

Students' Views of Connectedness in a College of Education with Respect to Climate and Diversity

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Abstract: *The increased commitment to recruit and retain diverse students and faculty among higher education institutions calls for an examination of current and future needs with respect to campus climate and diversity. This qualitative study explored students' perceptions of connectedness with respect to the climate in relation to diversity in a College of Education of a public university in the Western US. Two main categories were identified: the first is based on comments that indicated a degree of connectedness in the college; the second involved comments that centered on a sense of disconnection. Within both categories, two distinct themes were revealed. The first incorporates (a) the participants' voiced feelings about connection/disconnection, and the second refers to (b) the context of reception that the participants described, which includes spaces and people in the college. A discussion of these findings is provided, along with conclusions and recommendations related to policy, practice, and research.*

Keywords: recruitment, retention, college, university, climate, diversity, connectedness, education

With increased commitment to recruitment and retention of diverse students and faculty among higher education institutions, it has become more critical than ever to examine current and future needs with respect to campus climate and diversity. Within a College of Education, in particular, educational programs (i.e., teaching, counseling, leadership, etc.) have a central role in enhancing prospective educators' skills and abilities to promote educational equity for all individuals. Students' voices and perspectives on their sense of connectedness provide one lens for examining this higher education milieu. A greater understanding of students' views of connectedness in a college of education can be used to establish institutional policies, enhance practices, and address research-based needs related to climate and diversity. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of connectedness with respect to the climate in relation to diversity in a College of Education of a public university in the Western U.S.

Theoretical Framework

Despite the proliferation of studies that focus on diversity in colleges and universities, the meaning of the term escapes one-dimensional definitions. Discourses on diversity range from recruitment and retention of students and from faculty to academic and social aspects of college. Studies also differ on methodological approach and scope. Some researchers utilize national data through statistical means (Kugelmass & Ready, 2011), while others attend to the experiences of focal groups of students through qualitative approaches, such as indigeneity (Buckmiller, 2010) or religion (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Some studies focus on specific aspects of diversity (e.g.,

race, class, gender, ability, and religion), whereas others attend to more holistic conceptions. All these approaches greatly enhance our understanding of complex intersections of diversity and their impact on college life as a whole. Nevertheless, most researchers propose that contextual characteristics in various institutions, often referred to as “climate,” shape not only the various conceptions of diversity but also their meaning in day-to-day life (Tynes, Rose, & Markoe, 2013). It has been proposed that when the climate is considered supportive and cooperative, students feel connected, develop relationships, and enjoy their time in college (Sollitto, Jonson, & Myers, 2013). Indeed, learning opportunities can increase through social interactions and collaborative functioning when the notion of social connectedness is present (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). Moreover, diversified environments, interactional diversity, and diversity within course materials have all been identified as having positive effects on all students, including various educational outcomes (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Essentially, these and other opportunities for connectedness can positively contribute to organizational and classroom “assimilation” in college (Sollitto et al., 2013, p. 321) that could, in turn, support efforts toward recruitment and retention of diverse individuals within higher education.

Methods

Although our larger study included both quantitative and qualitative data sources, for this presentation we only focused on comments students provided for open-ended questions on an online survey. The first three questions related to curricular material, pedagogy, and interactions at the college. The next question invited participants to add comments about the college climate, and the last one asked them to talk about ways in which they felt included/excluded in the college. We found that the responses to the last two questions are especially relevant to the concept of connectedness. Thus, our study relied more heavily on those.

Upon downloading the survey comments, two of the researchers coded the responses independently using insights from critical discourse analysis. Rogers (2004) writes that the aim of such analysis is to “uncover power relationships and demonstrate inequities embedded in society” (p. 3) by looking at not only what is stated but also what is missing. The two researchers then met to compare their findings. They engaged in an exchange about the larger categories they had identified, along with the sub-themes. The coders agreed on the two major categories. Both saw the binary views that will be discussed below. The sub-themes that supported each of the themes were co-constructed. Most comments fit clearly into one of the two categories (with a few minor exceptions).

Results

Two main categories were identified during data analysis. The first is based on comments that indicated a *degree of connectedness in the college*. The second involved comments that centered on a *sense of disconnection*. Within both categories, two distinct themes were identified. The first incorporates the participants’ voiced feelings about connection/disconnection and the second refers to the context of reception that the participants described, which includes both spaces and people in the college.

In relation to expressions of *connectedness*, participants’ words described a general feeling of being “respected” and “welcomed” at the college. These two words were repeated several times. Further, expressions of connectedness were supported by similar sentiments of feeling “supported,” “comfortable, and “involved.” One student went as far as describing his/her experiences as being a member of a family. The spaces that facilitated such feelings of connectedness included specific classes in diversity, opportunities to collaborate with others

through class discussions, email communications with professors, and so on, confirming prior findings (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). In terms of how the students described people who seemed to enhance their feelings of belonging, they referred to individuals who were “approachable,” “available,” “friendly,” “open,” “helpful,” “sensitive,” “encouraging,” and “passionate.”

In contrast to the general positive notions that were expressed in some of the comments, others revealed a different perspective: that of feeling *disconnected*. Many participants discussed specific aspects of their and others’ identities that resulted to feelings of exclusion. They referred to race, socio-economic status (SES), religion, language, gender, international status, family status, age, and ability. Race and SES were the most frequently brought up. In addition, numerous comments referred to the lack of diversity at the college and a perceived infusion of middle-class, White cultural frameworks in course material and interactions. Expressing a contrasting view to the one described in the first category, the participants referred to class discussions, material and advising practices that were not inclusive. In the social space of their interactions with their peers, they also described the barriers that pre-existing cliques created for their social integration. Instances of specific people’s (i.e., professors, advisors) exclusionary practices were offered.

Through starkly oppositional messages, excerpts of which will be shared at the presentation, the findings of this study indicated that while a sense of connectedness can facilitate a healthy learning environment for students (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009; Sollitto et al., 2013), feeling disconnected can hamper students’ academic and social integration. As was noted previously, most comments fit clearly into one of the two categories that demonstrate a complex social environment, in which connectedness was the experience of some, but not all. Not surprisingly, those who felt excluded were often members of underrepresented groups.

Conclusion/Recommendations

In consideration of these findings, it is important to support and create policies for ongoing structured attention to the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and students in colleges along with the implementation of diversity training for faculty. However, an extension beyond the policies remains critical; specifically, there must be a transfer of these policy initiatives to practice coupled with sustained attention to all elements of academic and social interactions guided by strong leadership. Furthermore, evaluation of both policy and practice through both quantitative and qualitative research studies can lead to better understanding of ongoing needs and to create a cycle of continuous improvement that can foster recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and students.

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