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# Defining diversity: An exploration of the perceptions of first semester students at a mid-sized midwestern institution

Angela Hobkirk

*Eastern Illinois University*

This research is a product of the graduate program in [Counseling and Student Development](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

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Defining Diversity: An Exploration of the Perceptions of First

Semester Students at a Mid-Sized Midwestern Institution

(TITLE)

BY

Angela Hobkirk

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2009

YEAR

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THESIS DIRECTOR

May 5, 2009  
DATE

Ru Ru  
DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL HEAD

DEFINING DIVERSITY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST  
SEMESTER STUDENTS AT A MID-SIZED MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Angela Hobkirk

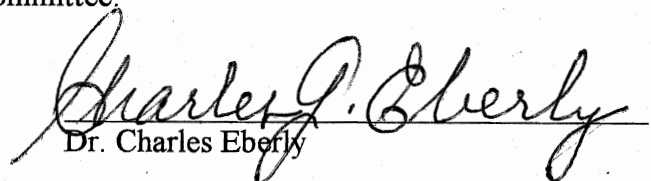
A Thesis


Submitted to the Department of Counseling and Student Development  
of Eastern Illinois University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

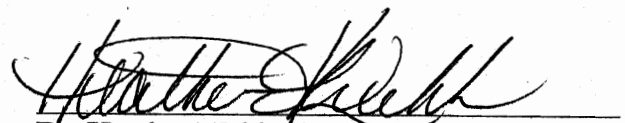
MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2009

Committee:

  
Dr. Charles Eberly

  
Dr. Reed Benedict

  
Dr. Heather Webb

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## Abstract

The present study is a qualitative exploration of how first semester college students operationalize the term *diversity* and whether or not they believed their university was successful in creating an environment supportive of *diversity*. Previous research in this area focused primarily on how to train faculty to teach diversity related issues within their classrooms; yet there has been limited research about student conceptions of *diversity*. While scholars and practitioners research multiculturalism, the effectiveness of diversity awareness programs, the effectiveness of diversity training programs, and other related ideas, there seems to be a gap in the literature in terms of the student perspective on the concept of *diversity*. A qualitative study was conducted using three focus groups and one interview following a semi-structured protocol. Focus groups and the individual interview were electronically recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed for emerging themes. Eight themes were identified, including lack of understanding and confidence in one's own perceptions, Catholicism not perceived as diverse, diversity is difference, diversity is "the other", diversity is race, diversity is best learned about through experience, fear of mixing, and the institution can only do so much.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the members of my committee for the support and encouragement they provided me when I was frustrated, felt misdirected, or was unable to see “the light at the end of the tunnel.” I would especially like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Charles Eberly, for pushing me to look at my work through new lenses as I learned how to be a qualitative researcher. Thank you for the many hours you spent reading, editing, re-reading, and re-editing my work. I cannot fully express how grateful I am for the feedback and continued guidance I received while working on this project. To my other committee members, Dr. Reed Benedict, who left his door open for me, and Dr. Heather Webb, who joined the team last minute and helped to push and encourage me to the end, thank you.

To my research methods professor in my undergraduate sociology course work, Dr. Rachel Kraus, thank you for helping to inspire the line of inquiry for this project. You helped me to hone in on the areas I was most fascinated with, and you helped me to realize this was not an unachievable goal.

To my peers and colleagues, thank you. You have been a solid support system for me throughout this process, and you have helped to motivate me on the days I wanted to give up. Thank you for supporting me and helping to convince me that I had not embarked upon this journey both alone and in vain.

Finally, to my family—thank you. Throughout my life, you have always pushed me to do more and be more than I could ever imagine. You believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself, and I thank you for that. To my parents, Michael and Ellen, you have always been my biggest role models, and I couldn’t have asked for a better example of

what hard work and constant love can achieve. You inspire me to work harder and be open to the endless possibilities in life on a daily basis, and I thank you for that.



## Dedication

This study is dedicated to all the first year students trying to figure out who they are, what they believe, and what mark they want to leave on this world.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how first semester university students operationalize the word *diversity*. Every day people are bombarded with messages from educational, social, and political institutions telling them they live in a 'diverse' world; 'diversity' is a thing of value; and they should constantly be striving to better understand and accept 'diversity' in their everyday lives. The term, *diversity*, appears within many different contexts, yet in none of those contexts is the term itself fully defined. When someone hears or reads *diversity*, that individual understands the meaning of this word based on contextual clues in the other person's speech and/or the environment in which the word was stated or written. This use of contextual clues is similar to the way many words are learned and understood (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985).

In order to serve students better, it is imperative that university personnel understand the ways students process and understand the world around them. Understanding how students view *diversity* is part of this mission. By comprehending ways in which students view *diversity*, university personnel will be able to provide better environmental and developmental resources as students adjust to university life and continue in their developmental processes.

Much of the research in this area has focused on how to train faculty to teach diversity related issues within their classrooms; yet there has been limited research about student conceptions of *diversity*. While scholars and practitioners research multiculturalism, the effectiveness of diversity awareness programs, the effectiveness of diversity training programs, and other related ideas, there seems to be a gap in the

literature in terms of the student perspective on the concept of *diversity*. Abersson (2007) argued that in a society where institutions of higher learning are focusing more heavily than ever before on teaching students to become accepting of diversity in this increasingly global society, university stakeholders need to also understand how such experiences are impacting student populations.

### *Research Questions*

Two research questions were developed for the present study.

- 1) What does the term 'diversity' mean to students enrolled in their first-semester of college?
- 2) Do first-semester university students believe their university is successful in creating an environment supportive of 'diversity'?

### *Significance of the Study*

Literature surrounding topics of diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice and related issues is bountiful; however, while searching through this literature, the researcher found a gap in terms of the student perceptions and perspectives on this and related topics. The goal of this research will help to fill this void and provide students with a voice in the professional literature. The outcome of this research may possibly help educators and student affairs practitioners to better understand the student voice as they work to facilitate programs, offer services, and create and foster inclusive environments.

### *Overview of the Study*

The purpose of the present study is to explore how first semester university students at a mid-sized Midwestern university make substantive meaning from use of the word 'diversity'. If an objective of liberal education is to open minds to new ideas and

ways of experiencing the world, and 'diversity' is lifted up as an ideal of post-modern cultural virtue, student affairs educators need to understand what entering students 'know' about diversity from prior exposure in order to seamlessly expand upon that knowledge in a manner that facilitates open inquiry. Chapter II will contain a review of literature on diversity issues. Chapter III will introduce the qualitative methodology utilized in the present study. Chapter IV will be a presentation of the findings of the study. Chapter V will include a discussion of the results and conclusions drawn, and offer recommendations for professional practice and further research in this area.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

Diversity research has encompassed many topics. To understand the rationale and goals for this study, it is necessary to first explore literature surrounding current social conceptions of diversity and student perceptions of diversity.

Diversity has been given many definitions within the literature. Pidot (2006) defined diversity in terms of race. Higbee, Siaka, and Bruch (2007) defined diversity as inclusive of multiple “social identities related to race, ethnicity, culture, home language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, and disability” (p. 7). Clarke and Drudy (2006) argued that the scope of the definition of diversity is dependent upon the groups chosen for inclusion and the groups specifically identified for exclusion. So what are possible groups to include? In addition, what does this group inclusion decision making process look like?

Research into the ways college students define diversity in itself has been limited. Brunner (2006) conducted a qualitative study of how students defined diversity and whether or not they believed their institution was successful in its attempts to create a diverse learning environment. Data were included from eight focus groups containing a total of 48 undergraduate students who were all students in the communications program at a large Southeastern university. Focus groups were conducted until data saturation was complete. Brunner placed minority and non-minority students in separate focus groups because race was an observable characteristic (Allen, 1995; Levine, 1991), and current literature suggested that individuals within different racial and ethnic groups tend to define diversity differently. Brunner was able to identify the following reoccurring



themes during the data coding and analysis process: diversity leads to valuable interactions, diversity is hard to define, acceptance and hatred are learned, the university is working to make a more diverse environment, campus diversity can be seen but not felt, self-segregation halts the progress of diversity efforts, and the magic to creating diverse communities is in the mixing.

Over the years, the United States Supreme Court reached many very important decisions that affect the way universities are able to create these diverse communities. In *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the United States Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that the use of quota systems in admission processes was unconstitutional because since minority applicants were only judged among one another for 16 of the 100 available seats and not against non-minority applicants, the non-minority applicants were being discriminated against. Twenty-five years would pass before the courts made another ruling related to the consideration of race in admissions processes. In *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), the United States Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that the law school at the University of Michigan was allowed to take race into consideration in their admission processes. In the majority opinion authored by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the court stated that the United States Constitution "does not prohibit the law school's narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body." That same year in another case involving admissions processes at the University of Michigan, *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003), the United States Supreme Court ruled 6-3 the use of point systems in which racial minority groups are given more points than non-minority groups toward admission based solely on their minority status was unconstitutional. The majority

opinion authored by Chief Justice Rehnquist stated that the admissions policy was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment because “the University's use of race in its current freshman admissions policy is not narrowly tailored to achieve respondents' asserted compelling interest in diversity.”

The need for diversity education initiatives in various courses of study has been discussed at great length in the literature. Several scholars agreed that future physicians need to have a strong awareness of cultural diversity to be sensitive and effective medical practitioners (Dogra & Wass, 2006; Hung, McClendon, Henderson, Evans, Colquitt, & Saha, 2007). Abrams and Gibson (2007) argued that future social workers needed to be exposed to a strong multicultural education model so that they will be more effective and understanding of clientele of all backgrounds in their practices.

Wan (2006) argued that it is imperative that issues concerning tolerance and diversity be expressed in classrooms before there can be any hope for global understanding and peace. Research indicates there may be a link between diversity education courses and the level of awareness and sensitivity to issues such as racism and white privilege (Kernahan, & Davis, 2007).

If there is an apparent need for such diversity education courses, how do student affairs practitioners and educators ensure students enrolled at their institutions are receiving them? In order to begin implementing more comprehensive diversity initiatives in college classrooms, faculty must first be prepared to teach diversity. In fact, much of the research about diversity focuses on assessing educator attitudes (Clarke, & Drudy, 2006; Jennings, 2007), providing resources designed to increase awareness among educators that they can take back and utilize in the classroom (Irvine, 2003; Wan, 2006),

and the challenges that educators face as they work to create diversity curriculums and raise levels of multicultural awareness amongst their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007).

Jennings (2007) conducted an internet-based qualitative study of elementary and secondary teacher preparation programs at 142 public universities in the United States in an attempt to discover what diversity related topics were being taught in teacher preparation courses, the priority these topics receive, whether or not this priority is influenced by geographic region, whether or not the race and gender diversity among faculty members related to the emphasis placed on various race and gender related issues, how the need for inclusion of specific diversity topics was assessed within these preparation programs, and lastly, whether instructors attitudes and knowledge about various diversity related topics had an effect on student attitudes toward these same topics. Jennings found that when forced to rank diversity topics in terms of importance within the program, educators within both primary and secondary education preparation programs ranked racial/ethnic diversity first, special needs second, and language diversity third. Economic diversity was ranked fourth, and sexual orientation and gender diversities were not often ranked high in importance. Jennings concluded that much of the importance and value of specific diversity characteristics was greatly influenced by educational governing boards—not by the faculty at the institution or the students enrolled in the teacher preparation programs.

Among challenges faced by educators who work to raise consciousness of issues surrounding diversity and multiculturalism are the contrary reactions of individuals more protective of the current social order. In late October 2007, the department of Residence

Life at the University of Delaware came under heavy scrutiny by a non-profit free-speech advocacy group based out of Philadelphia, Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), for its residential curriculum in which students living in the residence halls were challenged to think about and discuss their personal commitment to social justice and promoting diversity as well as issues related to racism and sexual orientation (Kersten, 2008). The group claimed the program was forcing on-campus students to develop personal values and ideologies similar to those taken by the university on issues concerning politics, race, sexuality, sociology, moral philosophy, and environmentalism (FIRE, 2007).

Multiculturalism as a concept has also received a great deal of attention. Higbee, Siaka, and Bruch (2007) set out to see if first year students in the General College at the University of Minnesota thought the department was committed to promoting 'multiculturalism' through its mission, curriculum, and student services. To do this, they first had to define what 'multiculturalism' meant in their study. They operationalized multiculturalism as the way people responded to diversity, which they defined as inclusive of multiple "social identities related to race, ethnicity, culture, home language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, and disability" (p. 7). Participating students were administered a questionnaire that encouraged them to think about what terms such as 'multiculturalism' and 'diverse groups' meant to them. Students rated items using a four point Likert-type scale where 1=almost never or never, 4=almost always or always, DK=don't know, and N/A=not applicable. Students were given the opportunity at the end of the assessment to make written comments or clarifying statements about any of the items on the questionnaire. Similar questionnaires were also distributed to faculty and

administrators within the General College. The authors found that students perceived the mission, curriculum, and student services within the General College to be in line with the multicultural focus of the University of Minnesota. Students and faculty both believed that the General College made significant efforts to achieve fairness in the recruitment and retention of students and faculty members. Both groups also agreed that the values of diverse groups were taught in the classroom, and that faculty members strived to incorporate these diverse perspectives into their interactions with students.

A result that puzzled the research team was that 22% of the students within the General College indicated they feared for their safety on a regular basis. Another 19% of students failed to recognize 'multiculturalism' as a central component infused in the practices of the General College. The researchers were also baffled that some students would answer "not applicable" to questions about whether the students' personal cultural groups had been portrayed in the classroom. This apparent lack of cultural awareness concerned the researchers because it made them wonder if the students understood what a cultural group was or if they did not recognize their own cultural group. As they analyzed the comments at the end of the surveys independent of one another, the researchers all came to a similar conclusion: maybe "multiculturalism means different things to different people" (Higbee et al., 2007, p. 21).

Umbach and Milem (2004) conducted a quantitative study of 1950 students at a mid-Atlantic university that sought to find a connection between major and career path choices and student views on diversity. They did so within the context of Holland's theory, which states, "human behavior is a result of the interaction between individuals and their environment" (Umbach & Milem, 2004, p. 628-629). The authors found there

was a relationship between the major and career path chosen by the student and the way that student viewed issues related to race and diversity. The researchers suggested that students majoring in fields such as art, music, sociology, et cetera, were less likely to harbor negative attitudes toward diverse issues than were students majoring in other more realistic and concrete fields such as mechanical engineering, military science, et cetera.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, literature surrounding the topic of diversity was explored as it applied to social conceptions and student perceptions of diversity including student perceptions of diversity, relevant Supreme Court rulings, multiculturalism in the university environment, institutional values and their relationship to how issues related to diversity are taught in the classroom, and the importance of diversity training and awareness programs for various professions .

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

#### *Design of the Study*

The present qualitative study was focused on how first-semester students operationalized the term *diversity*. Qualitative methodology was chosen because it would allow the researcher to fully examine participants' thoughts in ways that would have been limited by quantitative methodologies alone. Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to better examine the meanings that people give to their experiences (Morrow & Smith, 2000). First semester students attending a mid-sized Midwestern four-year public institution were the research participants for this study. Participants were initially solicited via e-mail from a majority freshman residence hall (Appendix A). These students were invited to participate in one of four pre-scheduled focus groups.

Respondents to the initial e-mail were sent an electronic copy of a basic demographic questionnaire gathering information about their gender, race, age, semester in school, etc., to complete prior to their participation in the focus groups (Appendix B). These participants also were asked to complete an informed consent form prior to participation in the research and bring the document with them to their focus group (Appendix C). As a double-check, copies of both the informed consent form and demographic questionnaire were made available on-site for signing prior to the start focus groups.

Participants were also solicited from hall government meetings in the same majority freshman residence hall. Interested parties were given copies of the informed consent form and the demographic questionnaire prior to the beginning of the research

and were asked if they had any questions or needed any clarifications. Research participants were offered an incentive of being entered into a drawing for a \$25 gift card to be given away at the completion for the data collection phase of the study.

The researcher completed one individual interview in place of a fourth focus group. The participant was very eager to be involved with the research, but was unable to attend a formal focus group. The same informed consent form and demographic survey designed for the focus groups was utilized for the single participant interview to maintain consistency..

### *Research Participants*

College students in the first semester of matriculation who reside in a majority freshman residence hall were selected as research participants for this study. First semester students are making their initial adjustments to college life yet still maintaining many of the values and beliefs of the environment in which they were raised (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Knowing the ways in which students conceive *diversity* at initial college enrollment can impact both instructional approaches to students and out-of-class student services and programming for students.

A total of 21 first year students participated in this research. Of the participants, thirteen identified as female and eight identified as male. Ten were age 18 and eleven were age 19. Seventeen participants identified as Caucasian/White. Two participants identified as Black. One participant identified as Hispanic. One participant identified as Multiracial. Two participants reported spending the majority of their pre-adult years in an urban environment. Thirteen participants reported spending the majority of their pre-adult years in a suburban environment. Five participants reported spending the majority of their



pre-adult years in a rural environment. Four participants reported aspiring to complete “some college”. Three participants reported aspiring to complete a bachelor’s degree. Thirteen participants reported aspiring to complete a master’s degree. One participant reported aspiring to complete a doctoral/terminal degree. A complete summary of all participant descriptors can be found in Table 3.1. Names were changed to inhibit participant identification.

*Table 3.1*

Demographic characteristics of participants.

<b>Name of Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major(s)/ Minor(s)</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Area Grown Up In</b>	<b>Education Aspirations</b>
Kate	F	19	Family & Consumer Sciences	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	M.S.
Heather	F	18	Pre-Nursing	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	B.S.
Danielle	F	19	Special Education	Caucasian/ White	Rural	M.S.
Jacob	M	19	Management Information Systems	Caucasian/ White	Rural	B.S.
Ryan	M	19	English Education	Caucasian/ White	Rural	M.S.
Nathan	M	19	Technology Education	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	M.S.
Henry	M	18	Accounting & Personal Finance	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	M.S.
Tom	M	18	Special Education	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	M.S.
LeAnn	F	19	Photojournalism/ Sociology	Caucasian/ White	Rural	M.S.
Amanda	F	19	Special Education	Caucasian/ White	Rural	M.S.
Cara	F	19	Elementary Education	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	M.S.
Ashley	F	19	Secondary Education	Multiracial	Suburban	M.S.
Ty	M	18	Psychology	Black	Urban	M.S.

<b>Name of Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major(s)/ Minor(s)</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Area Grown Up In</b>	<b>Education Aspirations</b>
Max	M	19	Psychology	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	M.S.
Nick	M	18	Management Information Systems & Economics	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	Some College
Zen	F	18	Computer Technology	Black	Urban	Some College
Becky	F	18	Elementary Education	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	B.S.
Megan	F	18	Family & Consumer Sciences—Teacher’s Certification	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	Some College
Amy	F	18	Elementary Education	Hispanic	Suburban	Some College
Jennifer	F	18	Pre-Physical Therapy & Physical Education & Athletic Training	Caucasian/ White	Suburban	Ph.D.
Sarah	F	19	Communication Disorders & Sciences	Caucasian/ White	Rural	M.S.

### *Instrument*

The focus group protocol (Appendix D) consisted of ten open ended questions relating back to the two research questions for this study that encouraged participants to give rich and detailed descriptions of their thoughts and perceptions. This instrument was used in both the focus groups and single interview.

### *Data Collection*

Focus groups and the single interview lasted approximately 25 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol (Appendix D) that involved asking students about how they operationalized the term, *diversity*, experiences that they have had with regard to diversity, and the ways in which they feel the university places value on diversity.

### *Research Site*

The research site for the current study was a mid-sized public university located in the Midwest. All participants resided in the same majority freshman residence hall located on the researcher's campus. The focus group discussions and single interview took place in a small study room located in the basement of the residence hall from which all participants were solicited.

### *Treatment of Data*

The focus group discussions and interview were electronically recorded, transcribed, member checked for authenticity by participants agreeing to do so, and content analyzed by the researcher for emerging themes (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2006).

### *Summary*

In this chapter, the methodology for the present study was presented. The study was completed utilizing a qualitative methodology. Three focus groups and a single interview were completed utilizing a semi-structured protocol. Participants of the present study were students completing their first semester of coursework at a mid-sized Midwestern university.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

Results of the present study are described below. Participants were encouraged to expand and elaborate on their responses during focus groups and the single interview. Direct quotes reflecting the “voices” of participants were provided following each of the ten protocol items outlined below.

The student focus groups and interview were conducted in a small, well-lit study room in the basement of the residence hall in which they resided. In the room were two small square tables that were pushed together with six chairs placed around the circle. When more chairs were needed, they were brought in from another nearby study room. Conversations were electronically recorded for later transcription. The recording device was placed in the middle of the table so to best capture the participants’ responses. Themes resulting from each of the research questions and associated protocol items are included in the following chapter.

Research Question #1 asked: What does the term ‘diversity’ mean to students enrolled in their first-semester of college?

Focus group questions that related to the above research question were as follows.

1. What is diversity?
2. If asked to come to a concise definition, how would you define diversity?
3. Is diversity more than just race?
4. How do you learn about diversity?
5. Does where you grew up impact how you define diversity? Why or why not?

6. If you had to pick just one characteristic to define diversity, what would it be and why?

7. What if I asked you to pick a second one?

*What is diversity?*

When asked what diversity was, Heather responded,

It's like, the like different kinds of people and like...um...you know... Like some blacks, some whites, like Mexicans, girls, and different races and religions... It's everything that you're not, pretty much.

Jacob simply stated,

It's just anything cultural that you're not used to that is diverse to you.

Nick responded,

Um...let's see...diversity...it's everyone being different and being able to come together...um..it's something that should be supported...um...something that's unique...but, at the same time it's that uniqueness that brings everything together...

Ryan stated,

Uh...umm...it's the difference between black people and white people and uh, just like different groups of people kind of...

Nathan responded,

It's not just black and white—it's all types of people—every race...

Henry added,

Yeah...it's like different people...um..you know...like...well, like he said black and white but also like your religion and stuff...

Ryan also added,

I didn't mean just black and white....I meant...I don't know...

Tom stated,

um...it's about all groups of people and them being...like...diverse...and...like...

Becky responded,

Um...I think it's different...like...ethnic backgrounds...I don't know...

Megan added,

I guess just like different beliefs...um...religion, morals, and everything like that.

Zen built on Megan's statement.

To add to what she said, also values...

Amy replied,

And maybe like different attitudes on certain material... I think like religion is part of it too nowadays...

*If asked to come to a concise definition, how would you define diversity?*

When asked to come to a concise definition of diversity, Kate responded,

A group of different kind of people, I don't know... I know, I feel like, I don't know...

Danielle built on Kate's response.

It wouldn't be just a group. Wouldn't it be like a bunch of different groups of people? Like like anything like Heather said like race and religion and like the world, and ...I don't know...

Ryan replied,

Yeah...it's like all different groups of people...and...like...I don't know...them just being...like...different...

Zen stated,

Differences...um...I guess people have like between themselves, I mean you have an outlook on something and mine might be different than yours, and then hers might be different than both of ours, so...that's about it...

Megan added,

I think it's anything that makes you unique.

Jennifer agreed with Megan.

Yeah...that's the best way to put it...in my perspective...

*Is diversity more than just race?*

The researcher posed the clarifying question of whether or not diversity was more than just race to which LeAnn replied,

Yeah...it can be all kinds of things...I mean...race is definitely one part...but it could be...like...your religion...um...where you're from...

Cara stated,

But...a lot of people just think it's race...

When asked why she thought that, Cara replied,

I don't know...

Ashley added,

It's just the easiest way to think about it.

Nathan responded to Ashley by stating,

Yeah...but it's not just race...it's everything...anything that can be different...not just race...

*How do you learn about diversity?*

When asked how one learns about diversity, Jennifer replied,

By putting yourself in different situations...maybe? By going coming to Eastern, it's diverse. I mean, by coming here you learn about diversity, you learn about different cultures, so...

Sarah added,

Putting yourself in a different culture than the one like just your own home where you grew up in, so like you get a chance to learn about the world around you.

Becky responded,

Yeah, the way everyone else grew up and lived, it's all unique...but you just can't change yourself, you just have to learn how to be a little bit more...accepting...

Zen built on Becky's response.

It's difficult to relate to others without learning where they're from...

Kate stated,

Through experiences you have...

To which Jacob responded,

Experience, yeah it's not really, I mean like textbook things in school can like give you ideas, but you have no idea until you see it or, like...

Danielle simply stated,

Like going on vacation...like...here, like everywhere you go...

Nick replied,



You have to experience it. You can't read about it. You have to...um...live it... You have to experience it yourself...immerse yourself in another country...immerse yourself in another lifestyle, and you have to actually experience it.

Tom responded,

By being around people that are different from you.

Nathan built on Tom's response.

Yeah...I mean...that's definitely one way, but you can learn about it by doing other things....like...in classes and stuff...

Tom replied,

I don't learn about it in classes...

Ty stated,

You have to experience it to learn about it...I mean...I'm black, and I grew up around black people...you can't tell me that I could just take a class about Muslim people and learn everything there is to know about them...you have to be around them to learn...

Henry added,

I agree...you can't just take a class.

Cara stated,

We have a committee that puts on programs and stuff...I know that it's not the same as being around different groups...but...like...it's a start...and the stuff they do is like actually fun sometimes...I mean...like...we play games...and like get

prizes...it's not like we just sit around and get lectured at...because that would really suck...

Nathan replied,

Well...it's not like you have to learn everything...you can just learn some things about people to learn about diversity...

Tom responded to Nathan by stating,

You can sit in class all day...learn some random stupid stuff...and then...just forget about it...but...if...say you're in a group of people...um...you can watch them and learn about them...I mean...I don't know...but you can't just learn in a class...

Ty agreed with Tom and added,

I agree...we have people out fighting wars and stuff...and...um...they didn't take a class to learn about the culture...they went out into the streets and learned about it...you just have to experience it...

*Does where you grew up impact how you define diversity? Why or why not?*

When asked if where one grows up impacts how they see diversity, Nick replied,

Absolutely...um...my high school was actually pretty diverse...um...it was...as far as racially diverse...it was practically split...um...about one third Hispanic, one third African American, and one third Caucasian...so it was almost directly split right down the middle...um...so...I got a taste of the Mexican American culture...um...like the...er...Mexican town was right by my high school...so we could go get tacos...from like a real, made by real Mexicans...um...like a taco stand...um...and then further down there was where...um...you could get real

soul food...and then, across the river would be...um...if you wanted European or Asian foods... living with...um...many different ethnic backgrounds...it helped...helped to see that we're all different, but we're all the same...we all like food, we all like—well most of us like sports. Just because you're different...just because you look different doesn't mean you are different...you can't like the same things...you can like the same music, the same...games...

Sarah stated,

Who you grew up with...influences like your parents, family, friends, and they all have their perspectives and they kind of rub off on you and you have your own judgments based on that 'cause it's all you know...well, until you just explore...

Becky responded,

I think if you just went to school at just like a private Catholic school your entire life then you are only exposed to people with like the same religion as you versus if you go to public school your entire life then it's just...basically like a sample of a piece of the world...er...nation, I mean...

Megan added,

I think also like where you live, like if you live like in the like small like town versus someone who lives in downtown Chicago, there's going to have way different like morals and like beliefs on like what's right and what's wrong...

*If you had to pick just one characteristic to define diversity, what would it be and why?*

When asked about choosing just a singular characteristic to define diversity, Kate,

Danielle, and Heather agreed on the characteristic of race. When asked for their reason why, Kate responded,

Well, we are different but that's just like how you view it like at a first glance.

Danielle also responded,

That's the main thing that comes to your mind when you...first think of it...like race...

Kate built on Danielle's response with,

Like we could all have a different religion and all be a different religion, but like we have that in common, like we all are white.

Sarah stated,

People's backgrounds? It's kind of broad because it goes with like where they grew up...what school they went to..what their parents' beliefs are...yeah...like people's backgrounds is a major thing...

Zen replied,

I don't know....it's like a...I don't know....but race....is probably the broadest part of diversity...um...because you know what I'm...like...people when they're having problems, and they're having problems about diversity...you know...Asians, Latinos, Blacks, Whites, you know...everyone's got issues, but by diversity being important and everybody understanding what it's about...I think...yeah...

Becky added to Sarah's response.

I think backgrounds play a major roles because that like ties in like the race, religion, like where you grew up, like I think your background ties in a lot...it kind of like ties it all in together...all of the things that contribute to like a diverse society.

Amy built on Becky and Sarah's statements.

And along with background, what kind of family environment you grew up in, like if you had a single parent or if you had to like work or if you were just like a spoiled child it kind of shows your character, and then your...diversity...how diverse you are...

However, Nick struggled to identify any one characteristic.

Homo Sapien.

When asked why he chose such a large category, Nick's response was simple.

Because everything...anything can be diverse...it could be race, creed, religion...anything...um...it all comes back to that, so I couldn't really pick just one...

*What if I asked you to pick a second one?*

When asked about what a second characteristic would be, Jacob stated,

The other second thing is probably like the place that you like came from and like I'm from Bloomington-Normal where ISU is and then like we get the people from the suburbs of like Chicago, and no offense to the suburban people but like, they think they're from the city sometimes. And they're really not, and they think that they're...well... I mean like, it's not like they come to a consensus or something...Some of the Chicago people think that Chicago is like "it" in the world and like, and if you're like not from around Chicago...

Danielle added,

You're not from anywhere

Kate responded,

I'm one of them... See, that's what I thought. Well, not what I thought, but I have never been more south than Eastern, and the first time I came... Well, not in Illinois....not like... But like, I've never been to St. Louis and like I've never gone down further than Bloomington-Normal...I don't know if I've even been there...

Danielle stated,

I only live like half an hour away from Bloomington and I went to school in Edwardsville which is down south and I felt like it was...it was a lot more diverse down there... actually 'cause there's a lot more people...you have the Chicago kind of people and you have the people from St. Louis there, too. So, I mean that was kind of a clashing thing, too...and then you had like all of the people in between because like nobody was from where I was from, but...like in central Illinois...but I don't know...It's kind of like you felt like it was either the Chicago suburb people or like the Southern Illinois people.

Jacob responded,

I'd say that's definitely another diverse issue. 'Cause there's always like a clash...it's always like a fun clash but like, at the same time, there's always like those like few arguments that come up like a joking argument but like you can tell like obviously it stems from where we're from...

Research Question #2 asked: Do first-semester university students believe their university is successful in creating an environment supportive of 'diversity'?

Focus group questions that related to the above research question were as follows.

1. Do you think diversity is more important to you now as a college student? Why or why not?
2. Does the university work toward having a diverse culture?
3. What more can the university do to make the climate better?

*Do you think diversity is more important to you now as a college student? Why or why not?*

When asked if diversity was more important now as a college student, Nick replied,

I think it's...um....it's more important now... because before it was just more so racially...um...now, I am speaking with international students. I got the perspective from a student from Germany, and how culture is different from what she's used to...um...and then the other thing is I'm from a city that has over 100,000 people, and I'm coming to a town that the university is...and the town too...makes up...um...over 20,000...it's just a huge huge difference.

Amy responded,

I feel like I was always one to accept others, like, it didn't really matter, and it's kinda how I feel now. But being here it's like we're all..here together..and it's not like you have a choice...why not just...you know...accept everyone for who they are...I don't see the reason why people don't do it...so yeah...I think it is...

Megan added,

Kind of like...well...you either want to accept it or you don't...it's like you're kind of forced to because you're not living with your parents, or you know...it's just like it's their beliefs and that's just what your always taught whereas here it's like you're living with forty other girls on a floor that all came from somewhere

different and you...well...that's going to definitely affect like who you are becoming like at college and stuff.

Jennifer replied,

I think being in college helps people expose themselves to diversity...

Zen agreed with Amy, Megan, and Jennifer.

They pretty much said it, like it is important, and you need to like pretty much understand diversity when you're in college.

Henry stated,

I think it is because you live with a bunch of different people...and you have to learn to deal with them...

Amanda replied,

Yeah...I think it is, too...I mean...like...I'm from like an all white town in the middle of nowhere, and we had like one Hispanic family there...so you weren't really exposed to it that much...

Cara added,

I think it's about the same...I'm used to it...I don't really think about it all that much...I mean...I don't know...well...like...I think about it but it's...it's not like I think to myself... "oh, look at all the diversity here...hardy har har..." it's not like that...I don't know...

Kate responded,

Well, for me, I went to like an all pretty much like well all like white school where everyone was pretty much all the same and being here like everyone's so different and from different places. I mean, I'm used to that, but like, now, I can



like see that people won't like always look like where I live 'cause it's different.

But I really didn't think like that before.

Heather responded,

I think um...I agree with Kate. Because you're like, you're so used to like just like what you grew up with and like coming to college is like so different like, like you meet so many different people that are different like not always exactly like you like and stuff...

Jacob stated,

Yeah, like I went to Catholic high school and a public university is definitely different. So, it's a lot different. But, yeah, it's uh, yeah, it's a good different, but it is different.

The researcher followed up and asked Jacob if he thought that his perspective would be different had he chosen to attend a Catholic university given that he attended a Catholic high school to which he responded,

Um...it would have been more close to it at least, 'cause I have friends who go who went to Catholic universities, and it's more like high school but, like everyone who went to public universities was like "wow", you know, now we know what diversity is, 'cause it...I would definitely say you are very sheltered when you go to Catholic school sometimes. As much as I, I always thought I was like not really that sheltered but then at the same time, when I came here I was like "wow" because I realized I was sheltered.

Heather responded to Jacob with,

That's how it was for me. I went to a Catholic grammar school and a public high school, and like you try to just like, you yourself look like everyone around you and then you go to public and you're like "oh, woah". Everyone is so different.

Jacob followed up with,

Because it seemed like it was more, in Catholic high schools like so like, huh, I don't know. It's just like you're getting judged every two seconds... And just like, you come here and, I don't know, a lot more people are just like laid back and...I don't know. I guess a lot of it is like I just don't have my priest watching me every two seconds.

*Does the university work toward having a diverse culture?*

When asked if the university worked toward having a very diverse culture, Heather quickly stated,

No. I don't really think it's that diverse.

Kate responded,

Ah, well, I don't know, I feel like...uh...I can't really explain it how...I can't like...um...I feel like the population of like people from the suburbs and like white middle class is very high here, but like if you go like other places, there's like more of like um like not exactly just like minorities, but like the like like ratios are different of like people to people...you know...I don't know. I can't really explain it.

Heather followed up with,

It's like smaller here...If you go to like U of I... if you go there their numbers are going to be like different compared to like...so...

Danielle built on Heather's statement.

They're bigger so they have more chances to like yeah... More diversity...

Ty stated,

It's okay...I mean it's better than I thought it was going to be here...there are a lot of people here who look like me...and...I guess that makes me feel better being here...I don't know...

Ryan added,

Um...I think that they could...I don't know...bring more diversity in...but...it's not like it's bad now...

Megan replied,

Yeah...they have like diversity week coming up and like the Beyond Words experience...I don't know...they always seem to have like opportunities...to learn more about diversity and cultures and...

Zen responded,

Like I said like earlier, I think this school is very diverse...there's different races, different religions, everyone here has different beliefs, so...it's not like this is a private...I don't know if they have private Catholic colleges...

Amy interjected,

Yeah, they do...

Zen continued,

Really? Oh, well this isn't one of those...so, yeah, I would say Eastern has a diverse culture...

Sarah stated,

Yeah, but I feel like it's not just about the programs they have that promote diversity...like everything else like classes, and other...well...just being at the union and stuff...it's not separated like, you know, if you're Catholic you have to go to this side, you know, like everyone is mixed in together so, and they're not even really trying...it's just how it happens...I guess that's probably all schools...

*What more can the university do to make the climate better?*

When asked about the university climate and things that could be done to make it more conducive to and supportive of diversity, Kate stated,

I really don't know.

Jacob responded,

Yeah, but I just don't think there's like that compared obviously to U of I...but there's obviously not as much diversity, but yeah I definitely think that they're welcoming. It's just that there just isn't. You know what I mean? Like they'd be welcoming to more diversity, but that's just how it is—there just isn't more of a...there's not a ratio you know comparing to like whi-...there's just a big white population...

Kate continued with,

I don't really know like I think like all of us having that in like difference...like... I don't think I'm making sense...I don't know if they really need any more, but I don't really know because I'm not going to like join something that has to do with that. I don't know... I mean, I'm not going to join like an African American club or whatever...that's just split up... by race or whatever. I'm just not going to. I don't know.

Jacob added,

Well, um...yeah, it's pretty good, I mean, you could always probably use more diversity. You know, it could never hurt. You know, just to get people more like...

Heather asked if Jacob meant to add "well-rounded" to the end of his statement to which he agreed and added,

I don't know how they would do it, maybe try and like I don't know if this is bad to say, like raise their quotas for which kinds of people they are going to let in...like what kinds of families you came from, your background and all of that, but...I don't really know how they would do it.

Heather stated,

I think it's kind of just like the person, like their choice of where they want to go to school. It's not really like the university's going to decide...it's all these...do you know what I mean?

Nick responded,

Laissez-faire. Hands-off. Just let it go. Um...if you start messing with..uh...requirements and things like that, you will experience...probably resentment...but if you were to just let it grow and take its own course, I think you would find it would be better...

Becky replied,

I kind of feel like you can only go to a certain point and then people don't want to get involved and they're not going to, so like just making sure they know it's out there if you want it...

Megan added,

Yeah, 'cause if you want to go to all the like diversity like presentations and like stuff, they're there but if you don't want to go to them, or you don't want to look into what times and stuff they are, then you're probably not going to go...

Zen responded,

I think Eastern is doing a decent job...it's more about the person themselves and how much they want to put forward, but...

Ryan added,

I don't know...I've never really thought about it...um...I guess they do a good job already...

LeAnn stated,

They do a better job than my high school did...you don't feel like there's any real tension or anything, so that's a good thing.

Amanda replied,

Maybe more programs or something? I mean...stuff that we would actually want to go to...no offense...but like a lot of the stuff they do here is stupid sometimes...I don't know...

Cara responded to Amanda.

I don't think it's stupid...I have fun...I like it here...

Ashley added,

Yeah, I like it, too...I think they do a good job here...you can tell they actually care...so...um...I guess it's a good thing...

When asked if he had any other thought about diversity in general or at the university, Nick stated,

I think more, um...more RSOs that promote diversity would be beneficial. Like uh, BSU...they do a lot of stuff...um...LASSO...they have internal issues...but they try to reach out toward the...um...towards the Hispanic community...um...I think things that would help stuff like that would be RSO funding....um...because they could be huge organizations but it always comes down to the money, and that prevents them from doing a lot of things...um...actually last night at BSU...one of the students proposed a carnival in trying to get...use it as a fundraiser and try to get people to...um...learn about BSU...and then also to tell people to give money at the same time, and it's just not possible because you need the capital to do it. Try to find sponsors, it's not really...your options are limited and...um...you can't...

Zen replied,

I just think it's cool and important that we can discuss topics like this...it helps...it's good to learn more about each other and our cultures...brings us closer...

### *Summary*

In this chapter, participant responses to each of the items on the focus group and interview protocol were presented in attempts to help preserve and convey the student voice in relation to each item.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion & Recommendations

In this chapter, themes emerging from the focus groups and the single individual interview are presented and discussed. This chapter also includes recommendations for further research and recommendations for educators and student affairs practitioners.

#### *Emerging Themes*

Regarding how first-semester students operationalized the term diversity several themes emerged including lack of understanding and confidence in one's own perceptions, Catholicism not perceived as diverse, diversity is difference, diversity is race, diversity is best learned through experience, and the institution can only do so much. Themes, and student "voices" reflecting them, are presented below grouped under the research questions posed for the present study.

#### Research Question #1: What does the term 'diversity' mean to students enrolled in their first-semester of college?

*Lack of understanding and confidence in one's own perceptions.*--When initially asked to define diversity, a majority of participants responded, "I don't know" in part or the whole of their response. When they did not answer, "I don't know", their responses were filled with long pauses and filler words so they could stall in order to think about what they were saying after they had already begun speaking. They would also look around to others in their group or the interviewer for direction and guidance in their response. This search for validation of their thoughts paired with their actual statements indicated participants did not yet have a firm grasp of what diversity is, and they were afraid that their perceptions would be at variance from other persons in the group.



This lack of confidence was easily identifiable in one participant, Kate, who when asked, “What is diversity?”, responded with, “I have to think? Oh, my gosh, um, oh shit. Okay.” After pausing for about ten seconds she added, “I don’t know how to answer.” Another participant, Ryan, initially defined diversity as, “Uh...umm...it’s the difference between black people and white people and uh, just like different groups of people kind of...” However, after other members of the focus group made statements that seemed to attack his initial statement, Ryan offered some clarification. “I didn’t mean just black and white...I meant...I don’t know...” Ryan’s statement indicates his level of discomfort with his initial response, and it shows how he was quick to correct what he had said so that he would better identify with the other members of the focus group.

*Catholicism not perceived as diverse.*--Throughout the course of the focus groups, several participants related their current encounters with diversity on a state-assisted non-sectarian campus back to their experiences as children and teenagers in K-12 education. Many of those responding in this way made some mention of their experiences in Catholic K-12 parochial schools. Participants either matter-of-factly stated that their experience was not diverse or they alluded to feelings of insulation from diversity.

One participant who openly stated that Catholicism was not diverse, Jacob, related his high school experiences to his college experiences and stated, “Yeah, like I went to Catholic high school and a public university is definitely different.” After further discussion among group members, Jacob added,

I have friends who go... who went to Catholic universities, and it’s more like high school but, like everyone who went to public universities was like “wow”, you know, now we know what diversity is, ‘cause it...I would definitely say you are

very sheltered when you go to Catholic school sometimes. As much as I, I always thought I was like not really that sheltered but then at the same time, when I came here I was like “wow” because I realized I was sheltered.

Another participant, Kate, agreed with Jacob’s assertions that Catholicism was not very diverse, stating,

That’s how it was for me. I went to a Catholic grammar school and a public high school, and like you try to just like, you yourself look like everyone around you and then you go to public and you’re like “Oh, whoa”

Another participant, Zen, was making statements about the diversity at her institution, when she, too, mentioned Catholicism.

Like I said like earlier, I think this school is very diverse...there’s different races, different religions, everyone here has different beliefs, so...it’s not like this is a private...I don’t know if they have private Catholic colleges...

*Diversity is difference.*--Most participants stated that the ultimate definition of diversity involved difference. Some participants would become very specific and identified the types of difference, while others would be far more general in their assertions. One participant made a general statement about diversity and difference, Jacob, who stated, “It’s just anything cultural that you’re not used to that is diverse to you.” Another participant, Nick, replied,

Um...let’s see...diversity...it’s everyone being different and being able to come together...um..it’s something that should be supported...um...something that’s unique...but, at the same time it’s that uniqueness that brings everything together...

Ryan responded, “Yeah...it’s like all different groups of people...and...like...I don’t know...them just being...like...different...”

Another participant, Zen, simply stated,

Differences...um...I guess people have like between themselves, I mean you have an outlook on something and mine might be different than yours, and then hers might be different than both of ours, so...that’s about it...

Nathan simply stated, “um...it’s being different...”

*Diversity is “the other”*.--Frankenburg (1996) stated that it is easier for white students to understand and articulate the characteristics of minority groups than it is for them to actually be able to know and identify anything about their majority cultural group. In fact, she states that it is actually easier for majority students to identify what they are not than what they are. In the present study, when working to define diversity, many Caucasian participants phrased their answers to indicate that diversity was anything that they were not. Perhaps the most straightforward example of this theme was a statement made by Heather when asked to define diversity. “It’s everything that you’re not, pretty much.” When questioned by another focus group member, Danielle, as to whether or not Heather actually saw diversity this way, another group member, Jacob, quickly replied, “Yeah.”

*Diversity is race*.--Pidot (2006) wrote about the legal justification behind the “diversity rationale” (p. 761) provided in several legal cases including *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003). In this discussion, he defined diversity in terms of racial differences. In the present study, more than half of the present participants stated at some point that race is a definite part of diversity and how it is defined. One

participant, Ryan, specifically defined diversity in terms of race. “Uh...umm...it’s the difference between black people and white people and uh, just like different groups of people kind of...” Another participant, Heather responded by first placing emphasis on race, but then quickly backing up and incorporating other characteristics. “It’s like, the like different kinds of people and like...um...you know... Like some blacks, some whites, like Mexicans, girls, and different races and religions... It’s everything that you’re not, pretty much.”

When asked about the climate for diversity on their campus and ways that it could be improved, many Caucasian participants kept referring back to increasing the number of minority students. Other Caucasian participants tried to reconcile the differences between their institution and other institutions by comparing the racial makeup of the various institutions. One Caucasian participant, Jacob, stated,

And, yeah, you know everyone who goes to U of I and my friend there is just like “yeah we have a lot of...there’s like a lot of Asians. There’s a lot of...there’s a lot of Blacks. There’s a lot of...you know. There’s also a lot of whites, but it’s more than you guys have at Eastern.

Jacob also commented that because his campus was predominantly Caucasian, that it was not diverse, even though he felt it would be very welcoming of additional diversity.

Like they’d be welcoming to more diversity, but that’s just how it is—there just isn’t more of a...there’s not a ratio you know comparing to like whi-...there’s just a big white population...

Another participant, Danielle, stated, "That's the main thing that comes to your mind when you...first think of it...like race..." Amanda also indicated that race was important to the definition of diversity, stating,

Yeah...I think it is, too...I mean...like...I'm from like an all white town in the middle of nowhere, and we had like one Hispanic family there...so you weren't really exposed to it that much...

*Diversity is best learned about through experience.*--Most participants agreed that the best way to learn about diversity was through taking the risk to immerse oneself in diverse situations. Participants agreed that although there are classes one can take to learn some things, ultimately, the best way to learn about diversity is to see it and experience it. One participant, Ty, stated,

You have to experience it to learn about it...I mean...I'm black, and I grew up around black people...you can't tell me that I could just take a class about Muslim people and learn everything there is to know about them...you have to be around them to learn...

Another participant in that same focus group, Tom, stated,

You can sit in class all day...learn some random stupid stuff...and then...just forget about it...but...if...say you're in a group of people...um...you can watch them and learn about them...I mean...I don't know...but you can't just learn in a class...

Ty built further on both his previous statement and on Tom's response.

I agree...we have people out fighting wars and stuff...and...um...they didn't take a class to learn about the culture...they went out into the streets and learned about it...you just have to experience it...

Regarding whether or not first semester students believed their institution was successful in creating an environment supportive of diversity, two themes emerged: fear of mixing and the institution can only do so much.

Research Question #2: Do first-semester university students believe their university is successful in creating an environment supportive of 'diversity'?

*Fear of mixing.*--In previous research, Brunner (2006) explored how students defined diversity and whether or not they believed the institution was successful in creating a "diverse student community of students" (p. 311). In this research, she identified several themes including that students felt there was a certain magic that happened when various groups were "mixed" together in efforts to create diverse communities. In the present study, however, students seemed to have a general fear of engaging in "mixing." Although many participants agreed that diversity was best learned through experience, some participants identified a certain level of discomfort with seeking out such new and different experiences that would expose them to such situations. Perhaps the best example of this response occurred when the researcher was asking about things the university could do to achieve a better climate for diversity when one Caucasian participant in an all Caucasian focus group, Kate, stated,

I don't really know like I think like all of us having that in like difference...like...  
I don't think I'm making sense...I don't know if they really need any more, but I don't really know because I'm not going to like join something that has to do with

that. I don't know... I mean, I'm not going to join like an African American club or whatever...that's just split up... by race or whatever. I'm just not going to. I don't know.

Another Caucasian participant in the same focus group as Kate, Danielle, agreed with Kate, stating, "Well, right."

In addition to the powerful verbal statements made by the participants were equally powerful non-verbal reactions to other group members' statements regarding this issue. In the above mentioned all participants nodded in agreement to statements indicating they would not participate in organizations composed primarily of students belonging to racial minority groups.

*The institution can only do so much.*--Although some participants had ideas to improve the campus climate for diversity, overall, the general consensus was that the institution can only do so much to create a welcoming and supportive campus atmosphere for diversity. Eventually, the responsibility to foster an environment open to diversity falls back on the willingness of each individual student to take the risk to experience diverse social situations.

One participant, Becky, was very vocal about placing the responsibility of learning about diversity and creating a welcoming climate back on the shoulders of the student.

I kind of feel like you can only go to a certain point and then people don't want to get involved and they're not going to, so like just making sure they know it's out there if you want it...

Another participant in the same focus group as Becky, Sarah, echoed this same sentiment.

Yeah, 'cause if you want to go to all the like diversity like presentations and like stuff, they're there but if you don't want to go to them, or you don't want to look into what times and stuff they are, then you're probably not going to go...

Zen agreed with Becky and Sarah. "It's more about the person themselves and how much they want to put forward..."

### *Discussion*

Students are constantly bombarded with messages about what diversity is, the importance of embracing diversity, and how it impacts their daily lives. In relation to the research questions posed exploring the ways in which first-semester students define diversity and whether or not they believe their institution to be successful in creating and fostering an environment supportive of diversity, several interesting connections to the professional literature emerged. Brunner (2006) researched student perceptions of diversity, and concluded that diversity was difficult to define. In the present study, students struggled to define diversity, thus validating her previous research. However, statements made by the participants, body language, and speech patterns indicated a general level of uncertainty coupled with lessened levels of confidence in individual responses and personal perspectives. This difference may be due in part to the age ranges of the participants. Brunner's sample included students at all levels in their undergraduate career, whereas the present research focused solely on first semester students. It is possible that as students progress through their undergraduate career, they will become increasingly more comfortable and confident in their perspectives in relation to this topic.

Another interesting connection made between the professional literature and the present study was that students tended to define diversity by identifying groups to which



they did not belong. Frankenburg (1996) argued that it was actually easier for majority students to identify all of the characteristics not present within their majority culture than it is for them to identify the distinct characteristics present within the same majority culture. Higbee, Siaka, and Bruch (2007) found that some students were unable to identify times in which their cultural group had been portrayed in the classroom setting. Perhaps students identify diversity as characteristic of the “other” because they are unable to see themselves as members of a specific cultural group. Since a majority of participants were Caucasian, the inability to “see” culture might be a reflection of their unconscious “white privilege”. Pence and Fields (1999) stated, “It is problematic for students to see their ‘whiteness’ as a norm” (p.150). Pence and Fields further believe this is problematic because it allows majority students to ignore the idea that “if one group is disadvantaged, another is advantaged” (p. 150).

Students identified that experience was the best way to learn about diversity, and stated that sitting in classes and reading texts about diversity and diverse groups did little to actually help them understand and be aware of diversity. This is interesting because there is much literature stressing the importance of offering such courses to all students as a way of broadening their understanding and acceptance of diverse groups and the issues they face (Wan, 2006; Kernahan, & Davis, 2007). Even more literature emphasizes the need to utilize such courses in their training and preparation for specific career paths such as medicine and social work (Dogra & Wass, 2006; Hung, McClendon, Henderson, Evans, Colquitt, & Saha, 2007; Gibson, 2007). If students find little value in such courses, what other options do educators and student affairs practitioners have for

creating a supportive and inclusive environment in which students are able to explore and discuss issues that will help them to better understand and be aware of diversity?

At the present institution, students are required to take courses to satisfy a cultural diversity requirement in their general education courses. These courses discuss things such as “issues of race, ethnicity, and gender; the history, traditions, and/or language of other countries or cultures; and the role of cultural sensitivity in making informed and ethical decisions” (Eastern Illinois University Council on Academic Affairs, April 2008). Also at the present institution, the university president has made integrated learning one of his initiatives. This emphasis on seeking out-of-classroom experience to complement in-classroom experience may be exactly the type of instructional methodology students will be able to connect with and learn the from the most. By creating course components that integrate the academic experience and the practical experience, educators and student affairs practitioners may be able to offer students an environment that is challenging and exciting.

Brunner (2006) concluded that there was a certain “magic” (p. 314) that was attained by mixing various groups in efforts to create diverse communities. The findings of the present study support this conclusion, but further state that first semester students have a general fear of seeking out those experiences that would foster this “mixing” (p. 314). This could be because these students are new to the university environment, and they are trying to figure out who they are and what they want to experience. This fear of entering unfamiliar situations or strange environments may subside as students progress through their undergraduate career.

One interesting phenomena occurring amongst the participants in this group was that of the 21 participants, nearly 67% responded that they wanted to obtain at least a Master's degree, with one seeking a doctoral degree. This astonished the researcher because it seems like a rather steep percentage for such a young group of students. In fact, according to the United States Census Bureau (2007) only 9.9% of the population aged 25 and older had attained a graduate degree. Although this does not directly relate to the current study, it raises interesting questions about what happens during the collegiate experience to affect an attainment level nearly 57% lower than the aspiration level, and what can we as educators and student affairs practitioners do to bridge this gap?

The challenge of the present study was to accurately portray the thoughts and perceptions of first semester students in reference to the operationalization of the term *diversity* and how successful they believed the university is in creating an environment supportive of diversity. With this in mind, the researcher has identified some suggestions for future research as well as some recommendations for educators and student affairs practitioners.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

- Future research should include a broader sample of first semester students at multiple institutions nationwide. Doing so would provide a better insight into how first semester students operationalize the term, diversity, in their daily lives.
- Future research should look at students at various stages of their collegiate career—prior to entering college, at the start of their experience, during each successive year, at the completion of their tenure at the university—to see if student perceptions of diversity change during the course of their time spent in the university setting.

- Future research should look at students in specific minority groups to see if these students have different operational perceptions of diversity as a concept than do majority students.

#### *Recommendations for Educators and Student Affairs Practitioners*

- Challenge students to think about how they see diversity and what this means to them in the overall scheme of things
- Since students believe that experience is the best way to learn about diversity, find ways to create programs, services, and inclusive environments that will foster conditions conducive to such experiences
- In courses in which students learn about diversity, create an out-of-classroom component that forces students to go and experience diversity at the university and within the community first-hand rather than read about it in textbooks
- Continually work to find ways to ease the fear of the “mixing”

#### *Conclusions*

This study was conducted as an attempt to better understand what new, first term students think and feel about *diversity*. Insights and perspectives gathered from the focus groups and the single individual interview helped to better understand some of the pre-existing literature about related topics included in the literature review.

How students perceive the world in which they live impacts the way they interact with those around them. As educators and student affairs practitioners, it is crucial that we learn and understand what students we work with think and feel so that we are able to provide them with the developmental programs, support services, and inclusive environments that will best meet their growing cognitive and psycho-educational needs.

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APPENDIX A

## E-mail Advertisement

Subject: Perceptions and Diversity

Hello!

My name is Angie Hobkirk, and I am a graduate assistant in the College Student Affairs program here at Eastern Illinois University. As part of my degree requirements, I am currently conducting research for my master's thesis. This is where I need your help! I am currently seeking participants for my study. My study is about how freshmen understand the concept of diversity and how they feel that Eastern places value on diversity.

I will be conducting four focus groups on the following dates and times:

**Thursday, January 29<sup>th</sup> @ 7PM**

**Friday, January 30<sup>th</sup> @ 1PM**

**Friday, January 30<sup>th</sup> @ 3PM**

**Saturday, January 31<sup>st</sup> @ 12PM**

If you are interested in learning more about this research, please reply to this e-mail or show up to one of the above sessions! All focus groups will be held in Carman Hall in the study room (near the vending machines in the basement), and will be limited to six participants.

**All study participants will be entered into a drawing for a Wal-Mart gift card.**

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me!

Angie ☺

(217) 581-2015

## APPENDIX B

## Demographic Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How many semesters have you been enrolled as a student (here and at other institutions)?

- 1     2     3     4     5     6  
 7+

How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your major(s)/minor(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How would you classify yourself?

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arab                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Latino/Latina        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Multiracial          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Would rather not say |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Caucasian/White          | <input type="checkbox"/>                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic                 | Other: _____                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Indigenous or Aboriginal |   |

Which of the following best describes the area you grew up in:

- Urban                       Suburban                       Rural

What is the highest level of education you hope to achieve?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Some College      | <input type="checkbox"/> Master's Degree           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's Degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate/Terminal Degree |

To protect participant identity, a pseudonym will be used to share individual participant responses. Participants will be given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym. Would you like to choose your own pseudonym?

- Yes, I want to choose my own.
- No, please assign one to me at random.

If yes, what would you like your pseudonym to be?: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

### Defining Diversity: A Qualitative Exploration of the Perceptions of First Semester Students at a Mid-Sized Midwestern University

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Angela Hobkirk and Charles Eberly, Ph.D. from the Department of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a first-term, first-time student at Eastern Illinois University living in an all freshman residence hall.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to learn what students make of the concept, diversity, prior to the beginning of their higher education experience. A total of four focus groups will be held that will include no more than a total of 24 students participating in the entire project.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group of no more than eight persons like yourself that will be audio recorded and saved for later transcription. Focus groups will last from 45 minutes to an hour. After the focus group discussion is transcribed, a copy of the transcription will be provided to you so you can make additions and corrections. The revised transcriptions will be analyzed for the purposes of this research. A copy of the final research paper will be electronically provided to you.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. Participants who later feel discomfort for any reason may have their data/comments removed from the study materials.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Research participants will not directly benefit from participation in the present study, except to have their perceptions about the topic either confirmed or disconfirmed as they participate in the focus group. The benefit to society is that future campus programming dealing with diversity will be informed based on your feedback.

- **INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION**

No compensation will be provided for participation in the present study beyond a chance to win a \$25 Wal-Mart Gift Card in a random drawing at the completion of the data collection phase of the study.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of assigning a pseudonym of your choice for purposes of transcribing and reporting the data. Only the Principal Investigator and Director of Thesis will have access to the focus group transcripts. Digital data will be password protected on the PI's laptop and destroyed one year after completion of the thesis.

The completed thesis becomes a permanent part of the Booth Library collection. Other forms of dissemination will include presenting on the topic at professional conferences, and in a professional publication.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Angela Hobkirk  
(217) 581-2015  
[amhobkirk@eiu.edu](mailto:amhobkirk@eiu.edu)

Charles Eberly, Ph.D.  
(217) 581-7235  
[cgeberly@eiu.edu](mailto:cgeberly@eiu.edu)

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.  
Charleston, IL 61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
E-mail: [eiurb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiurb@www.eiu.edu)

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

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I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

---

Printed Name of Participant

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

## APPENDIX D

## Focus Group Protocol

Developed by Angela Hobkirk  
November 2008

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[Ask permission to record and begin recording]

### Introductions

“Hello. My name is Angela Hobkirk, and I am a graduate student here at Eastern Illinois University in the College Student Affairs program.”

### Purpose and Goals of the Study

“I am currently completing a study of how first year college students understand and define diversity. This conversation will help me as I explore this topic.”

### Consent Form [re-affirm permission to record]

“This conversation will last approximately 20-25 minutes and will be recorded so that I am able to transcribe it at a later date. If you are still interested in participating in this study, please take a moment to read through this consent form. Signing this form indicates your agreement to take part in this project and your permission to record this conversation. If at any time you wish to stop this conversation, please let me know and I will promptly turn off the recording device. If following this conversation you do not wish for your contributions to be used in the research, please indicate so, and they will not be used.”

### Interview

Research Question #1: What does the term ‘diversity’ mean to students enrolled in their first-semester of college?

1. What is diversity?
2. If asked to come to a concise definition, how would you define diversity?
3. Is diversity more than just race?
4. How do you learn about diversity?
5. Does where you grew up impact how you define diversity? Why or why not?
6. If you had to pick just one characteristic to define diversity, what would it be and why?
7. What if I asked you to pick a second one?

Research Question #2: Do first-semester university students believe their university is successful in creating an environment supportive of ‘diversity’?

8. Do you think diversity is more important to you now as a college student? Why or why not?
9. Does the university work toward having a diverse culture?
10. What more can the university do to make the climate better?

### Wrap-up

“Thank you so much for participating in this study. Your time is of great value to me, and I appreciate you sharing it with me. This conversation will be transcribed and analyzed for content as part of my research. Is it okay if I use this conversation in my research? [If yes] Would you like a copy of this conversation for your records? [Pause] Would you be interested in being contacted at a later date if I have any further questions? [Pause; Give business card] Here is my contact information. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me. Again, thank you for talking with me today.”