2021 Diverse Learning Environments Survey

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The Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey is designed to capture campus practices, students' perceptions of institutional climate, and a variety of outcomes (e.g., habits of mind). This year marks the survey's 11th administration by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). The sample for the 2021 DLE survey includes 30,103 students across 5 universities, 29 four-year colleges, and 3 community colleges. This research brief explores students' levels of interaction across socioeconomic backgrounds, their ability to challenge derogatory remarks, and their sense of racial identity.

The DLE core survey includes a variety of questions about students' levels of engagement and interaction with peers. Additionally, institutions can choose to administer a number of optional modules, including the Intergroup Relations module which includes in-depth questions about the quality of students' interactions with their peers. Twenty-seven institutions opted to include this module for this year's administration. This brief report starts with an analysis of items found on the core DLE survey, followed by two stories that feature findings from the Intergroup Relations Module.

## INTERACTING ACROSS SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND

One question on the core DLE survey asks students how often in the past year they interacted with someone from a socioeconomic class different from their own (N=26,622). More than half (55.8%) of students *frequently* interacted with socioeconomically different peers. Nearly two in five (37.1%) students *occasionally* interacted with socioeconomically different peers, and an even smaller proportion (7.0%) did *not at all* interact with those peers. While most students interacted across socioeconomic backgrounds, these students were also

more likely to score higher on a set of academic/diversity-related factors.

Factor analyses were conducted to create measures that characterize a range of academic/diversity-related experiences and outcomes. For instance, the Critical Consciousness and Action factor is "A unified measure of how often students critically examine and challenge their own and others' biases" (HERI, 2019). This factor includes, but is not limited to, questions such as "How often in the past year did you: Make an effort to educate others about social issues; Recognize the biases that affect your own thinking; and Challenge others on issues of discrimination?" (HERI, 2019). Mean estimates were calculated for each factor across students' reported level of interaction with socioeconomically different peers where a score of 50 represents the national average, and 10 represents one standard deviation from the mean.

Figure 1 shows that students who *frequently* interacted with socioeconomically different peers tended to score above the national average on a variety of academic/diversity-related factors. Additionally, these students scored more than a whole standard deviation above those who did *not* interact with

Figure 1. Mean Scores of Academic/Diversity-related Factors by Frequency of Interaction with Socioecnomically Different Peers
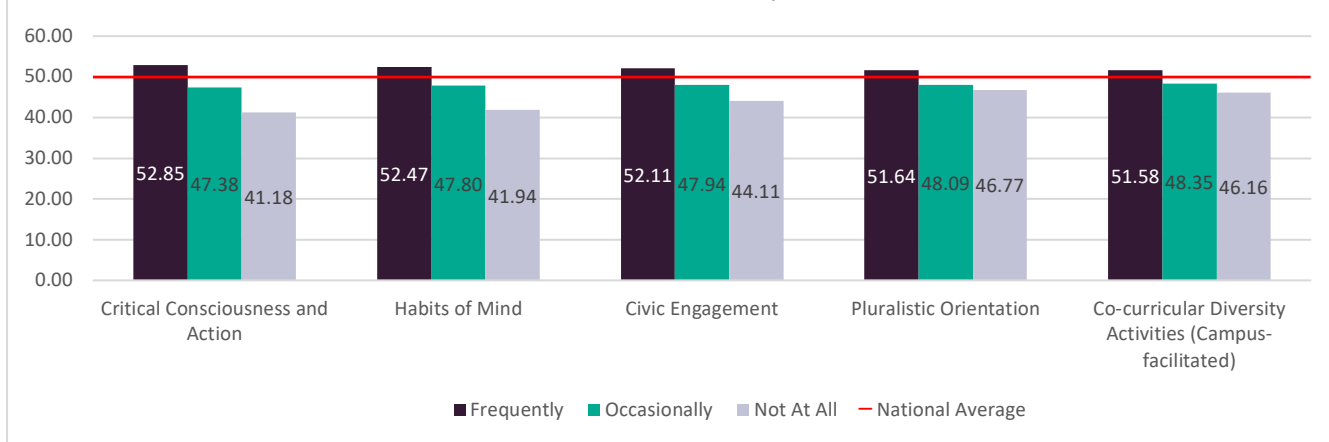
socioeconomically different peers *at all* on the Critical Consciousness and Action (52.85 versus 41.18) and Habits of Mind (52.47 versus 41.94) factors.

The Habits of Mind factor is "A unified measure of the behaviors and traits associated with academic success. These behaviors are seen as the foundation for lifelong learning" (HERI, 2019). This factor includes, but is not limited to, questions such as "How often in the past year did you: Evaluate the quality and reliability of information you received; Ask questions in class; and Accept mistakes as part of the learning process?" (HERI, 2019). Students who interacted *frequently* across socioeconomic background also scored approximately half a standard deviation above the national average on the Civic Engagement, Pluralistic Orientation, and Co-curricular Diversity Activities factors compared to those who did *not at all* interact with those peers. For more information about items in each factor, visit the HERI website. These findings suggest that interacting frequently across socioeconomic background could be related to a variety of outcomes that could speak to the diversity interests of colleges and universities.

Moreover, differences in interacting across socioeconomic backgrounds were more salient when controlling for political view and family income. Students were asked whether they identified as far left/liberal (45.0%), middle-of-the-road (37.2%), or far right/conservative (17.8%). When controlling for political orientation, far left/liberal (59.5%) students were slightly more likely than middle-of-the-road (53.4%) and far right/conservative (54.9%) students to *frequently* interact across socioeconomic background. Controlling for total family income provided more insight. There were similar proportions of students whose total family income was "Less than $40,000" (28.2%), "$40,000 to $74,999" (27.0%), and "$75,000 to $149,999" (29.9%). The fewest number of students came from families that made "150,000 or more" (14.8%). Moreover, far right/conservative students were more likely to report a total family income of $75,000 to $149,999 (34.3%, N=1,426) or $150,000 or more (21.6%, N= 899) compared to far left/liberal students (30.0%, N= 3,164; 14.1%, N=1,489).

Figure 2 shows that more than half of all students frequently interacted with socioeconomically different peers regardless of political orientation and family income. When controlling for political orientation and total family income, left-leaning (53.8%) students were similarly engaged compared to right-leaning (53.8%) students if they came from families that made less than $40,000. However, if students reported a total

family income of $40,000 or higher, then those who also identified as politically left-leaning were more even more likely to *frequently* interact across socioeconomic background than

Figure 2. Political Orientation by Total Family Income (% Frequently Interacted with Socioeconomically Different Peers)
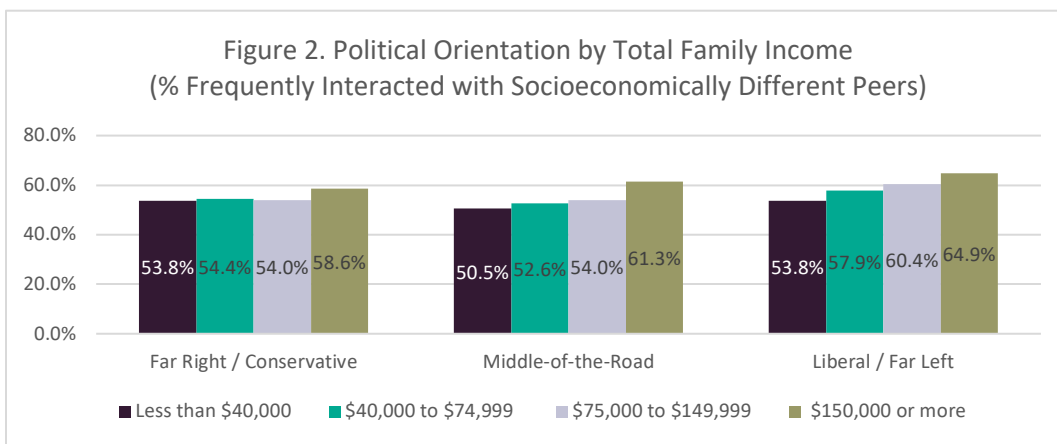
right-leaning and middle-of-the-road students. Figure 2 also shows that family income level was positively correlated with likelihood of interacting across socioeconomic background regardless of political orientation. These findings suggest that while left leaning students were more likely to interact across socioeconomic background, this likelihood was magnified when controlling for total family income, despite far right/conservative students typically reporting higher total family income.

CHALLENGING DEROGATORY REMARKS

The following stories feature select findings from the Intergroup Relations Module (N=14,078). Students' ability to engage across differences can be observed when exploring how they interact with others when witnessing or being involved in situations where questionable language is being used. When asked how frequently they challenged others on derogatory comments (N=16,287), half of students (49.3%) indicated they *often/very often* challenged these remarks. Two in five (41.7%) students reported *seldom/sometimes* challenging comments and approximately one in ten (9.0%) students said that they *never* challenged derogatory comments.

Situational contexts such as being the only person of their race/ethnic group at the time can influence students' willingness to challenge derogatory comments. For instance, the module also asked students if they had been in situations where they were the only person of their race/ethnic group (N=16,287). Almost one in five (17.7%) students were *often/very often* in these types of situations, followed by those who were *seldom/sometimes* (38.0%) and *never* (44.2%) in those types of situations. When looking at both the interactions and context of a situation, students seemed to behave differently. For example, three in five (59.1%) students who were *often/very often* the single person of their race in a situation had also *often/very often* challenged others on derogatory comments. If students were *seldom/sometimes* (45.1%) or *never* (49.0%) in

situations as the only person of their race in a situation, they were less likely to challenge derogatory comments *often/very often*. These findings suggest that students may behave differently based on the racial context that they are in.

Figure 3. Challenging Derogatory Comments by Race (% Often/Very Often in Situations as Single Person of Their Race)

Race	Often/very often challenged	Seldom/sometimes challenged	Never challenged
Multiracial (N=1,571)	65.5%	29.9%	4.6%
Hispanic (N=1,173)	64.7%	27.5%	7.8%
White (N=11,597)	61.7%	31.1%	7.3%
Black (N=610)	60.3%	34.9%	4.8%
Native American (N=83)	55.6%	22.2%	22.0%
Asian (N=1,115)	44.5%	42.8%	12.7%

■ Often/very often challenged derogatory comments　■ Seldom/sometimes challenged derogatory comments
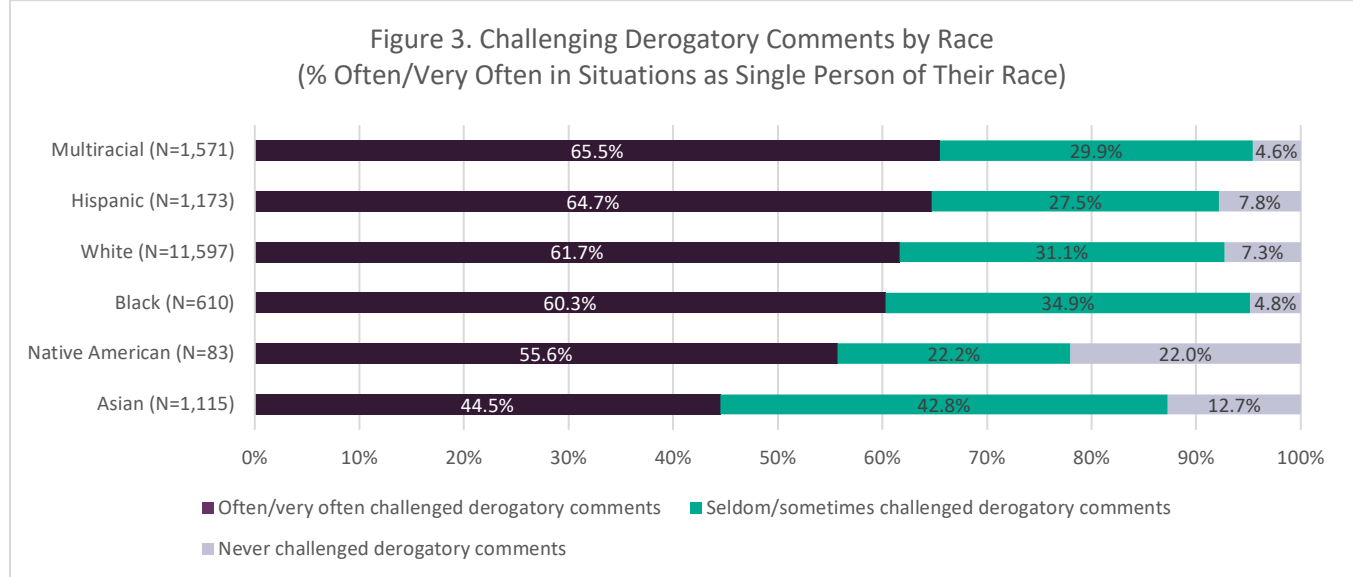■ Never challenged derogatory comments

Figure 3 shows, by race, the rates at which students who were *often/very often* in situations as the only person of their race had also challenged derogatory comments. Over half of Multiracial (65.5%), Hispanic (64.7%), White (61.7%,), Black (60.3%), and Native American (55.6%) students who were *often/very often* in situations as the single person of their race had also *often/very often* challenged derogatory comments. By contrast, less than half (44.5%) of Asian students in similar types of situations had also *often/very often* challenged derogatory comments. These findings suggest that while the racial context may influence the types of interactions students have, these influences may also differ by race.

There can be multiple reasons for students' varied experiences with challenging derogatory comments. Bystander effect or the presence of others could have a potential role in discouraging or leaving some students hesitant to disrupt derogatory comments. Some students may want to intervene but perhaps do not know how to challenge others when they use such language. Furthermore, students may have concerns about their safety when speaking up. Administrators should specifically consider the potential psychological toll and physical vulnerabilities of the students of color who are frequently in situations where they are the only person of their race/ethnic group, yet still demonstrate a strong willingness to challenge derogatory remarks when they are alone. Moreover, campuses should reflect on the institution-specific resources and programming that would equip all community members, and particularly those in the majority group, with the motivation and tools to disrupt verbal acts of assault and derogatory comments.

STUDENTS' SENSE OF THEIR RACIAL IDENTITY

Because students from different racial backgrounds may react differently to derogatory comments in different contexts, it is helpful to explore how they may feel about their own sense of racial/ethnic identity. According to findings from the Intergroup Relations Module (N=16,615), nearly one in four (27.0%) students *strongly agreed* that they have a clear sense of their racial/ethnic background and what it means for them. About three in five (61.2%) students *agreed* with the statement, whereas one in ten (9.8%) students *disagreed*. An even smaller proportion of students *strongly disagreed* (2.0%). When broken down by race, Black students were the most likely to *strongly agree* with the statement (52.1%), followed by Native American/Alaska Native (41.9%), Hispanic (40.2%), Multiracial (31.6%), Asian (29.8%), and White (23.2%) students. Accordingly, the proportions were reversed for those who only *agreed* with the statement. That is, White students were the most likely to only *agree* with the statement, and so forth. These findings suggest that while most students agreed that they have a clear sense of their racial/ethnic background, there was a contrasting distinction across race between those who only *agreed* and *strongly agreed*.

For example, students who *strongly agreed* with having a clear sense of their racial/ethnic background were also more likely to interact with students from different racial backgrounds than those who only *agreed* with the statement. In the Intergroup Relations Module (N=16,477), students were asked whether they *never* (18.1%), *seldom/sometimes* (46.0%), or *often/very often* (35.9%) had meaningful and honest discussions about race/ethnic relations outside of class with students from a different racial/ethnic background than their own. Nearly one in two (48.2%) students who *strongly agreed* versus one in three (31.9%) students who only *agreed* that they have a clear sense of their racial background also reported that they *often/very often* had meaningful and honest discussions

about race/ethnic relations outside of class with a student from a different racial background. The difference between students who *strongly agreed* and only *agreed* that they have a clear sense of their racial background was not as strong for those who *seldom/sometimes* (34.7% versus 50.3%) or *never* (17.1% versus 17.8%) had honest and meaningful discussions about race relations across race. These findings suggest that students who *strongly agreed* that they have a clear sense of their racial/ethnic background were distinctly more likely to interact more often with diverse students than those who only *agreed*. It could also be the case that students who interacted with racially different peers led them to establish a stronger sense of their own racial identity.
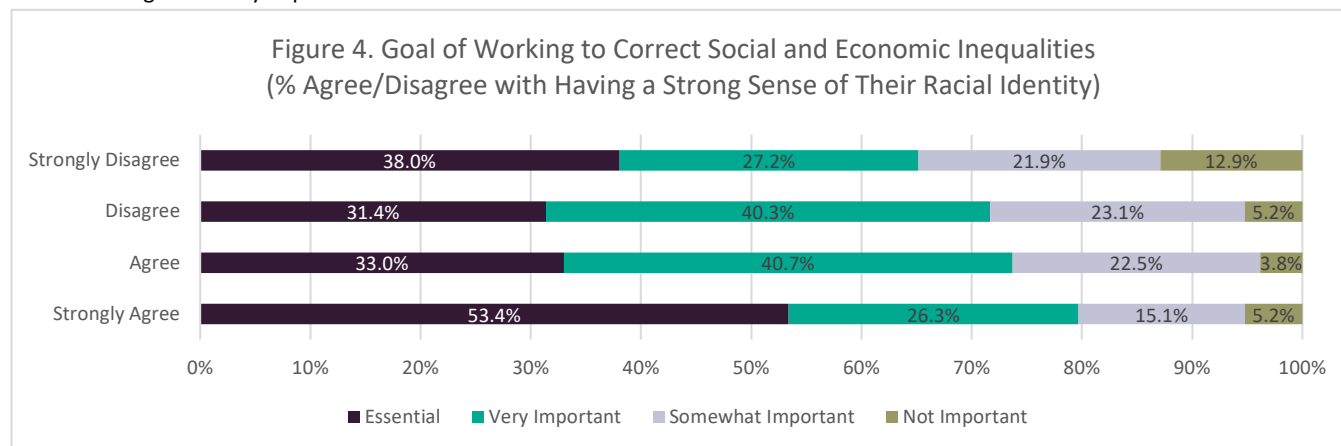
Students who *strongly agreed* that they have a clear sense of their racial background were slightly more likely than those who only *agreed* with that statement to consider the goal of addressing social and economic inequality as more essential, too. Students were asked to consider whether their goal of working to correct social and economic inequalities was *not important* (4.5%), *somewhat important* (20.6%), *very important* (36.5%), or *essential* (38.5%). While students had varying levels of considering this goal as important, students having a strong sense of their racial background were slightly more likely to consider this goal as very important or essential.

CONCLUSION

As colleges and universities continue striving toward a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, administrators may consider the varied experiences of all their students. Promoting opportunities for students to interact with individuals who are different from them may serve as one strategy to foster understanding across various social identities. However, urging students to engage across differences is not enough to address the potential risks that minoritized students face when they are the only person of their race in any given situation. Moreover, we urge individuals to reflect on and expand their current definitions of diversity in the pursuit of social justice-oriented outcomes. Members of the campus community must continue engaging in thoughtful dialogue while actively working to improve campus environments for the benefit of all students, and particularly students from marginalized backgrounds.

References

Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). (2019). Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) Survey-Appendix. Retrieved from https://heri.ucla.edu/cirp-constructs/.

Figure 4. Goal of Working to Correct Social and Economic Inequalities (% Agree/Disagree with Having a Strong Sense of Their Racial Identity)

	Essential	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Strongly Disagree	38.0%	27.2%	21.9%	12.9%
Disagree	31.4%	40.3%	23.1%	5.2%
Agree	33.0%	40.7%	22.5%	3.8%
Strongly Agree	53.4%	26.3%	15.1%	5.2%

For instance, Figure 4 shows that four of five (79.7%) students who *strongly agreed* versus three in four (73.7%) students who only *agreed* that they have a clear sense of their racial background considered their goal of working to correct social and economic inequalities as *very important* or *essential*. If students disagreed with having a strong sense of their racial background, then their goal of working to correct social and economic inequalities tended to be slightly less important, too, compared to those who had *strongly agreed* about their sense of identity. These findings highlight a slight difference between students who *strongly agreed* and only *agreed* that they have a clear sense of their racial background, which suggests that having a stronger sense of racial identity is only marginally related to considering the goal of working to correct social and economic inequality as *very important* or *essential*.