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Campus Racial Climate and Mental Well-being Among College Students: The Role of Feeling Valued, Sense of Belonging, and Racial Saliency

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BACKGROUND

- Around 73% of college students report experiencing at least one mental health crisis during college¹ and 64% report dropping out of college for mental health reasons².
- Although there is extensive research examining individual factors (e.g., academic) that contribute to mental health difficulties among college students, there is limited research evaluating how campus culture impacts students' mental well-being.
- For instance, there is a notable gap in understanding how negative racial campus climate may impact students' mental health.
- The current study examines factors that may impact how negative campus racial climate impacts students' mental health (depression and anxiety) and overall well-being. Specifically (1) feeling valued, and (2) belongingness at school were examined as factors that buffer, or decrease, the mental health impact, whereas (3) higher racial saliency was examined as a factor that may increase risk.

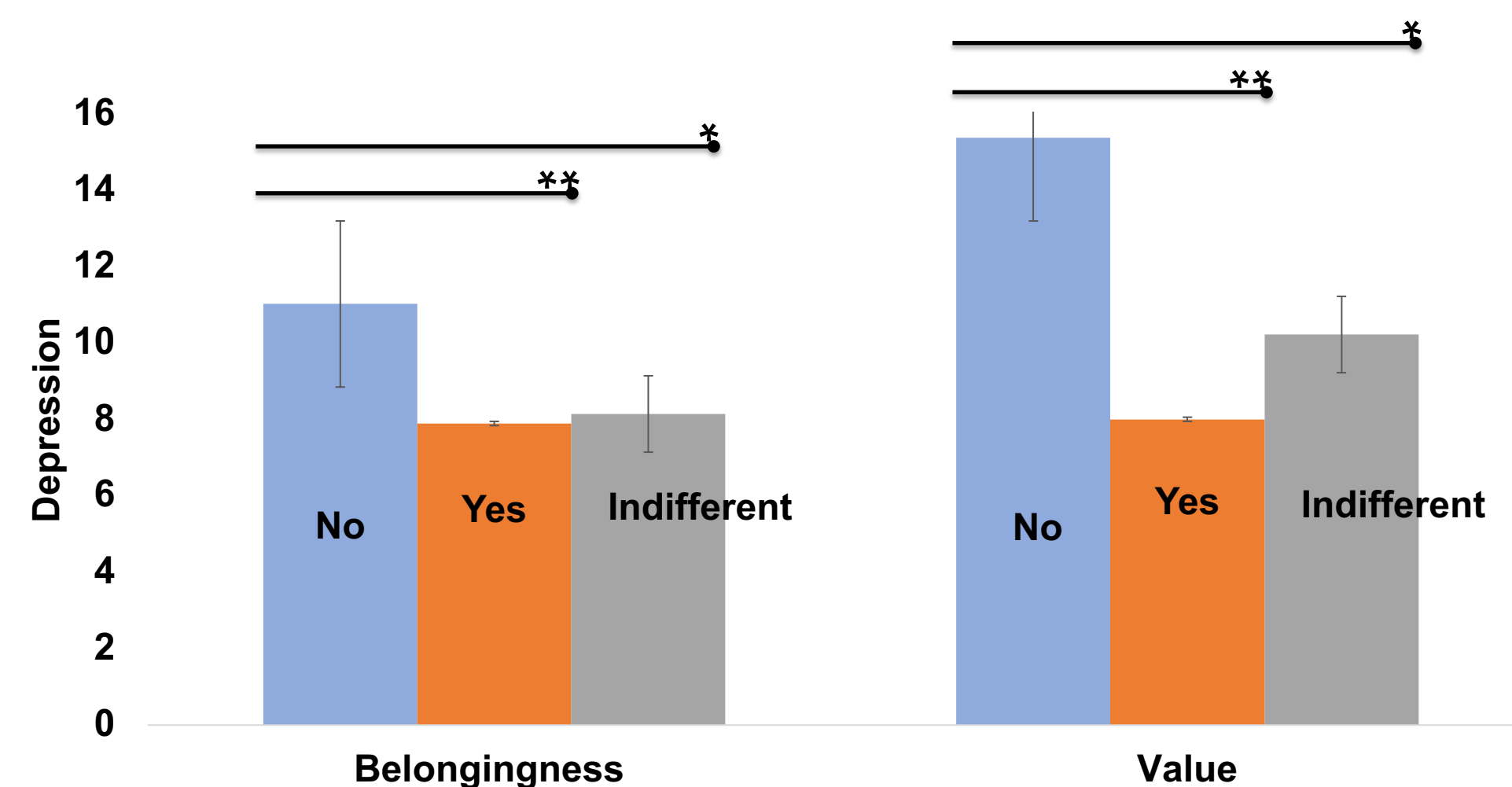
METHOD

- The study was conducted as a participating site for a larger national study (*Healthy Minds Study*⁶) that examines various aspects of university students' health and well-being.
- This cross-sectional and anonymous study was conducted with a random sample of 413 ODU undergraduate students ($Mean_{age} = 26.05$ [$SD = 8.90$]; 78% cisgender female; 59.4% White, 28 % Black; 79% heterosexual/straight) in March 2021.
- This one-time online survey included questions assessing:
 - 1) university climate and culture (*How would you rate the climate at [school name] for persons from the following racial/ethnic backgrounds?* Options: 1=Very respectful to 4=Very disrespectful),
 - 2) mental health outcomes (depression: PHQ-9³, anxiety: GAD-7⁴, positive mental health/well-being: Flourishing Scale⁵)
 - 3) feeling valued,
 - 4) feeling like they belong, and
 - 5) saliency of their racial identity.

RESULTS

- Although 59.6% of students reported the university climate to be “respectful”, 40.4% reported the university climate to be “disrespectful” or “very disrespectful” for all racial/ethnic students (including their own race/ethnicity).
- Among the students who reported the university racial climate to be disrespectful, a series of analyses were conducted to examine factors that may increase or decrease this impact on mental health.
- Degree of feeling valued was significantly related to less anxiety ($F[2,161] = 10.04, p < .001$), less depression ($F[2, 161] = 7.74, p < .001$), and greater mental well-being ($F[2, 161] = 12.18, p < .001$).
- Degree of belongingness was also significantly related to less anxiety ($t(153) = -3.26, p < .001$), less depression ($t(153) = -2.82, p = .006$), and greater mental well-being ($t(153) = 3.53, p < .001$).
- Higher degree of racial saliency was significantly related to greater depression (Welch's $F[2, 87.14] = 3.79, p = .026$). However, racial saliency was not significantly related to anxiety ($p = .440$), or well-being ($p = .184$).

Depression Scores by Belongingness and Feeling Valued Among University Students



Note: Among students who reported campus racial climate to be disrespectful, those who reported to feel no belongings, and not valued reported higher depression scores compared to those who reported to feeling like they belong/valued or feeling indifferent about their belongings/feeling valued. * $p < 0.5$, ** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

- This study suggests factors that may buffer or increase mental health impact of negative racial campus climate.
- Among students who reported negative racial campus climate, feeling valued and a sense of belonging at school was related to less depression and anxiety, as well as greater mental well-being.
- Higher racial saliency was associated with greater depression among students.
- These findings suggest that promoting a positive (racial) campus culture may have direct implications for mental health outcomes for all students.
- Moreover, fostering students' belongingness, and value may be critical in mitigating negative racial campus climate.
- Future research, campus policies, and mental health intervention need to consider racial climate, and students' connectedness to promote student well-being.

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