’re gonna stick you here, that’s why since Black people don’t know until the last minute if they’re gonna get in…
Living in the Projects/Ghetto—The American College Dictionary defines a ghetto as a section in a city occupied by a minority group who live there, especially because of social, economic, or legal pressure. The definition is also extended to include the restriction and isolation component. Students of color residing in the residence halls have found that they are perceived to reside in a “ghetto” or the “projects” because of the number of racial/ethnic minorities. The students experience a stigma associated with living in one dorm over another. In addition, Khuri and Goldman (2006) found that one of the campus’ living learning communities is referred to as such because of the higher percentage of African American and Asian international students.

Knowing One’s Place in the Dorms—University housing states on its Web site:

College is more than reading books, taking exams, and writing term papers. It’s about striking up new friendships with students from different backgrounds. It's learning to appreciate different music and cultures. And it’s sharing ideas and swapping stories with friends and neighbors. It’s about getting involved! University housing offers a wide range of amenities and services to make your stay with us an enjoyable and memorable one (http://www.housing.uiuc.edu/living).

Racial slurs and stereotypes have real negative effects on students and the overall campus climate. Within the residence halls, some students have to find ways to address these types of incidents on their own. One student noted within a particular residence hall that racism was a pervasive issue that was not being dealt with by the residence life staff.

And I remember when I seen the [N-word]… I went to the front desk and I told them about it and it was a Caucasian girl there and she was just like, we’ve been hearing about it all day, and she kind of blew it off, and then my floor had a meeting about the whole situation and my RA told me that nobody told them about the racial slurs on the elevator… someone hadn’t got there yet, but I did a lot of stuff that day and I came back and it was still up there… my RA, we had a meeting and she said that every racial slur for every race has been written up there…

The student noted that as a result racial/ethnic stereotypes persisted within that space. For example, students reported that racial slurs were written in dorm elevators and were more upset about the slurs not being removed immediately. A student reported the incident to the residence hall front desk personnel, who was non-responsive. When the slurs remained within the elevator doors for some time, the student questioned why the insults remained.

c. Coping Strategies of Students of Color

As mentioned earlier in this report, students of color experience racial microaggressions while at the University of Illinois. These microaggressions are “verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271).

The participants in the two university housing focus groups shared a variety of ways that they cope with racial microaggressions. Each participant mentioned a variety of strategies and that
those strategies change over time. By the senior year, students of color have developed a sophisticated set of coping strategies.

When students experience racial microaggressions, they respond in a variety of ways. Focus group participants used the following words to describe their feelings: fear, anger, frustration, disbelief, awkward, uncomfortable, isolated, and invisible. One student almost dropped out after his freshman year because he felt so unwelcome at the university.

The most common responses to racial microaggressions included the following: to ignore or dismiss it, to assume the person is ignorant or cowardly, and to blame the media. Most of the students—while they often got used to racial microaggressions and did not do anything about them—also told us of situations in which they did more. They called it “picking your battles.”

For the obvious racist actions, students reported problems to a higher authority, such as the person who sits at the front desk in housing or to a residential advisor. Students gave examples such as reporting racial slurs written on an elevator door and racially motivated pranks.

To counter the negative stereotypes about the intelligence of students of color, focus group participants said they chose to “prove themselves” to peers by working harder in class to “beat the stereotypes.” Some examples include participating in class, talking to classmates to make friends, learning the class material better than others, being leaders in group projects, and meeting with the instructor and teaching assistant.

Participants in the focus groups also mentioned the importance of getting information firsthand. For example, students made the decision not to rely on what friends told them but instead would go to housing directly to find out how assignments are made. In addition, participants talked about educating self and getting involved in programming around the campus. One student expressed that doing so made her feel the campus was less racist.

Restorative justice appears to be important for students of color. At times, students could not be quiet about the racial microaggressions they experienced on campus. The focus group participants told us of examples in which they confronted others both in class and in university housing contexts—this occurred face to face with the intention to correct the negative perceptions or stereotypes. In one case, a student caught another student setting up a prank on his door; he felt targeted because of his race. The student chased the other student down the hallway of the dorms, not to turn him in, but to tell him how he felt about his actions. Students of color know that if they respond physically, they will only perpetuate stereotypes. None of the students in the focus groups pointed to violence as a solution. However, one student’s parents did send their son a police baton for protection.

Overall, students work to build a supportive network of friends while at the University of Illinois. They look for students facing similar situations. These friend networks become key interpreters of potential racial microaggressions on campus. For example, students discussed whether because of their race they were assigned to a particular floor or received a lower grade. This subculture on campus has led students to tell incoming students to do group projects with other student of color; to take or not take particular courses; to hang out at the cultural houses,
libraries, certain places on campus; and to choose FAR and PAR because these building are known to be more comfortable than “Caucasian” dorms.

V. DISCUSSION

The primary objectives of this research project is to uncover the extent to which racial microaggressions affect the lives of students of color on the University of Illinois campus; to educate the campus community about the negative impact of racial microaggressions in fostering an inclusive Illinois community; and to provide the administration with recommendations to improve the campus climate for all community members. The students who participated in the focus groups reported both subtle and apparent forms of microaggressions within various locales on campus. Residence halls were noted as being a site for reoccurring incidents. The researchers found that the responses to these incidents could have short-term and long-term effects on the university and residence life. The larger question to consider is, “What is in the best interest of the university?” The response to this macro question should fuel initiatives in response to micro-level questions regarding racial microaggressions. The qualitative findings from the students who participated in the focus groups highlight this as an area for review. As a result, the university should be apparent and transparent when addressing incidents of racial microaggressions. The reality of microaggressions causes individuals to respond differently in order to persist at Illinois.

a. University Housing’s Role in Shaping Campus Climate

Research revealed a complexity of issues taking place within the university residence halls. These issues affect students academically, emotionally, physically, and psychosocially. We also found that the overall campus climate shapes attitudes about campus housing and the interactions of students inside of the campus housing environment. The discussions with students in the university housing focus group suggest that university housing might consider putting energy and resources into the following areas:

Reevaluate the University Housing’s Educational Purpose—University housing does more than provide food and shelter for students while at the university. Academic departments play an important role in providing formal education to students; however, university housing provides a space for students to learn how to be more independent from their parents, make friends, resolve conflicts, and negotiate the boundaries of what it means to be a positive member of a community.

University housing might reevaluate how it fits into the larger goals of the University (for Example, in leadership, sustainability, civic engagement, diversity, and so on) and determine where it contributes or could contribute to these university priority areas. Unit One and Intersections offer examples in which university housing makes these goals explicit. Why not with the rest of university housing? University housing is positioned to promote a range of living environments and learning objectives. Students often default to living where their high school friends want to live if not given a more compelling set of choices. Selecting a housing option should be as important as deciding on a major.
Manage the Perception of University Housing—Even before students arrive on campus, they begin formulating opinions about the different housing options. The perception of some student housing as a “ghetto” contributes to the perception that the university is racially segregated and an unwelcome place for students of color. University housing must grapple with the contradictory messages between the official university view of housing (Web site, brochures, application materials), the public perception (high school students, counselors, parents), and the actual student experiences. Managing the perception of university housing means bringing these three perspectives into alignment to create a clear and more truthful image of university housing.

Address Racial Steering—One of the ways to deal with the image of university housing is to take a strong stand against racial steering. Racial steering is the practice of guiding prospective students toward or away from university housing options based on race. Based on the focus group, students of color perceive racial steering occurring in two ways on this campus. Students (of all races) believe they are advised to live in certain housing options based on race. And when asking about housing options, students are not provided with all options because of their race. In the formal realm, prospective students must be told about and shown all housing options. This is particularly important in consultations on the phone and campus tours. Informally, racial steering is difficult to address directly but can be shaped by changing outsider and insider perspectives about campus. Training staff to avoid making statements that could be perceived as racial steering might be another way to address this issue.

Increase Transparency in Housing Assignments – This point is related to racial steering, but we feel it is worth calling out because it came up several times in the focus groups. The university housing assignment process is not well understood by students. University housing might consider placing more attention on explaining how the assignment process works. For example, university housing should let students know that not selecting a housing choice is in fact a choice. Random assignment does not lead to a random distribution of students. While this is a short-term solution to a bigger problem, university housing must rethink what is meant by random. Do 95% of students really get first choice? How many do not put a choice down? From the students’ perspective, housing is not randomly assigned. Rather, some students view housing assignments as racially motivated.

b. Collaborative Opportunities for University Housing and CDMS

This campus is home to a number of faculty and students conducting innovative research that overlaps with the interests of university housing. We encourage university housing to continue to participate in these projects.

Influence of Living-Learning Community on Students’ Racial Attitudes—Helen Neville and Lisa Spanierman in the Department of Educational Psychology found, among other things, that exposure to cultural diversity is an important part of the undergraduate experience at the University of Illinois. Students learn to appreciate differences and learn more about historical and structural racism. This education occurs both inside of and outside of living-learning communities.
Racial Segregation in Student Housing at the University of Illinois—Julie A. Dowling, Assistant Professor, Latina/Latino Studies Program, was a fellow at CDMS and is exploring how the segregated landscape of Chicago schools is reproduced as students transition to the University of Illinois. Dowling’s project explores race and space on campus, specifically focusing on the student dormitories. Currently, African American and Latino students are disproportionately housed in two residential halls.

Racial Microaggressions at the University of Illinois—Findings presented here are based on only two focus groups consisting of students living in university housing. Since then, the research team has completed nine additional focus groups. The research team would like to continue to work with university housing as we analyze the data in Phase II and as we transition to Phase III of this project. In particular, we would like to discuss how university housing could contribute to the racial microaggression research; for example, by funding a research assistant to assist with the closer analysis of housing related racial microaggressions in the new focus group data as well as with the Web-based survey. We anticipate that this in-depth and systematic survey will help us paint a more complete picture of the particularities of racial microaggressions in different housing environments.
VI. REFERENCES


Appendix A
Phase I Recruitment Materials

RECRUITMENT LETTER FOR PHASE I

Dear (insert student name):

We are looking for students of color who attend the University of Illinois and would like to participate in a small group discussion about issues related to race and the campus climate. Your participation will help us develop a campus-wide study examining student attitudes and experiences around issues of race, diversity, and campus climate. Receiving your feedback is important to us. We would like your participation in a focus group in order to hear about your experiences at the University of Illinois.

If you are interested in participating, please email us at cdms@uiuc.edu and let us know which date and time you can attend. The focus group should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes of your time. All of your responses will be strictly confidential and you can choose to discontinue your participation at any time.

To express our appreciation, all students who take part in the focus group will be placed in a drawing to win a cash prize of $300.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Cordially,

Stacy Harwood, Ph.D.
Department of Urban and Regional Planning

Ruby Mendenhall, Ph.D.
Sociology, African American Studies and Research Program
Appendix B
Phase I Consent Form

University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign
Sociology, African American Studies and Research Program, and Urban & Regional Planning

CONSENT FORM—FOCUS GROUP

Project Title: Racial Microaggressions at the University of Illinois
Responsible Project Investigators: Stacy Harwood and Ruby Mendenhall

Introduction/Purpose:
You are invited to participate in a study whose purpose is to examine the experiences of students of color at the University of Illinois. The professors conducting this study are Stacy Harwood and Ruby Mendenhall at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Dr. Harwood is in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and Dr. Mendenhall is in the Department of Sociology and the African American Studies and Research Program. Two trained research assistants will be assisting Drs. Harwood and Mendenhall with these focus groups. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of day-to-day discrimination and experiences of subtle racism at the University of Illinois.

Procedures:
As a participant in this study, you will be asked questions about your experiences at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. The focus group will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes and take place on campus at the University of Illinois. This study is completely voluntary, and you can stop participating at any time. With your permission, to aid us in recording your answers, we will use an audio recorder.

Risks:
Participation is not expected to cause any harm outside of what is normally encountered in daily life. In the rare event that you become upset or deeply offended by any questions, you may choose not to respond. In addition, you can choose to discontinue your participation at any time during the study.

Benefits:
A potential benefit of your participation is that you may learn more about your experiences with subtle forms of racism on campus. Furthermore, potential benefits exist for the UIUC campus,
such that administrators and faculty may become more aware of the ways in which they may be unintentionally harming the well-being of students of color on campus.

**Alternatives and Subject’s Rights:**
Your decision whether to participate will not affect your future relations with the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in this research study at any time. You can also skip any questions that you prefer not to answer.

**Confidentiality:**
Several safeguards will be taken to protect your identity. All of your responses will be strictly confidential.

**Financial Information:**
As a token of appreciation for your participation, you will be given an opportunity to enter your name into a drawing to win a cash prize of $300. The cash award will be selected after each of the phases of data collection, and the winner will be notified by e-mail.

**Contact Persons:**
Any questions you may have about this study may be directed to Stacy Harwood at (217) 265-0874 or by e-mail: sharwood@uiuc.edu. You can also contact Ruby Mendenhall at (217) 333-2528 or by e-mail: rubymen@uiuc.edu. Questions about research subjects’ rights may be directed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (217) 333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu. The IRB is a review board that monitors the research process and ensures the ethical and legal conduct of human subject research at UIUC. You are welcome to call collect if you identify yourself as a research participant.

**Consent:**
I have read this form, and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. If I have additional questions, I have been told who to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above, and I agree to be audiotaped.

I may be contacted at a later point as a follow-up to this study; however, I will be given an opportunity to provide consent to that aspect of the study at that time.

I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Participant’s Signature __________________________ Date __________________________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent __________________________ Date __________________________

Investigator’s Signature __________________________ Date __________________________
Appendix C
Phase I Focus Group Script
(adapted from Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007)

Hi, my name is “facilitator.” Thank you for coming here today to participate in this focus group. The purpose of today’s focus group is to gain a better understanding of day-to-day discrimination and experiences of subtle racism. I am sure that you are familiar with overt forms of discrimination such as racial slurs or hate crimes. However, today we are interested in hearing about your experiences of subtle acts of being discriminated against because of your race. These experiences may have occurred in any setting or at any time in your life. We will be asking you some questions that we encourage you to answer to the best of your ability, and we recognize that many of you will have unique experiences of being subtly discriminated against. There are no wrong answers. At this time, I’d like to introduce “observer,” who will be a nonparticipating member of our group today. He/She is here to record our conversation so that I can be involved in the group without having to take too many notes. Okay, so, I am going to give everyone a form now, which basically states that your participation in this group is entirely voluntary and that you may decline to participate and leave the group at any time. Please read this sheet carefully before signing it. It discusses potential risks to you as members of this group as well as the use of audiotaping during this session. I’d like to give everyone the opportunity to ask any questions they may have before we begin the group.

Question/Answer . . .

Statement of Confidentiality
We will be audiotaping this session in an effort to maintain the integrity of your dialogue. However, your identities will not be revealed to anyone, and only the researchers will have access to this tape. This discussion is to be considered confidential, and we would hope that you will all respect each other rights to privacy by not repeating any portion of this discussion outside of this session.

Opening Question
At this time we would like for each of you to say your first name, major, year in school, and why you are interested in participating in this study.

General Question
People of color often have experiences in which they are subtly invalidated, discriminated against, and made to feel uncomfortable because of their race. In thinking about your daily experiences at the University of Illinois, could you describe a situation in which you witnessed or were personally subtly discriminated against because of your race?

Interview Questions
- What are some subtle ways that people treat you differently because of your race?
- Describe a situation in which you felt uncomfortable, insulted, or disrespected by a comment that had racial overtones.
• Think of some of the stereotypes that exist about your racial group. How have others subtly expressed their stereotypical beliefs about you?
• In what ways have others made you feel “put down” because of your cultural values or communication style?
• In what ways have people subtly expressed that “the White way is the right way”?
• In what subtle ways have others expressed that they think you’re a second-class citizen or inferior to them?
• How have people suggested that you do not belong here because of your race?
• What have people done or said to invalidate your experiences of being discriminated against?

Transition Questions
• Where are these experiences taking place on the University of Illinois campus? (Probing questions: Are there places on campus where you do not feel welcomed? Are there places on campus that make you feel uncomfortable as a result of your experiences?
• Who have been perpetrators of these forms of racism on campus? (Probing questions: Peers that you know, peers that you do not know, faculty, staff, and/or administrators?)
• What are some of the ways that you dealt with these experiences?
• How did you or do you cope with these experiences? (Probing questions include: Did you file a formal complaint? Did you actively do something—such as speak up about it? Did you talk to other people about it? Did you ignore it? Did you confront the perpetrator in a physical altercation?)
• What do you think the overall impact of your experiences has been on your life?
• How have these experiences affected you emotionally?
• Do you feel like you are a part of the campus community?
• Has the experience(s) made you consider leaving the university?
• Have you discouraged others from attending the University of Illinois as a result of your experiences?
• Have you gotten involved in campus social activist organizations or activities to fight against these forms of racism and discrimination?

Ending Questions
So today you shared several experiences of subtle discrimination. Some of you said. . .
There were several themes that were consistent across many of your experiences. These themes include. . . Does that sound correct? If not, what themes might you add?
An increase in research focused on factors that influence the sense of belonging of students of color, such as campus racial climate, interactions with diverse peers, and student engagement. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

University students have unlimited access to the transit system in Champaign-Urbana. This system provides frequent and convenient bus service to and from several different points on campus, popular living areas throughout both cities, Willard Airport, and Illinois Terminal, where students can transfer to Greyhound buses or Amtrak trains. Bikes are also very popular on the U of I campus and in the cities, aided by the university, which has built a very large system of bike paths and lanes in and around the campus. Media. U of I sponsors WPGU 107.1, a continually broadcasting, student-run radio... University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. Web. 17 Apr. Description of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is dedicated to building upon its tradition of excellence in education, research, public engagement and economic development. More than 3,000 faculty members discover and create new knowledge. The central focus of the college is the synergy between research and the preparation of students for professional careers in the creation and interpretation of the environmental, visual, and performing arts. Deeply related to that focus is the commitment to elevate and sustain the study of the arts as both a necessary mode of understanding and a vibrant expression of human experience within the local, national, and international communities. Graduate College.