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# Race on Campus

Engage in higher ed's conversations about racial equity and inclusion.  
Delivered on Tuesdays.

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**Subject:** Race on Campus: Bipoc, Minority, or People of Color?

Welcome to Race on Campus. In a past issue, I explained the term "Latinx" and spoke with experts about its use on college campuses. This week I'm examining words that cover broader swaths of racial groups. This primer is for anyone who's unsure about which terms to use and when.

If you have ideas, comments, or questions about this newsletter, write to me:

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## **Bipoc, Minority, or People of Color?**

How do you refer to a group of non-white people on your campus? Do you say minority? People of color? Bipoc? Do you use the terms interchangeably? Are there some words you avoid or prefer?

Understanding and appropriately using words that label racial groups can be tricky, especially when there are many options, and not every phrase is universally embraced. I spoke with experts about their definitions and how to choose which word to use:

### **Minority**

When it refers to racial groups, the definition of “minority” can change based on the context. As the opposite of “majority,” it typically refers to a group with less of a share or representation in a population. For example, at a predominately white institution, Black, Latino, Asian American, and Indigenous students may be considered part of a racial minority group if fewer of these students are enrolled than their white counterparts.

But the word comes with its share of criticism.

Sometimes, the term minority is simply not correct, says Lewis Gordon, a professor and head of the philosophy department at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. In many cases, groups that are often called minorities are actually in the majority. At historically Black institutions, for example, African American students typically make up the bulk of the campus population.

Another problem is the term’s focus on numbers, which could limit progress toward racial equity, says Aris M. Clemons, an assistant professor of Spanish linguistics at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Someone could argue, for example, that because a historically marginalized group is actually a majority on a particular campus, those

students are no longer at a disadvantage. Or someone opposed to funding programs that support a minority group might say the group is too small to merit resources.

“It’s pretty clear that what happens is to disempower people — because that’s what racism and bigotry do — by giving them the sense that they lack at least a quantitative power by calling them ‘minority,’” says Gordon.

The word also doesn’t describe intersectional experiences. For instance, women can be considered minorities in certain disciplines but may be part of the majority racial group. Minority doesn’t account for further oppression or marginalization that can happen within racial groups — like the experience of a Black and Latino student who may face discrimination for their skin color in addition to their country of origin or immigration status.

Koritha Mitchell, an associate professor of English at Ohio State University, says she never uses the word minority. Instead, she says “marginalized” to highlight that certain racial groups were, and are, purposefully and systemically oppressed in the U.S.

Calling people minorities can further stigmatize them or make them reluctant to advocate for themselves and their community, Mitchell says. “This idea that we are minorities that have minority concerns is all of the reason why we shouldn't feel like we can press too hard for things to change.”

## People of Color

The term “people of color” originated in the 18th century [and comes from the French phrase](#) “gens de couleur.” As the phrase evolved, it separated the mostly Black enslaved people from free, mixed-race people or individuals with at least one Black grandparent or great-grandparent.

Today, the phrase “people of color” describes all people who do not identify as white, Gordon says.

It’s a catch-all term, Clemons says. But while the term may be more accurate than the term minority, some critics are uncomfortable with how its encompassing quality can homogenize various racial groups, each of which has distinct experiences with different forms of racism and oppression." The phrase doesn’t capture these individual nuances," she says.

## **Bipoc**

Bipoc is an acronym that stands for Black, Indigenous, and people of color. The term addresses the need for specificity that some say the phrase “people of color” lacks. The term seemingly originated online, and [gained traction](#) last summer during protests against police brutality and racism.

Using this term also shows that bigotry isn’t binary, Gordon says. By naming Black and Indigenous groups, the acronym signals that they face distinct societal challenges. Anti-Black racism impacts African Americans differently from the ways colonization affects Native Americans, for example.

Though Bipoc is more specific than “minority” or “people of color,” [some critics argue](#) that the acronym still lumps racial groups together. And given its recent emergence, many people are still unfamiliar with its meaning, which could further create confusion.

## **Which Term to Use**

Anytime that instructors or administrators use these words, they should define them and explain why they chose to use that particular term, Gordon says.

People from different backgrounds come together at college, sometimes for the first time, and many of these people are testing out which words they prefer. Not everyone will achieve perfection, Gordon says. What's more important is that conversations around preferred racial terms be grounded in respect. And providing students or the college community with a definition sets a tone of learning.

The more specific you can get, the better, Clemons says. She advises people to be specific about the racial groups they want to address and ask if the term encompasses someone who may be on the margins of that group. For example, if a college administrator is addressing Latin American students of Hispanic origin, they can ask members of that student population whether they prefer Hispanic, Latino/a, or Latinx. If an email to the campus community seeks to address multiple racial groups, administrators or communications staffers can ask members of these groups how they want to be referred to.

When in doubt: Ask campus groups or individuals which terms they prefer.

## Read Up.

- Many Americans didn't learn about the Tulsa Race Massacre in schools. There were [more race massacres](#) across the country where white people targeted Black people. (*The Washington Post*)
- Last year, the Johns Hopkins University announced that the institution's founder, known as an abolitionist and philanthropist, had enslaved people. [A new paper raises](#) doubts about whether there's sufficient evidence to support that claim. (*The Baltimore Sun*)
- The Virginia Theological Seminary will give cash payments to the descendants of the enslaved people who were forced to work at the institution. [Unlike other programs that provide scholarships or housing vouchers, the institution is giving out cash.](#) (*The New York Times*)