2020 Diverse Learning Environments

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The Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey is designed to capture student perceptions of institutional climate, student learning outcomes (e.g., sense of belonging), and campus practices as experienced with faculty and staff. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has administered the DLE survey annually since 2011. The sample for the 2020 DLE survey includes 13,549 students from 16 different institutions that consist of 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities.

The administration window for the 2020 DLE survey spanned from early October 2019 through mid-May 2020, which means the results presented in this brief represent students' perceptions before and during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Noting students' experiences with on-campus activities, sociopolitical issues that impassion them, and efforts to reflect on their dispositions for growth should prompt institutions to center campus efforts around the student perspective.

Given the DLE survey's usefulness as an instrument to assess the climate for diversity on campus, HERI encourages participating institutions to cast a wide net when inviting students to participate in the survey, which includes inviting students at all class levels to participate. Participants in the 2019-2020 DLE administration covered the range in class standing: 18.9% freshman/first years; 19.4% sophomores/second years; 25.5% juniors/third years; 20.8% seniors/fourth years; 5.7% fifth-year seniors or greater; and 9.7% graduate/professional students. For 2-year college participants, about half (51.1%) completed 0-24 units, one-third (33.4%) completed 25-59 units, about one in 10 (9.7%) earned 60-89 units, and the remaining 5.8% completed 90 units or more upon participation in the 2020 DLE survey.

Activities and Events Focused on Diversity

Respondents to the 2020 DLE survey valued diversity and often communicated publicly their support for various causes. Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents (63.6%) noted that they attended events focused on diversity (e.g., presentations, performances, art exhibits, debates). Secondly, over half of DLE participants (60.3%) publicly communicated their opinion about a cause in the past (e.g., blog, email, petition). Roughly two out of five students (41.2%) participated in ongoing campus-organized discussions on racial/ethnic issues (e.g., intergroup dialogue), and more than one-third (35.7%) demonstrated for a cause in the past (e.g., boycott, rally, protest). Students' levels of engagement in diversity- and civic-minded activities vary considerably when disaggregating the data by students' social identities.

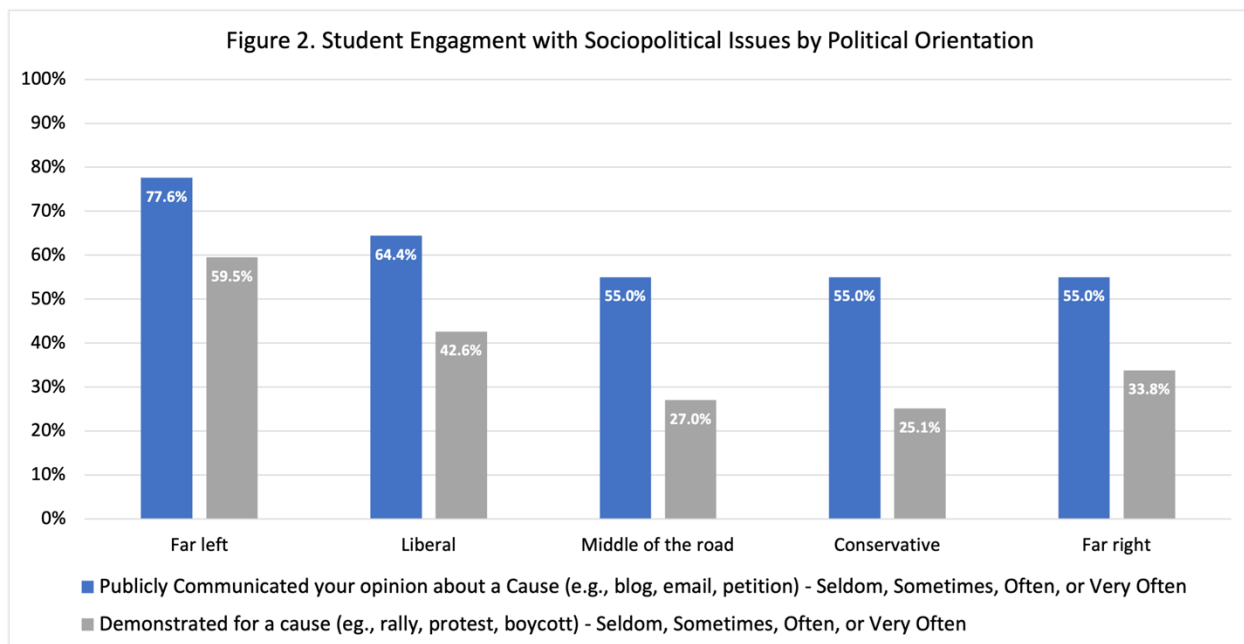**Campus-organized discussions on racial/ethnic issues**

Students in certain majors engage in more campus-organized discussions about race and ethnicity than others. Social science majors reported the highest participation compared to students in other fields, as almost half (48.5%) of respondents state that they have attended ongoing campus-organized discussions on racial/ethnic issues. By contrast, undecided students were least likely to participate in ongoing conversations about race and ethnicity (33.4%) (See Figure 1). Opportunities to engage in intergroup dialogue on topics such as race and ethnicity increase the likelihood for students to take a more productive approach with similar matters outside of on-campus, coordinated efforts (Hurtado, Alvarado, Guillermo-Wann, 2015). For students who participated in racial/ethnic discussions coordinated by staff and/or faculty in the past, 65.1% agree that they can help people from different groups use conflict constructively. Whereas for those who did not participate in campus-organized discussions, only 60.0% agree that they can help others engage in conflict constructively. Discussions around race and ethnicity remain a contentious issue. While students here are reporting participation in these discussions, if topics on the experiences of race and racism in the U.S. were raised during campus-organized dialogues, the unpacking of racial trauma did not reflect the current sociopolitical climate birthed from recent unjust state violence the world witnessed in the early summer of 2020.

Figure 1. Campus-organized Discussions on Racial/Ethnic issues by Major Field
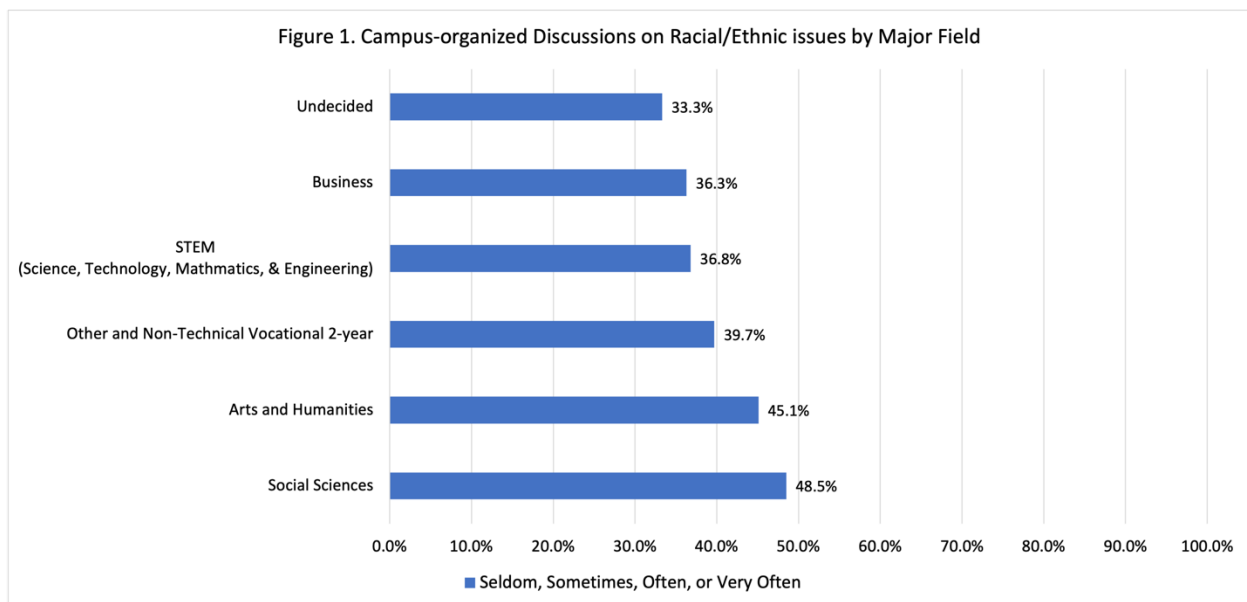
Student Engagement with Sociopolitical Issues by Political Orientation

Across all political orientations, students were more likely to publicly communicate their opinion about a cause, such as via a blog, email, or petition, than to demonstrate for a cause by means of a rally, protest, or boycott. Figure 2 shows how these two types of activism vary by political views. Students who identified as far left or liberal tend to communicate their opinions about

causes publicly or attend some form of rally, protest, or boycott more frequently than other students on the political spectrum (Figure 2). Students have been increasingly sharing their concerns on sociopolitical issues via social media (Gladwell, 2010) and have often made great strides to fulfill demands that began through organizing on web-based platforms. It could be that DLE respondents feel comfortable expressing initial concerns for a cause through blog content being shared online as an organizing strategy than physically attending a demonstration. There is far greater reach through web-based platforms like social media, with possibilities of sending information on causes one cares for across different time zones and geography (Gladwell, 2010). It is clear that DLE respondents still find some value through in-person demonstrating for causes since voicing concerns through online platforms cannot sufficiently replace the relationship-building crucial for participation in activist projects (Evans, 2013; Gladwell, 2010).

Figure 2. Student Engagment with Sociopolitical Issues by Political Orientation

	Far left	Liberal	Middle of the road	Conservative	Far right
Publicly Communicated your opinion about a Cause	77.6%	64.4%	55.0%	55.0%	55.0%
Demonstrated for a cause	59.5%	42.6%	27.0%	25.1%	33.8%

■ Publicly Communicated your opinion about a Cause (e.g., blog, email, petition) - Seldom, Sometimes, Often, or Very Often
■ Demonstrated for a cause (eg., rally, protest, boycott) - Seldom, Sometimes, Often, or Very Often

Whether it is campus-organized discussions on racial/ethnic issues or having said discussions outside of the classroom, students who identify as far-left or liberal frequent these events more often than "middle of the road," conservative, or far-right students. Despite these disparities, roughly two-thirds of each of these groups rate their ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues to be somewhat strong or a major strength (80.4% for far-left, 75.9% for liberal, 72.0% for middle-of-the-road, 71.8% for conservative, and 65.8% for far-right students).

Further analyses examine potential reasoning behind the less frequent involvement in racial/ethnic discussions, demonstrating, or communicating publicly about a cause for middle-of-the-road, far-right, or conservative students as compared to liberal or far-left students. At least 8 out of 10 from each group agree or strongly agree that their institutions encourage them to have a voice and share ideas openly (80.1% for far-right, 83.7% for conservative, 89.7% for middle-of-the-road, 92.0% for liberal, 81.2% for far-left). Just over half of all groups were satisfied or

very satisfied with the atmosphere for the expression of diverse beliefs. Less than half of far-right (42.5%), conservative (40.3%), or middle-of-the-road (49.6%) students reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the atmosphere for political differences. Liberal and far-left students, on the other hand, were more satisfied, as over half of each left-leaning group (57.7% and 53.6%, respectively) were satisfied or very satisfied with the atmosphere for political differences. About three-quarters of far-right students reported "never" to have experienced discrimination with respect to their political beliefs; roughly two-thirds of conservatives and over 80% of "middle of the road" students reported the same. Liberal and far-left students were similar to middle-of-the-road students, as roughly 80% of each left-leaning (83.8% and 80.0% respectively) group reported never to have experienced discrimination or been excluded from activities because of their political beliefs.

To summarize, conservative and far-right students are less satisfied with the atmosphere for political beliefs and report more instances of discrimination and exclusion due to their political views than any other group. A major reason students on the right may not feel comfortable engaging with others on such discourse is the perception of politically left institutions forcefully indoctrinating right-wing students to their philosophies (Gowen, Hemer, Reason, 2019). This leads to less involvement with campus politics through fears of being ridiculed and/or treated as hostile for not acquiescing to liberal values (Gowen et al., 2019; Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009).

Student critical reflections and actions

Respondents to the DLE 2020 noted how often they engaged with critical reflections and actions over the past year. When broken down by gender identity, there are notable findings of students' engagement in critical reflections and actions that warrant further examination. The CIRP factor for Critical Consciousness and Action was utilized to compare these differences between groups. CIRP factors are created using classical test theory; they help with benchmarking and allow institutions to examine how experiences compare to other student groups (see CIRP Constructs page). Two of the strongest loadings for the CIRP factor score were items that asked how often students: made efforts to educate others about social issues, along with critically evaluating their privilege on an issue regarding race/ethnicity, class, or immigration status (see CIRP Factor Technical Report). A one-way between-group analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of items under the CIRP Critical Consciousness and Action factor on gender identity. For this analysis, the student gender identity groups were genderqueer or gender non-conforming, women, and men. Results of the analysis of variance indicated significant (p<.001) variation in Critical Consciousness and Action across the three gender identities. Bonferroni Post Hoc analyses suggested significant mean differences between men (M=47.50, SD=10.31) and women (M=51.11, SD=9.54), and men and genderqueer or gender non-conforming students (M=50.77, SD=10.46), both significant at p < .001. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between gender identity groups was relatively small; the effect size (calculated using eta squared) was .03. Mean scores for women did not significantly differ from genderqueer or gender non-

conforming students. Figure 3 shows how women and genderqueer or gender non-conforming students are roughly 14% points greater in the "high" group for the CIRP Critical Consciousness and Action group score than Men.

Figure 3. CIRP Factor Critical Consciousnes and Action Factor Group Score Comparison with Gender Identity
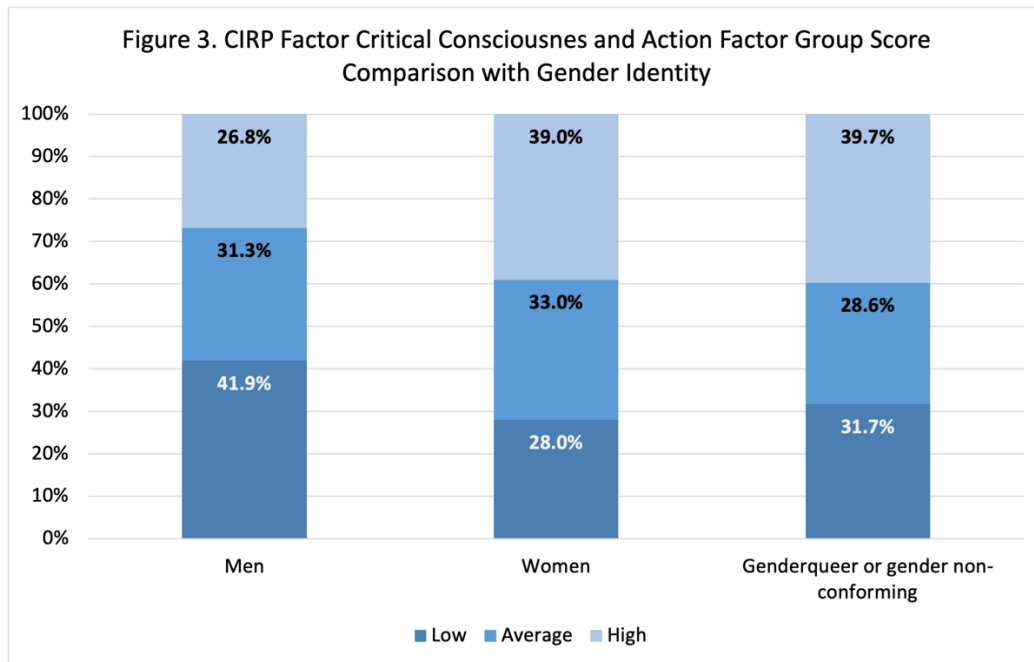
Essentially, male respondents did not engage in efforts that critically examined or challenged their own or other's biases at the same rate compared to women and genderqueer or gender non-conforming students. Higher mean scores for women and genderqueer or gender non-conforming students compared to men show that they are more concerned with addressing social inequities that perpetuate injustice, given the nature of the CIRP factor score items.
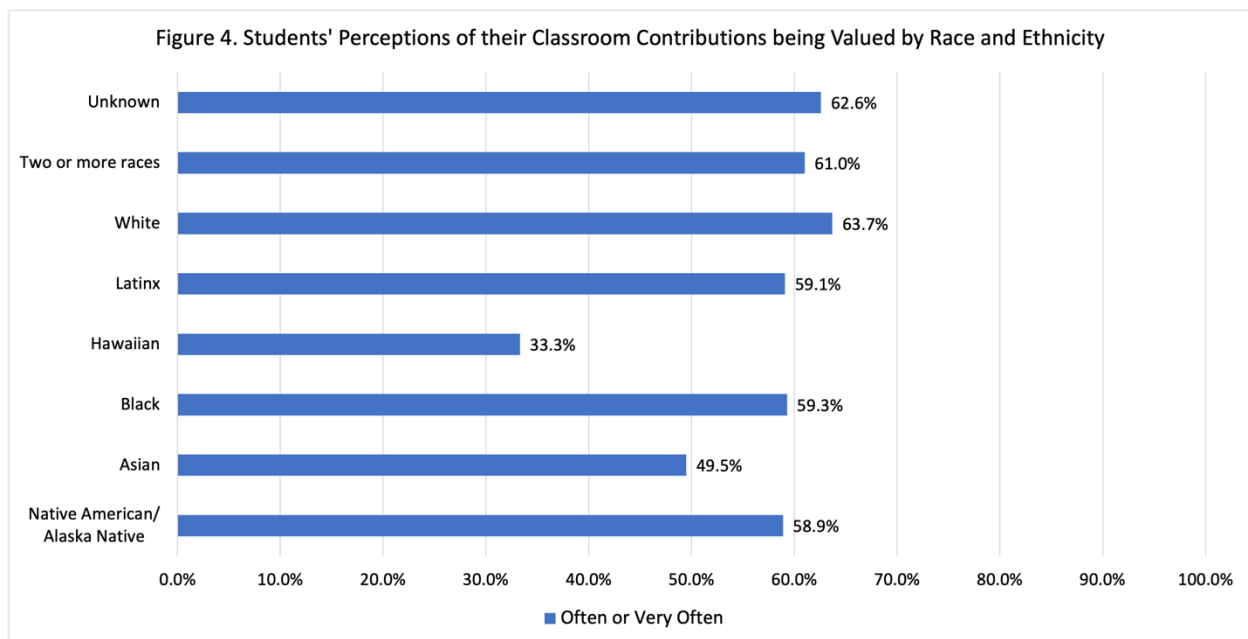
Men, cisgender-straight passing men, in particular, hold privileges that position them to have greater influence over multiple spheres within the U.S. (Johnston, 2016). Men being less affected by the negative ramifications of social inequities may be a reason why male DLE respondents (perhaps initially) do not engage in reflections that examine or challenge their own or others' biases as much as other groups do (Kehn & Ruthig, 2013; Richards et al., 2016). In contrast, women and genderqueer or gender non-conforming students who are more likely to be discriminated against must routinely advocate for themselves in light of the injustices they face. Additionally, experiences of being actively marginalized may position women and genderqueer or gender non-conforming identities to also hold moral rejections for other social inequities that intersect and go beyond their self-identified gender, leading to their allyship and support for other causes surrounding inequality within the U.S.
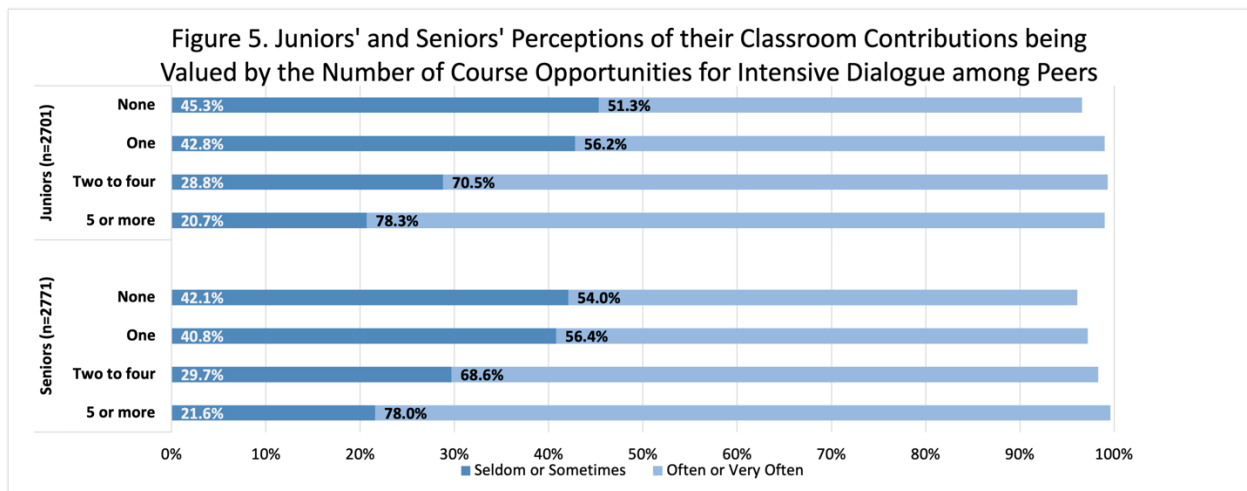
Classroom Climate

Classroom engagement is pivotal to college student development (Hurtado, Alvarado, Guillermo-Wann, 2015). Students' experiences, efforts, and perceptions about the classroom environment should inform administrators tasked with implementing curricular improvement across institutions. Although working hard to achieve academic goals is an admirable quality, students' perceptions of working harder than others to be perceived as good students may also be detrimental to their development. Over half of all students of color felt they needed to work harder than others to be perceived as good students. Nearly two-thirds of Black students (63.7%) endorsed this perception, as well as more than half of Native American (n=70) students (55.7%). The pattern persisted among other students of color, as a majority of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders (54.6%), Latinx students (53.6%), Asian students (51.3%), and students who selected "Other" race (50.0%) felt they needed to work harder than others to be perceived as a good student. By contrast, less than half of all multiracial students (44.4%) and just over one-third of White students (35.9%) shared this sentiment.

Academic Validation

As more than half of students of color felt the pressure of working hard to be perceived as a better student, similar patterns were found for perceptions of classroom contributions being valued by others. Over 50% of most students of color report to often or very often feel that their contributions were being valued in class by others (Figure 4). White students reported the highest perception of this type of validation at 63.7%.

Figure 4. Students' Perceptions of their Classroom Contributions being Valued by Race and Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Often or Very Often
Unknown	62.6%
Two or more races	61.0%
White	63.7%
Latinx	59.1%
Hawaiian	33.3%
Black	59.3%
Asian	49.5%
Native American/Alaska Native	58.9%

Students' perceptions of academic validation are linked with the amount of classroom engagement that occurs within their respective courses (Hurtado et al., 2015). More students of color not feeling as if others valued their contributions could result from limited opportunities in classes to engage in dialogue with other students. The 2020 DLE survey findings reveal that close to half of junior (44.1%) and over a third (38.5%) of senior respondents have yet to experience a course in which opportunities for intensive dialogue between students with different backgrounds and beliefs occur. By further examining descriptives from students, it would appear that being in classes where students are not provided with opportunities for discourse and critical reflexivity impacts future decisions about engaging in class. Juniors (n=2,701) and seniors (n=2,771) who enrolled in more courses that had opportunities to engage in intensive dialogue with peers also reported greater perceptions of their contributions being valued by others in the classroom (Figure 5). This pattern remained consistent regardless of institutional type. Whether students were enrolled at a two-year, four-year college or university, greater feelings toward their contributions being valued in the class went up for those who enrolled in more courses that involved intensive dialogue between students with different backgrounds and beliefs.

Figure 5. Juniors' and Seniors' Perceptions of their Classroom Contributions being Valued by the Number of Course Opportunities for Intensive Dialogue among Peers

Though findings here suggest the importance of intergroup dialogue amongst peers related to positive perceptions of their contributions for class discussions being valued, not many students across institution types are enrolled in courses that provide opportunities for intergroup dialogue amongst peers. Over half of (56.9%) students enrolled at two-year institutions that have completed 60 units or more, have yet to experience a course that offers opportunities for intensive dialogue with peers. At four-year institutions, over a third of seniors in four-year colleges (38.8%) and four-year universities (37.7%) have never enrolled in courses with opportunities for intensive dialogue among peers.

Conclusion

Findings highlighted in this research brief provide a window into what students have been experiencing on college campuses, along with what institutions should pay particular attention to. Perceptions of the classroom climate varied considerably by students' race or ethnicity. For instance, students of color are more likely to feel that they have to work harder to be perceived as good students than their white peers and are less likely to think others value their contributions in class. It also appears that creating spaces for intergroup dialogue may have positive implications toward the development of college students across racial, ethnic, and ideological backgrounds. For more information about the DLE survey, including the current survey instrument and details regarding registration and administration of the DLE survey, please visit our website: https://heri.ucla.edu/diverse-learning-environments-survey/.

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