



# You Can't Count If You're Not Counted

## A Practical Guide on How More Inclusive Data Can Drive African American/Black Student Success and What You Can Do

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### Introduction

Higher education research shows that a sense of *belonging* is critical to student success (Strayhorn, 2012). African American/Black students can experience greater belonging when they feel their college recognizes their racial identity. Yet, **many California community colleges use data methods that undercount African American/Black students who identify with more than one race or ethnicity.** This approach can lead to missed opportunities when it comes to fostering belonging throughout African American/Black students' academic journeys, and ultimately, improving equitable outcomes.

The RP Group's position paper [\*You Can't Count If You're Not Counted: More Inclusive Data Collection and Reporting Strategies to Drive African American/Black Student Success\*](#) (2025) identified this issue and provided institutional research, planning, and effectiveness (IRPE) leaders alternative strategies. This guide builds on that paper, offering practitioners and advocates insight on how colleges count African American/Black students currently, **why more inclusive methods matter for African American/Black students' success**, and what you can do to advance these approaches.

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## Most Colleges Overlook Diversity Within the African American/Black Population

Demographic measurement of the racial and ethnic identity of African American/Black individuals has been dictated to them since at least 1790 (U.S. Census, n.d.). The California Community Colleges system follows the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System's (IPEDS) approach. Students answer two checkbox questions: first to identify as either *Hispanic/Latino* or *Not Hispanic/Latino*, then to choose among six race categories (*American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White, or Two or More Races*). Hispanic/Latino identity is prioritized over others if selected, which means that if a student checks both Hispanic/Latino and another race, only their Hispanic/Latino identity is reported. Students who check multiple non-Hispanic categories are categorized as Two or More Races.

This current system limits students' identities. Specifically, only students who select *only* the African American/Black box are counted in that category. According to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart, in 2022–2023, 4.1% of students were categorized as multi-ethnic and 5.1% as unknown. **It is impossible to know how many of these students may consider themselves to be African American/Black.** As a result, colleges and districts may exclude these students from programs and services designed for African American/Black students, and therefore underallocate the resources necessary to meet these students' needs, perpetuating or widening opportunity gaps.

## Inclusive Identification Methods Can Lead to Increased Belonging, Better Outcomes

Allowing students to fully express their African American/Black identity in data collection will signal that their identity matters. Collecting more inclusive racial identification data will **provide a richer understanding of who students are** and allow for improved reporting, which can facilitate better-informed decisions about policies and practices designed to **promote equitable outcomes for African American/Black students** (Dowdle, 2019).

With more accurate racial identity data, colleges and districts can more effectively allocate resources to **meet the specific needs of African American/Black students**, mitigate inequitable access to programs and services, and address opportunity gaps (Dowdle, 2019).

Notably, more inclusive data methods can **benefit not only African American/Black students but also individuals from other racial/ethnic groups** that are also often undercounted, including Native American and Pacific Islander students.

## What You Can Do

How can colleges make data collection and reporting practices more inclusive? Ideas include allowing students to “check all that apply,” providing students the space to further describe their cultural or racial identity, and then reporting *all* of students’ race/ethnicity selections (see sidebar, *Inclusive Data Methods*). It is essential to note that when students’ racial/ethnic identities are fully recognized, percentages will no longer add up to 100% across groups in datasets and reporting.

### Inclusive Data Methods

Want to advocate for the adoption of more inclusive data collection, analysis, and reporting? Consider these ideas:

- **Adopt a “check any that applies approach”** for all race/ethnicity data collection efforts.
- **Include an open textbox next to each race/ethnicity category**, prompting respondents to describe any additional cultural or racial context they would like to include.
- **Report on different combinations** of African American/Black students (e.g., only marked African American/Black, marked African American/Black along with other races/ethnicities).
- **Recategorize race/ethnicity** using African American/Black as the reference or prioritized group.

### The RP Group’s African American Transfer Tipping Point (AATTP) Study

The [AATTP study](#) explored the experiences of transfer-bound African American/Black students and examined differences in the sample sizes based on identification method. Using the limited IPEDS methodology, the sample included 40,075 transfer-intending students. However, when employing a more inclusive method, the sample grew to 69,278 students, representing a 73% increase.

The RP Group has adopted **more inclusive identification and reporting methods that center the experiences of African American/Black students** to facilitate more comprehensive studies on educational outcomes and disparities (see example in sidebar, *The RP Group’s African American Transfer Tipping Point Study*). Some colleges are already at the forefront of this issue (see p. 4 sidebar on *Chabot College’s “Umoja Way” of Counting Students*). Community college practitioners and advocates can take steps to further promote these approaches:

- **Educate colleagues on why inclusive data methods are important** to African American/Black students' success and identify ways to adopt these approaches at all levels of the institution.
- **Review how your college/district publishes race/ethnicity data** on public dashboards and in reports.
- **Reach out to your research office** to explore how it collects, analyzes, and reports student race/ethnicity data.
- **Ask your research office to calculate enrollment metrics for African American/Black students using different methods** (i.e., an IPEDS count versus a more inclusive count) to demonstrate any differences.
- **Advocate for more student-centered approaches** that allow African American/Black students to self-determine their racial/ethnic identities, rather than limiting their options using more restrictive historical methods.

### Chabot College's "Umoja Way" of Counting Students

In a collaborative effort, Chabot College's Institutional Research (IR) and Umoja leaders developed a unique reporting method called the "Umoja Way."

Using Umoja principles, the approach ensures that all students who identified as "African American/Black" on their college application are included in this count, even if they also selected an additional race or ethnicity. The [Umoja Way method](#) provides a more accurate and comprehensive account of African American/Black students to inform campus decision-making, support Umoja and the Black Cultural Resource Center, and ultimately bolster the success of these students at Chabot College.

## For More Information

Learn more detailed information on inclusive data collection and reporting methods in The RP Group's companion resource [You Can't Count If You're Not Counted: More Inclusive Data Collection and Reporting Strategies to Drive African American/Black Student Success](#).

## References

- California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (n.d.). *Data Mart*. [datamart.cccco.edu/Students/Student\\_Headcount\\_Term\\_Annual.aspx](http://datamart.cccco.edu/Students/Student_Headcount_Term_Annual.aspx)
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- U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Measuring race and ethnicity across the decades: 1790-2010*. [census.gov/data-tools/demo/race/MREAD\\_1790\\_2010.html](https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/race/MREAD_1790_2010.html)

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