IMPLICATIONS OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC CLIMATE: DIVERSITY ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

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The absence of a campus environment or climate which nurtures and supports (1) minority student achievement and graduation and (2) minority faculty/staff professional growth and development is more readily acknowledged at predominantly white institutions today. This is due in part to the conscious and concerted efforts now prevalent on campuses to make educational opportunity a reality, but due as well to recent trends of increasingly open racial hostility and animosity, also evident in college and university communities.

Research studies have shown that, in general, minority students in predominantly white universities are in a more stressful situation than are white students. Their stressful experiences in meeting college expectations, coupled with their perception that university activities are directed more toward servicing the needs of white students, often lead to feelings of isolation and frustration. In some cases, they manifest this frustration by associating themselves primarily with other minority students or by leaving the university.

Astin (1982) identified the absence of a critical mass of minorities as a primary reason minorities are often uncomfortable on predominantly white campuses, a condition that continues to be the norm in the 1990s. He also asserted that institutional structure often interferes with the implementation of an "holistic, university-wide model which facilitates" minority student recruitment, retention and graduation.

In his studies, Tinto (1975) described the following as necessary conditions in an academic climate which provides students with the support needed for their successful matriculation and graduation:

1) the institution embraces all of its students, irrespective of race, origin, gender, or disability;

2) the institution actively supports all students' education-related endeavors by providing support services and by encouraging staff responsiveness to students' needs;

3) all students have equal opportunities for mentoring and for academic relationships and informal interactions with faculty; and

4) all students have equal opportunities to participate in educational, cultural, social, and political activities on campus.

"Implications of Student Perceptions of Academic Climate: Diversity on College Campuses" is based on data obtained in surveys collected from more than 10,600 students on Illinois public and private campuses in the spring of 1990 and examines campus climate with a focus on cultural diversity. Survey items which pertain to the concept of cultural diversity were selected for analysis. In order to measure perceptions, each respondent was asked to designate a importance level (to her/him) relative to the institution where enrolled.

Respondents were instructed to use a Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning "strongly disagree" and 4 meaning "strongly agree." An item was considered important to a group if its mean response was 3 or greater.

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The inventory items from the section on Institutional Attractiveness (IA) selected for this examination of perceptions of diversity on college campuses were:

IA2. Racial Diversity of Faculty/Staff
IA3. Gender Diversity of Faculty/Staff
IA4. Racial Diversity of Students

IA11. Ethnic/Minority Studies or Programs
IA13. Women's Studies or Programs
IA28. Racial Diversity by Residence Hall Assignment

SELECTED RESPONSES

- African American students agreed that Items IA3, IA2, IA4, IA11, and IA13 are all important, in that order.

- Hispanic students agreed that Items IA4, IA3, IA2, and IA11 are important, in that order.

- Native American students agreed that Items IA4, IA3, and IA2 are important, in that order.

- European American students agreed that Item IA3 is important.

- Asian American students agreed that Items IA3 and IA4 are important in that order. They, among the groups, gave the highest rating to Item IA28.

- Item IA3 received the highest mean (3.17) for all students. Item IA28 received the lowest mean (2.55)

- When the data were analyzed by race and by gender, all subgroups, males and females, with the exception of European American males, had means higher than 3.0 on IA3, i.e., each of these subgroups agreed that Gender Diversity of Faculty/Staff is important.

- African American males and females and Hispanic American females agreed that IA11, Ethnic/Minority Studies or Programs, is important.

- Only African American females (3.08) and Hispanic American females (3.04) agreed that IA13, Women's Studies or Programs, is important.

- Generally, females rated each item higher than males, collectively and within each racial group.

- African American females had the highest means among the subgroups on Items IA3, IA2, IA4, IA11 and IA13, in that order.

CONCLUSIONS

- On campuses where efforts have been conscious and calculated, there have been high degrees of success with:

  -- counteracting unfavorable behaviors;
  -- modifying adverse attitudes;
  -- establishing the tenets of multiculturalism.

- Regardless of specific institutional practices, or the characteristics of student populations, every institution is obligated to provide experiences and services which prepare all students to live and work in a climate of mutual respect in a culturally diverse society.

- Effective strategies for (a) fostering and validating cultural diversity and (b) enhancing the academic success of all students include:

  -- developing a campus community which, in all of its constituencies and levels of employment, reflects the racial and gender diversity of American society;
  -- developing curricula, instructional materials and teaching methodologies which accurately reflect the contributions and needs of all groups in the society.
  -- establishing and enforcing race-blind and gender-blind policies, disciplinary systems and procedures for appointment, promotion and professional development.

Reports, studies and climate assessment surveys prepared by the project staff are available on a fee basis.

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