

EQUITY ASSESSMENT EXCERPTS

ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

**CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY**
(309) 438-8627

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RACIAL CLIMATE

MORRIS, NEAL

Introduction and Purpose

Perceptions of whether or not a campus is hospitable to minorities differ to an important extent between minority and white students (Loo and Rolison, 1986). Surveys at predominantly white campuses repeatedly indicate the disparity between impressions by minority and majority students of similar circumstances, which may lead to misconceptions of minority students' behaviors. Even though no incidents of overt racism are recorded on a campus, an inhospitable climate could exist, affecting minority students' ability to cope and their determination to stay.

During summer and fall of 1988, a survey of State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) by officials of the New Jersey Department of Higher Education was conducted with the intent of determining to some degree the magnitude of human relations initiative underway in various states. Responses of SHEEOs suggested a tendency to view incidents or occurrences of racial/ethnic prejudice as isolated or rare events. At least 10 of the executive officers from as many states made no mention of the incidents that had been previously identified in the NIAPV study. A 1989 study of SHEEOs by the American Council on Education showed that 80% of the respondents characterized racial/ethnic tensions on their campuses as "low." However, 40% indicated that they perceived racial/ethnic tensions or campus racial climate to be poor or no better than fair for minority students (Marcus & Yavorsky, 1989).

The minority community demands for a greater share of the resources of the institution for their education in the 1960s, coupled with the financial crisis experienced by institutions beginning in the 1970s, has had an adverse impact on the higher education community. In addition, reduction in the availability of certain types of student financial aid (grant-aid), demand by the business community for a better trained potential employee pool, and publicity of campus racial incidents in the news media are all contributors to a worsening perception by students of college campus environment. Furthermore, enforcement of civil rights legislation, and the willingness of white college officials and faculty at colleges and universities around the nation to grant tenure to their mediocre white peers are related to the negative climate that exist on many college campuses today. The combination of these variables has resulted in a trend toward an insensitive and hostile campus environment for minority students in the higher education community (Hollander, 1988).

In a study conducted by Oteri and Malaney (1990), regarding awareness of recent publicity about racial incidents of all minorities and a random sample of non-minority students who were admitted but chose not to attend the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, similarities and differences between the two groups were found. Minority and non-minority students were found to be more aware of racial incidents that had occurred than out-of-state students. Minority students also indicated to a greater extent than non-minority students that their decisions not to attend the university were influenced by the publicity of racial incidents. African American students, more than any other group, indicated racial climate was an important reason for not choosing to attend the institution. Consistent with literature on college choice, the academic reputation of the institution was indicated by all students to be the most important reason for choosing to attend Amherst. The results of the study suggested that the campus racial climate, as defined via racial incidents, campus response, and resulting publicity, profoundly influenced the decisions of prospective and continuing African American students.

Procedure

A random sample of undergraduate students from 11 predominantly white Illinois universities was selected for study. The instrument used in the study was developed in the Center for Higher Education at Illinois State University. The purpose of the survey is to collect data on campus climate as perceived by undergraduate students. Campus climate consist of 3 major components. They are the: academic, social and racial climates. For the purpose of developing this report only the racial climate results are used.

Of the approximately 33,405 questionnaires given to undergraduate students, 10,615 completed surveys were returned resulting in a response rate of 31 percent. Minority students comprised approximately 18% of the respondents, and 80% were white or majority students. The distribution by racial group was 3.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 9.8% Black (Non-Hispanic), 3.9% Hispanic, 81.6% White (Non-Hispanic), and .9% Other.

Approximately 8% of the undergraduate students surveyed were from private institutions, and 92% from public institutions. Approximately 88% of the students respondents were enrolled full-time, and 12% were enrolled part-time. Approximately 34% were male, and 66% female.

The undergraduate student distribution by age, citizenship status, class level, and attendance pattern for the sample. The mean age of the respondents was 22.41 years. The mean age for minority respondents was 24.68, and the mean for white respondents was 21.91.

Racial Climate Items 1 through 11 consisted of items related on a semantic-differential scaling system. Opposite-paired adjectives on a 7-point semantic-differential scale were used to measure student perceptions of campus racial environment. The semantic differential is a combination of controlled association and scaling procedures. The reason for using a scale inserted between a pair of terms is, so that the subject can indicate both the direction and the intensity of his judgment. Items RC1 to RC11 were recoded in order to group positive adjectives at the lower end of the scale.

Cronbach's Alpha reliability procedure was used to test the internal consistency of the Spring 1990 undergraduate student inventory. The reliability coefficient for Racial Climate was (.85). The means and standard deviations relative to Racial Climate items 1 to 11 are shown in Table 1 as perceived by students groups.

The greatest agreement among all students regarding racial climate was on the Item RC2, "Friendly to Hostile," M = 4.49, SD = 1.49. Based on the means, minority students and white students agreed on Item RC2. Students from all groups viewed the campuses as having a "hostile" racial climate. Most students participating in this study perceived their campuses racial environment as worsening, RC10, "Worsening to Improving," M = 4.26, SD = 1.40, and tense (item RC1), "Tense to Relaxed," M = 4.22, SD = 1.60. These perceptions were generally shared by all student groups. The perceptions by students about campus racial climate pertaining to Items RC4, "Socially Separated to Socially Integrated," M = 3.41, SD = 1.69 and Item RC7, "Exclusive to Inclusive," M = 3.51, SD = 1.77; M = 3.84, SD = 1.46; and M = 3.38, SD = 1.61; M = 3.78, SD = 1.38, respectively.

Table 1				Table 2				Table 3			
Means and Standard Deviations for Survey Items Related to Perceptions by All Students About the Racial Climate				Means and Standard Deviations for Survey Items Related to Perceptions by White Students About the Racial Climate				Means and Standard Deviations for Survey Items Related to Perceptions by Minority Students About the Racial Climate			
V	M	SD	N	V	M	SD	N	V	M	SD	N
RC1	4.22	1.60	10423	RC1	4.18	1.57	8492	RC1	4.43	1.68	1804
RC2	4.49	1.48	10419	RC2	4.49	1.46	8491	RC2	4.47	1.59	1803
RC3	3.95	1.46	10395	RC3	3.93	1.42	8487	RC3	4.02	1.60	1801
RC4	3.41	1.69	10421	RC4	3.38	1.67	8487	RC4	3.51	1.77	1805
RC5	4.17	1.43	10399	RC5	4.16	1.40	8469	RC5	4.23	1.53	1802
RC6	3.99	1.53	10399	RC6	4.01	1.50	8477	RC6	3.87	1.65	1794
RC7	3.79	1.40	10321	RC7	3.78	1.38	8410	RC7	3.84	1.46	1783
RC8	4.21	1.41	10394	RC8	4.22	1.39	8469	RC8	4.15	1.53	1798
RC9	4.01	1.42	10361	RC9	4.02	1.38	8440	RC9	3.99	1.53	1793
RC10	4.26	1.40	10376	RC10	4.27	1.37	8454	RC10	4.20	1.52	1794
RC11	4.15	1.53	10388	RC11	4.15	1.51	8468	RC11	4.17	1.61	1793

Footnote: V = Variable, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, and N = Sample Size

Findings

The perceptions of students about campus racial climate seem to indicate that separate social systems drawn along racial lines is the rule, not the exception. Furthermore, students participating in this study viewed their campuses as competitive, hostile, tense, and worsening with respect to racial climate. However, students did concur that the racial climate on their campuses was socially integrated and inclusive. This would seem to suggest that some racial tension does exist at the campuses participating in the study. However, the racial climate conditions on the campuses of the participating institutions possibly is being addressed in some type of outreach activity/programming. The fact that students view the racial climate as, hostile, tense, and worsening is an indication that more outreach is needed.

One striking aspect of the study was that the variable "racial climate" was significantly related to all five demographic variables (gender, race, parent income, enrollment status, and ACT composite score). The variable "racial climate" was the only college campus environmental component for which this result occurred. Other campus climate components examined in the larger study included both the academic and social climates. However, the amount of variance explained by the variable set was small (2 percent). This result would tend to suggest that the variable set used in this study was inconclusive and other variables should be included with the variable set for the purpose of predicting student perceptions of campus racial climate.

Project Staff: Charles E. Morris, Director Ira L. Neal, Associate Director

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