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OVERVIEW

*Undergraduate Student Perceptions
of Academic Climate at a
Midwestern Baccalaureate Institution*

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*A RESEARCH PROJECT AFFILIATED WITH THE
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Assessment Of The Status Of Minorities In Education

*Center For Higher Education
Illinois State University*

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INTRODUCTION

During the Spring of 1984, subsequent to discussions of issues and concerns raised by the Illinois Committee on Black Concerns in Higher Education, the Subcommittee on Minority Concerns of the Illinois Senate Committee on Higher Education was formed to assess the educational progress of historically disadvantaged groups in Illinois. Both Senate committees were chaired by Senator Richard Newhouse. An early conclusion of the Subcommittee was that a concerted effort would be required on the part of all segments of the education community, as well as the legislative and executive branches of state government and the business community, to bridge gaps caused by barriers which have limited the educational access and success of racial minorities.

One of the recommendations of the Subcommittee was that Illinois colleges and universities should promote and sponsor research activities which focus on:

- (1) Identifying the causes for the disproportionate representation of minorities in postsecondary education; and**
- (2) Identifying successful strategies and programs throughout the educational system which foster and enhance the participation and status of minorities.**

During recent sessions of the Illinois General Assembly, legislation has been enacted--notably, Public Acts 84-726, 84-785, and 85-283 and various resolutions--setting in motion statewide, multidimensional efforts to enhance minority participation in education. However, the pace of progress has been slow, prompting the creation of a Joint Committee on Minority Student Access by Senate Joint Resolution No. 72 in June 1987 and its continuation by Senate Joint Resolution No. 130 on July 1, 1988 (both sponsored by Senator Miguel del Valle). Other statewide committees--such as the Joint Committee on Minority Student Achievement and the Task Force on Minority Concerns of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association--have been formed to focus on the same issues.

The project, "Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education," affiliated with the Center for Higher Education at Illinois State University, is intended as a concrete response to the recommendations of the legislative committees. The "Study to Determine the Relationships between Illinois Postsecondary Campus Climate and Institutional, Academic and Student Service Program Support Characteristics and Minority Student Matriculation" is a step toward refining the "assessment" process. The study attempts to identify the attitudes and perceptions of students, faculty, and administrative personnel regarding these relationships. Further, the study is designed to collect data which will facilitate the identification and assessment of programs and strategies that are successful at enhancing the participation and status of minorities in education.

The description of the data contained in this report cannot and should not be generalized to the total population of multiple-purpose, baccalaureate institutions. Any such attempt to generalize would be premature and contrary to the purposes of the report, and the intent of its authors. While many of the factors and findings contained in this report have been validated and confirmed in reports published by many research scholars, its scope is limited by the range of factors used to describe campus academic climate. The authors believe that a full investigation into the causes which influence the perceptions of all students regarding campus academic climate must include social, racial, economic and cultural considerations.

Nevertheless, this report clearly confirms that there are significant differences in the perceptions of white and minority students regarding campus academic climate. These differences cannot be dismissed and/or excused as random chance, given the alarming under representation in minority students on college and university campuses, nationwide.

This report, "Undergraduate Student Perceptions of Academic Climate at a Midwestern Baccalaureate Institution," is based on some of the data collected during Spring 1990.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC CLIMATE AT A MIDWESTERN BACCALAUREATE INSTITUTION

Overview

Background of the Study

This is one of a series of studies conducted by the Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education (ASME) Project housed in the Center for Higher Education at Illinois State University. The study is also a response to issues identified by the Illinois Senate Committee on Higher Education in deliberations and legislation concerning the educational progress of historically disadvantaged groups in Illinois.

A research activity which assesses the academic climate of an institution is relevant and timely, given the circumstances presently prevailing on college and university campuses. Student dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their educational experiences has been documented in previous research studies (Schmidt & Sedlacek, 1972). New students, in particular, are seeking avenues by which they can be assisted by the institution, or by its staff and faculty, to "fit" themselves into their new environment. The better the fit between the student and his/her college environment, the more satisfied the student will be and the higher will be the probability of the student's persistence in college (Clarke, 1987).

Sources of student dissatisfaction with the institution must be examined so that necessary corrective actions may be taken. These actions are essential for making the institution responsive to the needs of its students.

Conceptual Framework

Contemporary retention studies examine factors which influence a student's decision either to persist in or to withdraw from college. A commonly adopted theoretical framework for such studies, drawn from Tinto's model of student retention, views a higher education institution as an environment which provides both social and academic experiences conducive to and supportive of the ultimate educational aspiration of a student--obtaining a degree.

Underlying Tinto's theory about the environment of higher education institutions is the construct of an academic climate in which students are provided opportunities to interact within an institutional environment with the following prevailing conditions:

1. The institution embraces all of its students, irrespective of race, ethnic origin, or gender.
2. The institution actively supports all students' education-related endeavors by providing support services and by encouraging staff responsiveness to students' needs.
3. Students have equal opportunities for relationships and interactions with faculty.
4. Students have equal opportunities to participate in political, cultural, social, and educational activities on campus (Pascarella, 1980; and Tinto, 1975).

Purposes

The purposes of this study are:

- 1) to determine factors that contribute to building a supportive academic climate at a post-secondary education institution, and
- 2) to compare views of student respondents about the extent to which these factors exist on campus, given their race, gender, and class rank.

Factors Underlying a Supportive Campus Academic Climate

In the spring of 1990, some 14,000 undergraduate students enrolled at a public midwestern baccalaureate degree-granting institution were randomly selected to be surveyed regarding their perceptions of academic climate at the institution. Of the 14,000 students selected to participate in this study, 35 percent returned completed surveys. A factor analysis procedure resulted in the determination of the following eight factors characterizing academic climate:

F1. Racial sensitivity and tolerance on and off campus:

An important factor in building a supportive academic climate appears to be the racial sensitivity and tolerance displayed by (1) institutional support staff who provide non-instructional services, and (2) merchants and employees in off-campus establishments.

F2. Student acceptance and integration at the departmental level:

For students to persist toward graduation, it is important that the institution provide assistance in their choices of major fields. Students perceive themselves as having "identities" if they have majors. Integration into the academic culture of the department allows them to fit in with a particular social group and to direct their course work toward later employment (Bean, 1986). In consultation with faculty and staff advisors, students can make early decisions concerning their academic and career choices.

Good rapport with faculty was often cited in the student retention literature as one of the factors motivating students to stay in college.

F3. Integration and participation at upper levels of leadership/management:

Students appear to benefit from participating in decision-making on issues which directly affect them. In particular, their participation in student organizations, in leadership and/or in management roles teaches them how to take risks and to make decisions. It also enhances their administrative, budgeting, bureaucratic and programming skills. Participation, not only by students, but also by all individuals in the university, as leaders or managers at all levels of the university's organizational hierarchy, positively influences students' attitudes toward the institution in a positive way.

F4. Opportunities for mentoring relationships with faculty and for professional development:

Faculty contact seems to increase a student's academic integration into the institutional culture. Students who feel recognized and accepted by faculty--irrespective of their race, gender, or academic preparation--and who consider faculty members as mentors, as well as friends, are more likely to stay enrolled. Informal contact with faculty seems to be very meaningful to students.

Opportunities to participate in professional activities, such as attending conferences, writing articles, giving papers, and conducting research with faculty, are perceived as being important in a student's realization of his/her academic potential.

F5. Faculty and student racial sensitivity in the classroom:

A supportive academic climate is perceived when both faculty and students respect cultural and racial differences on campus. An exposure of both faculty and students, particularly to the cultures of diverse minority groups in the classroom, enhances meaningful interactions.

F6. Faculty consideration for students' academic needs:

Faculty members who are concerned about a student's cognitive and/or social development promote positive student attitudes toward the institution (Pascarella, 1980).

F7. Student orientation to and participation in institution-wide activities:

A supportive academic climate is perceived when the university provides co-curricular programs that enhance the student's social integration into the institution, such as curriculum-related clubs, theater, sports, student union programs, and the like.

F8. Inclusiveness in the classroom:

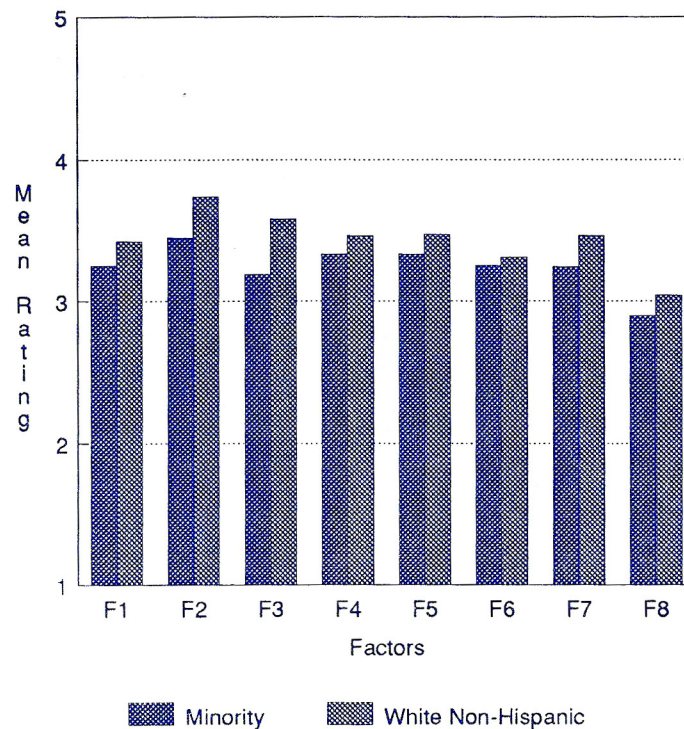
Consistent and fair recognition to deserving students furthers positive student attitudes toward the institution.

Comparison of Student Perceptions of Academic Climate by Race, Gender, and Class Rank

Controlling for ACT score, high school GPA, parents' incomes, parents' educational attainments, and percentage of minorities in the last high school attended, significant differences were found between race, gender, and two class rank divisions.

1. Minority students rated the following significantly lower than did white students (Figure 1):
 - F1. racial sensitivity and tolerance on and off campus,
 - F2. student acceptance and integration at the departmental level,
 - F3. integration and participation at upper levels of leadership/management, and
 - F7. student orientation to and participation in institution-wide activities.

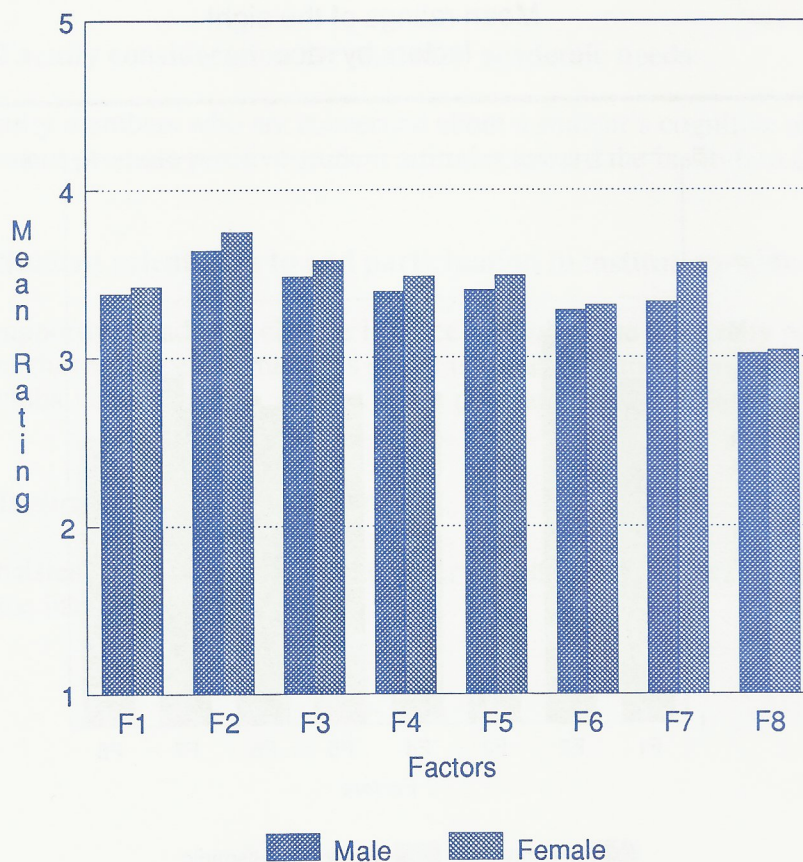
Figure 1
Mean ratings of the eight
factors by race



Source: Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education, The Center for Higher Education, Illinois State University (Undergraduate Student Survey, Spring 1990)

2. Males rated the following factors significantly lower than did females (Figure 2):
- F2. student acceptance and integration at the departmental level,
 - F3. integration and participation at upper levels of leadership/management,
 - F5. faculty and student racial sensitivity in classrooms, and
 - F7. student orientation to and participation in institution-wide activities.

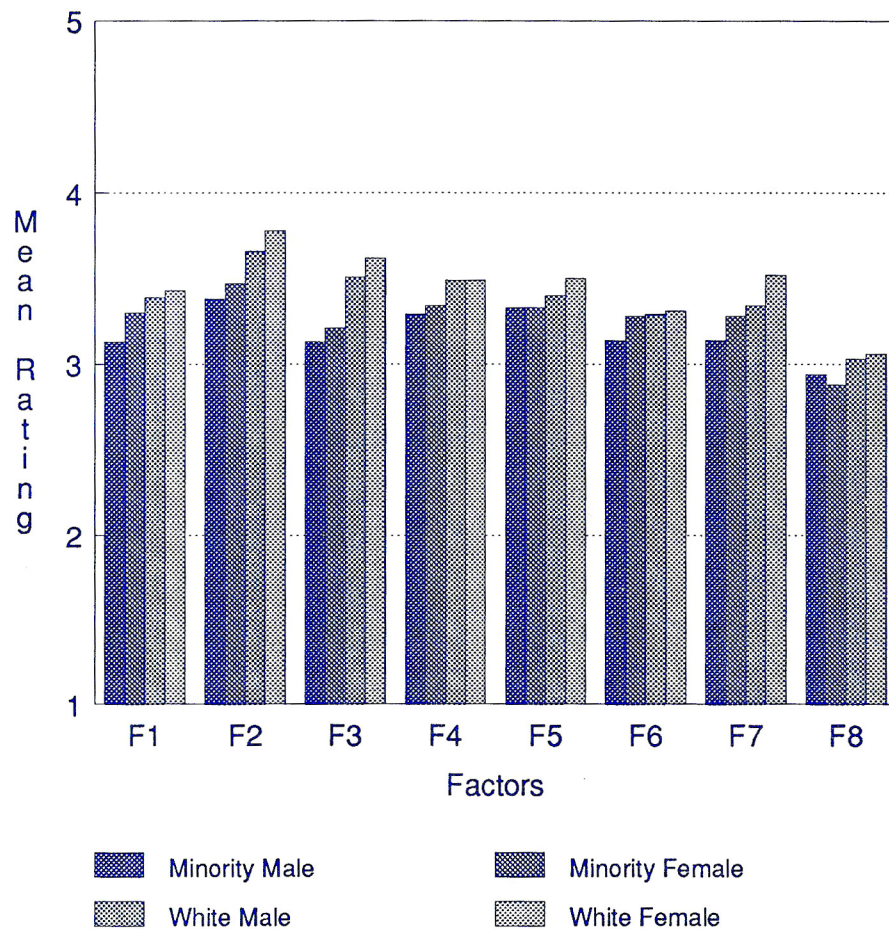
Figure 2
Mean ratings of the eight
factors by gender



Source: Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education, The Center for Higher Education, Illinois State University (Undergraduate Student Survey, Spring 1990)

3. White females viewed the academic climate of the institution more positively than did any other group (Figure 3).
4. Minority male students felt a lack of supportive academic climate more strongly than did any other group (Figure 3). [The exception is F8 where minority females gave the lowest average rating.]

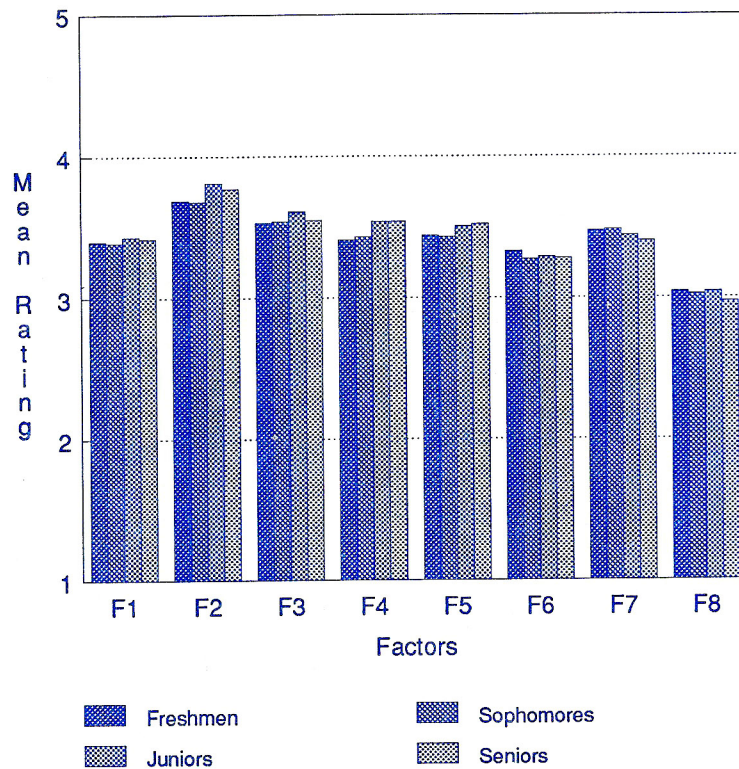
Figure 3
Mean ratings of the eight factors by race/gender



Source: Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education, The Center for Higher Education, Illinois State University (Undergraduate Student Survey, Spring 1990)

5. Lower division students (freshmen and sophomores) rated the following significantly lower than did white students (Figure 4):
 - F2. student acceptance and integration at the departmental level, and
 - F4. opportunities for mentoring relationships with faculty and for professional development.

Figure 4
Mean ratings of the eight factors by class rank



Source: Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education, The Center for Higher Education, Illinois State University (Undergraduate Student Survey, Spring 1990)

6. Minority sophomore students perceived the strongest lack of opportunities to participate in academic-related activities (e.g. course content, forum discussion, support organizations) and to hold managerial or leadership positions at any institutional level.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The preliminary findings of the study suggest four factors which may significantly influence a student's perception of academic climate:

1. racial sensitivity,
2. quality of academic services provided at the departmental level,
3. extent of faculty interaction with students, and
4. social and academic integration of students into the institutional culture.

One strong indicator of a supportive academic climate within an educational institution is the rate of persistence (percent enrolled or graduated) of its students. Several research studies document the significant relationships between academic services and faculty interaction with students and students' satisfaction with the institution.

The perceptions of undergraduate students, particularly minority students, of the academic climate of the institution present a possible challenge for renewal of the institution's commitment to maintaining minority enrollment. This challenge may be addressed by reviewing institutional policies, procedures and programs, including the following:

1. admission policies and procedures,
2. available academic services to minority students, such as entry, support and transition services,
3. formal and informal interactions between faculty and minority students, and
4. minority students' participation in student organizations and co-curricular activities.

NOTE: The participating institution's record of retaining its students currently surpasses both its state and the national averages. An April 1990 student retention report, showed that 55% of the institution's new freshmen students persisted over five years, compared to 49% and 50% average persistence rates statewide and nationwide, respectively. This performance is indicative of the success gained from the institution's student retention efforts. However, while the overall retention rate is relatively high, retention of minority students still lagged by 30 to 35 percentage points behind the nationwide average.

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