

# ASSESSMENT OF THE STATUS OF MINORITIES IN EDUCATION

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## OVERVIEW

# Contemporary Studies of Undergraduate Student Perceptions of Campus Climate

**A RESEARCH PROJECT AFFILIATED WITH THE  
CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION  
ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY**

Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity University

# HIGHLIGHTS OF THREE STUDIES ON PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS RELATIVE TO CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE, FINANCIAL AID, AND ACADEMIC CLIMATE

Demographic studies and the increasing body of higher education literature related to the growing concern about the status of minorities in higher education during the past decade, prompted the establishment of a research project in the Center for Higher Education at Illinois State University in December 1987. The project, "Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education" (ASME) is designed to collect data which will facilitate the identification of programs and strategies that are successful at enhancing the participation and status of minorities in education.

A pilot study was conducted at six predominantly white private institutions in Illinois in Spring 1989. As its title--"Study to Determine the Relationships between Illinois Postsecondary Campus Climate and Institutional, Academic and Student Service Program Support Characteristics and Minority Student Matriculation"--suggests, this initial survey was designed to ascertain the perceptions of students relative to several aspects of their educational experiences. The first of a series of reports developed from the data collected for this study was "Perceptions: Campus Racial Climate" by Charles E. Morris and Ira L. Neal (1989). A second report based upon this pilot project "Minority Access and Financial Aid: Perceptions, Policies, and Issues," by the same authors, was published in the Spring 1990 issue of the Education Journal, College of Education, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL, Vol 20, No. 2. Since the initial project, the assessment instruments have undergone a series of revisions and refinements, and have been administered to undergraduate students at many of the public 4-year institutions in Illinois, as well as some additional private institutions. The most recent monograph in the series is based on the survey at one of the public universities, "Undergraduate Student Perceptions of Academic Climate at a Midwestern Baccalaureate Institution" by Lilibeth Gumia, Noreen Michael, Charles E. Morris, William Mosley, and Ira L. Neal (ASME, Center for Higher Education, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61761, 1990). The major findings and recommendations of these three publications are summarized here.

**Perceptions: Campus Racial Climate.** The instrument used consisted of 168 items divided into seven sections, one of which was the racial climate. The undergraduate respondents were asked to rank their perceptions of campus racial climate on 11 scales: Relaxed to Tense, Friendly to Hostile, Cooperative to Competitive, Socially Integrated to Socially Separated, Communicative to Reserved, Concerned to Indifferent, Inclusive to Exclusive, Sensitive to Insensitive, Liberal to Conservative, Improving to Worsening, and Harmonious to Racist. There were statistically significant relationships between race, gender, and class level for most of the variables. Additionally, race was found to be statistically significant in all of the 11 items.

The data strongly infer that: (1) minority student perceptions of the campus "racial climate" are significantly different from the perceptions of their white counterparts and (2) minority students perceive that conditions for racial harmony on their campuses are deteriorating. These perceptions appear to be particularly true for minority students who are younger in age and who are classified as freshmen and sophomores.

As a group, minority students, particularly Blacks, perceived the climate as being a hindrance to their successful matriculation. Minority males indicated on all 11 items that campus racial climate worsens as they persist through the system. Black females viewed the campus racial climate as physically threatening.

The monograph concludes:

*This preliminary examination of campus racial climate is a step toward understanding the causes of minority under-representation in higher education. However, it is only a small step on a long journey. Much more work and a longitudinal approach will be needed to better understand all the dynamics surrounding this issue.*

**Minority Access and Financial Aid: Perceptions, Policies, and Issues.** This journal article examines the role of financial aid as a problem source for minority participation in higher education, and in bringing about higher educational equity for minorities and the economically disadvantaged. Further, the article describes significant changes in student financial aid distribution and financial aid policy, and the barriers these changes present to low-income families.

Based on the 1989 survey, one of the issues about which the attitudes/perceptions of minority students and majority students differ most is financial aid. These perceptions about financial aid seem to have a direct relationship to the quality of institutional climate. It is clear that perceptions about financial aid--its availability and its distribution--constitute a major reason for the tensions that are frequently erupting into incidents of racial disharmony on college campuses across the country. Educational practices, past and present, and lack of financial aid are among the causes for minority under-representation in education.

There are barriers that students from low-income families encounter which affect enrollment and persistence in higher education. Among these are the financial hardships low-income families face if one of its supporting members goes to college. Another is that minority graduates are likely to have large loan obligations if they persist through four or five years of college. Even more frustrating is the fact that minorities, particularly Blacks, have higher unemployment rates than their white counterparts following the completion of a baccalaureate degree. Additional barriers are associated with the kind and the amount of financial aid and the lack of access to information which can determine the type of student who enrolls in an institution or the type of institution a student can attend.

Increases in tuition and fees which outpace both inflation and growth in personal income pose a threat to access and choice in post-secondary education by making financing of higher education less affordable to minority and low-income families. Another alarming trend is the greater reliance on student loans for supporting college attendance. According to a study done by the American College Testing Program, "When loans were substituted for grant aid to low-income students, college access dropped, college choice deteriorated and the default rates increased." The situation was exacerbated during the 1980's when shifts in federal education policy reduced funding levels in general, and funding of special service programs, in particular.

Given the retreat of the federal government from financial aid funding, a key element in determining the extent to which minorities will enjoy full and equal participation in higher education is the state government's willingness to assume a leadership role. Further, the full participation of minority citizens in higher education is vital to our economic survival as a nation and financial aid is essential to ensuring that college attendance is an affordable and a viable reality.

**Undergraduate Student Perceptions of Academic Climate.** Contemporary retention studies have identified factors which influence a student's decision either to persist in or to withdraw from college. The purpose of the study upon which "Undergraduate Student Perceptions of Academic Climate

at a Midwestern Baccalaureate Institution" is based is to determine factors that contribute to building a supportive academic climate at a post-secondary education institution and to compare views of student respondents about the extent to which these factors exist given their race, gender and class rank.

A survey was administered to undergraduates enrolled at a public university in Illinois and a factor analysis procedure resulted in the determination of the following preliminary findings. Four factors which may significantly influence a student's perception of academic climate are racial sensitivity and tolerance on and off campus, the quality of academic services provided at the departmental level, the extent of faculty interaction with students, and social and academic integration of students into the institutional culture. White females viewed the academic climate of the institution more positively than did any other group. Minority male students felt a lack of supportive academic climate more strongly than did any other group. Lower division students rated acceptance at the departmental level and opportunities for mentoring relations significantly lower than did upper division students. Minority sophomore students perceived the strongest lack of opportunities for participating in academic-related activities and for holding managerial or leadership positions at any institutional level.

The report suggests that the institution surveyed could improve the retention of its students, particularly minority students, by addressing policies, procedures and programs related to admissions; availability of academic services such as entry, support and transition services; formal and information interactions between faculty and students; and students' participation in student organizations and co-curricular activities.

At the present, ASME associates are engaged in the development of several studies which are intended to have a positive impact on administrators, educators, legislators, parents, and students seeking to better understand many of the crucial issues facing higher education campuses. Included among these crucial issues are: student retention and persistence (undergraduate and graduate), institutional attractiveness, transfer student persistence, academic support services, student services program support, and transfer center evaluation. Each of the issues is related to the campus environment, either directly or indirectly, and may influence students' access and choice in higher education-- particularly those students who are minority or from low-income families.

The Assessment for the Status of Minorities in Education project represents a concrete effort on the part of educators, administrators, and legislators to: improve the quality of campus environment; and to enhance opportunities for full, and equal participation in higher education for all students.



Single copies of ASME publications may be ordered for \$3.00 from *ASME, Center for Higher Education, Illinois State University, Hovey Hall 301, Normal, IL, 61761-6901*. Orders of five (5) or more copies will receive a twenty percent discount. Inquiries should be directed to the same address.

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