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### Do Students' Perceptions of Cultural Diversity Impact Engagement: A Case Study of North Shore Community College

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Do Students' Perceptions of Cultural Diversity Impact Engagement:  
A Case Study of North Shore Community College

Tasia L. Cerezo

Merrimack College

Author Note

This paper was prepared for ED610G: Research Methods, taught by Audrey Falk.

### **Executive Summary**

The division of Student Affairs, specifically, offices of Student Life, Student Engagement, etc. at the higher education level have a difficult task. These offices are challenged with getting and keeping students involved while simultaneously supporting their academic matriculation and professional development. Although these offices and departments level of importance on college campuses, are often debated, they are essential to the pairing of classroom learning and real-life experiences. However, research has shown a decline in student engagement on college campuses, especially by students of color whose enrollment numbers in post-secondary education are steadily increasing, while degree obtainment is not.

This qualitative case study is meant to provide a voice for students that is often missing from scholarly work, intended to understand factors that affect them and their decision making while in college. This study provides the student perspective of North Shore Community College (NSCC) students on diversity and factors that affect student engagement. Data collected demonstrated a need for mentorship and understanding of what student engagement is and how it benefits students.

Through tabling outside of the dining hall, 39 questionnaires were completed by 39, different, registered, NSCC students from different backgrounds of age, ethnicity, gender, and race. The data extracted from questionnaire responses provided critical information at the opening section: demographics. Many participants, struggled to provide responses to open-ended questions asking them to identify their race and ethnicity, often asking me the difference. Similarly, as I manually transferred questionnaire responses to Survey Monkey, I was especially shocked by the varying levels of understanding of “student engagement” through participate provided definition.

Study results show students who feel there are faculty and staff who resemble their cultural background are more likely to be engaged on campus. Of the 39 questionnaire participants, 56% participants indicated there are faculty and staff who share their cultural background, 55% of participants identified as white and 46% of participants identified as being engaged on campus. While students, generally, felt diversity existed on campus, it was interesting that one student said “It is hard to see in the classroom” in the box where asked to define diversity.

This data suggestions more students are engaged on campuses where there are faculty and staff members who share their cultural background but would suggest, for future research, students identifying what they are involved in on campus to understand their level of engagement. I recommend, as an institution, NSCC has an open discussion about diversity, define and promote student engagement.

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### **Introduction**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), nearly 2.8 million students are enrolled in post-secondary institutions with mission statements that support providing an education to a specific cultural group. Institutions that state how much they value educating students of color (Latino/a, African America, etc.) are seeing an increase in applications. This number indicates that students are seeking to have a college experience with individuals whom they believe to have life journeys and experiences similar to their own based on their race and/or ethnicity. Morehouse College and Spelman College are two institutions recognized as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) with values rooted in educating men and women of color. These institutions, and others like them, will likely see an increase in prospective students with the steady increase of people of color in the United States (Doan, 2011) and people of color enrolling in post-secondary institutions. HBCUs acceptance rates are lower compared to predominately White institutions (PWIs) and state institutions; however, the enrollment rate of students of color in post-secondary education is steadily increasing. Despite their efforts, many institutions struggle, according to statistics, with retaining students of color.

While research has shown that the feeling of connection to someone or something, such as a group or club on campus, creates a sense of obligation, there is no scientifically proven way to engage all students on any campus in a profound way. It is not enough to acknowledge diversity on college campuses in mission statements or in the creation of clubs. Consistent practices allowing students to feel and physically see the value of diversity is an important part of creating a welcoming, comfortable, climate. According to Harper and Hurtado, as cited by Quaye, Griffin and Museus (2015), students of color have different perceptions of their campus

climate from their White classmates and often describe them [their campuses] as “hostile and antagonistic”. The previous acknowledgement of campus climate of students of color provides a foundation for this study and the community selected, North Shore Community College’s (NSCC) Lynn campus, which is explained in the methods section.

### **Purpose**

Students of color make up a large percentage of many institutions, yet do not feel a sense of connection. This case study – a qualitative, descriptive, research study of small groups of participants – addresses the student perspective of diversity and factors that affect student engagement in a community college, specifically North Shore Community College. The purpose of this study was to better understand challenges students of color face in order to help faculty, Student Affairs professionals and Retention Specialists understand how to engage and retain students of color while boosting graduation rates and creating a better college experience for students of color. This study provided professionals with the perspective of students and how they interpret diversity on their campus. This study evaluated the statistical correlations between students’ perception of diversity and their level of engagement on campus.

### **Rationale**

According to Lester and Harris (2015), participation in activities on campus affects female students and has proven to positively impact their success. On many community college campuses, especially at the start of the academic year, Student Affairs professionals think about the best way to engage and, in some ways, align with the schedules of their students; these schedules often include the balancing of dependent children, full-time jobs and classroom course loads. Student Affairs professionals have taken the approach of hosting the same event at a different times and days to give more students the opportunity to experience activities. However,

often they render the results of low attendance and participation; if the timing of events is not the problem, what is? While there are a variety of events that can be and typically are offered on college campuses, students of color are less likely to become involved. The truth behind the previous statement has led to this study's major research question: Do Students' Perceptions of Cultural Diversity in a Community College Impact Engagement? This study focused on students' perception of cultural diversity in a community college setting and its impact on students' level of engagement. Results of this study showed students are more likely to be engaged on college campuses where faculty and staff members share their cultural background.

### **Audience**

This study can assist professionals with determining programming that engages and supports the retention of students of color while including them in the fabric of the institution and allowing their voices to be heard. This study is useful for Human Resources departments in higher education when considering the ratio of students of color to faculty and staff of color when hiring. Student Affairs professionals, staff members in inclusion offices and retention specialists who focus on providing opportunities for students to become engaged and who provide support for students of color may also find this study helpful. This study is also beneficial for faculty members seeking to engage students of color in the classroom. This study provides researchers, higher education professionals and non-profits insight on the importance of creating a welcoming climate around diversity. This study is relative and important to the mentorship and support needed to aide in the success of students of color's matriculation in college.

### **Key Terms**



For the purposes of this study, the term engagement is defined as students' involvement on campus, outside of the classroom through participation in a student run club or organization, volunteering, or attending a college sponsored event through the office of Student Life or other college departments. The term student of color refers to any student who does not identify as White or Caucasian – the term “minority” is also used to describe these students. Diversity and cultural diversity are used interchangeably representing race and ethnicity variations on campus.

College student engagement can be defined in different ways and is often demarcated from institution to institution and even faculty member to faculty member based on practice. According to edglossary.org, “Generally speaking, the concept of “student engagement” is predicated on the belief that learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested, or inspired, and that learning tends to suffer when students are bored...” The involvement in activities outside of the classroom promotes curiosity, giving students a desire to want to learn more and connect with their institution. Student engagement is used when discussing engagement, in the general sense and for the purposes of this work should be thought of as co-curricular activities - activities which support elements of fundamental learning outside the classroom and adds a level of hands on experience for students. Engagement takes form in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, organizations such as Student Government Association (SGA), sports including intramural, volunteering, attending events on campus organized by student groups and/or departments on campus.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review covers higher education at its root – the history, the statistical increase of students of color entering postsecondary degree programs; the value placed on

diversity in higher education institutions at the level of accreditation, professional modeling and the effect diversity has on everyone.

All methods identified in this section which were used by other researchers was useful to my study of student perception, diversity and student engagement. While these studies individually focused on elements of students, student engagement, the foundation of colleges and universities, and the remodeling of professional staff, they do not address the problems holistically. On an individual level, these studies do not focus on why students may or may not get involved on campus, nor ask their level of comfort at their institution.

### **The History and New Face of Education**

Students of color are expected to be successful in a system that was not created with them in mind, nor for their success. At its core, the higher education system was not built with minorities or women in mind which has molded and continues to impact the climate of college campuses in America today (Kupo, 2011). Along with the realization of an institution's founding principles and mission, the institution must be willing to recognize the impact its history has on its current state and the foundation of the education system as a whole. Without the *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), it is likely laws that sustained and supported educational exclusion would still be in place today. The cultural barriers in America halt the growth of minority students before they enter the education system through lack of resources; after students of color enter the educational system, the educational gap continues to grow, keeping students of color at a disadvantage.

In American culture, youth are taught success comes with the attainment of a college degree. It is instilled in youth the only way to have a successful future, especially in America, is to earn a degree. Yet, students of color find themselves at a disadvantage for degree attainment

when looking at access to higher education. Youth are expected to earn their high school diploma and have a desire to earn a college degree, even if it does not seem financially, mentally or physically possible. Studies show that Black and Latino students are more likely than their White peers to work while enrolled in postsecondary education, not surprisingly, the former are less likely to earn their degree. While college students, generally, are likely to work part-time jobs while working to attain their degree, students of color are more likely to have the additional responsibility of taking care of a family. Often for students of color, their matriculation is stalled by life events.

Cases like the *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) has made way for the increasing number of students of color in higher education. Today, colleges and universities are seeing a steady increase at the undergraduate level of minority students' enrollment according to Doan (2015) but not an increase in their engagement on campus, especially at two-year institutions. According to Roach (2013), between 2009 and 2011, at the undergraduate level, Black student enrollment increased by 8.5 percent, Latino student enrollment increased by 22 percent and White student enrollment increased by 2.7 percent. Many factors are thought to be correlated with the increase of minority student enrollment and perceived lack of campus engagement by students of color. This literature review evaluates factors often associated with cultural diversity and student engagement. Doan (2015) uses qualitative and quantitative research to examine campus climate and students' of color involvement in student organizations on campus. Using multiple research methods eliminates holes in research.

Education Trust, as cited by Roach (2013), focuses on research that shows the negative effects of the education gap. Their research is done through college comparisons which is imperative to my study because they analyze different institutions – offering two and/or four year

degrees – serving the same population of students and their success rates. Their work evaluates the importance of institutional climate, matriculation variance and degree attainment which could show how institutions support students of color during their time in college. However, this information could be misleading – students who receive assistance at home may not seek out support at school. A study such as this, also, may not take into account variables that may have caused a student not to complete their degree outside of students not being mentally or emotionally prepared for higher education.

### **Institutional Importance**

The conscious development of inclusion and diversity starts with the accreditation process for institutions of higher education. Ferreira, Vidal and Vieira (2014), reported on the diversity and inclusion requirements present in some accreditation guidelines related to equal opportunity, which includes hiring practices. Even when diversity is identified as an institution's main area of focus, practices do not indicate priority. When evaluating the diversity or lack of diversity amongst faculty and staff members, we recognize these individuals as some of the first role models of success that students see. Students recognize faculty and staff members as success stories through the earning their degree and position(s) within the institution. Students are likely to be affected by their levels of achievement on a sub-conscious and/or conscious level. Ferreira, Vidal and Vieira (2014) offers a collection of qualitative information which outlines the guidelines of accreditation in multiple countries. The information provided by these researchers is useful in validating the importance and emphasis placed on diversity at the root of education all over the world. Therefore, the hiring of a diverse faculty and staff at the higher education level plays a vital role in addressing inequality on local and national levels.

### **Professional Modeling**

If a student can see themselves in a position of success through a role model, this will play an important role in their success. Chen and Yang (2013), interviewed leaders and faculty members of color from three universities in the Rocky Mountain area. Participants all spoke about the importance of being a role model – as a person of color – at the education level which has “fewer” representation than those at the entertainment level. They accepted their responsibility to be positive role models to their students and give them professionals to look up to who they saw on a consistent basis and could aspire to be like. Consciously hiring in a diversified way provides students of color with the opportunity to aspire to be, see, and connect with someone who looks like them. This, sometimes superficial, bond is often the difference between students feeling a sense of belonging and connection which, studies show, promotes student engagement. The opportunity to connect in a genuine way while being themselves is valuable to all students; “It is our view that students cannot be fully included on college campuses unless they feel safe and free to develop during the process” (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014, p. 116). This is supported by the development of student clubs and organizations which, in many institutions, require the advisement of a faculty member and/or staff. Doan (2015) articulately quotes Park (2008), explaining the basic desire of humans – the desire to belong and create strong bonds with those who are similar to them.

Chen and Yang (2013) use interviews to collect their data which is a great source of reflective data when asking about perception. Speaking with professionals of color about their experiences and struggles in higher education is an important aid when assessing the best way to support students of color. Understanding what professionals of color are faced with at their individual institutions is an important piece of understanding what students see at their level.

Chen and Yang quote a faculty member who has taken on the role and understand the importance of being a role model to students of color.

When reviewing the previously mentioned studies, Ferreira, Vidal and Vieira (2014) outline regulations of accreditation from different, states and countries while highlighting the aspects of diversity and inclusion; Chen and Yeng (2013) has the voice of faculty members and researchers, but neither has the voice of the student body; while Doan (2015) quotes students in his study, it is not with great depth. It is not uncommon to hear from educators and professional staff, “We are here for [because] of the students; if they weren’t here, we wouldn’t be either,” yet, students’ voices are absent when they are affected the most. Research suggesting how to hire faculty and professional staff of color, even the importance of diversity, has been concluded, but the scholarly dialogue correlating the increasing number of minorities pursuing a college degree and the decreasing number of minorities attaining a college degree lack.

### **Diversity Affects Everyone**

The student voice is the most important element of this research but is not present in scholarly review. An important element of absent literature related to student engagement and diversity is the effect, or lack of effect, this has on White students and how they are/can be involved in changing the climate at their perspective institution. This element should be thought of not only as a missing piece of the student voice, but as a missing piece of literature by those affected by the institution’s decisions to not actively work to create a welcoming environment for students of color. Research shows, White students benefit from integrated schools. According to Katherine Phillips, a professor at Columbia Business School, as cited by National Public Radio Education (2015) (NPR), when working in diverse groups, people are more likely to “work harder and focus on the task more.” When observed from the higher education perspective, it is

important to note the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development (Austin, 1993; Pasacarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pace, 1980) as cited by Kuh (2001).

### **Methods**

Students enrolled in and attending North Shore Community College were surveyed. Students were asked about their current level of involvement on campus, their responsibilities on and off campus (work, family, etc.), their cultural background and how they defined diversity and student engagement. According to North Shore's website the institution serves "26 cities and towns along the coastal region from north metropolitan Boston to Cape Ann." During the fall of 2015, there were 6,961 total students enrolled. Of the 6,961 students, 39.3% were identified as "minorities." Their website states, "The population served by NSCC represents a mix of urban and suburban, a diversity of ethnic and racial groups, white- and blue-collar, middle- and low-income groups, as well as growing numbers of recent immigrants" (North Shore Community College, n.d.).

To better understand the correlation often seen in student engagement, student retention and student graduation rates at the postsecondary education level, the importance of diversity and the value of mentorship, this study utilized questionnaires to collect qualitative data from North Shore Community College students. This approach allowed participants' observations, experiences and voices to be heard and recognized as the key factor of this study. I believe students of color are not as engaged as their White peers on college campuses because their voices, often, go unheard and their experiences are not validated. Students of color are forced to ignore their experiences and identities and adapt to White culture (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). Practice(s) should reflect institution's mission statements and not only exist in theory.

Because I seek to understand the perspective of students in relation to diversity and student engagement, this study was conducted within a transformative paradigm; based on a transformative paradigm, which recognizes that various versions of reality are based on social positioning (Mertens, 2012). Through the participation of students attending North Shore Community College, the voices of those directly affected were collected. Students can influence change in the division of Student Affairs associated with the hiring of new faculty and staff, while impacting events and activities sponsored by the Student Life Department.

The role and responsibilities of the researcher are defined in this section. Understanding the connection the researcher has to this study helps readers to understand its foundation. The sample, recruitment, data collection and analysis of this study are also discussed in this section; North Shore Community College has multiple campuses, understanding the Lynn campus and culture is an important piece to this study, especially as it relates to students engaging with the researcher and taking the survey.

### **Research Paradigm**

The transformative paradigm aided in the research process. According to Mertens (2007), knowledge is not impartial, but influenced by personal interest. Understanding what students are interested in and/or feel connected to inform this research. If students understood the power they possess in aiding in the creation of programming and/or changing the climate of the institution, would they be more likely to engage on campus?

### **Role of Researcher**

I would like to acknowledge my experience in the field of student engagement as the previous Assistant Coordinator of Student Activities at North Shore Community College. In this role, I was responsible for programming on two of North Shore Community College's campuses.



During this period, I had several interactions with other staff and, faculty, along with students who voiced concerns and raised questions related to diversity on campus, and this experience informs this study. It was my duty to remain unbiased during the introduction of the survey while asking students to participate and communicate my new position within the institution to any students who may have recognized me from my previous position in an effort to not affect data results.

### **Sample and Recruitment**

With permission from the Vice President of Student Affairs and Institutional Review Board at NSCC, I reserved space and a table outside the Lynn campus's cafeteria and verbally asked students, as they were passing by, to complete my questionnaire. The Lynn campus was selected because of the previous experience the researcher had and witnessed of student engagement on that particular campus, which has a greater percentage of student engagement than the Danvers campus. A sample of North Shore Community College students were asked to complete the questionnaire during their lunch break, transition from one class to the next, or as they left campus. Participants were made aware that this was not a requirement and not participating would not affect them in any way. Any registered student willing to participate was included in the study. Incentives of free doughnuts or apples were offered to all students. No students required special accommodations, but may be considered to be a part of a vulnerable population. A sample of cultural, gender, racial and socio-economic diversity students were gathered. Participants were given a verbal, general, overview of the project before being handed a consent form and questionnaire. In the overview, I introduced myself as a student at Merrimack College who was dedicating her Capstone Project to student engagement at North Shore Community College. I then explained to students that a Capstone Project is, essentially, the final

research paper to earn my degree. Students were thanked for their time and given the opportunity to ask any final questions about the project and questionnaire as a whole.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The primary method of data collection was surveying because of time / availability constraints. Data was collected February 16, 2016 and February 19, 2016, with a questionnaire serving as the source of data collection. The questionnaire was broken into two parts: demographics and survey. The demographics section gathered basic information such as age, gender, race, ethnicity and number of semesters spent at North Shore Community College so far. Part II, the survey, contained 11 questions and took students approximately five minutes to complete. Questions aimed to gather information regarding students' level of engagement on campus, level of commitment / responsibility outside of campus, and perception of diversity. Examples of questions are as follows: (1) How do you define "diversity"? (2) In your opinion, is North Shore Community College a diverse institution? (3) Would you consider yourself to be an engaged student? Understanding no one can look into my mind to understand exactly what I mean by each question (Taylor & Medina, 2013), questions were written in their simplest form. Students interested in having a deeper conversation about the study were given the opportunity to contact the researcher via email for a semi-structured interview based on the survey. The survey was prepared in English and consideration was taken for the possible misunderstanding of questions by students whose first language may not have been English.

### **Significance**

This study provides communities with a look into the true value of diversity in higher education. It also provides prospective students with questions to ask institutions before deciding to attend by being able to identify support systems put into place for students of color and to

recognize the value an institution places on diversity. The research presented in this study provides families of color with a foundation of questions to ask and to hold institutions to when asking for consistent support through the matriculation their children's college experience.

There is a plethora of scholarly work available surrounding the increase of students of color attending college and not completing their degree, but a lack of information including the institution's involvement – lack of professionals available for mentorship in the form of faculty and staff, inclusive programming and activities for students of color, and students' voices in what takes place on campus. This study affords scholars a different view into the success and/or lack of success of students of color.

### **Results**

The study of history shows a consistent pattern of cultural exclusion in society, politics and education. However, research suggests when an individual feels a sense of connection to someone or something they feel a sense of belonging and, even, a sense of obligation. An obligation that can take on many forms. For a student struggling with classes, obligation could mean weighing the pros and cons before dropping a class; obligation could mean understanding there are people who believe in you and you not wanting to disappoint them, and push through to the end. For individuals who do not have that innate sense of self-motivation, obligation is what keeps them in school. In higher education, connection can be developed through professional mentorship amongst faculty and/or staff with students, amongst classmates and through common interests via clubs and organizations on campus, yet students of color are less likely to become engaged at the undergraduate level and are less likely than Caucasian students to attain their degree. Thus, evaluating the impact of students' perceptions of cultural diversity on levels of engagement is an important element of student retention.

## Demographics

Five pieces of demographic data were collected from each participant which included age, gender, race, ethnicity and number of semesters students had been attending North Shore Community College (NSCC) to evaluate the impact perceptions of diversity have on student engagement. Demographics were collected through open-ended questions to allow for self-identification. Often participants questioned the difference between ethnicity and race which is addressed in the discussion section. A total of 39 student participants took the survey. Two student participants had been attending NSCC for one semester, 20 student participants had been at NSCC for two semesters, four student participants had been at NSCC for three semesters, two student participants had been at NSCC for four semesters, two student participants had been at NSCC for five semesters, four student participants had been at NSCC for six semesters and three student participants had individually been attending NSCC for eight, nine and 10 semesters.

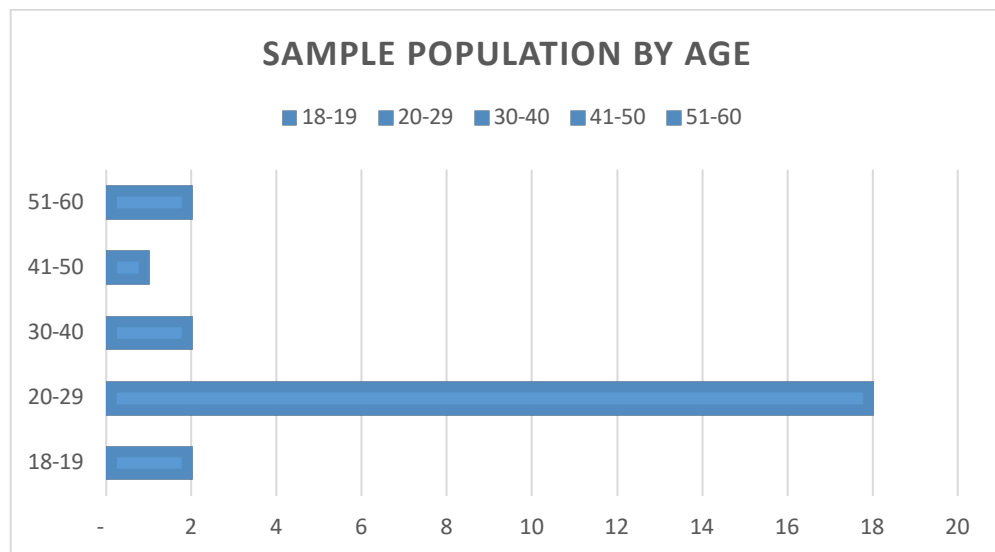


Figure 1

Figure 1 represents the number of student participants who indicated their age on the questionnaire. Two students between the ages of 18 – 19 participated in the survey, 18 students between the ages of 20 – 29 participated in the survey, two students between the ages of 30 – 40

participated in the survey, one 46 year-old student, and two 56 year-old students participated in the survey.

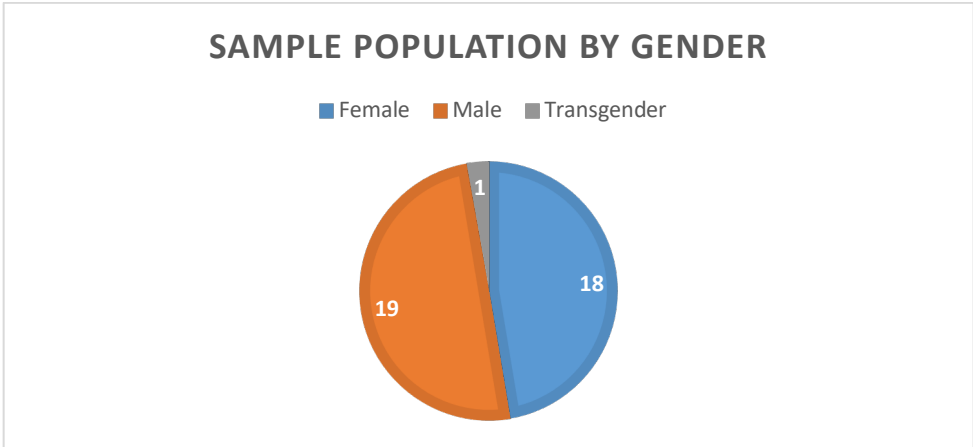


Figure 2

Figure 2 represents the number of student participants by gender. The results show 18 students who identified as female participated in the survey, 19 students who identified as male participated in the survey and one student who identified as transgender participated in the survey.

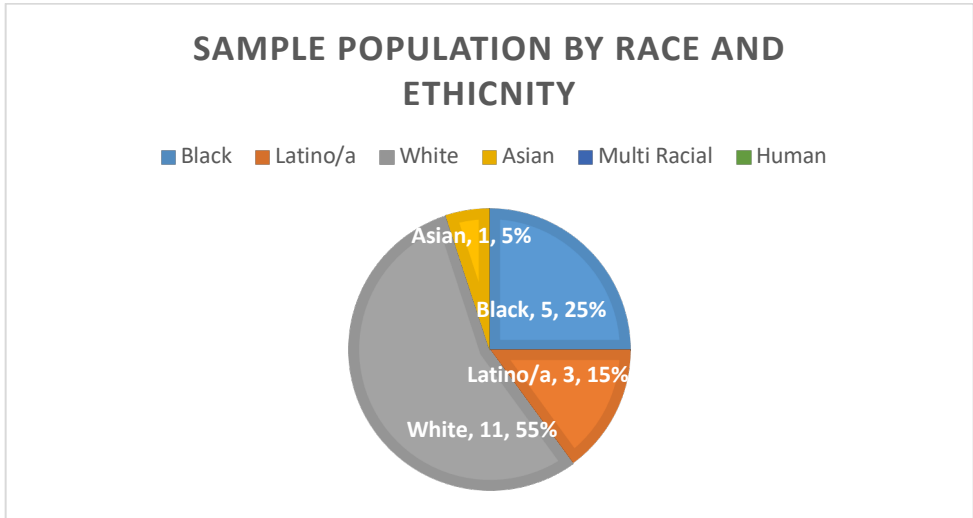


Figure 3

Figure 3 represents the number of student participants by, self-identified, race. Black identified students consist of five, with three students identifying as African-American and one

student identifying as African. Latino/a identified students consist of three students identifying as Latino/a, three students identifying as Hispanic and two students identifying as Dominican.

Eleven students self-identified as white, while two students identified as Caucasian. One student identified as Asian, and one student identified as Cambodian. Three students identified as Multi-cultural or “Mixed,” and another student identified as “Human”.

**How do you define “diversity?” and In my opinion, NSCC is a diverse institution on all levels.**

Focus was placed on two particular questionnaire prompts: How do you define “diversity” and “In my opinion, NSCC is a diverse institution on all levels”. When asked how they define “diversity”, students’ responses varied. Some participants defined diversity in the following ways: One student defined diversity as, “Different cultures”, while another student defined it as, “All walks of life.” Most students had a general idea of diversity. Other responses to statement were: “Difference in people, beliefs, ethnicity, and life styles”, “The differences that set us apart to be unique”, “Lots of different things in a cluster”, “A mix of age, race, and gender,” “Diversity is the different groups and ethnicities within a group,” and “Different types of people – LGBTQ, different races so on.” One student did not define diversity, instead, in some ways, mentioned the lack of diversity by saying, “It’s a challenge to see the diversity in your class”. Five students did not respond to this question. However, when asked to respond to the prompt “In my opinion, NSCC is a diverse institution on all levels,” all 39 student participants responded rendering the following results: 43.59% of student participants strongly agreed, 43.59% agreed, 5.13% remained neutral, 5.13% disagreed and 2.56% strongly disagreed.

**There are faculty and staff members, at NSCC who share my cultural background.**

When asked whether they believed that there were faculty and staff who shared their cultural background, 23.08% of student participants strongly agreed, 56.41% agreed, 7.69% remained neutral, 10.26% disagreed and 2.56% strongly disagreed, Figure 4 represents these statics.

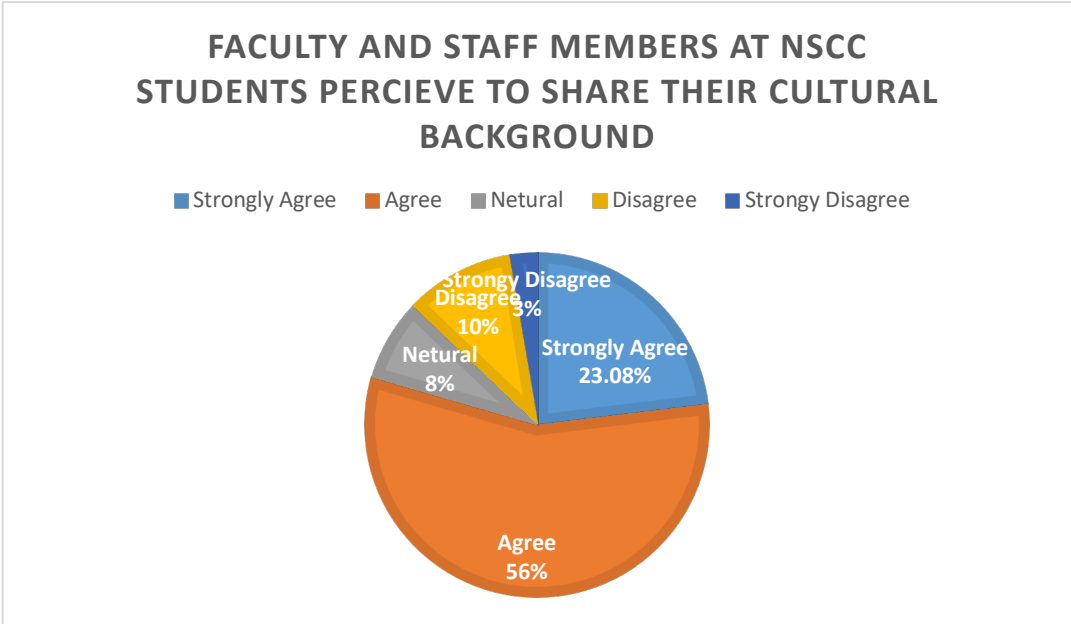


Figure 4

**How do you define “student engagement?” and I am an engaged student at NSCC.**

When asked to define “student engagement” in their own words, student responses varied. Some examples of students’ definition of student engagement are as follows: “Students engaged in activities around [the] school and community,” “When a student is part of the community,” “Participation,” “Being active,” “Including yourself in school activities,” “Involvement in core curriculum activities... Volunteer work,” “When a student is interested in something,” “Going to class. Doing homework.” One student responded with, “Not sure.” Four students did not respond to this question. Although some participants did not know how to define “student engagement,” all 39 student participants responded, answering whether or not they considered themselves an engaged student at NSCC. Figure 5 shows the results of this survey

question: 17.95% of student participants strongly agreed, 46.159% agreed, 23.08% remained neutral, 10.26% disagreed and 2.56% strongly disagreed.

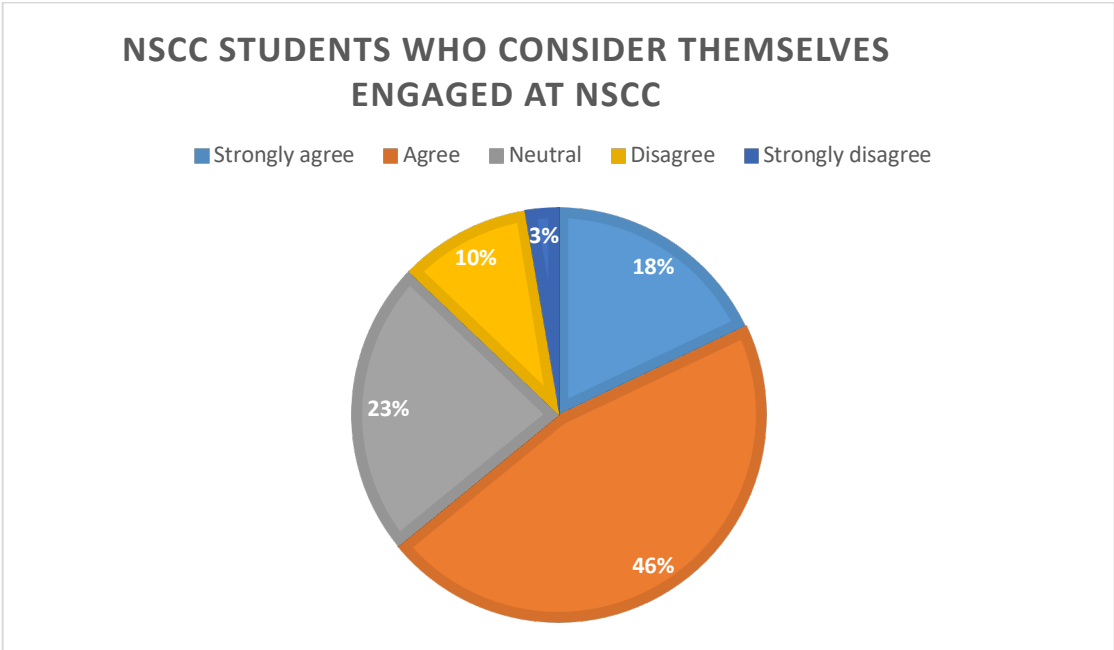


Figure 5

It would benefit institutions such as NSCC to highlight and define “student engagement” as a community. While it is possible to find a broad definition for student engagement, it does not look the same on all campuses. Results of this survey suggest students do not completely understand student engagement. For the purposes of retention, it is important for faculty and staff to engage students in meaningful ways, however, it is hard to determine if diversity or lack of diversity is a conscience factor when students are determining whether or not to become engaged on campus.

**Discussion**

To analyze the key question of this study: do students’ perceptions of cultural diversity in a community college impact engagement? The focus was placed on one crucial question and two fundamental statements from the questionnaire given to participants to investigate the research



question: (1) How do you define diversity; (2) In my opinion, North Shore Community College is a diverse institution on all levels and (3) I am an engaged student at North Shore Community College. Based on the study results, there is evidence that suggest a correlation between diversity, as perceived by students, and student engagement. Throughout this section focus is placed on four major themes that emerged: (1) the difference between ethnicity and race, (2) the importance of what students are doing in college versus where they attend college, (3) hiring practices at institutions of higher education, and (4) understanding student engagement. This discussion section also covers the limitations of this study, its implications and recommendations for further research.

### **Ethnicity vs Race**

The first section of the survey was the demographics section. Before students began addressing the survey, through open-ended demographic questions, students were given the opportunity to self-identify their culture, race and gender. Students were not given pre-selected categories to determine their race, gender and/or ethnicity. Student participants were able to share how they wished to be identified in the areas of gender, race, and ethnicity. The demographics section was arranged in this way to prepare participants to think about culture and their own identities. However, the demographics section caused more discussion at the time of surveying than originally expected. Students found themselves unable to determine the differences between ethnicity and race – often asking the researcher the difference between the two and how they are defined. The distraction of this question may have affected how students responded to the remaining survey questions.

### **Location vs Involvement**

While students are more likely to attend institutions in which they feel their cultural background is represented, research suggests what students do during college counts more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even where they go to college (Kuh, 2001). This study examined the ongoing debate of the impact diversity has in higher education settings, specifically community colleges, as it relates to students' levels of engagement.

Research suggests students who do not feel a sense of connection to their institution of study may not complete their degree which is enough to impact the retention rates of institutions impacting their numbers and funding. Revisiting the "basic desire" of humans – to connect with others and belong – as stated by Park (2008), students who do not feel there are others who share similarities to them are not likely to matriculate through graduation. This feeling of exclusion can be connected to the history of the education system which has shown throughout research, at its foundation, the educational system was not built for the advancement of people of color. The feeling of exclusion could be eliminated through the involvement of clubs and/or through students developing a professional relationship with faculty and staff members. Results from this study supports the idea that the higher education system was not built with minorities or women in mind and continues to impact the climate of college campuses in America today (Kupo, 2011).

### **Hiring Practices**

This study complements an emergent body of research related to diversity, student retention and student engagement by examining one key question: do students' perceptions of cultural diversity in a community college impact engagement? While it is important to acknowledge student voice and perception, it is ultimately up to institutions to make changes. Previous research has highlighted the need for institutions to change student, faculty, and staff demographics with necessarily well-funded and otherwise aggressive recruitment, admissions,

and hiring and retention programs (Clark, 2011). If students are not finding or building genuine connections with their peers whom they feel share their cultural background, it is imperative that institutions are intentionally hiring diverse faculty and staff. It is no surprise the hiring of diverse staff is mentioned and supported in accreditation requirements, as pointed out by Ferreira, Vidal and Vieira (2014).

### **Understanding Student Engagement**

Providing a working definition for students would have given them a foundation to think about their definition and could have altered results. Realizing there are students who feel it is “hard to see” diversity, according to one participant, in their classroom allows educators of all cultural backgrounds the opportunity to acknowledge that there are students who notice and/or perceive a lack of diversity within the institution.

As the researcher, I was impressed by students’ understanding of diversity and surprised by their lack of understanding of the term “student engagement” based on survey responses. While all 39 participants responded to the statement, “I am an engaged student at North Shore Community College” with 46.15% or 18 students agreeing with this statement, only 35 responded to the question before that which asked how they defined “student engagement”. Responses such as, “Not sure”; “When a student is interested in something”; “Going to class. Doing homework”; “When a student is part of the community,” suggests students do not completely understand the concept of “student engagement” and students have very different ideas about what engagement is which would make true correlation difficult – if their level of engagement is determined by how they understand “student engagement” are they truly engaged?

### **Limitations**

**Sample**

The findings of this study overcome previous study limitations by providing the voice of community college students which is often not present in research. However, it is limited by the number of participants compared to the amount of students registered at NSCC which was 6,961 during the 2015 fall semester. It is my belief, if more students as a whole were surveyed results would have been drastically different, especially if there had been more students of color had participated in the study. The lack of involvement from students of color in this survey, although present on campus, supports Doan's (2015) research around the increase of students of color enrollment without an increase of engagement.

North Shore Community College's Lynn campus is described as being in an urban setting in a community with a large percentage of Spanish speakers. Language and understanding may have been a limitation and barrier for participants, as well, restricting the number of participants. Originally, the thought had been to provide the questionnaire in English and Spanish but due to my limited proficiency in Spanish, questionnaires were only provided in English. Having the capacity to format questionnaires in Spanish but not being able to adequately communicate with Spanish speakers ultimately persuaded me to only provide surveys in English. The Lynn campus was chosen because of its reputation of having more engaged students on campus. However, surveying students on the Lynn and Danvers campuses may have provided a better insight into engagement and diversity of the student body.

**Positionality, Time and Access**

I was also limited by my own perceptions and positionality of student participation. Surveying took place over the course of two days: Tuesday, February 16<sup>th</sup> and Friday, February 19<sup>th</sup>, in the foyer of NSCC's cafeteria. A table covered with a blue tablecloth on Tuesday, two

chairs, two dozen Dunkin Donuts and 25 hard copy surveys with informed consent forms were set-up slightly after 10:00am, by 11:00am all 25 surveys had been completed and students walking by were asking if I had more. Preparing for a greater number of participants to take the questionnaire on Tuesday would have rendered greater participation and results. After running out of the 25 surveys I printed, I had to wrap up for the day. On Friday, I prepared with 50 surveys and informed consent forms, a goldish-yellow tablecloth, two dozen Dunkin Donuts and apples with noticeably less traffic and less participation likely because Friday is a slower day on campus. It is worth noting, the week of surveying was also the week of vacation for the local grade-level schools. This information is important because of the 38 participants that responded to the survey question: Including yourself, how many people live in your household? Thirty-six participants indicated one or more other people are living in the home besides themselves; students needing to attend to younger members in the home may have affected traffic on campus.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study presents implications for practice and policy regarding the hiring of diverse faculty and staff, as well as opportunities for more research around the understanding of student engagement.

### **Practice**

For the purposes of this study, I needed to allow students to define the terms diversity and student engagement. However, I believe, by providing a working definition of these terms students may have been able to gauge their level of understanding through a series of comparing, follow up questions. While my research provided me with the opportunity to get to know and understand students' perceptions of diversity and student engagement, the questionnaire responses brought up other questions: (1) has student engagement ever been formally introduced

to students? (2) Has student engagement been defined and discussed campus wide? (3) What recruitment efforts are in place for the hiring of diversity faculty and staff? (4) Do all institutions follow the accreditation requirements pointed out by Ferreira, Vidal and Vieira (2014)?

Creating and providing faculty members with a campus wide definition of student engagement that they can introduce in their classrooms creates an opportunity for faculty to determine if they would like to include or provide credit for student engagement or service-learning in their curriculum. Understanding student engagement as a campus would also provide students with the opportunity to understand its benefits to their future. Educators have the opportunity to provide students with chances to gain knowledge and hands on experience that would increase their chances of being seen as great candidates for career opportunities in their field, these opportunities, especially to students with full-time employment would more likely be welcomed if they knew about its benefits to them.

When looking to bring on new faculty and staff members at NSCC, hiring committees are created. The responsibility of the hiring committee is to be sure the individuals who are brought in for an interview are diverse – the problem with this process is it is hard to create diversity based on a name. Efforts to interview diverse faculty and staff has should be made at the initial process. Where job postings are shared plays a huge role in who will see and apply for them.

### **Further Research**

Future researchers should know if students have a working definition of student engagement and if it is based on how it is defined by the institution itself. When attempting to understand the correlation between job responsibilities and student engagement, participants should have been explicitly asked a question that would have better evaluated if job

responsibilities played a bigger role than cultural diversity. A question such as: Would you consider being engaged (or more engaged) on campus if you did not work?

Future researchers should also consider conducting one-on-one interviews with participants. A topic as complex as cultural diversity would have been better discussed verbally. Questionnaires, such as the one used for this research, does not provide participants with the opportunity to provide thoughtful answers. Likert scale questions did not give students the opportunity to elaborate on why they feel the way they do about diversity. Questionnaires often allude to major themes in an effort to not lead participants in a particular, possibly biased, answer but does not always provide researchers with the direct answers they are searching for. There should have been an emphasis placed on the opportunity for follow-up discussion with the researcher, which would have allowed students to filter through their thoughts and narrow down exactly what they wanted to say. One-on-one interviews provided by students, added to research papers such as Chen and Yeng's (2013), would provide a critical missing piece often found in studies around this topic.

There is no a shortage of literature surveying faculty and staff on how they perceive diversity on their campuses and their role, but very few documents providing students' perception and how it affects them. To engage students and better understand the services that would benefit them most, it is the responsibility of the administration to speak with them. It is the responsibility of the human resources department to be sure hiring is done in a way that creates diversity and offers the student body the opportunity to connect with someone whom they believe shares their experiences.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study allude to two important elements that were unsought: (1) some students have an idea of what diversity “should” look like, but do not know how to define it and (2) student engagement is defined and talked about differently among students, even, on the same campus (if at all), which makes tracking difficult. It is important for students to know what is offered on campus in the form of support and co-curricular activities but, more importantly, it is important for students to feel a sense of connection to seek out these opportunities.

For many students, the decision to go to college is life changing. The decision to go to college is often based on making a decent living now or investing in themselves through earning a degree to have a better living in the future. For some students, this decision comes with the support and motivation of role models or mentors, individuals they trust and, usually, have similar stories to their own. However, making the decision to go to college is not enough. Although, students of color are enrolling at increasing rates they are not obtaining their degree at the same rate. Providing students with professional role models in the form of faculty and staff whom resemble them offers additional motivation for students to earn their degree. Pairing role models with student engagement increases retention and degree obtainment once students understand what it is and its benefits.



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Appendix A



Diversity and Student Engagement Questionnaire

Part I: Demographics

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

How many semesters have you been at North Shore Community College?: \_\_\_\_\_

Part II: Survey

1. How do you define “diversity”?

2. There are faculty and staff members, at North Shore Community College, who share my cultural background.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

3. In my opinion, North Shore Community College is a diverse institution on all levels. Please consider faculty, staff and students.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

4. I am academically supported by faculty and staff at North Shore Community College. Explain.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

5. How many classes are you currently taking?

6. Are you currently employed? If so, full-time or part-time?

Yes, Full-time      Yes, Part-time      No

7. Including yourself, how many people live in your household?

8. There are student clubs that relate to my interests and identities.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

9. How do you define “student engagement”?

10. I am an engaged student at North Shore Community College.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

11. Is there anything you would change about your college experience? If yes, what?

Yes                      No