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Campus Cultural Climate: A Minority Perspective

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Abstract

A survey was administered to sixty-five students at The University of Akron, to assess their sentiments toward the cultural climate on their campus. It was hypothesized that minority students, specifically African-Americans, would report lower scores than White students, as previous research has shown that students of color do not perceive their campus cultural climate in as positive of a light as their Caucasian peers. Despite previous notions, students of color at The University of Akron reported a more positive view of campus cultural climate than did White students. A correlational analysis was then done, to see what factors could potentially contribute to one's perception of overall climate. Interestingly, one's experiences were significantly correlated to one's perception of climate, although White students seemed to have a more positive view of their college experiences than did African American students. Given these contradictory findings, it is evident that further research should be done, in order to compare other factors such as living on or off campus.

Keywords: minority, Caucasian, campus cultural climate

Campus Cultural Climate: A Minority Perspective

The main purpose of this research project is to determine if there is a strong, statistically significant relationship between overall institutional satisfaction and campus cultural climate from the perspective of undergraduate, minority students. This research is important for post-secondary institutions, like The University of Akron, who struggle with the retention of minority students. In order to improve these low statistics, attributing factors must be found. Self-report measures, such as the survey in this study, can help narrow the scope of potential factors that relate to campus retention. In addition to the low retention rate, this study can help reassure that this institution is promoting, advocating for, and embracing diversity. If students are responding with low agreement scores on the survey, then it is likely that diversity is not being celebrated as it should be in the eyes of minority students. Given that the student body here is predominantly Caucasian, it is important that all minority students still feel a sense of community and have a great experience. If there seems to be a negative trend in the survey responses, it will be known that this issue needs to be further discussed and ultimately addressed.

Literature Review

Campus culture, which is similar to other environmental constructs, is defined as “a set of ‘deeply held meanings, beliefs, and values’ by a given campus. Whether it be in an academic, professional, or social setting, one’s perception of their environment can have a huge impact on their behavior and ultimately their success. On college campuses, the perception of the cultural climate is heavily influenced by demographic factors, including but not limited to ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and mental health. The less represented populations within these subgroups are stigmatized in society as a whole, so it is imperative that they do not feel a sense of

marginalization in their campus community. Feelings of marginalization can spillover into the academic arena, affecting things such as retention rates and overall grade point averages. Past research has been done to compare minority students' perceptions of their campus cultural climate and their academic success.

Gossett and colleagues (1998) took an interest in African-American students at predominantly White institutions, as previous literature suggested that African-Americans did not fare well academic achievement or turnover, as did their Caucasian peers. Given the disparagement of African-American societies, Gossett and colleagues hypothesized that White people were doing better academically, and potentially socially, at predominantly white institutions due to their perception of campus culture. Their study found that African-American students felt marginalized on their college campuses in the following areas of college life: advising; interactions with the administration, faculty, and peers; classroom climate, and the delivery of campus services. Astonishingly, forty percent of the black students also reported that they did not feel at home or that they belonged on their campus. From these survey results, the authors concluded that there was a statistically significant relationship between one's perception of campus culture and academic success.

To further this research, Seanna Leath and Tabbye Chavous (2018) evaluated more African-Americans at predominantly White universities, but this time their sole focus was on women, adding the component of gender. Leath and Chavous wanted to converge on Black women, as their overall academic achievement has increased, on average, over the past decade. With black women being a double minority, it is remarkable that they are having so much success in academia, given Gossetts's findings (1998). A survey was administered to black, female students, and the results showed that while they reported a more positive perception of

their campus culture, it was evident that the campus culture was still not as welcoming as it could be, which could potentially be hampering the potential of other minority students.

In addition to the African-American campus community, Latinx students have also been impacted negatively, as a result of their campus cultural climate. Kenneth Gonzalez (2002) wanted to better understand the perception of campus culture, from the perspective of Latinx students. He, along with a research team, shadowed two Latinx students, Steve and Luis, for two academic years. Gonzalez had the two young gentlemen keep a journal and interview with a researcher frequently. While the results were only anecdotal, they were still very telling of how belittled the students felt because of their ethnicity and culture. Both students reported that they spent the majority of their time in their room, as they felt as if they did not fit in; there were no signs of Hispanic culture on campus, nor any students or faculty that resonated with their way of life. One of the students even considered leaving the institution, mirroring the decreasing retention rates seen in minority students.

Cristina Soto and Eric Deemer (2018) also wanted to gain a better understanding of the Latinx students' perspective, as they were alarmed by their academic rates. In 2012, there were more Latinx high school graduates enrolled in a university than there were Caucasian graduates; however, the number of Caucasian students who graduate college far surpasses the number of Latinx college graduates. Why is this? Soto and Deemer speculated that this discrepancy was correlated with the Latinx students' feelings of isolation and lack of support. Surprisingly, their hypothesis was not supported in their findings. However, significant results were found when comparing male and female students, demonstrating the importance of a congruent community at any institution.

Lastly, Nguyen and associates (2017) examined Asian American and Pacific Islander students. There is hardly any research on these two ethnic groups, as statistically they have had much more academic success than other minorities. However, the researchers still wanted to understand their perspective of their campus culture, as their social world may be affected by the associated racial stigma. Surely enough, the survey revealed that both Asian American and Pacific Island students had limited social circles, so they focus their energy on their schoolwork. Part of the college experience is expanding your professional and social networks; the fact that these students feel socially alienating shows that campus culture is a construct that still needs improvement, regardless of students' academic success.

In summary, past research has shown that minority students do not fare as well as their White counterparts at predominantly White institutions. Based on the literature discussed above, it was expected that African-Americans will report lower scores on perception of climate than White students. More specifically, the current study hypothesizes that there will be a significant difference in culture perceptions for African Americans and White students such that African Americans will report less satisfaction with climate.

Methodology

In order to determine if there is relationship between overall satisfaction and campus cultural climate, a survey developed at The University of Maryland was administered (Ancis, 2000). Approximately sixty-five undergraduate students fully completed this survey and reported their current cumulative grade point average and other demographics (sexual orientation, gender, and age). Using a Likert scale, students were asked to report their level of agreement with each given statement. Once all of the data were collected, independent samples T-tests were run, comparing Caucasian and students of color. Specifically, a test was run comparing the African-

American and Caucasian students. In addition to this inferential statistic, the correlational formula was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship.

Results.

Prior to conducting analyses testing the hypotheses, an independent samples t-test was run as a method to compare the means of different demographical groups. All completed The Campus Cultural Climate Survey (CCCS) from The University of Maryland (Ancis, 2000). Participants were coded on the basis of their ethnicity: 1 being Caucasian and 2 being minority. Before conducting these analyses, it was hypothesized that the Caucasian students would have a more positive position on the issue of campus cultural climate at The University of Akron.

In regards to the participants' overall feelings regarding the cultural climate at the University of Akron, for those who identified as a minority (African-American, Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern, and or Native American), the mean score on the CCCS was higher ($M=3.32$) than the mean score for those who identified as Caucasian ($M= 3.02$). An independent samples t-test showed these means to be significantly different from each other ($t= -2.01, p < .05$); equal variance was assumed, given the non-significant F-test ($F=0.009, p<.05$) Thus, it can be concluded that there are in fact significant differences in the perceptions of White and minority students. More specifically, minority students actually perceived climate to be significantly better than White students. Given this surprising statistic, an independent samples t-test was ran to compare solely White and Black students' perception of the cultural climate. Although the minority sample comprised mostly of African-American students, there were no significance differences found ($p=.07$).

Contrary to previous findings, ethnically diverse students seem to be more satisfied with their cultural climate than are Caucasian students at The University of Akron. However, other correlational data were analyzed, comparing students' perceptions across a multitude of factors and other demographical scales. For example, on top of the to the significant correlation seen between ethnicity and overall climate ($r=0.25, p<0.05$), there is negative correlation between

one's gender and the prevalence of diversity ($r=-0.358$, $p<0.05$) and campus experiences ($r=0.012$, $p<0.05$).

Discussion.

Although previous literature supports the notion that minority students do not fare as well as their non-minority counterparts, that does not seem to be the case at The University of Akron. From the ethnicity perspective, students of color are fonder of their overall campus cultural climate than are their White counterparts, even though the undergraduate student body is predominantly white. This was a riveting find, as the retention rate of students of color, especially African-Americans, is low at this institution. However, campus cultural climate cannot be deemed as the cause of this statistic, given the inverse relationship.

Another interesting relationship found was that between one's experiences (in the classroom, at events, etc.) and overall perception of climate ($r=0.314$, $p<0.05$). As shown through previous research (Gonzalez, 2002), a sense of community and belonging is salient for one's overall college experience, so it seems logical that this relationship exists; but, this positive relationship is compelling, as White students reported having better experiences than their peers of color. The significant, aforementioned correlation shows that the more positive one's experiences are, the more positive their perception of overall climate will be. Nevertheless, students of color reported a higher rating of campus cultural climate than did Caucasian students, while Caucasians had better experiences.

Given the results of this study, a few new questions have arisen: Why are White students more likely to complete their degrees than students of color, if they are not as fond of their campus cultural climate?; Why are White students experiences not reflected in their perception

of campus cultural climate?; If campus cultural climate is not the source of the retention issue here at The University, then what is?

It is clear that further research should be done, especially on University of Akron's campus in particular. This institution has a very large commuter population, meaning that students live off campus or at home with their parents or spouses. Studies should be done to see if one's residential status contributes to their opinion of climate and their overall experiences, as this could explain the forenamed correlational discrepancy. I also think that campus engagement should be analyzed as well. If one is not engaged, and then he or she may not even be aware of what a college campus has to offer. White students could potentially just be attending classes and then returning back home, while students of color are joining underrepresented student organizations, such as Black Students United, UA Latinos, or LGBTUA. Overall, a more complete student profile is needed to better understand how our campus cultural climate can be improved for future undergraduate students.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, campus cultural climate is crucial for one's college experience, whether you are male, female, Black, White, straight, gay, and the like. All students need to feel included, part of something bigger than themselves. While students of color do have a more positive view of campus cultural climate than do Caucasian students, that does not mean that campus climate does not need an improvement. The University should continue to do research on this matter, to assure that all students are comfortable. There are numerous ways that this can be accomplished: hiring more diverse faculty (regardless of demographic category); executing more events to promote diversity and inclusion; administering surveys, so the students constantly feel that they are valued and being heard; the like. Being part of the community is what enhances the college

experience; The University of Akron should make it its mission to have an all-inclusive space where any and everyone feels like they are at home. The University has done an excellent job of building community and enhancing experience thus far by starting a few initiatives on its campus: the hanging international flags in the Student Union, the opening up spaces for reflection and prayer around campus, and providing funding for student organizations who collaborate with other cohorts to put on inclusive events to name a few. Needless to say, this institution has been taking the necessary steps to help improve the students' view of campus cultural climate and help with the turnover of underrepresented students. Regardless of this fact, it is imperative research like this continues, so this campus can continue to promote diversity and inclusion, building an overall better campus community and cultural climate.

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Tables

Table 1

Correlation Matrix: Demographics v. Dimensions of Campus Cultural Climate

	Overall Climate	Gender	Race	Sexual Orientation
Treatment	-.083	-.061	-.200	-.094
Experiences	.314*	-.314*	-.001	-.155
Support	.271	-.201	-.071	-.126
Effort	.131	-.278*	-.088	.021
Prejudice	.223	.057	-.031	-.065
Comfort	.177	.032	-.141	-.241
Diversity	.353*	-.358**	-.046	-.059
Prevalence				

Note: * signifies that $p < .05$

Tables

Table 2

Independent Samples T-Tests: Caucasian v. Minorities

	Mean	F	T	P Value
Climate		.009	-2.012	.049
1.00	3.02			
2.00	3.32			
Treatment		.778	1.593	.116
1.00	4.42			
2.00	4.14			
Experiences		.248	.006	.996
1.00	3.05			
2.00	3.04			
Diversity		1.171	.359	.720
Prevalence				
1.00	2.48			
2.00	2.40			
Support		.849	.559	.578
1.00	3.15			
2.00	3.04			
Comfort		.079	1.114	.270
1.00	4.09			
2.00	3.90			
Effort		.029	.690	.493
1.00	2.76			
2.00	2.65			
Prejudice		1.069	.232	.818
1.00	2.06			
2.00	2.00			

Note: Equal variance was assumed; 1 signifies Caucasian; 2 signifies Students of Color

Tables

Table 3

Independent Samples T-Tests: Caucasian v. African-American

	Mean	F	T	P Value
Climate		.343	-1.861	.069
1.00	3.02			
2.00	3.35			
Treatment		2.674	1.595	.117
1.00	4.42			
2.00	4.09			
Experiences		.008	.422	.675
1.00	3.05			
2.00	2.99			
Diversity Prevalence		1.181	.964	.340
1.00	2.48			
2.00	2.23			
Support		1.429	.512	.611
1.00	3.15			
2.00	3.04			
Comfort		.001	.389	.699
1.00	4.09			
2.00	4.01			
Effort		.019	.956	.344
1.00	2.76			
2.00	2.59			
Prejudice		.165	-.139	.890
1.00	2.06			
2.00	2.10			

Note: Equal variance was assumed; 1 signifies Caucasian; 2 signifies African-American