

## **UNDERGRADUATE PERSPECTIVES**

### **IT'S A DIFFERENT WORLD FROM WHERE WE COME FROM**

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The idea of shapeshifting is not a new term or concept. It spans across cultures—Eastern folklore, Greek and Roman mythology, Norse mythology, Celtic folklore, Native American folklore, and modern fiction (Geller, 2016). Shapeshifters are as diverse in their abilities as they are in their appearance, appearing in everything from romantic fairy tales to horror tales. This article explores how Black undergraduate students navigate educational spaces from four distinct academic environments. For us, shapeshifting means centering our identity amidst the sea of change and managing adulthood as young adults. We share the perspectives of a Black female student at a Historically Black College and University (Howard University), another Black female student at a historically white Jesuit institution (Loyola University New Orleans), a Black male student at a historically white institution (Louisiana State University), and a Black male student at a minority serving institution (University of North Carolina Greensboro).

Navigating higher education as a student of color often involves confronting unique challenges and negotiating identity in complex social spaces. For Black students, the university experience can be marked by moments of profound connection and isolating otherness. Whether attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU), a historically white institution (HWI), a faith-based campus, or a minority serving institution (MSI) these students grapple with questions of belonging, community, resilience, and self-worth. This collection of narratives captures the voices of four undergraduates—Myra, Zora, Zachary, and Caleb—each recounting their journey in forging identity, adapting to new environments, and seeking spaces where they feel seen and understood. Through their personal reflections, these students reveal not only the challenges they face but also the strength and resilience they draw from their communities, their faith, and their ability to adapt in the face of adversity.

#### **Myra**

There is nothing better than feeling like you belong. This was the first time in my life that I felt I could be myself completely and unapologetically. It was college, and it was Howard University where I found home. Growing up in the South, my parents placed my younger sister and me in schools that were performing well. I attended schools in affluent areas with high scores, but these public schools had very few students who looked like me, and I experienced microaggressions from both students and teachers. The aim was always for students to achieve the best scores and gain admission to top schools. In an environment filled with numbers and subtle racism, it became unhealthy for any Black child.

If you didn't have perfect scores like your peers, who had expensive tutors and resources, you were viewed as unsuccessful—"stupid," for lack of a better word.

When choosing a school for my undergraduate studies, I knew I needed to be somewhere with value, where I could be heard, and where I felt at home. I toured several different schools, both HWIs and HBCUs. At the HBCUs, there was a palpable sense of comfort as students engaged in their everyday activities—walking to class, hanging out in the yard, and eating in the cafe—creating a sense of community. I knew I had to be there.

During my college application process, amidst the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, I resolved not to attend a HWI. I knew that for my success and education, I had to attend a Black school with students like me. I applied to several schools, got accepted to all of them, and was still questioned about why I didn't apply to Duke, Chapel Hill, or other prominent schools in my area. I just knew they weren't for me.

What people crave most in this world is community—a place to be seen, heard, and understood. I found that on the beautiful campus of Howard University. My HBCU was the place where I could connect with all the different sides of myself. There was a place for me as a dancer, a scientist, a collaborator, a leader, and somewhere just to have fun.

I loved that at my institution, there was always a place for me to present myself. I didn't fully understand the value of that until I left my campus. Living in such a diverse city like Washington, D.C., I felt an immediate disconnect from my community as soon as I walked two blocks from campus. I felt the eyes of people watching me, their assumptions questioning my intelligence, capability, and value. Going back home to North Carolina was even more extreme; I instantly felt like the only Black child in the room again, reminiscent of my elementary school days. The supportive bubble created by my HBCU is something no amount of value could replace.

Transitioning between different environments—that's the definition of a "shapeshifter." As a Black woman going from a community that uplifts and supports me on my HBCU campus to a grocery store created a "shift" in my identity. I was taught on my campus to always be myself and represent my community, but that became difficult once I left. I vividly remember during an internship in San Antonio, Texas, a graduate student questioned my curly hair and asked slightly inappropriate questions about my institution, implying it was still an "all-Black" campus. Regardless of the intention behind her comments, it was clear that she was not educated in my world and that I would have to assimilate into hers for the rest of my life. It's disappointing, honestly. No matter what graduate program, school, or job I pursue in the future, it will never feel as safe and accepting as my college campus.

I will never be fully heard the way my school hears my voice, nor will I be seen the way my campus sees me. My HBCU, Howard University, is a place that uplifts, supports, and understands what it's like to be African American in the United States. However, it isn't always as glamorous as it sounds. For so long, universities like mine have fought to mold their students into individuals who can change the world for the next generation. With generations of fighting for equal rights and freedom for African Americans, somewhere the mentality within the HBCU community became "breaking you down to build you back up." The origins of this mentality are unclear; it could stem from religion, Greek life, or the historical difficulties faced by African Americans in the U.S. Yet, this approach can sometimes focus more on "breaking you down" than on "building you back up."

From hazing to bullying to running for an executive board position, many students face experiences that can break them down when trying to succeed. This mentality has evolved from simple campus issues and academic troubles to extremes that end up on social media. The "breaking down" moments HBCU students experience often lack the "building back up" necessary to remind them of their identity, why it matters, and the value they hold in this world. Internally, the HBCU experience can feel ostracizing, which is hard in a world that barely accepts you.

### **Zora**

I think it's easy for many to feel like they are floating in a world where they do not belong or where they have no purpose. This can be especially true for young African Americans living in the stain and backlash of a horrific time in American history. Despite these notions and overwhelming circumstances, this couldn't be further from the truth. As children, we grow up learning how to navigate life—from code-switching to knowing how to respond when pulled over by police, handling microaggressions, and standing up for ourselves while being the minority in America. Yes, these things are valid and true, but they do not dominate my identity or shape the way I view the world.

The school I attend is Loyola University New Orleans. Although it is a Jesuit institution, it seems to be losing sight of its faith. When I chose Loyola, I must admit that I was drawn by financial considerations and the vivid memories of touring the campus when I was about 10 or 11 years old with my brother. I remember it being a place that seemed open, free, and filled with opportunities to truly discover the meaning of life and my identity amid it all. I can say that has been true for my experience at Loyola.

Unlike some of my peers, I haven't had specific moments where I felt marginalized or cast out in most academic settings. However, there have been times when I felt out of place due to the backgrounds and capabilities of those around me.

This had nothing to do with them but was all about my own feelings of inadequacy, conditioned by society to feel less than for my abilities in comparison to others who seemed more eloquent, had more remarkable opportunities, and so on. Throughout my four years of college, I've realized that I don't have to let external factors, or my own self-doubt convince me that what I bring is insufficient, subpar, or ordinary. I possess unique gifts, talents, and experiences that make my story extraordinary because my God is extraordinary.

Although I have not faced specific marginalization because of my skin color, I do believe I have been marginalized based on my faith. I identify as Apostolic Pentecostal. As I deepened my faith, I felt compelled to share what the Lord has shown me and done in my life. However, in academia, there seems to be a strict pushback against real truth. We accept many types of faith, but whenever I mention Jesus or incorporate Him into my work, I sense annoyance or frustration from peers or instructors.

I could have allowed these moments of pushback to discourage me, but because I know who I am in Jesus, nothing anyone says can take away my purpose in this world. The overall issue we see today stems from a lack of understanding of our true identity. We are image bearers of Christ, yet mentioning His name often feels taboo. We live in a fallen world, and it's easy to view life through a binary lens. But what if we turned our eyes to our hope in Jesus and recognized the real problem? What if we prayed against racism, sought more equality, and placed our trust in the one who doesn't change? If these things don't change, will we continue to live miserable lives, always on edge, or will we realize that we have freedom in the Lord?

Many think they are living liberated lives, controlling their emotions and not letting others affect them, but what makes you think a guarded life is freedom? Living this way only leads to domination by our minds and by forces that seek to undermine us. The Lord offers us abundant life when we put our hope in Him.

After finding Jesus and realizing I don't have to be a victim, I recognize the power I possess—not from myself, but from the One who is the Highest Power. The Lord will perfect that which concerns me, scattering anything that tries to come my way (Psalm 138:8; Deuteronomy 28:7). In the hand of the Lord, there is no promise that things will be easy; in fact, it's often the opposite. However, life becomes fruitful when you understand that this fallen world doesn't have to dictate your reality.

My hope is that everyone reading this understands that Jesus is the source of our hope. This fallen world can be brutal and may hurt at times, but we don't need to focus on what others do. Instead, we should realize that the Lord is our fortress and protector. Some may see this as ignorance, but I pray they find the true meaning of life and recognize that we are all searching for something to fill the God-shaped hole in our souls. Many fill it with knowledge, pride, accolades, or control. These things are fleeting and will eventually perish. We pursue these things because we want to feel loved, seen, and like we matter. The truth is, we all do, and every day the Lord reaches for us to show that He is in control. People will be people—they will be rude, mean, and racist—but Jesus is the God of the marginalized, specializing in bringing the lost to wholeness.

### **Zachary**

As a senior in my undergraduate program, this is an opportune time to reflect on my experiences for multiple personal and professional reasons, particularly to strengthen my self-awareness regarding my identity as an educated Black man studying among peers from different racial backgrounds. My time at this HWI has significantly shaped my educational experience in ways I never imagined.

I have encountered countless microaggressions that have become a regular part of my life, making it difficult to recall each instance. These experiences have become so normalized that even stark occurrences, which once stood out during the beginning of my academic journey, now feel commonplace. For example, being the only person of color in a classroom is almost expected. Similarly, I often find myself as the only man of color in some of my classes.

Given my academic interests in psychology, political science, and women, gender, and sexuality studies, I tend to think critically about how we socialize and make meaning of our shared and individual experiences. Thus, I often engage in spirited discussions with classmates and friends about issues of race, gender, and politics. What I have found through these informal conversations is that despite clear racial disparities in the student demographics on campus, many of my white peers still believe that the demographics are “about even,” which could not be further from the truth. One white student even told me he has seen so many Black people on campus that he thinks the representation is “about even” with that of white students. He insisted, “It's not as bad as y'all make it out to be.”

I vividly remember being the only person of color in multiple classes, surrounded by individuals who seemed unable—or unwilling—to appreciate or understand my experiences, yet who were also convinced that racial representation was balanced across the university. This leaves me questioning how best to approach this situation. My instinct tells me that it requires having a conversation with respect and empathy while remaining focused on data and facts. Unfortunately, even as individuals from marginalized racial groups share stories of discrimination, bias, and systemic barriers, these experiences are not always visible to others.

In a time when “alternative facts” and rampant misinformation abound, it is discouraging to invite further discussion. While I admit that sharing resources offering a different perspective on racial imbalances might be useful in encouraging reflection on the broader systemic nature of racial issues, this situation often leaves me feeling torn and exhausted. Although I feel somewhat motivated to enlighten my peers, I also feel it is not my responsibility. This dynamic concretizes feelings of isolation and outsidership and leads me to consider the concept of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) (Smith, 2003), which describes the cumulative psychological, emotional, and physical toll that individuals from marginalized racial groups experience from repeated exposure to racial microaggressions, discrimination, and systemic racism. Nevertheless, I am also resistant to admitting I experience RBF out of concern for being perceived as a victim or through a deficit lens, which could negatively impact my academic or professional experiences.

These feelings are further exacerbated by an incident where a white student called me “subhuman” after learning about a medical condition that required me to use a cane at the time. This played into the narrative that Black people are less than human. Not only was he insensitive to my disability, but what is more disturbing is that he felt comfortable enough to say such words to me, confident there would be little to no repercussions for his actions, regardless of how hurtful they were.

Before I became accustomed to these microaggressions, they often made me feel that as a Black man, I did not belong at this university. One incident that stands out was when a white staff member asked me for “proof that I didn’t steal” my parking pass. He even demanded to examine it before granting me access to campus. This moment cemented the idea that, to some, I am an outsider who does not deserve to be here. They see me as an anomaly—despite the supposed “even numbers” of Black and white students here—while I’m expected to view them as the norm. This makes the idea of equality in numbers laughable, not to mention that he was questioning my audacity in parking in a reserved lot.

Although I thought I was prepared for these challenges before attending this historically white institution, I did not anticipate their frequency or intensity. I also did not expect the emotional toll and racial environmental stress caused by these experiences. However, an unexpected positive outcome has been the strong connections I have formed with other Black students. Despite our relatively small numbers on campus, I feel more connected to my community of Black peers than I ever expected. The friendships I have developed have fostered a sense of solidarity, and the most meaningful support and thought-provoking conversations I have had have come from these peers. For that, I am deeply grateful.

### **Caleb**

Shapeshifting, to me, is the ability to change your behavior and part of your identity according to the people around you. From an early age, I learned that being Black matters in society. I attended a historically white school for most of my life, and my experiences with white peers, their parents, and teachers helped me learn how to shapeshift. Growing up, I was often one of the few, if not the only, Black boys in my class. As a result, I made many white friends, which allowed me to become comfortable around white adults and learn how to act in their presence.

When I decided to attend the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG), I knew nothing about the school. Having grown up with mostly white kids and their families, I was unaccustomed to the diversity at UNCG. Outside of extended family and church, my family and I were consistently the minorities. However, at UNCG, a minority-serving institution (MSI), the diversity is so rich that, as a Black male, it's almost impossible to feel like the minority. This was a huge adjustment for me. My whole life had involved shapeshifting to fit in with white students; I had never had the chance to be myself while still fitting in. It was my first real opportunity to make several Black friends.

My journey began during peak COVID in 2020, my freshman year, when almost all my classes were online. It was challenging to socialize and meet people, especially as everyone was wearing masks and trying to avoid strangers. As COVID restrictions eased during my sophomore year, I began to attend more in-person classes. Initially, it felt unfamiliar to see so many minorities in one room, but it was exciting to experience all the different cultures and backgrounds.

One significant experience was in an in-person communications class, where we were randomly divided into groups for a semester-long project. This project was pivotal in helping me become more familiar with minorities and learn how to shapeshift while being myself. In my group, I had three partners of different races, and working with them was wonderful. As the semester progressed, I grew more comfortable and learned to navigate my identity in a diverse environment.

As a college student with a full-time job, I am always busy. I work in customer service, currently serving as an assistant manager. My role requires me to manage not only my coworkers but also customer complaints, which means I must shapeshift around people of various ages, races, backgrounds, and beliefs. I often find myself shapeshifting around my boss, as I work for a company where conservative beliefs prevail among executives and store managers. I understand this dynamic and adapt my behavior accordingly. For instance, how I interact with my minority peers and coworkers is entirely different from how I engage with my boss and white coworkers. My ability to shapeshift has allowed me to progress rapidly in my career, leading to multiple promotions and new opportunities.

Shapeshifting is a skill that can be learned through experience. The more diverse experiences we have, the more comfortable we become in various situations. My time at a historically white high school and at an MSI university has equipped me with the ability to shapeshift and adapt among people from different cultures. While I may not always feel comfortable, I am confident in my ability to navigate these challenges and embrace the opportunity to connect with diverse individuals.

### **Conclusion**

These narratives underscore the nuanced and often challenging experiences of Black students in higher education. For some, their campuses provide a supportive community that reinforces their sense of belonging, while for others, the journey is marked by the need to confront and adapt to environments where they feel marginalized. Whether through the solidarity of fellow students, the grounding power of faith, or the adaptability they have cultivated, each student has crafted a path defined by resilience. These stories reveal a powerful truth: the journey to self-acceptance and identity in higher education is complex, yet it offers opportunities for growth and empowerment. By sharing their voices, these students contribute to a broader understanding of what it means to thrive in the face of systemic challenges, reminding us of the vital role of empathy, understanding, and support in transforming educational spaces.

### **References**

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