

Findings from the 2015 Diverse Learning Environments Survey

October 2015

INTRODUCTION

The Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey captures students' perceptions regarding the institutional climate, student learning outcomes (e.g., pluralistic orientation), and campus practices as experienced among faculty, staff, and peers. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) has administered the DLE survey since 2011. This year, 2015, marked the survey's fifth administration. The survey collected data from 19,580 student respondents attending 26 colleges and universities across the United States. In this research brief, we discuss students' experiences with witnessing discrimination on campus, analyze how students contest discrimination, and suggest practices that may lower instances of discrimination on campuses.

ON-CAMPUS DISCRIMINATION

In light of institutional claims about investment in the improvement of campus climate, a critical question needs to be asked: How effective are those efforts in addressing the fundamental issue of educational equity? It is not sufficient to simply provide students with access to higher education; institutions must practically and philosophically create an educational environment that encourages all students to thrive and succeed. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) argue, along with other scholars, that campus climate impacts the educational outcomes for minoritized students. It is important to also note that diversity-related learning and cocurricular activities have been shown to improve learning for all students (Denson, 2009; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Measuring the success of diversity initiatives can vary based on institutional context, but, despite institutional differences, one can argue that a clear measure

of success includes students experiencing less discrimination as well as the transformation from hostile institutional climates that permit such actions to occur to more inclusive environments that embrace and celebrate differences among individuals.

Witnessing Discrimination

Overall, 57.5% of students report witnessing discrimination on campus. It is of great concern that nearly three out of five students are witnessing discrimination on campus. The idyllic image of a college or university campus as a safe place to learn is contested when approximately 60% of students report witnessing discrimination. As the DLE is the largest multi-institutional survey specifically focused on the campus climate for diversity, comparable national data are not available to verify these findings. The DLE directly assesses what students are experiencing and witnessing on campus. It is important to keep in mind that what students are reporting could be subtle forms of discrimination—microaggressions—or other forms of overt discriminatory behavior (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). When nearly three out of five students make claims of witnessing discrimination, further investigation is needed.

Types and Forms of Discrimination

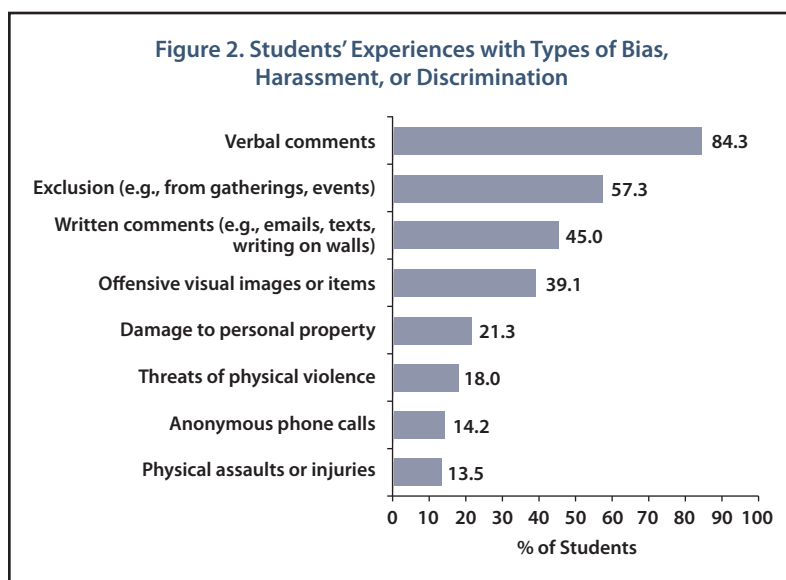
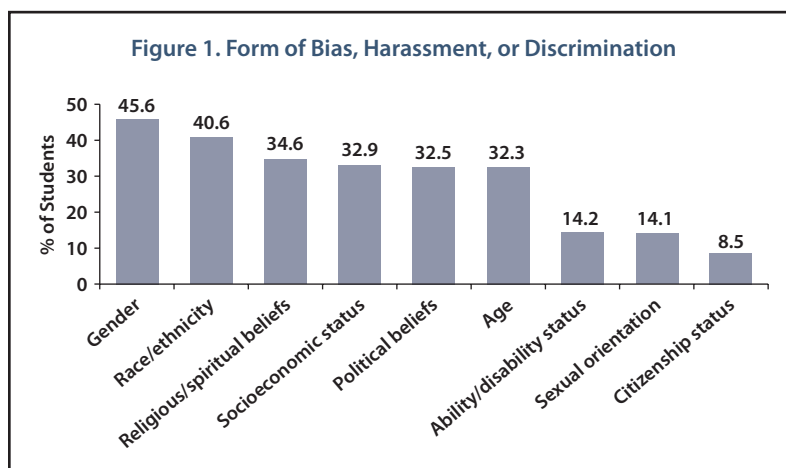
Discrimination can come in multiple forms (e.g., discrimination based on race, gender, or other forms of social identities) and types of experiences (e.g., verbal, written). It is important to note that the DLE does not ask specifically whether students who witnessed discrimination were referring to actions directed at others or themselves; however, the instrument does ask students to report whether they have personally

encountered discrimination, bias, or harassment across several forms and types of experiences. Collectively, discrimination type and form items provide more specific insight as to the nature of discriminatory experiences students have had.

Among students who responded to the “forms of discrimination” item bank, 43.6% reported having experienced discrimination. Among these students, 45.6% reported having experienced discrimination, harassment, or bias due to their gender. More than two in five (40.6%) of the students who reported having experienced discrimination, harassment, or bias associated it with their race/ethnicity, and more than one-third (34.6%) had experienced discrimination due to their religious or spiritual beliefs. Similar proportions of students who had experienced discrimination reported that the incident(s) related to their political beliefs (32.5%) or their age (32.3%) (see Figure 1).

Among the students who responded to a second bank of questions about the types of experiences they have had with respect to discrimination, harassment, and bias, nearly three in five (59.6%) reported having experienced some type of discriminatory action. Nearly all (84.3%) of these students reported having experienced discrimination, bias, or harassment via verbal comments. More than half (57.3%) had these experiences in the form of exclusion, and nearly half (45%) had received written discriminatory, biased, or harassing comments. Figure 2 displays the full set of items in this bank.

In sum, we see great variation in the ways in which students personally experience discrimination, bias, and harassment. Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano and Cuellar (2008) argue that psychological climate, the perception of discrimination (real or imagined), and behavioral climate (the experience of discrimination) impact how students experience campus climate. Campus administrators, faculty, or staff members may not want to believe that their campus is unwelcoming or even hostile. While some may even try to deny the claims, it does not change the reality that students on



campus are witnessing and personally experiencing what they consider to be bias, harassment, or discrimination. There is cause for alarm when the majority of students report witnessing (57.5%) or experiencing first-hand (59.6%) instances of discrimination, harassment, and bias.

Contesting Discrimination

While nearly 60% of students reported having witnessed or experienced discrimination on campus, about one-third (31.7%) of all students reported “frequently” challenging others on issues of discrimination (see Table 1). Among students who reported witnessing discrimination, 37.4% reported “frequently” challenging others on this issue. Similarly, among students who personally experienced verbal comments associated with bias, harassment, or discrimination, 37.1%

Table 1. Students' Frequency of Challenging Others on Issues of Discrimination, by Type of Experience

Among those who...	Percent Marking "Frequently"
Witnessed discrimination	37.4
Experienced discrimination based on gender	47.9
Experienced discrimination via verbal comments	37.1

reported “frequently” challenging others on issues of discrimination. For those students who personally experienced bias, harassment, or discrimination due to their gender, 47.9% report “frequently” challenging others on issues of discrimination. We should note that the item about challenging others on issues of discrimination is not specific, and students could be responding regarding particular instances they have witnessed or challenging, more conceptually or theoretically, ideas about discrimination in discussions or in the classroom.

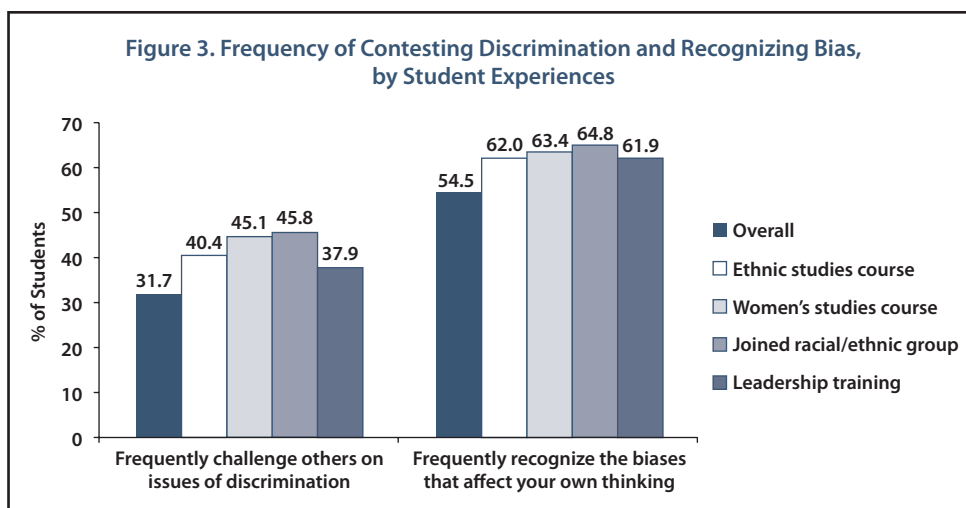
PRACTICES TO CONTEST DISCRIMINATION

There is clear research that demonstrates that participation in diversity-related activities supports the development of critical thinking and pluralism, among other learning outcomes (e.g., civic engagement, democratic outcomes). For example, Bowman (2010) found significant and positive relationships between college diversity experiences and cognitive development in his meta-analysis of 23 research studies.

The DLE asks questions about students’ participation in several activities that may provide the opportunity to support and enhance skills and knowledge to contest discrimination. In terms of students who reported “frequently” challenging others on issues of discrimination, we see a large gap based upon whether or not they had taken an ethnic studies course. Among students who had taken an ethnic studies course, 40.4% reported “frequently” challenging others on issues of discrimination.

By contrast, just 28.4% of students who had not taken an ethnic studies course said they had “frequently” challenged others on issues of discrimination (see Figure 3). There is a similar relationship between having taken a women’s studies course and discrimination contestation outcomes. Among students who have taken a women’s studies course, 45.1% said they “frequently” challenged others on issues of discrimination compared to 28.4% of students who did not take a women’s studies course. As noted previously, these students may be challenging others on issues of discrimination in the classroom in the theoretical sense or they may be contesting actual instances of discrimination that they witness or experience.

We also note associations between challenging others on issues of discrimination and students’ out-of-class experiences. Among students who joined a racial/ethnic student organization reflecting their own background, 45.8% report “frequently” challenging others on issues of discrimination; by contrast, 29.7% of students who did not participate in such student organizations “frequently” challenged others on issues of discrimination. The benefits from cocurricular activities are not limited to social identity-based groups. Among students who participated in general leadership training, 37.9% “frequently” challenged others on issues of discrimination contrasted with 29% of those who did not participate in leadership training. In sum, there are curricular and cocurricular activities that may support students’ development of the skills, knowledge, and confidence to challenge on-campus discrimination.



CONCLUSION

When roughly three in five students are witnessing discrimination on campus, with similar rates of students reporting actual experiences with discrimination, harassment, and bias, there is an imperative to further investigate this critical aspect of campus climate. Issues related to discrimination, harassment, and bias can be further explored through detailed analysis of the DLE survey but also by conducting follow-up focus groups or interviews with students. Institutions must collect data with respect to campus climate as a starting point to understanding the key issues and potential solutions for on-campus discrimination.

Additionally, it is important to note that students who feel marginalized on campus may be reluctant to participate in campus climate surveys or focus groups, especially when their calls of discrimination have not been heard previously. Moreover, these resistant students may be skeptical about the intention of the institution to act upon their findings based on their previous experience and institutional history. Our hope is that the DLE survey results may serve as a call to action to address issues of bias, harassment, and discrimination that are occurring. It is imperative for institutions to become aware of the issues, acknowledge

the magnitude of the problem, and attempt to improve the learning environment for all students, particularly those from minoritized backgrounds.

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