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INSTITUTIONAL ATTRACTIVENESS: WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS?

In the spring of 1990, researchers for the Assessment of the Status of Minorities in Education (ASME) project collected data from over 10,600 students of 11 Illinois four-year institutions. In the spring of 1992, over 750 students at four Illinois community colleges were also surveyed. The surveys were designed to capture student perceptions of institutional attractiveness, racial climate, social climate and academic climate.

Minority females at four-year institutions were more likely than white males to say that a multicultural and diverse environment is important to making an institution attractive to students. These findings emerged again in a study of 177 students at an Illinois community college. Further, white students perceived more strongly than minority students that there were opportunities for leadership roles at their institution. White females at four-year institutions rated academic programs and services as more important than white males rated those items.

Case Study Highlights

This is a summary of a report which analyzed data from one of the four community colleges participating in the ASME project. It specifically focuses on student ratings of institutional attractiveness. The research questions were: "Do males and females differ in the reasons for which they find the institution attractive?" and "Do minority students and majority students differ in the reasons for which they find the institution attractive?"

Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with 26 statements about institutional attractiveness: "If you could choose the ideal college to attend, how important are the [following institutional attractiveness] items in your decision?" The four-point scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4).

Two hundred and ninety-three randomly selected students from a community college responded to the Community College Student Inventory. Eighty percent were white (non-Hispanic), 7.8% were Asian American, 5% were Hispanic and 4% were African American. The responses of Asian American students were not included for analysis in this study. Hispanic and African American students were grouped together and are referred to as "minority students."

Institutional Attractiveness Factors. Three reliable factors emerged. ANOVA was used to identify statistically significant differences between groups. Only statistically significant differences are reported.

Factor A: Inclusion in Leadership Roles. This factor is comprised of items related to the participation of women and students of all races/ethnicities in student organizations.

Factor B: Culturally Diverse Campus Environment. This factor is comprised of items related to the presence of race and gender diversity on campus -- among persons as well as within campus and community activities.

Factor C: Availability of Support Services. This item is comprised of items related to the availability of services such as academic advising, counseling and tutoring, and services for those with disabilities.

Results

- Overall, students rated Factor C as the most important factor. The mean was 3.29. The mean for Factor A was 2.87 and the mean for Factor B was 2.74.
- Females agreed more strongly than males that "Inclusion in Leadership Roles" is an important aspect of institutional attractiveness. The mean for females was 2.95 and the mean for males was 2.72.
- Females (2.8) agreed more strongly than males (2.62) that a "Culturally Diverse Campus Environment" is important.
- Females (3.34) agreed more strongly than males (3.18) that "Availability of Support Services" is important.
- Minority students (3.15) agreed more strongly than majority students (2.85) that "Inclusion in Leadership Roles" is important.
- Minority students (3.08) agreed more strongly than majority students (2.71) that "Culturally Diverse Campus Environment" is important.
- There was no difference between minority students and majority students on the factor "Availability of Support Services."
- In this case study, males and females differ in the reasons for which they find an institution attractive.
- Where differences exist, females always agree more strongly than males that the item is important for an ideal campus.

Conclusions and Implications

- Colleges and universities at all levels are realizing the importance of demonstrating responsiveness to a culturally diverse student body in order to attract, retain and graduate those students.
- Institutions need to consider those issues which are most important to females, such as child care and counseling services, if they want to be perceived as being sensitive to the needs of female students.
- Minority students and majority students also differ in their ratings of institutional attractiveness. In this case study, minority students rated the importance of cultural diversity and inclusion in leadership roles higher than majority students.
- The differences found in this study are small. However, even small differences within a population can make a significant difference for a particular student. Other ASME studies confirm that students of different gender, races and ethnicities have different perceptions of institutional attractiveness and consequently have different needs. It is important that administrators, faculty and staff address the needs of students of all cultural backgrounds.

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

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