The paper I read outlined a research project investigating whether attending a racially affirming college affected the amount of stress experienced by African American students. The researchers also set out to determine whether coping strategies and overall academic success would be different at a racially affirming college. The framework for the study was Lazarus and Folkman’s transactional model of stress, which recognized the connection between a person and his environment. Based on this theory the researchers hypothesized that African American students at a predominately white college and university (PWCU) would “experience person-environmental incongruence” and that this would lead to “greater stress, less effective coping mechanisms and poorer academic performance than students attending a historically black college and university (HBCU)” (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007, p.389).

The researchers used a total of 200 African American participants for their study; 100 students attended a mid-sized PWCU in the Midwest and 100 attended a HBCU on the East Coast. In order to assess stress levels of their participants, the researchers used the Minority Student Stress Scale (MSS). This survey broke stress down into five subscales: environmental, interpersonal, intra-group, race-related, and achievement-related stressors. This breakdown was strategic; the researchers could determine whether the type of institution a student attended influenced all types of stressors or just those associated with their minority status. The Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced Inventory (COPE) was used to measure students’ coping mechanisms and students were asked to self-disclose their ACT/SAT scores and cumulative GPAs in order to assess academic performance.

Consistent with Greer and Chwalisz’s hypothesis, participants at the PWCU experienced “significantly higher levels of environmental, interpersonal, and intra-group stressors than did their counterparts at the HBCU” (p.398). Surprisingly, the researchers did not find that institution type had any significant affect on the amount of academic stressors that students experienced. However, the researchers were able to conclude that “minority status stress was a significant predictor of academic success” (p. 400). In addition, the data did not indicate any significant difference in the coping mechanisms used by students at the PWCU compared with those at the HBCU.

The data collected by this research project contributes to a widely held belief within the field of student affairs. This belief was most notably described by Vincent Tinto who concluded that “the greater the individual’s level of social and academic integration, the greater his or her subsequent commitment to the institution and commitment to the goal of college graduation”. As a result of this belief, higher education administrators are constantly trying to identify the factors that contribute to student integration and therefore higher retention rates. Greer and Chwalisz’s research provided evidence that an HBCU created a less stressful environment for African American students and as a result students experienced greater academic success. Their research is backed up by a National Center for Education Statistics project that found that HBCU’s graduate approximately 87% of their African American students,
while PWCU’s graduate only 9% (Greer and Chwalisz, 2007, p.388). While I do not question the results of this study, some additional details would have been helpful in order to tie it back to the larger implications it supports. It would have been helpful to know if the PWCU and HBCU in the study were similar in size (small vs. large), location (urban, suburban, or rural) and mission (liberal arts vs. research). These factors may have contributed to differences in stress levels and therefore they should have been addressed in the study. The study would have been more conclusive if students had taken the stress surveys at multiple points during the year. Having only taken one series of measurements is problematic because stress levels change and it could be argued that at the time of the assessment, students at the PWCU were going through a naturally more stressful period of time than the students at the HBCU. Lastly, while the Minority Stress Scale is broken down into sub-categories, I would argue that one type of stress invariably impacts all others and therefore it is possible that students were only experiencing one type of stress but that created a greater perception of stress in other areas of their lives.

While there are some flaws to this study, higher education administrators all should widely accepted the conclusions of this study and understand the importance of addressing issues concerning the disparity in academic success among minorities. Perhaps one of the best avenues for addressing and beginning to tackle this issue is through reducing minority-related stress. I think that a good place to start, in this regard, is with open and honest conversations with underrepresented students about the possibility of increased stressors due to their minority status. Greer and Chwalisz’s research showed that students at PWCUs and HBCUs used the same coping skills, but given the extra stressors faced by students attending PWCUs, these students need additional skill development in this area. Many PWCUs have special recruitment events, orientation programs, summer bridge programs, and first-year seminar courses for underrepresented student populations. These programs are often designed to introduce students to the campus culture and address the unique challenges they will go through as minorities. I do not think that these programs focus enough on educating students about the adaptive coping mechanisms they can utilize in order to deal with their added stressors. Students need to be encouraged to develop a greater awareness about their stress signals and ways to relax and thereby control their stress. Cultural centers and Offices of Community and Diversity should also facilitate programs that address the unique stressors that minority students experience along with ways to combat the negative consequences of stress. These programs would not only be beneficial for underrepresented students, but a great professional development opportunity for staff and faculty members.

While the above tactic is a good place to start, simply assisting underrepresented students in coping with their minority-related stressors and making others aware of these stressors is not enough. PWCUs cannot simply turn their backs on minority students and resolve to be second rate to HBCUs and other minority serving institutions. Instead, universities must make greater strides to create person-environmental congruence among greater number of their students. University policies must openly name and discourage the behaviors, words, symbols, etc. that feed social inequities and their negative impact on the campus community must be minimized. The
college core-curriculum must reflect the university’s commitment to recognizing the unique achievements, histories and challenges of diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Classes on cross-cultural communication, conflict management, and critical discourse would also help to create more affirming campuses for underrepresented students. These changes will invariably create tension and stress among traditional college students who are unfamiliar and uncomfortable discussing issues of discrimination, white privilege, etc. and in turn they will experience some person-environment incongruence. This is where the concept of stress management comes full circle. These students will get to experience first-hand what it is like to be stressed because of their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. It will be just as important to help these students become aware of these stressors and how to properly cope with them. In this way, every student will deal with issues of stress related to their ethnic, cultural, gender, etc. identities and perhaps in struggling with the same issue, students will recognize their similarities and minority-related stress will lessen as a result.