

Examining Colleges and Universities as Effective Multicultural Environments

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Abstract

This study discussed the history of integration and diversity of college campuses and universities, the reasons and importance of diversity on college campuses and question whether or not colleges and universities are effectively multicultural. The results found were that these places of higher education are not as effective as they could be and that often campus officials are not aware of the lack of welcome or are uneducated on how to promote effective dialogue to encourage a sense of belonging as well as educate those who are unaware of their biases. The conclusion was that campuses need to every so often asses their campus climate and evaluate their policies and programs to ensure multicultural students feel welcomed and that they belong.

Introduction

The United States historically has been known as a diverse nation, striving to become better than the previous generation before it, and as a “superpower” leading by example. With this ideal, it is unspoken and understood that America’s colleges and universities, institutions for higher education and learning, should reflect the desire for diversity and inclusion. In the year 2019, it is often found that this is not quite the case, especially since today’s political climate does not urge or promote diversity or inclusiveness as ideals that are valued. In fact, college campuses are one of the major areas where we see students of other cultures and backgrounds coming together and reflecting the divided beliefs of this country.

The purpose of college is to educate young minds so that they are productive and informed members of society who help promote knowledge and virtue and contribute to creating a more successful and advanced society (Zosel, 2018). It benefits all when college students are informed and accepting of diversity, and history has shown lack of education, the inability to identify one’s implicit bias, and unacceptance of diversity has done much more harm than good. This study will discuss diversity on college campuses, specifically how students, faculty, and staff perceive the campus climate and rate their feelings of belonging on said campus, policies in place to encourage diversity, and the threats and issues marginalized students face or feel and why it might lower their graduation rates.

Statement of Research Problem

The purpose of this study is to discuss the importance of cultural awareness among college students and faculty to address feelings of identity and belonging on campus. Studies show that perceptions of campus climate are seen as favorable when students of different

cultures feel as if they are accepted, especially in a suburban, metropolitan college (Zosel, 2018). “On a whole, campus climate impacts the learning environment of students, the work conditions of faculty and staff, and the cultural backdrop to the community” (Zosel, 2018). The research question to be answered is:

RQ: Are College Campuses Effectively Multicultural and Accepting?

Definitions

Affirmative Action: an active effort to improve the employment or educational opportunities of members of minority groups and women

Critical Race Theory: recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society.

Equality: the state or quality of being equal; correspondence in quantity, degree, value, rank, or ability

Equity: the quality of being fair or impartial; fairness; impartiality:

Implicit Bias: bias that results from the tendency to process information based on unconscious associations and feelings, even when these are contrary to one’s conscious or declared beliefs

Institutionalized Racism: a form of racism expressed in the practice of social and political institutions. It is reflected in disparities regarding wealth, income, criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, and education, among other factors.

Literature Review

Affirmative action is a commonly known policy, set in place in the early 1960s to protect those discriminated, and was intended to promote diversity in the workplace, college campuses and other spaces that were primarily dominated by white males (Rich & Bourassa, 2018). While planning to make up for injustices and prejudices faced by these minorities, workplaces and college campuses found loopholes in this policy, seeking to meet a quota or only have a certain percentage to as a show of reluctant compliance to the policy. Soon after, once these tactics became commonplace, it was then that executive orders were given that quotas and percentages were not legal ways of complying with this legislature. However, due to many holding negative views about the policy—mainly white students—the idea of affirmative action has been seen as a way to “force” diversity and believed to be given to minorities who are actually undeserving and punishing the white students based on the same biases the policy initiatives put in place to prevent discrimination.

Researching, I came across a journal which held the opinions of many students expressing their viewpoints on certain policies, this specific one, Affirmative Action. Two articles stood out to me, one where the authors were against the policy the others in favor of the policy. The authors against the policy write that affirmative action is harmful to the students that are accepted to the colleges through this college, as well as those that are unable to gain acceptance through the college because of a “quota” needing to be filled (Driscoll & Newton, 2018). They argue that, while it was set in place to promote diversity on colleges for women and people of color, affirmative action no longer focuses on diversity. Instead, affirmative action satisfies the need for complying with regulation of not showing bias or prejudice by proving that they have the diversity on their campuses, regardless of whether that minority is eligible or not.

The authors claim that affirmative action causes reverse discrimination against “Caucasians, males, and Asian Americans, no longer required for women because women have made the most gains under affirmative action.” They also claim because the minority students are accepted due to affirmative action and not their actual qualifications, there is a sense of awkwardness from the minority students, a lack of the sense of belonging, as well as tension because the other students are most likely aware of their lack of qualifications on college campuses.

This article does not clearly state the reason they believe Affirmative Action works against Asian Americans, and while the article described above is an opinion piece, it does fail to list reasonable evidence for their strong beliefs or supporting information for their opinions. This viewpoint is a common viewpoint that many white applicants who feel slighted when denied acceptance of their college of choice. The two authors are part of the population that believes that Affirmative Action causes more harm than help, especially to white people. Regardless of their opposition to this policy, this opinion places blame on the policy, under the complete impression that the students of color got in solely due to Affirmative Action, and it assumes that the students of color were not deserving of their admission to the university due to the belief that standards were lowered to accept minorities. The accepted student then faces scrutiny because of this rhetoric that most students are here only and only because of affirmative action and not of their own merit. While this is a perfect example of implicit bias-- the immediate thought or reaction to a person of color being accepted into a prestigious college or university is that it was due to the color of their skin and not their actual capabilities--the issue comes down to the fact that colleges are more likely not facilitating the policy correctly.

In an article written by June (2011), the diversity officer brings up this point as well. Often the university or colleges lack-lustered sets up a quota or qualifications for students of

color to be brought in and accepted (Rich & Bourassa, 2018). The diversity officer then explains the need for a committee such as his on campus. He states that there needs to be a committee in each university to promote equity and diversity, to help students, faculty, and staff overcome any issues they might face due to their marginalized background. The officer lists his challenges and how there is often resistance and blame placed on the victims, which reaffirms the need for very well-informed committee members, as well as luring in supporters in the form of alumni to get concerns addressed by the president and so forth (June 2011).

While the successful integration of a diversity office on one campus is an excellent way to help combat lack of diversity, another way is to include programs, activities, spaces and even to have more diverse faculty and staff who relate to the students' identities. In the article by Hoffman, Rodriguez, Yang, and Ropers-Huilman (2018), they address the issues that students of color may feel on campus; feeling that either they belong, or they are an outsider on their campus. It then discusses the options of assimilation and subversion--wherein the student of color is integrated into a broader campus culture--or the main ideology of the campus, which is still based in institutional norms and historical whiteness--or where the student is connected to other students of color, when in a predominantly white community/culture. According to Zosel (2018), campuses that increase community engagement have been proven to have a positive effect on perceptions of inclusion and diversity, as well encourage students to have an active role on their campus and in their education.[LS1] "In addition and inclusion of students at a social level has been linked to increased engagement and inclusion at the education level" (Zosel, 2018).

Karkouti (2016) states that the faculty and staff feel the same in a situation like this; faculty and staff who make up the minority feel the tensions as well if there isn't a well-integrated, diverse environment. Karkouti and many others state the importance of diverse

campuses, finding substantial evidence proving that diverse college campuses provide all students with broader perspectives, which makes it better for them to serve their society in the long-run. He also addresses the issue as to why a lot of universities do not promote diverse practices; it is a “tricky” mix between the historical practices and reluctance towards change, lack of knowledge of how to integrate academic curriculum that emphasizes diversity, as well as the lack of diverse faculty and staff to give insight on their viewpoint. Many findings show that many undergraduate and graduate environments do not adequately facilitate meaningful race discussions or faculty are not trained on how to effectively deal with racial tensions when they arise (Linder, Harris, Allen, & Hubain 2015). Many colleges or universities claim to be diverse and want to promote a multicultural environment, but faculty do not know how to effectively go about meaningful dialog or encourage white students to speak up or relate. The findings also prove many of the same experiences students of color have relayed from other campuses; white students view the racial climate much different than those of students of color, and that faculty fail to intervene or diffuse racial tensions or microaggressions because they are not aware it is racist and a microaggression in the first place. Tanksley, Lopez, and Martinez (2017) explain from their study that everyday racism underwent a subtler, more covert forms of racist expressions, not diffusing or relieving the effects of institutionalized racism, but further perpetuating it.

One other issue is that there is a lack of faculty of color in graduate schools, and it is detrimental to all graduate students (Linder et al., 2015). It is detrimental to the white students because they lack proper interaction with a person of color in power, and the students of color lack a proper mentor who might understand their viewpoint.

Methods

The method used to develop the framework for this research was the analysis of multiple works of literature and published data. The Purchase College Library's database was used to search for peer-reviewed literature, news articles, and other forms of research. The literature was collected, examined, and sorted through to determine the relevancy to this capstone project.

Due to the extensive amount of time spent on sorting through data and works of literature, no other form of data collection was employed towards this study. Grounded theory was also a form of research applied in this study. Grounded theory is a theory that acknowledges the fact that the researcher is not a passive influence in the participation of the study, but the researcher's experiences and background influence the perception and subjects the researcher does a search (Tanksley, Lopez, & Martinez, 2017).

Results

After reviewing the copious amounts of related data, the studies show that students who feel welcome and like they belong on their campus, are less likely to feel discriminated against than those who are at a historically white college (Zosel, 2018). In addition, students and faculty engaging in meaningful conversations and productive dialog create a better understanding of diverse issues and can create new alliances and relationships. College campuses are supposed to be an environment of free thinking and continuous learning. Instead, many students fall victim to an institution that fails to make their multicultural students feel like they do not have a place among their traditionally majority white campus. The solution for this problem is to educate faculty and staff multicultural educational training (June, 2011), integrate campuses with a more diverse faculty and staff, provide conducive dialog about race and cultural awareness (Hoffman, Rodriguez, Yang, & Ropers-Huilman, 2018), create opportunities for students to provide their

input on campus climate (Linder, Harris, Allen, & Hubain, 2015), and to frequently check in with the students on their opinions about the campus climate and how well they feel as though they fit in. Along with the previously presented solutions, more research as well as studies need to be done on different college and university populations as well as including the opinions of faculty and staff about campus climates.

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