

TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' IDENTITIES AT CSUN

OVERVIEW

In this report we examine different ways to identify Black/African American students at CSUN using the existing data. Although federal requirements provide clear guidelines for reporting race/ethnicity data, they may undercount the Black/African American population in particular. We therefore study these data using different definitions of racial/ethnic identity to better understand the composition of the Black/African American student population at CSUN.

Data

The dataset for this report was compiled by CSUN's Office of Institutional Research and includes all undergraduate students who first enrolled at CSUN between Fall 2009¹ and Fall 2021². This includes 126,923 students, for whom we compiled detailed data on racial/ethnic identity.

DEFINING BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN

There are many terms that are used to denote the Black/African American population, including (but not limited to): Black, Black American, African, African American, of Black descent, and of African descent. In this report, we use "Black/African American" in recognition of the shared African ancestry of this group and to be inclusive of individuals who may identify as Black but not as African American (e.g., Afro Latino). We acknowledge that notions of race, ethnic, and national identity carry political, social, and familial meanings that can be controversial. Most importantly, we recognize the limitations and imperfections of any label applied to such a diverse group.

Data on race/ethnicity largely come from student responses in the CSU system application ([Cal State Apply](#)). To meet federal reporting requirements (i.e., to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or IPEDS), the CSU application includes the required two-question series to gather race/ethnicity data: 1) "With regard to your ethnicity, do you consider yourself Hispanic or Latino?" (yes/no), followed by 2) "Regardless of your answer to the question above, please select below one or more of the following groups in which you consider yourself a member", with response options: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, Decline to State, or None of the Above. Per [federal guidelines](#), if a student answers "Yes" to

question #1, they are classified as Latinx/Hispanic, regardless of how they might respond to question #2. The CSU application includes a third race/ethnicity question, separate from the federally required questions: "California State University often needs to report ONLY ONE summary race/ethnicity description for a person. Please select your reporting preferences", with the following options (respondent may only choose one): American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, Two or More Races/Ethnicities, or Decline to State.

Because the federal reporting guidelines require that the response to the Hispanic/Latino question be the overriding identifier, students who respond that they are Black in question #2 would be identified as Latinx/Hispanic if they answered yes to question #1. For example an Afro-Caribbean student might personally identify as Black, but their responses on the first two questions on the CSU application would result in a federally-defined grouping of Latinx/Hispanic. In the dataset for this report, 7,138 (5.6%) students are identified as Black/African American using the federal reporting guidelines. In this example, using the third race/ethnicity question might be a better way to classify the race/ethnicity of this individual. Using question #3 to identify Black/African American students in our dataset results in 8,105 students (6.4%) who chose this as their preferred identity.

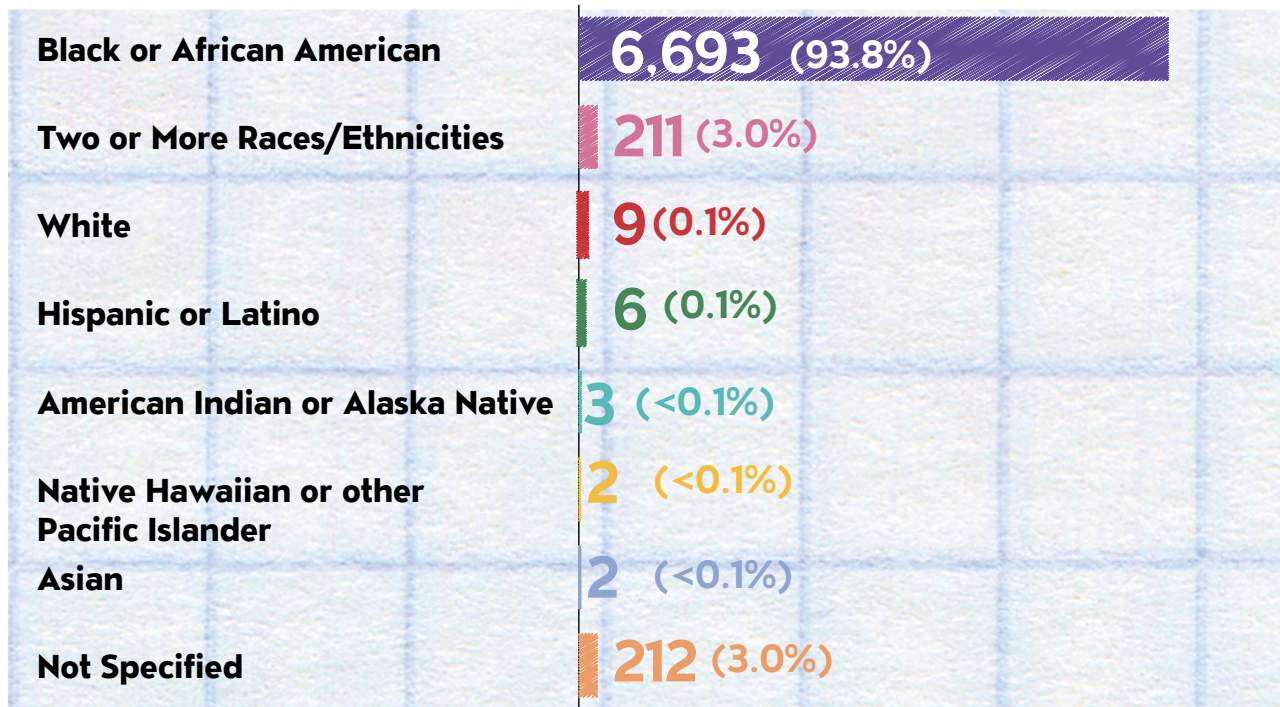
1. The questions required by the federal government for gathering data on race/ethnicity changed in 2009; hence, this report focuses on data going back to 2009 only.
2. Because we are looking at student outcomes, we include only those cohorts for which we have at least 1 year of academic data at the time this report was written.

Furthermore, even if a student responded no to the first question, if they checked more than one race in the second question (e.g., Black and American Indian), federal reporting guidelines indicate that they should be reported as “multiracial”. This broad category encompasses all individuals who responded no to question #1 and chose more than one option in question #2. As a result, “multiracial” captures a wide range of experiences and backgrounds and likely does not fully capture individuals’ personal feelings of racial/ethnic identity. Of the 4,347 (3.4%) students identified as multiracial using the federal guidelines in our dataset, 1,683 (38.7% of multiracial; 1.3% of full dataset) indicate that one of their identities is Black/African American. An additional 1,397 students (1.1%) in the dataset were grouped as Latinx/Hispanic using the federal guidelines (i.e., responded yes to question #1), but indicated Black/African American as one of their identities as well (in most cases, along with other race identities).

Identifying Black/African American Students: Federally Defined vs. Preferred Identity vs. Multiracial

As a first step toward better understanding the racial/ethnic identities of students who are identified as Black/African American in our reporting of student data, using the federal definitions, we examined the preferred identities (i.e., responses to question #3) of those identified as Black/African American using the federal definition. These data indicate that the vast majority of students (93.8%) identified as Black/African American using the federal reporting guidelines do prefer to identify as Black/African American when they have to choose one identity. The next most common identity is multiracial.

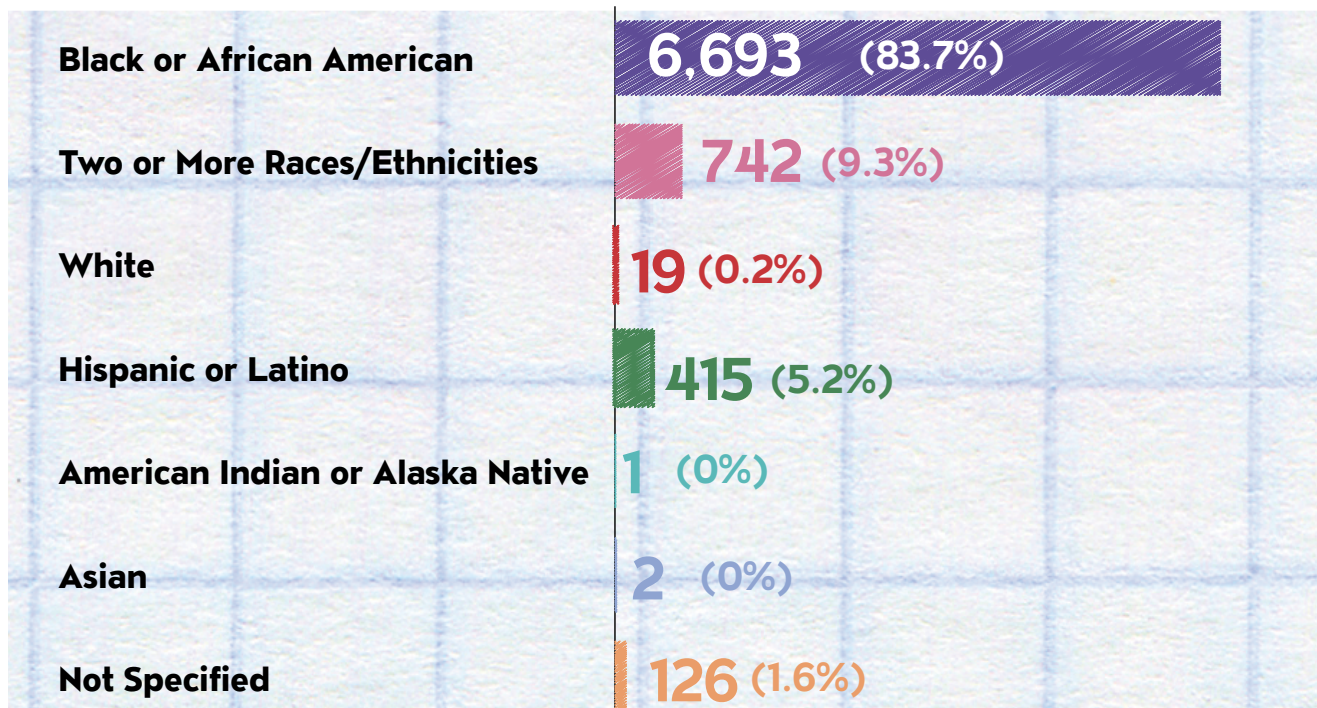
Preferred identities of students who are grouped as Black/African American by federal guidelines³



3. Race/ethnic labels are shown as listed in the application questions in the data visualizations throughout this report.

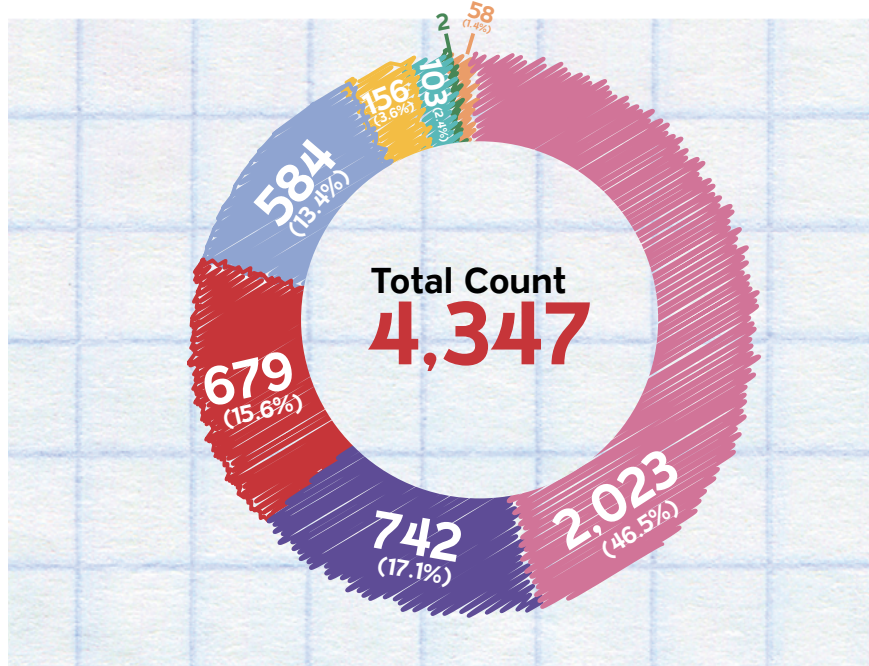
When examining the federally defined groupings of students whose preferred identity is Black/African American, there is less alignment of the two classification methods. That is, a strong majority of students who prefer to be identified as Black/African American are also reported as Black/African American using federal guidelines (83.7%), but that proportion is less than calculated the reverse (i.e., the proportion of those federally identified as Black/African American who prefer Black/African American as their identity). The next two most common federally defined groups among those who preferred Black/African American are multiracial (9.3%) and Latinx/Hispanic (5.2%).

Federally defined identities of students whose preferred identity is Black/African American

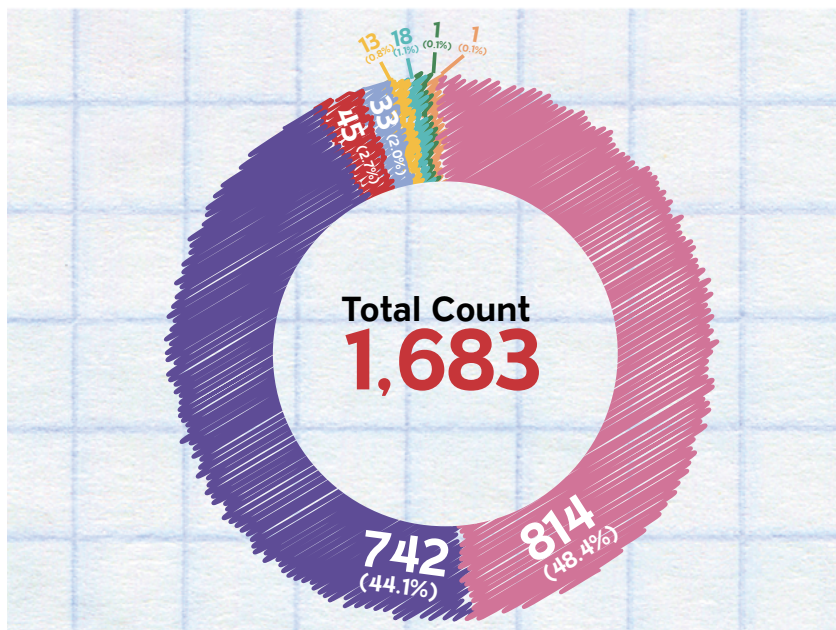


In examining the data about multiracial students (federally defined), the most common preferred identity is multiracial (46.5%), the second most common preferred identity is Black/African American (17.1%). When the data are filtered to just those multiracial students (federally defined) who indicate Black/African American as one of their identities, multiracial is still the most common preferred identity (48.4%), but Black/African American is a very close second (44.1%). Furthermore, among students grouped as Latinx/Hispanic using the federal guidelines who also indicated Black/African American as an identity (often along with other race identities as well), they were slightly more likely to indicate Black/African American as their preferred identity (28.3%) than Latinx/Hispanic (24.6%) (multiracial was still the most preferred identity among this group; 44.7%).

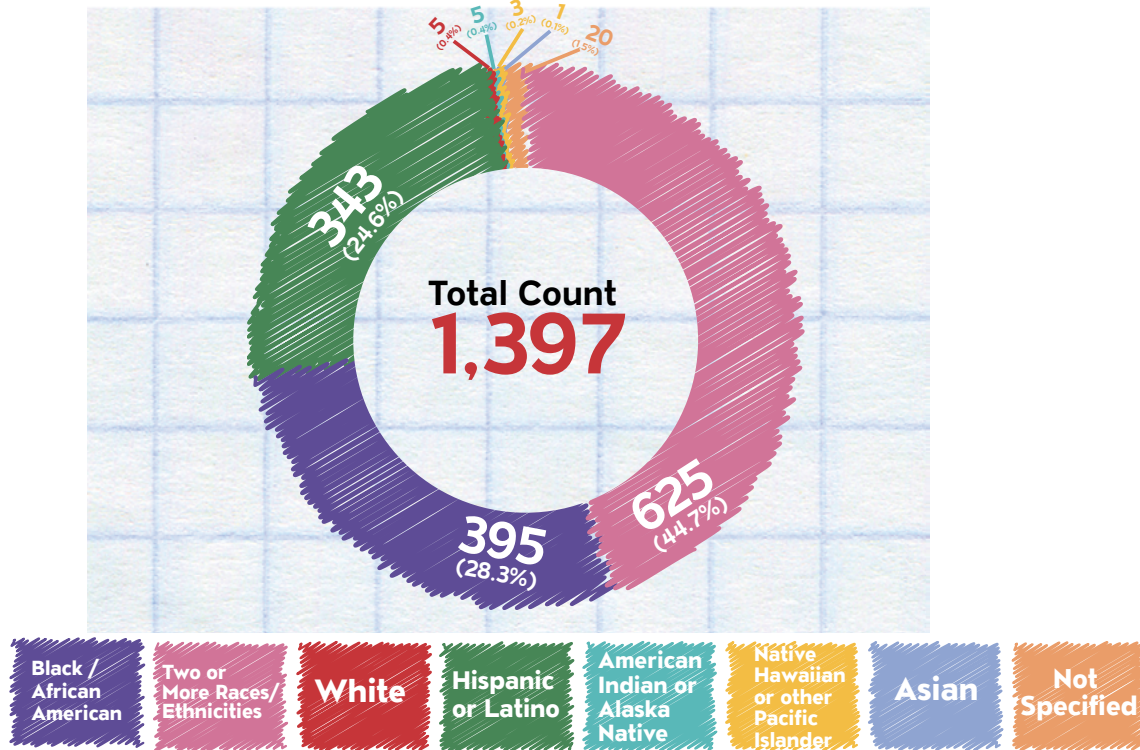
**Preferred identity of multiracial students
(federally defined)**



**Preferred identity of multiracial students
(federally defined) for whom Black/African American is one of their identities**



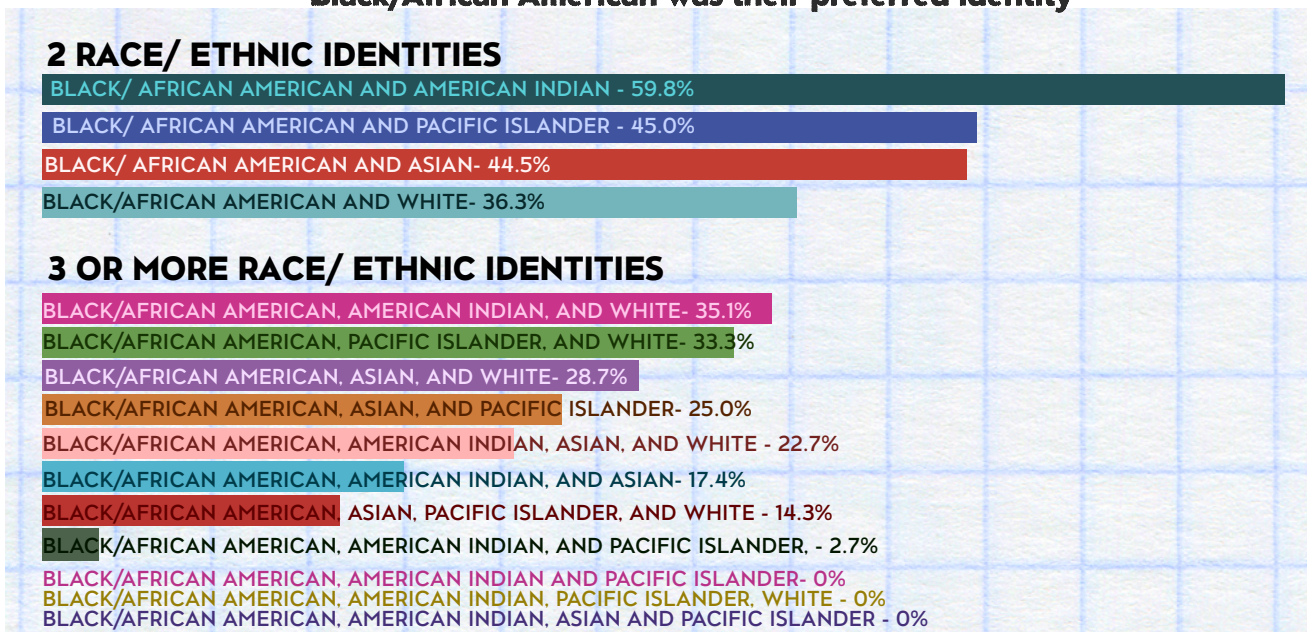
Preferred identity of federally designated Latinx/Hispanic students with Black/African American as one of their other identities



Focus on Multiracial Students

Students who identified more than one race/ethnicity in the first two questions, of whom at least one of those identities was Black/African American, were most likely to indicate that Black/African American was their preferred identity. The strongest such preference was among students of Black/African American and American Indian heritage, 59.8% of whom indicated that Black/African American was their preferred identity. Among those with three or more race/ethnic identities, preferred identity was more of a mixed bag, with those of Black/African American, White, and American Indian (36.3%) and Black/African American, White, and Pacific Islander (33.3%) heritage most likely to indicate that Black/African American was their preferred identity.

Proportion of multiracial students who indicated that Black/African American was their preferred identity



TAKEAWAYS

Whereas many colleges and universities only ask the federally mandated race questions, the CSU systemwide data include a critical third race/ethnicity question regarding one's preferred identity. For Black/African American students in particular, this points to a deficiency in the way that the federal guidelines identify Black/African American students. In particular, we see that nearly 1 in 6 (16.3%) students whose preferred identity is Black/African American on our campus are not captured by the federal definitions for this group. They are instead usually grouped as multiracial or Latinx/Hispanic, and a deeper dive into these data reveal nuances in the identities of students whose backgrounds reflect multiple racial/ethnic identities.

The fact that not all students who may actually identify as Black/African American (as captured by the preferred identity question) are identified as such in the usual race/ethnicity reporting for the university results in not only an incomplete picture of our student population but also incomplete support and resources for Black/African American students. For example, when a program or initiative designed specifically for Black/African American students requests a list of these students for outreach purposes, our usual practice is to default to the federal definitions – it is clear from the data in this report that this means that 1 in 6 Black/African American-identifying students would not be included in this outreach. This is common practice in postsecondary institutions. CSUN and other institutions must address this problematic institutional approach; one quick way to do so on our campus would be to use the preferred identity option for identifying Black/African American students when possible. We will continue to explore such data to better understand racial/ethnic identities of our students, and we will share these additional nuanced data as much as possible.



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