

RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



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2017 DIVERSE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

By: Destiny McLennan & Sidronio Jacobo

The Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey is designed to capture student perception of institutional climate; student learning outcomes (e.g., sense of belonging); and campus practices as experienced with faculty, staff, and peers. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program has administered the DLE survey every year since 2011. The sample for the 2017 DLE survey includes 17,550 students from 28 institutions, including 3,991 students from five two-year colleges.

Diverse student populations are at the center of the survey, and this brief disaggregates findings by different social identities, including race, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability status, socioeconomic status, and citizenship status. This research brief discusses how discrimination is experienced and reported, student commitment to the understanding and inclusion of diverse identities and perspectives, and how diversity is integrated into classrooms.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE WITH DISCRIMINATION AND BIAS

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of organized student efforts within and across college campuses calling forth greater administrative leadership and accountability. Such efforts have been central in challenging campus climates and incidents of discrimination, bias, and harassment that impact the collegiate experience of students with intersecting identities that have historically been undermined. As the general college student population continues to diversify, colleges benefit from understanding the different forms and types of discrimination that take place on their campuses.

The DLE survey asks students if they have personally been discriminated against due to their social identities and/or their association with particular communities. About one in four students felt they had been discriminated against or excluded from activities based on their gender (27.4%), race/ethnicity (25.4%), or age (25.4%). Additionally, survey findings indicate over 20.0% of students felt discriminated against because of their political affiliation (23.0%) or socioeconomic status (21.2%). Furthermore, Table 1 displays the proportion of students who experienced discrimination related to their spiritual or religious beliefs, disability status, sexual orientation, citizenship status, or military status.

While 18.8% of males and nearly one-third of

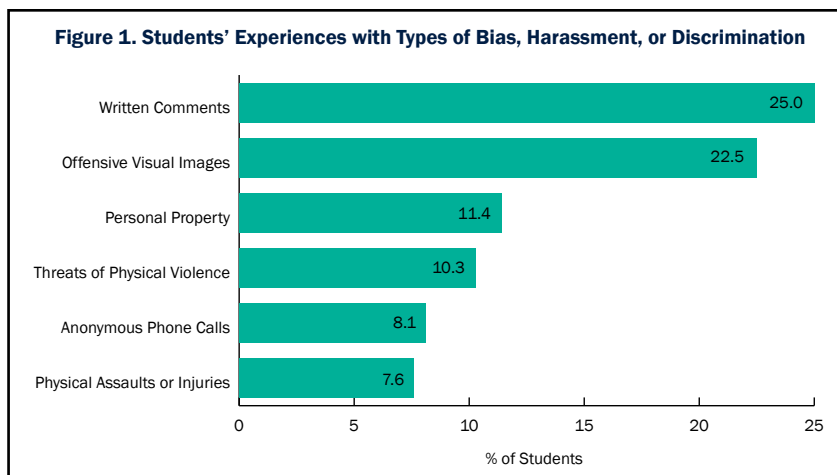
female students (31.0%) reported that they experienced discrimination based on their gender, about 3 in 5 of students who identified their sex as “other” (58.4%) experienced discrimination based on their gender. When we disaggregate students reporting discrimination based on race by race/ethnicity, there is a discernible difference between students of color and white students. Black students (42.7%) and Asian students (37.3%) were more

Table 1. Forms of Bias, Harassment, or Discrimination

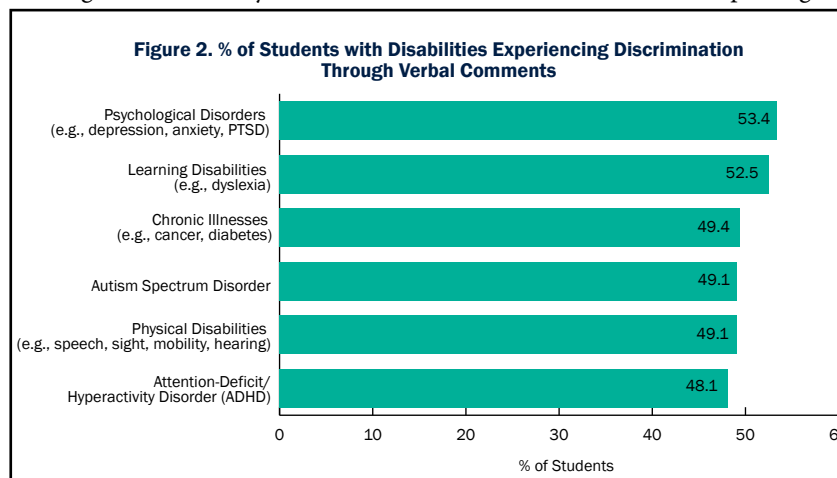
because of your:	% of students
Gender	27.4
Age	25.4
Race/ethnicity	25.4
Political affiliation	23.0
Socioeconomic status	21.2
Religious/spiritual affiliation	18.4
Ability/disability status	13.0
Sexual orientation	10.9
Citizenship status	9.2
Military/Veteran status	5.2

likely to experience discrimination based on race/ethnicity than white students (17.4%), a difference of at least twenty percentage points. Further, 23.3% of Latino/a and 29.4% of multiracial students also experienced race-based discrimination.

In conjunction with survey items asking students the forms of discrimination they experience, the DLE also explores how students experience different types of bias, harassment, and discrimination. Students experienced bias, harassment, or discrimination through verbal comments (42.9%), exclusion (e.g., gathering, events) (26.6%), written comments (25.0%), and offensive visual images (22.5%) at higher rates than other incidents of harassment (See Figure 1).



As Figure 2 highlights, students with disabilities or medical conditions reported higher instances of discrimination and bias made through verbal comments than the overall sample population (42.9%). Over half of students with psychological disorders (53.4%) (such as depression, anxiety, PTSD) or learning disabilities (52.5%) reported hearing discriminatory comments. Students with chronic



illnesses (e.g., cancer, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, etc.) (49.4%), autism spectrum disorder (49.2%), and physical disabilities (e.g., speech, sight, mobility, hearing) (49.1%) heard biased and discriminatory comments. Lastly, 48.1% of students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder experienced discrimination through verbal comments. In particular, 8.7% of students with autism spectrum disorder reported hearing verbal comments “very often,” the highest among students with disabilities or medical conditions. As the literature on disabilities studies notes, people with disabilities are often subjected to stigma, discrimination, and harassment because not all disabilities or medical conditions are visible (Davis, 2016). The experiences of students with disabilities must

be taken into account as more students in college report having disabilities or medical conditions that require academic and other accommodations.

When we disaggregate student respondents by sexual orientation, we observe substantial differences in students reporting discrimination through exclusion such as in social gatherings. In the 2017 DLE survey, 13.8% of students did not identify as heterosexual or straight. While 25.7% of heterosexual students responded feeling excluded from events, students who identify as gay (34.9%) and queer (42.1%) were more likely to feel excluded. Lesbian (28.5%), bisexual (29.5%), and students whose sexual orientation was noted as “other” (31.9%) had similar proportions of students who have felt excluded. Furthermore, queer students (3.6%) and students who identified their sexual orientation as “other” (5.6%) reported experiencing exclusion “very often,” the highest rates amongst non-heterosexual students. While college campuses benefit from exploring workshops, programming, and presentations to challenge heteronormative practices and structures, it is essential for student clubs and organizations not to perpetuate this as well.

Beyond students reporting their personal experience with discrimination, approximately half of students (51.3%) reported witnessing discrimination at least once on campus. Given that the majority of students do witness discrimination, it is critical to note that about one in three students (35.7%) reported they “frequently” challenged others on issues of discrimination and 46.1% of students reported they “occasionally” challenged

others. While students report challenging others on matters of discrimination, it has not translated into direct reporting of discriminatory activity given that only 11.0% of students reported an incident of discrimination to a campus authority.

Furthermore, about half of students reported feeling satisfied (50.0%), 12.1% of students felt dissatisfied, and 37.4% of students took a neutral stance in their sentiments about their campuses' administrative response to discrimination. When we disaggregate this item by institutional type, students at four-year institutions (49.5%) were slightly less satisfied (responses include, "satisfied" and "very satisfied") with how their campus administration responded to discrimination in comparison to two-year institutions (54.7%). When we further disaggregate schools by institutional type and control, a more considerable difference emerges. Students attending private doctoral universities (55.5%) reported feeling satisfied at higher rates than students at public doctoral universities (46.3%). Amongst students at private and public four-year colleges, findings show a 5.2 percentage-point difference in which students at four-year public colleges (51.9%) felt more satisfied with campus response to discrimination than students at four-year private colleges (46.7%).

Additionally, out of all race/ethnicity groups, 21.8% of Black students felt "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with their campus' administrative response to discrimination (in comparison to 12.1% of the general student population who felt "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied"). Furthermore, students reported hearing insensitive or disparaging racial remarks from students (51.3%), faculty (19.6%), or staff (15.5%). Given this reality, it is imperative for institutions to know more than just how often students experience prejudice but rather how students, faculty, staff, and administration react and respond to the types of discrimination, bias, and harassment.

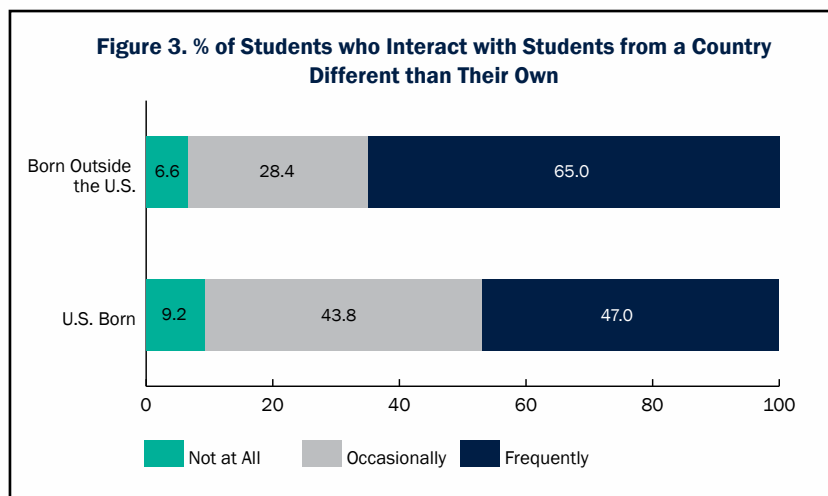
STUDENT COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY

Despite various forms of discrimination, students maintain a commitment to the understanding and inclusion of diverse perspectives and identities. About 46.8% "frequently" make an effort to get to know people from diverse backgrounds, showing their commitment to creating cross-cultural relationships. This number decreases when looking at Latino/a students (42.9%) but increases when looking at Asian students (49.9%) and Black students (57.4%). We also see that a higher percentage of women (48.8%) than men (41.4%) frequently make an effort to getting to know people from

diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, while the majority of students "occasionally" or "frequently" challenging others on issues of discrimination (81.3%), we see a lower percentage of men (78.0%) than women (82.5%) "occasionally" or "frequently" challenging others on issues of discrimination. Additionally, while over half (52.3%) of students are also "frequently" recognizing the biases in their own thinking, we see a higher percentage of U.S. born students recognizing their biases (53.7%) than students not born in the U.S. (48.2%). Understanding how dedicated students are to challenging forms of discrimination as well as recognizing their own biases will allow for more inclusive campuses and constructive conversations around possibly controversial, diverse perspectives.

While 55.5% of students "frequently" interact with students of different sexual orientations from their own, disaggregating by the corresponding demographic characteristics shows stark differences. For example, 51.1% of heterosexual/straight students "frequently" interact with students of a sexual orientation different from their own while 81% of bisexual students, 90.1% of lesbian students, 90.5% of gay students, and 92.8% of queer students frequently interact with students of a sexual orientation different than their own. These proportions are appropriate given the substantially lower number of LGBTQ identifying students in the sample, however understanding how these students must negotiate their interactions are still noteworthy.

Similarly, while 49.7% of students "frequently" interact with students from a different country other than their own, 65.0% of students born outside of the U.S. (regardless of citizenship status) "frequently" interact with students from a country different than their own, while 47.0% of U.S born students "frequently" do so (See Figure 3). These data show how students with minoritized identities have to constantly negotiate their interactions with other students



who may not share similar experiences with them.

DIVERSITY WITHIN THE CAMPUS

Beyond the core DLE survey, colleges and universities have the ability to add additional modules to their administration of the survey. The Classroom Climate module asks respondents about their perception of the classroom environment and the various types of pedagogical practices employed by instructors. In 2017, twenty-three schools participated in this module of the survey (n = 11,380 students).

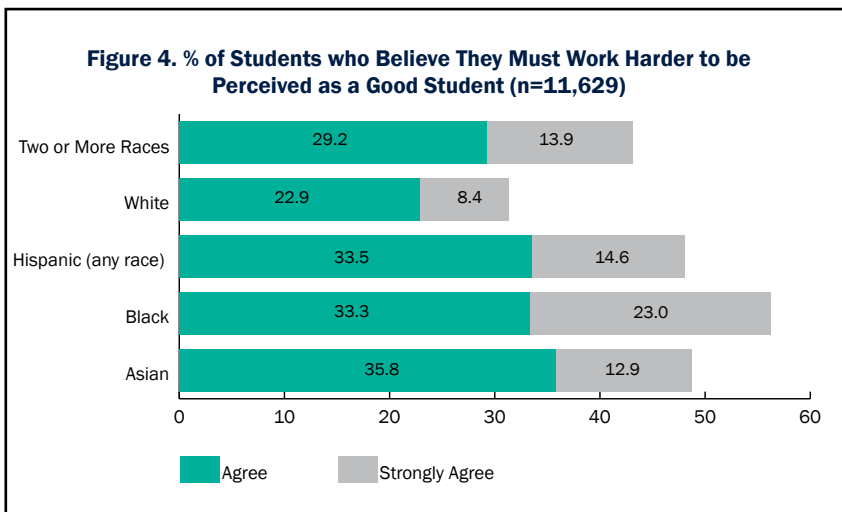
Classrooms provide environments for students to learn from both their professors and their peers. Classrooms foster diverse perspectives and ideologies and allow students to discuss difficult or controversial topics. About one in five students do not feel comfortable contributing to class discussions (21.4%, “agree” and “strongly agree”) and a majority (83.7%) “agree” or “strongly agree” with feeling comfortable sharing their own perspectives and experiences within the classroom. This shows that, generally, students feel comfortable in their classroom environments. However, while less than half (40.7%) of students feel they have to work harder than others to be perceived as a good student (“agree” and “strongly agree”), 48.1% of Latino/a students, 48.7% of Asian students, and 56.3% of Black students reported feeling this way (See Figure 4).

is comparably higher for students who do not identify within the man/woman gender binary. For example, 30.6% of gender queer/gender non-conforming students reported being singled out because of their identity. When students are “othered” because of their identities, further investigation by the institution is necessary so all students feel included.

As professors play a key role in setting the tone of the classroom environment, it is important to examine how professors create diverse learning environments within the classroom. While 24.3% of students “agree” or “strongly agree” with hearing their professors express stereotypes based on social identity, 23.0% of white students, 25.7% of Asian students, and 31.9% of Black students have heard their professors express stereotypes. While stereotypes can have negative lasting effects on students, research has shown that comments specifically related to differences around performance in the classroom can lead to stereotype threat and underperformance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Given these realities, professors could benefit from diversity trainings that would allow them to understand the diverse identities within their classrooms, and limit potential exclusionary language.

About 55.4% of students reported that “most” or “all” of their professors have open discussions around privilege, power, and oppression. However, we see this number decrease when looking at STEM majors (33.2% for engineering, 36.1% for physical science, and 45.5% for biological and life sciences). In contrast, 59.4% of arts and humanities students, 64.7% of history/political science students, and 64.8% of education students reported that “most” or “all” of their professors have open discussions around privilege, power, and oppression. While these differences in percentages could be attributed to the nature of the content of course materials, it is essential for professors of STEM-related majors to also incorporate more difficult dialogues and remain inclusive in their language and curriculum.

Additionally, 69.6% of students reported that “most” or “all” of their professors teach students tolerance and respect for different beliefs. However, teaching tolerance and respect for various beliefs is vastly different from fostering a classroom environment that promotes diversity, and allows for inclusion of various backgrounds, perspectives, and ideologies. Institutions must probe deeper into how professors’ pedagogical practices actually produce inclusive environments. While it is important to note that 82.9% of students reported that “most” or “all” of their



It is important to look at within group percentages because classrooms can be isolating for students with minoritized identities. For example, only 16.0% of students overall reported they “agree” or “strongly agree” that they have been singled out because of their identity (e.g. race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, religious affiliation, etc.). However, upon disaggregating to explore specific subgroups, we find that this number

professors value individual differences in the classroom, we must further explore how professors facilitate critical conversations around individual differences within the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Colleges and universities are making strong strides towards more inclusive campus environments. Particularly, colleges benefit when they regularly assess their campus climate. Students must feel comfortable reporting instances of discrimination whether they experience it or witness it. While we continue to explore diverse learning environments, we must continue to expand our understanding of diversity. Teaching tolerance and respect is not enough. We must urge professors to practice inclusion, facilitate difficult dialogues in the classroom, and create safe environments for all of their students. Institutions must organize more thoughtful and purposeful trainings on race and racism, sexism, and other various forms of discrimination, so professors are more properly equipped with the tools to encourage and lead discussion. If our professors aren't fostering diverse learning environments, we cannot expect our students to.

Furthermore, we encourage institutional researchers and campus leaders to disaggregate their data to find the nuanced stories of their institutions. Diverse perspectives and ideologies must be explored and revealed.

REFERENCES

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