

# Seeing through their eyes: the diversity and inclusion lessons learned from rural university students

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In recent years, diversity and inclusion in higher education has become a topic of increased interest both nationally and internationally. Given the importance of this topic in today's world, it is surprising that the research is limited, especially with university students in the rural areas. This study examines on-campus students' perceptions of university diversity initiatives, and their value to the university environment.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Focus-group interviews with both undergraduate and graduate students from a public university in rural Michigan, USA, were conducted. Focus groups were used in this study because they are a particularly good method for generating discussion and stimulating ideas.

**Findings** – Overall, the participants identified several positive attitudes toward diversity and inclusion that included being accepting and respectful. However, it is significant that some participants are limited in their perceptions of culturally diverse backgrounds, which has resulted in some anxiety.

**Originality/value** – This study not only provides guidance to current institution administrators to create effective inclusive environments in their university. It can also be treated as a model for other rural universities, as building a successful inclusive environment in the future.

**Keywords** Higher education, USA, Rural university, Diversity and inclusion, Students' perceptions

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Students' learning at institutions of higher education is an intricate process that is impacted by the totality of their experience, both inside and outside of the classroom. Their attitudes, and the knowledge and skills they acquire, are affected by both their formal and informal education (Bitew, 2015). Their ability to interact with members of the academic community is vital to their success as university students, as well as future citizens. In order to facilitate this success, schools, including colleges and universities, must address the nuances of student backgrounds, including their education, social and emotional needs (Harwick, 2000). The importance of creating an inclusive campus community that offers understanding, acceptance and respect forms the foundation of a diverse and inclusive culture.

Universities, both nationally and internationally, have been emphasizing the importance of including diversity and inclusion instruction in curriculum offerings and campus experiences (Jayakumar, 2008). Business colleges, in particular, have long recognized the need to expose learners to diverse cultures and experiences that would better prepare them for post-graduate



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work environment (Chang *et al.*, 2006; Hurtado *et al.*, 1998). Students are taught that companies embracing diversity and inclusion succeed in attaining both quality and financial results. The world's expanding global society requires graduating professionals able to perceive diversity as a strategic, competitive advantage (Purcell *et al.*, 2015).

To this end, the purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to explore the perceptions of current students enrolled in business programs in one of the comprehensive rural universities in Michigan, USA. Rural schools may complicate the story because rural areas in most of the United States are disproportionately White, yet at the same time they tend to suffer high poverty rates (Logan and Burdic-Will, 2017). In that context, rural universities primarily enroll students in close proximity to the primary campus (Byun *et al.*, 2015; Wells *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, given the reduced student population attending rural universities, exposure to diverse cultures and nationalities is limited and associated international exchange programs are underfunded in comparison to urban universities (Blumenstyk, 2020).

Listening to students' experiences and perceptions will provide valuable information about the success, or lack thereof, of college and campus-wide diversity and inclusion initiatives on student understanding. The study will also address which diversity initiatives have made the most significant impression on business students, which will lay the foundation for future educational and social opportunities.

## 2. Diversity in the higher education institution

The benefits of providing university students with increased exposure to diversity and inclusion experiences has been discussed in many publications for the last few decades both inside and outside of the United States. Hurtado *et al.* (2003) explored the relationship between students' experiences with diverse peers in college or university settings and their educational outcomes. Using both single- and multi-institutional data from the University of Michigan and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, they examined the effects of classroom diversity and informal interaction among African American, Asian American, Latino/a and White students on learning and democracy outcomes. Their research findings underscored the educational and civic importance of informal interaction among different racial and ethnic groups during the college years. They also offered their findings as strong evidence of "the continuing importance of affirmative action and diversity efforts by colleges and universities, not only as a means of increasing access to higher education for greater numbers of students, but also as a means of fostering students' academic and social growth" (Hurtado *et al.*, 2003, p. 330).

In 2008, Jayakumar conducted research to investigate the relationship between White individuals' exposure to racial diversity during university and their post-university cross-cultural workforce competencies. With the use of survey data obtained from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program available at the University of California at Los Angeles, he used structural equation modeling to show that for "whites from both segregated and diverse pre-university neighborhoods, their post-university leadership skills and level of pluralistic orientation are either directly or indirectly related to the structural diversity and racial climate of their postsecondary institutions, as well as their level of cross-racial interaction during the college years" (p. 615). He then explained that students who are academically and socially exposed to diverse and inclusive populations while pursuing their university degree are better prepared to handle the complex issues of a global society (Jayakumar, 2008). Hence, it is important for the higher education institution to provide a university environment with a culturally diverse population.

A qualitative focus group were used by Mitchell and Vandegrift (2014) in a midsized, Midwestern United States university to examine how US business students experience the relationships among internationalization, multiculturalism and diversity. A total of 32 business students participated in the focus groups. These researchers determined that White students in the focus group tend to change the subject away from the topic of racial or ethnic

diversity. When asked about the topic, they often steer the conversation toward other issues, such as internationalization or generational difference. [Mitchell and Vandegrift \(2014\)](#) further explained that “these discursive practices indicate discomfort” (p. 37). Additionally, the White students also “advocate a “colorblind” approach to diversity, in which they claim that a culturally competent person should simply not notice racial and ethnic difference” (p. 37). This underscores the importance of diversity and inclusion exposure, and it also demonstrates the importance of understanding student thoughts and opinions regarding diversity and inclusion in order to improve their academic experience.

An empirical study was initiated by [Beacham and Rouse \(2012\)](#) to investigate students’ attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and inclusive practice while pursuing their graduate diploma in education at the University of Aberdeen in the UK. Their findings from the surveys indicate that these student teachers’ attitudes and beliefs toward the principles of inclusive education remain positive throughout the course and are largely undiminished by school experience. They also suggested that if pro-inclusion attitudes are to be sustained within the higher education institutions, it is necessary for inclusion specialists to work closely with other faculty and administrators to build and promote an inclusive environment.

[Sedaghatnia et al. \(2015\)](#) examined the experience of social inclusion among students in three university campuses of Malaysia. They argued that “understanding student inclusion is essential for better understanding of their real needs and requirements” (p. 96). Based on the survey completed by 312 students in three universities of Malaysia, they have identified ten major factors (including legibility, social relation, hostel quality, facilities, extracurricular activities, accessibility, safety, comfort, academic services and transportation) affecting student inclusion with the campus environment ([Sedaghatnia et al., 2015](#)).

In the research conducted in New South Wales, Australia, [Denson and Zhang \(2010\)](#) examined whether student experiences with diversity impact on the development of selected graduate attributes and whether this relationship differs between international and local students in one the public universities in Australia. The findings from their online survey demonstrate that student experiences with diversity positively impact on problem-solving, ability to work with others and appreciation of and respect for diversity. They argued that the quality of the university experience is “appreciably enhanced by perceptions of a positive institutional culture as well as experiences such as being exposed to diverse perspectives in class and engaging in conversations with diverse others” ([Denson and Zhang, 2010](#), p. 541).

Clearly, student exposure to diversity and inclusion has a positive impact of their academic experiences as well as the evolution of their personal growth to deal with a global community. It is also clear that students at larger universities have more opportunities to experience populations of diverse background. Even though rural students have diminished exposure, the importance of diversity and inclusion experiences cannot be diminished in importance. The need for research will address these concerns with the goal of offering direction to enhance current programs.

### 3. Purpose of study

Diversity and inclusion in higher education has become a topic of increased interest both nationally and internationally in recent years. While academics and practitioners have given more attention in providing university students with increased exposure to diversity and inclusion experiences ([Mor Barak et al., 1998](#)), gaps remain to be filled in the literature. For example, there is limited research focusing on the importance of students’ exposure and understanding of cultural differences on campus, in particular, university students in the rural areas. ([Loreman et al., 2008](#)).

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As pointed out by [Maruyama and Moreno \(2000\)](#), “faculty members believe that diversity helps all students achieve the essential goals of a college education and that white students suffer no adverse effects from classroom diversity” (p. 15). [Maruyama and Moreno \(2000\)](#) further explained that perhaps the most striking and telling survey finding is that faculty members strongly believe that racially and ethnically diverse classrooms enrich the educational experience of White students. Diversity and inclusion provide a broader perspective that brings in all aspects of human characteristics.

This research focuses on current undergraduate and graduate programs at Ferris State University (FSU) in order to determine the diversity and inclusion perceptions of enrolled students. The university’s College of Business (COB) was selected because the researchers work in that venue as professors and interact with the student population on a daily basis. This study sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do College of Business students understand and experience diversity and inclusion at Ferris State University?
- (2) How do College of Business students describe diversity initiatives at Ferris State University?

#### 4. College of business at Ferris State University

The students who participated in this research were enrolled in one of the university degrees offered by the College of Business (COB) at Ferris State University (FSU) in rural Michigan, USA. FSU is a public institution that was founded in 1884 and has eight colleges, with its main campus located in Big Rapids and 19 off campus sites throughout Michigan ([Ferris State University, n.d.](#)). The student population is predominantly White. The university is a medium-sized comprehensive higher education institution in the United States with more than 13,250 students currently pursuing their university degrees ([Ferris State University, 2019](#)).

As of Fall semester 2018, there were approximately 2,384 students pursuing their university qualification at COB ([Ferris State University, 2019](#)). In brief, COB provides career-oriented education, responding for over 100 years to the changing needs of the business world. Today, with more than 80 full-time faculty, an administrative staff, and a student body numbering in the thousands, the College offers over 40 certificate, associate, bachelor’s and master’s degree programs to a variety of traditional and nontraditional students at times and locations that are convenient to them ([College of Business, n.d.](#)).

The COB sponsors or co-sponsors diversity and inclusion events throughout the school year. Program participation is voluntary and provides students exposure beyond their rural experience. For example, the COB Committee on Inclusion provides education events with varied populations from a business perspective. As co-hosts with the Office of International Education, the COB is directly involved with programs such as the Asian Lunar Year celebration and the Hindi Diwali Lights Festival. Furthermore, the COB faculty and students are active in the Study Abroad program, which provides enriching experiences in diverse cultures. All of these programs are available to COB students, as well as the greater FSU community.

It is important to note that the COB and university have established goals regarding diversity and inclusion that are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are overlapping, with the COB providing more college specific goals for its population ([College of Business Diversity Plan, 2008](#)). The three established goals of the COB are:

- (1) Create a university that is welcoming to diverse populations.
- (2) Recruit, retain and graduate a diverse student population.

- (3) Hire and retain a diverse workforce.
- (4) Create environments for student learning that are inclusive of and sensitive to a diverse student population.

All four goals are referenced in this study, involving both student and faculty understanding and sensitivity to diversity and inclusion perceptions and practices in the COB. Achieving these goals is a continuous work in process, and feedback is essential for improvement to be vigilant in addressing each goal, pursuing both short-term and long-term strategies.

## 5. Methodology

A grounded theory approach was used to determine emerging themes (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Using this application allowed for the discovery of a variety of perspectives (Patton, 2002). This is a particularly relevant method since the study focused on the experiences, perceptions and emotions of students currently enrolled in the COB. Per Charmaz (2011), the initial themes for each focus group were inductively coded based on review of the individual transcripts. A second examination of the transcripts offered more focused, frequent themes that assisted in the understanding of student opinions (Maxwell, 2005). Continued review resulted in commonalities lead to identifiable themes. The use of focus groups was deemed appropriate for this study because of its effectiveness in gathering information about students' in-depth feelings, opinions, perceptions and behaviors (Brophy *et al.*, 2016; Hair *et al.*, 2017; Ho and Madden-Hallett, 2020) related to diversity and inclusion within the COB environment. Using this technique of identifying emerging themes was encouraged by the FSU Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### 5.1 Data collection via focus group

Focus groups for this study were held during March 20 through April 17, 2018. The primary source of data came from undergraduate students who took part in the first two focus groups. Student involvement in these focus groups allowed participants to hear other responses and add additional comment beyond their original responses. Krueger and Casey (2000) emphasize this concept by indicating that interactions between participants add quality to the data. Student participants responded to an unstructured question protocol to share their opinions. For this study, "student participants" refers to all students who took part in a focus group, regardless of cultural background.

The undergraduate students, who were enrolled as Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors or Seniors, were contacted and responded to a call for voluntary research participants. Both focus groups represented a purposeful sample based on their suitability to participate in the study (Morgan and Krueger, 1993). Specifically, students were contacted based on their previous experience with diversity and inclusion research.

Both researchers were present during the focus groups, and rapport was quickly established since students and researchers were acquainted with each other as members of the COB community. Both moderators remained neutral during the focus group experience in order to allow student participants to delve deeper into the discussion of their perceptions (Morgan and Krueger, 1993). Both focus groups were held for one hour at the same time and location on different days. Students randomly drew questions for response by members of the focus group. Both groups responded to the same set of questions. The questions pertained to student perceptions regarding their diversity and inclusion during the university experience.

A third focus group, consisting of graduate students, was recruited as a convenience sample to serve as an additional layer of validation to responses received at the undergraduate level. The student participants at the graduate level responded to the same

questions as the undergraduate participants. The graduate students were earning their Master of Business Administration (MBA), and as such had experience as students in an undergraduate environment.

All three focus groups were conducted within a one-month period of time and were recorded in order to maintain the consistency and integrity of the research. The focus groups were comprised of both male and female student participants. All student participants were European-American, except for two students. Of those two student participants, one was African American and the other was Asian (See [Table 1](#) for further information about the characteristics of the student participants).

The reflections received by the focus groups were reviewed and coded separately using grounded theory to identify emerging themes, as previously discussed ([Corbin and Strauss, 1990](#); [Patton, 2002](#)). This was achieved using NVIVO software, and the coding process was applied to all three focus group interviews. Thematic codes were reviewed and documented by both researchers and ultimately resulted in five primary discussion themes.

## 6. Findings and discussion

This section explores the perceptions shared from student participants regarding their diversity and inclusion experiences. The focus of the research revolves around their viewpoints regarding diversity and inclusion at the COB. However, participants shared other topics, such as personal experiences as individuals growing up in homogenous or diverse environments. They also made recommendations regarding changes or improvements that could be made to the existing programs. To respect ethical research guidelines pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of participants.

For this study, the responses from all three focus groups resulted in five relevant emerging themes:

- (1) Emotions and attitudes regarding diversity and inclusion
- (2) Perceived differences among people
- (3) Necessary diversity and inclusion competencies for post-graduate professional experiences
- (4) College of Business diversity and inclusion culture
- (5) College of Business diversity and inclusion initiatives

### 6.1 Emotions and attitudes

Undergraduate students identified several positive attitudes toward diversity and inclusion that included being accepting and respectful. In fact, the most common emotion that was expressed by undergraduate students was the idea of being “happy”. For example, Erika (U, EA) said:

	Male	Female	Other
<i>Undergraduate student participants</i>			
European American (EA)	6	5	1
African American (AA)	1	–	–
<i>Graduate student participants</i>			
European American (EA)	2	5	–
Indian (I)	1	–	–

**Table 1.**  
Undergraduate and  
graduate student  
participant  
characteristics

It makes me happy when I see diversity, especially culturally and racially and just different backgrounds because I think it's important to experience all those differences. If you just experience what you know for your entire life. . . , what do you get from that? Variety is the spice of life.

However, students also felt equally “hesitant” and “intimidated” by diversity in the COB, but this was largely due to a lack of experience with different cultures. Gina (U, EA) shared:

I'm more hesitant to be. . .interactive with international students because I never really had experience with anyone [like that] who I grew up with my whole life. [From] high school I came here and. . .I do not really know what to say or I do not really know how to go about starting that friendship because I do not know anything about you or your life. I'm just sort of more hesitant when it comes to picking groups or talking to you.

Mark (U, EA) offered a similar perspective about his reluctance to establish relationships with students that were different:

It's kind of like they are so afraid of rejection they did not even give, you know, culture or person a chance because they were so intimidated, or they had that fear of rejection. It's like, I'm going to hunker down in my corner and build my own little castle feelings about other people.

Students in the graduate focus group shared similar emotions, but their feelings dealt with being insecure. Jeff (U, EA) stated:

If people look different how are you going to judge them? If they talk differently, are they going to be judged differently? When you get into a new group it creates some sort of insecure-ness, you know, [so you have to be] extra careful.

Students across all focus groups believed that two attitudes were necessary to handling their feelings of hesitancy, which were identified as 1) genuine acceptance and 2) respect for people who are different from themselves. Marianne (U, EA) said:

You can talk about it as much as you want and say 'like I am respecting everyone, I want to try and include everyone', but until you do it in real life and in a real time experience you basically did not do anything.

In that same vein, Curtis (U, EA) said:

. . . it's just accepting people and not trying to tell people how they can live and how they cannot live. Then it's a lot easier to have a more diverse community because people are not withholding change.

### *6.2 Perceived differences among people*

All students, both undergraduate and graduate, were very specific about the comparison between their personal experience prior to attending university and their experience within the COB environment. Students offered several words to define diversity, such as “different,” “unique” and “race.” In particular, most students had only had experience with other Michigan students prior to attending the university, as referenced in the previous section. However, they also recognized that diversity reached beyond physical traits. Craig (U, EA) stated:

If a place is diverse, like Ferris State for example, I think there are a lot of different mindsets, different cultures, different religions, different races that all come together.

Interestingly, although students recognized that overall physical and cultural differences existed, some students shared ideas about a broader sense of diversity that had to do with thought. Karl (U, EA) claimed that:

I guess diversity would mean “different”, like a pool of people who each have different thought pairing and experiences and backgrounds in order to form one solution. There can be more diverse

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minds of thought, can have different ways to solve one problem, it's not exclusive to you. Diversity of thought can be another difference as well.

Most student participants were born and raised in Michigan, and they recognized that their personal background was limited in how they personally perceive diversity and inclusion. Gary (U, EA) shared:

I grew up in a small town of 8,000 people and I went to school with every single person from preschool to my senior year of high school.

Craig (U, EA) also emphasized his lack of exposure to diverse population when he said:

...out of like 557 students that I graduated with I think 555 of them were White, and we all grew up in that area.

Student participants in the undergraduate group agreed with each other that most university students came from backgrounds that were "Midwestern." However, those students that grew up in a larger environment, either large American city or foreign country, believed that their personal experience made it easier to acclimate to diverse populations. Chris (U, EA) shared:

Where I grew up from is a big city. We have a lot of foreigners; We have Indians, we have Americans, we have Germans, so that opens you. I understand, and when people can tell me diversity, I understand people's different cultures and what they think and how they think and I get to share my thoughts to you.

Student participants for the graduate level focus group provided statements that supported their undergraduate counterparts. Lindsey (G, EA) said:

When I think of diversity I think of personality and skills, religious background, race, but it's an eclectic group. I think if you're in a group of like-minded people it does not feel diverse and that could mean you have like-minded people that are offering various backgrounds, but when you start to get into the differences in people and how they think and how they operate, that to me is kind of where the diversity comes [into the workforce].

This statement again confirms student perceptions that diversity transcends physical characteristics and is also involved in the process of how people conduct critical thinking. With that, however, graduate students recognized the limitations to diversity and inclusion access due to personal circumstances and provided their perceptions from a more experienced lens. Lindsey continued, stating:

...the same word I used before, the "self-awareness", so I think we do have unconscious biases and whether or not it's brought to light, or we discover it through some sort of means, but it could exist for everyone at some level.

Bridget (G, EA) followed up by saying:

It goes back to experiences. [Perceptions] are based on someone's experiences.

### *6.3 Necessary competencies*

Undergraduate student participants believed that self-awareness and understanding were key competencies to be successful as future business professionals. Mark (U, EA) pointed out:

The world's a lot bigger than Big Rapids, Michigan. . .it's going to be more diverse than this place so you need to be able to be comfortable with that.

Erica (U, EA) that was also stated:



... it's just a lot about this being aware of the different cultures and everything around you and just making sure you understand things before you just blindly walk into a situation and then just royally screw up everything because, you know, how they run a meeting may be completely different, you know, they may have a glass of whiskey at 8:00 in the morning. . .

From this, and other dialog, students understood the importance of recognizing their internal biases in regards to diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, they understood the necessity to manage these attitudes on a continuous basis, which is consistent with their belief of the necessity of respect in the diversity and inclusion process. Vivian (U, EA) said:

It is important to get people of different mindsets and cultures to work together. . .you have to be conscious of and think about it instead of just thinking it's going to happen naturally.

Student participants believed that work-place training would help identify biases, which would in turn assist them in their career. Some students felt that formal education would not be as important as self-motivation. Mark (U, EA) thought that:

We need to function to just be aware of [different] factors, and just, you know, educating yourself and also getting away from all the biases.

Most of the graduate students already held professional positions in the business world, and their responses came from that perspective. However, they echoed the undergraduate students in regards to awareness as a competency. Sheryl (G, EA) stated:

I think if the question is like what competency do you need to provide Ferris business students to be prepared, I would say that it's teaching them awareness, that there's differences and that they may have their own biases of that. Awareness is a kind of competency. . .know your potential biases, knowing that it exists, I think that's a starting point.

#### *6.4 College of Business diversity and inclusion culture*

Both graduate and undergraduate participants discussed the strengths of the COB diversity and inclusion culture, as well as the areas that need improvement. Most students perceived that the International Office, which is coincidentally housed next to the COB, was a part of the COB. This leads students to the misunderstanding that student participation by the International Office was intertwined with the COB culture. Consequently, most study participants saw diversity culture in the COB through an international studies lens. Vivian (U, EA) shared:

I think maybe compared to other colleges. . .it does not seem like [other colleges] have as many international students or maybe as diverse [as the COB]. . .

Jana (U, EA) further emphasized this by saying:

Here is the first place I can just be walking around through the [COB] and University Center and hear two or three different languages spoken every day, just in passing conversation.

Ironically, though, some participants acknowledged that international students entering programs in the COB experienced difficulty acclimating to the college and university culture. Abel (U, EA), an international student, disclosed that:

I feel like I get the worst understanding of it because when I got here that huge culture shock—everyone knows about that—I was absolutely hating everything and could not understand things and why people are doing them. . .

He continued to point out that:

At least understand that there's different people in this world and they think differently and not only your way is right, that other people could think the right way too, but it's different and I think you should [be put] in situations and you face it.

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Students were divided along degree lines regarding the COB culture presented by the business faculty. A few undergraduate students felt that some business faculty were not prepared to promote a culture of diversity. Erica (U, EA) said that:

...professors at this university have failed me. . . I do not know if they get any special training on this kind of stuff, but I think if they do not that's something that we need.

Karl (U, EA) clarified this by stating:

This comes from—like it is usually older professors. . . Middle-aged. . .

However, graduate student participants shared a very different perspective. Edward's (G, EA) comments were consistent with his cohort:

I know some of the professors personally, and I think they do a really good job of including all of the different nationalities and things like [that]. [Professors I know] welcome them into their home, and try to learn what their culture is so they can help them through their college experience. During breaks they have nowhere to go, some of them, so [professors] welcomes them into their homes or find placement for them. I think it says a lot about those professors and what they're willing to do for their students.

In spite of some concerns, all student participants were generally positive of the culture presented in the COB and in the greater university environment. Curtis (U, EA), an undergraduate, said diversity could involve:

...personal choices in life, not just having one set of people of the same skin color, same religious beliefs, [or] same ethnic backgrounds. . . Differences should be celebrated because it's interesting.

### *6.5 College of Business diversity and inclusion initiatives*

All students felt that the quality of college and university initiatives was good, but they also thought it could be improved. They believed that many initiatives were taking place on campus, but felt that the communication of those events was lacking. Gina (U, EA) summed it up very well:

...if we knew about their events, more of our organizations or other people's organizations would want to go, and then we can kind of bridge the diversity gap in our organizations.

It was believed that diversity activities between COB and university organizations would foster more collaboration to experience different events and cultures. Given the small size of the university environment, though, students felt that the COB was doing very well promoting diversity initiatives.

Both undergraduates and graduates agreed that a communication gap existed regarding diversity event notifications. Mark (U, EA) supported this by saying:

I know there's a bunch of programs, but I would not know where to start to find them, probably Google.

Graduate students, many who take online courses, felt a disconnect in on-campus communications regarding COB and university diversity initiatives. Edward (G, EA) said:

I think being an undergrad at one time here, I think [emails are] more geared towards the on-campus undergrad versus the non-traditional [graduate] student.

Other graduate students made statements verifying their lack of knowledge. Lindsey (G, EA) said: "I do not have a true awareness." Sheryl (G, EA) said: "I have no idea at all." Fran (G, EA) said: "I think [the emails] are pretty general." Even with these perceptions, all students generally believed that the quality of the diversity initiatives at the COB and university community were above average and continued to improve.

Jayakumar (2008) argued that university students who are academically and socially exposed to diverse and inclusive populations are better prepared to handle the complex issues of a global society. Although we agree with Jayakumar, we discovered little research exists to validate students' actual academic exposure to diversity and inclusion initiatives. However, one qualitative study by Mitchell and Vandegrift (2014) revealed that White students in focus groups tended to avoid topics of diversity and inclusion when discussing their academic experience. We did not find this to be the case when we performed our focus group research. In fact, just the opposite was true among all respondents, including White participants.

In contrast, we found that our research was consistent with the findings of Denson and Zhang (2020) research results. They discovered that students valued opportunities to experience diversity and inclusion for problem-solving, collaboration and general appreciation of cultural differences. Our findings were similar with their research. We also discovered that students demonstrated curiosity regarding the various life experiences of students with different backgrounds and ethnicities. In summary, our current research could be a reflection of changing social attitudes.

### 7. Limitations

Three main limitations of the study are identified. These limitations, however, point out promising directions for future research. First, all the focus group interviews were administered between March 20, 2018, and April 17, 2018. Performing this research in a broader time frame would offer more opportunity to gather relevant and accurate data. The findings presented in this study allowed students to briefly share their experiences; More time would allow for a greater variety of culturally diverse students to participate, thus adding value to the research.

Second, the current study focused only on the on-campus students of COB and these students had agreed voluntarily to participate in the study which was conducted within the main campus of the university. Performing similar research that includes other FSU colleges, or even reaches beyond the FSU community, would provide a greater pool of socially diverse student participants. Along the same line, longitudinal studies would also provide student reflections of evolving societal diversity and inclusion perceptions. Being able to compare past experience with the present offers opportunities to better prepare students for the future.

Third, the qualitative method used in this study may be its own limitation. Although focus groups allow for diving deeper into the reasoning behind people's responses, quantitative techniques, such as surveys, are often undertaken as a follow up to a focus group study to assess strength of conviction and generalizability (Basch, 1987; Ho, 2019). Additionally, surveys can accommodate large sample sizes so that results can be generalized to the target population (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

As previously stated, there are opportunities to focus future research on several topics mentioned throughout this paper. For example, a longitudinal study would determine consistencies, inconsistencies or the evolution of students' cultural perceptions regarding diversity and inclusion. In addition, this research is focused on students from a mid-sized, rural institution in central-West Michigan region. Further studies can involve other higher education institutions in surrounding areas with a similar, or different, demographic. With that in mind, the study can be expanded to consider urban university populations. The results of this research provide an organic path to review the perceptions of students of a diverse social background, which will add depth to our understanding of this topic. All of these research opportunities could be studied through a quantitative or qualitative lens.

## 8. Conclusion

Given the importance of students' exposure and understanding of cultural differences, it is surprising that the research is limited on this topic. This study attempts to address this gap and examine on-campus students' perceptions of university diversity initiatives, and their value to the university environment. Because of the current interest in diversity and inclusion that has surfaced on a national level, more research on this topic will surely surface in the future. This is particularly relevant as it pertains to the perceptions of students who are learning social constructs in a university environment.

This research study offered the researchers the opportunity to gain new insights from student perceptions that were illuminating. It is encouraging to learn that COB students have generally positive attitudes toward the diversity and inclusion efforts they are experiencing within the college and the FSU campus community. It is also encouraging that students appreciate the opportunity to have diverse cultural experiences. However, it is significant that some students are limited in their perceptions of culturally diverse backgrounds, which has resulted in some anxiety. The literature is clear that students' ability to embrace a changing global environment, with its many cultural differences, is a required competency to be successful as a post-graduate citizen.

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