

# Contemporary multicultural issues: student, faculty, and administrator perceptions

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*The purpose of this study is to determine how students, staff, faculty, and administrators view campus diversity and multicultural issues and activities. The findings reveal that students, faculty, and administrators view the campus differently in terms of racial and social climate. In addition, faculty and students differ about how diversity and multiculturalism should fit into the academic experience. Finally, faculty and students seem to have the most positive perception of the overall campus environment. Recommendations are shared at the end of the report.*

## Introduction

American higher education is challenged to prepare its youth for active participation in a high tech, multicultural world. The world economy dictates that we educate our citizens for escalating global competition. It is imperative that institutions develop effective learning techniques—in and out of the classroom—as they struggle to create programs which support persistence-to-degree among diverse student populations, particularly important for community colleges because more than 50% of all full-time, first time students begin their education at community colleges (Pierce, 1996; Seidman, 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Cultural differences and similarities continue to be topics of concern for educators, humanitarians, and politicians. Books, movies, and documentaries inform us of the advantages and disadvantages to any society choosing to divide and discriminate against its citizens based on race and ethnicity.

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In addition, colleges and universities need to move from cultural diversity to multiculturalism—from like groups banding together to address their special needs, to the reshaping of the institutional culture to include minorities in a significant way. To succeed in college, students from all racial and ethnic groups need to experience a variety of challenges in and out of the classroom. Undoubtedly, increasingly diverse student enrollments have created challenges in every area of campus life. Fortunately, most of the challenges have given rise to a discourse about diversity and multiculturalism that has enhanced student learning and development, faculty development, and administrative practices.

Institutions expend enormous resources on multicultural initiatives in the name of creating civility and comfort in the work place. The effort has generated a number of questions: What are we truly trying to accomplish with an integrated society? What do we really mean—short term and long term—when we speak of a multicultural campus community? Do we have a vision of what a multicultural campus should look like? How do we operate a campus to welcome all students while providing a safe zone for free and civil debate?

After thirty years of integration and multicultural initiatives, can we truly say the efforts have provided a better education for all students in community colleges? Are minority and majority students' college experiences similar?

Do community colleges and their agents know how to design a campus environment that is welcoming to all students? These are important questions to consider if we are to respond with a sound ethical and moral voice regarding our contemporary multicultural initiatives (Watson, Terrell, Wright & Associates, 2002).

One of the initial steps in accomplishing a truly inclusive and equitable organization is to understand the key terms and concepts relevant to the development of a multicultural campus environment. *Multiculturalism* is viewed as the process of increasing awareness of, and knowledge about, human diversity in ways that are translated into respectful human interactions and effective interconnections (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1995). Therefore, multiculturalism is seen as an action or set of interactions that intentionally promote respect for human difference and positive, meaningful interactions. Such interactions have, as their base, a fundamental belief that race, ethnic and cultural differences are valuable and should be included in the college's programs, curricula, and services. More specifically, multiculturalism might be seen as a state of being in which humans feel comfortable in their communication with people from any culture, in any situation, because they desire to learn about others and are empathic in their quest. Accordingly, a "multicultural organization is one that is genuinely committed to diverse representation of its membership;

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is sensitive to maintaining an open, supportive and responsive environment; is working toward and purposefully including elements of diverse cultures in its ongoing operations; and is authentic in its response to issues confronting it" (Barr & Strong, 1988, p. 85).

The pathway to providing a quality education for all students while recognizing the diversity they bring to the academic setting in the community college is not a simple one. In fact, it takes a concerted effort and a sincere commitment by all involved for any institution to realize its vision for multiculturalism. Diversity and multiculturalism are of great importance in the community college, for it is the community college that provides the initial exposure to higher education for most non-traditional and minority students. Adopting a multicultural stance in the community college is helpful in serving a diverse student clientele (Burstein, 1997). Though student diversity on community college campuses is increasing rapidly, community colleges are not achieving similar levels of diversity among their administrators (Foote, 1996). Some experts believe that community colleges will not reach their full potential as a catalyst for educational and social progress without increasing the commitment to multicultural leadership (Bowen & Muller, 1996).

## Purposes

The purposes of this study are to determine (a) the general campus

climate perceived by students, staff, faculty, and administrators at a community college, and (b) whether there are differences of perception between majority and minority racial groups at the community college.

## Methodology

### Sampling

Questionnaires were sent to 491 individuals. The administrative group (n=78) consisted of department heads (n=30), executive leadership team (n=13), and professional staff (n=35). Inter-office mail was used for employees of the college. They were asked to complete and return the questionnaire to the Dean of Students Office at the Southeastern, rural community college. A random selection of part-time and full-time faculty (n=100) was sent a questionnaire and given the same instructions. Students (n=235) were purposefully sampled from the summer English classes. Faculty members who taught the courses were asked to read the instructions for administering the questionnaire and have students complete it during class. All questionnaires were confidential and did not include the student, faculty, or administrator names or identification numbers.

Questionnaires were received from 250 participants (172 students, 42 administrators, 33 faculty, 3 missing cases). The response rate was 50.9%. Returned questionnaires included 61 participants

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of minority status and 167 of majority status. Of the sample, 59% were females and 41% were males. Approximately 62% of the sample indicated that they were 29 years old or younger. More than 40% of the sample indicated that they were single. Thirty-five percent of the student population had taken nine or more classes. Of the staff and faculty, the majority had been employed between eleven and fifteen years.

### **Institutional description**

The research site, a Southeastern, rural community college, is a public, two-year community college dedicated to serving as a catalyst for the economic and lifelong development of the citizens of three counties in upstate South Carolina. The college is recognized for its outstanding programs and unparalleled service and is an open-admissions institution serving 6,000 to 7,000 students. Approximately 16% of the students enrolled at the college are African-American. There are nearly 300 full-time employees. The college grants certificates, diplomas, and associate degrees in technical, career, and transfer programs. The college also offers certificates in continuing education programs. The Student Affairs Division at the college includes an office of Multicultural Student Services that promotes campus-wide initiatives that honor diversity and equality. Services to students of under-represented populations are available to assist in adjusting to all aspects of college life ranging from cultural issues to academic challenges. Sup-

port services are available from enrollment through graduation. All students are encouraged to attend the events and activities sponsored by the Multicultural Student Services office.

### **Data analysis**

General descriptive statistics are used in conjunction with Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine whether there are differences among faculty, administrators, and students on racial and social climate scales. Scheffé post hoc tests served as follow-up tests to significant ANOVA results. Pearson chi-square was used to assess significant differences in commitment and attitudes between faculty, administrators, and students.

### **Limitations**

The survey questions were designed to elicit participants' strong feelings in order to avoid neutral responses. Therefore, some may view the design as skewed towards "strongly disagree" or "strongly agree" for related questions. The size of the sample was small for faculty and administrators, which might indicate significant differences where there may not be any if the sample were larger. In smaller groups, differences tend to be heightened. Finally, two sets of questions that related to policies and practices only appeared in the faculty and administrative questionnaires. Therefore, no analysis was computed for students. The survey was only administered in English classes.

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## Questionnaire design

The same questionnaire was applied to all the targeted groups to obtain a true community-wide evaluation of the college climate and a systematic comparison of student/employee views. The common battery of attitude items included direct ratings of the groups' attitudes and perceptions about campus racial and social climates.

## Racial and social climate

The racial climate scale is a Likert scale that uses a 1 rating for a more negative perception of institutional climate and 5 for a more positive perception. The higher the score the more likely one is to perceive the campus climate to be a favorable one. This scale was adopted with permission from a survey developed by Dr. Charles E. Morris of The Center for Higher Education at Illinois State University. The racial climate scales indicate overall perceptions of the campus climate.

The Social Climate section is based on the understanding that individuals experience an environment based upon their subjective interpretation of the environment. How people relate to the environment is based on how individuals perceive their actual and ideal selves. Therefore, participants in the study could have answered one of four possibilities "no opinion," "strongly disagree," "agree," or "strongly agree" with numerical representation from 1, representing "no opinion," to 4, representing

"strongly agree." To avoid skewed results, "no opinion" responses were omitted.

Most of the items included in this section of the report pertain to both academic and social perceptions of participants. Therefore, the section addresses one's perceptions of classroom discussion, faculty interactions, student interactions, and other social activities included in the scope of one's college experience.

The Social Climate section presents four questions for participants to answer regarding their actual attitudes and commitment towards diversity. For example, participants could respond yes or no to the following questions:

- I would like to see more cultural festivals held at the college.
- I have attended activities held by the Multicultural Student Services Office.
- Do you socialize with people who are racially different from yourself outside of the institution?
- Do you socialize with people who are racially different from yourself within the institution?

## Results

The ANOVA results for the racial climate scales indicate statistically significant differences on all ten variables. The mean scores for all variables are lower for administrators than faculty and students, particularly for the scales of

“Hostile–Friendly,” “Separated–Integrated,” “Exclusive–Inclusive,” and “Conservative–Liberal.” Administrators perceive the racial climate to be more hostile, separated, exclusive, and conservative, while faculty and students perceive the climate to be more friendly, integrated, inclusive, and liberal. Scheffé post hoc tests indicate that administrators differ significantly from faculty on “Tense–Relaxed,” “Hostile–Friendly,” “Competitive–Cooperative,” “Exclusive–Inclusive,” and “Intolerant–Tolerant.” Administrators differ significantly from students only for “Separat-

ed–Integrated,” “Indifferent–Concerned,” “Reserved–Communicative,” “Insensitive–Sensitive,” and “Conservative–Liberal.” Table 1 contains means, standard deviations, F-ratios, and significance for the set of ten racial climate variables.

The ANOVA results for the social climate scales indicate statistically significant differences for nine of the 27 variables. Scheffé post hoc results indicate significant differences between administrators, faculty, and students for “Diversity and multiculturalism has no effect on learning or the academic

**Table 1. ANOVA Comparisons of the relationship among administrators, faculty, and students and racial climate factors**

Variables	Administrator		Faculty		Student		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Tense–Relaxed	2.63	.859	3.29**	.824	3.20	.888	7.662	.001
Hostile–Friendly	2.73	.708	3.40**	.621	3.19	.907	6.470	.002
Competitive–Cooperative	2.54	.790	3.19**	.749	3.10	.867	7.754	.001
Separated–Integrated	2.23	.842	2.71	.902	2.95***	.926	9.783	.000
Reserved–Communicative	2.10	.841	2.94	.814	2.98***	.938	15.390	.000
Indifferent–Concerned	2.25	.870	2.77	.817	2.81**	.951	5.920	.003
Exclusive–Inclusive	2.25	.981	2.93**	.828	2.85	.896	7.641	.001
Insensitive–Sensitive	2.46	.884	2.87	.819	2.97**	.869	5.308	.006
Conservative–Liberal	2.14	.751	2.54	.838	2.82***	.967	8.651	.000
Intolerant–Tolerant	2.50	.816	3.07*	.828	3.00	.927	5.421	.005

Scheffé post hoc significance: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

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experience.” Significant differences are found between administrators and students for “There is social interaction between minority students and non-minority students on campus,” “There are opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with female faculty on campus,” “There are opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with minority male faculty on campus,” and “There are opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with minority female faculty on campus.”

Significant differences between administrators and faculty exist regarding “There are opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with male faculty on campus.” Finally, post hoc tests indicate significant differences between administrators and faculty for “Students learned about various cultures and people from around the world through festivals held at the college” and between students and faculty for “Racism affects the lives of non-minority students, faculty, and administrators on a daily basis.” Table 2 (following page) contains means, standard deviations, F-ratios, and significance for the set of 27 social climate variables.

For administrator, faculty, and student commitment and attitudes, the chi-square indicates significant differences for the question “I have attended activities held by the multicultural student services office,”  $\chi^2(1)=92.875$ ;  $p<.000$  (see Table 3, p. 88). Greater proportions of faculty and administrators attend events at the Multicultural

Student Services office, whereas comparatively smaller proportions of students attend such events.

## Discussion

Significant differences exist between administrators, students, and faculty for racial climate. Lower mean scores for administrators, as compared to faculty and students, indicate that administrators perceive the racial climate of this institution to be very different than do both faculty and students. One explanation for administrator’s differing perceptions could point to limited experiences outside the purview of their department or division. Most administrators are on the front lines dealing with departmental-specific issues and concerns. Prolonged exposure to these concerns and issues could skew administrators’ perceptions of the institution. Faculty possess the highest mean scores for “Tense-Relaxed,” “Hostile-Friendly,” “Competitive-Cooperative,” “Exclusive-Inclusive,” and “Intolerant-Tolerant.” Faculty members seem to view the institutional racial climate as more relaxed, friendly, cooperative, inclusive, and tolerant. Students possess the highest mean scores for “Separated-Integrated,” “Reserved-Communicative,” “Indifferent-Concerned,” “Insensitive-Sensitive,” and “Conservative-Liberal.” Students perceive the institutional racial climate as more integrated, communicative, concerned, sensitive, and liberal. Comparatively,

*continued on page 88*



**Table 2. ANOVA comparisons of the relationship among administrators, faculty, and students for social climate statements and questions scales**

Variables	Administrator		Faculty		Student		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
There is social interaction between minority and non-minority students on campus.	1.90	.532	2.00	.277	2.11*	.435	3.361	.028
There is social interaction between minority students and non-minority faculty on campus.	1.95	.613	2.00	.272	2.08	.528	.999	.370
There is social interaction between minority students of different minority groups on campus.	1.89	.629	1.91	.288	2.10	.520	2.491	.086
There is social interaction between non-minority students and non-minority faculty on campus.	2.03	.618	2.00	.302	2.13	.531	.796	.453
There is social interaction between non-minority students and minority faculty on campus.	1.95	.621	2.00	.309	2.01	.458	.238	.789
There is open discussion about multiculturalism and diversity issues on campus.	1.92	.673	2.04	.562	1.99	.530	.357	.700
Faculty openly discuss multiculturalism and diversity issues in the classroom.	1.88	.588	2.13	.548	1.98	.557	1.191	.307
Acceptance of interracial relationships is welcomed on campus.	1.55	.686	1.86	.478	2.37	3.645	.932	.397
Acceptance of same sex relationships is welcomed on campus.	1.23	.560	1.31	.479	1.85	.667	12.664	.000
There are opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with male faculty on campus.	1.64	.638	2.00	.365	1.96*	.516	3.753	.026
There are opportunities for develop mentoring relationships with female faculty on campus.	1.6	.690	2.11*	.471	1.95	.521	3.491	.034
There are opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with minority male faculty on campus.	1.67	.637	1.93	.258	2.05**	.482	5.076	.008



There are opportunities for develop mentoring relationships with minority female faculty on campus.	1.69	.618	2.00	.354	2.00*	.522	3.405	.037
I believe that minority students' opinions are valued in class.	2.23	.717	2.28	.455	2.19	.503	.327	.722
Most faculty members show personal interest in students regardless of race, ethnic group, gender, or disability.	2.41	.599	2.45	.568	2.24	.529	2.565	.080
Race should be a factor or consideration in hiring and employment decisions.	1.42	.649	1.16	.473	.	.	2.852	.097
There should be scholarships or financial aid designated for minority students.	1.81	.701	1.80	.645	1.96	.737	.869	.421
There should be academic support programs specifically for minority students.	1.89	.614	1.90	.673	1.83	.723	.172	.842
I believe there should be "cultural" facilities and services for various minority student groups on campus.	1.91	.588	2.05	.722	1.85	.660	.827	.439
I believe the institution should mandate courses that include diversity and multiculturalism.	1.79	.641	1.68	.670	2.03	1.118	1.799	.169
Students learned about various cultures and people from around the world through classroom experiences.	2.17	.453	2.30	.465	2.08	.530	2.193	.115
Students learn about cultures and people from around the world through personal friendships with classmates.	2.14	.430	2.24	.435	2.17	.491	.387	.680
Students learned about various cultures and people from around the world through festivals held at the college.	2.11	.393	2.22*	.424	1.94	.575	3.606	.030
I believe having people from diverse backgrounds in class will increase students' understanding of subject matter.	2.29	.524	2.15	.534	2.06	.550	2.587	.078
Diversity and multiculturalism has no affect on learning or the academic experience.	1.21	.538	1.23	.514	1.69**	.695	10.162	.000
Racism affects the lives of minority students, faculty, and administrators on a daily basis.	1.97	.695	1.70	.635	1.88	.715	1.036	.357
Racism affects the lives of non-minority students, faculty, and administrators on a daily basis.	1.83	.711	1.43	.590	1.88*	.711	3.794	.025

Scheffé post hoc significance: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

**Table 3. Pearson chi-square for faculty, administrators, and students for commitment and attitude**

Measure	Administrators	Faculty	Students	Chi-Square	p
I would like to see more cultural festivals held at the college.	40	31	169	3.631	.163
I have attended activities held by the Multicultural Student Services Office.	41	32	169	92.875	.000
Do you socialize with people racially different from yourself outside the institution?	39	33	169	.187	.911
Do you socialize with people racially different from yourself within the institution?	39	33	168	1.548	.461

administrators view the climate differently than faculty and students.

An examination of social climate indicates significant differences for faculty and students, but none for administrators. Fifty percent of the significant differences for faculty center on their job duties within the institution: students' mentorship development with female faculty. The other fifty percent deal with student's cultural learning outside the classroom. The first finding could also signal the potential of faculty remaining within their own institutional conclave and not venturing outside their department or division, similar to administrators. Certainly, faculty deal with campus concerns and issues, but faculty members, as a whole, particularly at the community college level, are involved in significantly fewer departmental

issues and concerns than administrators are. Consequently, faculty may possess skewed perceptions of the institution, but in the opposite direction of administrators, as noted above in the racial climate results. That faculty attribute students' cultural learning to campus festivals seems to contradict the later chi-square finding that students are significantly absent from programming initiatives at the Multicultural Student Services office. Perhaps it is easier to identify students at larger campus festivals, not because the proportion of students is necessarily larger, but because there is a greater total of people in attendance, versus a smaller program, perhaps held by the Multicultural Student Services office, where absolute numbers can be identified.

Several measures of student perceptions of social climate are

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significant also. The majority of these significant measures center on relational issues, acceptance of interracial relationships, same sex relationships, and interactions between minority and majority students. Student perceptions in this area are contradictory to administrator perceptions on the racial climate scale. Because students tend to be involved with administrators on an as-needed basis, and are mostly limited in their interactions with faculty, students tend to congregate within their peer groups. Thus, these findings of relational acceptance, although interpretable as mere institutional openness, could also be much more indicative of student peer-group relations. However, to suggest that this institution does not possess openness toward these relational acceptances would be incorrect since institutional factors, along with many others, do influence students' perceptions.

Students also perceive opportunities to develop mentoring relationships on campus with male, minority male, and minority female faculty. The finding also supports student perception that the campus is more friendly, open, tolerant, etc., versus administrators' perception to the contrary.

The last two significant measures on social climate for students are puzzling. On one hand students indicate "racism affects the lives of non-minority students, faculty, and administrators on a daily basis" and on the other "diversity and multiculturalism have no effect on learning or the academic

experience." Students do not feel racism affects the lives of minority students, faculty, and administrators, but given that almost three times the participants in the study indicate majority status, such a response could reflect a majority perception that racism affects their business within the institution. The response, however, does not lend credence to the notion that minority students, faculty, and administrators may be affected by racism as well.

The discussion, coupled with the second finding that diversity and multiculturalism do not affect learning or the academic experience seems contradictory in nature, and at a core developmental level, suggests a disjuncture between students' in-class and out-of-class realities. Intuitively, if the institution engages students, faculty, and administrators in multicultural and diversity initiatives and, in addition, faculty perceive that students learn about various cultures and peoples within the classroom; then, it would seem more appropriate to find diminished feelings of racism on campus, and/or an understanding of the connection between such initiatives and the learning environment. However, as stated previously, given the high number of majority participants in the study, if majority students perceive that they are being affected by racism within their daily lives—i.e., hearing about it, talking about it, holding a perception that implicates them with racist attitudes—and the institution's di-

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iversity and multicultural initiatives are marketed primarily for minority groups instead of for dialogue and cross cultural relationships, then the finding seems more appropriate and may signal the need for multicultural and diversity initiatives that are structured to engage majority students as well.

Significant differences are found in the number of faculty, administrators, and students who attend programs at the Multicultural Student Services office. That greater proportions of students do not attend such programs lends further support to the student findings above. If students are not attending multicultural or diversity programs, particularly majority students, then those programs would not have influence on the institutional and academic environment. Again, given the high number of majority students at the institution, they may be less likely to attend programs at the multicultural student services office if those programs are perceived as being targeted for someone else, i.e., minority students.

## Conclusion

Professionals who work within a community college must be equipped to interact, teach, serve, and counsel students from a global and contextual perspective that takes into account student culture. Community college professionals must know how to assist students from any background to ensure

academic and personal success. Therefore, if we do not know how to assist a student, we should act in good faith to make sure that the student gets to a person who can. To the surprise of many professionals, answering questions of diverse populations does not always default to the Multicultural Center or Resources on a campus.

Many times, minority and majority students alike just want to know that there is a faculty or administrator within the college who can relate to and understand their challenges. Concerning race and ethnicity specifically, many times that means being able to relate to someone who knows how it feels to be “the only one” in class and/or interpreting and decoding comments made by a peer, professor, or administrator. Regarding majority students, expressing such understanding means creating an environment that makes multicultural and diversity programming relevant to their future learning and cross-cultural bridge building. Any professional within the college should be able to relate to any student with encouragement, guidance, and resources for support. It is a responsibility and professional courtesy to be ready for the challenge of addressing the needs and concerns of an increasingly diverse student body.

## Recommendations

Consider what the institutional community terms as “inclusive.” Most times, inclusion means mi-

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nority inclusion; however, in this case the institution should pay closer attention to how it is including majority students in multicultural or diversity discussions and programs. A holistic perspective of multicultural and diversity initiatives could encourage majority students to view the campus with what Perry terms a more multiplicit or relativistic perspective and less dualism (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

To that end, greater efforts are needed to engage faculty, administrators, and all students as institutional subgroups. This is particularly important in a community college given the commuter status of students as well as the segregated nature of both faculty and administrators in their respective professional enclaves. Creating programs and events that engage and involve all campus constituents can eliminate polarized perceptions and create more grounded perceptions. Such engagement also

exposes people to situations and people that they would not normally encounter, creating a “holistic learning” environment.

### **Future research**

Similar research should be continued within community colleges to compare it with the trends found in this study. Future studies should also focus on predominantly minority institutions for comparison purposes, as well as understanding the differences between the two.

### **Study caveats**

The reader is reminded that this study consists of self-reported data, and as such, is subject to the sources of error associated with such data collection, chiefly, intentional and unintentional response distortion. Also, the chi-square statistic is a goodness-of-fit and interpretations of causality should be avoided.



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