

# Sister to Sister



## A MODEL FOR CREATING ACADEMIC COUNTER-SPACES FOR BLACK WOMEN AT HWIS

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The racist and sexist structural inequality that Black women experience in academia renders them virtually invisible on college campuses.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that Black students at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) are confronted with unique challenges and stress when integrating into college life.<sup>2</sup> Black women in particular, are among the most vulnerable to psychological, social,<sup>3</sup> and academic maladjustment.<sup>4</sup> The experiences of Black women at UCLA illustrate such trends. Black women at UCLA report the lowest sense of belonging of any racial-ethnic group. They feel the most unsafe on campus, and have the highest rate of sexual harassment. In response to the unique needs of Black women at UCLA, a team of experts on the academic and social-emotional wellness of Black women and girls collaborated to develop the undergraduate course Sister to Sister.<sup>5</sup> Since Spring 2014, Sister to Sister has served as an academic counter-space centering the voices and perspectives of Black women. The purpose of this brief is to highlight the psychosocial experiences of Black women at an HWI, and present key components of a successful academic counter-space.

## Black Women's Experience at UCLA

Data come from the latest, university-wide Diverse Learning Environments Survey (2011)<sup>\*</sup> and UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (2018)<sup>\*\*</sup>

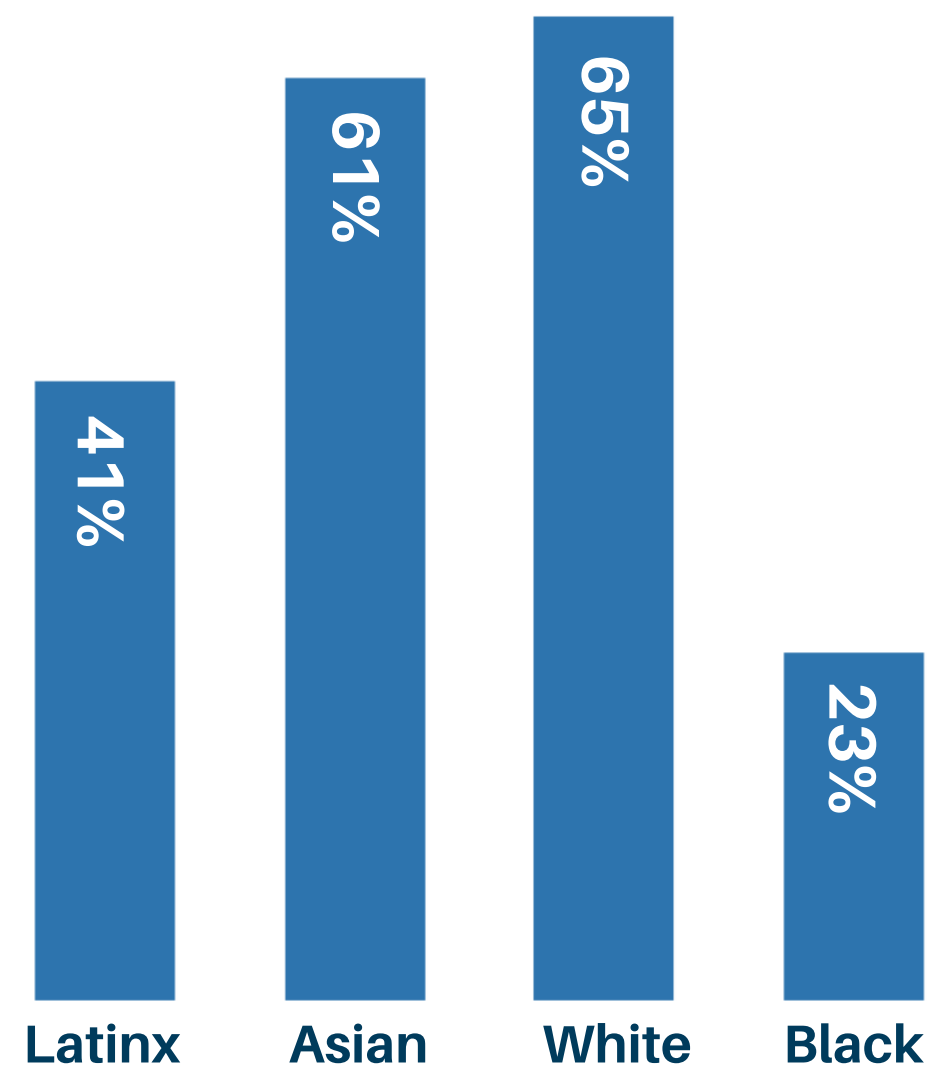


**3%**

OF THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT POPULATION AT UCLA ARE BLACK WOMEN



### PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN WHO FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH THE CLIMATE OF DIVERSITY & INCLUSION AT UCLA \*\*



### BLACK WOMEN IDENTIFY CAMPUS AS AN UNSAFE PLACE AT

**3X** THE RATE OF ASIAN & WHITE WOMEN

**2X** THE RATE OF LATINX WOMEN

Latinx **11%**

Asian **3%**

White **3%**

Black **34%**

BLACK WOMEN FEEL **\*\*** DISRESPECTED ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR RACE-ETHNICITY AT APPROXIMATELY TWICE THE RATE OF LATINX, ASIAN, AND WHITE WOMEN COMBINED.

### BLACK WOMEN REPORT LOW SENSE OF BELONGING AT \*\*

**2.6 Times**

THE RATE OF WHITE & ASIAN WOMEN



**33%** OF BLACK WOMEN **\*** EXPERIENCE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

**97%** OF BLACK WOMEN DO **\*** NOT REPORT INCIDENTS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

BLACK WOMEN AT UCLA EXPERIENCE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT **\*** HIGHER RATES THAN WHITE, ASIAN, AND LATINX WOMEN, BUT HAVE THE LOWEST REPORTING RATE OF ANY RACIAL-ETHNIC GROUP

# Responding to Black Women's Needs

In response to the unique needs of Black, undergraduate women, four Black women staff and graduate students at UCLA collaborated to launch the undergraduate course Sister to Sister in Spring 2014. They created a course grounded in Black Feminist Theory that prioritizes creating a safe space and centering the voices and perspectives of Black women. The course examines pertinent topics in the lives of Black women such as emotional and mental health and wellness, sexual assault, being a scholar of color, and loving relationships. In an effort to help undergraduate participants have a more enriched collegiate experience, Sister to Sister facilitates community building and works to expand students' networks by hosting guest panels and connecting students to campus resources and personnel as well as alumni. Since its inception more than 300 students have taken the course.



## Sister to Sister as an Academic Counter-Space<sup>6</sup>

Being a Black woman is a marginalized identity in the higher education system. Sister to Sister works as an academic counter-space in that it allows Black women to redefine their marginalized status. As a place where Black women can draw strength, gain empowerment, and develop personal agency and critical navigational strategies for success, Sister to Sister resists the dominant culture of college campuses which fails to recognize the social and cultural experiences of Black women.

## Key Components of Sister to Sister

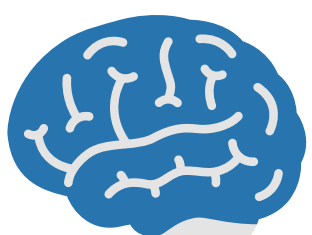
### ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

Introduces Black Feminist Thought and is anchored in scholarship for, about, and by Black women

Establishes common language for discussing discrimination & assault

Incorporates themes and topics that address Black womanhood holistically

Engages in critical reading, writing, and discourse



### INSTRUCTION

Incorporates a co-teaching model with 2-3 Black women

Instructors have personal connections to the African Diaspora and experience mentoring Black girls

The course is advertised to Black women students via affinity groups & orientations



### CLASSROOM CULTURE & COMMUNITY

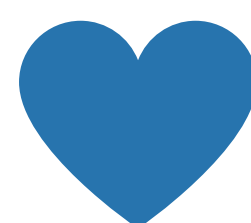
Creates a student-centered classroom

Centers Black women's voices and perspectives

Establishes community norms and incorporates community building throughout the course

Conducts daily in-class check-ins

Facilitates small group discussion & activities



### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Engages with Black women staff, faculty, & administrators on campus

Provides opportunities for former students to TA

Connects students to academic resources and other campus opportunities

Introduces students to graduate school, career, and alumni networks



# The Impact of Sister to Sister



Class observations, focus group interviews, and document analyses of student writing highlighted 4 key themes: *Safety, Community, Identity, and Self Care*. Students in Sister to Sister described the course as space where they felt safe to be vulnerable and be themselves. Feeling safe helped them to discuss and positively cope with social, emotional, psychological, academic, and other stressors. Students specifically described feeling safe and supported to disclose and process experiences with sexual assault. Students also described feeling part of a dependable community that valued their contributions and cared for them personally. Building such a community was an inspiring and empowering experience for many students. Students also described thinking critically about the intersections of race and gender, and feeling prouder and more knowledgeable about their identities. Greater personal awareness allowed students to navigate campus more effectively and build stronger relationships. Sister to Sister was also described as a healing space, and the catalyst to students prioritizing their physical and mental health which positively impacted their college experience and academic engagement.

## Student Quotes

"This seminar was beneficial to me mentally and emotionally. I had a community that heard me out and actually cared about my well-being. It was the first time I ever felt this way on campus."

"Sister to Sister actually introduced me to my therapist. She has been super impactful in many of my struggles and has helped me get on top of my academics ..."

"I really appreciate this space and can honestly say it has had a great impact on not only my experience as a Black woman here at UCLA but on me as a Black woman in general."

"... Sister to Sister was important in building a network.. I can still go to them [classmates] for help in a class, advice, or if they did an internship that I really want to do..."

"I feel more connected with the Black students on campus, and by association more connected to the general campus... I'm just more comfortable..."

"At a point I no longer believed that I belonged at UCLA. I felt invisible... This class taught me to develop different personal strategies to counter the negativity..."

"The class discussion on sexual assault was eye opening... I now feel more empowered. It brought me a step closer to bringing justice to myself even if I may never go to the police."

"I have found a community of people who show me unconditional love."

"Sister to Sister has taught me so much about myself and other women in academia at UCLA. Sister to Sister has become a safe haven for me, I am not afraid to share my thoughts and most importantly I feel that my thoughts are valued in class... The check-ins, discussions held in class, and the friendships were all essential in community building."

"The guest speakers from CAPS, the Rape Trauma Center, and other professionals on campus allowed me to learn techniques to cope with the different stressors that Black women often face in academia."

"Sister to Sister cared for me, and I had a safe place to express my hurt."

"Sister to Sister brought me close to a lot of other women, and it made me embrace myself more as a Black woman..."

**UCLA**

**Black Male Institute**

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**Methodology.** Quantitative data was retrieved and analyzed from the most recent administration of the campus wide surveys, Diverse Learning Experiences Survey (2011) and the UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (2018). The survey from which each data point was retrieved is indicated by the following asterisks:

Diverse Learning Environments Survey (2011) \*  
UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (2018) \*\*

Qualitative data was collected via class observations and focus group interview conducted in Spring 2019 as well as student writing samples from Spring 2017 and Winter 2018.

- 1 Haynes, C., Stewart, S., Allen, E. (2016). Three paths, one struggle: Black women and girls battling invisibility in U.S. classrooms. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 85(3), 380-391.
- 2 Gebre, A., Taylor, R.D. (2017) Association of poor kin relations, college adjustment and psychological well-being among African American undergraduates. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26: 217-224.
- 3 Shahid, N.N., Nelson, T., Cardemil, E.V. (2017). Lift every voice: Exploring stressors and coping mechanisms of Black college women attending predominately white institutions. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 4(1)3-24.
- 4 Littleton, R.A. (2003). Community among African American students on small, predominantly white campuses: The unforeseen "minority within a minority" experience. *NASPA Journal*, 40(4), 83-104.
- 5 The founders of the UCLA Sister to Sister course are four Black women--Dr. Jonli Tunstall, Dr. Samarah Blackmon, Dr. Maisha Beasley, and Dr. Michelle Smith. At the time of the course's founding, Dr. Blackmon and Dr. Smith were graduate students and Dr. Beasley and Dr. Tunstall were full-time staff at UCLA. Today, Dr. Tunstall and Dr. Blackmon continue to instruct the Sister to Sister course.
- 6 Solórzano, D.G., and Villalpando, O. (1998). Critical Race Theory: Marginality and the Experience of Minority Students in Higher Education. in c. Torres & t. Mitchell (eds.), *Emerging Issues in the Sociology of Education: Comparative Perspectives* (pp. 211-224). Albany: State University of New York Press.

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