

Executive Summary and Theoretical Grounding

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1. Executive Summary

This guide draws from the findings of the study “It’s Still There, But It’s Not the Same”, which explores how Black student leaders (BSLs) at historically white institutions (HWIs) in Florida and Georgia are navigating Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) amid a wave of anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and anti-CRT (Critical Race Theory) legislation. Through two in-depth interviews with 14 student leaders engaged in civic engagement and student activism, the study revealed a pattern of heightened psychological stress, institutional invisibility, and emotional withdrawal. Despite these challenges, students also demonstrated agency, using peer support, faith, and cultural resilience to navigate campus life. This resource guide translates the study’s findings into actionable tools for educators, administrators, and campus professionals committed to supporting Black students and preserving civic engagement in the face of legislative suppression.

2. Study Background

This guide is based on a qualitative research study exploring the lived experiences of 14 Black student leaders attending historically white institutions (HWIs) in Florida and Georgia. The study, conducted in the context of increasing anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) legislation, sought to understand how these students navigate campus environments shaped by policy hostility, racial marginalization, and shifting institutional support systems. Participants were undergraduate students involved in leadership roles ranging from cultural organization presidents to resident assistants and civic engagement ambassadors. Each brought personal insight into the racialized dynamics of leadership, belonging, and institutional response in public higher education settings.

3. Theoretical Grounding

This project is anchored in two interrelated theoretical frameworks: Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) and Critical Hope.

Racial Battle Fatigue (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007) is a framework that describes the cumulative toll of racial microaggressions, systemic inequity, and hostile racial climates on Black individuals. It theorizes that constant exposure to racism and structural oppression results in three interrelated forms of stress:

- Psychological Stress: feelings of frustration, anxiety, anger, hopelessness, and hypervigilance.
- Physiological Stress: symptoms such as fatigue, sleep disruption, headaches, high blood pressure, and physical illness.
- Emotional and Behavioral Responses: coping mechanisms such as social withdrawal, emotional masking, heightened performance pressure, and increased reliance on spirituality or cultural affirmation.

In the context of this study, RBF helps explain how anti-DEI policies exacerbate existing racial stressors, forcing Black student leaders to navigate civic engagement and student leadership under psychological and emotional strain. It also clarifies how these students are expected to function as public leaders while masking the private costs of racialized stress.

Critical Hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) complements RBF by emphasizing the necessity of building institutional environments that do not merely acknowledge injustice but act courageously to repair harm and foster collective agency. Critical Hope rejects blind optimism or cynicism and instead insists on tangible, equity-driven change rooted in truth-telling, healing, and political clarity. In this study, student leaders demonstrate critical hope through peer advocacy, community organizing, and mentoring, despite navigating hostile conditions.

Together, these frameworks reveal how students simultaneously carry racialized burdens and build liberatory spaces of engagement. This guide aims to help practitioners recognize, respond to, and reduce the compounding pressures of RBF while nurturing student civic engagement through structures of critical hope.

4. Key Findings

The study identified four major findings:

1. Black student leaders face intersecting psychological, physiological, and emotional stressors that align with Racial Battle Fatigue.
2. State-level anti-DEI legislation has created fear, confusion, and erasure of identity-affirming institutional language and support systems.
3. Students employ a range of coping strategies including cultural community building, spiritual grounding, and strategic withdrawal from hostile spaces.
4. Despite adversity, students engage in advocacy and peer-based leadership rooted in Critical Hope and community cultural wealth, creating micro-environments of support and resistance.

5. Key Implications for Higher Education

- Black student leaders require consistent, identity-affirming support beyond DEI offices to sustain leadership and well-being.
- Institutions must ensure that civic engagement efforts are inclusive and that policies do not undermine democratic participation or leadership development among students of color.
- There is a need for proactive policy communication and transparency from university leaders to prevent fear, apathy, and disengagement among marginalized student populations.
- Student affairs professionals must be trained to recognize signs of racial battle fatigue and provide trauma-informed advising and programming.

6. Civic Engagement Resources

- Campus Compact: www.compact.org
- NASPA Civic Learning & Democratic Engagement: <https://naspa.org/division/civic-learning-and-democratic-engagement>
- UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement: <https://freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu/>
- AAC&U Civic Engagement Resources: www.aacu.org

7. References

Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. *Journal of Negro Education*, 80(1), 63–82.

Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(2), 181–194.