

Research Brief

Bringing their perspectives to campus: Students' experiences with inclusive courses and diverse environments

How much do students experience courses that emphasize sharing their own perspectives or respecting diverse ideas? How much institutional support for commitment to diversity do students perceive? This study uses data from a multi-institution survey to explore student experiences with inclusive courses and perceptions of institutional commitment to diversity and discusses campus responses to their institutional assessment results.

Purpose

Recognizing the importance of students' experiences in inclusive courses and their perception of their institution's commitment to inclusion and diversity, this study explores factors affecting those perspectives. Exploring student perceptions by student demographics allows administrators to better understand how students are experiencing institutional diversity and inclusion efforts. Toward this end, we also feature an additional, practical research question that explores how campuses with institution-specific inclusion and cultural diversity data act on their results.

Guiding Questions

1. How much do students experience inclusive coursework and how does this vary by student demographics?
2. How do student perceptions of institutional emphasis on inclusive practice vary by student demographics?

Data Source

The data for this study come from the 2017 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement's (NSSE) optional Topical Module *Inclusiveness and Engagement with Cultural Diversity* (ICD) items. Respondents consist of over 52,000 students who attended

one of the 131 institutions that administered the ICD Topical Module.

ICD Module: Inclusive Coursework Items During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following?

Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little

- Developing the skills necessary to work effectively with people from various backgrounds
- Recognizing your own cultural norms and biases
- Sharing your own perspectives and experiences
- Exploring your own background through projects, assignments, or programs
- Learning about other cultures
- Discussing issues of equity or privilege
- Respecting the expression of diverse ideas

ICD Module: Commitment to Diversity Items

How much does your institution emphasize the following?

Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little

- Demonstrating a commitment to diversity
- Providing students with the resources needed for success in a multicultural world
- Creating an overall sense of community among students
- Ensuring that you are not stigmatized because of your identity (racial/ethnic identification, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.)
- Providing information about antidiscrimination and harassment policies
- Taking allegations of discrimination or harassment seriously
- Helping students develop the skills to confront discrimination and harassment

Extant Research: Inclusive Coursework & Emphasis on Diversity

Diversity courses are commonly used by institutions to promote cultural diversity and inclusion, and decades of research point to the benefits of culturally inclusive content and pedagogy on student outcomes (Hurtado, Mayhew, Engberg, 2003; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado, 2003). Furthermore, Nelson Laird (2011) found that more faculty incorporate this type of curricula than might be assumed and in courses that are not necessarily designated as “diversity” courses.

Ginsberg and Woldkowski’s (2009) three functional dimensions of culturally relevant pedagogy—institutional, personal and instructional—emphasizes the breadth of aspects of the learning experience that educators must consider to implement cultural responsiveness in courses. As advocated by Alemán and Gaytán (2017), it is not sufficient to simply know if students are exposed to these experiences; rather, we must understand how students personally experience culturally inclusive coursework.

Institutional commitments to diversity are communicated in a variety of ways, including mission and diversity statements (Rankin & Reason, 2005), diversity curriculum, (Patton, 2016), institutional policies (e.g., harassment and discrimination policies), and diversity strategic plans (Iverson, 2010). Although articulating the importance of diversity is necessary (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999), institutions need to actively enact these commitments (Harris & Bensimon, 2007). The ways campus educators enact institutional diversity commitments are especially important in a time when students are expressing serious concerns about racism and free speech (Kendall-Ball, 2016). Regardless of campus educators’ approach to diversity initiatives, students’ perceptions of

institutional emphasis influence their experiences (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Yet, not all students perceive the institution similarly. Students need to see themselves within the institutional emphasis on diversity (Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado et al., 1999).

Framework

This study is guided by the tenants of critical quantitative research, which specify that research should reveal inequities in educational processes and describe the experiences of those who have been underrepresented (Stage, 2007; Stage & Wells, 2015). According to Rios-Aguilar (2015), critical quantitative assessments of the campus environment should challenge policies and practices and provide more opportunities that are equitable for all students. Relatedly, the fact that the data source for this study explicitly aims to encourage institutional action on assessment results led us to adopt the *Diversity Scorecard* emphasis on using data to encourage the examination of campus inequities and make changes to achieve equity (Bensimon, 2004).

Culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory, which explicitly acknowledge racism and aim to reveal how dominant pedagogy can fail to push students to examine racial biases (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Patton, 2016) frames our exploration on coursework. In particular, we aim to use assessment data to examine the extent to which courses provide space for inclusive pedagogy and expose racial realities of college life.

“The most significant learning experience I’ve had is being placed in an environment with people I’ve never met and opening my eyes to different cultures and personalities.” FIRST-YEAR STUDENT, PSYCHOLOGY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BUFFALO

Findings Overall

We find variation in student perceptions of emphasis on inclusive and culturally engaging coursework and institutional commitment to diversity. This variation in perceptions extends to differences by student characteristics (below) and student demographics (following page). The following lists identify on which items students scored the highest and lowest overall.

Highest Perceived Emphasis:

Inclusive Coursework:

- ↑ Sharing your own perspectives and experiences
- ↑ Respecting diverse expression of ideas
- ↑ Recognizing your own cultural norms and biases

Commitment to Diversity:

- ↑ Demonstrating a commitment to diversity
- ↑ Taking allegations of discrimination or harassment seriously
- ↑ Ensuring that you are not stigmatized because of your identity

Lowest Perceived Emphasis:

Inclusive Coursework:

- ↓ Exploring your own background through projects, assignments, or programs
- ↓ Discussing issues of equity or privilege

Commitment to Diversity:

- ↓ Helping students develop the skills to confront discrimination and harassment
- ↓ Providing students with the resources needed for success in a multicultural world

Variation in ICD Scales by Student Characteristics and Demographics

In the following table we see how *Coursework Emphasis* and *Institutional Commitment* vary by select student characteristics. Seniors, athletes, fraternity/sorority members, non-STEM majors, full-time enrolled, and students living off campus all perceive more positive emphasis on culturally

engaging and inclusive coursework. First-years, fraternity/sorority members, non-STEM majors, and transfer students all feel a stronger sense of their institution's commitment to diversity.

On the following page, we see how *Coursework Emphasis* and *Institutional Commitment* vary by select student demographics. Women; Asian, Black or African

| Select Student Characteristics | Coursework Emphasis | | Institutional Commitment | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
| | B | Sig. | B | Sig. |
| Senior vs. first-year | + | *** | - | *** |
| Athlete vs. non-athlete | + | ** | - | |
| Frat./Soro. member vs. non-member | + | *** | + | * |
| STEM major vs. non-STEM major | - | *** | - | *** |
| Enrolled full-time vs. part-time | + | *** | + | |
| Transfer vs. non-transfer | + | | + | *** |
| Living on campus vs. off campus | - | * | - | |

Note: Results presented here represent coefficients in OLS regressions with ICD measures as dependent variables. + indicates a positive relationship, - indicates a negative relationship. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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American, and Hispanic or Latino students; and LGBTQ students all perceive more positive emphasis on culturally engaging and inclusive coursework than the average student. First-generation students perceive more positive emphasis than non-first-generation students. White, multiracial, straight, and students questioning or unsure of their sexual orientation perceive less emphasis on culturally engaging and inclusive coursework. Men, women, Hispanic or Latino, White, straight, and LGB students all feel a stronger sense of their institution’s commitment to diversity than the average student. Gender variant and queer students feel less of this sense than average. Additionally, first-generation and students without a diagnosed disability feel a stronger sense of commitment than students identifying as non-first-generation and with a diagnosed disability, respectively.

Institutional Use

Investigation into what institutions with ICD results did with their data offers an opportunity to explore what data are salient and how data are used. Briefly, a good portion (but not all) institutions reported that they shared results with important stakeholders including college and university presidents, vice presidents of academic affairs, vice presidents of student affairs, chief diversity officers, etc. One institution assembled a faculty data action team to analyze their data and submit recommendations to the president. Another institution is using their results as a baseline to gauge the impact of a new core curriculum with diversity components and a new diversity and inclusion action plan. These institutional uses demonstrate that assessment data hold promise for informing institutional efforts to establish more inclusive and equitable practices and policies.

| Select Student Demographics | Coursework Emphasis | | Institutional Commitment | |
|---|---------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
| | B | Sig. | B | Sig. |
| Gender identity (<i>vs. the average student</i>) | | | | |
| Man | + | | + | *** |
| Woman | + | *** | + | *** |
| Another gender identity | - | | - | ** |
| I prefer not to respond | - | * | - | ** |
| Racial/Ethnic identity (<i>vs. the average student</i>) | | | | |
| Am. Indian or AK Native | + | | - | |
| Asian | + | *** | + | |
| Black or African American | + | *** | - | |
| Hispanic or Latino | + | *** | + | *** |
| Native HI or other PI | + | | - | |
| White | - | *** | + | *** |
| Other | - | | - | |
| Multiracial | - | * | + | |
| I prefer not to respond | - | *** | - | *** |
| First-generation vs. non-first-generation | + | *** | + | ** |
| Diagnosed disability vs. non-disability | - | | - | *** |
| Sexual orientation (<i>vs. the average student</i>) | | | | |
| Straight | - | * | + | *** |
| Bisexual | + | | + | * |
| Gay | + | *** | + | *** |
| Lesbian | + | ** | + | ** |
| Queer | + | * | - | *** |
| Questioning or unsure | - | *** | - | |
| Another sexual orientation | - | | - | |
| I prefer not to respond | - | *** | - | *** |

Note: Results presented here represent coefficients in OLS regressions with ICD measures as dependent variables. + indicates a positive relationship, - indicates a negative relationship. Multi-categorical demographics were effect coded so that “the average student” can be used as a comparative reference group. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001