RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA

2019 DIVERSE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

By: Destiny McLennan

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 and staff. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program has administered the DLE survey every year since 2011. The sample for the DLE 2019 survey includes 9,598 students from seventeen institutions.
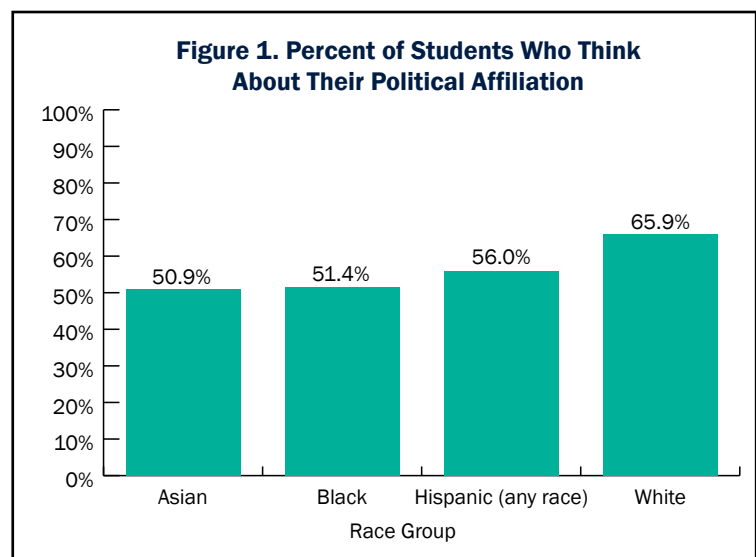
This research brief seeks to understand student thought and engagement with and around diverse issues. While understanding how institutions are fostering diverse environments is critical, we must do more to understand how students actively insert themselves in these conversations, classes, and events. Understanding how students both act and think about diverse issues allows campuses to gauge student activity and learn how to best engage their students in tackling potentially difficult dialogues.
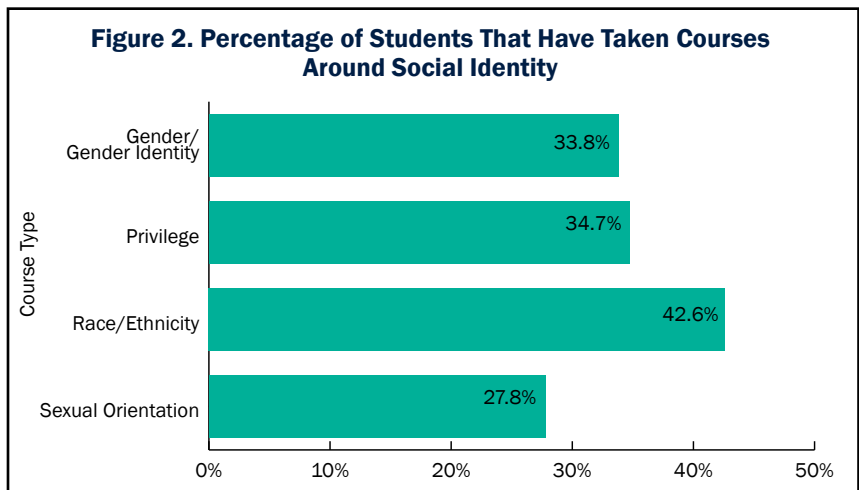
IDENTITY SALIENCE

Results from the 2019 DLE administration show that more than half of all students think about various aspects of their social identity. Within the past year, reporting "sometimes," "often," or "very often," 70.0% of students think about their socioeconomic class, 65.8% think about their race/ethnicity, 54.1% think about their gender/gender identity, and 61.3% think about their political affiliation. Students thinking about these very salient identity markers are not surprising. However, these numbers increase among students of color, when disaggregating by race group, and decrease among white students. For example, 71.2% of Asian students, 75.9% of Black students, and 75.8% of Hispanic (any race) students reported "sometimes," "often," or "very often" thinking about their socioeconomic status within the past year, while 65.8% of white students reported the same.

While this trend remains consistent for students thinking about their race/ethnicity, it changes for gender/gender identity and political affiliation. When disaggregating among race group, the numbers decrease for students of color who think about their political affiliation, and increase for white students.

Figure 1 shows that 50.9% of Asian students, 51.4% of Black students, and 56.0% of Hispanic (any race) students reported "sometimes," "often," or "very often" thinking about their political affiliation, while 65.9% of white students reported the same. This trend may occur because politics may seem too distant compared to their other very salient identities they come into contact with daily. Additionally, while 29.5% of all students reported "sometimes," "often," or "very often"

Figure 1. Percent of Students Who Think About Their Political Affiliation

- Asian: 50.9%
- Black: 51.4%
- Hispanic (any race): 56.0%
- White: 65.9%

Race Group

thinking about their citizenship status within the past year, 36.9% of Mexican American / Chicana/o/x students, 37.3% of Central American students, and 44.2% of Other Hispanic or Latina/o/x students have thought about their citizenship status (of those that responded). The Trump administration has gone to great lengths to create policies and legislation that deter border crossings (including those seeking refuge), phase out deferred action for childhood arrivals, build a wall, and prioritize deportation (Felter & Renwick, 2019).
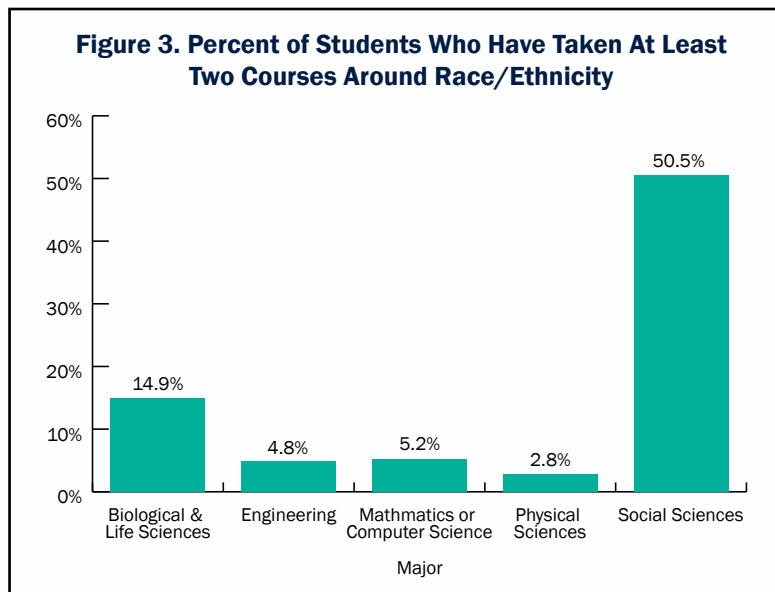
Figure 2. Percentage of Students That Have Taken Courses Around Social Identity

Considering such, the trend in which Latinx students think about their citizenship is fitting, as countless raids and inhumane detainments have continually occurred across the country.

STUDENT GOALS

The survey asks students about their goals around influencing the greater society and most students reported "very important" or "essential" in maintaining such goals. For example, 79.1% of students reported helping to promote racial understanding as a goal, 77.3% reported working to correct social and economic inequalities as a goal, 76.4% reported working to achieve gender equity as a goal, 68.9% reported influencing social values as a goal, and 59.5% reported influencing the political structure as a goal. However, while most students maintain these goals, fewer students have taken courses that incorporate readings related to such goals. For example, Figure 2 shows 42.6% of students have taken at least two courses around race/ethnicity, 34.7% have taken at least two courses around privilege, 33.8% have taken at least two courses around gender/gender identity, and 27.8% have taken at least two courses around sexual orientation. These numbers show that while students maintain goals around positively impacting the greater society on a social, economic, and political level, the courses they take have less to do with such values.

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Additionally, these numbers vary by major as more students within the social sciences have taken these types of courses than students within STEM. In fact, 49.7% of students within the social sciences have taken at least two courses around privilege while only 15.9% of students within biological and life sciences, 4.5% of students in mathematics or computer science, 3.8% of students in engineering, and 0.6% of students in physical science have taken at least two courses around privilege. Similarly, Figure 3 shows that while about half (50.5%) of students in the social sciences have taken at least two courses around

Figure 3. Percent of Students Who Have Taken At Least Two Courses Around Race/Ethnicity

race/ethnicity, 14.9% of students within biological and life sciences, 5.2% of students in mathematics or computer science, 4.8% of students in engineering, and 2.8% of students in physical science have taken at least two courses around race/ethnicity. Understanding these trends among majors can help institutions provide more opportunities in coursework and class offerings to allow for all students (even in STEM) to access and take more classes around social issues.

Beyond taking courses around their stated goals of promoting racial understanding, working to correct social and economic inequalities, working to achieve gender equity, influencing social values, and influencing the political structure, less than a third of all students have actively participated in events around such goals. Reporting "sometimes," "often," or "very often," only 30.7% of students have participated in campus center activities (e.g., LGBTQ+, racial/ethnic, etc.), 27.4% have participated in ongoing campus-organized discussions on racial/ethnic issues, and 20.6% have demonstrated for a cause. Students at two-year schools, however, have participated less. For example, reporting "sometimes," "often," or "very often," 18.6% of students have participated in campus center events, 14.2% have participated in ongoing campus-organized discussions on racial/ethnic issues, and 16.2% have demonstrated for a cause. Furthermore, more students participate in such events at private institutions than at public ones. For example, 28.3% of students at private institutions have demonstrated for a cause compared to 17.5% of students at public institutions (reporting "sometimes," "often," and "very often"). Public institutions should do more to understand the climate and cultures they foster that may make students more or less willing to involve themselves in such activities.

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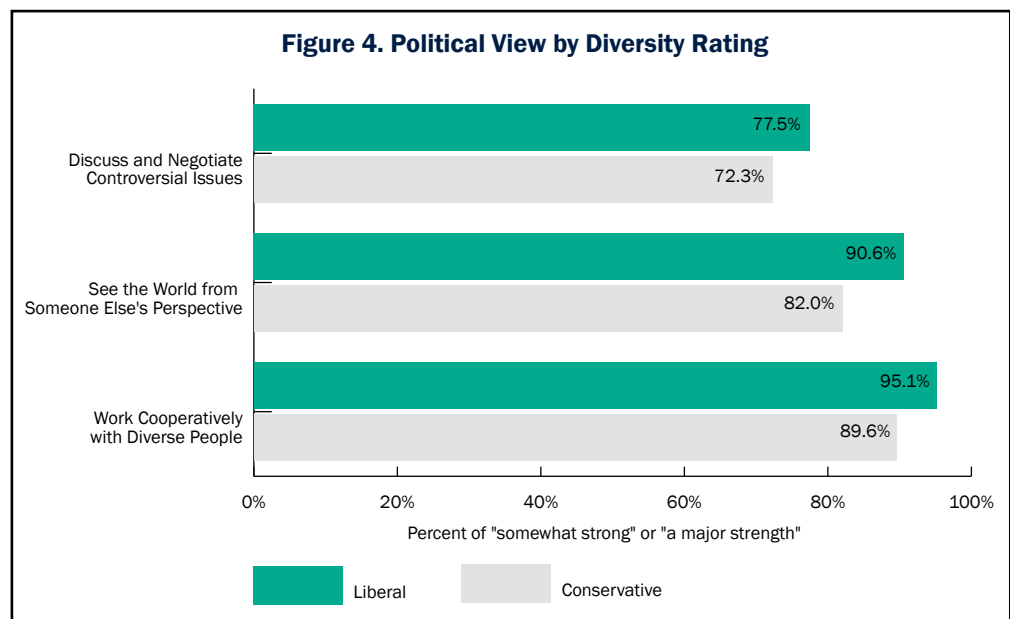
ABILITY TO NAVIGATE DIVERSE ENVIRONMENTS

Students continue to consider their understanding and navigating of diverse environments as a strength. Reporting "somewhat strong" or "a major strength," 92.7% of students report their ability to work cooperatively with diverse people as a strength, 87.1% report their ability to see the world from someone else's perspective as a strength, and 75.6% report their ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues as a strength. Students who characterize their political view as conservative reported lower than students who characterized themselves as liberal, though both groups still rated themselves relatively high. Figure 4 shows 89.6% of conservative students report their ability to work cooperatively with diverse people as "somewhat strong" or "a major strength," compared to 95.1% of liberal students; 82.0% of conservative students report their ability to see the world from someone else's perspective as "somewhat strong" or "a major strength," compared to 90.6% of liberal students; and 72.3% of conservative students report their ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues as "somewhat strong" or "a major strength," compared to 77.5% of liberal students.

Figure 4. Political View by Diversity Rating

CONCLUSION

Most students are thinking about various aspects of their social identity and maintain goals around influencing the larger society. However, though their identity is salient, and they have such goals, fewer students have taken coursework relevant to their social and political goals, and even less have participated in events to manifest their goals. Nonetheless, students continue to rate themselves high in their ability to navigate diverse environments. The disconnect between students' social and political goals, their involvement in activities around such goals, and their self-rating in the navigation of diverse environments is where institutions can begin to bridge gaps. When institutions better understand how their students think and navigate, they can begin to create environments best suited for their students' needs. Such environments can then foster positive social and academic outcomes, positively impacting student retention and completion.

REFERENCES

Felter, C. & Renwick, D. (2019, July). The U.S. Immigration Debate . *Council on Foreign Relations, Retrieved from https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-immigration-debate-0*

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is one of the premier research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, the institute is an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education.

HERI administers the national Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) surveys, including the CIRP Freshman Survey, Your First College Year survey, Diverse Learning Environments survey, College Senior Survey, Staff Climate Survey, and the triennial HERI Faculty Survey. CIRP has collected data on over 15 million college students from more than 1,900 colleges and universities since 1966.

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