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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL CLIMATE AND ACADEMIC CLIMATE AT AN ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Jennifer Woods Quinn, Charles E. Morris and Ira L. Neal

Campus climate is the formal and informal environment in which students learn, work and live (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1988). Student perceptions of their campus climate may influence their decisions to drop out to persist through graduation or to transfer to another institution (Tinto, 1987). Because campus climate has such profound effects on student behavior, it is important to assess the quality of such climate.

In the spring of 1992, researchers for the Assessment of Educational Equity (AEE) project collected data from over 750 students at four Illinois community colleges. The surveys by AEE staff were designed to capture student perceptions of institutional attractiveness, racial climate, social climate and academic climate. An examination of the relationship between satisfaction (an important precursor to student attrition, persistence and transfer rates) and student perceptions of campus climate has been conducted.

A Case Study

In this report, we summarize data from one of the four community colleges which participated in the 1992 AEE study. The purpose is to determine if student perceptions of social climate and academic climate are related to their inclination to attend the institution again.

Eleven hundred students were randomly selected from all those enrolled at the community college to complete the AEE Community College Student Inventory (CCSI). Four hundred and twenty-three students (38.4%) responded. Most of the respondents are female (71 percent). Seventy-three percent of the respondents are white, almost ten percent are Hispanic, almost 9 percent are African-American, six percent are Asian-American, and fewer than two percent identified themselves with some other racial/ethnic group. All respondents were included in the analyses for this report.

Method

Several demographic variables were included in the analyses as independent variables. They are race, gender, enrollment (full- or part-time), current GPA, highest degree expected, and family income. The other independent variables are six factors related to social climate and academic climate.

Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with 11 statements about social climate and 23 statements about academic climate: "Based on your experience, please indicate the extent to which you disagree or agree that each of the following exists on your campus." Students responded on a 4-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4).

The dependent variable is a measure of the student's satisfaction with the institution. They were asked to respond "yes" or "no" to the question, "If I could start over, would I still attend this institution?" Discriminant analysis based on the independent variables was used to discriminate between those who said "yes" and those who said "no." For example: Do those who say "yes" perceive the social climate differently from those who say "no"?

*Jennifer Woods Quinn is currently a Research Associate with the AEE Project in the Center for Higher Education at Illinois State University.
Charles E. Morris is Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Illinois Board of Regents.
Ira L. Neal is an Associate in the Center for Higher Education at Illinois State University.*

RESULTS

Factor Analysis. One reliable factor of social climate and five reliable factors of academic climate emerged from factor analysis. These factors are:

Social Interaction. This factor is comprised of items which indicate the quality of social interaction between different groups on campus.

Equalitarianism. This factor is comprised of items that indicate the extent to which faculty treat students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds equally.

Inclusiveness. This factor is comprised of items that indicate the extent to which students have opportunities to become involved in campus activities.

Mentoring. This factor is comprised of items that indicate the extent to which students have opportunities to be mentored by faculty.

Singling Out. This factor is comprised of items that indicate the extent to which faculty single out certain students, either for censure or for praise.

Assisted Learning. This factor is comprised of items that indicate the extent to which faculty members take steps to ensure that students are learning.

Discriminant Analysis. Discriminant analysis is a statistical procedure used to distinguish between two different sets of respondents — i.e., those who would choose to attend the institution again and those who would not. All demographic variables, the social climate factor and the academic climate factors were examined in the course of the analysis. Some of the findings were:

- Minorities are slightly more likely to say they would not attend the institution again.
- Those with lower GPA's are slightly more likely to say that they would not attend the institution again.
- Those who disagreed that equalitarianism, inclusiveness and mentoring exist on campus were slightly more likely to say that they would not attend the institution again.

Analysis of Variance. ANOVA was used to test whether or not different racial/ethnic groups differ in their perceptions of academic climate.

- Hispanics and whites scored higher on Equalitarianism than Asian and African Americans. That is, the former students were more likely than the latter students to agree that an equalitarian climate exists on campus.
- Asian Americans had the lowest mean on the factor Inclusiveness and whites had the highest.
- Hispanics and whites were more likely than Asian and African Americans to perceive that the participation of students of all races/ethnic groups in institutionwide activities occurs on campus.
- Asian Americans were least likely to agree that opportunities exist on campus to become part of student support groups.
- Whites were most likely to agree that course content attempts to reflect contributions of all races/ethnic groups.
- Whites and Hispanics are more likely to agree that professors interact well with students of all races/ethnic groups, show personal interest in all students and call on students of all races/ethnicities.

SUMMARY

- Students who disagree that the campus is equalitarian and who disagree that the campus is inclusive are also more likely to say that they would not attend the institution again. For both of these variables, Asian and African Americans had lower means than white students. Minorities (especially Asian and African Americans) are less likely to want to attend again because they perceive that their campus is not racially inclusive or equalitarian.
- Hispanic students and white students often had similar perceptions of academic and social climate. More detailed studies are needed to identify the reasons that Hispanics seem satisfied with their college experience so that similar experiences can be fostered for students of other cultural backgrounds.
- The analyses used in this report revealed small differences between the perceptions of students of different racial groups and about social climate and academic climate. Academic leaders need to continue to pay attention to issues of cultural diversity, multicultural education and educational equity to ensure that students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds acquire a college education that is satisfying, demanding and enlightening.

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

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:
"Assessment of Educational Equity"
Center for Higher Education
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61761-5960
Phone: 309/438-8627

Project Staff: Charles E. Morris, Director
Ira L. Neal, Associate Director

Maria E. Canabal, Research Coordinator
Jennifer W. Quinn, Research Associate

Alvin Townsel, Senior Research Consultant
Lilibeth Gumia, Research Consultant
Jeanne B. Morris, Research Consultant

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