

# RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



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## 2016 DIVERSE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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*The Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey has been administered by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) since 2011. The sample for the 2016 survey includes 31,111 students from 30 different institutions, including 4,284 students from five two-year colleges. This brief focuses on survey findings across four different areas: student perceptions of campus diversity, identity salience, diversity courses, and student actions to address bias and promote diversity.*

### PERCEPTIONS OF CAMPUS DIVERSITY

A strong majority of students agreed their campus has a long-standing commitment to diversity (85.0%) and that it promotes an appreciation of cultural differences (91.2%). Students at two-year institutions were most likely to perceive a long-standing commitment to diversity (93.3%) compared to students at universities (86.8%) or four-year colleges (80.1%). Examinations of differences across institutional control reveal that a greater proportion of students at public institutions (88.5%) perceived their campus as having a commitment to diversity compared to their peers at private institutions (76.7%).

Although more than 9 in 10 students in the sample felt that their campus promotes an appreciation of cultural differences, a smaller percentage of students who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native (81.0%) and African American/Black (83.3%) similarly agreed. Agreement among Asian, Latinx, and White students that their institution promotes an appreciation for cultural differences exceeded that of their American Indian/Alaska Native and African American/Black peers by approximately 10 percentage points. While there were differences between students based upon their racial/ethnic identities, students who were born outside of the United States felt their campus appreciates cultural difference at nearly identical rates as their peers who were born in the United States.

Students also nearly universally agreed that their campus appreciates differences in sexual orientation, as more than 90% of all students endorsed this perspective. Despite high levels of agreement among the full sample, there were measurable differences based upon students' reported sexual orientation. Among students identifying as heterosexual/straight, 92.0% agreed that their campus appreciates differences in sexual orientation compared to 83.5% of lesbian, 82.7% of

gay, 86.2% of bisexual, and 79.7% of queer-identified students. In this particular sample, 86.2% of students identified as heterosexual/straight, 10.6% as LGBQ, and another 3.2% identified as other. Though a majority of LGBQ students agreed that their campus appreciates differences in sexual orientation, students who identified as LGBQ were more than twice as likely to *disagree* that their campus appreciates differences in sexual orientation compared to their heterosexual/straight peers. Similarly, LGBQ-identified students were approximately three times more likely to be dissatisfied with the atmosphere for differences in sexual orientation at their respective campuses (See Table 1).

While the vast majority of all respondents reported positive feelings about general institutional commitments to diversity, student experiences and views concerning the campus climate for specific sub-populations lacked such unity. For example, 61.0% of students expressed satisfaction with the respect for the expression of diverse beliefs on campus, 57.9% were satisfied with the atmosphere for differences in sexual orientation, and 55.4% were satisfied with the atmosphere for religious differences.

Students' somewhat less positive perceptions of the

**Table 1. Student Views on Campus Climate for Sexual Orientation Differences, by Sexual Orientation**

	Campus appreciates differences (% "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree")	Atmosphere for differences (% "Dissatisfied" or "Very Dissatisfied")
Heterosexual/Straight	8.0	5.1
Lesbian	16.5	18.8
Gay	17.3	18.7
Bisexual	13.8	12.4
Queer	20.3	19.6
Other	17.5	14.0



atmosphere for differences among specific social identities may be connected to their perceptions of racial tensions and acts of discrimination that occur on campus. For example, more than a quarter of all respondents agreed that there is a lot of racial tension on their campus (25.5%), but the data suggest significant variation by race/ethnicity: 40.1% of African American/Black students, 31.7% of American Indian/Alaska Native, and 31.0% of Asian students perceived their campuses to have a lot of racial tension. Such data suggest that students may recognize their institutions' efforts in promoting an appreciation for cultural differences, but they continue to encounter and perceive racial tensions in their daily experiences.

In addition, more than half of students (54.3%) reported that they had witnessed discrimination at their institution, with nearly three in ten (28.5%) witnessing discrimination at least "sometimes." Students at private schools were much more likely to report witnessing discrimination (63.9%) compared to their peers at public institutions (50.2%). Similarly, a greater percentage of respondents at private institutions (34.2%) reported witnessing discrimination at least "sometimes" than respondents at public institutions (26.1%).

One deterrent to reporting acts of discrimination is a perception that nothing will come of such reports, and findings from the full sample of respondents suggest that less than half (44.8%) expressed satisfaction with the administrative response to incidents of discrimination, suggesting substantial room for improvement. Overall, a considerable percentage of students agreed that their campus has administrators who regularly speak about the value of diversity (74.8%), with students enrolled at universities endorsing this sentiment at slightly higher rates (78.4%) than their peers at four-year colleges (71.7%) or two-year institutions (71.6%). Students at public institutions were only slightly more likely than respondents at private institutions to agree (1.9 percentage points higher) that their institution had administrators who regularly speak about the value of diversity. Thus, while data suggest that institutions do promote the appreciation of diversity represented on campus and are working to create an atmosphere that is respectful and inclusive, colleges and universities seem to have much more work to do to fully embrace and honor their commitments to diversity.

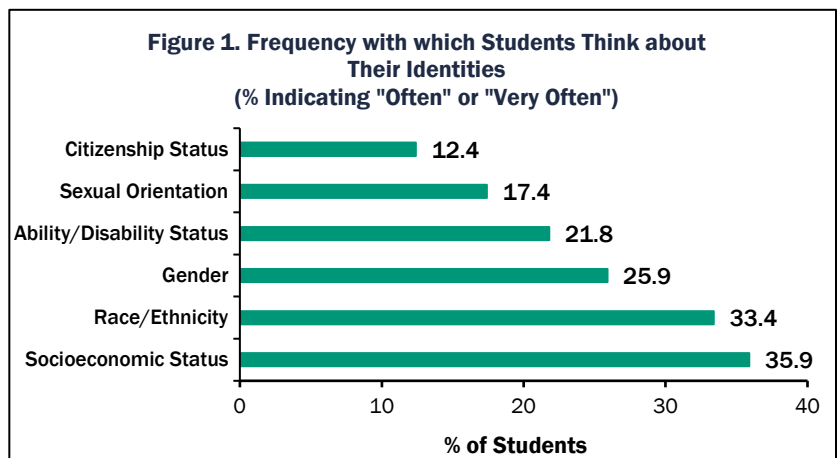
**IDENTITY SALIENCE**

When asked how often they think about their various identities, such as ability/disability status or sexual orientation, less than half of students indicated their identities were something they considered "often" or "very often" (See Figure 1). More than one-third (35.9%) of respondents either "often" or "very often" reflected on their socioeconomic status (35.9%) compared to just 12.4% of students who thought about their citizenship status either "often" or "very often."

Disaggregating the data by students' social identities

reveals important differences. For example, although more than one-third of all students in the sample often thought about their socioeconomic status in the last year, 43.0% of students from families making less than \$30,000 reported doing so compared to 29.4% of those from families who earn at least \$150,000 in annual income. Such differences emerge not only with family income but also with students' concerns about their ability to finance their college education. For those who had major concerns about financing college, 52.5% often thought about their socioeconomic status, but this figure was cut in half (26.0%) for students with no major concerns about their ability to finance their college education. Thus, students who had greater concerns about paying for college and who came from less affluent families were also more likely to be thinking often about their socioeconomic status.

Although a relatively small percentage of students thought about their citizenship status "often" or "very often," the data suggest that such saliency varied considerably based upon respondents' reported citizenship status. In this sample, less than one in five (17.7%) students reported being born outside of the United States. Those students born outside of the United States were much more likely to think about their citizenship status "often" or "very often" compared to their U.S.-born peers. For example, approximately 6% of students born in the United States often thought about their citizenship status, regardless of where their parents were born. Less than one in five (17.1%)



foreign-born students who had become naturalized citizens reported thinking about their citizenship status either "often" or "very often." By contrast, two in five (42.2%) respondents who identify as permanent legal residents, as well as a majority of students who entered the United States with a student visa (54.6%) think about their citizenship status either "often" or "very often." Among students who do not identify as citizens, permanent legal residents, or student visa holders, more than half (53.0%) often think about their citizenship status.

Similarly, the salience of students' racial/ethnic identity varied considerably based upon how students identified their race/ethnicity. Overall, 33.4% of students reported they often thought about their racial/ethnic identity. Less than one-quarter (23.6%) of White students thought about

their racial/ethnic identity either “often” or “very often.” By contrast, well over half of students who identified as Black (61.5%) indicated that they often thought about their race/ethnicity, which exceeded the rate of multiracial (44.3%), Hispanic (42.0%), American Indian/Alaska Native (38.7%), and Asian (36.9%) students who “often” or “very often” reflected upon their racial or ethnic identity.

Disaggregating the data even further reveals important differences among students who identified as Asian. More than two out of five (42.2%) South Asian students thought about their racial/ethnic identity “often” or “very often” compared to just over one-third (34.0%) of students who identified as Southeast Asian.

Lastly, some of the most pronounced differences in identity salience emerged with respect to variation across students’ sexual orientation. Overall, less than one-fifth of respondents (17.4%) either “often” or “very often” thought about their sexual orientation. Among students identifying as heterosexual/straight, less than one-tenth (9.5%) often reflected upon their sexual orientation. By contrast, a clear majority of students who identified as lesbian (77.6%), gay (80.0%), bisexual (63.4%), or queer (84.1%) thought about their sexual identity either “often” or “very often.”

While less than half of all students in the sample indicated they “often” or “very often” think about a particular identity, individuals who identify with a group that has been excluded and/or marginalized in higher education experienced significantly greater identity salience. Such differences may influence or reflect the ways in which students experience the campus climate, interact with others who do not share a particular identity, and engage with the campus curriculum.

**COURSES**

Data from the 2016 DLE survey reveal that more than half of students took at least one course that included materials or readings focused on differences in social identities. As shown in Table 2, more than two-thirds (69.2%) of students took at least one course that included materials on race/ethnicity, and nearly the same percentage of students (68.0%) enrolled in at least one class that covered socioeconomic differences. Less than half of students similarly reported taking at least one course with materials/readings on disabilities (41.3%) or sexual orientation (48.1%).

**A majority of students reported taking one or more courses featuring materials/readings about gender, privilege, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic**

While a majority of students in the sample took courses that covered important aspects of diversity, data reveal that students were more likely to enroll in courses that included a focus relevant

to their personal identities. More than three out of five (62.5%) women took at least one class with readings/materials related to gender compared to 50.0% of men. Similarly, 60.3% of LGBTQ-identified students enrolled in one or more classes with readings/materials related to sexual orientation compared to 46.4% of their peers who

identified as heterosexual/straight.

Nearly identical proportions of first-generation students (51.3%) and continuing-generation students (51.5%) enrolled in one or more classes with materials/readings on privilege. By contrast, a greater proportion of women (54.6%) than men (44.8%) took at least one such course on privilege. Students’ major also played a role in their likelihood of taking a course focused on privilege. Nearly one-third (30.0%) of engineering and 33.1% of physical science majors enrolled in at least one course on privilege, a rate far below that of business (45.9%), education (60.3%), and social science (71.5%) majors. Thus, colleges and

**Table 2. Enrollment in Courses that Address Diversity**

Course Includes Readings/Materials	% Enrolled in 1+ Course(s)
Race/Ethnicity	69.2
Socioeconomic Difference	68.0
Gender	58.3
Privilege	51.3
Sexual Orientation	48.1
Disability	41.3

universities likely need to examine the distribution of courses addressing privilege within the curriculum and how students in different majors are exposed to and gain access to such courses and material.

In addition to variation across academic major, students’ class standing also relates to their likelihood of enrolling in a diversity-related course. More advanced students had a greater likelihood of having taken one or more classes with materials/readings related to diverse topics. For example, 30.3% of freshmen students at four-year institutions took one or more classes with materials/readings about disability. By contrast, a greater percentage of sophomores (39.0%), juniors (42.6%), and seniors (49.7%) reported having taken at least one course focused on disabilities; as a result, these figures may simply represent the increase in the number of electives available to students who have matriculated further into their degree programs. This pattern holds across courses with materials/readings related to gender, privilege, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic difference.

Students who attend two-year institutions do not report their class standing; instead, they indicate the number of credit hours they have completed at the time of survey administration. Among students attending two-year institutions, more than half of students reported taking one or more classes with materials/readings about race/ethnicity (62.7%) and socioeconomic difference (62.5%). Roughly 42.4% of students at two-year institutions took one or more classes with materials/readings about disability. Similarly, students who have earned more credit-hours have an increased likelihood of having completed at least one course with materials focused on privilege. This trend, however, does not hold for the most senior students, as those with at least 90 units are less likely than their peers who have completed 25-

59 units or 60-89 units to have taken courses with materials in all six areas. Such differences may reflect that students in this sample with 90 or more units are more likely to major in the health professions, biology and mathematics/computer science than their peers with fewer completed credits.

### A YEAR OF ACTION

While diversity courses are an important place for students to gain knowledge and awareness, a substantial portion of students also report taking action to address important social issues. On an internal level, high proportions of students report “frequently” (50.7%) or “occasionally” (43.2%) recognizing biases that affect their own thinking. Female students “frequently” recognized their biases (52.7%) at significantly greater rates than their male peers (46.7%), while students identifying as queer (82.5%), lesbian (59.1%), and gay (61.6%) reported “frequently” checking their biases at much greater rates than their heterosexual/straight peers (48.6%).

Additionally, the overwhelming majority of students applied lessons learned in the classroom to real-life situations (50.2% “frequently” and 43.0% “occasionally”), with considerable variation by students’ major. Among engineering majors, 40.4% did so “frequently,” compared to 36.0% of mathematics and computer science majors, and 46.4% of business majors. This contrasts with 55.7% of arts and humanities, 53.4% of education, and 62.3% of social science majors who “frequently” applied their personal learning in the classroom to real life situations, suggesting that humanities and social science students perceive important connections between their coursework and the “real world.”

A majority of students in this sample reported engaging with important social issues on their respective campuses. Among students in this sample, 41.4% “frequently” and 43.9% “occasionally” discussed issues related to sexism, gender differences, or gender equity while 31.1% “frequently” and 45.7% “occasionally” challenged others on

issues of discrimination. Also, large percentages of students reported making an effort to educate others about social issues (37.3% “frequently” and 46.4% “occasionally”). Student actions appear to align with their own personal goals to influence social values and promote racial understanding. More than half of students who identified influencing social values (55.4%) or helping promote racial understanding (56.9%) as essential goals also frequently challenged others on discrimination. Thus, students are not just indicating they want to lead on these important issues but they are also taking important actions during college to live out these goals and values.

As the 2016 presidential race heated up during the past academic year, students were actively involved in local, state, and national politics. This year, one-third (33.4%) of students demonstrated for a cause by attending a boycott, rally, or protest, whereas nearly one-fifth of students (19.7%) worked on a local, state, or national political campaign. Data suggest that students from across the political spectrum were involved in the primary campaign season, as approximately the same percentage of students who identified as conservative/far right (19.7%) or middle-of-the-road (19.1%) worked on a campaign compared to their liberal/far left peers (20.2%). Despite the similar rates of campaign engagement across students’ political orientation, the percentage of students who communicated their opinion about a cause through such media as blogs, emails, and petitions varied considerably based upon how they identified politically. More than two-thirds (68.1%) of liberal/far left students reported blogging, emailing, or petitioning about a cause, compared to 57.9% of those who identified as conservative/far right. This past academic year students were not only engaged in the classroom on important issues of diversity, DLE survey results show that students were also actively challenging each other, educating their peers, and applying what they learned in class to their lived experiences.



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