

Finding Space: An Observational Analysis of Race-Based Courses and Black Application and Enrollment Rates at UNC Asheville

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Abstract

Being one of the last states to integrate its higher education systems, North Carolina has had a tumultuous relationship with equitable education. This study focuses on UNC Asheville, and its varying enrollment and application rates for Black students since its integration. For new college students, there is a plethora of new, sometimes daunting experiences that come with the new environment of a university. Black students are often forced to consider the racial component of all of these factors when applying to, and enrolling, in colleges. Entering a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) can be especially challenging, as Black students must navigate white spaces constantly. As Black students navigate their way through white spaces at PWIs, they will often seek reprieve in courses which speak to their experiences. An observational study is conducted to assess the relationship between the proportion a race-based courses offered at UNC Asheville, and the application and enrollment rates for Black students in the following year. A bivariate regression analysis showed a positive relationship between the proportion of race-based courses and Black enrollment and application rates. However, a multiple regression analysis, which included other control variables, only showed a positive relationship between race based courses and Black application rates. This suggests that an increase in race based courses can lead to an increase in Black applicants, potentially creating a larger pool of accepted Black students.

1. Introduction:

North Carolina, being one of the last states to integrate its higher education systems in 1981, has always had a turbulent relationship with equitable education. After several failed integration proposals to the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), the UNC System, after threat of closure, was involved in a legislative battle with the HEW to implement meaningful integration policy. This resulted in the Consent Decree, which imposed integration across UNC System schools -- both Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). The Consent Decree outlined enrollment quotas for Black enrollment at PWIs, and white enrollment at HBCUs. During the time of the Consent Decree's implementation, all HBCUs within the UNC System were able to reach their quotas. None of the PWIs were able to do the same. UNC Asheville specifically has been on the lower end of Black enrollment, in comparison to other PWIs in the UNC System. In fact, in the years directly following its integration, UNC Asheville's Black enrollment dropped. This raises the question: why has Black Enrollment at UNC Asheville varied since its integration?

Black students at UNC Asheville can often expect themselves to be the only person of color in the classroom. In these situations, they are often assumed to be the the expert on topics pertaining to race. The lack of knowledge, or simple lack of desire to engage in a conversation where you are an assumed expert and mouthpiece for a community which is vastly larger than yourself can be especially draining. Students should not be made to feel this type of pressure in a setting which is supposed to be the 'Great Equalizer'. One way students are able to remedy this issue

(in part) at a PWI such as UNC Asheville, is through the curriculum. By taking courses with curriculum that centers experiences which Black students can relate to -- and are often taught by Black professors -- students can be in an environment where they feel understood. It is integral that UNC Asheville, as well as other universities, make changes in any areas possible to increase the presence of students of color so that strong communities can be built to facilitate a successful college experience. This argument will be tested with data on courses, Black application rates, and Black enrollment rates from 1985 to 2017. The findings of this research indicate that the proportion of race-based courses has the potential to increase Black application rates, but unexpected results were observed surrounding the effect on Black enrollment.

Firstly, this paper will outline the extant literature on the topic of Black enrollment at PWIs, highlighting the gap in the literature which specifically addresses how course offerings can affect Black students' decisions of where to apply and attend college. This is followed by an argument as to how and why the curriculum matters in this respect. The theory is then tested using data from UNC Asheville from 1985 to the present. This will conclude with a discussion of results and the implications of this study.

2. Literature Review:

When assessing and analyzing the factors influencing Black enrollment at UNC Asheville, it is important to note the existing literature which has previously attempted to understand motivations for college choice, specifically among Black students. As it pertains to the choice to the choice between attending and HBCU or a PWI, Perna¹ finds that the social and cultural capital a university has to offer is given the same weight as the academic offerings of a university for Black students. This intersection of social and academic desires for education echoes P. Pitre, Jonson, and C. Pitre's² integrated model of college choice. This model combines the econometric model -- which prioritizes the monetary investment in college education, and the possible returns on that investment -- with the sociological model which "[focuses] on the influence of schools, parents, peers, and teachers". Additionally, Scott³ notes that HBCU students who had previously considered attending a PWI actively considered their role in increasing racial integration at a PWI. This shows that Black students are aware of the space they would inhabit when attending a PWI, making it more necessary to investigate what draws them to do so.

Minor⁴, when assessing the history of university integration in North Carolina and Mississippi, and the contemporary policy efforts which affect its progress, addressed the impact of academic programs and their ability to increase campus integration. He found that while effectiveness varied, increased academic programs at HBCUs were able to increase enrollment of white students. However, this study largely assessed the addition of graduate and professional level programs, not the effects of additional undergraduate programs, which would be the case for UNC Asheville. This fits into the econometric model², as graduate and professional programs are seen as ways to increase access to higher paying jobs.

There is a gap in literature which addresses the effects of course offerings and the role they play in college decision making for Black students. While there is successful research which has accurately predicted the college aspirations of white students, this is not the case for Black students². This leaves room to explore new criteria in the decision making process for Black students. As Minor⁴ notes when discussing academic programs, HBCUs have been able to increase white enrollment through the addition of new programs. These results could be replicated by PWIs such as UNC Asheville, but it is important to observe past trends in Black enrollment. Since social sciences -- which have the ability to encompass large amounts of race-related curriculum -- are routinely ranked the second most popular college major among Black students⁵, UNC Asheville has the opportunity to diversify this field, which comprises 45.6% of its degree output. By looking into the course offerings at UNC Asheville, a new variable can be added to those which have already been addressed when investigating the college decisions of Black students.

3. Why Curriculum Should Matter:

When considering universities to attend, one of the first criteria a prospective student considers is whether or not the university offers a program they would like to pursue. Since college is, in part, preparation for a career, it is necessary to consider whether or not universities offer comprehensive courses to support paths students choose to follow. Additionally, college is a time for self-discovery. Students explore options to find their passions, causing them to take courses from a variety of different subjects.

For new college students, there is a plethora of new, sometimes daunting experiences that come with the new environment of a university. Leaving family, often for the first time, making new connections, maintaining grades, and exploring a new sense of independence all play a major role in the college experience. Black students are often forced to consider the racial component of all of these factors when applying to, and enrolling in, colleges^{2,3}. Entering a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) can be especially challenging, as Black students must navigate white spaces constantly. Microaggressions -- the “subtle behavioral ‘put downs’ perpetrated by majority populations on minority or disenfranchised groups⁶” -- both in and outside of the classroom can make students feel alienated, causing their academics and mental health to suffer⁷. To alleviate the stresses that come from being a minority in an academic setting, this paper advances the argument that Black students will be drawn to choose courses with subject matter that speaks to their experiences⁹. While the Black Experience is not a monolith, there is often a shared mentality that comes with being a minority at a macro level in society, as well as being hypervisible at the microlevel of a PWI^{9,8}. Black students choose classes that are less eurocentric, and instead opt for courses which put the spotlight on Black people, who are often left in the periphery^{9,10}. Being surrounded by other Black students as well as, often times, a Black professor, students feel more comfortable being in a space where a majority of the room can empathize with one another⁸. Thus, UNC Asheville’s amount of race-related courses could be responsible for the amount of Black students that have enrolled in, and applied to, the university. As such, the hypothesis is that, Black student enrollment, and Black application rates, will increase with the number of race related courses offered at UNC Asheville.

4. Research Design:

This hypothesis was tested through a quantitative observational study between the proportion of race-based courses offered in a given academic year, the application rates for Black students, and the enrollment of Black students in the following year

As discussed above, the theory was tested on two different dependent variables: the enrollment rate of Black students and the application rate for Black students. The academic year served as the unit of analysis, as the course offerings, Black enrollment, and Black application rates all varied based on this unit. Black enrollment is the proportion of Black students enrolled at UNC Asheville for a given academic year, relative to all students. Black application rate is the proportion of applications to UNC Asheville which are made by Black applicants, relative to all applicants. The proportion of race-based classes offered serves as the main independent variable of interest. The concept of a race-based class is defined as a course with a title or description which specifically highlights the topic of race as a central theme. There may be additional themes, but race should be integral. This includes mentions of race, Africa (or Africana), African Americans, or Black people. In order to assess the proportion of race-based classes offered, data was obtained through the Department of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning at UNC Asheville. This data was collected by filtering all of the course offerings since 1985 for the keywords ‘race,’ ‘Africa,’ ‘African American,’ ‘Black,’ as well as classes with the Africana Studies (AFST) designation. In addition to this, the Department of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning provided data on the total number of course offerings, enrollment percentages for Black students, and Black application rates for each academic year. By establishing the proportion of race-based classes offered, regression analysis was used to observe the relationship between this, the proportion of Black students enrolled, and Black application rates in the following year. Enrollment and application rates are examined for the year following the course offerings, as prospective students will base their desire for classes on the offerings from the previous academic year. Suggestions from current students about courses and professors can influence students to seek out specific classes during the following academic year.

In terms of control variables, consideration was given to the number and proportion of Black faculty at UNC Asheville, the implementation of the Africana Studies Department, the African American Colloquium, and the Diversity Intensive general education requirement. The presence of Black faculty cannot be ignored when addressing the enrollment of Black students. Often acting as mentors, Black faculty play an integral role in the community building aspects of the college experience for Black students⁸. The Black faculty variable is defined as the proportion of Black university professors who taught classes in a given academic year, relative to all professors. Data on this was, once again, collected through the Department of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning. Filtering through faculty records, the department assessed the total number of teaching faculty, as well as the number of Black teaching faculty. The Africana Studies Department comprises a large amount of the race-based classes offered at UNC Asheville. Its implementation may serve as a draw for Black students, showing an increase in enrollment. Although an important consideration, the Africana Studies Department was implemented in 1985, meaning it did not vary during the time period of interest. Due to this, it was not included in the regression analysis. The African

American Colloquium also served as a control variable to be considered. Introduced by the first Black faculty at UNC Asheville, the African American Colloquium was a highly comprehensive course led by these professors. Literature, film, and outside trips were used to enrich Black students attending the university. The African American Colloquium could serve as an effective recruiting tool, as students who previously participated in the Colloquium served as mentors for new Black students. Data on the African American Colloquium will be collected by consulting one of the professors who created the course, as the years of the colloquium's formal listing on university records may not be all of the years in which the course was actually taught. Lastly, the Diversity Intensive requirement is a control variable to account for. Diversity Intensive courses are designed to expose students to courses from a variety of perspectives. Often centered around ideas from different areas, geographically, the main goal of these courses are to "[highlight] the centrality of diversity and complexity of difference in contemporary life." The Diversity Intensive requirement could appeal to Black students seeking a more well rounded set of courses which intentionally shift the focus away from Eurocentric ideas¹¹. Information on the Diversity Intensive requirement was received from the University Registrar, whose data lists the year of the implementation of the Diversity intensive requirement.

Data on course offerings yielded several interesting observations. Although the proportion of race based courses constantly varied across academic year, the most occurring number of race based courses offered was 18. The median proportion of race based courses was 0.0064, or 0.64%, while the median number of race based courses was 16. On average, the proportion of race based courses offered is 0.0057, or 0.57%, and the average number of race based courses is 13.42. These numbers are especially low, given the average number of non-race based courses is 2181.6. At its lowest, the proportion of race based classes offered was 0.00065 (0.065%) in 1987, while its highest was 0.0103 (1.03%) in 2013. Variation in the number of race based classes across academic years is shown in Figure 1. In terms of the number of race based courses, the lowest number offered was 1, and the highest was 28. The standard deviation for the proportion of race based courses was 0.003, while the standard deviation of the number of race based courses is higher, at 7.603.

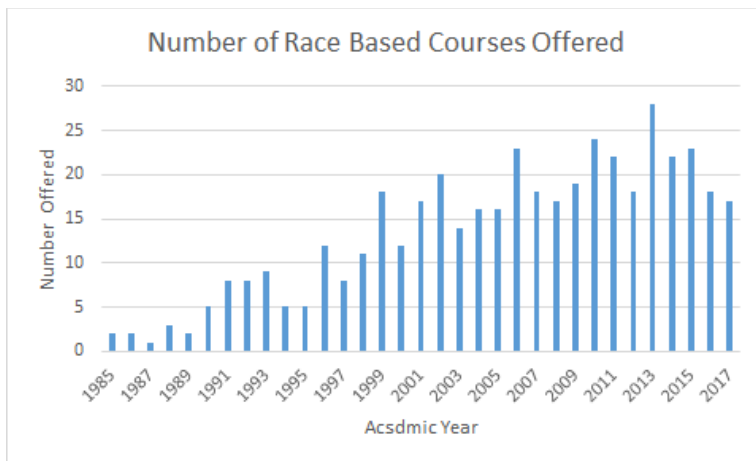


Figure 1: Number of race based courses offered per academic year

Figure 1 shows the variation in the number of race based courses offered across academic years. There is a general increase, with 1987 being the lowest number of race based classes offered, and 2013 being the highest. However, there is variation over time.

Black enrollment was another key variable to address. The most recurring number of Black students enrolled was 160. The median proportion of Black students was 0.042 (4.2%), while the median number was 162. On average, the proportion of Black students at UNC Asheville was 0.042 (4.2%), and the average number of Black students was 175.4. The lowest recorded proportion of Black students was 0.031 (3.1%) in 2003, while the proportion peaked at 0.065 (6.5%) in 2017. Black enrollment was at its lowest when the number of Black students was 125 in 1991, and at its highest when it reached 286 Black students in 2017.

Black application rates was the other dependent variable to be assessed. The most recurring number of Black applicants was 51. The median proportion of Black applicants was 0.042 (4.2%), and the median number of Black applicants was 81. The average proportion of Black applicants was 0.044 (4.4%), and the average number was 105.54 Black applicants. The proportion of Black applicants was lowest in 1991, when the proportion of Black applicants

was 0.025 (2.5%). The highest proportion of Black applicants was 0.069 (6.9%) in 2017. The lowest number of Black applicants was 40, in 1991, while the highest was 263 in 2017.

Black faculty, a control variable, was also assessed statistically. The most commonly recurring number of Black faculty at UNC Asheville was 6. The median proportion of Black faculty was 0.036 (3.6%), and the median number was 5. On average, the proportion of Black faculty is at 0.037 (3.7%), while the average number of Black faculty is 11.18. At its lowest, the proportion of Black faculty is 0.0221 (2.21%), and at its highest, it was 0.054 (5.4%). The minimum number of Black faculty was 5, while its peak was 19. The variance in the proportion of Black faculty was quite low at 0.000087, while the number of Black faculty varied to a greater degree, at 14.84.

The control variables of the African American Colloquium, as well as the Diversity Intensive requirement, were both represented by a dummy variable to distinguish the presence of each of these programs. The African American Colloquium, first introduced in 1991, was consistently offered for the next 13 academic years (1991 to 2004). The Diversity Intensive requirement was introduced in 2004, and remains a requirement for all undergraduate students.

5. Results:

To evaluate this argument, a series of regressions were estimated. First, a bivariate regression was estimated to assess the relationship between Black enrollment rate and the proportion of race based classes offered. These results are presented in Table 1. A positive coefficient of 1.13 was shown between these two variables, indicating that a 1% increase in the proportion of race based classes offered is associated with a 113% increase in Black enrollment. Given the range of the proportion of race based classes, which has rarely been above 1% of all courses offered, a 1 unit change is an unreasonable metric by which to evaluate this result. Instead, unit changes will be divided by 1000, in order to more accurately represent the data. Given this, a 0.001% change in proportion of race based classes is associated with a 0.113% increase in Black student enrollment. This relationship appears to be minute, but with a percentage of race based courses which has peaked at 1.03%, this number can become substantively significant. Since race based classes currently make up such a small proportion of course offerings, small increases in this proportion can have large, positive effects. The p-value for this regression analysis was 0.088, and the 95% confidence interval was -0.18 to 2.43, indicating that this change is not statistically significant.

Table 1: Bivariate Analysis Between Black Student Enrollment and Race Based Courses

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	p-value
y-intercept	0.037	0.004	<0.05
Proportion of Race Based Courses Offered	1.126	0.640	0.088

Table 1 outlines the results of a bivariate regression analysis between Black enrollment rate and the proportion of race based courses offered. As predicted in the hypothesis, there is a positive relationship between these two variables, as a 1% increase in the proportion of race based courses offered is associated with a 113% increase in Black enrollment. However, the result is not statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval

In addition, a multiple regression was estimated to observe the relationship between Black enrollment rate, the proportion of race based courses offered, and the control variables -- proportion of Black staff, presence of the African American Colloquium, and the presence of Diversity Intensive courses. These results are shown in Table 2. Considering these variables, a one unit change in the proportion of race based courses offered is associated with a 57% decrease in Black enrollment. When divided by 1000 (given the range of data for course offerings), this can be interpreted as a 0.001% change in the proportion of race based courses offered is associated with a 0.057% decrease in Black enrollment. This relationship is surprising given the hypothesis, but is still statistically indistinguishable from zero. With a p-value of 0.61 and a 95% confidence interval of -2.84 to 1.69, these results are not statistically significant. The inclusion of the Black faculty variable also yielded unexpected results. A one unit change in the proportion of Black staff is associated with an 11% decrease in Black student enrollment. Although this number may not prove to be substantively significant, given the range of Black staff (2.2 to 5.4%), it is still at odds with expectations. The p-value was 0.79, and the 95% confidence interval was -0.59 to 0.37 showing that this is not

statistically significant. This unexpected result could be the result of multicollinearity, if Black faculty disproportionately offer the race-based courses. In terms of the African American Colloquium, a one unit change in the presence of the Colloquium (a shift from the course being unavailable to available) was associated with a 0.15% increase in Black student enrollment. A p-value of 0.79, and a 95% confidence interval of -0.009 to 0.012 shows that this is not statistically significant, but the effect is positive, as expected. Lastly, the presence of the Diversity Intensive requirement was assessed. A one unit change in the presence of the Diversity Intensive requirement was associated with a 1.61% increase in Black student enrollment. Given that the Diversity Intensive requirement is still present in UNC Asheville's general education requirements, this variable has served a substantive role in increasing Black enrollment. With a p-value of 0.03, and a 95% confidence interval of 0.002 to 0.030, this is statistically significant.

A bivariate regression analysis was also estimated to assess the relationship between the proportion of race based classes and the Black application rate, rather than Black enrollment. The results of this analysis is presented in Table 3. A positive coefficient of 2.29 was shown between these two variables, meaning that a 1% increase in race based classes offered is associated with a 229% increase in Black applicants. When adjusted to account for the range of race based courses offered, this can be described as a 0.001% change in the proportion of race based classes offered is associated with a 0.229% increase in Black student applications. When current trends in the proportion of race based classes are considered, this coefficient can become substantively significant with small changes to the proportion of race based classes. A p-value of 0.01, paired with a 95% confidence interval of 0.49 to 4.09, shows that this is statistically significant. This supports the hypothesis.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis Between Black Enrollment and Race Based Courses

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	p-value
y-intercept	0.043	0.006	<0.05
Proportion Race Based Courses Offered	-0.575	1.104	0.61
Proportion Black Staff	-0.110	0.232	0.64
African American Colloquium Available	0.001	0.005	0.79
Diversity Intensive Requirement Implemented	0.016	0.007	0.03

Table 2 contains the results of a multiple regression analysis of Black enrollment rate, the proportion of race based courses offered, and the control variables -- proportion of Black staff, presence of the African American Colloquium, and the presence of Diversity Intensive courses. Both the proportion of race based courses, and the proportion of Black faculty had negative relationships with Black enrollment rates, contrary to the hypothesis. However, the effects are statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Table 3: Bivariate Analysis Between Black Application Rate and Race Based Courses

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	p-value
y-intercept	0.032	0.005	<0.05
Proportion of Race Based Courses Offered	2.291	2.591	0.01

Table 3 shows the results of a bivariate regression analysis of the proportion of race based courses offered, and Black application rate. There is a substantial and statistically significant positive relationship between these two variables, as predicted.

Lastly, a multiple regression analysis was estimated in order to discern a relationship between Black application rate, proportion of race based courses offered, and the control variables -- proportion of Black staff, presence of the African American Colloquium, and the presence of Diversity Intensive courses. These results are reflected in Table 4. Accounting for these variables, a one unit change in the proportion of race based courses offered is associated with a 41% increase in Black application rates. When adjusted, this can be described as a 0.001% change in the proportion of race based classes offered is associated with a 0.042% increase in Black application rates. This number does not appear to be substantively significant, and when paired with a p-value of 0.8, and a 95% confidence interval of -2.49 to 3.31, it is not statistically significant either. The proportion of Black staff had a negative relationship with the Black application rate. A one unit change in the proportion of Black staff is associated with a 27% decrease in Black applicants. This number is quite large, but the p-value, 0.3, and the 95% confidence interval -0.88 to 0.33, indicate that it is not statistically significant. Again, this may be a result of multicollinearity between Black professors and race based courses. The presence of the African American Colloquium also had a negative relationship with Black application rates. A one unit change in the presence of the Colloquium was associated with a 0.17% decrease in Black application rates. This number is at odds with expectations, but is not substantively significant when considering that a one unit change is the only shift possible for this variable. The p-value of 0.8 and 95% confidence interval of -0.02 to 0.01 indicates that this is not statistically significant. Finally, the Diversity Intensive requirement was assessed. A one unit change in the presence of the Diversity Intensive requirement is associated with a 2.09% increase in Black application rates. Since the Diversity Intensive requirement is still present at UNC Asheville, this number has been substantively significant in increasing Black application rates.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Between Black Application Rate and Race Based Courses

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	p-value
y-intercept	0.045	0.008	<0.05
Proportion of Race Based Courses Offered	0.412	1.414	0.773
Proportion of Black Staff	-0.274	0.297	0.364
African American Colloquium Presence	-0.001	0.007	0.809
Diversity Intensive Requirement	0.020	0.009	0.029

Table 4 contains the results of a multiple regression analysis of Black application rate, the proportion of race based courses offered, and the control variables -- proportion of Black staff, presence of the African American Colloquium, and the presence of Diversity Intensive courses. Both the proportion of Black staff, and the presence of the African American Colloquium had negative relationships with Black enrollment rates, contrary to the hypothesis.

Some of these results proved to be contrary to the original hypothesis. A possible reason for this could be the range of data for the proportion of race based classes. Since there is so little variation, the results of a regression analysis using it as a variable could create inconsistent data. As discussed previously, it is also possible that these results are a function of multicollinearity between race based courses and Black faculty. Since race based classes are assumed to be taught by a majority of Black faculty, it is possible that these two variables are so closely associated that they affect the results.

6. Conclusion:

In theory, Black students, regardless of their major, will seek out courses where they feel they will find both peers and professors who can better understand the specific challenges they face as minorities in higher education⁸. Black students, seeking relief from the added pressures inherent when attending a PWI, will take race based courses⁹. As the proportion of these race based classes increases -- the options available for students to find the communities that

are largely absent from the majority of classes -- so will Black enrollment and application rates. The results indicate that there was a positive relationship between the proportion of race based courses and Black enrollment, but the results were not statistically significant. This was also the case with the multiple regression analysis, which showed a negative relationship between Black enrollment and race based courses, but was also statistically insignificant. However, there was a positive relationship between the presence of the diversity intensive requirement and Black enrollment, showing that this is a step in the right direction. In terms of Black application rates, the hypothesis was supported in a bivariate regression analysis, as the proportion of raced based classes coincided with an increase in Black application rates. A multiple regression analysis revealed that the diversity intensive requirement also related to an increase in Black application rates.

Although the initial hypothesis was not completely supported, the results of this study point to potential solutions to the lack of Black enrollment and applications. Since the diversity intensive requirement had a positive relationship with both dependent variables, it could be worthwhile to pour more resources into bolstering the courses which fall under the diversity intensive area. While the coefficient may not appear to be large, it is important to take any steps possible to ensure progress in diversity at the university. Another major observation is that the proportion of race based classes *did* have a positive impact on Black applications. Although this does not necessarily translate directly into an increase in Black enrollment (as evidenced by the previous regression analyses), it does not mean that race based courses serve no purpose for Black students. Increasing the proportion of race based classes can increase Black application rates, resulting in a larger pool of students who can later become enrolled students at UNC Asheville.

This research and data is not without flaw. North Carolina's resistance to integration until 1981 has resulted in almost 30 years of unusable data, in comparison to other universities. This would provide a much larger sample size, and possibly more variance in the dataset itself. Additionally, the dataset was severely low in both range and variance. The proportion of race based courses had a range of 0.97%, and peaked at 1.03%, showing that even at its height, UNC Asheville has been severely lacking in its course offerings. This could have had an impact on the regression analyses, as trends in race based course offerings may not have ever been high enough to induce actual change in the first place -- it is impossible to show that something has had a meaningful impact, if the numbers have never been high enough to do so.

While this research investigated a topic which has never been analyzed thoroughly, there are still many other avenues which may account for the variance in Black enrollment at UNC Asheville. Admission and recruitment policies and practices are another angle which one could investigate to account for this variance. What high schools are the university visiting, and what is the racial makeup of these schools? How are grades, extracurriculars, and workload factored in when deciding whether students are actually accepted into the university? Further research into these areas have the potential to motivate real, meaningful change in the way UNC Asheville handles its racial diversity, creating an environment where all of its students feel welcomed and accepted, so they are better able to focus on their academic success, and help the university achieve its highest potential.

7. References

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